



## **CHAPTER 1**

# **CHANGING DYNAMICS OF CLASSICAL DANCE IN INDIA**



In general day to day life, if you describe someone as dynamic, you approve of them because they are full of energy or full of new and exciting ideas. The dynamic of a system or process is the force that causes it to change or progress. 'Dynamic' is used as an adjective, except when it means "motivating force", while 'dynamics' is always used as a noun meaning 'functioning' and 'development'. I think that, in the case of my research work, 'dynamics' is better suited than 'dynamic'.

In contemporary Indian society, a revitalisation of 'traditional' dances can be observed which manifests in the proliferation of dance schools and institutions, especially in urban areas. This revival was part of the drive, which has characterised India, to reconstruct itself after the traumatic colonial rule of 200 years. It was to create a new, unified nation that strives to be 'modern' and integrated into the global market economy. Here in the thesis I try to explore the repertoire and dynamics of one of the eight accepted classical dance styles, which is Bharatanatyam and its repertoire that is the *Margam*, as it embodies the new national identity. I have also tried looking into and pointing to the practices and views of gurus, teachers, scholars and dancers trained in the pre-colonial period and those from contemporary times with respect to the structure of the *Margam*. My research concentrates and is limited to looking and exploring the dynamics of changes in the format and structure of the Bharatanatyam *Margam*.

The postures of classical dancer obey and follow strict rules established by tradition while following the mechanical rules of the body. This combination offers a perfect milieu for assessing scientifically how the execution of this particular artistic activity has changed over time, and evaluating what factors may induce such changes. Artistic culture appears to be a uniquely human attribute. The art exists in many forms, but there are some commonly present characteristic features in all of them. These mainly include a creator or creative artist, a creation or an "art object", and the audience or observer. The combination of the first two features may result in an emotional experience in the observer, which is called as 'aesthetic experience'

India has numerous classical dance forms that have evolved and changed in various major and minor ways over the centuries. Some of the major elements that have influenced changes include periods of peace and turbulence. Periods of peace

allowed the dance form to stabilize and allowed for experimentation. It helped in increasing the number of dancers and teachers, and more opportunities for performance. Periods of distress included conflicts and wars, change of regimes, influence of religious and cultural beliefs. At times the natural disasters created long-term impact, socio-political situations that fuelled migrations away from native places. Such times led to significant changes in the dance forms, its presentations and content, its social acceptance or rejection. These often-caused dance teachers, practitioners and musicians to go underground, adopt practices that were philosophically, thematically and morally opposed to their original training. They adapted as per the dictates of survival, sometimes undertaking all kinds of paid work that had nothing to do with dance. However, the fact remains that so many dance forms have survived in spite of such ups and downs over hundreds of years, quietly practised in alleys and basements, carried down carefully from one generation to the next. These are proofs of their innate strength and power in these dance forms, combined with the physical desire in the body to express thoughts and feelings through movement.

The last one thousand years has seen India ruled by Hindu kings, Muslim sultans, the Mughals, several European colonizers such as the Dutch, Portuguese, French and finally the British who ruled India for almost 200 years before Independence in 1947. Each of these regimes had their own cultural, political and moral understanding of the role of dance and music in the public domain. Accordingly, dancers and musicians adapted with their patronage, at times also to their whims and fancies. The Victorian Age in England that held sway over the entire British colonies all over the world for almost a century (approximately 1825-1925), was marked by extreme moralism with a highly conservative attitude towards gender issues and sexuality. It stressed on patriarchal authority, control over women and their behaviour, and relationships that were governed by matters of race, colour of skin, birth, religion, and class/caste.

Classical Indian Dance offers one such case, as it involves human body postures, a strong and clearly defined artistic tradition, and rich documentation in the form of oral traditions, literature, sculptures, paintings and such. Bharatanatyam is a dance form, which uses a single, codified, set of positions of the human body to express

emotions and other mental states. Bharatanatyam in this sense is traditional and conservative: dancers today use the same positions that were codified may be in the 10<sup>th</sup> century or in *Natyashastra*, and often follow choreographies established in the 18th century. The body positions appropriate at each moment in the Bharatanatyam are transmitted from generations by the oral traditions with *Shruti* and *Smriti*, the observational learning and instructions by the Gurus and teachers and may be more recently by books of notation and video records. But at the same time, and during its growth from temple to theatre, this dance form has assimilated very democratically various influences that have come in its way. The core dynamics have allowed the undisturbed flow.

This combination has allowed and motivated me to examine and explore successive artistic changes in the formation of a repertoire or *Margam*. As is seen, performing arts show a slow, progressive change that parallels the changing aesthetic preferences of audiences. For this purpose, we have explored whether successive dancers have modified the expression of standard *Margam*, despite the codified rules of classical dance. Because dance aims to produce aesthetically relevant material, such variation could either reflect changes in dancers' strength, or could reflect changing aesthetic references. This research work concentrates only on the structure of *Margam*. Many factors influence *Margam* and its artistic production. For this research work, we have considered some possible explanations for the historical changes: changing dancers' fitness, changing aesthetic preferences with major concentration on the structure of the *Margam*, its coming and growth as well as the present and future scope. Performing arts clearly involve many aesthetically important elements. In the case of Bharatanatyam, these include narrative, music, costume etc. We have focused only on one core feature of Bharatanatyam, and that is the structure of its performance format. The historical change we will try to describe indicates that Bharatanatyam has become more expanding and accepting many diverse cultures in its fold. This changing dynamics definitely corresponds to changes in aesthetic value, not merely in performer ability. Here we will very briefly see the changing dynamics of all Indian classical dance style very briefly and then concentrate on Bharatanatyam.



There are many art forms in India and post independence there have been tremendous changes. Coming together of the democracy away from the colonisation. Democracy brought so many changes in the social, political, cultural and economic structures of the whole country, the different communities, different states which has definitely affected the growths of art and art forms. As we are concerned here mainly with the classical dance, we shall concentrate on the classical dance style of the India. Kathak, Kathakali, Manipuri and Bharatnatyam were recognised and accepted classical dance forms in India earlier. And then post-independence were recognised Odissi, followed by Kuchipudi, Mohiniattam. The most recent to be part of this special list is Sattriya. Thus, at present we have eight Indian classical dance styles.

In a simple observation, one notices apparent changes in the performances and presentation both in Bharatanatyam and Kathak from just being solo dance styles, they have group works and dance-dramas in last few decades. Kuchipudi which was the dance drama has evolved into a solo presentation, with fewer dance drama-s. Also, Kuchipudi which was performed and practiced by men only is no more the case. Traditionally, the Mahari-s performed *Abhinaya* and Gotipua performed acrobatic *Nritta* in Odissi. But today they have come together in solo performance. Kathakali still remains the dance theatre form and Manipuri has the Rasa dance and the *Sankeertans*. Outside the North East, Manipuri is mostly presented as solo.

Even in a very superficial observation, one is able to see and mark these developments in the Indian classical dance styles in last centuries. These are fundamental changes that have occurred in each dance styles. Coming out from the temples and courts, in the proscenium theatres, dance has grown in democracy. Patronage patterns are different. Dance practice, even the space where practices are conducted have evolved from small rooms in a guru's house to the large, wooden floors with mirror walls. These and all other aspects contribute to the changing dynamics of Indian classical dance. I will very very briefly give an overview of all eight classical dance styles with this perspective.

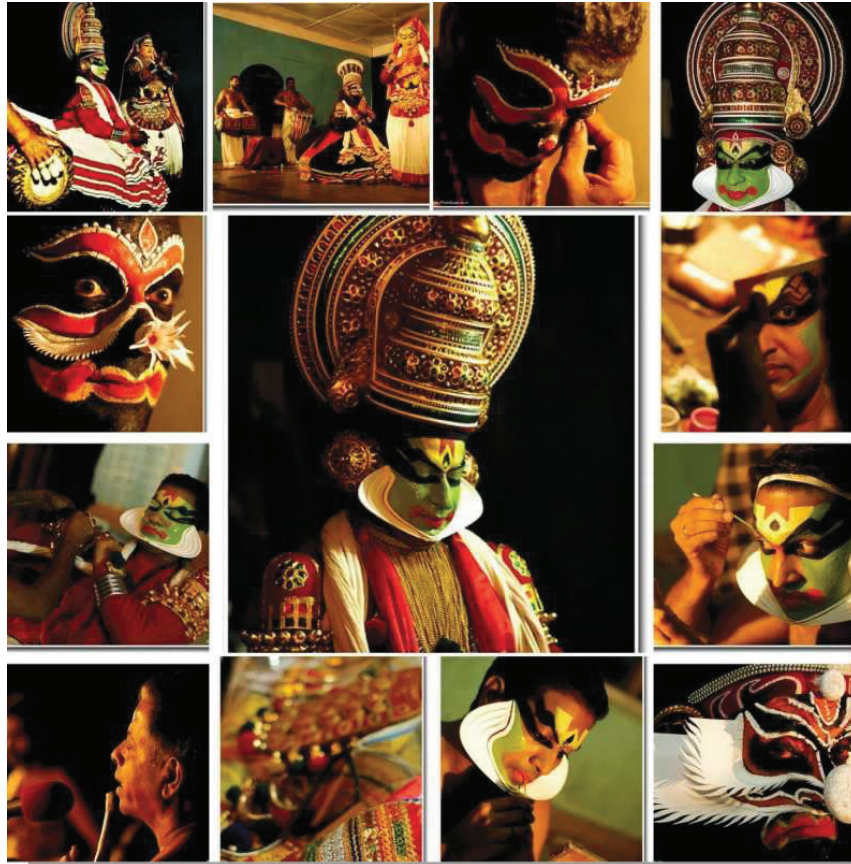


**Fig. 1: Ms. Malvika Sarkar**



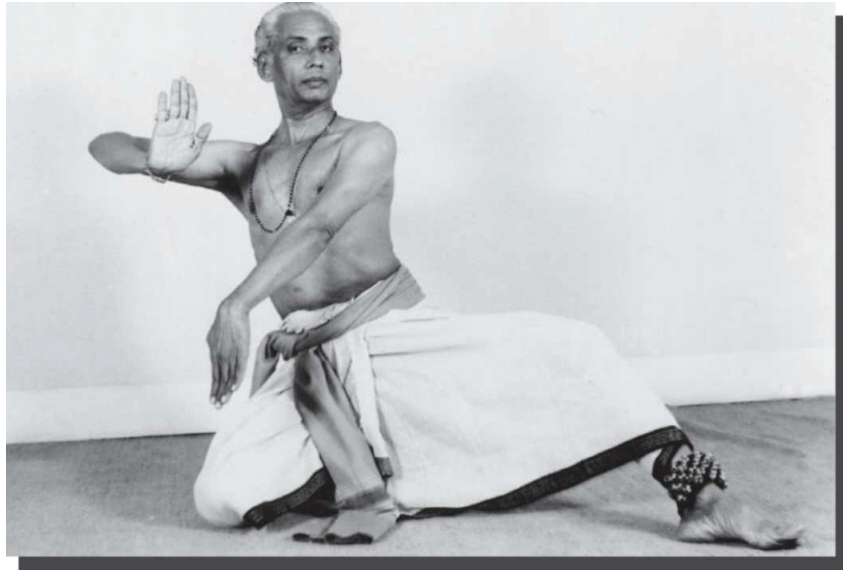
**Fig.2: Ms. Aditi Mangaldas**

**KATHAK** was performed earlier times in the temples and later shifted to the Rajput and Mughal courts. There is specific technique of Kathak with four very prominent *Gharanas* or the schools. The Jaipur, the Lucknow, the Banaras and the Raigadh *Gharana*. One can easily notice the speciality of Lucknow *Gharana* in its *tahezib* and grace where as the Jaipur more vigorous and strong in *Nritta*. Though there is the specificity of each *Gharanas* the contemporary dancers and artist are taking the best of all the *Gharanas* and changing to suit their own creative expression. They have gone beyond the themes of Radha-Krishna, Shiva or Devi. Their themes are more personal statements, awareness to social, political, environment awareness and such. They are different, the costume are more dramatic. Smt. Kumidini Lakhia and many other non-traditional gurus and choreographers have taken Kathak on another level. Today Kathak is one of the prominent and famous dance style in India and abroad. Many dancers use combination of Kathak and other styles in their creative works.



(Fig.3 :Kathakali Dance Prepararion)

**KATHAKALI:** There have been some innovations and changes in Kathakali during its long historical past. It moved from Krishnattam, Ramanattam to Kathakali in its inception. Later as a small example, instead of the earlier Border, a pigment, now the artist use regular make up colour as the base. The experts of different school uses a different *kalasam*. Also with the coming of electricity and technology there is a change in its aesthetics. Lot of things have become different and changed. But still, perhaps Kathakali is one classical Indian dance style which has remained less prone to change.



**Fig.4: Guru Vemapti Chinna Satyam**



**Fig.5: Ms. Yamini Reddy**

**KUCHIPUDI:** This dance form derives its name from the village of Kuchelapuram, of Krishna District in Andhra Pradesh. It traces its heritage to three types of dances namely the *Devdasi* dance, the Yakshagana dance-dramas and the secular court dances. It shifted from the rural and ritual performance in the temples to the auditorium and stages. Bharatanatyam became the role model for Kuchipudi. From the dance-drama by males only, it has become the solo dance mainly females though men do perform it. Even changing the makeup and costume. In the past two decades



due to the efforts of some of the gurus, one can observe a wide variety of movement patterns emerging in the *Nritta* aspects of Kuchipudi thus making it much stronger. Guru VempatiChinna Satyam, the colossus of Kuchipudi dance form has played a pivotal role in the rejuvenation and spread of the form. His contributions are significant for it breathed a new lease of life into the form, which was at a point of time at the verge of receding into oblivion. It was the time after Independence when almost all the cream of Kuchipudi dancers and Gurus were lured into cinema world.



**Fig.6 : Smt. Rukminidevi Arundel**



**Fig.7 :Padmashri Geeta Chandran**

**BHARATANATYAM** Today Bharatanatyam circulates in ever-expanding directions. The form has moved well beyond its twentieth-century epic centre, the city of Chennai (formerly Madras). Its pulse can be felt in every major urban centre around the world. Post-colonial and hybrid diasporic identities have given new impetus to the form. In Bharatanatyam we find many changes in teaching methodology, language, presentational format etc. in its four major *Bani-s* or schools Pandanallur, Thanjavur, Mysore and Vazuvur and one may add Kalakshetra too. Thanjavur Brother created *Margam* format for presentation. But after 1980-90 the

great gurus, dancers and choreographers started evolving for stage presentation. Bharatanatyam is a solo form, but a lot of group work is also done since long. Many group productions are composed and choreographed by the gurus and dancers. A lot of transitions and innovations are part of the healthy growth of Bharatanatyam from technique, music, costumes, and its coming out from temple to theatre.



**Fig.8 : Traditional Dance of Manipur**



**Fig.9: Smt. Priti Patel with her Manipuri Dance Drama Group**

**MANIPURI** Geographically bounded on one side by the Indo- Burma border and on the other by the Assam Hills, Manipur for centuries has preserved and nurtured its own distinct dance and music traditions. In Manipur dance and music are closely inter woven with rituals and religious. From the stories of the god and goddesses to the stories of the people Manipuri dances have made a long journey. With the emergence of young choreographers and dancers the boundaries of Manipuri is being extended. No longer do dancers shy away from deviating from the tradition, but they boldly attempt to bring the elements of martial arts which quicken the pace and invest the form with a pulsating, throbbing, vital elements. The ability to adapt to changes reflecting contemporary sensibilities. Whereas in villages one often sees night long performances of Raasleela, one is equally impressed by the bold experiments which exists side by side with the traditional performances. This has helped Manipuri dances keep pace with the changing times.



**Fig. 10 : Dr. Bharti Shivaji**



**Fig.11: Swanlake by Ms. Vijiyalaxmi**

**MOHINIATTAM** is considered to be the classical dance form of women of Kerala. It is understood as a ‘feminine’ or *lasya* style of dance, based on its use of body movements. Currently, Mohiniyattam is being represented as the heightened version of the ideal Kerala/Malayalee woman’s identity and femininity. A few years ago, “Swan Lake” was performed in Mohiniattam to Tchaikovsky's original music at Bolshoi Theatre by BharatiShivaji and her troupe. It was not just a milestone in her

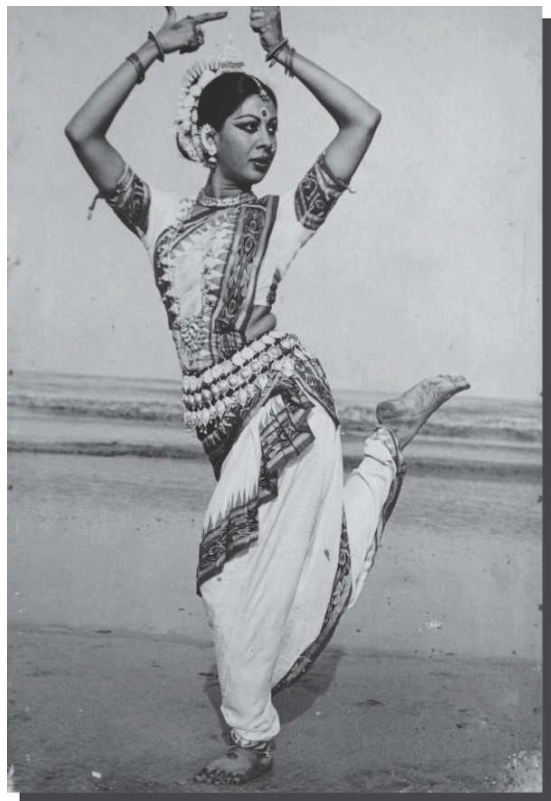


career but also a statement of how far Mohiniattam has travelled — from obscurity to respect and recognition on the international scene.



**Fig.12 : Gotipua Dance**

**ODISSI:** The present Odissi was recognised by 1950s only in the country. Prior to this the dance form, with its long history dating back to 2<sup>nd</sup> B C, was limited to the region of Orissa, practiced by the Mahari-s and the Gotipuva in the temples. From that dance of the Maharis to the Odissi on the Linciln Centre stage by the Nrityagram group, tremendous dynamic changes are part of the natural course of development of the form. Today it is one of the most versatile and practiced forms not only in India but outside too.





Contributed by traditional Gurus of both dance and music, nurtured and nourished by the practitioners and scholars, the dance form is one of the best examples of the strength and depth of the classical form! ( Fig.13 : Smt. Protima Bedi)



**Fig.14 Ms. Anvesha Mahant**



**Fig. 15 Ms. Krishnakshi Kashyap**

**SATTTRIYA:** The Newest addition to the Indian Classical Dance panorama is the Sattariya from Assam. Originally starting out as a ritual dance form in the latter part of the Bhakti Movement (16th cen.) when there was an upsurge of Vaishnavism, it was performed by celibate priests in the monasteries or Sattras of the area. Now a days with the introduction of women artists this stylistic ritual dance has undergone a subtle change in the nature and treatment of movement. In its journey to the proscenium, the ritualistic core has been further elaborated and many items from mythologies have also been added. The rhythmic patterns have also seen further development and emphasis in delineation.

With dance shows such a hit on television and people dancing on music of DJ at weddings and parties of the rich and poor alike, we all realize how much dance is an integral part of Indian psyche and tradition. We are connected with our gods through dance. Our gods dance! There are different types of dances described in the Epics and Purana-s to these dancing Gods. But this dance activity is very different from

Shiva's dance. The dance of Shiva was an expression of a mood. Shiva usually danced alone, in serene isolation, a hermit, blissfully unaware of anything around, his eyes shut. To express his inner mood of sorrow, love, peace or joy he danced alone and for self. Those who watched him were spellbound. This was not for entertainment or for but an expression of inner state. Every gesture had a meaning. It was to communicate wisdom that he danced. Nataraja, the spectacular form resulted thus. Nataraja is the King of Dancers, Cosmic Dancer, the King of Dance. Nothing remains static in dance, or to that matter of fact, in any performing art. This dynamism is the manifestation of the entire universe. He danced the *Tandava*. Perhaps He was the first ever solo dancer, a classical dancer!



**Fig. 16 and 17 Lord Nataraja ( The Lord of Dance)**

Krishna is worshipped in the country in all his divergent manifestations as the supreme dancer. He is known as *Natawar*. Lord Krishna is one of the most widely revered and most popular of all Hindu divinities worshipped as the eighth incarnation of Vishnu and also as a supreme God in his own right. Lord Krishna became the focus of numerous *bhakti* (devotional) cults which over the centuries have produced a wealth of religious poetry, dancing, painting and music. Lord Krishna philosophy is closely related with human life.

If Shiva is celebrated as Nataraj, then Krishna is Natwar, another solo dancer. Krishna dances with eyes open, entertaining all around him and himself getting entertained by amusement and joy. To celebrate his victory over the serpent he dances on the hood of Kaliya. He plays the mesmerizing flute and dances with the *gopikas*, in Vrindavan on full moon night. He dances to communicate his love for Radha. Krishna dances for everyone's pleasure as everyone dances for his. Thus, the greatest solo dancers are Nataraj and Natwar, Shiva and Krishna from time immemorial.



**Fig. 18 : Kaliyamardan Sculpture**



**Fig.19 : Krishna As Natwar**

Both Shiva and Krishna, Nataraj and Natawar, are considered the dancers par excellence in Indian mythology. But for their dance the world of Indian dance would be nothing. They are the ones to start the great solo dance traditions! Thus dance has different manifestations. The apsara danced for someone else's pleasure, Krishna danced for everyone's pleasure and Shiva danced for no one's pleasure. Three kinds of dance, three different expressions of human thought, simultaneously manifesting in time and space. Dance is the only art form to exist both in space and time. Perhaps that is why dance is special: it cannot be captured. Every moment marks creation of one pose, one gesture, one expression and the destruction of another.

For us, as we have seen earlier in the chapter, the best examples of solo dancers are Shiva-Nataraja and Krishna-Natawar. All the Indian classical dance forms have used their unending stories with numerous interpretation since their inception. Through movement, sculpture, painting, poetry and all other art forms, we can trace a continuous strand of solo classical dance in India. Bharatanatyam *Margam* was constructed as a performance format for a solo dancer. The dynamics of change were appreciated and valued at each point of time and place. Through the work of this research, I will try to support this hypothesis.

The classical solo dances are the most traditional format. We are trying to see and connect the history of classical solo dance through literature, sculpture, painting and films media. There are other mediums too but as the scope become too wide we limit to these forms which supports the existence of the unbroken existence of classical dance at least post *Natyashastra*. The brief history of Bharatanatyam, its structure of performance format that is the *Margam*, its history, Prabandha and Nirupana the pre-cursor to the *Margam*, the structure of *Margam*, *Nritta*, *Nritta-Nritya* and *Nritya* (*Abhinaya*) items of Bharatanatyam. In the present context from the traditional *Margam* format what new experiments have been conducted by various experts. A new trend of solo dance theatre in Bharatanatyam as well as going back to preserve the tradition..

Over the last many decades, a truly serious presentation of a solo Bharatanatyam performance invariably comprised the full *Margam* – from the lithely performed *Pushpanjali* and *Alarippu* to the scintillating *Tillana*. A performance that invariably spanned a good three hours or so with an interval. Both the performer and the audience needed that break. The *Margam* has evolved over at least last two centuries. Like an elaborate essay, it commences in dance movement and meaning that begins gently with the *Alarippu* as each body part is activated, dotted with short pieces of *nritta* and *nritya*, building up to a crescendo of the *Varnam*, and slowly cooling off with the *Tillana*, and a couple of short pieces before the performance ends.

While the *Margam* performance continues to be in *Arangetrams* across the country as it is a testimony to the young dancer's talent, training, stamina and readiness for performance. It appears that the *Margam* is no longer a programme of choice for



established and even upcoming dancers. Over the past few years, the popularity of performing the full *Margam* seems to have dipped sharply with many dancers and programme organizers across the metropolitan cities in India. Why has this happened? Is it because the *Margam* has become too predictable? That there are only so many *Jatiswarams*, *Varnams* and *Tillanas* that the performer can choose from? Or is it because modern audiences have become too impatient to sit through an entire *Margam*? That they just do not have the time anymore for such long drawn out performances? If not the classical and traditional *Margam*, how are present-day solo dancers designing their performances to make Bharatanatyam still relevant in terms of theme and content, choreography and style, technique and presentation?

My research examines the early beginnings of the *Margam* as one of the most important systemic performance forms of solo presentation and teaching form of Bharatanatyam. It then explores its evolution, as it honed and sharpened itself to create a repertoire of items that balanced *nritya* and *nritya*. And finally, it examines the challenges that it faces in today's socio-cultural time and space.

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