

## **Innovations in the Classical: The Example of Odissi**

Cultural forms, like that of the classical dance, clearly have a relation to their social and economic contexts. When, therefore, those contexts change through development, it is inevitable that classical cultural forms will also change. It is beyond my scope here to attempt to enter into a full discussion of the nature of the classical, and of the ancient contexts for the dance forms in contrast to contemporary contexts. I would like, however, to investigate briefly the nature of the response of the classical dancer to a current situation in which the dance is apparently losing its rootedness in a primarily religious scene, and—while not altogether losing that religious atmosphere—is responding to a consumer-oriented “audience” in search of entertainment as much as anything else. Whatever we might think about it, the dancer must recognize the current situation for her art in order to keep it lively and relevant. Clearly, however, the transition from religious observance to performance presents some dangers as well as opportunities. We might think of this shift as a shift to “culture” in a sense that is now pretty well established in the West: something one attends for edification. Various Festivals of India promote this aspect of Indian art, and yet something of its original purposes are still evident.

I shall argue that as the dance form develops, inevitably, in response to developmental changes in the rest of society, the innovators in dance must do at least two things. They must keep their attention on the roots of their form—indeed they must constantly, on a day-by-day basis, rediscover those roots. By doing this they make it possible to consider what we might think of as the formal elements of the dance, and to draw as much on those formal elements as sources of change as they do on the economic forces of development that too often seem to be dictating a particular kind of change with particular values, which are not necessarily the only or best set of values. Secondly, of course, the dancer must keep vitally alert to the nature of her audience to see what kind of expectations and demands are being created by the new circum-

stances. Not unrelated to the latter is the role of both the large industrialists and businesses, and governments, which are becoming in India the new patrons of culture, standing in perhaps for the now gone figures of the courtly culture of the past.

When we talk about Classical Indian dance, we know exactly what we mean—or at least we think we do. We mean Odissi, and Bharatanatyam and the others. But when pressed to specify precisely the difference between a classical form of dance and some other forms we are bound to become vague, elusive, and possibly abusive as well. For, classical tends to mean 'the essence of our ancient culture' and again we all tend to think we know exactly what that is. The classical is old, recurrent, serious, important, and it tells us who we are historically. It preserves some deep continuity with the past. We might wonder if this was always so, however, and if it is the whole of the story. When Classical dance forms were first developing (in whatever lost moment we can imagine that as taking place), were they then maintainers of an ancient tradition, communicators of a serious past, or were they fresh, new, exciting, innovative, capable of surprise and discovery? We must imagine them so.

So why are they now 'classical' and what does that mean? The recent (of the last several hundred years, but especially of the last sixty years or so) history of the dance in India is well known. Suffice it to say that classical dance was in need of a resuscitation, a revival and rediscovery, begun, among others, by the legendary Ram Gopal, and Rukmini Arundale and continued by many others. In the case of Odissi, the current scene of the dance descends from two or three male Gurus, usually themselves *gotipua* dancers at one time, who have passed on some of their knowledge to young dancers, almost without exception women. They developed individual styles, more or less fluid, more or less lyrical, and so on, but in large measure they handed down what was already classically established. There has been some new choreography from these few gurus, but very little. Interestingly, the few examples of new choreography have (if they have been effective)—quickly come to occupy a secure place in the 'classical' repertoire. This would seem to be a paradox, at least to those who believe (for good or ill) that classical must mean not subject to change or innovation. One essential reason for the integration of such new compositions is that the dance form (all of the 'classical' dance forms) has changed radically in its shift from the temple to the performing stage. Dance has changed from being primarily a religious observation to being an artistic performance—certainly a performance still deeply imbued with religious elements. And as dancers must meet the needs of an

audience for entertainment, they become more and more aware of the danger of boring their spectators and so look avidly for new numbers.

But our very insistence that a form is classical means that we must believe that not every new number will be acceptable, some will fall outside the pale, some will be legitimate and some will not. How can we possibly decide, and where can we draw the line? The answer is that probably we cannot, at least if we expect the matter suddenly to become simple, requiring no effort and no considerable exercise of judgement. We shall always have to work hard to keep a classical form vigorous. And it seems fair to say that these days not much hard work is being put into keeping our classical forms vigorous. A high degree of repetition has taken over the efforts of our dancers. There is very little effort being put into the creation of new compositions, and less—virtually none—into the encouraging and staging of new compositions. Why should this be so?

It is so in part at least because of the curiously mixed nature of classical dance in our time. Our attitude to it is that it is enduring, always there, available and free to all. In short we do not think like western audiences do who feel some need to support their art forms (most of which are relatively new, unlike ours, and therefore more obviously fragile than we believe ours to be). At the same time we are aware in general that our 'culture' is a good selling point for the country, especially for our country's business. And if it were not for the interests of business houses in India, classical dance would not be available at all it seems. We have quietly handed over responsibility for our art to our businesses. The canniness of the businessman leads him to invest his money in a known quantity. So the current relative health of our dance forms has been bought at the cost of a certain stasis. Dancers have learned (unconsciously perhaps) that they will be successful if they repeat what was successful on previous occasions.

And why not one might ask? Well, I may be wrong, but I suspect a growing resistance to classical forms, especially amongst the young in our country. Readers can make their own observations to check me out on this, but my belief is that more young people are familiar with the names of Indian film stars and the plots and music of our films, familiar with the names and tunes of most of the major western pop music groups. But they are not familiar with our classical music, literature and dance. And they find their parents' lip-service to classical art boring. In a country now committed to necessary rapid development, old values either prove their currency or they go by the board.

Now, as I have suggested, classical dance in India has proved its worth, and it still holds a major place in the Festivals of India, events designed primarily as a marketing strategy for India, and likely to be

successful in increasing tourism and trade. But it is not altogether clear that our dance forms are thriving in full vigour. Nor that they are renewing themselves by means of legitimate innovation.

A recent article in *India Today* drew attention to experiments with classical forms. I was not able to witness these events so can have no view of their value. The author welcomed them with the naivete of one wishing to predict the arrival of a new fad. So much so that he declared that the *Natya Shastra* was no longer the only authority on dance. What was odd about this claim was that it did not tell us what the new authority is. And there we see precisely the problem that arises with the question of innovation. When you add something new in an established idiom, can you be sure that you have added something, or might it be that you have taken something away? Only one who is aware of the nature of creativity can live in the uncertainty of creativity. Ex cathedra judgements are ill-advised in this context.

Let me put it this way: suppose that experiments in dance, making use of elements from all of our classical forms are successful, what then? Insofar as such experiments make dance more appreciated by the public, good. It seems that we must imitate the west in this as well, and of course, free-form experimental dance troupes there are extremely important. A genuine analysis of our cultural forms, of course, cannot simply rest with the comfortable conclusion that what makes any audience happy is a good thing. Audiences, like dancers, differ in their abilities. And the analysis of public satisfaction is a matter for an analyst of ideology: is there anything in our pleasure seeking that makes us willing cogs in an economic wheel and inhibits our creativity? Questions that cannot be answered here, but questions to keep in the front of one's mind when considering experimental forms and audience response.

Some might argue that new experimental forms ought to be restricted because they might become so popular that they drive out the old forms. But one cannot legislate history in that way. If the old forms die it will be in part because of a failure to remain vital. Which does not necessarily mean that they have to remain thematically relevant—although in our time it is perhaps desirable for women dancers to question the creative desirability of mindlessly repeating stories of Sati and Sita. Where then can the classical forms turn if they are to reinvigorate themselves?

They can, on the one hand, turn to their roots. New growth needs a good root system, and our classical dance forms have good roots. Despite the claims of some, the *Natya Sastra* is not exhausted (it would have had to have been followed much more closely for it to have been exhausted). The temple sculptures, like those at Konarak which serve

as a handbook for the Odissi dancer are 'consulted' by thousands of tourists, but hardly ever by Odissi dancers. The classical literature, for those who can read and interpret Sanskrit, is a virtually endless source of verses, slokas, lyrics and dramas. And we can turn to our musicians, those neglected geniuses who hold in their hands and throats the richnesses of a tradition.

Given that, can we say what a new classical addition would be? I want to avoid giving the impression that I can fully answer that question. Instead I want to borrow the useful conception of B.C. Deva in *Indian Music*, who says that a classical form is one with a grammar. In that sense then, a classical form is structured like a language, and there are rules for making sense. The rules are not primarily restrictive, but every native speaker knows when a statement falls inside or outside the boundary of making sense. A grammar is an innate set of rules for making sense. A good performer, or speaker, of a language, performs necessarily according to the rules of combination of the particular language. Every native speaker, that is to say, has developed an unconscious knowledge of rules of the grammar, so that he can recognize a good sentence like "The car hit the wall" from a bad sentence like "The car walled the hit."

So if Odissi (or any other form) is classical, it has a grammar. Now, linguists tell us that there is an infinite number of new sentences that the grammar of a language can produce. That should mean that one could produce an endless number of new compositions in classical dance, and still be speaking the language of classical dance. How illiterate we seem to be indeed! One of the implications of what I have said is that only native speakers will know the rules. This means that only those for whom, either as dancers or as lovers of the art, have made themselves conversational in the form will recognize the grammatical from the ungrammatical. A non-speaker of any of the regional languages of India cannot be called upon to adjudicate a grammatical dispute in that language.

So, the conscious study of our classical forms is a task that always awaits us. And it will be successful only if it is a genuinely descriptive and analytic undertaking. Simple-minded attempts to codify the language of a dance form are bound to fail if they attempt to set up a set of arbitrary rules that will restrict rather than develop the form. From what we have said so far, then, it seems that not only is innovation called for, it is essential if we are to keep our dance forms as living rather than dead languages. Individual dancers and gurus can turn their energies to a practise which can be both traditional and new at the same time. From now on, whenever and wherever a suitable venue is facilitated, my own concerts will feature some of my own new compo-

sitions. On their own, however, without consistent institutional support, individuals can do only so much.