



# Stepping back in time to explore classical dance

by ANITA SRIVASTAVA

CLASSICAL Indian dance continues to be popular around the world, drawing diverse audiences including those who watch it for the first time and others who take up classes to learn it.

While some of the dance disciplines are performed in their purest forms, others are combined with contemporary influences from the west. Learning about the various disciplines adds to the appreciation of the art form that has been enchanting audiences across centuries.

Akademi, the UK's leading producer of south Asian dance, works to encourage excellence in the practice and appreciation of the art forms within a contemporary artistic social and educational context.

With that in mind, *Eastern Eye* approached Akademi to get a rough guide to the eight classical dance forms from India.

## FROM BHARATANATYAM TO SATTRIYA, A GUIDE TO THE EIGHT INDIAN STYLES



Bharatanatyam dancer Archana Ballal

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bards of ancient northern India who recited religious and mythological tales using mime and dance accompanied by musicians.

Kathak started in temples in northern India and later transited to Mughal courts during that era. This is the only classical dance form that has links with Hindu and Muslim culture.

The pirouettes are the most distinguished feature of Kathak. The technique is built on intricate footwork and soft gliding movements of the neck, eyebrows and wrists.

Also, recitation of the rhythmic syllables is common – the dancer often pauses to recite these to a specified metrical cycle of 16, 10, 14 beats followed by execution through movement.

Both the drummer and the dancer weave endless combinations on a repetitive melodic line.

The beats are called by different names such as *tukra*, *tora* and *parana*, which are all indicative of the nature of rhythmic patterns used and the percussion instrument accompanying the dance. The dance often commences with a sequence called *that*. This is followed by a conventional formal entry known as the *amad* (entry) and the *salami* (salutation).

There are three major gharanas (schools) of Kathak. These schools are named according to the geographical area in which they were developed and each has a slight difference in interpretation and repertoire. The Lucknow gharana is known for its expression of moods and emotions; the Jaipur gharana is famous for its rhythmic virtuosity; and the Varanasi gharana is characterised by the exclusive use of the *natwari* or dance *bols*, which are different from the tabla and the *pakhawaj bols*. There is also a great use of the floor.

**ODISSI**  
This classical dance form originates from the eastern state of Orissa in India. As per the archaeological evidences, it is the oldest surviving dance form of



Kathak performer Natalia Hildner

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Odissi dancer Khavita Kaur

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India. This dance form is referred as Odra-Magadhi in *Natyashastra*.

*Maharis* (temple girls), who dedicated their lives in the service of God, initially performed Odissi in temples as a religious offering. It has the closest resemblance with sculptures of the Indian temples.

Some of the most distinguishing features of Odissi dance are the *tribhangi*, which involves movement of head, chest and torso and *chauka* or *chouka*, the basic square position that symbolises Lord Jagannath. These poses are more curved than other classical Indian dances.

*Mudra* is also an important component of Odissi dance. The term *Mudra* means 'stamp', and is a hand position, which suggests a wide array of symbols and emotions. Odissi themes are most often religious in nature, and many revolve around expressing the stories of Lord Krishna.

Odissi is characterised by various stances known as *bhanga*s, which involves stamping of the foot and striking various postures as seen in Indian sculptures. The common ones are *bhanga*, *abhanga*, *atibhanga* and *tribhanga*.

**KUCHIPUDI**  
Kuchipudi is a classical dance that derives its name from the village of Kuchelapuram, a small village in erstwhile Andhra Pradesh in south India.

Bharata Muni, who wrote the

*Natyashastra*, had explained various aspects of this dance form. Later Sidhendra Yogi gave impetus to Kuchipudi by redefining the dance form.

Performed to classical Carnatic music, Kuchipudi shares many common elements with Bharatanatyam. The technique of this dance form makes use of fast rhythmic footwork and sculptural body movements, and uses miming and subtle facial expressions, combined with strong narrative and dramatic character.

Historically Kuchipudi was performed as a dance drama by male dancers only, with several of them performing women's roles. By the 20th century, it had fully crystallised as a classical solo dance form. Thus, there are now two forms of Kuchipudi – the traditional musical dance-drama and the solo dance.

A typical orchestra for a Kuchipudi recital includes the mridangam, flute and violin. A vocalist sings the lyrics, and the *nattwanar* conducts the orchestra and recites the rhythmic patterns. The themes are mostly derived from the scriptures and mythology, and the portrayal of certain characters is a central motif of this dance form. One example is Satyabhama, the colourful second consort of Lord Krishna.

Another unique feature of Kuchipudi is the *tarangam*, in which the performer dances on the edges of a brass plate, executing complicated rhythmic patterns with dexterity, while sometimes also balancing a pot of water on the head.

**KATHAKALI**  
Kathakali originated in the southwestern state of Kerala in India during the 17th century. It is a classical Indian dance-drama noted for the attractive make-up of characters, elaborate costumes, de-



Kuchipudi dancer Arunima Kumar

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A Kathakali performer

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tailed gestures and well-defined body movements presented in tune with playback music and complementary percussion.

Kathakali is a visual art where *aharya*, costume and make-up, are suited to the characters as per the tenets laid down in the *Natyashastra*. The characters are grouped under certain clearly defined types like the *pacha* (green), *kathi* (knife), *thadi* (beard), *kari* (black) or *minukku* (radiant).

The face of the artist is painted over to appear as though a mask is worn with the lips, eyelashes and eyebrows are made to look prominent. A mixture of rice paste and lime is applied to do the make-up (*chutti*).

Colours used in the make-up determine the character in the drama; for example, the faces of heroic characters such as Rama are predominantly green. Characters of demons such as Ravana are allotted a similar green make-up, slashed with red marks on the cheeks. Extremely angry or excessively evil characters wear predominantly red make-up and a flowing red beard. Forest dwellers such as hunters are represented with a predominantly black make-up base.

In no other Indian dance style is the entire body used so completely as in Kathakali. The technical details cover every part of the body from facial muscles to fingers, eyes, hands and wrists. The facial muscles play an important part. The movement of the eyebrows, eyeballs and lower eyelids are not used to such an extent in any other Indian dance. The Japanese performance art Noh is similar in many ways to Kathakali and deploys numerous masks and costumes.

Traditionally, all Kathakali dramas were composed to last an entire night. However, nowadays stories are presented in parts and last no more than three to four hours. The dancers play various roles in performances traditionally based on themes from Hindu mythology, especially the two epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*.

**MANIPURI**  
Manipuri dance, also known as Jagoi, originated in the state of Manipur, a northeastern region of India. It incorporates both the *tandava* (vigorous)



Manipuri dance troupe

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and *lasya* (delicate) and ranges from the most vigorous masculine to the subdued and graceful feminine. Generally known for its lyrical and graceful movements, Manipuri dance has an elusive quality. In keeping with the subtleness of the style, the facial expressions (*mukhabhinaya*) are natural and not exaggerated (*sarvangabhinaya*), or the use of the whole body to convey a certain *rasa*, is its forte.

Among the important constituents of the Manipuri repertoire are the *Sankirtana* and the *Raas Leela*, based on the devotional theme of Lord Krishna and Radha. The *Raas Leela* depicts the cosmic dance of Krishna and the cowering maidens. The beautiful embroidered skirts of the dancers, long and flared from the waist, and translucent veils, along with Krishna's costume with the tall peacock feather crown, add to the attractiveness of this dance, as performers sway and twirl to an ascending tempo.

Manipuri dancers do not wear ankle bells to accentuate the beats tapped out by the feet, in contrast with other Indian dance forms, and the dancers' feet never strike the ground hard. Movements of the body, feet and facial expressions in Manipuri dance are subtle and aim at devotion and grace.

**MOHINIYATTAM**  
Mohiniyattam (also spelled Mohiniattam) is a classical dance from Kerala. The term Mohiniyattam comes from the words *Mohini*, meaning a woman who enchants on-lookers, and *aattam* meaning graceful and sensuous body movements. The word Mohiniyattam literally means 'dance of the enchantress'.

Mohiniyattam is characterised by swaying movements of the upper body with

legs placed in a stance similar to the plié position. The eyes play an important role in accenting the direction of the movement.

The costume features a white sari embroidered with bright golden brocade (known as *kasavu*) at the edges. The dance follows the classical text of *Hastha Lakshanadeepika*, which has elaborate description of *mudras* (gestural expressions by the palm and fingers).

The vocal music of Mohiniyattam involves variations in rhythmic structure known as *chollu*. The lyrics are in *Manipravalam*, a mixture of Sanskrit and Malayalam. Mohiniyattam is performed to this accompaniment by the subtle gestures and footwork of the dancer. The performer uses the eyes in a very coy, sensual manner to entice the mind without enticing the senses.

**SATTRIYA**  
Sattriya (or Xattriya) was originally practiced by celibate monks in Assam in the form of mythological dance dramas. This dance form has remained a living tradition in Assam's Vaishnava monasteries, known as *sattras*, for over 500 years now. The dance-dramas were written and directed by the Assamese Vaishnava saint and social reformer Sankaradeva, and by his principal disciple Madhavadeva during the 16th century.

Sattriya dance's strict adherence to the principles of the *sattras* has allowed it to maintain its pure form and distinct style. Traditionally only male monks in monasteries performed Sattriya as a part of their daily rituals or to mark special festivals. Today in addition to this practice, Sattriya is also performed on stage by men and women who are not members of the *sattras*.

Like other Indian classical dance forms, Sattriya encompasses the principles required of a classical form such as a distinct repertoire

(*marg*) and the aspects of *nritta* (pure dance), *nriya* (expressive dance), and *natya* (*abhinaya*).

Sattriya *nriya* is accompanied by musical compositions called *borgeets*, based on classical ragas. The instruments that accompany a traditional performance are *khols* (drums), *taals* (cymbals) and the flute. Other instruments like the violin and harmonium have been recent additions.

The costumes are usually made of *pat*, a silk produced in Assam, which is derived from the silk worm and woven with intricate local motifs. There are two types of costumes – the male costume comprising the *dhoti* and *chadar* and the female's comprises of the *ghuri* and *chadar*. The waistcloth, known as the *kanchi* or *kingkini* is worn by both male and female dancers.

The ornaments, too, are based on traditional Assamese designs.



Sattriya performer Shatarupa Chatterjee

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This information is compiled by Anita Srivastava for Akademi's resource website southasiandance.org.uk. Founded in 1979, Akademi is a London-based south Asian dance charity and production house headed by director Mira Kaushik OBE. Log onto www.akademi.co.uk to find out more.