

I N T R O D U C T I O N

PURPOSE

METHODOLOGY

SCOPE

" And I came down from Heaven
and I danced on the earth
At Bethlehem I had my birth ...
.....
They cut me down
and I leap up high ...
I am the Lord of the Dance said he"

The sentiments of this popular Christian religious folk song give 'Dance' and 'Dancing' a special prominence in the life of Jesus. Of such importance in fact that dance figures both in his genesis and birth, as well as his crucifixion and death.

Is this then a total contradiction of Christianity and the Spirit of the Gospel?

On the contrary, No.

It is an affirmation ... a celebration of the joyousness and life that is at the core of the Christian religion. Here, in this song, the activity of 'Dance' refers figuratively to the growing moving embryo within Mary's womb ... and finally to the same Jesus' rising in glorious triumph over despair and death on Easter Sunday.

The present study dwells upon dance in the Christian Scriptures and tradition in general and, Christianity and Indian Dance-Forms with special reference to the Southern Styles in particular. On the surface, one doesn't find a great deal of dance in practice among the Indian Christians, but a closer, critical and historical survey reveals that dance has been part and parcel of the Religious and social life of various groups of Christians in different regions of India. In fact, there are a few dance-forms

exclusively practised by the Christians in India, which have a long-standing history of many centuries. Further, it is to be noted that Christian themes have also been introduced in many other Indian dance-forms. Efforts have been made here, first to delve deep into the various aspects of the dance-forms of Christians in different regions and communities. Then follows a critical evaluation of the attempts made at introducing Christian Themes in other dance-forms of India. This total presentation has been undertaken with a view to obtain and compile all possible information hitherto unavailable anywhere.

In order to properly evaluate, understand and interpret the origin and evolution of these above mentioned art-forms through time and space, I had to work out my research design, documentation method and methodologies required for the study.

The Methodology:

1. Personal visits to the different regions of India with special reference to the South to witness and study various dance-forms being actually performed by the various Christian communities and also to get acquainted with their life styles.
2. Interviews with scholars, teachers, performers and patrons of different dance-forms.
3. Analysis of the basic structure and form, and their variations.
4. Study of the depiction of dances in Christian sculpture and paintings with special reference to the South.
5. Data collection through the Research Questionnaire, especially in relation to contemporary attempts.
6. A survey of the Church history in India.
7. A critical compilation of all scriptural and historical references and details available in various Christian Sacred Books and Indian Christian tradition on dance.

8. Collection of data and information from the manuscripts written for the dance-forms by ancient authors on Christian Themes in India.
9. Study of the Indian Church documents and synods that affected the growth and development of performing art-forms in the Indian Church.
10. Documentation through tape-recording, photography and choreographic line-drawings.
11. Analysis of all available data to arrive at the relevant conclusions.

According to the Christian Scriptures, dance has a very prominent and important function mainly in the religious and social life of the people. Both in the OLD and NEW TESTAMENT dance is referred to as an integral part of worship and it helped enliven the community spirit of the believers. The early Christians also used dance in their religious and social life. There are references to this effect in the writings of the early Fathers and in

Church history. The historical survey shows the development, growth and decline, use and misuse of dance down the centuries. The gnostic writers of the 2nd century consider Jesus Christ as the leader who leads his followers in the dance. In the thesis, a brief historical note up to the present time on the religious function and role of dance in the Church is discussed. Besides, the origin, growth and development and the present state of Sacred dance in the American, the European, the African and the Australian church is also presented, in brief.

Christianity and Indian dance-forms are presented under two categories and three phases:

Categories: a) Dance-forms exclusively practised by the Christians, that comprised mainly Christian Themes but at times included social and historical episodes.

b) The second category, where Christian Themes

are depicted in the other dance-forms of India.

The Three Phases: a) Ancient or Traditional (52 A.D. to 1599)

b) Medieval to the Contemporary (1599-1947)

c) Post-Independence period (1947-onwards)

Dance-forms in the first category are mostly found in the first two phases. Whereas the second category is found mostly in the third phase.

Ancient and Traditional:

It is a commonly accepted fact that Christianity came to India in 52 A.D. through St. Thomas who landed at Maliankara, near Cranganore, Kerala. All those who embraced Christianity through him as well as their descendants are called 'Mar Thoma Syrian Christians'. In the year 345 A.D. a certain merchant Thomas of Cana (Kanaï Thommen) migrated with 400 Syrian Christian families to Malabar and Cranganore. These are called Knanaya Syrian Christians. The worship pattern, art-forms, Church architecture etc. of the

aforesaid groups of Christians were similar to those of the Hindu Bretheren of that time. Their art-forms were least affected by the foreign influence and were very much Indian in Form and Spirit. Dance-forms such as Margamkali, Vattakali and Parisumuttukali practised by these Christians survive to the present day.

Medieval Onwards (II Phase)

On May 14, 1498 Vasco da Gama landed at Kappad near Calicut on the Malabar Coast. With the coming of the Portuguese a new group of believers called 'Latin Christians' came into existence. The Portuguese kept a strict control over the religious and social life of all Christians in Kerala. Their political dominance gave them a superior advantage over other groups of Christians already existing in Kerala. They made various attempts to Westernize the Church in India. The Westernization of the Church was intensified by the Synod of Diamper in 1599 which practically

suppressed and forbade the existing art-forms of the Christians as superstitious and scandalous. However, the people couldn't suppress their artistic instinct to express religious experience in different art-forms. As a result, a number of new dance-forms came into existence since medieval times. Of course, they were greatly influenced by the western theatre especially in the aspect of theme, costume and presentation, though less affected in the technique. Cavittunātakam and other art-forms of the Latin Christians in Kerala , and Mēl, Mando, Dēkhni etc. in Goa, are a few examples to be mentioned here.

c) Post-Independence Period

In the Post-Independence period many attempts have been made to depict Christian themes in the other dance-forms of India, i.e. Kathakali, Yakshagana and other art-forms. Many institutions and individuals have tried to depict Christian themes borrowing and making use of one or more dance-styles for this purpose. Data has been

collected on these attempts and a critical evaluation has been presented. In this context, I have adopted a scientific approach in depicting Christian themes in Bharata Natyam. New Devahastas and postures for the Bible personalities have been invented on the basis of Christian Theology and a study made on the different dance-treatises.

The major portion of the Thesis comprises the study and description of the dance-forms of the Indian Christians in different regions with special reference to the South as they are performed today with a historical background. Most of these dance-forms are found in Kerala and Goa. It is in Kerala that ancient art-forms like Mārgamkali, Parisumuttukali and Vattakali, all practised by the Syrian Christians belonging to the Knanaya group are found. Cavittunātakam, and Parisumuttukali are prevalent among the Latin Christians in the Coastal area of Cochin, Alleppey etc. The Jacobite Syrian Christians also practise Parisumuttukali as their art-form. All the three sects have

similarities and differences in their dance-form -
Parisumuttukali.

In the district of Palghat the Tamil-speaking Christians have a theatre tradition of their own which originated in the 19th century. Kūthu (i.e. Mūnrurājakūthu) Nātakam (Allēsu Nātakam, Kunkunammal Nātakam etc.) and Kummiāttam are still in practice among these people. In Tamil Nadu, Pasca or passion play, at times called Siluvaimaranam, is in the style of Kūthu in some places and Nātakams at other places. In Goa, Mussal khel, Gauda Dhalo, Dekhni, Christian version of Jagar, Mando, Kumbi, Khēl, Mēl and Carnival are still practised by the different communities of Christians. All these dance-forms have a tremendous tilt towards the social and entertainment aspect rather than purely religious. However, most of them are performed as per the religious calendar and feasts. In spite of pressure tactics of the Portuguese the great influence they exerted and their way of life, these dance-forms have survived. Some of them may not retain the original nature and form yet they continue

to be part of the fabric of life. In Andhra, efforts have been made to have Burrahkathas on Christian themes.

However, Gumtanas of the Mangalore Christians is almost a story of the past. In the North, in many of the Ādivasi and Tribal dances, Christian themes have been introduced keeping the same format of their original dances. Dondo Nato of the Ganjam district in Orissa is the Christian version of the traditional Hindu Dondo-Nato.

My knowledge and practice of classical dance helped me tremendously in comprehending and understanding the basis of physical movements, the rhythm and choreographic patterns of the above dance forms of the Christians.

Though with limited resources, the attempt has been made to cover the maximum possible regions especially in the South among the different Christian communities to study dance in the religious and social context. The scope of the research is much wider and one hopes to continue further study. The dance-forms of the Christians can be studied

in comparison to different regions and to other Indian
dance-forms of the same area.