

THE CLASSICAL INDIAN DANCE AND SCULPTURE

Markandeya told King Vajra in the *Viṣṇudhar-mōttara Purāna* that he must learn the art of dance before he learned the art of icon making, and the art of music before he learned the art of the dance; he added that rhythm (*tāla*) was basic to them all. This story is significant from the point of view of the Indian Arts, since it points towards the inter-relationship of the arts not on the level of the aesthetic experience alone, but also that of technique.

The aim of the Indian artists, in the fields of literature (*sāhitya*), sculpture (*śilpa*), painting (*chitrakalā*), music (*sangīta*) and dance (*nritya*), has been the evocation of a state of mind (often termed as “sentiment”—*rasa*). This state of mind is essentially a state of awareness of reality in its manifold forms through the medium of emotion.

The smallest units of space, colour, sound, movement have been recognised in India for their emotive content and their related sentiment (*rasa*), permanent state (*sthāyī bhāva*) and transitory state (*sanchārī bhāva*). The aesthetic theory of the

ancients was only a codification of a principle already in practice and the artist very consciously and deliberately employed this complex technique in his art.

In Indian dance and Indian music, the continuity of this practice has been preserved, as it has not been in the other arts in India. If we analyse the constituents of the Indian dance, we discover that it combines in one art form the technique of several others. It takes a piece of poetry, which has its particular *rasa*, *sthāyī bhāva* etc. and this piece of poetry, narrative or lyric, is set to music in a particular *rāga* (melody) and a particular *tāla* (metrical cycle): the *tāla*, and more particularly the *rāga*, also has its particular *rasa*, *sthāyī bhāva* etc.: each note of the melody and each word of the poem have to synchronise with each other with the single aim of evoking a particular emotive state (the *rasa*). The dancer pursues the same aim in her interpretation of this poetry and this *rāga* through movement. The poses she strikes are sculpturesque, not only because she holds a stance in a given point of time, but also because through a succession of them she realises the moods and attributes of Gods and Goddesses, as laid down in iconography. Her treatment of space is similar to the sculptor's and each single unit of movement of the human body is significant in so far as it is related to the ultimate objective of evoking the particular emotive state (*rasa*). There are thus points of contact between the Indian arts where two arts become one and indistinguishable. The sculptor captures movement in a static form and the dancer gives movement to the static form; indeed it is often said that the Indian dance is a continuous stringing together of many static poses. Music organises sound to create a particular aesthetic state; dance does the same through the human form. To this end, it makes use of the achievements of sculpture, literature and music.

While it is not necessary to go into the application of the *rasa* to all the Indian arts, it is worthwhile pointing out that the classical Indian arts should be critically judged and analysed only within the framework of this theory. The *rasa* theory was to be understood, both as a philosophic theory of aesthetics, and also as a theory of technique. A parallel study of any two Indian Arts is rewarding on many levels because one observes

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that the Indian Arts use diverse implements of technique with the identical aim of evoking a particular emotive state (*rasa*). The study of words in literature, sound in music, mass and plane in sculpture, line and colour in painting, or human movement in Indian dance, as vehicles of a most completely conceived technique, is as fascinating as it is overpowering. For in the Indian arts, we find that the most precise mathematical abstractions in various combinations are imbued with deep feeling so as to evoke a unified experience on the psychical as well as the intellectual plane. It is for this reason that any Indian Art can hardly be understood or analysed in its entirety without understanding its relationship with the other arts, or at least being aware of the artist's use of the achievements of the other arts.

In the dance, literature, music, and sculpture are all used and thus a comparison of the Indian dance with any of the other arts throws not only interesting light on the technique of the dance itself but helps us in understanding the other art also.

The relationship between sculpture and dancing can be observed on many levels. There is first and foremost the relationship of the plane of the aesthetic aim. To both the Indian sculptor and the Indian dancer, the human form is important only in so far as it is an instrument through which the final emotive state (the *rasa*) can be suggested—the actual, the real, and for that matter the particular cease to have significance, nor do they provide the starting point. Both the dancer and the sculptor begin with the firm belief that artistic expression follows a state of spiritual realization and the artist only seeks to suggest the truth of the thing he has realized through the medium of the art form. Neither is concerned with men and women in their state of action or with the resolution of a conflict through the art form; instead their concern is with states of being which can be expressed through the human form and which in turn can evoke similar states of being in the spectator. Movement thus is a completely conceived discipline where through the vehicle of the human form, the personal and the subjective is completely depersonalised and universalised. Everything that would draw attention to the merely physical is shed and everything that can play a part in suggesting the "idea,"

the state of being, is emphasized. The elaborate technique of either of these arts is the means through which each single unit of the human figure can be used symbolically to suggest a state of being. The technique which was evolved through a practice of centuries was a technique in which the medium of expression was first broken up into its smallest units. Then these units were combined in certain patterns so that the next unit had an emotional validity; permutations and combinations that followed were determined by the artists' awareness of the emotive quality of the particular units and their capacity of coming into contact with one another to produce certain emotive effects.

In sculpture, thus, the human body was broken up into its smallest physical units. But since the ultimate aim was to stress the timeless, the one and the unchangeable, the human muscles and the tendons ceased to have any significance. The Indian sculptor's concern is not with the relaxation and the tension of the muscles, but with the structure of the human figure; with the source of movement rather than the means by which it is achieved. The joints assume an importance which is not noticeable at first, but the more carefully one looks at Indian sculpture, the more one discovers that the human form is indeed seen as mass with three key points of motivation. The neck is the pivot responsible for all movements of the face and the head; the shoulder joint and the pelvis for the movements of the torso; the pelvis and the knees (and the feet) for the movements of the lower limb. In fact, if Indian sculpture is analysed from the point of view of mass and space manipulation, one discovers that it is the relative distance and positioning of the particular parts of a human body which suggest states of peace or disturbance, denote static or dynamic quality, comparative relaxation or tension. Since it is not a particular character that is being depicted, surface treatment is unimportant and the desire of the Indian sculptor is always to draw the attention of the spectator from the outer to the inner, from the point of disturbance to the point of perfect balance; so much so that, to the Hindu mind, images become diagrams for contemplation rather than sculptural representation of actual men and women.

The Indian sculptor's treatment of space is governed by

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three main concepts. There are the *sūtras* (the axes) along three planes, there are the deflections from these axes (the *bhaṅgas*), and there are the units of measurement (the *tālas*) on different planes which indicate the relative largeness or smallness of the image. The *tāla*, the *sūtra* and the *bhaṅga* determine the nature of the image. If a particular emotive state (*rasa*) is to be suggested, then a particular measurement (the *tāla*) should be chosen. The permanent state (the *sthāyī bhāva*), in turn, determines the particular *bhaṅga*, and the relative distribution of weight along the different axes denotes the state of comparative calm or tension in the image.

Viewed vertically, the human figure is conceived of two equal halves divided by a vertical median (the *brahma-sūtra*). This is the constant, the invariable, and stands for the unchangeable pull of gravity. All movement is visualised in relation to this vertical median. The other four vertical axes enumerated in the texts of sculpture (the *śilpāsāstras*) are variables and are drawn from different points of the human figure in different types of images. These are the *madhyasūtra*, the *pārśvasūtra*, the *kakṣhasūtra* and the *bāhusūtra*. Vertically the human figure can be broken up in terms of these axes, and the relative positioning of different parts of the body from the central median indicates the relative states of dynamism or composure. Along the horizontal plane, the human figure is broken up into three main sections, determined by the major joints of the human skeleton. There is the horizontal axis called the *hikkāsūtra* at the neck, the *bhadrasūtra* at the navel, and the third, the *katisūtra* at the pelvis. Thus the head, up to the pivotal neck-point, forms one major unit, the torso forms another unit and the lower limbs from the pelvis downwards form yet a third. The transverse plane is also visualised and various axes along the thickness are defined. All space around the human figure is thus comprehended in terms of measurement along the three planes. The *māna* is thus the measurement along the vertical plane, the *pramāna* is the measurement along the horizontal plane and the *parimāna* is the measurement along the periphery, that is, the surface or in the round. There are the other measurements known as the *unamāna*, the *upamāna*, *lambamāna*. The human figure thus is reduced into its simplest

mathematical abstraction, and the artist's effort is to combine these units in such a way that the final stance attained can convey a state which is imbued with deep feeling. To this end, the artist employs the principle of the manipulation of weight to the fullest. The study of deflections (the *bhaṅgas*) in Indian sculpture is nothing if not a study in the distribution of mass and a codification of the laws of balance.

The *samabhaṅga* is, consequently, the position of perfect balance; the weight of the two halves of the human figure is equally divided along the *brahmasūtra* and there is equal and perfect distribution of weight. Since the principle is one of equal division, the *samabhaṅga* can be achieved in the standing, sitting or reclining positions. The perfect equilibrium suggests mental and emotional equilibrium and thus gods and goddesses, men and women in states of peace (*śānta*), stillness and meditation are depicted through the *samabhaṅga*. The standing, sitting or reclining figures of Buddha or Vishnu or Brahmā will belong to this category. Sarasvati in her quiet mood, Lakshmī in her peaceful mood are depicted through the *samabhaṅga*.

The point of imbalance, but not of movement, naturally appears with a slight shift of the weight. This is motivated from the pelvis, the *katisūtra*. Since this is the point only of a slight asymmetry (in fact only of relaxation without a sense of break), the mildly erotic, the sweetly vivacious can be depicted through this deflection. The *abhaṅga*, therefore, is the stance of *śringāra* (the sentiment of love), the *vira* (the heroic sentiment) and sometimes *karuṇa* (the sentiment of compassion); the images of Kodanda Rāma, the Devi images of Gouri and Parvatī, the playful moods of *Kalyānasundara* are all in *abhaṅga* pose.

Finally, there is the *tribhaṅga* or the *atibhaṅga*, where the deflections from the central median are the greatest. The face from the *bikkāsūtra* deflects to one side, the torso above the *bhadrasūtra* swings to the opposite side and the lower limbs swing back, more often than not, to the side of the face. The deliberate unequal distribution of weight gives the Indian sculptor the opportunity to depict the maximum deviations from the *brahmasūtra* and as such to suggest states of dynamism. When the distribution is conceived as in the *Natarāja* pose, then it represents the rhythm of cosmic movement; when it is deliber-

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ately less disciplined or rigorous it depicts the states of *vībhatsa* (disgust), *raudra* (anger), or *bāsyā* (laughter). The Indian sculptor could thus through the placing of the feet, the movement of the hip, the deflection of the torso, the slight bends of the neck suggest certain states of mind, without depending upon facial expression.

Without going into great detail of the nature of this modelling, we can be fairly certain that to the ancient Indian sculptor the human figure was a sacred instrument through which the supreme states of being could be depicted; the body changeless, the human form immutable were his concern, and he did everything to emphasize this changeless and timeless aspect.

The Indian dancer, like the Indian sculptor, is not concerned merely with the beautiful body, the changing form, the conflicts and resolution through movement of the personal self. The human figure is instead an impersonal medium where the personal, the subjective and the merely physical have no part to play. The dancer is indeed only the impersonal vehicle through which a theme, a state of being is being transmitted. Through each stance, each hand gesture, each movement of the limb, he or she must convey the basic emotive state (the *sthāyī bhāva*); what may seem spontaneous improvisation to the spectator, is the result of a rigorous discipline where the human form can be used only in a certain way and not in any other way. The dancer conveys as much through the use of the limbs as through the deliberate absence of movement.

In Indian dance, therefore, the dancer is not expressing anything subjective. As a result, the human figure can be broken up into its smallest units and these units can be recombined in such a manner that the combination has an emotional validity. Each single part of the human body is analysed and its physical possibilities of movement along various planes are studied. Then each of these possibilities is given a significance insofar as each is the vehicle of a particular transitory or permanent state. The movements of separate parts of the body then combine into larger units of the head, torso, upper or lower limbs and they, in turn, combine to form single units of movement and these units of movement form cadences of the dance. In fact, even in the theory of the Indian dance, movement is conceived

as a continual process of change from one sculpturesque stance to the next.

The poses so characteristic of the Indian dance are executed to emphasize a point of perfect balance. In fact all movement in Indian dance emerges from this point of balance or perfect stillness and this is none other than the *samabhanga* of Indian sculpture. All movement returns to this point of perfect balance and stillness. Like the Indian sculpture, the Indian dancer does not lay much emphasis on the muscles of the human form and takes the joints and the bone structure of the human skeleton as its basis. This enables the dancer to achieve absolute form and geometrical patterns in space. There is no desire on the part of the Indian dancer to be released from the pull of gravity even if temporarily; this explains the deliberate avoidance of leaps in the Indian dance, a feature so characteristic of the western classical ballet. The Indian dancer's preoccupation is not with space as with time; she is always striving towards a perfect pose which will convey the sense of timelessness, of the unchanging and the everpresent. It is thus that she achieves different stances in time rather than in space and the entire intricacy of the Indian dance technique lies in the very fine and deliberate manipulating of the movement of the human figure within a given metrical cycle (*tāla*). The Indian dancer achieves a series of poses and the perfect pose coincides with the first beat of the metrical cycle, and at no point is it the attempt of either the dancer or the musician to get away from a self-imposed limitation of space. The entire system of movement, as conceived by Bharata in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, is a system wherein movement is seen and studied within a self-imposed limitation and once the framework is indicated, then all possible permutations and combinations of human movements are allowed.

As in Indian sculpture, so also in Indian dance, the human body is divided into two broad divisions, viz., the major limbs (the *angas*) and the minor limbs (the *upāṅgas*). The head, the chest, waist, hips, feet and hands constitute the major limbs; the face, the eyebrows, the eyeballs, the eyelids, nose, lips, chin, mouth constitute the minor limbs. There are then parts of the body which are not the key points of movement but which are important in different portions of the technique of the dance

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called the *pratyāṅgas*; the forearm, the thigh, the shanks etc. constitute the *pratyāṅgas*. Here also the body is divided into two equal halves along the vertical median, that is the *brahmasūtra*. All the stances of the Indian dance in the elementary and complex movements are defined in terms of weight manipulation along this vertical median. More important, however, are the three horizontal *sūtras* we have spoken about in Indian sculpture. Along the neck is the *bikkā-sūtra* of Indian sculpture, and the movements of the face described in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* correspond to the movements of the human figure above the pivot neck joint. There are then the movements of the torso and these are conditioned by the shoulder joints on the one hand and the pelvis on the other. There are finally movements of the lower limbs, which are motivated from the pelvis; the flexions of the knees, and the placing of the feet determine the nature of the stance, while knee and ankle joint play a most important role in the Indian dance technique. In fact, it would be correct to say that the key points from which movement emerges in the lower and upper limbs in the Indian dance technique are the knee, pelvis, shoulder, and the neck joints. The classification of human movement in Indian texts has, therefore, followed the two categories mentioned above; that is, the movements of the major limbs and the movements of the minor limbs. The movements of the major limbs are all emphasized in the pure dance technique, i. e., the *nritta*. The movements of the minor limbs are emphasized in the mime positions (*abhinaya*) of the Indian dance.

One could go on to describe in great detail the classification of movement in the Indian dance technique and its unbroken tradition of practice in the various styles of contemporary Indian dance, but this deserves an independent study. No matter what the particular style of the Indian dance, the significant thing to observe is that both the Indian dance and the Indian sculpture were deliberately using the human figure within a self-imposed limitation of space and weight manipulation and the technique that resulted was not only similar but was practically identical. The identity was indeed so great that when the Indian dancer took certain poses, then those poses were none other than the well-known poses of Indian iconography. On the other hand,

when the Indian sculptor represented certain states of mind, he followed closely not only the rules and regulations of sculpture but also those of the dance. On account of this outstanding feature, it is possible to this day to study forms of Indian dance prevalent during a certain historical period through sculptural representations. Conversely, it is also true that many iconographical forms are seen in the execution of the Indian dance today.

During the course of history, different regions in India each developed a distinct sculptural school. The dance also developed its distinct type of stylization in different regions of India. It is interesting to note that the stylization of sculpture and dance in each region was very similar. Thus in mediaeval sculpture, when there were two distinct schools of sculpture, there were also at least two distinct schools of the Indian dance. Very broadly speaking, there was the mediaeval school of the East and North, namely the Orissan sculpture and sculpture as seen in Khajuraho. There was then the South Indian sculpture of stone and bronze of the Chola and Pallava period. In the first, there was an emphasis on the waist and of movements emerging from the spinal cord. There was also an emphasis on the elongated waist as also on delicate modelling of the legs with little or no flexion of the knees. When we compare this treatment of the human figure with the treatment of the human in styles such as the Odissi and Manipuri, we realize that the dancers of these styles today are treating the human figure exactly in the same manner as the sculptures of these periods. Similarly, when we look at the sculptures from South India, especially of the Chola and Pallava period, and when we see a *Bharatnatyam* dance recital, we realise how intimately South Indian sculpture and *Bharatnatyam* are related.

We shall deal here only with a few motifs: make a comparison between the treatment in Indian sculpture and Indian dance, as seen in Chola and Pallava sculptures of South and *Bharatnatyam* as practiced today.

One of the outstanding features of the Chola and Pallava period is the treatment of the human figure wherein the torso is invariably used as one single unit and is never broken up. Another feature is the absence of the use of an exaggerated hip

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deflection. A third feature is again the absence of any circular movements emerging from the pivot neck joint or from the waist. When we look at *Bharatnatyam*, we find that the *Bharatnatyam* dancer is always using the human figure in order to achieve straight lines and angles rather than curves or circular forms. It would be worthwhile, therefore, to take for purposes of this comparison, examples of different types of deflections, both in Indian sculpture and in Indian dance.

Let us take the first example of a standing *samabhanga* position. As we have explained earlier, in this position there is perfect distribution of weight, and it is equally divided between the two halves of the body. We see here that both the feet are on the ground and there is an impression of the erectness of the torso and the spinal cord. All dancing in *Bharatnatyam* begins from this position and comes back to this position. All *Sattvika* images of Indian sculpture are also seen in this position. In fact, the *Sama* to which the dancer returns is all important in all styles of Indian dancing; and at this *sama*, except in very rare cases, the pose achieved is one of composure of perfect integrated balance.

There is then the *abhanga*. There are two outstanding examples of the *abhanga* in South Indian sculpture, namely the famous Kodanda Rāma and the Devi image. In both, we find that the right leg is erect and there is a small flexion of the left knee. The weight of the body is on the right foot and this, in turn, results in a slight deflection of the right hip to the right. This deflection in the Devi images, as also the Kodanda Rama, stands for the slightly erotic and the mildly heroic. In *Bharatnatyam*, the Indian dancer takes this position whenever either Sita or Gauri have to be depicted or the character of Kodanda Rama is portrayed. The hands are also similar in both the arts, although their names may differ in texts of iconography and of the Indian dance. The dancer is constantly trying to achieve the perfect *dola* or *lata hasta* of the Devi image and the sculpture is aiming at the perfect moment of movement.

Finally, there is the *tribhanga* or the *atibhanga* and this provides us with our richest field of comparisons. There are the *nrittamūrtis* of Indian Gods and Goddesses in Indian sculpture, especially South Indian sculpture, and there are also the dance

scenes and dance poses represented in Indian sculpture. We know the dance pose of the *Natarāja* and the dance poses of Sarasvati, Laksmī and Vishnu. The dance representation is seen on the walls of hundreds of Indian temples from the earliest times, but by the 13-14th century, it has achieved a stylization which is unmistakable. The distinct feature of this stylization is the position of the knees wherein both the knees are thrown sideways which is the basic position of *Bharatnāṭyam* today. This position, which is known in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* texts as the *ksipta* or *ardha mandalī* position of the knees, is the *ukkara mandalī* of contemporary *Bharatnāṭyam*. In fact, whenever scholars have found this out-thrown position of the feet with flexed knees, they have identified the figure as a dance figure. This is a feature which is common to the representations of the dance all over India and is not limited only to dance representation in South Indian sculpture. From the universal representation of this position of the knees in India, it would not be incorrect to conclude that about the 14th century practically all forms of Indian dance used this *ksipta* position of the knees. One triangle is formed by the feet as the apex and the line joining the knees as the base. This triangle is repeated by another triangle with its base on the line joining the two knees and the apex on the waist. A third inverted triangle is conceived of with the waist as the apex and the line joining the two shoulders as the base. All movement in the lower limbs does not deviate from the principle of the median we have spoken about but emphasizes it in every possible manner, and this basic out-turned position of the feet and the flexed knees is imperative in *Bharatnāṭyam*. Thus, whether it was the image of *Natarāja*, where one foot was lifted in the *bhujangānchita*, or whether it was the dancing Sarasvati, where one foot was lifted in the *ūrdhvajānu*, the other leg invariably was on the ground and in this *ksipta* (flexed knee) position. This feature is characteristic of the contemporary dance and it is easy to illustrate how the good *Bharatnāṭyam* dancer executes all movements by deliberately keeping one half of the body in this constant position. All movement is of the one uplifted foot or leg and never of both together.

The *Bharatnāṭyam* dancer, like the South Indian sculptor, does not break the torso and thus there are seldom any move-

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ments of the waist (*pārśva*). These movements of the waist, so characteristic of the Manipuri dancing and of the *śālabhanjikās* of Bhuvaneśvara and Khajurāho, are never seen in South Indian sculpture. The torso is used as one single unit and is invariably bent sideways, backwards or forwards as a single unit in quick, sharp, and terse movements. In South Indian sculpture, we find that the sculptor rarely takes a liberty with this law, though in a few representations in the *Amman* in *Chidambaram* this principle is erred against. However, in all South Indian bronze and stone sculpture in the round, this is still a distinct feature. In the *adavus* of *Bharatnāṭyam*, it is this aspect which is emphasized repeatedly. The dancer is continually told to keep her torso as erect as she can. Whenever the torso is bent, it is bent only to one side, so that the triangular formation which is the basic geometrical form is never spoiled.

We see thus that the Indian sculptor and the Indian dancer were seeking to use the human figure for an identical aim and had, therefore, evolved analogous techniques. The similarity could not have been so close but for one other factor which must be mentioned, and this is the overwhelming literary quality of both Indian sculpture and Indian dance. Indian sculpture and the Indian dance take for their content only the mythological characters of Gods and Goddesses and do not go out to the world of actuality for their raw materials. The nature of these arts thus becomes primarily one of illustrations of the literary theme. The Indian sculptor depicts it through stone and bronze; the Indian dancer conveys the meaning of the word through these stylized stances and gestures. The three arts, along with the art of music, thus come together to be the vehicles of that state of aesthetic joy which is akin to the ultimate state of bliss achieved in the union of soul with God.