



# सांस्कृतिक स्रोत एवं प्रशिक्षण केन्द्र CENTRE FOR CULTURAL RESOURCES AND TRAINING

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## Classical Dances

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Dance in India has a rich and vital tradition dating back to ancient times. Excavations, inscriptions, chronicles, genealogies of kings and artists, literary sources, sculpture and painting of different periods provide extensive evidence on dance. Myths and legends also support the view that dance had a significant place in the religious and social life of the Indian people. However, it is not easy to trace the precise history and evolution of the various dances known as the 'art' or 'classical' forms popular today.



*Dancer, Pre-historic Cave painting, Bhimbetka, Madhya Pradesh*

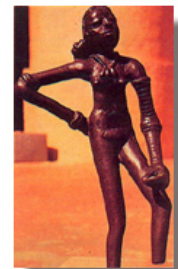


*Palm leaf manuscript, Bihar*

In literature, the first references come from the *Vedas* where dance and music have their roots. A more consistent history of dance can be reconstructed from the epics, the several *Puranas* and the rich body of dramatic and poetic literature known as the *nataka* and the *kavya* in Sanskrit. A related development was the evolution of classical Sanskrit drama which was an amalgam of the spoken word, gestures and mime, choreography, stylised movement and music. From the 12th century to the 19th century there were many regional forms called the musical play or *sangeet-nataka*. Contemporary classical dance forms are known to have evolved out of these musical plays.

Excavations have brought to light a bronze statuette from Mohenjodaro and a broken torso from Harappa (dating back to 2500-1500 B.C.E.) These are suggestive of dance poses. The latter has been identified as the precursor of the Nataraja pose commonly identified with dancing Siva.

The earliest treatise on dance available to us is Bharat Muni's *Natyashastra*, the source book of the art of drama, dance and music. It is generally accepted that the date of the work is between the 2nd century B.C.E- 2nd century C.E. The *Natyashastra* is also known as the fifth *veda*. According to the author, he has evolved this *veda* by taking words from the *Rigveda*, music from the *Samaveda*, gestures from the *Yajurveda* and emotions from the *Atharvaveda*. There is also a legend that Brahma himself wrote the *Natyaveda*, which has over 36,000 verses.



*Dancing girl, Bronze, Indus civilization*

In terms of the classical tradition formulated in the *Natyashastra*, dance and music are an inextricable part of drama. The art of *natya* carries in it all these constituents and the actor is himself the dancer and the singer, the performer combined all the three functions. With the passage of time the status of an independent and specialised art, marked the beginning of the 'art' dance in India.

As per the ancient treatises, dance is considered as having three aspects: *natya*, *nritya* and *nritta*. *Natya* highlights the dramatic element and most dance forms do not give emphasis to this aspect today with the exception of dance-drama forms like Kathakali. *Nritya* is essentially expressional, performed specifically to convey the meaning of a theme or idea. *Nritta* on the other hand, is pure dance where body movements do not express any mood (bhava), nor do they convey any meaning. To present *nritya* and *natya* effectively, a dancer should be trained to communicate the *navarasas*. These are: love (*shringara*), mirth (*hasya*), compassion (*karuna*), valour (*veera*), anger (*raudra*), fear (*bhayanaka*), disgust (*bibhatsa*), wonder (*adbhuta*) and peace (*shaanta*).



An ancient classification followed in all styles is of *Tandava* and *Lasya*. *Tandava* the masculine, is heroic bold and vigorous. *Lasya* the feminine is soft, lyrical and graceful. *Abhinaya*, broadly means expression. This is achieved through *angika*, the body and limbs, *vachikasong* and speech and *aharya*, costume and adornment; and *satvika*, moods and emotions.

Bharata and Nandikesvara, the main authorities conceive of dance as an art which uses the human body as a vehicle of expression. The major human units of the body (*anga*) are identified as the head, torso, the upper and lower limbs and the minor human parts (*upangas*), as all parts of the face ranging from the eyebrow to the chin and the minor joints.

Two further aspects of *natya* are the modes of presentation and the style. There are two modes of presentation, namely the *Natyadharmi*, which is the formalised presentation of theatre, and the *Lokadharmi* sometimes translated as folk, realistic, naturalistic or regional. The style or *vrittis* are classified into *Kaishiki*, the deft lyrical more suited to convey the *lasya* aspects, the *Arbati*, the energetic masculine the *Satvati* often used while depicting the *rasas* and the *Bharati*, the literary content.

Nurtured for centuries, dance in India has evolved in different parts of the country its own distinct style taking on the culture of that particular region, each acquiring its own flavour. Consequently a number of major styles of 'art' dance are known to us today, like Bharatnatyam, Kathakali, Kuchipudi, Kathak, Manipuri, Odissi and Sattriya. Then, there are regional variations, the dances of rural and tribal areas, which range from simple, joyous celebrations of the seasons, harvest or birth of a child to dances for the propitiation of demons or for invoking spirits. Today there is also a whole new body of modern experimental dance.



*Nataraja Bronze Sculpture, Chola period*

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