

Drama, Theatre and Dance forms

India is an enormous country with diverse tradition and incredible history. The origin of Indian theatre is still obscure, but it is certain that dramatic performances have been a part of Indian culture for a very long time indeed. Structures discovered at Sitabena and Jogimara in Sarguja (Chhattisgarh) are believed to be among the world's oldest theatres.

India's dances and drama differ from place to place. Dance forms from north to south have very different styles. Kathak in the north and Kathakali in the south have almost nothing in common. Each dance has its unique expression and style. Theatre, too, has different artists who have contributed extraordinarily to Indian cinema. Indian cinema has also witnessed transformation in its trend and style with the passage of time.

Drama and Indian theatre

As mentioned above, the excavated ruins at Sitabena and Jogimara caves represent the world's oldest amphitheatres. The script of Bharat Muni's *Natya Shastra* says that Brahma created *Natya Veda* for the pastime of Gods, combining elements of the four Vedas. It is believed that the intellectual content of the *Rigveda*, the music of the *Samaveda*, the *abhinaya* or mime from the *Yajurveda* and the *rasa* from the *Atharvaveda* have been brought together in the *Natyaveda* to embody moral and spiritual truths. Thus, art is meant to entertain as well as instruct and inspire discipline and righteousness.

In India theatre began as a narrative art form, which encompassed a concoction of music, dance and acting. The Sanskrit word '*nataka*' was derived from the root word '*nata*' which actually meant dancer. In the ancient era, the plays were basically of two types:

- *Lokadharmi*: These were realistic depictions of daily life.
- *Natyadharmi*: These were conventional plays with stylish narration.

Plays were categorized into ten types in the classical Sanskrit tradition: *Anka, Bhana, Dima, Ithamgra, Nataka, Prahasana, Prakarna, Svakarna, Vithi* and *Vyayog*.

Classical Sanskrit plays had happy endings, where the lead hero wins or does not die. The protagonist was male who would achieve what he desires at the end. The plays had very clear and well-defined openings and pauses. Most types of dramas had a hero, a heroine, a villain, as well as a *vidushak* or jester who provided comic relief!

The epics - the Ramayana and the Mahabharata – were dramatically narrated by the *Sutas*. This was the main inspiration for the development of classical Sanskrit theatre. Fragments of plays by Asvaghosa are the earliest dramas to have survived. Some great dramatists of the Classical Age are Bhasa, Kalidasa, Shudraka, Visakhadatta and Bhavabhuti.

Over time the Sanskrit writers began to diverge towards poetry, so lyrical writings started gaining popularity over dramatic work. As Sanskrit became more and more embellished, it lost popularity among masses.

The great monarch Harsha himself was an accomplished playwright, who wrote *Ratnavali* in which one finds one of the earliest references to the festival of Holi. Kalidasa's major works include *Ritusamhara, Kumarasambhava, Meghduta, Malavikagnimitra* and the best known of them all- the *Abhijnanashakuntalam*. Shudraka wrote the *Mrichhakatika* (the little clay cart) which tells the story of the love of the dancer Vasantasena and Charudatta, with a sub-plot of political revolution woven in. Visakhadatta wrote the *Mudrarakshasa* which is based on the times of Chandragupta Maurya, Chanakya and the Nandas of Magadha.

Folk theatre

Traditional folk theatre depicts the local lifestyle including beliefs, customs etc. India has a rich tradition of folk theatre in various parts. The folk theatres which still exist emerged in the period around 15th – 16th century AD with devotional themes.

Broadly we can classify Indian theatre into three categories:

1. Ritual theatre
2. Theatre of entertainment
3. South Indian theatre

Ritual theatre: The folk theatre became a very popular means to express and communicate faith to god during the Bhakti movement. Some examples include-



Ankia Nat: It was started in the 16th century by Vaishnava saint Shankaradeva and is happens largely in Assam. The narrator is accompanied by a group of musicians known as Gayan-Bayan Mandali who play khol and Cymbals.

Bhavai is a very popular folk theatre of Gujarat and Rajasthan. Initially it was part of religious rituals to propitiate the Mother Goddess. The theme on which the play is based is romantic. The play is accompanied by a semi classical music, played in a distinct folk style with instruments such as bhungla, jhanjha and tabla. In Rajasthan, '*Dhola Maru*' is a favourite, which depicts the eternal story of Dhola and Maru.

Kala: This form is mainly based around life and incarnations of Vishnu. Important branches include *Dashavatar kala*, *Gopal Kala*, *Gaulan kala*.



The Dashavatar Kala celebrates the 10 Avatars of Vishnu.

Ramlila: This play is prominently performed by male actors. The whole enactment of Ramayana is done using background music, dialogues.

Bhuta: This involves worshipping dead ancestors, and is prevalent in the Kannara district of Karnataka.



Ramlila portrays the story of Lord Ram and his victory over Ravana

Ramman: This is dedicated to Bhumiya deva and is performed in the Garhwal region of Uttarakhand. People of the Bhandari caste wear sacred masks symbolising *Narsimha*, the half-man, half-lion *avatar*.

Theatres of entertainment

They focused mainly on stories of love, valour and the socio-cultural traditions.

Daskathi: is performed in Odisha. The *Gayak* is the chief singer and *Palia* is the co-narrator. Kathia, a wooden musical instrument accompanies the narration.

Garodas: This narration of love stories and valour is done using painted pictures.

Jatra: A popular play of eastern India is an open air performance that was initiated by Vaishnava saint Sri Chaitanya. To propagate the teachings of Krishna through rural Bengal, he used the medium of Jatra.

Kariyila: It is another form of open air theatre which is quite enthralling and is performed in the foothills of Himachal Pradesh.

Maach: It is popularly performed in the region of Malwa in Madhya Pradesh. Later, romantic folk tales were included into this.

Nautanki: It finds mention in Abul Fazl's *Ain-e-Akbari* and is the most popular theatre of northern India. The dialogues are performed in lyrical manner and accompanied by the beats of the beats of a drum called Nagaara.

Oja-Pali: It is performed in Assam. Oja is the main narrator and Palis are the member of the chorus.

Swang: They are the popular entertainment in Punjab and Haryana. The daramas are accompanied by the music of ektara, dholak, sarangi etc.



Tamasha is still the most popular source of entertainment in rural Maharashtra.

Tamasha: This is a very popular drama in the region of Maharashtra and themed on humour and risqué content. The very interesting fact about it is that even some of the male roles are performed by the female actors. Several *Lavani* songs accompany a *Tamasha*.

Villu Pattu: It means bow song. The narration of stories of Ramayana is done using bow shaped instruments.

Bhand Pather: It involves mythological stories and is mainly performed in Jammu and Kashmir. It has music, dance, and drama.

Bhaona: Played popularly in Assam, its main purpose is to inculcate and develop moral values and religious idea through entertainment.

Dashavatar: This popular form of drama is performed in Goa to honour the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu. The play is usually divided into two parts: poorva ranga and utara ranga.

Naqal or Bhand: This is a mimicry based performance done in the regions of Punjab and adjoining areas. The artist who performs is also called Behroopiya or Naqalchi.

Theatres of South India

After losing popularity in North India, Sanskrit classical theatre started gaining popularity in South India. In Northern India, much emphasis was given to music whereas in South India more emphasis is given to dance. Some of the popular theatre style in South India are:

Burra katha: The theatre derives its name from Burra – a percussion instrument used during the performance. This is a very popular dance form in Andhra Pradesh.

Pragati Veshalu: This folk tradition revolves around a principal character known as vesham which literally means disguise. This is popularly performed in Telangana, as well as the Krishna district of Andhra Pradesh.

Bayalata: This is performed to worship the local deity of the place. It is an open air theatre tradition performed in Karnataka. Bayalatas are generally of five types: Dasarata, Sannata, Daddata, Parijata, Yakshagana. The stories basically describe and display the love stories of Radha-Krishna.

Tal maddale: The title derives its name from the instruments. Tal is a kind of Cymbal and Maddale refers to drum. The play is performed while sitting and without any costumes.

Theyyam: To honour the spirit of ancestors, this play is performed in front of temples and is an open theatre performance. It is popularly performed in Kerala.

Modern Indian theatre

A lot of transformation happened during the colonial era. The writings of Shakespeare and Gotthold Ephraim were accepted into Indian theatrical community. With the rise of cities like Calcutta and Madras during that time, many theatres emerged and this created a need for new form of entertainment. During the 18th and 19th century, a lot of transformation and development took place in style and technology. Entertainment taxes were being imposed on viewership by the British rulers. The plays were being written in regional languages (Gujarati, Marathi) and the theatres also became commercialized.

An amalgamation of features of western and Indian styles was done during the British era. Many Indian writers emerged as theatre gained fame in colonial India. Among the most notable was Rabindranath Tagore, who wrote Valmiki Pratibha at the age of twenty. Many Personalities started their own production house. Prithvi Raj Kapoor established the Prithvi Theatre in 1942.

To promote art and theatre the Sangeet Natak Akademi was established in 1952 in New Delhi. The academy functions as the apex body of the performing arts in the country to preserve and promote the vast cultural heritage of India expressed in music, dance and drama. It also works with governments and art academies in states and territories of the country.

The National School of Drama is one of the foremost theatre training institutions in the world and the only one of its kind in India. It was set up by the Sangeet Natak Akademi as one of its constituent units in 1959. In 1975, it became an independent entity.

Some famous modern-day personalities of Indian theatre are Indira Parthasarthy, Girish Karnad, Habib Tanvir, Vijay Tendulkar, Badal Sarkar and Dharmavir Bharati.

Indian Dance Forms

The principles of Indian classical dance – whatever the style may be – originate in the *Natyashastra* by Bharata Muni.

Natya is an amalgamation of music, drama, and dance. Many bronze sculptures of a dancing girl, dating back to the Harappan civilization, and engravings of community dancing at Bhimbetka tell the importance of dance as a means of social entertainment. According to Natya Shastra, there are two aspects of Indian classical dance: Lasya and Tandava.

An act is basically broken into three elements:

- Nritta: These are the basic dance steps and performed rhythmically.
- Natya: This refers to the narration of a story through dance styles.
- Nritya: This refers to the feelings and emotions evoked through dance.

Further, there are nine rasas or emotions which are expressed through dance:

- Shringara: for love.
- Roudra: for anger.
- Bibhatsa: for disgust.
- Veera: for heroism.
- Shaant: for peace and tranquility.
- Haasya: for laughter and comedy.
- Karuna: for tragedy.
- Bhayanak: for horror.
- Adbhuta: for wonder.

Different Dance Forms:

The Sangeet Natak academy recognizes 8 dance forms as classical dances: Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi, Kathakali, Mohiniattam, Odissi, Manipuri, Kathak, Sattriya.

Bharatanatyam: This dance is performed in Tamil Nadu. The word 'Natyam' means dance in Tamil and the name Bharatanatyam comes from Bharat Muni. The origin of this dance form can be traced back to 'sadir'- the solo dance performance of temple dancers or devadasis in Tamil Nadu. With the weakening of the Devadasi system which had degenerated with time, the art became almost extinct.



Bharatanatyam is one of the most elegant, and popular dance forms in modern India.

But with the effort of some prominent freedom fighters such as E. Krishna Iyer, the dance form revived its glory. Some very prominent personalities such as Rukmini Devi Arundale contributed extraordinarily to Bharatanatyam and gave it global recognition.

Bharatanatyam is commonly also referred to as Tanjore natyam. In this dance equal importance is given to *lasya* and *tandava*. Sometimes it is also referred to as fire dance because of some of its movements resembling to that of a dancing flame. Famous proponents of Bharatanatyam are Mallika Sarabhai, Lakshmi Vishwanathan and Padma Subramaniam.

Kuchipudi: This dance was traditionally performed in Kuchelapuram or Kuseelavapuri (colloquially known as Kuchipudi) in Andhra Pradesh. With the advent of Vaishnavism, the dance form became the monopoly of the male Brahmins. This dance was performed at the temples. The dancers of this dance came to be known as Bhagwathalus and the stories of Bhagvat purana became the part of recitals. The dance was initially started at the villages and was restricted there until the advent of twentieth century.



This dance is generally a team performance and involves difficult foot movements. This dance has its own features and includes all the three components: Nritya, Nritya, Natya. Principal exponents include Raja and radha Reddy, Swapnasundari and Chitra Krishnamurthy.

Kathakali: The two dance forms, Ramanattam and Krishnattam which were performed in the temples of Kerala, became the source of Kathakali. The word Kathakali comes from '*Katha*'

which means story and '*Kali*' which means drama. This dance is closely related to Koodiyattam and other ancient martial art performance.

Very few props are used in a performance and the dancers' faces wear a lot of stylistic makeup. Kathakali is essentially a performance by an all-male troupe.

The colours used for the makeup have the following significance:



- Green: divinity, nobility, virtue.
- Red patches beside the nose indicate royalty.
- Black: used to indicate evil and wickedness.
- Yellow: for saints and women.
- Completely red painted face: evil.
- White beard: indicates beings with high consciousness and divinity.

Guru Kanchi Kurup was the first Kathakali artist to come into prominence.

Mohiniattam: This is essentially a solo dance performance by a woman. The dance gained prominence under the rulers of Travancore in the state of Kerala. The word comes from '*mohini*' which means beautiful woman and '*attam*' which means dance.



It narrates the story of the feminine form of Vishnu. The dance symbolises air as an element. Musical instruments used during a dance performance are drums, veena, flute and cymbals. The dance is accompanied by music and songs. The costume is a very vital part of the Mohiniattam dance, with white and off white being the principal colours and a gold coloured border with the dress forming the costume.

This dance form had sunk into obscurity when Vallathol Narayana Menon made efforts to revive it. It was popularised by Kalyani Amma, and actresses Vyjayanthimala and Hema Malini among others. Jayaprabha Menon is one of the best known exponents of this dance form.

Odissi: As the name suggests, Odissi originated in, and is widely practised in, the state of Odisha.

The dance is similar to Bharatanatyam in *mudras* (gestures) and postures to express emotions. A very common feature of the dance is that the lower body is kept static and the upper body moves. During the nritya part, hand gestures play a very vital role in expressing emotions. The tribhanga posture, is innate to Odissi. The 'chowk' posture with hand spread out is used to depict masculinity.



With the effort of some famous proponents such as Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra, Charles Fabri, Indrani Rehman, Sanjukta Panigrahi and Sonal Mansingh, Odissi has gained global recognition.

Manipuri: The dance traces its origin to the festival of Lai haraoba. During the 15th century, the dance gained prominence with the advent of Vaishnavism. This is a popular dance of Manipur and is generally performed by female dancers with Krishna as the central theme. With the effort of Guru Rabindranath Tagore, the dance came into the limelight as he introduced it in Shantiniketan.



Typically, this is a slow dance which involves gradual movement of body parts. The women wear a unique long skirt. This is a dance form that gives emphasis to devotion rather than sensuality. The faces are covered with a veil and lesser importance is given to facial expressions. The Ras-leela is a recurring theme of Manipuri. Instruments involved in Manipuri dance are khartals,

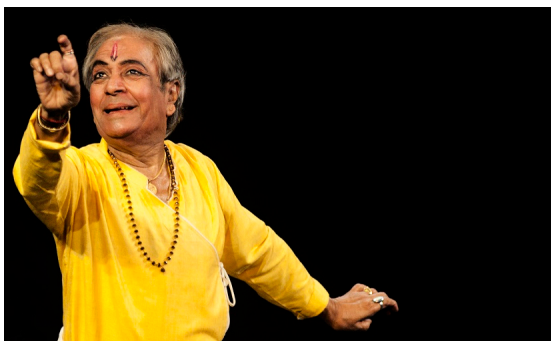
flute and dhols. Some well-known exponents of this dance form are: Guru Bipin Singha, Rajkumar Singhajit Singh and the Jhaveri sisters.

Kathak

Kathak is a traditional dance form from the state of Uttar Pradesh. It traces its origins to the ras-leela performed in Brajbhoomi. The dance derives its name from the word *Kathika* which means a 'story-teller' who narrates the story with the help of gestures. Lady Leela Sokhey during the 20th century revived Kathak as a dance form. Today Kathak is based on Hindustani style of music and is divided into different gharanas:

- Lucknow gharana
- Jaipur gharana
- Raigarh gharana
- Banaras gharana

The competitive play between the dancer and the table player also known as Jugalbandi is the main charm of the dance. To outline the mythological episodes, *Gat bhaav* is used. There is an introductory item or *Ananda* through which the dancer enters the stage. Usually a Kathak performance is accompanied with dhrupad music. Famous proponents of Kathak include Birju Maharaj and Sitara Devi.



Birju Maharaj has won numerous accolades, including Filmfare Awards and National Awards.

Sattriya

It was introduced by Vaishnava saint Sankaradeva in Assam during the 15th century AD. The dance was practised in Vaishnava monasteries known as *Sattaras* from where the dance derived its name. The dance is inspired by the Bhakti movement. The dance form is essentially an amalgamation of various dances prevalent in Assam.



Instruments used in Sattriya include the *dhol*, cymbals, flute etc. The female dancers wear traditional Assamese jewellery, *Ghuri* and *Chador* while the male dancers wear *Dhoti* and *Paguri*. Today, Sattriya has developed into two different streams: *Gayan-Bhayanar Nach* and *Kaharmanar Nach*.

Chhau

The Ministry of culture has recognized 9 classical dances which includes the above 8, and an additional one- the 'Chhau' from East-Central India.

The Chhau is a form of masked dance which is used to narrate mythological stories. The word Chhau comes from the word '*Chhaya*' which means shadow. The dance is performed in Jharkhand, Odisha and West Bengal under the names- Saraikella Chhau, Mayurbhanj Chhau, and Purulia Chhau respectively. The artists who perform Mayurbhanj Chhau do not wear masks.



Folk dances of India

Apart from the 9 dance forms described above, there are several well-known forms of folk dances in India. In fact, India has a wealth of folklore, legends and myths which combine with songs and dances into a composite art. Here are brief introductions to some of these:

Garba: This is a very popular folk dance in Gujarat. This dance is performed at the time of Navaratri. The word Garba actually comes from “Garbha dweep” which is a lamp placed inside a perforated earthen pot. The women dance around the lit lamp in a circular manner with rhythmic clapping.



Dandiya Raas: A traditional folk-dance form of Gujarat & Rajasthan, it is an enthralling, energetic dance performed using *dandiya* sticks. The dance represents a mock fight between Durga and Mahishasura, the mighty demon-king, and is nicknamed "The Sword Dance".



Ghoomar: This dance is performed in Rajasthan by the women of Bhil tribe to worship Goddess Sarasvati. The swirling, colourful skirts and the graceful twirling movements make this dance form an aesthetically appealing one. The term '*ghoomna*' describes the twirling movement of the dancers and forms the root that of the word '*ghoomar*'.



Bhangra/ Gidda: The bhangra is a very vibrant and energetic folk dance performed by both men and women. The dance is associated with the spring harvest festival '*Baisakhi*'. Men wear a turban on their head as an essential part of their costumes. Drum beats are used accompanied by vigorous kicks, leaps and bends of the body.



Matki: This is a solo dance performed by women on special occasions like weddings. In this form, women are dressed in *sarees* or in *lehengas* and many earthen pots are balanced on head. It is prevalent in the Malwa region of Madhya Pradesh.

Jhumar: The dance is performed by tribal communities of Odisha and Jharkhand. The dancers move around in circles with the musical instrument drum placed at the centre. The primary emphasis is on recreating the gait of animals and birds. The two variations are: 1. Janani Jhumar- performed by women, and 2. Mardana Jhumar- performed by men.

Bihu: The dance is performed in group by both men and women in Assam. It is associated with the celebration of the Assamese new year and the spring festival. The dancers are well dressed in a traditional colorful Assamese costume.



Rangma/ Bamboo dance: The dance is performed in Nagaland. This is a war dance of the Nagas. The costumes are colourful, with jewellery and colourful headgear. The dance is performed by a group of men or women in perfect synchronisation with rhythmic clapping and chanting.

Singhi Chham: The dance is performed in Sikkim with face masks. The dancers wear furry costumes, symbolising the snow lion. It is said to have introduced by Chador Namgyal, the third Chogyal of Sikkim. It has a religious association with the peaks of Kanchenjunga and is usually performed during the *Panglasool* festival.

Mayilattam: This dance is usually performed in the Hindu temples of Kerala and Tamil Nadu in which young girls are dressed like peacocks, with colourful headgear, beaks and feathers. The dancer performs on special stilts.

