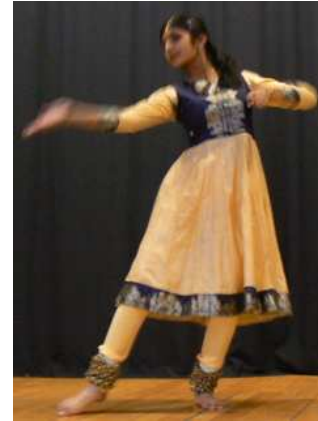


Let's Dance Around the Globe - Dr. Jharna Chatterjee

Nobody would deny that dance is a universal form of expression – it is a natural way for human beings to express joy, to celebrate a special occasion, to entertain dignitaries, and in some cases, worship deities. Folk dances are the simplest forms of dance, performed all over the world by many people, to celebrate special occasions or to simply have fun together – mostly performed in groups – sometimes mixed gender, sometimes composed only of men or women. Perhaps the best known folk dance in the Western world is the graceful waltz – and I immediately think of the delightful 'Blue Danube'.



Left: Painting of an Indian folk dance by an anonymous artist; Right: A Kathak dancer on stage

In many parts of the world, there are classical dance styles that have been historically performed in more formal settings: in royal courts, in the entertainment halls of wealthy landlords and kings, and in temples. In India, Bharata-natyam (of Tamilnadu) and Odissi (of Orissa) dance styles originated in temples as a form of worship and happen to be among the oldest known forms of classical dance. Devadasis – literally meaning servants of gods – dedicated their lives to 'entertain' gods by their dance. Only in the recent decades these dance styles have become popular in secular settings like a stage and have taken the form of popular arts and entertainment. Another classical dance style, Kathak (of Uttar Pradesh), was used to entertain the Moslem rulers of India, but like its sister-dance styles has now found a niche in Indian dance schools everywhere as another popular form of dance for entertaining people from all strata of the society. Other classical Indian dance styles include Kathakali, Manipuri, Kuchipudi and Mohini Attam. In Kathakali, a dance style from Southern India, the dancers wear a mask-like make-up and elaborate attires to represent various mythological characters. It also involves intense foot work and elaborate pantomime. Manipuri is a gentle dance style with its distinctive basket-like skirts for female dancers; it originated in the North Eastern part of India, around Manipur. Kuchipudi is a dance tradition associated with Andhra Pradesh and Mohini Attam with Kerala.

The themes of Bharata-natyam and Odissi most often are derived from Indian epics, legends and mythology about divine beings such as Shiva (the benevolent destroyer who ensures the continuation of the cosmic cycle – also known as the Nataraja or the Lord of Dance) and his consort, Parvati in her various forms, Visnu the Preserver (or Krishna, his incarnate) and Radha, Krishna's beloved, and about the ten incarnations of Visnu.

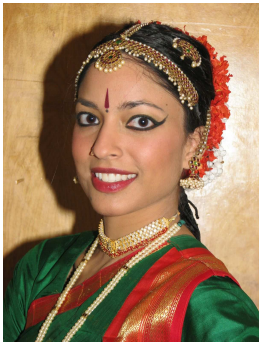


A statue of Nataraja, the Lord of Dance

The Lord of Dance dazzles –
In the supreme dance of joy, of ecstasy.
The rhythmic steps, the resonant drum-roll,
Primordial vibrations bring the cosmos to be,
Then dissolve it to create again.
The dance is an incessant play of renewal
and dissolution, eternally bound together.
Shakti, the cycle of Flames –
the endless, luminous energy dances around,
Surrounding her Shiva, the Nataraja.
Music flows in the heavens;
Finite souls arise and merge
On the bosom of the Infinite -
Like small ripples that know not,
They belong to the Ocean of Absolute.
The divine spirits form flying hair
Joining in this celestial dance.
His right hand says 'Despair not',
While the Jiva lies at his ever-dancing feet
Oblivious to her own identity;
She is immersed in deep, silent slumber.

(The poem, written by the author, has been published on another website before)

The Bharata-natyam recitals invariably start with worshipping Nataraja, and Odissi recitals with the worship of Jagannatha (translated into English – the Lord of the World), followed by a prayer to Ganesha, the remover of all obstacles. But before the recital starts, the dancers also touch the ground reverently and pay respect to mother earth for patiently taking the beats of their dancing feet on her bosom. The recitals also end in a prayer wishing well for all, or Mangalam. Thus, Bharata-natyam and Odissi dancers benefit from an understanding of Indian culture and Hindu mythology. Dancers express the emotions and sometimes tell a story through the use of numerous well-defined 'mudras' or hand gestures, rhythmic foot-work – often with ankle bells, and through sculptural body postures. Dancers in these two classical Indian dance styles present nine different types of emotions: love, peace, laughter, heroic courage, compassion, fear, anger, disgust and wonder. Both Bharata-natyam and Odissi have their own specific dance costumes, exquisite jewelry, hair ornaments and make-up. Eye make-ups are prominent to accentuate the eye movements and expressions.



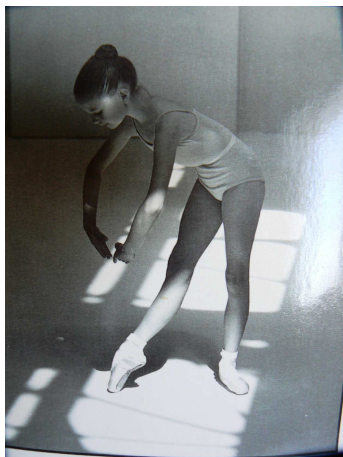
Left: Typical facial make-up and jewelry in Bharata-natyam; Middle: A male Manipuri dancer on stage; Right: a painting of two female Manipuri dancers.



Left: An Odissi dancer; Right: Dancers in three Bharata-natyam poses.

Ancient Indian temples, caves and palaces demonstrate dancing figures as sculptures or paintings, thus attesting to the existence of these dance styles for thousands of years. Gurus or teachers impart Bharata-natyam dance techniques based on the Natya Shastra (Manual of Dramatic Art) written by sage Bharata, a treatise believed to be two thousand years old.

The name Bharata (Natyam) consists of the first syllables of the three Sanskrit words representing three essential elements of dance: Bhava (which means emotion), Raga (which means melody), and Tala (which means rhythm). The dances consist of "Nritta", or pure and simple movements of body and limbs, even the head, neck, eyes and eyebrows. "Nritya" is defined as interpretive dance that involves facial expressions, hand gestures and graceful, fluid and symbolic body poses. Finally, "Natyam", accompanied by narrative songs embodies elements of a drama. These dance styles are similar to Yoga in their emphasis on the close relationship of the body with mind. The "Natya Shastra" proclaims: "Where the hand goes, the eye follows, where the eyes go, the heart follows".



Left: A young ballerina practicing her 'pointe'; Right: A group of dancers in Bangkok.

To the Western world, classical dance is almost synonymous with ballet that evolved in Europe during the Renaissance period as a court dance. Ballet involves intricate movements including balanced dancing on one's toes, mostly done by female dancers. The ballet movements aim at

giving an impression of weightlessness of the dancer's body and of defying gravity like an airborne bird. In both Bharata-natyam and ballet, the dancers' feet are turned outward to form a 'v', (and in Bharata-natyam, the knees are bent as well). In Bharata-natyam, the arms and the body form geometric lines, the hands and the fingers are rigid in 'mudras', while in ballet, arms are gently curved at elbows, and the hands are held loose. Odissi movements are softer and curved, not as angular as in Bharata-natyam. While Bharata-natyam, Odissi and ballet all demand great control of the body and a vast amount of energy, ballet involves higher leaps and jumps, and mid-air turning of legs or feet. All classical dance styles require rigorous training, co-ordination, self-discipline and regular practice to keep the body strong, flexible and fluid.



Dolls – Left: Flamenco dancer; Middle: Balinese dancer; Next: Thai dancer, all in their respective classical costumes and poses; Right: A mask similar to a Kathakali dancer's face with hanging artificial beard.

A few years ago, I happened to travel to Spain and spend a glorious week in enchanting Seville. It was raining most of the time on that "plain in Spain", but "not on my parade"! I was determined to have a good time – and that is exactly what I did, equipped with an umbrella, a city-map and some local money in my hands. One evening, as the United Nations Conference delegates and their spouses, we were dinner-guests of the city at a huge, beautiful place drunk with the fragrance of blooming multitude of 'queen of the night' blossoms. The night ended with a spontaneous performance of 'Flamenco' by a group of local ladies. Modern Flamenco, a powerful, rhythmic and passionate dance form, is considered to have evolved from a unique blend of Andalusian, Islamic, Sephardic and Gypsy cultures. Alas, I didn't have a camera handy!

In Denpasar, Bali, we had an opportunity to attend a dance recital – a classical 'story-telling' Barong dance, depicting the eternal struggle between good and evil. This dance style is based on mythology, religion (influenced by Hinduism from the ancient cultural dominance of India) and local traditions. The Balinese people perform such dances at temples, and other special ceremonies. Wikipedia describes the typical posture of the Balinese dance as "the legs half-bent, the torso shifted to one side with the elbow raised and lowered in a gesture that displays suppleness of the hands and fingers. The torso is shifted in symmetry with the arms. If the arms are to the right, the shifting is to the left and vice-versa."

In Bangkok, one evening we were privileged to see an extremely graceful group dance during our dinner in an upscale restaurant. The dancers wore their traditional, ornate, colorful costumes and danced to create a hypnotic atmosphere with their slow, structured but fluid and soft movements.

Sometimes they add six-inch long artificial nails to accentuate the delicate poses of their hands – expressing complex symbolic meanings. Like some other classical dance styles, Thai dance also originated as entertainment for the royalty.

Finally, let us travel to south to Mexico, and then to the Southern hemisphere and watch two types of folk-dances: 'Capoeira' and a group folk-dance of the local ladies, in traditional flowing costumes. Capoeira is said to have originated as a martial art form among African slaves, now evolved into a street dance in which young men dance to the rhythm of a local percussion instrument called 'berimbaus' – made with a wire cord stretched tight across a wooden bow.



Left: Aztec dancers in Mexico City, Mexico. Top right: Folk dancers in colorful flowing costumes on top of the 'Sugar Loaf' mountain', Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.



Left: Capoeira on a street in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil and a miniature metal berimbau

Merging of Cultures

Throughout the last few decades, many Western dancers have embraced Indian classical dance. One such dancer is Alexandra Romanova, who had learned ballet at the National School of ballet in Warsaw. An exposure to Indology at the Warsaw University inspired her to take Bharatanatyam lessons. She had her solo stage debut (Arangetram) after training under Guru Yamini Krishnamurti in New Delhi. She acquired further training with Guru Ranganayaki Jayaraman and P.T. Narendran in Madras (now Chennai).

Uday Shankar, a legendary Indian dancer, who happened to be the oldest brother of Sitar virtuoso Ravi Shankar and a music guru of the Beatles, pioneered the dance style that mingled Indian themes and dance style with ballet. An aspiring painter, he went to England in the early 1920s to study painting at the Royal College of Art in London after graduating from the J. J. School of the Arts in Bombay (now Mumbai). He came in contact with the famous Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova while staying in Europe. He incorporated ballet movements learned from her in his dance choreography in creating two dance-dramas: (1) Krishna and Radha and (2) A Hindu Wedding; the result was well-received in Europe. It also became the inspiration for a new style of dance when he returned to India in 1929 and founded his own dance troupe and institution where to this day instructions include folk and classical dance styles as well as improvisation.

As young girls of Indian ancestry – mostly daughters of parents who emigrated from India to North America and settled there – started learning Indian classical dances parallel to ballet, tap dancing, various types of Latin dances and jazz, and also playing the piano, guitar and Western flute, it was natural for some of them to start experimenting – capitalizing on their perception of rhythm, similarities in moods and movements. In fact, personally I find lots of similarities between some Bhangra and Ukrainian dances (remember in 'Fiddler on the Roof' the dance at the marriage celebration?). Instead of dancing to the traditional classical Indian music – mostly composed in Tamil or Sanskrit or some other Indian language that were not too familiar to most of them or to their peer group, sometimes they choreographed Bharata-natyam or Odissi dance recitals or blended dance forms to popular North American and European instrumental or vocal music, the kind of music they have grown up with, and even some pieces from African, Latin and Indian cultures – creating an innovative, versatile and attractive style. Some of the musical pieces they have utilized were from Enya, Big Band, African Beats (jazz), Polka, River Dance, Storms of Africa, Latin-American songs as well as Indian Bhangra, Dandia/Garba as well as a Sanskrit prayer to goddess Durga. Like all innovators (and mavericks), they crossed the boundaries of the 'dictates' found in the ancient treatise, but as a consequence had a wider entertainment appeal for their North American, non-Indian audience. In our global society, more and more such intercultural exchanges have been taking place, and will happen increasingly more often, enriching our lives through the creative endeavors of some of these artists.



Three Bharatanatyam (left), two Kathak (center) and three Odissi dancers (right) pose together after a mixed-style group dance they had choreographed to a musical piece by Ananda Shankar.

Author's Note: All photos included here have been taken by the author, except the photo of the Kathakali mask (Nilanjana Mukherjee), of the ballerina (Dr. Mrinal K. Paul), the close-up of the Bharata-natyam

dancer (Mr. Sastry Cherla), of the Aztec dancers (Mr. A. N. Sengupta) and the Bharata-natyam dance pose in yellow costume and the last group photo (Dr. Suhit Das).