OBJECTIVES

Dances of India are a very important tourist attraction especially for those who have an interest in the cultural richness of India. Our purpose in this Unit is to acquaint you with dance as an art form. After reading the Unit you will be able to:

- know the theory and techniques of Indian dance forms,
- trace the history of Indian classical dances, and
- understand the distinctive features of some of the main styles of classical dances in India.

INTRODUCTION

Dance is nearly as old an art as the human civilization is. It has always been a part of the life of Indian people. Our religious literature recognized dance as an important activity in the human search for god. The relics of earliest civilization in India clearly demonstrate the importance of dance. In the later period too dance remained at the forefront of all the fine arts. We learn about it from the sculptures, from the paintings, as also from numerous textual treatises on the art of dance.

In its simplest and most obvious form and meaning, a dance is the physical expression of the emotive content of music. The pleasure of music is in the listening; the pleasure of dancing is in watching that music take a bodily shape and express its meaning in a visual experience. It is a miracle of both movement and stillness, of music and of silence, the dancer taking you into his/her innermost confidence.

In this Unit we shall take a closer look at this art form, called dance. The focus of our discussion shall be the classical dances of India.

DANCE: ATTRIBUTES

For such an ancient art as the dance, a study of the main attributes is essentially a matter of selection. We, therefore, focus on two main themes viz. the theory and the technique of dance in this section.

In Indian literary tradition there is no dearth of critical writings on the art of dance. Both, at the level of theory and technique, the texts provide valuable information. But the most important and also fundamental amongst all these works is Natyashastra. It was composed by Bharat, a sage, and its date is generally believed to fall between the 2nd century B.C. and
2nd century A.D. (in all probability around the 1st century A.D.) Most of the information on theory and technique given here is thus based on the same text.

9.2.1 Theory

The theory of Indian dance is holistic in its exposition and cannot be understood in isolation, without taking into account the technique of the dance. At the level of the technique, the art of dance has to be comprehended as an interesting synthesis of the arts of sculpture, painting, music, and even literature. The dance texts do not deal with the technique in isolation of one or all of the above. All the treatises, in fact, consider dance as one amongst many communication techniques. The Natyashastra thus states categorically, about dance, in the following words: This art will be enriched by the teachings of every scripture (shastra) and will give a review of all arts and crafts.

The theory of dance is an integral part of the tradition of drama (natya). It is, therefore, imperative to understand the conception of the drama to be able to realise the implications of the integrating character of the dance.

At a very early stage of development dance and drama fused themselves into one. Thus, by the time Natyashastra was composed, the dance was very much a part of drama. Evidently in the text then both appear as one - consciously conceived as one. They also have numerous points of contact. The theory of Indian dance has actually to be picked out and its principles selected with discrimination from the entire technique of drama prescribed by Bharata (Kapila Vatsayan, Indian Classical Dance, Publications Division, New Delhi, 1992).

There are three broad principles that govern the structure of Indian dance:

- The mode of presentation modes (dharmis)
  stage way (natya)
  way of the world (loka)

- Types of styles (vrittis) graceful (kaiseki)
  grand (sattavati)
  energetic (arabhati)
  verbal (bharati)

- Types of acting (abhinaya) gestures (angika)
  vocal (vachiak)
  stage props (acharya)
  temperament (sattvika)

It is, in fact, a combination of all or most of these principles which characterises the classical dance. The Natyashastra, as has been said above, does not discuss these in the context of dance or drama alone. This division is to be seen later texts such as Abhinaya Darpan, which deal with dance as an independent art. The treatment given to dance in Abhinaya Darpan becomes a standard for almost all later writers/commentators. Thus Sharangdeva, and the texts like Vishnudharmottara Purana and Natyashastra Sangraha more or less accept the same treatment and analysis.

9.2.2 Technique

According to Sangirnatakar, Abhinaya Darpana and other medieval treatises, dancing is divided into three distinct categories namely natya, nritya and nritya. Natya corresponds to drama and nritya to gesticulation when it is performed to the words sung in a musical melody. Nritta corresponds to pure dancing, where the movements of the body do not express any mood (bhava) and do not convey any meaning. All these aspects use movements of the limbs and poses of the human body as their medium.

The other type of distinction stated by these texts is that of tandava and lasya. Hence the technique of classical Indian dancing can be classified either under nritya, nritta and natya or tandava and lasya. These terms are prevalent among practising dancers, and we find that dancers from all parts of our country speak an identical language of basic technique, even though there may be serious variations in their interpretation.
On this basis the technique of dancing can be classified under two clear heads - pure dancing (nrutta) and dancing with miming and gesticulation (nritya). It would be more appropriate to term the latter as angika-abhinaya or just abhinaya.

Nritta

The nrutta technique of Indian dance emphasizes human movement. Indian dance is, in fact, a stringing together of a number of highly stylized and symbolic poses. The nratta technique encompasses not only the technique of rendering rhythm (tala) through movements which do not have meaning, but also important feature of projecting specific poses within the given rhythmic cycle.

Indian dance purposely emphasize only certain types of movements. It explores the full possibilities of those movements within consciously imposed limitation. None of the Indian dance styles use large leaps except for certain aspects of Kathakali and Chhau forms, and little or no discussion of them appears in the treatise on Indian dance.

Natyashastra contains detailed analysis of the movements of major limbs (the angas) and minor limbs (the upangas). The head, breast or chest, sides (waist), hips and feet constitute major limbs (angas), and the eyes, eyebrows, nose, lips, chin, mouth etc. constitute the minor limbs (upangas). This is followed by a discussion on basic stances i.e., the sthanas - the combination of these primary movements.

Abhinaya

The miming aspect of the natya termed as angikabhinaya in the Natyashastra is also an integral part of dancing. In dance (nrittya) it is known as abhinaya. Same principles applied to both drama and nritya or abhinaya.

In the nrutta portion, musical accompaniment utilizes swaras of a melody in a given rhythmic cycle (tala) and the variations of tala are interpreted by the feet and the other angas and upangas of the body. In the abhinaya portion, the musical accompaniment invariably consists of poetry, lyrical or narrative, which is set to music and rhythm. It is this poetry which is interpreted by the dancers. In the actual interpretation, especially in the solo dancing of all the classical styles, it consists of portraying the various transient states (sancharibhava) of the particular dominant state (thayibhava). This is done through a series of the angikabhinaya in which each word or line of poetry is interpreted in as many different ways as possible. In doing so, the principle of natyadharmi is fully followed - the dancer assumes different roles without change of dress or costume.

From amongst the movements of the angas and upangas the nritya or abhinaya portion depends mostly on the gesture of the hands and face especially the movements of the eyes, eyebrows, eyeballs etc.

The technique of Indian dance is as complex as the technique of any other art in India. It builds from its smallest part into a composite whole by a series of laws applied systematically. All this is done with a view to evolving a particular stage of mind or rasa.

Check Your Progress-1

1) Write four lines on the theory of Indian dance.
9.3 DANCE: HISTORICAL EVOLUTION

The history of Indian classical dance extends from the earliest days of civilization to the present day. India's pre-history and proto-history also provide sufficient evidence of this fact. For example, there is the dancing girl from Mohenjodaro and the broken torso of the Harappan period suggestive of dance pose. There are beautiful metaphors and similes in the Vedas based on the art of dance. Dance as a profession, and as a social activity, has been associated with all significant moments of the cycle of life.
Roughly speaking we can trace the history of dance into three main time divisions.

- The early period comprises the evidence found in the cave paintings, engravings, the evidence of Harappan civilization and the literary evidence which can be had from the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Brahmans, and the epics.
- The second period is from the second century B.C. to the ninth century A.D. This includes the evidence available from Buddhist stupas such as those of Bharhut, Sanchi, Bhaja, Amravati, and Nagarjunakonda, and the caves of Ellora and the temples in different parts of India from Kashmir to Orissa, specially, the early Gupta temples and those of Bhubaneswara.
- The third period - from the tenth or eleventh to the eighteenth century A.D. - period includes early medieval and late medieval monuments. While there are no literary records of the pre-historic period, in the later half of the first period (Vedic India) and in the second period, Sanskrit exercised outstanding influence on the intellectual and artistic life of the people and its rich literature manifested the all-round development of the arts in the country. This may be considered as a period of unity along with the emergence of some regional styles. In the third period, there was a marked development of regional architectural, sculptural, pictorial music and dance styles along with the development of regional literature.

9.3.1 Archaeological and Literary Evidence

It was in the second period that there was the first articulation of a self-conscious understanding of dance as an art. It is found that there was an effort at stylized reliefs show that they had arrived at a stereotyped convention merely to be followed or repeated. The motifs in the sculptural tradition of Krishna and Yakshis and many others, all these Yakshis who stand against tree and women and men are seen in the dance pose. Alongside are dance scenes with full orchestra. This is also the period of the emergence of some sculpture, especially Siva, Durga, Saraswati and Ganesha. Each has a dance aspect popularly called the aittamurti. From this second period, we realize that the dance as art must have been central to the culture and the sculptor to have been inspired to arrest it in stone repeatedly.

To this second period also belonged the construction of stupas and temples. Different aspects of life have been depicted on the railings and gates of stupas, and the walls of the temples. Amongst these are the motif of dancer, the dance recital as also the dancing aspect of god and goddess. The Orissan temples of Bhubaneswara and even earlier the stupas of Ratnagiri tell us of the pre-occupation of the sculptor with the image of dance. The temples of Raja-Rani, of Parsurameswara, and of Lingraja - all reverberate with music and dance. Innumerable figures entwined with trees or pillar holding birds, standing on animals or dwarfs smiling or more serious, are depicted in panel after panel on the outer walls of these temples. Looked at closely, one is impressed by the fact that the sculptor was not only a keen observer of movement, but was also a self-conscious illustrator of the basic positions i.e. the sthanas and the fundamental movements called the charis described in the Natyashastra. The monuments of Central India especially those of Khajuraho built by Chandelans and, Udaiyashwar of the Parmaras belonging to the 11th and 12th centuries also present a wide array of movement patterns from solo standing figures to figures in ardhamandali, to groups and finally to the most impressive series of flying figures, leaves a staggering impression of the popularity of dance.

These sculptors and painters record in stone and in painting, through line and colour, what no chronicle could record in words. This tradition continues in miniature painting. Some
are inspired by Buddhist texts other by Jaina themes and yet others by Hindu Puranic myths and legends. The evidence of dance in mural paintings ranges from the famous dance scenes of Bagh caves to Ajanta, Ellora and Pannamalai.

9.3.2 Literary Evidence

This impression of the pervasive popularity of the dance motif is further reinforced by the evidence available in Sanskrit literature of the classical period. In the epics Ramayana and the Mahabharat, many dance performances are prescribed. In the works of poets Bhasa, Kalidas, and others, until the time of Harsha, we encounter many precise descriptions of dancers and dance recitals. From all this, one can gather that the poet and the dramatist were equally well-versed in the technical intricacies of dance. They appreciated the aesthetic beauty and drew upon this art to structure their play on poetic or dramatic edifice. None of the plays of Kalidas, Bhavabhuti, and Harsha had been conceived of as drama dependent on the spoken word alone. The communication system employed by the writer takes into account not only the verbal communication through gestures, costumes, decor alone but all the inner states of being which are reflected in involuntary expressions. This tradition was established in India many centuries prior to the writing of the plays of Bhasa or Kalidas. This is evident from the codification of these communication techniques in the first treatise on dramaturgy i.e. the Natyashastra. This tradition continuous in the plays of Bhavabhuti and Harsha and culminates in the work of Rajshekhra. Many examples of this could be cited from the
dramatic works of the 10th century A.D. *Karpuramanjari* is the example of this where the
dramatic form, chiefly utilizing the verbal hand, gives place to the musical play. Now it is
clear that the musical play was an important genre in the Sanskrit tradition. However, its full
and vigorous flowering took place only in the early and the late medieval period say 9th
century A.D and continuing until 11th and 12th century A.D.

In the 9th and 10th century a commentary of *Natyashastra* by *Abhinavagupta* was written.
The commentary of *Abhinavagupta* began a new phase of the evolution of different theories
of aesthetic and artistic creation.

From the 13th century onwards one can find manuals on dance from practically every region
of the country. Even a superficial study of these manuals emphasizes two broad facts; first,
that despite regional variations all schools subscribed to the basic principles of the
*Natyashastra* tradition. The dance continued to be divided into *natya* and *nritta* on one hand
and into *tandava* and *lasya* on the other. The second is that, although they continued to follow
these broad principles, many distinctive regional styles evolved and each region ultimately
developed a distinctive vocabulary. This second fact led to the formulation of different
classical styles in India. The beginning of the contemporary classical styles - be it
*Bharatnatyam, Kathakali, Manipuri, Odissi, or Kathak* - can be traced back to
developments in the medieval period, roughly dating from 1300 A.D. to 1800 A.D. (*Kapila
Vatsyayan*)

The recent revival of interest in dance, developed as a sign of national pride in the glories of
indigenous art and culture, helped the development and popularity of our various dance
styles. During the past five decades many layers of the past artistic glory have been uncovered.
The digging continues and each time one delves deeper, a greater treasure is discovered.

Check Your Progress-2

1) What is the nature of archaeological evidence on dance in India?

2) Discuss the information on dance available in the literary sources.
In this Section we present the details of three more prominent and popular styles of Indian classical dances.

9.4.1 Bharatnatyam

Bharatnatyam is perhaps the oldest among the contemporary classical dance forms of India. Its claim to antiquity rests not on the name which is derived from the name Bharata and thus associated with the Natyashastra, but on the overwhelming literary, sculptural and historical evidence available.

The Bharatnatyam dancer's repertoire is extensive. It is fairly well established that the dance was performed both as a solo dance and in groups. However, the present form of Bharatnatyam crystallized as a solo dance about the 19th century, primarily through a remarkable contribution of four brothers from Tanjore - Chinnayya, Pannayya, Vadivelu and Sivanandam.

In the villages, Bharatnatyam continued as part of the presentation of the Bhagvata Mela tradition in the villages of Nellore, Melattured, Soolmangalam etc. However, here only it was men who performed the dance. The efforts of E.Krishna Iyer and later of other pioneers, lit a small torch for a new awareness. On this scene came others from very different background. Rukmani Devi decided to study Bharatnatyam under the grand old master Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai and from Mylapura Gauri Amma. In 1936 she gave her first performance. This was the lighting of a new fire. Finally, there was the emergence of dancers from the families of the traditional repositories. The most important amongst them were Devadasis who decided to perform in the public. Thus Balsaraswati gave her first public performance outside the traditional milieu in Varansi in 1935.

The post Independence period was an era of revival and reconstruction. Institutions begun by Rukmani Devi, recitals performed by Balsaraswati and disciples trained by Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai, such as Shanta Rao, all left a deep impact. Some continued the tradition of their peers others reconstructed and recombined fragments they found into a new whole.

Normally, a recital opens with alarippu, considered a creation. It is performed, beginning with perfect repose and an attitude of perfect equilibrium (sambhanga) in the standing posture. The movements of neck shoulder and arms are introduced with great charm. The movements of all major and minor limbs are employed in their simplest forms. The basic attitude of these items is obeisance to the God of Dance.

In the next piece called jatiswaram, the performer weaves several patterns on a basic musical composition. The basic material patterns (tala) which guide the music also guide the dancers. Here the dancer introduces for the first time, full sequence of various types of adavus or dance cadence.

The piece that follows is called sabdam, again a composition of Carnatic music. Here the dancer performs to a song and introduces mime. The miming is deliberately elementary and only the literal illustration of the word is presented through movement. The end sequences of this short number are of pure dance and serve as a bridge between the pure nritta composition like the alarippu and the jatiswaram on the one hand and the major composition of the varnam on the other.

After having introduced substantially all elements of the dance, the dancer proceeds to render the varnam, which is easily the most intricate and complex number. The varnam provides the fullest scope to the dancer to improvise on a given theme. Like the jatiswaram and sabdam this varnam is essentially a musical composition rendered through dance.

9.4.2 Kathak

Kathak is one of the most popular dance forms of North India. It is also called as the Natwari dance. The genesis of this dance is commonly traced from the word Kathak figuring in ancient Sanskrit lexicons. It indicated the existence of a community of story-tellers through enacting the various parts of the story. The Jain religious literature also mentions a specific category of people - the entertainers - through a word Kahag. In its present form Kathak
was developed and given patronage in the court of the Nawabs of Awadh. One noticeable deviation from the original structure of Kathak during its growth in Awadh is the preponderance of sensuous elements. Musical forms such as tappa and thumri now provided the rhythmic base for the dance. The two percussion instruments that have come to be used heavily in Kathak performances are tabla and pakhawaj.

The dance is composed of three basic parts - the dance prose, movement (gat), and the enactment (abhinaya). The dance is only rhythmic play of the different parts of body. Movement (gat) is the depiction of, primarily, the Krishna Leela through facial expressions in consonance with different postures of hands and arms. The feet respond to the musical rhythm by thumping the ground. Enactment (abhinaya) is the climax. Here the dancer sings and through different dance postures enacts the story.

The costume used in Kathak is generally a brilliant sherwani (long coat), churidar pajama (tight breaches), a decorated cap and angarakha (fine tunic) etc. The Muslim and Rajput impact is clearly visible on the costume.

Kathak has been promoted through three main gharanas - Lucknow, Jaipur, and Banaras. In fact the Jaipur and Banaras gharanas owe their origin to the Lucknow gharana. The kings of Kathak, Lachhu Maharaj and Shambhu Maharaj, belong to Lucknow. This gharana was founded by their grandfather Maharaj Thakur Prasad, who was a courtier and the dance teacher of Nawab Wajid Ali Shah. His two sons, Maharaj Kalka Prasad and Bindadin did yeoman service to the cause of Kathak. Some of the other important artists have been Birju Maharaj, Gopi Krishna, Sitara Devi, Damyanti Joshi, etc.

9.4.3 Kathakali

Kathakali is the dance from the southernmost state of India - its centre has been the region of Kerala and Malabar. The genesis of the word Kathakali is generally traced to a combination of Katha and Keli, the literal meaning of which is dance-drama. This tradition of dance-drama has been popular in the Malabar region primarily in the form of Krishna and Rama ballets. The same folk-art was rechristened, in the 17th century A.D., by the ruler of Travancore State, Manaraja Veerkeral Verma, as Kathkali. The lyrics used in this dance seem to be influenced very largely by Jaidev's Gita-Govinda.

This dance form, curiously, is an exclusive domain of the male dancers. Even female roles in the story line are performed to perfection by male artists. In support of the performance of dance, a group of singers keep continuously reciting the poems and epics. The artists who perform Kathakali do not sing the lines themselves. The actions are all executed in silence by the artists, only through the poses and postures of body and face. These dance postures are more complex than those used in Bharatnatyam.

One of the peculiarities of this dance form is its costume and very elaborate make-up of the face. In this respect Kathakali has presented and also kept alive and continued the ancient dance-dramas of Kerala, such as Chakkiyarkuthu and Kuttiyattam. The face is mostly painted with red and yellow and the eyes and eye-lashes are adorned with lines in white all around. These white lines are known as Chuttee. The head-dress in Kathakali is of special significance as it also defines the hierarchical status of different artists participating in the performance.

The dance is performed all through the night on a stage which is simple yet specially designed for Kathakali. A large brass lantern is invariably hung on the stage. The beginning of the performance is preceded by Chaidakaran, a ritual playing of drums. Traditionally the stage presentation of this dance was immediately preceded by a practice session called sevakali and undertaken in the precincts of a temple.

Late Shankaram Namboodiri and Gopinath have been Kathkali artists of repute. In the propagation of this dance form late Vallatol, the famous poet and dancer of Kerala had done tireless work. He had made it suitable to the requirements of changing times. An organization, known as Keral Kalu Mandalam, was set up by him and has since done commendable work.
Check Your Progress

1) Describe the structural composition of Bharatnatyam dance.

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2) Write in the following space some of the main features of the facial make-up of Kathkali.

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9.5 LET US SUM UP

Dance is part of a musical triumvirate of song, instrument and dance. The three cannot be separated yet in many ways retain individual identity. Dance can be traced, in the form of an art, from the dawn of Indian civilization. Centuries of refinements and introduction of new elements have today made dance one of the most elaborate arts. It is also sustained by a rich theoretical lexicon and vivid details of technique. Since dance is an essentially visual art, it has also found a prominent place in the rich tapestry of Indian culture. Thus sculptures on temples and paintings both mural and miniature have depicted dance in its myriad forms rather profusely.

Indian classical dances are today one of the most important tourist attractions. The ambience provided by our glorious architecture has only added to this attraction. The backdrop of our ancient and medieval monuments is an ideal foil for arranging the performances of classical dances. And this is today turning out to be a prime tourism mover.

We have also discussed in this Unit three more prominent classical dances. There are, however, several others which may merit attention. Some of these may be listed thus: Odissi, Manipuri, Mohiniattam, etc.

9.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress-1

1) See Sub-Sec.9.2.2
2) See Sub-Sec.9.2.3
Dance

Check Your Progress-2

1) See Sub-Sec.9.3.1
2) See Sub-Sec.9.3.2

Check Your Progress-3

1) See Sub-Sec.9.4.4
2) See Sub-Sec.9.4.3