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PAPER 8
DANCES AND DANCE DRAMAS OF SOUTH EAST ASIA
MASK DANCES OF SOUTH EAST ASIA/ASIA-PACIFIC COUNTRIES, RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES FOR PERFORMING ARTS (DANCE) DANCE THERAPY
PAPER 8

MODULE 14
DANCE DOCUMENTATION- FILMS, VIDEO, PHOTOGRAPHY

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Paper 8
Module 14
Dance Documentation - Films, Video, Photography
In his book, The Dance in America, Walter Terry writes, “The ephemeral nature of dance makes every method of recording its fleeting wonders a precious instrument. Words, symbols, films: these are the major methods of recording the action of dance. Drawings, sculpture, and photographs: these are the major methods of recording movement pause, be it a quiet pose or the peak of a leap...Exactness in recording dance can be supplied by two methods: motion pictures for the recording of actual performance, and notation (a dance script) for recording choreography. Films are to dance what phonograph records are to music...”

Towards the beginning of the 20th century, the moving pictures or the cinema offered an even more faithful ‘documentation’ with each movement shown in continuity as against the static, single image of the photograph. And by the close of this century, videography brought easy and cheap access to filming complete movement sequences as a method of learning and teaching, of documenting compositions and choreography created by dancers everywhere, also the whole area of video art for dance.
In the first quarter of the 20th century, the ‘movies’ began to be made to India. The early Indian silent films developed out of the strong stage tradition of ‘musicals’ that were already popular amongst both urban and rural audiences.

These ‘musicals’ traced their roots to the uparupak tradition full of songs and dancing. The early movies continued the trend and were full of dance-music sequences.

With dancing going away from the temples, there was a new interest emerging for dance in the early 1900s. This not only brought concert dance in the theatres but also manifested itself in cinema. Though silent films had some dancing, with the coming of the talkies, dance became special. There were varieties of short films made some of which dealt with dance exclusively. Some traditional dancers and nattuvanars turned to the newly established and growing film industry in Madras (Chennai) and later in Bombay (Mumbai) for better opportunities in earning a living through dance. They provided dance and dance direction. The film “Sairandhri” made in 1933 carried genuine Bharatanatyam. Raginidevi and Gopinath performed a duet in Bharatanatyam for a Telugu film. Many dancers, especially from professional dance communities, made their way to cinema and more meaningful dancing was introduced. Early commercial Indian cinema, almost till the mid-1960s, often featured dances that were truly in the Bharatanatyam and Kathak traditions, by trained dancers. At times specific dance items were shown such as Alarippu, Tillana, Thumri, and Tatkar and so on. The movements, accompanying music as well as the costumes were also as authentic to the tradition as possible. Gowri Ammal was the last devadasi-dancer at the Mylapore
Kapaleeswarar Temple. Dancers Lakshmi Viswanathan and her elder sister trained with her for two years.

In the film, Thyaga Bhumi, the elder sister played the role of a character called Saroja who danced ‘Krishna Nee Vegamai Verai’, the Tamil version of the famous ‘Krishna Nee Begane Baro’ as taught to her by Gauri Ammal, composed by Papanasam Sivan and sung by the dancer’s mother. So here one has the actual record of a dance piece the way it was interpreted by one of the senior-most exponents of the dance style.

Some of the well-known films in which classical dances can be seen are Raj Nartaki, Mughal-e-Azam, Chandrlekha, Navrang, Jhanak Jhanak Payal Baaje, Guide, Pakeezah, Prince, Nache Mayuri, Jal Bin Machli Nritya Bin Bijli, Teesri Kasam, Kinara, Sargam, Umrao Jaan, Devdas, latest in the genera may be Aja Nach le. Here the main heroine often played the role of an accomplished dancer or a person who expresses herself through dance.

If the film itself did not have a dancer-based story, there were also scripts that accommodated songs and sequences with classical dance. An example is the Killing of Dushashana episode from Kathakali in Shyam Benegal’s Kalyug to portray the state of mind of the character in the film watching the performance. There have also been film made by dancers, such as Uday Shanker’s classic, Kalpana and documentary films on dancers made by directors of Satyajit Ray’s stature such as Bala on Balasaraswati, Kumar Sahani’s film on Kelucharan Mahapatra and so many others. Many regional films in the South Indian languages – Tamil, Malayalam, Kannada and Telugu – often use the classical dances themselves.
Towards the beginning of the 20th century, the moving pictures or the cinema offered an even more faithful ‘documentation’ with each movement shown in continuity as against the static, single image of the photograph. And by the close of this century, videography brought easy and cheap access to filming complete movement sequences as a method of learning and teaching, of documenting compositions and choreography created by dancers everywhere. With the dance and technology offered and mastered as special subjects in major learning teaching institutions, almost all choreographers use video/film/projection for their creations today. Almost all performances are videoed.

The development and coming of Television and Video technology and its inter-play with the arts have created newer and wider possibilities in all the areas of artistic creativity, be it choreography, presentation or preservation. It has played an important role for the record and revival of dance. The dance performances are recorded, and dances are specially designed for the camera. The tele serials like “Nupur”, “Shilapadikaram”, have revived the images of ancient past. In the serials and narratives one finds ample use of all kinds of dance. The video recordings of travelers and amateurs are at times amazingly sensitive and provide detailed dance activity hitherto unseen. They have become professional tools for capturing the “never to be repeated” dance and virtual evidences of existing dance activity. Photographs offer indisputable evidence of the existing realities of dance with the artistic interpretation of the photographer. There are numerous photographs available of devadasis, nautch girls in the late 19th and early 20th centuries taken by the foreign travelers.
During their stay, they seem to have captured interesting images of life in India. They clearly indicate the style, audience, body dynamics, dress and jewelry, the accompanying musicians, and even dance postures. Some of the pictures clearly show the limitations in the scope of movements due dress style, space limitations and so on. The most sensitive pictures of the great dances are imaginatively captured by photographers, which immortalize both the dance and the dancer. Today we have world renowned photographers like Avinash Pashricha, Suresh Parekh and Inni Singh capturing the essence of dance movement in their art works. The dancer considers themselves privileged if photographed by these artists.

**MOVEMENT NOTATION of INDIAN CLASSICAL DANCE**

Though dance is considered mother of all arts and man has danced forever, there has been not many tools developed to preserve and document it. The notation of dance movement is recent and can be perfected much more. The Egyptian hygrographs, Indian temple sculptures, literature and paintings, the Greek and Roman frescoes and ceramics, all show dancers and dance movements. They are evidences of how dance must have been performed. But did any of these seriously notate dance or they were more decorative figures? Perhaps they were recording the event of past and present and at times future. The first era of dance notation began by the 15th century, in the form of letter writing in the West. In India, not notation, but verbal descriptions of various body movements were articulated in the numerous technical texts of the field, though for a
long time almost till the 17th-18th centuries, they described movements and a few and varied dances.

During all stages of evolution of the dance forms in India attempts were made to codify and record them. One may even say that nowhere else in the world exists such a rich store of documentation of the kind that exists in India. As we have seen earlier, a large part of it is in form of descriptive literature about various techniques besides the physical movements, which, of course, are the main constituents of dancing. Bharata’s NS is universally acknowledged as an inexhaustible wonder of the world of dancing. It contains meticulous analysis of dance-techniques. A good number of texts and manuals are written in the regional languages as well as Sanskrit closely following.

But it appears that no script for dance was evolved in India. The art of dance was learnt and practiced under the direct guidance of the guru, the teacher. It was always a practical transformation, with memory as the only repository. The system of handing down an art form through successive generations of a family had and has many merits. From the very early years a child can absorb a lot from the ambience around, by seeing and hearing. Later, while growing up, systematic training is given by the elders for about twenty years. Meanwhile one starts performing with the seniors and the mentors. It is thus that a classical style is imbibed through practical training.

Texts like the NS contain descriptions of movements and gestures. But they do not reveal the exact manner in which they are aligned as concert numbers. We do not have a meticulous record of
choreographic patterns. In other words we do not have any system of dance notation. The names of dance items such as Pushpanjali, Navsandhi, Mukhachali, and the like are mentioned in many texts.

None of them is notated to reveal the exact manner in which time and space were utilized. There have been and are many who have tried to preserve the art of dance, dedicating long hours, perhaps a life time to capture the essence of movement. There are many, who have not invented new systems, but perfected and utilized the already existing ones. Dance notation or Choreo-graphics means writing or drawing of dance. There have been many approaches, presentations, using different symbols; each one records on paper the elements of movement.

The structure of any dance notation system must have provision for form, rhythmic movement, dynamic quality, style and expression. It must point out the details of movement of each limb, simultaneous and separate, space levels, with visual and kinesthetic associations. Rudolf von Laban’s first attempt, shorthand for the type of space harmonies with which he was involved, gave way to a more universal approach to the recording of movement. This developed in two stages into the system which basically has remained unchanged despite further development.

Any visual representation of movement on paper provides obvious advantages. The Laban system contains more visuality in its structure than may at first be apparent. The Laban system has been developed on a universally based analysis of movement, thus making it suitable for all forms of human movement. Although the system is
generally presented through commonly understood spatial description of limb placement, the basis of its analysis is as scientific as those which proceed from a wholly mathematical concept.

Universality in development and application of the Laban system has been guaranteed by the fact that the system is not the product of one person’s ideas; many different people working in a variety of movement disciplines have contributed to it from their experiences. It had a widespread trial under a broad variety of situations; only from such use healthy growth has taken place. Spread of the Laban system has provided such trial through its professional application in recording choreography of many types, classical and contemporary, as well as ethnic dance forms and non-dance activities such as sports, swimming, riding, etc. not to mention its application to zoology.

A significant advantage in the Laban system is the fact that one symbol provides four pieces of information: the part of the body that moves, the direction and level, the moment when the movement begins and the duration of the movement. There is no change in the meaning of the symbols when they are applied to different forms of dance; the symbols are applicable to every form of movement. However, specialists in a particular form may evolve special usages for their needs, such usages being carefully placement on the staff.

Notating dance is by no means a simple task. To make a proper graph of the leg, ankle and foot in action in proper tempo and sequence and with precise transference of weight is certainly next to impossible. If such a system is evolved, it certainly will be a high water mark in the history of choreography. Each creative guru with
artistry and imagination introduced elements that gave rise to the different schools, Bani-s, Gharanas, ways and the stylistic differences.

The important question is can the whole area of dance movements be standardized in India? As in ballet, the plie or demi plie remains the same in all countries, be it Italy, France, Japan or Britain, will Araimandi be different in Delhi, Chennai, Baroda or New York? Will the definition of “Pataka” hasta change in different schools of Bharatanatyam? We fear the standardization may deter creativity. But perhaps it is the other way round.

The ways of teaching, classifying and performing the adavu-s of Bharatanatyam have been slightly different though Tatta, Natta and Kutta remain the same. The teachers have their own way of interpreting them. Even in the same school, each student is able to learn, perceive and execute a step with his or her ability, physical structure, and nature and of course nurture. Specialty of each school be it Angashuddha, grace and softness of style, tala with the choreography concentrating on complicated cross-rhythmic patterns or the emotional aspect with facial expression can easily be preserved while following a standard format. With an eye on the need for instruction, the dance techniques are also codified and given appropriate names. For example, there are striking rhythmic syllables and terms for footwork and choreography, which are important elements of dance. In different dance forms there are different rhythmic syllables which go by various names such as vaythari, cholkettu, bols, padhant and so on. One who has undergone training in a particular form can easily understand the footwork it represents from the sound of rhythmic syllables. Tatkar
in teen tala, Tatta adavu and Natta adavu in Bharatanatyam are some of the innumerable terms. For an artiste who has had adequate training, it is easy to translate such terms into movements. The terms facilitate teaching and memorizing greatly.

There is documentation available to guide us along this route. Where Bharatanatyam in particular is concerned, it must be pointed out that a number of books and articles have been written on the various aspects of Bharatanatyam (genealogy, general descriptions of items, banis, dancers and nattuvanars). But even now there is hardly any authoritative book on the complete dance technique of Bharatanatyam, detailing margams or performances, and the formal structure of this dance style.

But the possibility of developing an adequate notation system is still the matter of controversy. Most dancers and teachers believe that for memory and record, the best way is to practice so much that the movement becomes a part of oneself. Also, it is widely and genuinely believed that such formal records take away the spirit of creativity. Yet there are a few bold and creative futuristic dance professionals and theorists like Shri G. Venk, Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam, Prof. Judi van Zile, the author herself, who have attempted to create notation systems for Indian Classical Dance. “Notating Dance is by no means a simple task. To make a proper graph of the leg, ankle and foot in action in proper tempo and sequence and with precise transference of weight is certainly next to impossible. If such a system is evolved, it certainly will be a high watermark in the history of choreography.

In India, in Bharatanatyam many popular numbers have retained their shapes and form over a century because they were learnt by
rut. Even teachers have been depending upon their computer-like memory and not on notation. But with the passage of time, many new forms and movements are created as is evident at various levels. In this process of evolution it is necessary to keep a record of at least whatever we are familiar with.

The system of Adavus seems to lend itself to notation.” (Dance Notation of Adavus, Bharatanatyam, Indian Classical Dance Art, Dr Padma Subrahmanyam, edited by Sunil Kothari, Marg Publications, pg 35). The late Smt. Anjali Merh had worked out a practical and easy ‘stick drawing’ system for students’ records and journals at the department of Dance, Faculty of Performing Arts, and M.S. University of Baroda in late 60s. This was not a formal system, but grew out of the need of students, who came from all over the world to learn. The system created to help them remember, preserve and recreate, which continues even today.

Though not created as notations, the detailed writings and drawings of legendary dancer Ramgopal in his book “Indian Dancing, The series of photographs of Smt. M.K. Saroja with detailed article by the only Indian dance historian Shri Mohan Khokar in Marga Magazine (1957), the later version of the same by Dr. Padma Subrahmaniam (Marga publication “Bharatanatyam” 1979, 1982, 1997) on Nritta and the Adavu-s does provide details of positions of Adavu-s of different schools of the dance style. The famous dancer and choreographer Dr. Padma Subrahmaniam is pioneer for her in-depth research, analysis and reconstruction of the Karana-s of Natyashashtra. It may have been the motivating factor for her to create a notation system for the Adavu-s of Bharatanatyam. Her notation is based on the staff notation of the Western music. “An
introduction to Indian dance” in the book Reading Dance has simple notation developed for the Adavu-s based on the musical timing, simple symbols for basic head gestures and abbreviations for the Hasta-s.

The author projects this work as the “voyage of exploration into the realms of dance notation in general” Dr. G. Venu’s work on the notation of Hasta-s, “Alphabet of gestures in Kathakali” was first published in 1968. He took the 24 basic mudra-s as given in the “Hastalakshandipika” and put them symbolically with considering the viewing frontal, side and profile views. He made symbols for the rotary (Rechaka) movements of the wrist, movements of the fingers and that of the whole arms as well as combined them to create a whole arm action.

A most enriching and futuristic research article by Laban experts, Irmgard Bartenieff, Peggy Hackney, Betty True Jones, Judy Van Zile, Carl Wolz is “The potential of Movement Analysis as research tool: a preliminary Analysis” that has used the Cholkettu from the Mohiniattam for analysis using Laban’s Effort-Shape. The whole dance is notated directly using the Labanotation, with detailed descriptive notes on cultural context and research methodologies. The idea was more exploratory. “The movement analysis of Adavu-s” and “Movement Analysis of the different schools of Bharatanatyam” are the ongoing research projects since early 90s by the guide of this research work, Prof. Parul Shah and Prof. Mary Alice Brennan. In her Ph.D. thesis, Dr. Ami Pandya, with her guide Prof. Parul Shah, has used Laban Movement Notation as a tool to notate all the Adavus of
Bharatanatyam. It definitely is hard, meticulous, detailed work of 6 years and perhaps first solid step towards the making of dance notation in India.

Post-independence and in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century, tremendous changes are taking place in all areas of life in India which demand the preservation of important, vast and priceless heritage of the performing arts and Dance. The patterns are changing of the purpose of dance, the audience, the patronage, the dancers, in the relationship between gurus and pupils, the teaching, the presentation and also the creation. So the traditional system of transmission can no longer be relied on to pass on the whole gamut of the great heritage and knowledge from the past. The question of the movement notation and analysis is of prime importance.
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