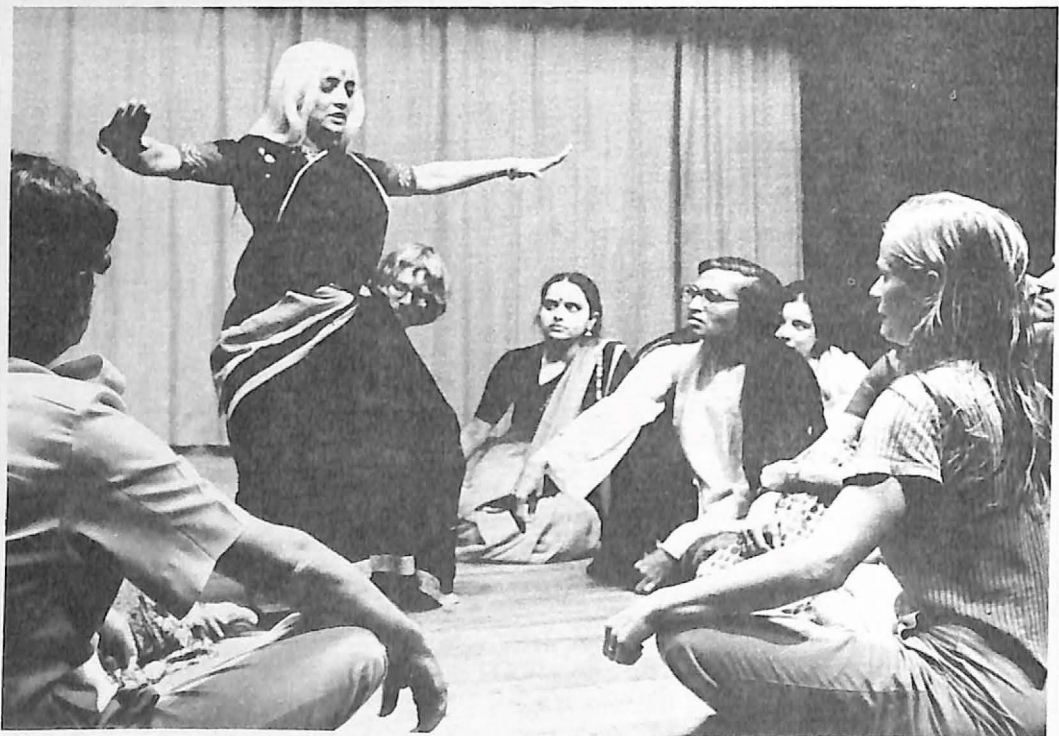


## Contemporary Relevance in Classical Dance—A Personal Note

Chandralekha

One of the crucial experiences that shaped my response and attitude to dance was during my very first public dance recital (*arangetram*). It was a charity programme in aid of the Rayalaseema Drought Relief Fund. I was dancing *Mathura Nagarilo*, depicting the River Yamuna, the water-play of the *sakhi*-s, the sensuality, the luxuriance and abundance of water. Suddenly, I froze, with the realization that I was portraying all this profusion of water in the context of a drought. I remembered photographs in the newspapers of cracked earth, of long, winding queues of people waiting for water with little tins in hand. Guru Ellappa was singing *Mathura Nagarilo*. Art and life seemed to be in conflict. The paradox was stunning. For that split second I was divided, fragmented into two people.

Through the years this experience has lived with me and I have not been able to resolve the contradiction which, of course, is also a social contradiction. On the one hand, a great love for all that is rich and nourishing in our culture and, on the other, the need to contribute positive energies towards changing the harsh realities of life. For me, to be able to respond to the realities of life is as crucial as to remain alive and tuned to sensuality and cultural wealth. I have struggled to harmonise, to integrate these diverging directions in order to remain sensitive and whole.



*Chandralekha demonstrates a movement. Watching her are, among others, Sunil Kothari, and Susanne Linke. (Photo: Palasranjan Bhaumick)*

In the dance sphere, what I have found most lacking, is a dialogue within the discipline as well as at inter-disciplinary levels. We must generate such a dialogue if we want to infuse the classical dance situation with much-needed contemporary vitality. I am keen, therefore, to pose concepts and critiques to initiate a meaningful discussion, realising as I do the potential of aesthetic and cultural forms for liberating the human body and mind from inertia.

Being inheritors of colonial structures and institutions (of education, language, liberal values and, maybe, even notions of aesthetics), we cannot overlook the mediation of the West in shaping our approach to our traditional arts. Problems of revivalism, nostalgia, purity, exclusiveness, conservation, preservation, need to be examined. There is a tendency to swing between the polarities of rejecting the West to seek the security of our little islands or of accepting the West at the cost of a wealth of traditions and without any attempt to try and listen to what they have to tell us.

Such conflict stems from a lack of consciousness and an inability to comprehend the central and basic issues which, ultimately, are issues connected with integrated and humanised existence on our planet. The East, in order to be 'contemporary' in its expression, need not have the burden of using the West as a crutch or a ready reference. To me, to be 'contemporary' would mean to understand and express the East in its own terms; to explore to the full the linkages generated by valid inter-disciplinary principles common to all arts and central to the creative concept of *rasa*; to extend the frontiers of the loaded cultural language of our soil.

This will not happen without a struggle. Concepts like *loki* and *margi*, *mandala* or *rasa* were formulated by Bharata and Abhinavagupta centuries ago and are, even today, radical concepts in every sense of the term. Any move to generate *rasa*, a harmonious integration of the individual with himself, with his society and with nature, in an epoch of social fracture, is to enter the realm of human liberation and will be looked upon with suspicion. Thus the 'traditional' dancers, too, trapped in their repetitive slots and reproducing quantitative values, militate against *rasa* and can be accused of being contrary to the spirit of the early radicals.

I see dance as a visual, tactile and sensual language, structured with a specific vocabulary and idiom, with a space/time bind, with organic principles and, most importantly, related to the dynamics of energy and flow with a capacity to recharge human beings. The internal relation between the dance and the dancer and the external relation between dance and society are questions that cannot be taken lightly.

First of all, dance is an expression of physicality. In the course of human evolution, for a long time, physicality was a communal possession to be collectively expressed. The remnants of tribal societies show the basic unity of material life and physical expression. So we start from the fundamental premise that dance does not originate from heaven, that it has a material base, that it is rooted in the soil, the region, the community, in usages, work rhythms, habits and behaviour, food patterns and social relations and in racial characteristics like nose, skin, eyes, hair—a whole lot of accumulations that go by the name of culture and intimately

related to body attitudes, physiognomy and to work and tools. Even in its most stylised form, dance retains a certain universality of idiom and is an extension of and a supplement to spoken language.

The history of dance, then, cannot be separated from the history of the various stages of society. The variations in form are like variations in soil, climate, trees, vegetation. Over a long period of time, however, dance along with other arts and social functions, became integrated into the evolving hierarchical structures of society effecting a transformation in its role—from communal participation to communal consumption.

The codification of dance in a society that admitted a hierarchical structure introduced a process of rigidification in the roles of the performer and the spectator, propelling classical dance and dancers towards limiting, though exotic, specialisation and to a fossilisation of the form. Increasingly, the dances became a class preserve expressing an ideological content.

However, through all the distortions of the medieval period, the body retained a certain primacy and sensuality and played a vital role in maintaining human dignity in spite of much privation. It is when we come to contemporary times and an industrial/urban society that a sudden and harsh break occurs. The vital link, between body and nature, body and work, body and ritual, snaps. Dance becomes, almost totally, a spectacle.

A reversal, too, takes place. While traditional thought conceptualises the human body as a unique centre, a centre of the universe, expanding outwards into the cosmos, industrial society converts the human body into a prime target of attack: as citizen, attacked by the political system; as consumer, attacked by the economic system; as individual, bombarded by the media, denied contact with nature, incapable of self-renewal, suffocated by poisons in air and water, isolated and deprived of directions for change.

The question then arises: What role can dance play in such a society? Can it recuperate energies? Can it initiate a living flow between individual and community? Can it integrate human perspectives? Can it infuse people with joy for life, radical optimism, hope, courage and vision to negate all that is ugly and unjust and hurtful? If our life is alienated, can our dances and arts help to transcend that alienation?

I have experienced dance as a sensual language of beauty and of essential freedom; a language of coordination as against alienation; a movement towards the human essence, the sap, the vitality, the *rasa*. It is this aspect of classical dance and its unflagging potential to regenerate the human spirit that constitutes for me its contemporaneity and the reason why we need to work with the form. Any human mode with a capacity to touch, to energise, to transform is potent. Otherwise art is primarily to be lived. It is nothing but the *quality* of all that is made.

In the prevailing dance situation, there are certain negative features against which we have to guard:

- spectacular mindlessness;
- archaic social values;

- faked religiosity;
- idealisation leading to mortification of the form;
- numbing sentimentality;
- literalism, verbalism, dependence on *sahitya*, on word;
- mystification and dollification;
- perpetuation of anti-women values;
- rigid standardisation leaving no room for exploring;
- quantitiveness leading to conspicuous quantity of effects;
- easy assimilation into governmental designs for propagating a false 'image' of India, distanced from reality and replete with nostalgia;
- the distortions of the 'foreign' circuit which squeeze out all essence and convert classical dances into an item of cultural export;
- encroachments of tourism, urbanisation, commercialism, and packaged entertainment;
- cynicism within the solo dance situation and its senseless competitiveness.

There are also more serious questions. Why have classical Indian dances become insular and unresponsive to the dramatic social, historical, scientific, human changes that have occurred in the world around us over the past thirty years? What blocks and complexes prevent classical dancers from initiating basic changes? What makes them resistant to contemporary progressive social values? Why is it that even purely formal exercises and experiments have eluded these forms? Why have no attempts been encouraged to explore the power and strength of these forms? For example, their links with martial arts?

At the same time, the criteria, the parameters, the references, the directions for what constitutes 'new' and 'contemporary' in the realm of classical dance is a sensitive area and there can be no easy formulae and solutions. I believe one can make only one small step at a time with feeling and sincerity. One does feel the lack, though, of serious and integrated intellectual inputs. If Bharata, Abhinavagupta and Nandikeshwara once enunciated radical and loaded concepts for human self-renewal, the question arises: What kind of scholarship is available to us today?

The principles of wholeness and relatedness that form the core of traditional thought are most relevant for us today. Through these we get some idea of the directions for a fresh search—questions of perceptual and creative levels, exchange and transmission, movement and control, art and experience, tradition and modernity, inner and outer, space and time, individual and collective, integrity and rupture, quantity and quality. These questions need to be confronted to help energise the classical dance scene.

I have explored the classical Bharatanatyam form to attempt a set of primary references based on which a progressive series of departures could be made. Though dance has been a fundamental passion with me, the performing situation never created an area of relevance for me. While being nourished by dance, I sought relevance outside the dance situation in other art forms as well as through integrating these. I relate to dance not as a performer but as one who explores through it deeply-felt experiences of life. These constitute layer upon layer of social accretions which retain dynamic power.

In a group production called *Devadasi*, I ventured out of the comfort and security of the traditional framework for the first time. Rejecting religious *sahitya*, I composed and choreographed this dance on the contemporary history of Bharatanatyam through its manifestation in the temple, court and modern stage; the social status of the dance and the *devadasi* dancers; its ostracism from orthodox South Indian society; its resurgence, riding the crest of the nationalist movement and its present decorative status. The dance concludes on a note of joy, vigour and buoyancy of spirit represented by a futuristic composition.

Even this primary exploration was intoxicating and I could no longer return to the irrelevance of the solo dance situation. Away from it, I began to see dance all afresh from a sociological perspective—saw its martial origins, its regionality, its direct link with human social practices as against idealistic notions of divine origin. I could also understand the pulls and pressures on modern Bharatanatyam, now the cultural vehicle of an elite section of the community.

*Navagraha* was another effort to interact with the conservatism of the classical dance world. Very deliberately, I pursued an inter-disciplinary approach involving leading vocalists, instrumentalists, graphic designers and film makers. I explored, to the full, abstract notions of time and space, subject and object, stillness and movement, centre and cosmos, besides integrating dynamic principles of dance with graphic and colour symbology, iconography and astronomy and the male-female social relationship. It represented a need to go back to the basics.

Other exploratory dances I have composed and choreographed, not really for performing but for generating dialogue, convince me that the conceptual foundations upon which our classical dances have been organised are tremendously rich and powerful and charged and, in fact, have worked out aspects of the form, the body, the stage and presentation which are quite contemporary and avant-garde in their sweep. The amount of inspiration the contemporary dance and theatre movements of the West have taken from these are an indication of their formal richness and contemporaneity. The tragedy is that our performing scene today does not quite live up to these concepts, most of the time being even oblivious of the energy and power that these contain.

What is needed today is for classical dancers to probe deeper into their art with an open mind—not necessarily immediately in terms of large audiences but, first of all, in order to come to terms with the unexplored wealth of the form itself. For this, of course, they will need as much intellectual rigour, sensuality and broad humanism as a Bharata or an Abhinavagupta.

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