



# SAARC ART

June, 2018 | Issue No. 5



**SAARC CULTURAL CENTRE - SRI LANKA**



South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation





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June, 2018 | Issue No. 5

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## Message from the Director

role of a language, the language of the body bearing a specific meaning, a form of communicating and putting across one's emotions and expressions depending on the space and time of the subject matter.

In this respect, the fifth issue of the SAARC Art Magazine is dedicated to Dance, Culture and Society bringing an array of articles from Afghanistan, Bhutan, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka in an attempt to shed light on various art forms in the region. There is no doubt that the South Asian region which is rich in its mosaic of art forms has gifted to the world an array of dance forms rich in both in their philosophy and depiction. These dance forms testify to the plurality of South Asia, its textures, colours and scents. Contributors of this issue examine dance as a part of national identity and investigate various dance forms and traditions in the context of modernity and change.

With this short introduction, I sincerely hope this publication will help the readership gain an insight into some of the dance traditions of the region. I thank all the contributors of this issue for their valuable contributions and look forward to receive similar contributions for the forthcoming issues of the SAARC Art Magazine.

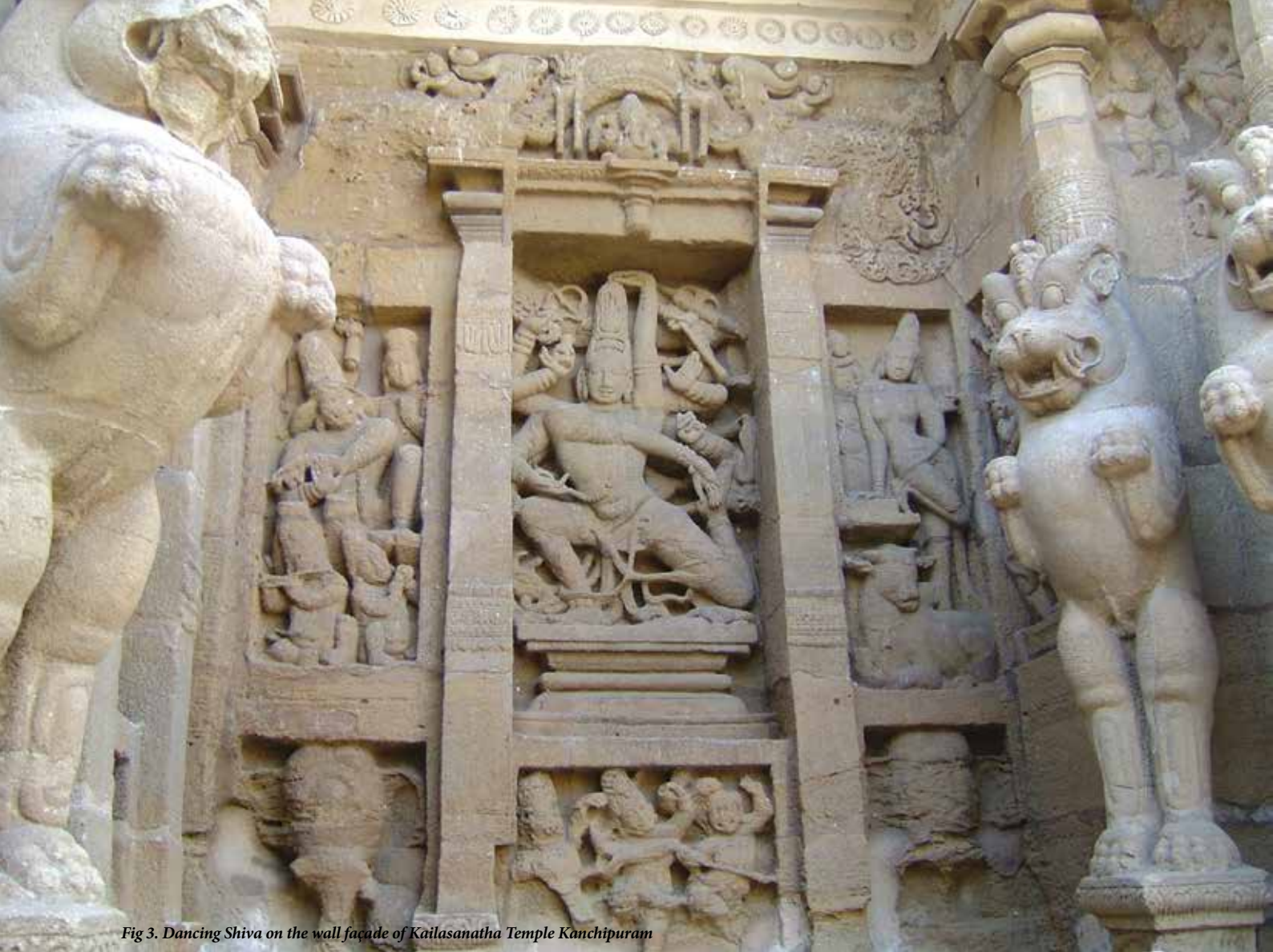
**Wasantha Kotuwella**  
Director

Art is expression and the earliest humans on the planet used various modes to express their emotions. Art, therefore, one would claim, has its origins in the cave paintings. Although their depictions, form, and style carry certain stark similarities across the continents, they still remain as one of the least understood work of art. This very elusiveness of a work of art and its aesthetic expression is what makes it a subject of varied interpretations and depictions. The present-day practices of dance are also the oldest forms of artistic expressions in the world which by now has reached beyond a simple physical rhythmic activity to one encompassing multiple roles and meanings.

Dance as a form of art has occupied an important place in human cultures in the annals of history. Commonly defined as human expression through movement, dance has made its mark in the social and cultural milieu of the human civilization over millennia. From ancient civilizations of the East to the West, dance played the







*Fig 3. Dancing Shiva on the wall façade of Kailasanatha Temple Kanchipuram*

# Nataraja and the Cosmic Dance

By

**Dr. Choodamani Nandagopal**

The most fabulous icon of India in metal sculpture is the dancing Shiva, popularly known as Nataraja or Natesha, the Lord of Dance. The sculpture was conceptualized during the Chola period between 9th to 12th centuries in Tamilnadu.

The tradition and technique of metallurgy in creating the Chola bronzes was mastered by the sthapathis, the traditional sculptors of Chola Kingdom and handed down through the generations to the present day.



Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy in early 20<sup>th</sup> century discussed the concept of the dancing Shiva in *The Dance of Shiva and other Fourteen Essays* which led to the understanding of the concept of dancing Shiva. This initiated a deeper understanding and perception of Indian Art within the global art history. The late 20<sup>th</sup> century publication of C. Shivaramamurthi titled *Nataraja in Indian Art, Thought and Literature*, provided more scope for research in this field. Fritz Capra has associated his life and written very extensively on the dancing Shiva. My doctoral research began with the enquiry on dancing Shiva sculpture of Badami Rock-cut cave of early Chalukyan times, which resulted in the publication of *Dance and Music in Temple Architecture*.

There are references of dance movements and poses in sculptures prior to the times of *Natya Shastra*, such as the panels depicting the procession from the Buddhist *stupas* of Barhut, Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda. A proper application of *Natya Shastra* in sculptures increased with the development of temple architecture in the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE. Dance representation of Shiva as the lord of dance and of music receives pre-eminence in *Natya Shastra* of Bharata as early as the

2<sup>nd</sup> century CE. The ancient texts *Saivagamas* (the earliest books in the Sanskrit language on the Shaivism) and Bharata's *Natya shastra* state that Shiva has 108 modes of dancing. The 108 modes are documented in the form of sculptures with the corresponding verses from *Natya Shastra* at the Bruhadishvara Temple in Tanjore and at the Nataraja temple at Chidambaram. The earliest sculpture emerges from the Cave architecture of Badami and the icon that symbolized Indian

philosophy of eternal path of life which emerged later in the form of Nataraja bronze image in Chola times.

As Ananda Coomaraswamy puts it in his *The Dance of Shiva*, the impact of Nataraja concept found in the expression of the architects in erecting the most magnificent *natyamantapas* (dance structures) of high artistic merit in the vast premises of the temple signifying as the abode of Shiva's dance. All the divine beings take active part in

Fig 1 Badami Shaiva Cave, Early Chalukyas, early 6th century CE, the earliest depiction of Dancing Shiva





the blissful moment of the Lord's dance picturing vividly as Sarasvati plays on *veena* (string instrument), Indra on flute, Brahma on cymbals, Vishnu plays on *mrdangam* (percussion) while Lakshmi is singing. The gods, demy-gods, apsaras, yakshas, gandharvas stand around to witness the celestial dance and hear the music of the divine choir of the twilight.

The faithful rendition of this divine theme opened the gates of imagination of the *sthapathis* and effused in the form of expressive panels depicting *Natyagama* (dance) both in the rock-cut architecture and also in the grand edifices of Chalukya, Pallava, Rashtrakoota, Chola, Hoysala, Chandella, Sena, Kakatiya and Vijayanagar styles of temple architecture. The dancing hall of Veerabhadra Temple Lepakshi has the individual pillars depicting the life-size figures of the divinities playing on musical instruments as mentioned in *Shivapradosha stotra* for the dance of Shiva. Thousands of dance sculptures of the *Natya Shastra* tradition is portrayed through the length and breadth of India, however, depicting cosmic dance of

Shiva in sculptures stand in a class of its own.

The earliest historical illustration of dancing Shiva in accordance with

*Natya Shastra* tradition is in the Chalukyan sanctuaries of Badami and Aihole in the mid 6<sup>th</sup> century CE. The first representation of the eighteen-armed Shiva dancing on a lotus platform at Badami, Karana

a majestic conception of the deity who for his pleasure sets the world in motion. Though the rock itself seems to vibrate with the rhythmic movement of the dance, the noble head bears the same look of serene calm and dispassion which illuminates the face of Buddha. It belongs to the most virile period of Hindu sculpture i.e. from the 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> centuries CE and in technical achievement marks its highest

development." A façade of the Kailasanatha temple (fig 3) of Kanchipuram in Tamil Nadu exhibits Shiva dancing in a delightful movement changing his positions. The

central portion of the ceiling of Mantapa from the Mahadeva Temple Ittagi (fig 4) exhibits a beautiful *Nrtta Murti* of Siva dancing on *Apasmara* (the dwarf demon Nataraja killed which represents ignorance, manifested in the beliefs in opposites - good and bad). The central part of the ceiling of the Ramappa Temple, Palampet (fig

5) dated to 1213 CE, has a beautiful six-armed *Natya* Shiva dancing amidst a bevy of

dancing damsels. Entire ceiling is convergent to the dancing imagery of Shiva. Another good example is the Nataraja belonging to the 13<sup>th</sup> century from the Guwahati Museum (fig 6) collection is noteworthy.

India is known for the bronze Natarajas (fig 7) and the iconic image of four armed Nataraja was

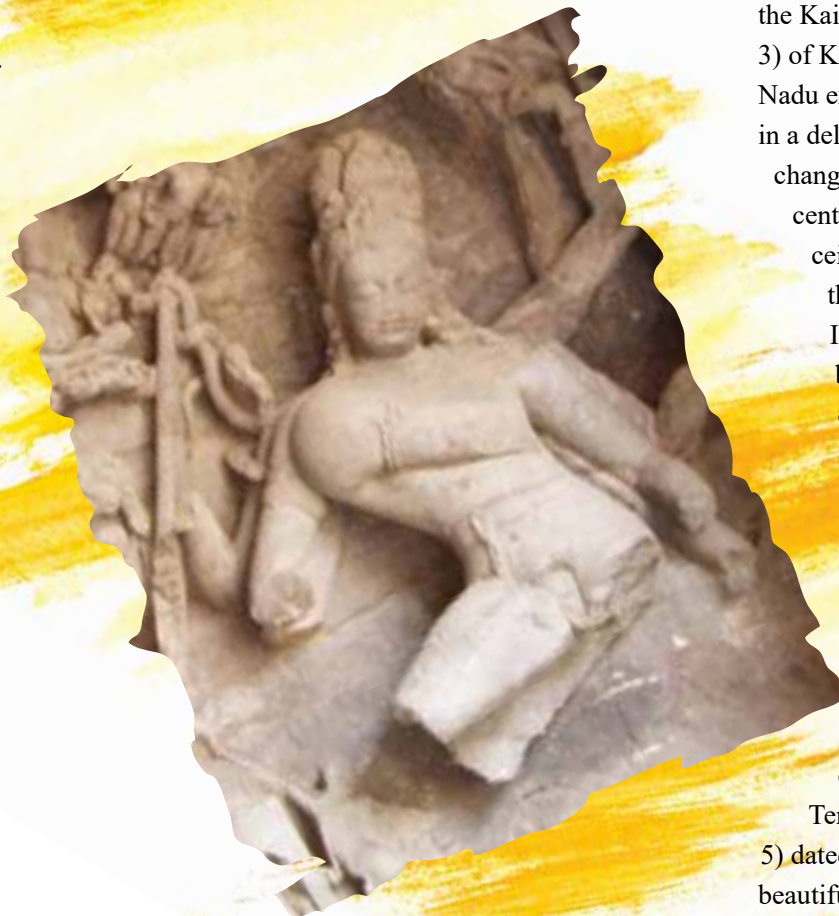


Fig 2. Dancing Shiva Rock-cut architecture  
Elephanta

taka exhibits movement of all his hands with gestures as specified in Bharata's *Natya Shatra*. (fig 1) The sculpture of Nataraja dancing in an aggressive *Lalita Karana* from Elephanta (fig 2) is appreciated by E.B. Havel as, "even in its present mutilated condition it is an embodiment of titanic power,



conceived and executed in the lifetime of Raja Raja Chola during early part of 11<sup>th</sup> century CE. At that time, it had not acquired the term as Nataraja, the king who conceived with philosophical intent, passionately associated himself with this icon called as 'Adavallavan', the one who knows dancing. During the course of time, this image acquired pre-eminence as the Lord of dance the 'Nataraja' and worshipped by the dance artistes. The Nataraja image symbolizes the eternal values of humanity, the evolution and the progress of the universe and the cosmic dance through the drum beats and vibrates the whole world with the concept of creation of human mind and consciousness.

The icon of Nataraja is interpreted in several ways, as symbolising the three states of the universe the *srusti* – creation, the *sthiti* – the development and progress and the *laya* – the delusion. He dances at Tillai, the Temple of Chidambaram in all the five *sabahas* and finally while dancing in the *chitsabha*, the hall of consciousness He dances in the hearts of his devotees in the form Cosmic Dance.

An interesting example of a bronze Nataraja is found in the collection of the Site Museum at Polonnaruwa in Sri Lanka. This city was under Chola occupation with a large Tamil population during 11<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> century CE.



Fig 8. Nataraja in the collections of Site Museum Polonnaruwa in Sri Lanka



Fig 4. Dancing Shiva on the Central Ceiling of Mahadeva Temple Ittagi





Fig 6. Dancing Shiva Guwahati  
Museum Assam



Fig 5. Dancing Shiva Ceiling panel  
Ramappa Temple Palampet



Fig 9. Karaikkal Ammaiyyar, Polonnaruwa  
Museum, Sri Lanka

The imagery of Nataraja is little different from usual Chola figure. There are two important rare unique features in this sculpture for which it is known. Firstly, the head dress is simple with a half crown and not featured with the wide spread matted hair and ornaments. Secondly pedestal has line of figures playing on various musical instruments and participating in the *ananda tandava* (Dance of Bliss) of Nataraja.

The 12<sup>th</sup> century dissipated image of a female devotee of Shiva named Karaikkal Ammaiyyar (fig 9) is also exhibited at the Museum of Polonnaruwa. She is seen playing

on the cymbals for the dance of Nataraja. The bronze sculpture of Nataraja and Karaikkal Ammaiyyar were found at Siva Devala No 5 in 1960 and preserved in the site Museum of Polonnaruwa.

The Nataraja figures discussed here throw light on the varied forms of dancing Shiva and iconographic details depict as Shiva in the Cosmic dance of creating and destroying the ignorance in the minds of man-kind. His *jata* -hair flies out wildly as he dances, the *dhamaru* –kettledrum in the right upper hand is shaken with the

syllabi, rhythmic and the whole body of Shiva comes into the benevolent form of action, denoting Cosmic dance. The entire Cosmos itself symbolically represented in the *prabhavali* – surrounding ring of flames encircling the deity luminously. Complementing this moment of creation is the simultaneous destruction of the cosmos, symbolised with reducing all the rising flames into single





Fig 7. Chola Nataraja: Bronze icon representing Indian philosophy

flame held in the upper left hand. This action signifies the balance of creation and destruction. The lower right hand offers solace to his devotee by performing the reassurance of *ahhaya mudra* (benediction). The blessings are further affirmed and promotes the enlightened knowledge through the gracefully stretched left hand. The symbolic pose promises the devotee release from the sufferings of *maya* (illusionistic world) while the right foot crushed

the *ajnana*, (ignorance) in the form of *mayalagan* (the dwarf figure). The other significant details of the icon are the human skull signifying the death at the crown, crescent moon, symbolizing the entity of Cosmos; the matted hair signifies the ferocious aspect of Shiva, and the diminutive figure of Ganga offering the river to humanity, the tassels of the clothing flung around show the vibrancy in the movement. The devotees perceive the power of compassion, enlightenment and eternal creation in the icon of Nataraja and His Cosmic Dance.



**Dr. Choodamani Nandagopal**

Dr. Choodamani Nandagopal is a renowned Art Historian of international repute, with PhD from Mysore University. She was awarded the UK Visiting Nehru Fellowship at Victoria & Albert Museum in London, UNESCO Silk Road Fellowship in Paris, UNSW Senior International Fellowship in Sydney and Exeter Visiting Professor Research Fellowship in UK. She has also received a national fellowship from the Indian Council of Historical Research.

She is a highly respected academic in Visual Arts, Art History and Cultural Studies and established the Art History and Research Department at Chitrakala Parishath. She was the Academic Head of Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts Southern Regional Centre in Bangalore and launched the Department of Cultural Studies at Manipal University and Jain University. She has published in multiple languages including 10 international publications, five Kannada publications as well over 70 research papers. She has been the key-note speaker at many international conferences. She has guided more than 15 PhD scholars and 20 MPhil candidates during her career and is associated with Gallery G and Raja Ravi Varma Foundation. She has been consulted by several museums and art galleries in India and abroad. Her research on dance sculptures is a seminal work. Her books Dance and Music in Temple Architecture and Classical Dance Heritage of Karnataka are essential texts in the field.





# Atan, the National Dance of Afghanistan

By

**Ms. Mahbooba Paigham**

Atan is a traditional dance of Afghanistan common among the Pashtun residential areas. The Atan dance is believed to have originated as a religious dance of the Aryan communities. Atan dance is a part of Pashtun cultural tradition and is accepted today as the national dance and an integral a part of the intangible cultural heritage of Afghanistan.



In the ancient texts of Afghanistan indicates that Aryan youth anointed their hair and adorned themselves with wild flowers, singing songs and danced (Atan). According to Professor Habibullah Rafi, Atan dance was performed in open air in the fields and the ancient Indian text Rig-Veda states that the feet of the Atan dancers raised a lot of dust. Professor Rafi, an expert on Atan dance states that Atan dance commenced during the times of ancient Aryans with the harmonious movements of their heads during celebrations or special days and gradually developed into different types.

The Pashto Dictionary refers to Atan dance as follows:

"Atan is a folk dance of Pashtuns, collectively performed prior to battles, and during victory celebrations and other celebrations accompanied by songs of heroism."

Atan has its own song that is called Sarowki which was accompanied by musical instruments and special physical dance movements. Atan is performed during general social gatherings, prior to battles and wars, in fields for entertainment, etc.

Music for Atan performance is created with flutes, rubab and drums and sometimes other musical instruments which adds to the entertainment and pleasure of the viewers. Atan is performed in a circle and more than 100 dancers can participate in this dance. The

dance movements are controlled by the rapid or slow beat of the drum and the circle of dancers

decrease as the dancers become tired and leave the dance circle. The leader of the Atan dancers requests for the drum beat to be faster and drummers respond by playing faster and the dancers perform to the faster beat.

#### Types of Atan

There are many different types of Atan dances in Afghanistan. Every Region has its own unique style of Atan which are identified by the name of the Region such as Kabuli Atan, Wardaki, Khosti, Herati, Kochy (nomads), Khataks, Pashai Atan etc. Despite the Regional differences, all Regional Atan dances are considered to be a part of Afghani Atan.

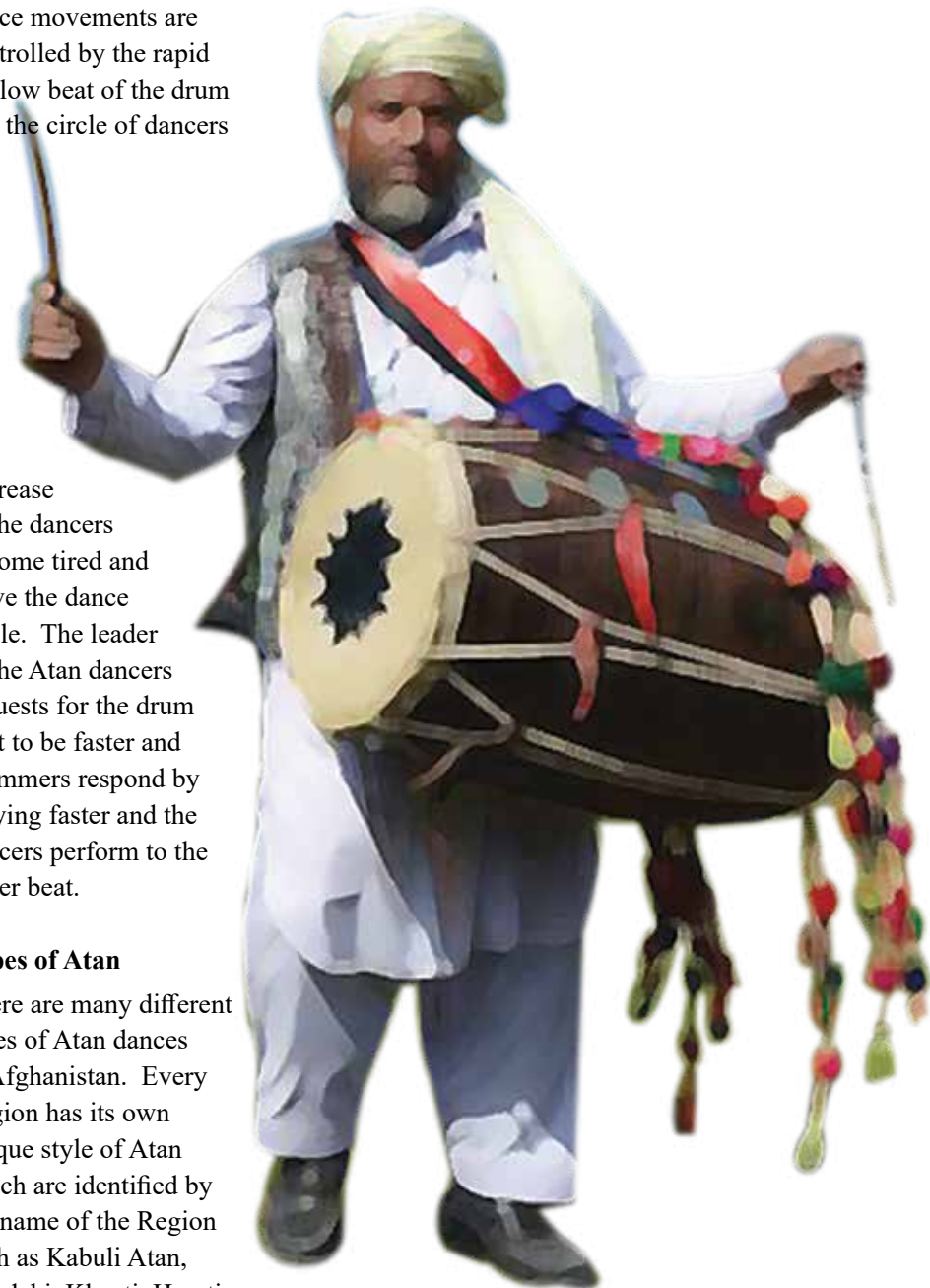
#### Kabuli Atan

The dancers organise themselves in a circle and start their movements. Kabuli Atan is danced by both male and female dancers and the movements are the same. The Kabuli Atan has two to five steps with the dancers participating in a circle. As the tempo increases from step to step

so does the movements and at the end of the fifth phase the Kabuli Atan dancers raise their hands and end the Atan. The dancers also clap to the music while dancing synchronising their hand movements to the drum beat as well.

#### Wardaki Atan

Wardaki Atan performers tie a handkerchief around their waists and lubricate their hair with plant oils. The traditional Wardaki Atan dancers had moustaches and





grew their hair long and wore long trousers and short shirts while dancing. Their lubricated long hair was a part of the dance with hair also moving according to the drum beats.

multiple twists and sitting down dancers also sit down while moving their hair.

### Khataks' Atan

Khataks' Atan is very famous and interesting. This Atan dance

are no traditional ceremonies such as weddings, etc., or even picnics without Atan dancers in Afghanistan.

### Movements and Forms of Atan

**Scatter Atan** - The dance moves of all Atan dancers are in one direction but dancers gradually create a circle.

**Sitting Atan** – The dancers move rapidly and abruptly sit and raise their voice.

**Laying down Atan** - All Atan dancers laydown in one direction



*The Atan Drummers*

### Logari Atan

Logari Atan music is one of the fastest music among the Atan music of Afghanistan. The music is happy and exciting to both the dancers and the audience. Logari Atan dancers too have long hair which is covered in a turban at the beginning of the dance and gradually as the movements increase in rapidity the turbans are removed and they display their long hair. The Logari Atan dancers raise their hands and clap when they come close to the other dancers.

### Paktiai Atan

Paktiai Atan has five to seven steps. Paktiai Atan performers move their heads harmonically from side to side. At the end of the first step they come together and sit and after a while continue again with the Atan movements.

### Kochis (Nomad's) Atan

The Kochis or Nomad's Atan is only performed by males. They have red handkerchiefs in their hands and the dance movements



*Compound of various types of Atan as new form of Atan, Kabuli Atan.*

originated after the Moghul invasion to Afghanistan. The dancers carry a sword and at the beginning the dancers form a circle. After the second step, two dancers fight against each other with their swords similar to fencing. The Atan dancers appear on the dance area as a hero and performs heroic dance movements with his sword. There are also special songs and poems associated with Khataks' Atan.

Today, Atan dance is performed by both men and women and is performed as a part of most ceremonies in Afghanistan. The Atan dance increase the happiness of the participants and there

and suddenly stand again and move very fast. **Secret Atan** – Secret

Atan is performed at night. The dancers stand in a circle and hold each other's hands and leave occasionally. Sometimes this is performed around a fire **Pair Atan** – This dance is performed within Pashtun tribes among relatives. There are both male and female dancers who occasionally take each other's hands while dancing

### Atan Performances

Atan dance is performed collectively. The dancers stand in a circle the dance commence with





*Atan performers of Pakiaee Atan*

the sound of drum and flute. At the beginning of the Atan dance there are few dancers participating as the beginnings are very slow. Gradually with the increase of the tempo of the music more and more spectators also join the dance. The dancers also make sounds displaying their feelings while dancing to the beat of the drums.

There are singers of Atan who add to the atmosphere by singing special songs. The leader of the Atan dancers is the most skilful dancer among the performers and he leads the dance while the others follow.

Every young person should be able to dance the Atan skilfully and this creates a competition among the

youth and everybody wants to become the leader. They also mirror the movements of the leader who is the best dancer and try to show their dancing skills by moving to the centre of the circle and displaying his talents. The Atan dance is a reflection of joy and happiness to both the dancers and the audience.



**Ms. Mahbooba Paigham**

Ms. Mahabooba Paigham is a graduate of the Faculty of Journalism of the Kabul University. She commenced her career as a Journalist at the National Radio Television of Afghanistan, responsible for writing programmes for the Radio in different subjects including advice on family safety. She has also worked as the Secretary and Administrative Officer for the Deputy Minister of Counter Narcotics and as the producer and writer for the National Radio and Television Station. She was the Programme Director for Deputy Minister of Youth Affairs, Programme Director for the Ministry of Information and Culture and the Tourism Alignment Affairs Officer. Currently she is working as the Folklore Director at the Ministry of Information and Culture. She has travelled widely during the course of her career and has been honoured for her by the Government of Afghanistan, National Security Council of Afghanistan, Ministry of Information and Culture and Environmental Administration of Afghanistan.





## The Traditional Mask Dance (Gar Cham) of Bhutan

The Mask Dance or Gar Cham is an integral part of the Bhutanese cultural identity. These dances are the dramatization of the teachings of the enlightened spiritual masters for the benefit of the sentient beings. The Mask dance is traditionally believed to have been introduced by Guru Padmasambhava who is also known as Guru Rinpoche in the 8th century CE.



The Mask Dance or *Gar Cham* is an integral part of the Bhutanese cultural identity. These dances are the dramatization of the teachings of the enlightened spiritual masters for the benefit of the sentient beings. The Mask dance is traditionally believed to have been introduced by Guru Padmasambhava who is also known as Guru Rinpoche in the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE. The Mask Dances are normally performed during the *Tshechu* festival which is held on the 10<sup>th</sup> day of the lunar month to celebrate the birthday of Guru Padmasambhava. The Mask dances are divided into two categories known as *Tsun Cham* or the Mask dances of Monks and *Boe Cham* the Mask dance of the lay people.

*Tsun Cham* is performed only by the fully ordained monks. The different types of *Tsun Cham* includes Black Hat Drum Dance (*Zhana Nga Cham*), Dance of the Terrifying Deities (*Tung Ngam Cham / Thung Ngam Cham*), Wrathful War Dance (*Ging Tsholing Cham*), Dance of the Eight Manifestations of Guru Rinpoche (*Guru Tshengye*) and the Dance of the Sixteen Wisdom Consorts (*Rigma Chudrug*).

*Boe Cham* on the other hand can be performed by lay people as well as un-ordained monks. *Boe Cham* dances include the Dance of the Four Stags (*Sha Zam Cham*), the Three Ging Dances of Pema Lingpa (*Peling Ging Sum Cham*), the Treasure Dance of the Pema Lingpa (*Peling Tercham* or *Tshangmai Ging Cham*), the Dance of the Stag and Hounds (*Shawo Shachi Cham*), the Guitar Dance (*Dranyen Cham*), the Dance of the Noblemen and Ladies (*Pholay Molay*), the Drum Dance of Drametse (*Drametse Nga cham*), the

Dance of the Lords of the Cremation Grounds (*Durthroe Dagmo Chezi Cham* or *Durdag Cham*), Dance of the Judgement of the Dead (*Raksha Mangcham*), Dance of the Heroes (*Pa Cham*) and the Religious Dance (*Choe Zhey*).

Each of these dances emerged out of a social or cultural necessity and has its own history and development. The Black Hat Drum Dance is used to overcome poisonous and infectious afflictions, Dance of the Noblemen and Ladies is based on the story of King Norzang of Ngaden Kingdom and his Dakini Queen, the Dance of the Stag and Hounds revolves around the story of Milarepa converting a hunter to become a Buddhist, etc. The Mask Dance is an integral part of the Bhutanese culture and society

which in turn has enriched the Mask Dance.

As a form of performing arts the Mask Dance provide joy and happiness to the spectators. However, the Mask Dance also enable the spectators to acquire spiritual merit and liberation from worldly sufferings. The dance also reminds people of their spiritual and moral duties and obligations. It is considered beneficial for people to be able to identify each mask in the dance and the spiritual and moral messages reminded through the dances.

The masks and costumes of the *Tsun Cham* Mask Dances are created, preserved and maintained by the Buddhist monks in their monasteries. These masks and costumes are kept in a special place in the monasteries which has been cleansed and considered to be sacred when not in use. The masks and costumes which has survived for a long time is believed to be special and powerful. The creation and maintenance of masks and costumes as well as the dance itself is an integral part of the intangible cultural heritage of Bhutan.







*The Dance of the Stag and Hounds (Shawo Shachi Cham)*

The *Boe Cham* masks and costumes are kept in *Dzong* (Fortress) of each *Dzongkhag* (Province). The masks and costumes of *Boe Cham* are created, repaired and maintained by traditional tailors and traditional mask makers who are wood carvers. The *Boe Cham* masks of Thimphu is kept at the Royal Academy of Performing Arts (RAPA).

*Gar* means twisting movements of the body and *cham* mean movements of the limbs. *Gar Cham* together means the movements of the complete body. The gestures (*mudra*) represent the nine skills of dancing, eight divine manifestations of peaceful and wrathful deities. Every single Mask dance has its own unique rhythm and style. A mask dancer visualizes his body to be of a divine being while performing the dance. The visualization uses the three types of Buddhist meditation embodying the Right Concentration (*samyak-samādhi / sammā-samādhi*), Right Mindfulness (*samyak-smṛti / sammā-*



*The Black Hat Drum Dance (Zhana Cham)*

*sati*) and Right View (*samyak-dṛṣṭi / sammā-diṭṭhi*) and the four sublime states of Loving Kindness (*Metta*), Compassion (*Karuna*), Sympathetic Joy (*Muditha*) and Equanimity (*upekkhā, upekṣhā*).

The *Tsun Cham* dances are more mystical and closely related to Buddhism and Guru Rinpoche. All dances revolve around an incident in the life of Guru Rinpoche or one of the other famous Buddhist leaders of Bhutan. In the Black Hat Drum Dance, the masked dancers

beat their drums to indicate victory over evil spirits. In the Dance of the Terrifying Deities, the dancers wear masks which look terrifying representing the form of Dorje Drago, a manifestation of Guru Rinpoche. The dance of the Wrathful War symbolizes the victory of good over evil.

The *Boe Cham* dances are usually performed at the Fortresses and monasteries. These dances also



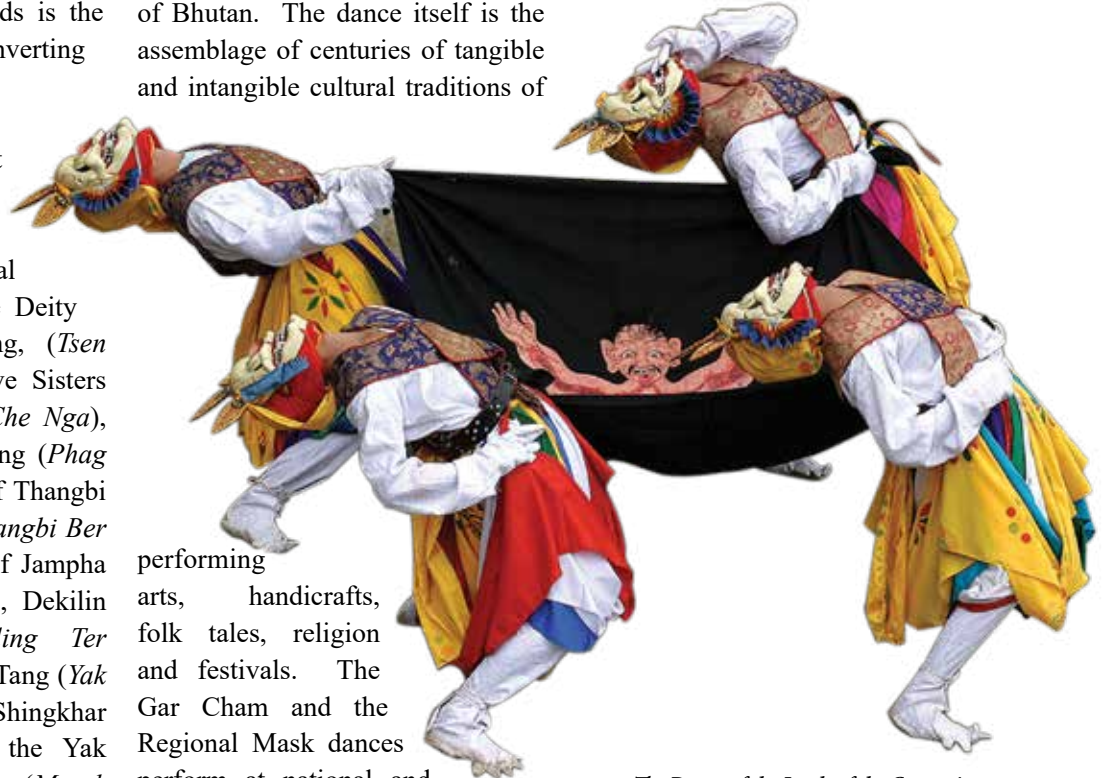
revolve around Buddhism but the content is based on popular stories which is commonly known in Bhutan. The Dance of the Four Stags is the story of Guru Rinpoche subduing the King of the Wind. The Dance of Stag and Hounds is the story of Jetsun Milarepa converting a hunter into Buddhism.

The Mask dance is not limited to the above-mentioned *Gar Cham*. There are many Regional Mask dances such as the Deity Dance of the Sumthrang, (*Tsen Cham*), Dance of the Five Sisters of Long Life (*Tshering Che Nga*), the Pig Dance of Tamzhing (*Phag Cham*), Treasure Dance of Thangbi (*Thangbi Ter Cham* or *Thangbi Ber Cham*), the Lion Dance of Jampha Lhakhang (*Singye Cham*), Dekilin Treasure Dance (*Dekiling Ter Cham*), the Yak Dance of Tang (*Yak Cham*), the Yak Dance of Shingkhari (*Shingkhari Yak Cham*), the Yak Dance of Merak and Sakteng (*Merak Sakteng Yak Cham*) and the Dance of Sister Lhamo (*Achey Lhamo*) are some of the well-known Regional

Mask dances still performed in Bhutan.

The Mask Dance or the *Gar Cham* of Bhutan is at the heart of tangible and intangible cultural heritage of Bhutan. The dance itself is the assemblage of centuries of tangible and intangible cultural traditions of

to that dance. The performers bring life to the traditions and culture of Bhutan through their vivid masks and costumes and the physical movements bringing joy and happiness to the spectators.



*The Dance of the Lords of the Cremation Grounds (Durthroe Dagmo Chezi Cham or Durdag Cham)*

performing arts, handicrafts, folk tales, religion and festivals. The *Gar Cham* and the Regional Mask dances perform at national and regional festivals in Bhutan and each of these dances has a festival, event or a tradition which is unique



**Ms. Tshering Choki**

Ms. Tshering Choki obtained a Masters in Business Administration from University of Canberra, Australia and Bachelor of Commerce Honours degree from the Sherubtse College in Bhutan and joined the National Library and Archives as an Archivist. She manages the records, conservation and preservation of rare documents at the National Library and Archives in Bhutan. She Co-authored the Book on the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Bhutan. She has undertaken field research in mapping the intangible cultural heritage elements in Bhutan and has carried out a joint research on Tibetan Diaspora in Bhutan and currently finishing a research on Community Engagement in the Preservation and Management of Chortens in Bhutan.





## Traditional Dances of India

India is a land of diverse cultures with multiple languages, music, arts, and dances. The diversity of culture has led to the many types of dances in India such as ritualistic dances, folk dances, traditional classical dances and experimental abstract dances of the modern period.



India is a land of diverse cultures with multiple languages, music, arts, and dances. The diversity of culture has led to the many types of dances in India such as ritualistic dances, folk dances, traditional classical dances and experimental abstract dances of the modern period. Though there are differences in the style, costume and in these dance forms, the *Abhinaya* or the expression in dance, *nritya* which is the art of narration through hastas or gestures, the movement and facial expressions is common to all of them. The *Natya Shastra*, the ancient Indian text on Performing Arts mentions four categories which are important in dance. These categories are

- (1) *Angika* expressions of the limbs including the *mudras* (hand gestures), *mandis* (postures) and the walk of the dance;
- (2) *Vachikabhinaya*, is the vocal and musical instruments supporting the dance;
- (3) *Aharyabhinaya* consists of the background, costume, make-up, accessories and sets;
- (4) *Satvikabhinaya* is the subtle moods and emotions expressed by the eyes and body movements of the performer.

All the forms of traditional dances of India revolve around the eight rasas or the aesthetic flavours. They are *shringara* (love), *hasya* (comedy), *bhibatsa* (disgust), *raudra* (fury), *karuna* (compassion), *vira* (heroic), *bhayanaka* (terrible) and *adhbhuta* (marvellous).

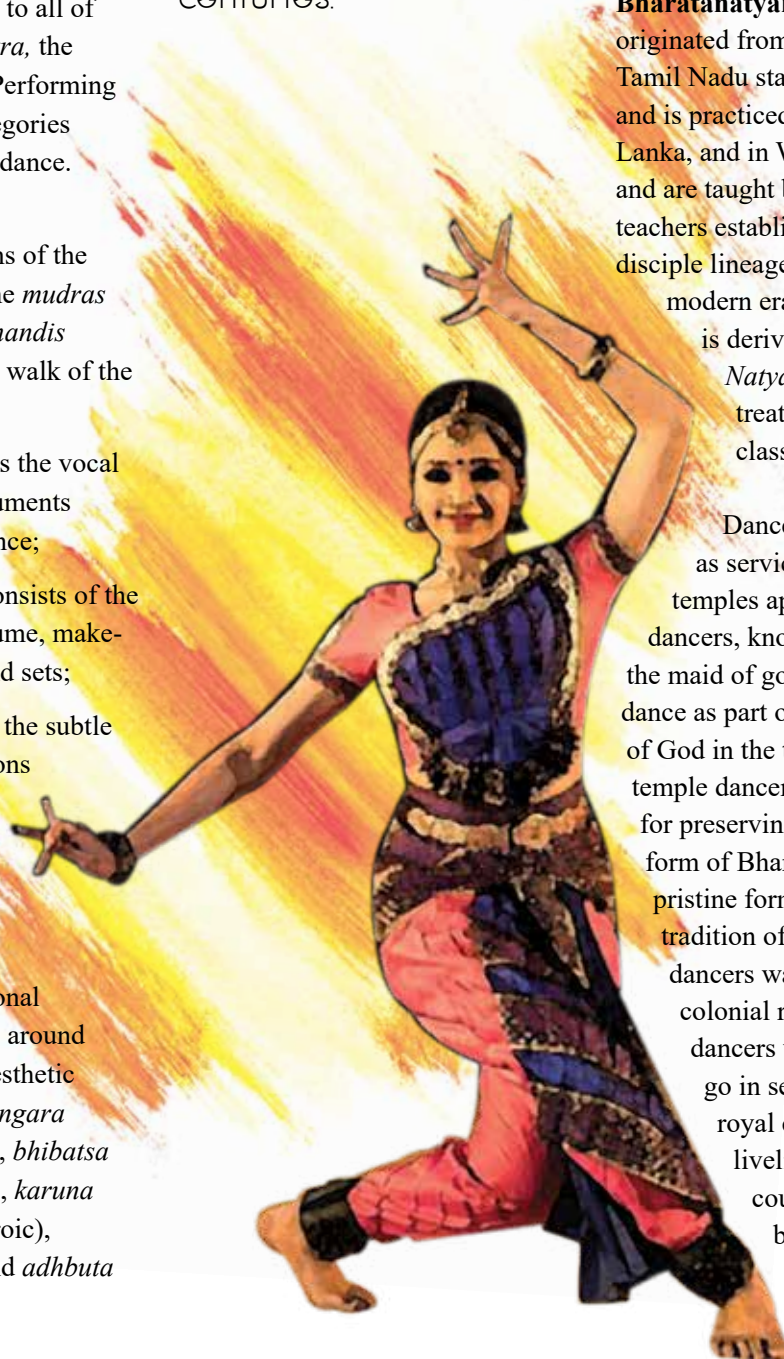
The dance forms are a fusion of gestures and postures from different cultures. The traditional forms of dance have retained their purity in content and style by the tight system of the guru-shishya parampara or master-disciple lineages through the centuries.

The many dance forms are represented in Indian sculptures and paintings through the ages. Each of the dance forms have their own unique styles of costumes, makeup and jewellery. Among the many dance forms of India, eight are recognised as traditional classical dance forms namely, Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Kathakali, Kuchipudi, Manipuri, Mohiniyattam, Odissi and Sattriya.

### The Eight Classical Dance Forms of India

**Bharatanatyam** - Bharatanatyam originated from Karnataka and Tamil Nadu states in South India and is practiced all over India, Sri Lanka, and in Western countries and are taught by Indian dance teachers establishing master-disciple lineages even in the modern era. Bharatanatyam is derived from Bharata's *Natya Shastra*, a Sanskrit treatise on Indian classical performing arts.

Dance was considered as service to God and temples appointed temple dancers, known as *devadasi*, the maid of god. They offered dance as part of rituals in front of God in the temple. These temple dancers were responsible for preserving the traditional form of Bharatanatyam in its pristine form. The practice and tradition of temple dancing and dancers was abolished during colonial rule in India. These dancers were compelled to go in search of Regional royal courts for their livelihood. The royal courts patronized by these dancers were, Tanjore, Mysore, Madurai,







Trivandrum and other small royal or feudal families across south India.

Dance repertoire of Bharatanatyam includes *Nritta* – pure dance, *Nritya* – *abhinaya* the narrative content and *Natya* – the story-based performances. Today this classical form is performed on stage with technical brilliance, versatility, skilful team work with a singer, a drummer, (*mrudanga*), flutist and violinist. Since this dance form originated from the temple precinct, the three elements are highlighted in all performances are namely *Bha* denotes *bhava*, the emotions and feelings, *Ra*, represents *raga*, the melodies, *Ta*, represents *tala*, rhythm. When combined, *Bharata* consists of *Bhava*, *raga*, *tala*, the dance form with essential and core content of these three is Bharatanatyam.

**Kathak** – The origin of Kathak is traditionally attributed to the traveling bards of ancient northern India known as Kathakars or storytellers. The traveling

bards used their hand and foot movements, and facial expressions to tell a story. This tradition came to be known as the Kathak dance tradition. Kathak dance form has three distinctive styles named after the Indian cities where each tradition originated – Jaipur, Banaras and Lucknow. Kathak is a dance tradition enriched by both Hindu and Muslim culture and India and the costumes also reflect these influences. Jaipur and Lucknow dance traditions portray a close affinity to Muslim culture while the Banaras Kathak dance tradition indicate more of a Hindu influence.

**Kathakali** – Kathakali is the distinctive dance-drama tradition of Kerala in the South-West India. Kathakali emerged as a distinctive genre of performance in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. Kathakali was given its present name, which literally means ‘story play’ and

refers to the performance of dramas written by playwright-composers in highly Sanskritized Malayalam. Kathakali plays enact one or more episodes from regional versions of the pan-Indian religious epics such as *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and *puranas* (mythology). Kathakali was nurtured under the patronage of *Nayars* (*Samantans*) the royal lineage in Kerala and the highest ranking *Namboodiri* brahmins. Kathakali dancers wear colourful and attractive make-up of characters, elaborate costumes, detailed gestures and well-defined body movements. Though the artists do not speak or sing their movements are in sync



with the anchor, playback music and accompanying percussion. Kathakali's highly vivid costumes and makeup are part of the process which 'transforms' the actor into a wide variety of idealized and archetypal character giving the audience a magnified experience.

**Kuchipudi** – According to tradition Siddhendra Yogi is considered to be the founder of the Kuchipudi dance-drama tradition. A devotee of Krishna and well-versed in the *Natya Shastra* he composed a dance-drama *Parijatapaharana* and came to Kuchelapuram, the present day Kuchipudi village. He took a promise from the artistes at Kuchipudi that they would perform the play once a year. They, in turn, assured him that their sons and descendants would preserve the tradition. It is believed that the descendants of the Brahmin families continue this tradition of the Kuchipudi dance-dramas. The

performers are all male and some of them impersonate the female characters. *Nrittaratnavali* an ancient text on dance refers to *Brahmana Mela* and *Nattuva Mela*, the latter being the dancers of the female temple servants known as the *devadasis*. Medieval Hindu saints advocated *Bhakti* (devotion) through music in South India specially associated with the village of Kuchipudi, creating an important centre for dance-drama tradition. Siddhendra Yogi is believed to have established the "*Bhama Cult*" which is an expression of the love of Satyabhama one of Krishna's wives, which later on was known as *Madhura Bhakti*.

**Manipuri** – Manipuri Dance is named after the Region of its origin in North-eastern India – Manipur. The Manipuri people are believed

to be the descendants of the *Gandharva* the celestial musicians and dancers mentioned in the Vedic texts of India. The Manipuri dance too belongs to the genre of dance drama where dances are dedicated to the stories of ancient Hindu texts, specially the narrative love stories of Radha and Krishna known as *Raslila*. Children of Manipuri are trained by traditional dance teachers in the role of Radha or Krishna and perform the *Raslila* at the temple. Manipuri dance movements are graceful, fluid and sinuous with greater emphasis on hand and upper body movements to the accompaniment of devotional music created by multiple instruments. The Manipuri dancers are clad in

Kathak dancers



Kathakali dancer  
Dr. Sadanam Harikumar  
photographed by VB Suresh Babu





Mohiniattam dancer Swapna  
Rajendrakumar  
photographed by VB Suresh Babu

costumes typically representing the Region with a long skirt, an *odhni* which is a transparent decorative scarf, and a barrel-shaped skirt with bamboo rings inside it that hold the skirt stiff.

**Mohiniyattam** - The term Mohiniyattam comes from the words Mohini meaning, Lord Vishnu in the guise of a woman who enchants onlookers and *aattam* meaning graceful and sensuous body movements. Mohiniyattam is believed to have originated in sixteenth century and considered to be a very graceful form of dance meant to be performed as solo recitals by women. There are two popular legends associated with Mohiniyattam, one of them being that of Lord Vishnu disguised as Mohini who appeared to lure the *asuras* (demons) away from the *amrita* (nectar of immortality) obtained during the churning of the ocean of milk. The second legend is that Vishnu appears as Mohini to save Lord Shiva from the demon Brahmasura. Costumes include white saree embroidered with bright golden brocade (*known as kasavu*) at the edges. The dancers wear a special golden Lakshmi belt designed especially for the Mohiniyattam. The performer also adorns herself with fresh white Jasmine flowers in her hair on the left side which makes Mohiniyattam artists distinct from artists of other dance forms of India.

**Odissi** – This dance type originated in the Hindu temples of Odisha, an Eastern coastal state of India. The Odissi dances are predominantly performed by women with narrations of religious and spiritual concepts specially associated with Vishnu as Jagannath. Odissi dance-dramas are performed with



musicians singing devotional mythical stories and the dancers performing with expressions and gestures and symbolic body movements. An Odissi dance performance repertoire begins with an invocation, followed by *nritta* (pure dance), *nritya* (expressive dance), *natya* (dance drama) and *moksha* (dance climax indicating the freedom of the soul and spiritual release). The costumes of Odissi dancers are colourful with female dancers wearing sarees usually of local silk called Pattasari and the male dancers wearing *dhoti*. Their jewellery is made of silver and the hair is tied up and decorated with a moon shaped crest of white flowers for women and a peacock feather head dress for the male dancer playing Lord Krishna.

**Sattriya** - Originated in the Eastern state of Assam. Sattriya is a dance-drama attributed to Srimanta Sankardev a saint and scholar of the *Bhakti* (devotion) movement associated with the Krishna and the *Vaishnavite* monasteries. The

themes of the dance are centred on Krishna and Radha, the mythological stories of Krishna based on the *Bhagvata Purana* the ancient Indian text, and the different incarnations of Vishnu. The Sattriya dance tradition has one-act plays called *Ankiya Nat*, which bring aesthetic and religious experiences through ballad, dance and drama. Filled with devotion, this dance is performed in the temples known as *Sattras*. The hand gestures, footwork and postures are drawn from the *Natya Shastra*. Traditionally, Sattriya was offered in the temples as a part of the daily rituals and



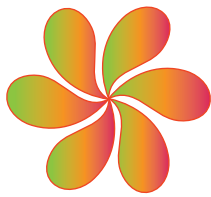
A Sattriya Dancer



Odissi dancer Paridhi Joshi  
photographed by VB Suresh Babu

special festivals performed by male monks but in the present days women also dance. The dancers wear unique jewellery made of raw gold and influenced by Assam Region in its design and style.

Following the *guru-shishya paramparara* (Master disciple lineages), the classical traditional dances of India hold a prominent place in the cultural sphere of the country. Thousands of artistes perform and study these forms and are initiating the next generations into these dance traditions. The dancers bring into the viewers through the precise movements of the body, gesture and expressions that evoke the emotions these forms of dance successfully actualize the art experience.



### **Dr. Soumya Manjunath Chavan**

*BFA, MFA (Painting - Bangalore), PhD  
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*Culture Specialist Programmes, SAARC  
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Dr. Soumya Manjunath Chavan is an artist and a researcher, holding a Master's degree in Painting and a PhD in Fine Arts from the College of Fine Arts, Karnataka Chitrakala Parishath, Bangalore University, India. She began learning painting at the tender age of five at the Kalamandir School of Arts, Bangalore and through her career has held five solo exhibitions of paintings and participated in many group exhibitions and art camps in India and abroad. She has undertaken numerous commissioned art works and executed murals and sculptures at many multinational companies in Bangalore. With painting as her specialization, she chose the visual aspects of Adi Shankaracharya's philosophy and traced his influence on the contemporary Indian painters for her doctoral degree and received the junior research fellowship from the Indian Council for Historical Research (ICHR) in the year 1999. She has presented and published around 20 research papers at national and international conferences. Her academic career at the Jain University in Bangalore had been interesting along with teaching and guiding MPhil and PhD candidates at the Department of Visual Arts and Cultural Studies under the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. She has worked as an assistant and associate researcher in projects on urban studies of Bangalore and Jainism in Karnataka. She is the principal researcher of the project titled 'Ajanta and Dambulla – A continuity of Buddhist Tradition of Painting' funded by the India-Sri Lanka Foundation in 2016. She is a research consultant at the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS), Bangalore.





# Kuchipudi – The Dance Drama Tradition of India

By

**Dr. Soumya Manjunath Chavan**

The history of dance is divided into two periods based on the account of the continuity of Sanskrit from 2nd century BCE to 9th century CE and the later developments of the vernacular regional languages from 10th century CE to 18th century CE.

The history of dance is divided into two periods based on the account of the continuity of Sanskrit from 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE to 9<sup>th</sup> century CE and the later developments of the vernacular regional languages from 10<sup>th</sup> century CE to 18<sup>th</sup> century CE. The latter period coincides with the growth of various Regional styles and with the development of tradition of Kuchipudi dance-dramas.

Many branches of learning flourished in Andhra and the tradition of the *Natya Shastra* is one of the noteworthy traditions embracing the twin arts of music and dance. The *Natya Shastra* refers to the Andhra Region in reference to *Kaishiki vrutti*, a delicate and graceful movement in the dance traditions in the Region. Along with the music, the dance traditions of the Region can be traced to ancient temples, the Buddhist ruins excavated at Nagarjunakonda, Amaravathi, Ghantasala, Jagayyapet and Bhattiprolle indicating a flourishing dance tradition in ancient Andhra Region. The Amaravati stupa relics are the most ancient, dating back to 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, which reveal the great choreographic possibilities of group and composite dances called *pindibandha*, mentioned in *Natya Shastra*.

Texts on the composite arts of dance and music were written from the 11<sup>th</sup> century onwards by a number of Andhra kings and scholars. The most important texts are considered to be *Sarasvati Hridayalankara* by Nanyadeva, *Abhilashitartha Chintamani* or *Manasollasa* by Someshwara and *Sangita Chudamani* by Pratapa Chakravarti. The most important text of Andhra Region on dance is



Kuchipudi dancer Rajashree Holla, photographed by VB Suresh Babu

*Nrittaratnavali* by Jayapa Ganapati Deva. Other works include Kumar Giri Reddi's *Nasanta Rajiyam* (1440 CE) *Sangita Chintamani* by Peda Komati Vema Reddi (1450 CE) and *Sangita Parijata* by Ahobala (1600 CE). The famous commentator from Andhra is Bhatta Lollata who wrote the commentary on the *Natya Shastra*.

Siddhendra Yogi, who was a devotee of Krishna is considered to be the founder of the Kuchipudi dance-drama tradition. Well-versed

in the *Natya Shastra* he composed a dance-drama *Parijatapaharana* and came to Kuchelapuram, the present day Kuchipudi village. He obtained a promise from the villagers that they would perform the play once a year. They, in turn, assured him that their sons and descendants would preserve the tradition. The descendants of the Brahmin families, it is believed, continue this tradition of the Kuchipudi dance-dramas. The performers are all male and some of them impersonate the female characters.

The *Bhakti* (devotion) cult had its association with Vishnu-Narayana in the South of India. The 12<sup>th</sup> and the 13<sup>th</sup> centuries saw a succession of great leaders among the



worshippers of Shiva and Vishnu, the former known collectively as Nayanars, “the leaders”, the latter as Alvars, “those immersed in God”. Siddhendra Yogi, the founder of Kuchipudi dance-drama tradition, had his initial training in Vedic studies at Udipi. Many saints advocated *Bhakti* (devotion) through music in the South of India and some significant places around the village of Kuchipudi and thus it gained importance as another centre for dance-drama tradition with the association of Siddhendra Yogi. He is believed to have established the “*Bhama Cult*”, which later on was known as *Madhura Bhakti*.

Satyabhama, the consort of Lord Krishna, loved him passionately. Her ambition was to have Krishna exclusively in her embrace. The devotee worships the Lord with such intense passion and wishes to merge with the Lord. This yearning for union with *paramatma*, the supreme soul, on part of the *atma*, the soul, underlined this intense devotion. It has been the governing principle of *Bhakti* in general and Siddhendra Yogi promoted the cult emphasizing that every *bhakta* (devotion), devotee, should have this intense devotion for the Lord, as intense as that of Satyabhama. Krishna is *Bharta*, the Lord, and each devotee is his consort-Satyabhama.

Centering round the dance-drama *Bhama Kalapam* the tradition at Kuchipudi developed over the years. *Bhakti* remained its binding force. The Brahmin families inherited the legacy of dance-drama and music from the previous generation and passed it on to the next. During the last two centuries it has undergone many vicissitudes. It was reduced to a form of mere entertainment.

With the changing times and under the British rule the influence of the Dharwad and Parsi drama companies with dialogue in colloquial dialect, advance stage techniques, lighting, decor and costumes was detrimental to the growth of Kuchipudi which a traditional dance-drama only.

From the nineteen thirties onwards Kuchipudi dance-dramas faced competition from the film medium as well. As a result, during the thirties and the forties popularity of Kuchipudi was waning. However, with the freedom movement and the spiritual awakenings Kuchipudi gradually revived. E. Krishna Iyer and Rukmini Devi were striving hard for re-establishing Bharata Natyam in Madras; poet Vallathol Narayana Menon had

established Kerala Kala Mandalam for training in Kathakali; Madame Menaka was presenting Kathak in India and abroad winning laurels; Uday Shankar had succeeding in popularizing dance with his world tours and in general there was an awareness about the dance heritage to be saved from oblivion and give it its due place in the society.

In Andhra, Bada Kanakalingeswara Rao, Vissa Appa Rao and Tandava Krishna worked towards creating this awareness by writing articles in the newspapers and journals, organizing performances by the troupes, and presenting Kuchipudi dances in a manner that would make Andhra people proud of their heritage. It was at this time that Vedantam Lakshminarayana Sastri, with his son Jagannath Sarma,



Kuchipudi dancer Rajashree Holla  
photographed by VB Suresh Babu

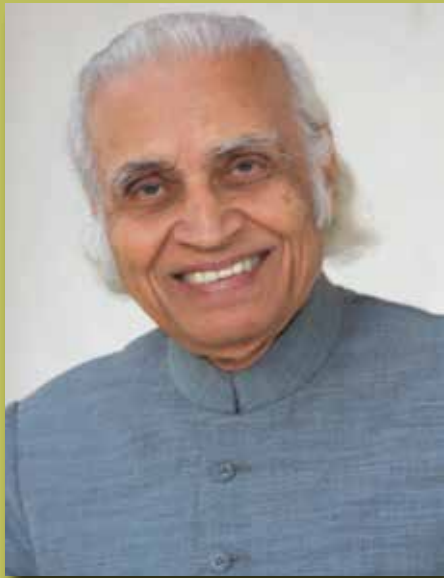
began touring and presenting solo performances, introducing *nritya* numbers and *Tarangams* in which a dancer balances himself on rim of a brass plate, introducing female dancers in the Kuchipudi tradition by training them, and in general shaping the form for solo exposition. Others migrated to the cities like Hyderabad and Madras and some joined films. Vempati Peda Satyam and Vedantam Raghavayya through films made Kuchipudi popular. Vempati Chinna Satyam followed their suit, but after time gave it up and followed the example of his mentor Vedantam Lakshminarayana Shastri training students in solo Kuchipudi numbers, as well as choreographed

several dance-dramas. Following his contribution Kuchipudi dance and dance-dramas were placed on par with other dance forms.

With the independence and formation of the Sangeet Natak Akademis, like other performing arts, Kuchipudi also received attention on the national level and after the historic All India Dance Seminar convened in 1958 by Sangeet Natak Akademi at Delhi where the dance-demonstration of Kuchipudi technique and scholarly paper presented by Vissa Appa Rao, interest was generated in Kuchipudi tradition. Followed by a conference in Hyderabad in 1959, Kuchipudi received its due recognition as

a major classical dance form.

The performances by Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma won an award from the central Sangeet Natak Akademi. Siddhendra Kalakshetra was established at Kuchipudi village due to the untiring efforts of Banda Kanakalingeswara Rao and others. The young female dancers started studying Kuchipudi at Vemati Chinna Satyam's Kuchipudi Art Academy at Madras. The performances of Indrani Rahman and Yamini Krishnamurti kindled further interest in Kuchipudi. Soon it became a part of the international dance scene. Today it has spread far and wide as a precious dance form of Andhra Pradesh with its countless votaries.



**Dr. Sunil Kothari**

Dr. Sunil Kothari is a leading dance historian, author and critic. He was the Professor and Head of the Department of Dance, Rabindra Bharati University of Kolkata, Dean and Professor of the School of Arts and Aesthetics at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi and Fulbright Professor at New York University. Sunil Kothari's love for dance began when he started learning Kathak as a ten-year-old in Deodhar's Classes at Opera House. Curious to know what made artistes perform in their unique ways, Kothari interacted with dance legends. As a dance critic of *The Times of India*, he has also contributed extensively on Odissi, Mohiniattam and Kuchipudi dance forms to *'The Illustrated Weekly'* of India. He has authored numerous books and research papers on different forms of Indian classical dance and allied art-forms like, *Bharata Natyam: Indian Classical Dance Art*, *Odissi: Indian Classical Dance Art*, *Rasa: The Indian Performing Arts in the Last 25 Years*, *Kuchipudi: Indian Classical Dance Art*, *Photo Biography of Rukmini Devi*, *Kathak: Indian Classical Dance Art*, *New Directions In Indian Dance*, *Chhau Dances of India*, *Damaru: Essays on Classical Dance*, *Music, Performing Arts and Folk Dances*, *Rituals, Crafts*, etc. His 2013 publication *Sattriya dances of Assam*, was an endeavour of 20 years of research. For his outstanding contribution to dance he has received many awards including Sangeet Natak Akademi award, Ratna Sadasya Fellow award, Kumar Chandrak in 1961, Ranjitram Suvarna Chandrak in 2012 and Padma Shri, civil honour from the President of India. Today as a mature and senior dance historian, he occupies the unique position of having witnessed the changes in classical dance forms over the last four decades.





# Dhamaal: A Mystic Dance of Pakistan

By

**Dr. Kiran Shahid Siddiqui**

Dhamaal is considered to be a mystic dance of Pakistan and there are many beliefs among scholars regarding its origins. Some scholars believe that Dhamaal traces its origins to the Sufi Fakirs (Religious Ascetics) of Sehwan Sharif of the Sindh Province in Pakistan.



It is stated that *Dhamaal* “Model their dreads or jata (matted or braided hair), red robes and dust-smeared bodies on those of Shaivite sadhus, so the dhamaal derives from the damaru drum of Shiva, by which, in his form of Nataraja, or Lord of the Dance, the destroyer drums the world back into existence after dancing after dancing it into extinction”.

According to the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE Chinese traveler Xuan Zang (Hiuen Tsang), Sehwan was the

religious center of Shaivite sects called the *Pashupatas* who had faith in mimicking the dance of Shiva as a component of their ritual practices, using this shamanistic dancing as a means of attaining connection with God. Remarkably Sehwan Sharif seems to have maintained the ancient Shaivite dance of the *Pashupatas* in

a thinly Islamicised Sufi form even though music and dance are strictly forbidden in Islam.

*Dhamaal* is associated with the shrines of holy men of Islam. Lal Shahbaz Qalandar, one of the famous saints of South Asia, who lived during the 13<sup>th</sup> century, is said to have

practiced this mystic whirling dance.

His shrine is visited yearly by over a million pilgrims- Hindus and Muslims alike. Lal Shahbaz Qalandar is popularly known as ‘*mast qalandar*’ ‘the spiritually intoxicated *qalandar*’. A *qalandar* is a title given to Sufi holy men, especially in South Asia. In some cultures, Qalandars are controversial and seen as heretics but in others they are revered and regarded as chosen holy men. *Dhamaal* is practiced at the shrine, especially on Thursdays, after the *maghrib* (evening prayers). In addition, thousands of pilgrims visit the shrine of Lal Shahbaz

*Dhamaal performance*





Qalandar in Sehwan Sharif, Sindh, to dance to the beat of the large ritual drums and reach the ecstatic state of their saint.

Madho Lal Husain's shrine near Shalimar Gardens, Lahore where a large number of devotees gather to celebrate his *urs* (death anniversary) is another place where *Dhamaal* dance is practiced.

They sing and dance to express their respect and devotion to the saint. Sounds of flute, *tabla* (drum), and harmonium complement the rhythmic compositions of *qawwali*, an active musical performance of Sufi Muslim poetry that intends to lead audience to a state of religious trance—to a spiritual bond with God, on which the pilgrims perform *dhamaal* exclaiming “Shah Husain, waliullah, Shah Hussain”. The literal meaning of *waliullah* is “a friend of God”.

There are other Sufi shrines, such as Shah Jamal tomb in Lahore, the shrine of Syed Sultan Ahmad, Hazrat Sakhi Sarwar in Dera Ghazi Khan, the shrine of Hazrat Golra Sharif in Islamabad, etc., where *Dhamaal* is performed occasionally or on a regular basis.

*Dhamaal* is a mystic dance associated with dervishes or fakirs. It involves a blissful twisting of the body and head and by pointing the index finger towards the sky and stepping high while moving in a circle. Interestingly, this is a vigorous whirling dance, a captivating and thrilling performance, which demands substantial stamina and strength. In the meantime, huge

drums and gongs beat to the mass devotional dance beginning with a slow and soft rhythm and ultimately culminating into a wild increase of excitement making a deafening noise. *Dhamaal* is believed to be a secondary form of Bhangra dance which is thought to have existed since 300 BCE in South Asia. Moreover, one should possess the appropriate enthusiasm and rhythm to perform this dance as the rhythm increases and decreases with the music. To increase the tempo and the energy level of the dancer or performer, the musical note of harmonium or shehnai, a musical reed instrument very similar to the western oboe, and even the drum's beats add to the excitement and the spirit.

Darwish or Fakirs perform this dance form often. A dervish is a person who is unbound by the social and customary self-consciousness and restrictions, who lives a life of aloofness from the world. And a fakir is an ascetic who vows to poverty and worship declining pleasures of life. Also, this dance, is performed by both men and women at holy festivals in Sufi shrines.

There are many beliefs associated with *Dhamaal* dance. This mode of dance is common among people who are inclined to Sufism which employs dance to visually represent the Islamic belief of *tawhid*, which means emphasizing the oneness, supremacy and absolute perfection of God. Also, it is believed that *Dhamaal* drives out tilting evil spirits from one's body and takes them to a state of selflessness. Further, it is also believed that the ecstasy of *Dhamaal* is a ‘safety valve, providing an outlet of tensions that else would have no other expression in this deeply conservative society’. Another understanding of *Dhamaal* is that it is popular for its power to heal, and in Sindh—as elsewhere in Sufi Islam—it is generally held that an ailment that



seems to be physical, but which in fact has its roots in an illness of the spirit, can be healed by the power of Sufi music and drumming. This is done by sending the person with the ailment into a trance, where their grief and anxiety will be calmed and, eventually cured. Lastly, it is thought to create a connection between god and man and they show their devotion through their dance. It is held that the performers get intoxicated during their dance without drinking alcohol. It is the 'wajd' or trance that makes them forget everything and not alcohol.

Although there is no specific tradition of religious dance in Islamic societies, religious dances have been accepted in most Muslim countries and including in Pakistan.

Various spiritual dance forms are performed in Pakistan until today and *Dhamaal* dance is one of them.

*Dhamaal* dance by dervishes and fakirs is not for pleasure or entertainment. Being ubiquitous in South Asia, it is rather connected with Sufism, though there is no trend of dancing in Islam. However, the thinking that it gives a person inner peace and harmony is from their personal experience. Undoubtedly, it heals their souls and take the performers to the state of self-forgetfulness helping them to forget their worldly tensions and worries.

*This article is a tribute to Sheema Kermani, a social activist, theater director and performer of Bharatnatyam dance who*

*courageously shared her message of peace and love through her performance of Dhamaal at Sehwan, Sindh after a massive bomb blast in early 2017 in which 70 people were killed and more than 150 injured. The incident took place in the courtyard of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar's shrine where Dhamaal was being performed after the evening prayers. With her performance she gave a clear message that nobody can stop music and dance.*



**Dr. Kiran Shahid Siddiqui**

Dr. Kiran Shahid Siddiqui is an Assistant Professor in Taxila Institute of Asian Civilizations (TIAC) at the Quaid-i-Azam University in Islamabad. She was a regular faculty member in University of Karachi since 2000. She obtained her PhD in Gandhara Studies from the University of Karachi. She was a visiting faculty in the Institute of Business Administration IBA for three years (2012-15). Dr. Siddiqui was awarded a post-doctoral fellowship by the Confucius Hanban Institute in 2016 to conduct a research project on "The Buddhist Iconography of Gandhara and its Extension in China" in affiliation with Peking University, Beijing, P.R. of China. She has participated in various national and international conferences and workshops and published research papers in several reputed research journals. Her research interest includes the tangible and intangible heritage Pakistan, history of South Asia, Hindu-Buddhist art and architecture, etc. She is currently engaged in research projects funded by the Quaid-i-Azam University Research Fund.





# In the Footsteps of Dance: A journey through Art in Sri Lanka

By  
Ms. Bindu Urugodawatte

Dance is a part of our lives, an important cultural element in celebrations, rituals, healings and entertainment today, the intangible heritage which is rarely appreciated or understood. Dance is an important element of cultural identity, embodied and enriched by music, costumes, songs and other cultural elements, creating a visually beautiful performance art.



Today there are three main schools of traditional dancers in Sri Lanka – the Kandyan dancers, the Sabaragamuwa dancers and the Low country or the coastal dancers. The Kandyan dancers are accepted as the representatives of the Sri Lankan classical dancers with a close affinity to Buddhist rituals and specially the Temple of Tooth Relic in Kandy. The Sabaragamuwa tradition evolved with the worship of God Saman while the Low country tradition is closer to folk traditions with dances associated with healing being an important part their tradition.

The history of dance and its rituals dates back to the establishment of habitations in the island nation. The origin and history of dance is obscured by the veils of time but rare references to dance in celebrations can still be gleaned from Sri Lankan historical chronicles *Mahawamsa* and *Culawamsa* and other historical texts. With the proliferation of texts during the medieval period of Sri Lanka such as the “*Sandesha Kavya*” or the Verse Messages of the Bird, Buddhist Jataka stories in verse the most famous being the “*Guttila Kavya*” or the Jataka story of Guttila in verse carry numerous references to dance, accompanied musical instruments and musicians but most of all regarding the dancers. The earliest historical reference to dance in *Mahawamsa* dates from the reign of King Pandukabhaya (5<sup>th</sup> – 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE) where it says that King Pandukabhaya had gods and men to dance before him for his pleasure and enjoyment.

The introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka during the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE changed the Sri Lankan

culture which in turn had a great influence on the dances of Sri Lanka. Buddhist rituals became a part of the dance tradition, some of which has survived to the modern era in the form of intangible cultural heritage. The intangible heritage of dance in the form of rituals, folk tales, verses, etc., indicate that Sri Lankan traditional dance was introduced by the gods, who even presented the dancers with some of their clothes to be used by the dancers. Interestingly the costumes of the Kandyan dancers of today are very similar to the costumes portrayed in the art and sculpture of Gods in ancient Sri Lanka and even today. The costume of the Serpent God from Anuradhapura Abhayagiri Monastery Ratnaprasada Guard stone has a conical head-dress similar to the head-dress of the Kandyan dancer along with the numerous necklaces used as the only covering for the upper body and decorated wide belts holding the garment covering the lower body.



*The traditional Kandyan dance costume and the Serpent God*



A tangible glimpse of Sri Lankan traditional dances can be identified through the paintings and sculpture of Sri Lanka. The earliest surviving paintings and sculpture dating from Anuradhapura period (6<sup>th</sup> century BCE to 11<sup>th</sup> century CE) and Polonnaruwa Period (11<sup>th</sup> century CE to 13<sup>th</sup> century CE) are mostly religious art and sculpture with very little evidence of secular art. Although dance was a part of the religious rituals, clearly discernible representations of dance dated to Anuradhapura have not been identified as yet probably due to the fact that secular art was created with material such as wood, clay, cloth, etc., which would not survive the ravages of the tropical climate in Sri Lanka.

During Polonnaruwa period, rare glimpses of dancers can be identified as a part of the architectural detail. A stone

*The frieze with female dancers from Polonnaruwa (12th century CE)*

reason for the decorative frieze with females in traditional Sri Lankan dancing postures are not known. The costumes and jewellery used by the dancers are very similar to the costumes worn by the Kandyan dancers of the modern era.

The Gadadeniya Temple dated to the 14<sup>th</sup> century CE has a stone frieze as a part of the architectural decorations of the Buddhist Image House. The dancers in the frieze are female and accompanied by a female drummer. The clothing and jewellery are difficult to identify at this stage due to weathering of the stone but the visible details indicate the influence of the Kandyan dance tradition with bare upper body

include dancers, musicians, shops, houses, palaces, processions, nature, etc. Although the style of paintings and iconography of the paintings from different areas carry similar details there are many Regional variants visible. In the paintings which include dancers the different types of the dancers representing the different Sri Lankan traditions can be identified.

The Habarana Temple on Pillars dated to 18<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century CE has a wall painting inside the Image House with three female dancers. These dancers are in the first



posture of the Kandyan dancing known as “*mandiya*” or standing with feet apart and knees bent outwards with a straight spine. These three dancers have bare upper body with

decorated only with jewellery and lower body covered with a garment including a wide belt.

The largest corpus of paintings in Sri Lanka date from the Kandy Period (16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century CE) and most of these paintings are Buddhist paintings created as a part of the Image House. These paintings carry the tradition of Buddhist art over 2 millennia reflect moments from secular life as well. The secular details in these paintings

a hair twisted to a conical shape decorated with jewellery. The upper body is also covered with necklaces and arm bands. The painting itself is badly deteriorated and some of the details are not very clearly visible.

The Kottimbulwela Raja Maha Viharaya, a Cave Temple in Sabaragamuwa, has paintings from different periods adorning its walls and ceiling of the cave dated between 17<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century CE.

decorative frieze from Polonnaruwa now at the Colombo National Museum provides one of the earliest and rare glimpse of female dancers accompanied by a drummer. This frieze has been identified as a part of architectural detail however the function of the monument or the



*Low country dancer, folk dancer and devil dancer from the Image House of the Kataluwa Ancient Temple dated to 19th century CE.*

Within the large Image House area of the cave there is a long wooden offering table which is covered with painted wooden boards in front.

The painted wooden boards of the table have numerous paintings dated to 19<sup>th</sup> century and among them is a dancer and musicians. The dancer accompanied by a drummer wears a conical hat is bear in his upper body but it is not adorned with jewellery. The lower body is covered with a garment secured by a wide belt. This dancer without the elaborate upper body jewellery of the Kandyan tradition seems to indicate an affiliation to Sabaragamuwa tradition but

unfortunately difficult to identify with this painting only. This dancer may also be depicting a more rural and simple version of the Kandyan dancer.

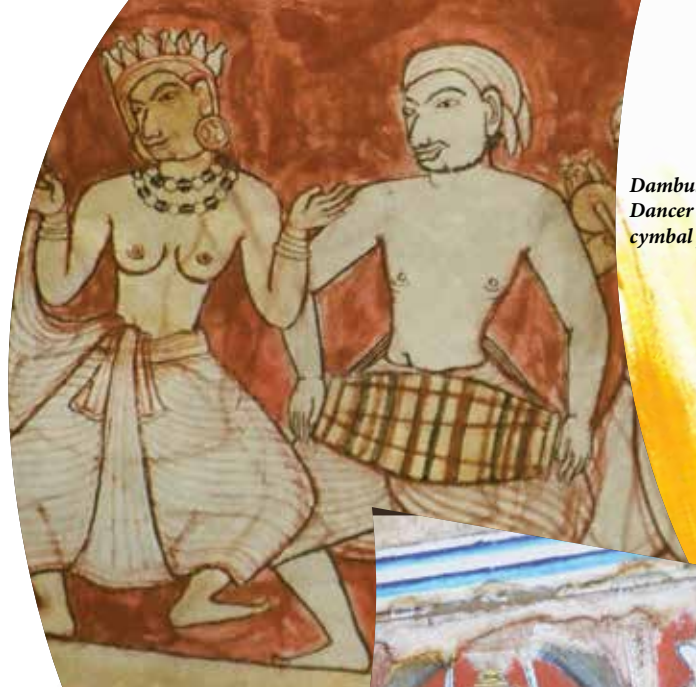
The Kataluwa Ancient Temple located in the Southern Coastal area of Galle has dancers painted as a part of a procession with musicians. The dancers include a male dancer in the Low country dancing style and two children in the folk dance of style of wooden sticks known as “Lee Keli”. The wooden sticks in this instance are used to create an intricate dance accompanied by music and the sound of sticks in a variety of play. The procession also includes a masked Devil dancer as a part of the procession. The Devil dancers are a part of the ritualistic healing associated with specially the Low country dance traditions.

The sculpture and paintings of dance provides us with a wonderful insight to the traditional dance of Sri Lanka. However, the art also raises the question as to why the paintings and sculpture identified as representations of the Kandyan dance have female dancers as their theme of a tradition which was completely dominated by males until the modern era.

*Architectural Frieze from Gadaladeniya Temple with female dancers accompanied by a female drummer. (14th century CE)*







*Dambulla Ancient Temple  
Dancer Drummer and  
cymbal player cropped*



*Kottimbulwela  
Raja Maha  
Viharaya Dancers*

Was the representation of female dancers the artistic license of the sculptors and painters or was it representation of a tradition which disappeared centuries ago?

The time has come for the traditional dancers with their wealth of knowledge of the intangible heritage of dance to look into their roots with the researchers to understand our own history of dance from different disciplines.



**Ms. Bindu Urugodawatte**

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Ms. Bindu Urugodawatte is the Deputy Director Research at the SAARC Cultural Centre. She is an Archaeologist by profession, trained both in the East and West and carrying out her research in South, Central and East Asia. Her research interests include Buddhist Archaeology of Sri Lanka and South Asia, Silk Road Buddhist Archaeology, Buddhist Archaeology of Central Asia and China. Currently she is carrying out research on *Paintings of Jataka Stories at the Kizil Rock-Cut Cave Temple in Xinjiang Province of China*. She has contributed her research to both national and international publications and presented her research findings at national and international forums in USA, Europe and Asia. Her recent publications include *Buddhist Art and Architecture and Key Buddhist Centres of Devotion and Pilgrimage in Buddhism Living Religion Sri Lanka* published by the Ministry of Buddhasasana of Sri Lanka. *Buddhism in Central Asia in 2600 Years of Sambuddhatva: Global Journey of Awakening, Influence of European Diaspora on Sri Lankan Buddhist Art in the Circulation of Cultures and Culture of Circulation: Diasporic Cultures of South Asia During the 18th to 20th Centuries* are some of her publications. She has worked in governmental, non-governmental and private organisations in Sri Lanka, USA and China in various capacities. She is avid photographer, a nature lover and an intrepid traveller



"The new is only an extension of the old"

## **The Chitrasena Dance Company and the Development of Traditional Dance in Modern Sri Lanka**

By

**Ms. Thajithangani Chitrasena Dias**

The traditional dance rituals in Sri Lanka have a history of over 2,500 years. The intangible heritage associated with dance reveal that traditional dance is considered to be sacred because it was taught to the native people by the divine beings and the gods even handed over some of their costumes and ornaments so as to see these rituals continue for the betterment of the country and its people.



Thus, the dance and associated rituals is an offering to the gods themselves.

Traditionally, male dancers or dance priests adorned the elaborate ornaments of the gods, performed in a ritual space to cure illnesses and for prosperity, or as exorcism rituals to ward off evil spirits. As healing was a huge part of these rituals it was essential for the dancer to be one with god when performing the rituals. These ritual dance forms are accompanied by drums and chanting. Folklore suggests that in the past, these rituals had more chanting and were performed for seven nights at a stretch in the villages. These traditional healing rituals was a source of cure and reliever of pain, anguish and grief for many ailments. Today, these rituals are usually performed for one night only; the dance and drumming acts having become more prominent and the healing aspect mostly staged for continuity.

"I strived to preserve the pure traditional styles and to evolve new national dance forms based on the Kandyan technique so that through the fullness of time a truly national ballet may emerge out of our humble efforts"

*-Guru Chitrasena-*







### The Chitrasena Dance Company

The Chitrasena Dance Company established in 1943 by Guru Chitrasena became his vehicle to experiment with and around these traditional dance forms. During the colonial rule, the ritual dance forms gradually declined and the custodians of these sacred art forms were influenced by western culture to some extent. Guru Chitrasena, one of the pioneers of dance in Sri Lanka saw the importance preserving these art forms away from just the village ritual space. Being primarily trained in the Kandyan dance tradition and after his return from studying classical dance in India he adapted the traditional dance forms to suit the modern 'stage' while retaining its essence. The dance forms became more refined and polished and was taught according to a specific structure or syllabus in order to train a dancer to be able to perform on

*Upeka in Ridmaranga*



stage. Although drawn from the traditional or folk roots of Sri Lanka, the choreography, lights, costumes and sets made the dance forms suited to that particular time resulting in a traditional contemporary art form.

Guru Chitrasena had to swim against the tide in order to re-establish our traditional art forms as the National dance forms of Sri Lanka at a time when not just dance but everything around him was being influenced by western culture. He was successful in earning drummers and dancers the respect that they deserve as custodians of an ancient tradition at a time when the caste system was strongly present within the Sri Lankan community and these traditional ritual artists were looked down upon as they belonged to one of the lower castes in the archaic caste hierarchies.

The traditional dance forms of Sri Lanka fall into the ambit of '*Nritta*' or pure dance according to the classification in the *Natya Shastra*, an Indian Sanskrit text on the performing arts. It has no form of storytelling unlike Indian classical dance where narratives form the core of the technique. After studying the ancient form of Kathakali in India, Guru Chitrasena saw the need for a powerful medium through which human experiences could be expressed. Subsequent to Guru Rabindranath Tagore's visit to Sri Lanka and being greatly inspired by Udaya Shankar's work, Guru Chitrasena introduced 'dance-drama' to Sri Lanka where he brought stories to life through dance. He innovated within the traditional dance forms by infusing natural gestures and movement, creating a whole new vocabulary suited for this genre.

The Kandyan, Low-country and the Sabaragamuwa traditional dance forms are only performed by males in the ritual setting. Guru Vajira Chitrasena, one of the first female professional dancers on stage, broke ground pushing the boundaries of the Kandyan technique and created a more feminine or '*laasya*' form. Once again, the Kandyan Dance form went through a change in technique, costume and presentation to suit the female body. While the ritual in the village continued and kept evolving through time a parallel





*Thaji Chitrasena Dias in Samhara Nrityagram Dance Ensemble of India  
(Photograph by Akila Venkat)*

form, although strongly rooted in the ritual, branched out as the traditional-contemporary form suited for the modern stage.

One of the immeasurable contributions to our country by our dynamic duo, Gurus Chitrasena and Vajira can be said to be their eldest daughter Upeka Chitrasena! She is the embodiment of her mother's grace and her father's strength. She headed the Company as it's principal dancer during one of the darkest periods of our countries history. She carried on her legacy with strength, courage and elegance without giving into the challenges our school and company faced and always finding solutions which brought the company to what it is today. She continued with the training, teaching and performing together with her younger sister Anjalika while continuing their parent's legacy. She has given the 3rd and subsequent generation memories, inspiration and wisdom of the dance without ever holding back. She continues to train the members of the Chitrasena Dance Company and nurture world class dancers for the modern stage.



### To the era of information

The Company is now in its 75<sup>th</sup> year, making it one of the oldest and most prestigious dance companies in Sri Lanka. It consists of 3<sup>rd</sup> generation artists led by Guru Chitrasena's eldest granddaughter and Artistic Director of the Company, Heshma Wignaraja. She continues to experiment with a dance form that demands zest and vigorous technique while adapting it for the present time and audience, constantly tracing back to our roots to draw inspiration.

We, the third generation who are the custodians of Guru Chitrasena's legacy find ourselves treading similar waters as Guru Chitrasena did when he first began in the 1940's. We live in a time where western influences and Hindi pop culture have greatly influenced our art to a point where the traditional dance forms cannot be recognized. Perhaps there is a need for such light entertainment where the performance space can be a stage, hotel lobby or even the tarmac, but as traditional stage dance artists, where do we draw the

line when it comes to influence? How much do we take and how do we earn back the respect we deserve as preservers of an ancient heritage in Sri Lanka? Tradition is ever changing and innovation is key to see it live and breathe through time, but how do we consciously innovate without losing the essence of the form? More importantly how do we educate an audience when artists themselves fail to meaningfully present this language of the gods? Sometimes what is intended as a glimpse into the future only illustrates our ignorance of our own past.

"Without complete technical control the body cannot become a sensitive instrument of expression"

**-Guru Chitrasena-**

A question on balance between boundaries and influence is exemplified by the collaboration

between the Nrityagram Dance Ensemble of India and The Chitrasena Dance Company. The Nrityagram Dance Ensemble is a world-renowned dance company specialising in Odissi, one of the 8 classical dance forms of India. As a choreographer and dancer respectively, Heshma and I have greatly been influenced and inspired by the work of these artists whose first international collaboration we were fortunate to be a part of. The feminine beauty of Odissi and the masculine energy of Kandyan were brought together on one stage through a production titled '*Samhara*' which premiered in February 2012 at Chowdiah Memorial Hall, Bangalore. This was only possible because of a decade long friendship, our similar work ethics and the fact that both companies committed one full year which included workshops and exchange programs in order to understand each other's forms and connect at a deeper level to bring a meaningful production to life.

The latest production of the Chitrasena Dance Company,

*Three Generations of the Chitrasena Dance Company - (L to R) Anjalika, Vajira, Thaji, Umi, Upeka and Heshma*



choreographed by Heshma, after her experience working as the assistant choreographer for 'Samhara' where she worked side by side with a story telling dance form accompanied by Indian classical music, enabled her to create 'Devanjali' – a Ritual – Rites - Reflection which premiered in December 2014, drawing elements and adding layers to our traditional dance forms, to understand the sensibility inherent in movement, to consider music and musicality for us Sri Lankan traditional dancers who perform to the accompaniment of drums only and adding meaning to pure dance pieces.

"Impactful art has no shortcuts"

- Heshma Wignaraja-

We, the 3<sup>rd</sup> generation of the Chitrasena legacy, attempt to nurture our art forms and together hope to change lives, one person at a time. The climb is steep and the ascend is slow. But we can only hope that something fruitful emerges for the benefit of the next generation of artists in our country, out of our humble efforts. Guru Chitrasena once said, *"The dance is a very sacred thing. It is an offering to the gods. It is an expression of humility and surrendering of the ego"*

As a tribute to this great guru and visionary today the Chitrasena Vajira Dance Foundation has created a scholarship program for deserving students who seek to pursue dance as a profession, where they are taught the Chitrasena technique of dance at no cost with the hope that they will

themselves teach, perform, inspire and pass on their knowledge to the next generation. Celebrating 75 years as one of the premiere dance companies and institutions for dance in the heart of Colombo, we envision celebrating our existence by going back to the past and recreating guru Chitrasena's home in the 1950's where artists from all corners of Sri Lanka immersed in protecting our dying art forms are brought under one roof for a 4-day festival during the first week of September at the Chitrasena Kalayathana. A brainchild of Heshma, she envisions our new home for the dance buzzing with Sri Lankan arts and crafts tracking its evolution from the past to the present and into the future making it a reminder for the artist and the viewer that the new is only an extension of the old.



**Ms. Thajithangani Chitrasena Dias**

Ms. Thajithangani Chitrasena Dias is the youngest granddaughter of Chitrasena and Vajira. Thaji started learning Kandyan dancing at the tender age of seven and began touring with the Dance Company in 2000, when she received the rare opportunity of performing at the prestigious Theatre Du Soleil in Paris with her aunt Upeka Chitrasena as a guest of Ariane Mounckine.

Since then, she has performed as a member of the Dance Company to local and international audiences and festivals including the Asian Arts Festival in Chinese Taipei in 2003, Montpellier Festival in France in 2005, the Sydney Festival in 2015 and The Esplanade Dance Festival in Singapore in 2016. She was also one of the two members who represented the Company in their first international collaborative production, *Samhara*, on invitation by the world renowned Nrityagram Dance Ensemble of India, which toured UK at the Royal Festival Hall, London, US at the prestigious Joyce Theater in New York and many parts of India.

She is now the Principal Dancer of the Company and she is actively engaged in teaching a variety of classes and training younger dancers at the Chitrasena Dance School





# Dance, Music, Song and the delicious melting pot of Performing Arts

By

**Ms. Kishani Jayasinghe Wijayasekara**

The dynamic world of performing arts is a complex, exciting and imaginative sphere of arts, which encompasses a wide array of physical disciplines. These sometimes weave together to form more complex forms of art such as musicals and operas.



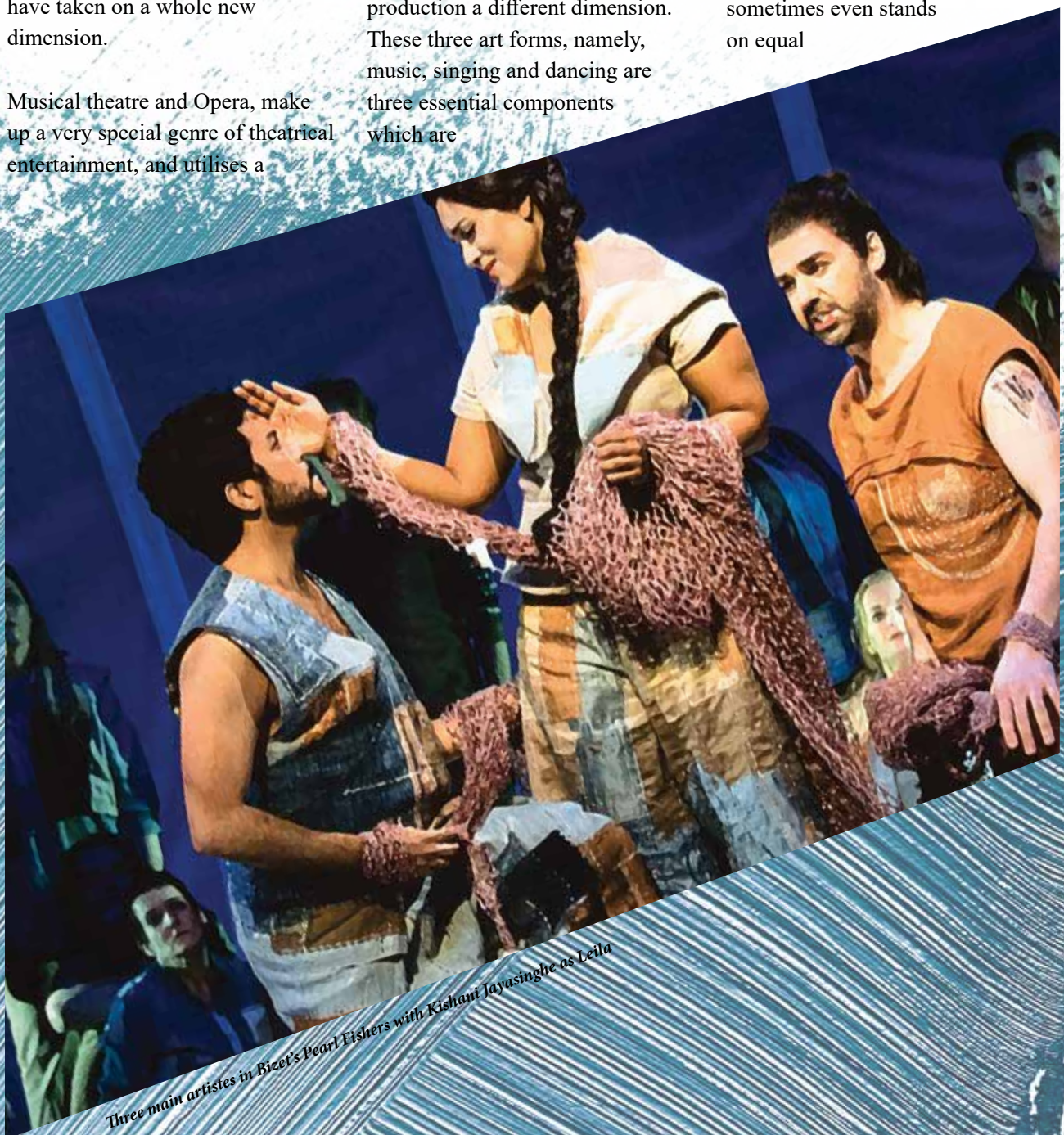
There is sometimes a perception that the musical art form tends to predominantly rely on song and text, with little regard for physical demonstration, in order to convey the message. When a patron visits the theatre for the musical arts, it is assumed it is mainly for a feast of the ears, and not necessarily for the eye. However, the concept of theatre has evolved and with that, so have the expectations of the modern-day audience and the ideology of arts and entertainment have taken on a whole new dimension.

Musical theatre and Opera, make up a very special genre of theatrical entertainment, and utilises a

multitude of art forms to complete its visual spectacle. In addition to the obvious musical element, there is also the text which is delivered by way of singing and sometimes prose. Unlike a straight play which tells a story using the narration in a spoken manner, the art form of opera and musical theatre do so by way of sung speech. However, no production is complete without the physical aspect of demonstration by way of dance, which comes in especially with regards to giving the production a different dimension. These three art forms, namely, music, singing and dancing are three essential components which are

necessary to deliver a successful production.

Traditional dance has long since played a part in theatrical productions. The physicality of dance and the third dimension it adds to a piece of theatre has long since been a very valuable ingredient in a production's recipe for success. In the present-day context, dance in general has become a second dialog within the context of a piece of theatre. It sometimes even stands on equal



Three main artistes in Bizet's Pearl Fishers with Kishanti Jayasinghe as Leila



ground with the spoken and sung script - such is its importance. It adds not only colour and textures to the stage and the production itself, but it also enhances the emotional experience for the theatre-goer. The audience finds themselves being lured into a world of fantasy and story-telling not only with the auditory sensation of the music and the singing but also with the visual specificity and creativity of dance which adds unmeasurable depth to any theatrical experience.

The genre of opera has explored the value

and depths of dance within its performance arena for hundreds of years and probably since the time operas have been staged. The concept of dance visually depicting the story line sung by the voice has been an integral part of the operatic tradition. Every student of opera, is required to have a basic knowledge of traditional dance forms and will be required to put this knowledge into practice at least a few times during the span of a professional career. In many ways it is fair to say that the art of dance is an integral part of stage performance and the demand for singers to be actors as well as dancers in the business of music is growing.

Each composer has a different style and feeling for *how* they would like to tell their story. Whether it is with a classic feel or with a

more modern approach and this in many ways lay the foundation for the entire production. Directors have a degree of freedom to select the manner in which they will dramatize the story, but many work within the framework set out by the composer and the conductor of the opera. Many of the very traditional operas tend to have segments written in especially for traditional dance. Examples such as the French operatic composer of the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Charles Gounod's epic opera *Faust*, has an entire Act dedicated to traditional dance – in this case Ballet. Russian composer Peter Tchaikovsky's classic tale of *Eugene Onegin* would not be complete without the element of classical dance in the ballroom scene. Italian composer Giuseppe Verdi's iconic opera *La Traviata*, commences with the heroine Violetta's party in which one is introduced to the concept of dance almost immediately. Interestingly however, more and more opera



*The Three dancers mirroring the three main singers in the Pearl Fishers*



Kishani Jayasinghe as Donna Elvira from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. The great classical composer W.A. Mozart frequently incorporated traditional dance sections into his operas

directors are attempting to break the mould and have more fluid and modern productions which are not tied to the conventional practices of introducing dance simply as a peripheral requisite. Some directors go so far as to introduce it as a main element in the production.

In a recent production of French composer George Bizet's *Les pêcheur de perles* which was staged in The Netherlands, I sang the role of the leading lady named Leila. The director very cleverly used three traditionally trained ballet dancers, well versed in the art of alternative dance, to shadow and mirror the three principal vocal soloists throughout the production. The concept behind it was to physicalise the emotions of the singers and actors through a

visual display. This was an unusual element to an otherwise very traditional and generally accepted depiction of the story.

Interestingly too, the principal dancers were all male, whilst the singing principals consisted of two men and one woman. Each dancer was assigned to a singer for the duration of the production. In many ways they became the soul of the singer.

They were instructed to physicalise the feelings and emotions that would otherwise only be portrayed by the text and the expression of the singer's voice. Therefore, when Leila was feeling something akin to a tempest arising within her, the emotions were reflected not only in the orchestration and with the lighting, but with the physical dance movements of the dancer assigned to shadow Leila's emotions.

In Charles Gounod's popular opera *Faust*, the opera had an entire act of ballet inserted into it before it was revived in Paris. The dancers in this case depict the decline of the heroine, Marguerite, who started life as a bright eyed young girl, full of wonder and waiting for life to unfold with dreams of a promising future. The love of a scheming scoundrel brings about her ruin (it is after all, an opera...!) and towards the end of the opera we see the pristine and light footed graceful ballerinas becoming hard edged and broken, like the main character itself.

In another production of the Peter Tchaikovsky's *Pique Dame* (Queen of Spades), there is a role play within the story, where a young girl plays the part of a shepherd boy. The easiest way in which to portray this was through the use of dance. The folk dance that ensued in the production was so very cleverly choreographed, that the feminine and delicate movements of the young maiden, were suddenly angular and more masculine, which immediately gave the message to the viewers that this was now a young boy instead. Easy enough to display with a change of clothes but doing so through dance and dance movements simply adds another



layer of authenticity and creativity and immediately gives the viewer a more comprehensive picture.

In a performance of Franz Lehar's *The Merry Widow*, sung as close to my home shores as Singapore, there was the fantastic and vibrant section devoted to the can-can girls and their extraordinary dancing. The dancing girls in that very scene, were able to tell a story that no words nor script ever could. Aided by the marvellous flash and fanfare of costumes and lighting, the level of performance rose to another level of brilliance with the introduction of the dancing girls. The Merry Widow herself is an exceptional dancer and is called upon several occasions to 'give it a whirl' at various embassy functions within the arms of the dignified brigade – all part of the storyline and plot, but nevertheless as important as the singing and the conversation that was the mainstay of the production.

Ultimately the performing arts is a melting pot of music, song and dance, all of which combine for the greater good of telling a story. Whether it be something as

simplistic as a fairy tale brought to life with the use of ballet dancers and folk singers, or the complex and dramatic operas characterised by the vigour and stamina of its dancers, or the aesthetically pleasing and visually stunning musicals that glitters with sets, costumes and dancers to rival the *mardi gras*, finally every aspect of theatre is honed and nurtured, tweaked and adjusted to bring about something spectacular to the stage. There is no happy medium of mediocrity – every aspect of the performing arts has its part to play in making the story extraordinary and memorable. Every aspect of theatre is utilised to bring about a supremely professional production that is touching, heart-breaking, hard fought but also so very real. In the end there is no dance without music, no music without song and no song without dance. This makes the melting pot called the performing arts all the more colourful, vibrant and rich and in turn enriches the lives of the lover of culture and the many aspects that come together to give us the opportunity to experience it.

The most exciting aspect in relation to the performing arts and opera specifically is perhaps its evolution and adaptability. The latter has been considered a western art form for a very long time. Yet, the aspects of cultural arts that go into formulating a multi-disciplined performance such as opera, involving dance, music and song/text as discussed previously, are also evolving. In South Asia these art forms have their own equivalent traditional arts.



Kishani Jayasinghe as the Merry Widow with the traditional Hungarian gypsy dancers

In Sri Lanka, the music maestro, Premasiri Khemadasa, created his own version of opera, Sri Lankan Opera. *Manasawila* remains one of his most memorable compositions in this genre. The music was greatly enhanced by the element of dance in it, and the aspects of traditional Sri Lankan dance which were incorporated into the production, told the story and made the emotional investment, much stronger. In that instance, the combination of a western concept and eastern artistry formed the perfect blend for an art form which reflected the culture of the composer.

This then leaves the whole playing field of opera, theatre and the performing arts as a genre, open to individual interpretation, and the future then seems limitless. It makes the prospect of the evolution and adaptation of culture incredibly bright, for being able to marry western and eastern forms of art in a seamless manner, simply opens the heart and mind towards greater acceptance. It allows the artist leeway to formulate and create as *they* choose and then the limit of how dance, music and song can conspire together to thrill and inspire, simply becomes that of ones' own imagination and ability.

Thus, the future of the artform of dance, music and song continue to remain boundless, exciting and ever so exciting.



**Ms. Kishani Jayasinghe  
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In addition to being the Deputy Director for Programmes at the SAARC Cultural Centre, Kishani Jayasinghe - Wijayasekara is an International Opera Singer and International Commercial Lawyer. She was a Young Artiste at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden and has the distinction of being the first South Asian Soprano soloist to perform there. Having obtained her operatic training at the Royal Academy of Music in London, she is the winner of six International Vocal Competitions in Italy, France, The Netherlands, Spain, Turkey and Finland, and is a Pioneer for Opera in the South Asian Region. Kishani has double Masters degrees in Law and Music and has been recognised as an Outstanding Alumni by all her academic institutions. She has been adjudicated The Asian Woman of Achievement for Art and Culture, having competed with finalists from India, China, Pakistan and Iran. She was presented to HM Queen Elizabeth II as a Young Commonwealth Ambassador for the Arts and has performed for Royalty and Heads of State around the world. Referred to as the "Golden Voice of South Asia", she is considered an authority on Opera in South Asia. Founder of the Colombo Opera Company in Sri Lanka, she is passionate about enhancing the cultural landscape of South Asia through music and opera. A keen sportswoman, Kishani was Sri Lanka's Women's National Rowing Champion and worked at the International Olympic Academy in Greece, where she worked as their founding Music Director. Kishani shares her vocal and performance knowledge with the next generation through Universities and the Kishani Jayasinghe School of Voice. She is also a Goodwill Ambassador for the Women's Fund Asia, and Women in Need, Sri Lanka and is the creator and author of the National Weekend Newspaper feature 'Voice for Women'. Kishani is also an Educator, Philanthropist, Rotarian, Wife and Mother





# South Asian Cultures

## Unity within Diversity

Culture plays a major role in promoting relations and understanding among South Asian countries. Few Regions have as rich and varied cultural heritage as South Asia. South Asian culture in its true sense is not an elite manifestation or something to be confined to museums, art galleries and other repositories. With deep roots in the past, culture in South Asia is a living expression of the creative impetus inherent in the peoples of the Region in their daily lives.

We need to accept the fact that different civilizations and cultures nurture each other. Differences in culture need to be acknowledged as varied experiences are reflected in the richness of national expression. Such differences need to be understood in proper perspective and tolerance and concord must be developed among cultures and civilization.

Many religions of South Asia, some of which in fact have their origin in the Region, have inspired some of the finest manifestations of architecture, literature, sculpture, painting and music in the world. The plurality of the religious traditions and practices of South Asia must be respected, appreciated and protected throughout the Region. National cultural policies are being articulated at high political levels in the individual SAARC countries, it is important to remember that South Asia is heir to a profound civilization continuum of great antiquity and shares roots of mutual heritage exemplifying "Unity within Diversity".





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