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### Philosophy of Indian Dance

Amid the apparent diversity of Indian dance, a common worldview gives all the forms a basic unity and continuity. According to Indian thought, the universe is eternal yet in constant flux, the parts merely emanations of the whole. Everything is constantly being born, growing, and dying. All matter is composed of the five basic elements of fire, water, earth, space, and sky; humans are but a part of nature, responding to it rather than dominating it. Like plants or animals, humans develop from a seed in the

womb, grow to maturity, and in turn produce the seeds of new life. So the cycle continues without beginning or end.

The distinctiveness of being human lies in inner consciousness, the understanding that every part of our being (body, mind, and spirit) reflects the nature of the cosmos. At the center of the universe and the human spirit is a still point like the hub of a wheel with consciousness expanding outward like the spokes in concentric circles, but held together within the boundaries of the universe.

This cosmology is first explained in the earliest Indian texts, known as the Vedas. Subsequent philosophic texts called the Upaniṣads give the concept its theoretical foundation. Finally, the Brāhmaṇas or ritual texts describe the exact rituals (*yajña*, usually translated as sacrifice) that give concrete form to the abstract principles. In the Upaniṣads the cosmos is described in metaphors as the hub and spokes of a wheel; in the Brāhmaṇas the cosmos is symbolized physically by every sound, word, gesture, and object of the ritual. The ritual performance involves the whole community. The Upaniṣads introduce the philosophic concept of *yoga* as the gathering inward of all energies, both physical and mental, so revelation can take place; the Brāhmaṇas describe the ritual acts of the *yajña*: how to design a consecrated space by establishing a center within an enclosure and lighting fires in each of three altars, one shaped like a square, one like a circle, and one like a semicircle. These ritual acts symbolize the sacrifice of parts of the body, which must take place over a prescribed number of hours or days. The purpose of both experiences—the inner *yoga* and the outer *yajña*—is to achieve harmony, equilibrium, and tranquillity.

These concepts and rituals recognize the human capacity for both introspection and growth. At the same time both the introspection of *yoga* and the concrete ritual of *yajña* are important not by themselves but only within the framework of the whole. Life and death are part of the same continuum. According to Indian philosophy, all life grows out of the formless (*arūpa*) ground of the cosmos, develops into the many forms (*rūpa*) of life, and returns in the end to that which is beyond form (*pararūpa*). All these concepts are fundamental to the Indian theory of aesthetics, as is the notion that the individual soul (*ātman*) is constantly aspiring to merge with the universal (*brahman*, the Supreme Being). The direction is from physical to metaphysical, from the senses to the spirit in a continuous progression.

**Indian Theory of Aesthetics.** An Indian theory of aesthetics is first referred to in Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* (c. 1000 BCE). The purpose of this treatise was to lay down the rules for the kind of total artistic performance through which the audience might achieve a state of supreme joy or release from the world of illusion; the theory is implicit rather than spelled out.

Known popularly as *rasa* (religious or artistic essence), this theory envisages a three-part process: first, the vision of the artist; second, the content, form, and technique of artistic expression; and third, the evocation of a similar aesthetic experience in the audience. The artist's inner vision resembles that state of mystical bliss called *brāhmānanda*; it is an experience of the whole, the universal where the individual ego and subjective emotion are transcended, the distinctions of physical time and space are erased, and the finite and infinite merge. The artist's state of concentration can be described by the word *yoga*, the release from pain and pleasure in this life. It is said that at that moment, the artist sees the white light of luminosity in his or her inward eye. The artist's problem, then, is to convey this experience, this essence (*rasa*) to the audience through sound, word, gesture, movement, mass, line, color, symbols, and dynamic images. The work of art serves as the bridge from the formless, through the many forms, to that which is beyond form.

Naturally, such art cannot deal with the unique individual, but only with the universal and symbolic. The form and content of these works of art—whether a small icon, a brief dance or song, or a great architectural monument like a temple or stupa—find their counterparts in the symbols and acts of the ritual sacrifice and in the many forms of speculative thought. Every part of the work is related to the whole, and the energies flow out from the central hub. The characters in such art become archetypes and the emotions impersonal and general. There are nine dominant *rasas* or *bhāvas* (moods or emotions): eroticism (*śṛṅgāra*), pathos or compassion (*karuṇā*), heroism (*vīra*), fierceness (*raudra*), laughter (*hāsyā*), fear (*bhaya*), disgust (*vibhatsa*), wonder (*adbhuta*), and tranquillity (*śānta*).

In addition, there are the transient emotions, like minute shades of color, called the *sanchāri bhāvas*. For example, love can be expressed by passion or jealousy and may pass through phases of separation and yearning, culminating in union. These two kinds of emotion are presented through the archetypal characters of gods and humans in drama, dance, music, poetry, sculpture, and painting. Whatever the language of the art (speech, sound, gesture, mass, line, color), its smallest unit corresponds to a single state of emotion. When combined, as the notes of a song or the gestures of the human body, these forms merge into a work of art with its distinctive shape, color, or taste, which evokes the state of joy in the audience as it did in the artist. The three steps in the process are called *rasānubhāva* (experience of *rasa*), *rasābhivṛtyakti* (expression of *rasa*), and *rasoutapatti* (evocation of *rasa*). Inspired by the Upaniṣads, Yeats summed up the theory of Indian art in a line: "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" Indeed, the dancer becomes the vehicle for transmitting the emotion to the spectator.



In the tenth century, the Kashmiri philosopher Abhinavagupta spelled out the theory that Bharata only implied:

Artistic creation is the direct or unconventionalized expression of a feeling of passion "generalized," that is, freed from distinctions in time or space and therefore from individual relationships and practical interests, through an inner force of the artistic or creative intuition within the artist. This state of consciousness (*rasa*) embodied in the poem is transferred to the actor, the dancer, the reciter, and to the spectator.

These statements, made nearly one thousand years ago, remain pertinent today for a proper understanding, appreciation, and appraisal of Indian art, especially dance and music, which have enjoyed a remarkable continuity in their traditional forms.

Since artistic experience was regarded as an instrument and discipline vital for the uplifting of the individual toward the universal self, both artist and spectator made a special effort to use the experience for achieving a state of harmony. The language employed by the performer for this purpose was symbolic rather than realistic, revealing the truth and beauty of life by suggestion. And the spectator had to be trained to understand the symbols before communication could take place.

The terms used for the spectator in Sanskrit sum up this view: *sahridaya* (one of attuned heart) and *rasika* (one who experiences *rasa*). Art evokes in the spectator certain states of consciousness that already existed in his or her soul. So, like the creative artist, trained spectators are capable of experiencing the emotion that frees them from the limitations of time and space.

Because of the continuity between past and present in classical Indian performing arts, both performer and spectator believe in the importance of such arts as a means of experiencing the universal and are willing to undergo the necessary and exacting preparations for these performances.

For example, in classical Indian dance, the performer must learn to use his or her body in a manner that symbolizes the universal self. The dancer, therefore, uses every design in space, every instance of muscular tension and release, and every gesture of hand and eye to convey to the audience this universal self rather than a particular subjective emotion. Just as the dancer's body becomes the vehicle for communicating universal feelings, so the spectator responds to these impersonal feelings rather than the personal experience of the artist. All these classical Indian art forms are based on the worldview and theory of aesthetics originally enunciated in the Vedic texts, and the highest fulfillment of art comes when the mystical unseen spirit permeates the whole community.

Since the pleasure of witnessing these classical dances

comes from recognizing the unfolding of something latent rather than from encountering something unusual and highly individual, the demands made upon the spectator are different from those required for an appreciation of Western dance. The themes recurring in much of the classical dance of India are highly literary in character, drawing upon the same sources of Indian legend, mythology, and epic poetry as the other classical arts. The positions and stances that the Indian dancer assumes can be recognized in the chiseled poses of Indian sculpture and iconography; the gestures are symbolic and are derived from the ancient rituals specified in the *Brāhmaṇas*; the music and rhythmic patterns of the dance are the classical *rāgas* and *tālas*.

In pure dance sequences, called *nṛtta*, the body may form a single geometric design, such as a triangle in *bharata nṛtīyam* (in South India), a square in *kathakali* (from Kerala), a figure eight in Manipuri (from Manipur), a line in *kathak* (in North India). Floor space may also be covered in the same rigidly structured design. The navel becomes the symbol of the cosmic center, and all movement flows outward from it and returns to it in a fixed pose. Just as in the traditional rituals, time and space may be consecrated.

In the mime or expressive dance sections (*nṛtīya*), a line of poetry is set to music and rendered within a metrical cycle (*tālā*) in order to recreate one of the dominant emotions: those like love, valor, or pathos with their variations and improvisations are intended to evoke in the spectator an experience of joy and release. Specific characters and themes are important not in themselves but only as aids in evoking the dominant mood. The dance is composed of the interplay between stasis and dynamics.

To the uninitiated spectator this highly symbolic dance form may seem repetitious and full of bewildering complexity. The appreciation for such dance requires a knowledge and training that goes beyond the mere visual experience to an understanding of meaning and technique. These demands merely increase the initiated spectator's delight in the performance. The thrill of recognition arises partly from the spectator's experience of emotional states and forms already familiar from works of poetry, music, architecture, and sculpture. However, since the content and the formal elements are only part of the total design and are, in fact, tools of expression in attaining a higher state, a sensitive though uninitiated spectator who is not looking for specific meaning or story may be transported to that elevated state of joy or bliss that transcends the world of appearances.

There is an organic unity connecting the Indian worldview, the aesthetic theory, and the performance with its many layers of meaning and expression. By giving up the limited sense of self, the artist is enabled to create a

greater realm of life in art and to expand the consciousness of both performer and spectator into the universal self. Those who experience this enlarged consciousness return to the ordinary world with a heightened sense of harmony and tranquillity.

[For related discussion, see Aesthetics, article on Asian Dance Aesthetics.]

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