

Nartakī

Glory of a Glorious Indian Tradition

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While Indian narrative art is replete with depictions of scenes which emulate movements revealing great affinity with dance or suggesting movements well related to dance, the literary tradition is replete with beautiful and suggestively erotic descriptions of dancers, which in turn explains the significance and the supremacy of dance as an art form. As the tradition goes it is performed on all important occasions and embraces all the themes and attitudes of life. The *Nṛttaratanāvalī* states : It is not Śiva alone but all the three principal deities, the trinity, that takes delight in dance. The wonderful sweet ocular appeal of dance is so inviting that Śiva, Kṛṣṇa and Brahmā practice dance with their respective consorts.¹ Even the Mātṛkās dance, who are called Nāṭyamātarah. The worship of the Mātṛkās by Cārudatta in the early drama *Mṛchchhakatīkam* in this light gains special significance. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* reference to the uddhata prayoga by Śiva and the sukumāra prayoga by Pārvatī, and Brahmā creating apsaras for the enactment performance of Kaśikī vṛttī, on the request of sage Bharata are points in the line. The reference to the Nāṭasūtras of Śilalin and Kṛṣāsava by Pāṇini and the profound knowledge in music and dance, *saṅgīta* by kings and princes like Udayan and Naravāhandattā, contemporaries of Buddha, Naravāhandattā playing *vīṇā* to accompany his consort who was a skilled dancer, not only amply speak of the antiquity of this art and the great fervour and reverence for it but also accounts for the identification of the great art with great names in history and the greatest celestial artists as its exponents. On the worldly plane the glory of dance lies in the fact that it is not just an exposition of a great art practised and performed by the divine, but that its practice and performance help the dancer and the audience to achieve the four *puruṣārthas* : *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma* and *mokṣa*. It is the dancer hence forth referred to as the *nartakī*, who is the subject of our attention and consideration.

There are both direct and indirect references to the art, persona and attributes (*kalā*, *rūpa* and *guṇa*) of the *nartakī*. The *Nṛttaratanāvalī*, *Abhinaya Darpaṇa*, *Ubhayasārikā*,

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Saṅgītaratnākar, *Saṅgītāsamayasāra*, *Saṅgīta Cintāmaṇī*, *Rasa Kaumudī*, *Saṅgītarāja*, *Saṅgītamālikā*, *Sahasarasa*, *Mṛgāvati*, *Saṅgīta Makaranda* and many others have given detailed accounts of the distinctive attributes of a *nartakī*. The poets have sung of her beauty at length while the sculptors and painters have delighted in capturing her physical ecstasy. Whatever the medium the effort has always been to capture her beauty of form, her graceful gait, her soft and delicate limbs, her moon like face with wide open eyes, her skill and dexterity in the art coupled with a deep understanding of the Śāstra-thereby making 'spiritual realization concrete and mundane experiences religious'²

The *nartakī* is amorous and seductive, beautiful and graceful, intelligent yet passionate, erotic yet chaste, talented, religious, devoted, spiritual, secular, modest and glamorous. Educated in the sixty-four *kalās* (which included the arts of music and dance), she is bold and candid. She is *Mugdhā*, *Madhyā*, *Praudhā*, *Svakīyā*, *Parakīyā*, *Sāmānya*, *Padminī*, *Citṛiṇī*, *Śankhinī*, *Hastinī* etc³. She is celebrated in the history of Indian dance as an *apasaras*, courtesan, *devadāsī*, *rāja dāsī*, *alaṅkāra-dāsī*, *nagara-badhu*, *sumāṅgalī*, *nitya-sumāṅgalī*, *gaṇikā* the *urvaśī* *sampradāya* *patra*, *paturiyā*, *gondali*, *muralī*, *mahārī*, *naikin*, *lolohī*, *dominī*, *hurokenī*, *hentsinī*, *bāī*, *rāī*, *moī*, *parī*, *kancanī*, *caudharain*, *tawaif*, *raksa*, *deredāra*, *nautch-wālī* and finally in the reincarnated form as the *nāyikā*, *begum*, *devī*. Her world was unique. Unique in the sense that it was a world enveloped in beauty with beautiful attributes. The place of her practice and performance was variously known as the *Indra-sabhā*, *raṅga-śālā*, *raṅga-bhūmi*, *raṅga-maṇḍapa*, *nāṭya-maṇḍapa*, *sabhā*, *koṭhā*, *mehfil* and the *parikhānā*.

The refined mannerism, and education of the *nartakī* provided her with a special dignity and place in the society. She was intellectual companion to the male elites many of whom were *rājās*, *nawābs*, or people holding high positions. The *nartakīs* were witty, intelligent and to be associated with them was considered to be a symbol of status, wealth, sophistication and culture. Many of the *nawābs* would send their sons to the *koṭhās* of *baijīs* to learn mannerisms and etiquettes from them. In return they were given gifts in the shape of land, money and valuables. Many of the *nartakīs* were extra-ordinarily rich. The *nartakīs* were considered to be auspicious and were present on all important functions of the state or the family⁴.

Many of the dancing and singing girls went on to become mistresses of their patrons. Their attributes and charm are now a part of recorded history in terms of sculptures, paintings, poems and stories. The *Gurjari Mahal* still reverberates with the love strains of the *Gurjari* queen *Mriganayanī* and *Rājā Mānsigh Tomar*, the love story of *Baz Bahādur* and *Rani Rūpmatī* even today continues to sparkle with a glitter and vibrates with an intensity that

refuses to blur in the mist of time, the Anand Mahal again continues to stand as a silent tribute of Rambhā, the talented mistress of Ibrāhim Ādil Shāh; the Amtar Palace even today stands as a mute testimony to the love of Sansār Chand for his dancing girl Jamālo. In literature and poetry, the writers and poets are suffused with a passion for the physical charm and the art of the *nartakī* only to get even a glimpse of the unearthly. A detailed or sometimes even a suggestive analysis of the *nartakī*-her appearance, apparel, moods, passions and small movements have provided the inspiration and have been the cause of innumerable lives and colours in painting and poetry, so much so that by the medieval period the literature is inundated with vivid and passionate descriptions of soraha-śṛṅgāra/śoḍaśa-śṛṅgāra, dvādaśa ābharāṇa, bārā-māsā, ṛtu-cakra, all themes of dance, thereby unlocking the door and giving vent to many secrets of the love and joy. Whether it was the writer of the Uśā sūklā, or the Bhāgavata Purāṇa or Kālidāsa, Jayadeva, Bihāri, Baksha, Kutuban, Śrī Kaṇṭha, Jayasi or Keśava Dāsa, they all seem to have used their nāyikās as a medium to attain the unattainable. They are all drenched in the colours of adoration of the physical beauty of their pātra, who leads them to the attainment of the Absolute Beauty which is God. The journey from the physical to the metaphysical, from the earthly and the mundane to the unworldly and the divine is made easy and enjoyable in the arms of the beloved *nāyikā*. The union is the union of the souls. It was thus that the poet Jai Deva gave to the world the immortal *Aṣṭapadī*-the *Gīta Govinda*. It is believed that the inspiration for conceiving and writing the great epic was his wife Padmāvātī, who was a mahārī in the temple of Lord Jagannātha.

Ancient Indian art had a dual purpose-while on the one hand it was used for the nobler purposes of life, on the other it was used as a foil to provide entertainment/enjoyment to the masses (figs. 1-2). Dance was a popular adjunct to a *yajña* performance and thus women singers and dancers were an important part of both the entertainment as well as the ritual or spiritual world⁵. The beautiful and well groomed *nartakī* was thus naturally exposed to the evils and hazards of society. Though she had learnt and practiced the arts of music and dance as *sādhanā*, she was devoted or attached to some patron, organization, temple or *nāṭyaśālā*. These in turn had their conditions and demands, many a times selfish and unnatural. Many stories and incidents record the darker and dimmer side of the institution of the *nartakī*. An institution set-up for the service of the divine-the Devadāsī in attendance of the Lord finds itself ending in nautch and the nautch girl during the period of the British rule in India⁶.

History has recorded many stories about the adventures and misadventures of a *nartakī*. According to Abul Fazal on hearing about the beauty and charm of Rūpamatī and her passionate affair with Bāz Bahādur, Akbar desired to have her at any cost and invaded

Malwa. Bāz Bahādur fled to Khandesh. Rūpamatī ended her life by consuming poison. The beautiful dancing girl Anārkali was entombed alive when Akbar came to know of the love between Prince Salīm, his son and Anārkali. As reported by Manucci, Rana Dil, a dancing girl of humble birth but extremely charming and beautiful captivated the heart of Dara Shikoh. She remained faithful till the end. After the death of Dara Shikoh, Aurangzeb wanted to take Rana Dil as his wife with all the honours and privileges given to a wife but Rana Dil turned down all offers. She even cut off her long hair and slashed her face, collected the blood in a piece of cloth and sent it to Aurangzeb with a message that what attracted him to her was destroyed. Lal Kunwar, the singing empress, the most glamorous and notorious dancing girl captivated the heart of Jahandar Shah, grandson of Aurangzeb. Conferred with the title of Imtiaz Mahal (the chosen one of the palace), she was provided with the royal insignia and an allowance of one crore rupees. Nur Bai had a direct access to the court of Mohammad Shah Rangila. She rode on an elephant escorted by liveried soldiers and attracted huge crowds even to get a glimpse of her. Exceedingly beautiful she conducted her mehfil in a royal style. During his occupation of Delhi, Nadir Shah was greatly impressed by her performance and wanted to send her to Persia which she smartly refused. Ad Begum was the most unusual dancing girl, who delighted in dancing nude without being discovered by the onlookers. Mastani the jewel of Chhatra Sal, created history by committing Sati after the death of her lover Baji Rao Peshwa. Kaunam from Lucknow, with her beauty and elegance was the chief attraction of the nautch parties organised by Sāhibs. Alfina from Delhi was known as the Catalani of the East. It is believed that she divested some of the gallant nawābs of Delhi of half of their fortune. Nicki from Calcutta was the prima-donna of the east and the list can go on⁷. Many of the nartakīs were used variously as spies, for forging political alliances. It was only some, a class, who practised dance not as an art but as a subterfuge to promote their vocation of prostitution⁸.

History has the uncanny power of showing the mirror to the society. The reflections in the mirror reveal some patches smeared and stained with greed and lust. The very society which had given birth to the noble institution/profession of a nartakī defeated its objective by deviating from the principles on which it was built. The culturally rich Indian fabric of the art of dance and the institution of the nartakī fell to pieces. Then followed the renaissance. Efforts were made for revival. The arts were resurrected, yet the noble purpose was perhaps left behind. Today the look is new. The nartakī is much more glamorous, richer, smarter in her dress, appearance, ensemble, presentation, commercially more viable yet the basic question looms large. Where is the element of spirituality for which Indian art is so well

known. Is India loosing the richness of its cultural heritage in the name of growth and development ? Globalization at what cost ? Our *nartakīs* adapted themselves and their art in the process of evolution as revealed in many surveys and studies, yet they seldom compromised with the inherent ethos of the art. Art can never be any industry for it will loose the human touch. The glory of a glorious Indian tradition, even today remains a beautiful lie.

References :

1. Tr. From C. Sivaramamurti : *Naṭarāja in Art Thought and Literature*, p. 11.
 2. Foreword by Humanyun Kabir : M.S. Randhawa, *Kangra Paintings on Love*.
 3. *Ibid.*, refer for more detailed analysis of the nayikas.
 4. Cf. R. Srivastava, *Kathaka : its origin and development* (A study based on ancient and medieval sculptures and paintings) unpub.
 5. C. Sivaramamurti, *Op.cit.*, p. 8.
 6. Cf. Afterword The Dancing foot by Mulk Raj Anand : vide M.S. Randhawa, *op.cit.*, '...the courtesans of the 18th-19th centuries enjoyed the status of Nautch girls. They did not know the classical dances, which were still part of the ritual of Hindu temples. Nor were they court dancers, except for those honoured in courts of gay kings like Wajid Ali Shah.'
- Later the nautch was danced nainly as free dance in swaying movements to seductive songs in the prostitute quarters of almost every town. Also see Bakshu, Sahasrasa : Ed. P.L. Sharma; It would be interesting to note the views of Prof. P.L. Sharma, Here in she clearly states that today ganikā is a synonym for veśyā (prostitute). But the ganikā of the Kāmasūtra and the pātārā of Sahasaras though Sāmānyā nāyikās are not just traders of their beauty.... Even today people know that there is a difference between a singer and a prostitute-p. 129 (Hindi).
7. Pran. Nevile, : Nauth Girls of India - Dancers, Singers, Playmates for detailed stories, also see *Kathaka its origin and development*, infra. for more examples.
 8. *ibid.*, p. 156





1. Nartakī in delightful Dance, Parshvanatha temple, Khajuraho, 10th century C.E. (Photo courtesy, Prof. M. N. P. Tiwari)



2. Nartakī in delightful Dance, Adinatha temple, Khajuraho, 11th centry C.E.
(Photo courtesy, Atma Prakash Singh)