Performing Arts and Artistes in Modern Times

Chapter 21

Performing Arts and Artistes in Modern Times

- Above are some photos of performing arts. How many of them can you identify? Write down the names below each of the photos.
- Did you see any of them being performed in your village? Share your experience in the class.

In this chapter we will read about performing artistes in the 20th century. By performing artistes we mean those who dance, sing, do plays etc. They are different from other artistes like painters, sculptors and writers in that their work cannot be preserved - every time they have to perform afresh.

Many of the folk arts are performed by the people themselves. Peasant and tribal women sing and dance as part of their work and also during leisure times and festivals. The Chuttukamudu is one of the art forms of Telangana that came out of the daily labour of the peasants. Their work songs were molded into dancing songs. Usually, they are performed by women who gathered on moonlight nights and sang Chuttukamudu songs and danced to the rhythms of clapping. Similarly, village girls hang swings on trees and sing the Fuyyala Patalu with devotional stories of Goddess Lakshmi and Gowri. Many other art forms are performed by special people.

- Find out from your parents and grandparents about the songs sung and dances performed by family members on special occasions. Make a chart listing them, the occasions and some sample songs. Have any changes come in these performances in recent years? Share your findings with rest of the class.
- If any of you know some of these songs and dances perform them in the class.

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Different forms of dances

Dhimsa:

Dhimsa dance is performed by tribal groups living in Araku valley. During the festivals and marriages Dhimsa dancers travel from village to village. Dancers are accompanied by those who play musical instruments like Movi, Kirudi, Tadunu, Dappu and Kommi. There are eight different categories of dances. Boda Dhimsa, Gundevi Dhimsa, Goodi Betta Dhimsa, Potaralu Dhimsa, Bhag Dhimsa, Natikari Dhimsa, Kunda Dhimsa, Buya Dhimsa. Natikari Dhimsa is the only dance which is not performed in group.

Gusadi:

Raj Gonds of Adilabad celebrate Deepavali in a big manner. The dance they perform during this celebration is called ‘Gusadi’. They decorate themselves in colourful costumes of peacock, Brahman, deer horn etc. It is accompanied by musical instruments like Dappu, Thadam, Pipi and Kallu.

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Lambadi:

Lambudi is a semi-nomadic tribe in Andhr Pradesh has dances inspired by the movements associated with daily tasks like harvesting, planting and sowing. The costumes, embroidered with glass-beads and shining discs are beautiful. When they perform for festivals like Dussera, Deepavali and Holi people pay them money.

Sadar Natyam:

A solo dance form performed for centuries by devadasis in temples and especially in the royal courts of South India, especially in Tamil Nadu.

Kuruvai:

A group dance by women, interpreting literary or poetic compositions typically on the theme of fulfillment of the love of a girl for her beloved.

Kuchipudi:

A group form of dance drama from Kuchipudi, a village in Andhr Pradesh, with all roles performed by men also and themes based on mythology.

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Down the ages, artistes like dancers, storytellers, singers, actors, etc. have not only entertained people and given them aesthetic experience, but also helped to communicate spiritual messages and criticise the ills of our society and suggest alternatives. Performing artistes could play a powerful social role by mobilising people for large social causes. Fakker patalu, Bairagi patalu, Dandaganam, Lattuvarasab etc were songs sung by travelling fakkers and bairagis. They were in Telugu and Deccani urdu and mixed language.

Several other art forms required larger teams like in Burrakatha and Goda Suddala. It is said that initially these Goda Suddala were practiced by shepherds who migrated from place to place. Some of them were associated with religious groups like Veerashaivas.

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Fig 21.2: Photo of a bairagi

Fig 21.3: Photo of Burrakatha performance

Burrakatha is associated with Veerashaiva movement in 12th and 13th century. The term ‘burr’ refers to ‘ямhara’ a stringed instrument worn across the right shoulder of the main performer (kathadasa). Usually, this art is practiced by a team of two or three people from the same family of certain caste/tribe like picachuguntla or jangalu. In this form of narration the main storyteller tells the story while playing a tambura and dancing wearing andalu (anklets). He dances rhythmically forward and back on the stage while reciting a story. The performer also wears over his right thumb, a hollow ring, with which he beats basic tempo of the songs. One or two associates assist the main narrator with two-headed earthen drum called dakkula or budke. The drummer to the right of the performer comments on contemporary political and social issues even if the story is mythological and the drummer on the left provides comic relief. ‘Vinara Bhurata Veera Kumara Fijanam Manadari’, ‘Tandana Tana’ is the popular refrain of the Burrakatha. Performance begins in the evening with songs in praise of various gods. Then the Kathadasa introduces the main story by giving the place, time and context of the story, while the assistants repeat the refrain of the narrative.

Burrakatha is performed mostly during Dasara or Sankranti festival seasons. Mostly mythological stories from epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata and some stories of kings like Kumbha or Vagina or Babli, Kallu, Palna, Kattamallu etc. are told.

Burrakatha in our times: During the independence movement, Burrakatha was brought into mainstream in Andhr Pradesh and was used for political purposes. Burrakatha played an effective role in conveying message to people and awakening them.

The British and the Nizam governments harassed the Burrakatha artistes as they suspected them of spreading
rebellious ideas among people. This was also a large extent true as Burrakatha artists took to new themes like nationalism and communism. Burrakatha of patriots like Alluri Sitaramaraju who fought against the British roused the rebellious ideas among the people. Progressive artists of the Communist Party set up the Praja Natya Mandal in 1943 and invited folk artists who performed Burrakatha etc. to spread the message of nationalism and communism in Telangana villages. Women members of the Communist Party like Moturi Udadyam, Kotesvaramma gave Burrakathas performances. Nazar performed many Burrakathas during the Telangana movement. His Moscow Polimeralona became very famous. The Telangana artists also began to compose and perform new Burrakathas for their movement. The more notable among these were Tiranagam Ramajeyatras ‘Telangana Vaaravathitta’, Addu Yeddu Ramu’s ‘Naizam Viplavam’ and S.K. Chaudhary’s ‘Kasim Razvi’ and Sunkara Sathyarayana’s ‘Kuchipudi’. These Burrakathas focused attention on the socio-economic problems and perform new themes like Telangana movement. His Burrakatha stories on Andhra famine and Bengali famine of 1943 became very popular. Nazar wrote the stories as well as sang them. In the 1940s he worked for the Communist Party for spreading its message. Nazar’s Burrakatha performances were included in several cinemas. He received several awards including the Padmashri award in 1986. His biography ‘Punjari’ narrates the poverty and problems he faced and widening of his world due to his performances for the people. Several people were inspired by Nazar in taking up Burrakatha as a profession. However, Nazar died in utter poverty.

The Themes of the plays

The performances draw from the epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata and local legend with raucous humor and wisecracks about current events. For epics, the troupe uses regional versions. Very rarely; they write new stories. Performers are mostly wandering troupe. They wander for nine months in a year from village to village giving performances in return for money and grains.

With the advent of modern means of information and entertainment like films and television people are turning away from traditional forms of performing arts. Also landlords have no longer patronise artists like in the past. As a result the folk artists are facing a decline and crises of livelihood. Since they have been travelling artists, they also lack modern school education and the only other profession they can adopt is one of unskilled workers.

The government has stepped in to use some of these arts for propagation of government programmes. Many additional troupe are now performing plays on themes like sanitation, healthcare, girl’s education, family planning and environment. Such scripts are generally provided by the government that sponsors the shows.

Some families of Tholobhanomatla artists have also opted for alternate livelihoods like production of decorative lampshades and wall hangings of leather. A co-operative puppet making center in Tirumala was established to promote this art form.

One name that strikes when Burrakatha is mentioned is Shaik Nazar Vali who popularised the art form and in turn became popular because of it. People would travel long distances to see Nazar perform. Nazar was born into a poor family with the occupation of carding cotton in 1920. Starting with Balarama Natka Sankasman in Telugu he performed for four decades. His Burrakatha stories Andhra famine and Bengali famine of 1943 were very popular. Nazar wrote the stories as well as sang them. In the 1940s he worked for the Communist Party for spreading its message. Nazar’s Burrakatha performances were included in several cinemas. He received several awards including the Padmashri award in 1986. His biography ‘Punjari’ narrates the poverty and problems he faced and widening of his world due to his performances for the people. Several people were inspired by Nazar in taking up Burrakatha as a profession. However, Nazar died in utter poverty.

Performances begin at 9 p.m. and last through the night. The troupe of shadow puppeteers consists of eight to twelve artists. The troupe will have at least two women for singing and speaking female roles, two men for male roles, three instrumentalists for playing the harmonium, sarathi and cymbals and one assistant who is used for quick supply of puppets and maintenance of lamps.

They select an open place in the village for the stage, planting four-bamboo sticks to form a rectangle shape with a white cloth tied to the poles. The commentator is behind the curtain and there are a row of lights that throw the shadow on the screen.

Fig 21.4: Tholobhanomatla

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Revival

Against all odds, a few families preserved the knowledge of this dance and music tradition. Its revival involved individuals from disparate backgrounds: Indian freedom fighters, Westerners interested in Indian arts, people outside the devadasi class who learnt Bharatanatyam, and devadasis themselves. Everyone working with classical Indian dance today owes a debt of gratitude to these individuals, without whose efforts Bharatanatyam may have been lost.

E. Krishna Iyer was freedom fighter and lawyer who also had learnt Bharatanatyam. He would perform it in female costume to remove the stigma associated with the dance, and campaigned to raise public interest in the art. He also played a role in founding the Music Academy in Madras (now Chennai), and used its platform to present Bharatanatyam performances by devadasis. The public controversy caused by the first such event made the second one a great success, and the art gained respect due to its acceptance on the Music Academy stage.

Bharatanatyam now attracted young artists from respectable families. Initially met with shock, their participation ultimately helped to shift public opinion in favour of reviving the art. Also during this time, Western artists like the ballerina Anna Pavlova were taking interest in the artistic heritage of India, while the spiritual heritage of India was being promoted by Westerners in the Theosophical movement.

Rukmini Devi had trained in ballet under a pupil of Anna Pavlova’s, but Pavlova advised Rukmini Devi to learn Indian classical dance instead. Raised in a Thespian family, Rukmini Devi’s unique background equipped her to reform the existing Bharatanatyam to emphasise its spirituality.

An association of devadasis joined the effort to revive Bharatanatyam. Its ranks included a teacher of Rukmini Devi as well as artistes like Bangalore Nagarathamma and the legendary dancer Balasaraswati. They advocated preserving the tradition, and also keeping it in the hands of the devadasi community. Their argument was that the art would die if separated from the community, while advocates for Bharatanatyam from the educated community argued that the art had to be transferred to respectable hands to be saved. Ultimately, both communities carried on with the dance. It was, after all, the devadasis and nattuvanars that trained the new dancers from other castes.

Rukmini Devi’s debut performance in 1935 was a milestone. Her efforts won over much of the orthodox community of Madras. Her reforms of costume, stage setting, repertoire, musical accompaniment, and thematic content overcame the objections of conservatives that Bharatanatyam was vulgar. She went on to found the Kalakshetra institute, to which she attracted many great artistes and musicians, with whom she trained generations of dancers. Kalakshetra is a modern institution which employs artistes to teach and perform and conducts degree and certificate courses. Any student whether they were of dancers family or not can learn dance there.

Balasaraswati promoted the traditional art of the devadasis, maintaining that reforms were unnecessary and detracted from the art. Staying true to her devadasi lineage, she achieved recognition for her excellence. The renewed awareness of Bharatanatyam in Indian society allowed many nattuvanars to resume their training activities, and many artistes to enter the field of classical dance. A diversity of styles like Pandanallur, Vazhuvur, and Thanjavur, named after the villages from which the nattuvanars came, became recognised. Bharatanatyam soon became the most widespread and popular of the Indian classical dance forms. It wasn’t long before it achieved international recognition as one of India’s treasures.

Why do you think it became important for other caste to take over the dance in order to revive it?

Other questions:
1. What was the special role of the nattuvanars? What impact do you think it will have on the dance if they are replaced by dancers themselves?
2. In what way do you think the establishment of modern institutions like Kalakshetra influenced the art and artistes?
3. In what way has the immense popularity of Bharatanatyam helped it? Has it also created some problems?

Bharatanatyam today

In the vital decades after its revival, Bharatanatyam achieved such esteem that by the late 20th century, the demand for learning Bharatanatyam exceeded the infrastructure to support the art and maintain its standards. Today, it is the demand for learning it, rather than a growth in its audience or sponsorship, that fuels the spread of Bharatanatyam.

Dancers, rather than the nattuvanars, have become the custodians of the art form. The generation of nattuvanars that trained dancers during the revival period was the last generation of exclusive nattuvanars. Due to larger numbers of aspiring dancers, nattuvanars no longer are the only trainers.

In institutions like Kalakshetra, internationally trained artists trained as teachers educate the next generation. But even more students now learn privately from individual dancers. The role of the nattuvanars during performances is taken by dancers or musicians with special training.

Many are forced to use recorded music in dance performances to keep costs down. Dancers today usually can’t make a living by performing. With a few exceptions, Bharatanatyam is today a secondary career, or a profession for those with family support. Few dancers can devote their entire lives to training and developing as dancers. To earn money, dancers start teaching early in their careers. This affects the quality of their dance and also their teaching.

Without nattuvanars, and with more and more dancers becoming teachers, the unbroken lineage of instruction that maintained the integrity of the dance form has been lost. In the hands of many dancers rather than a few trainers, Bharatanatyam is now subject to numerous innovations.

While this has been the experience of Bharatanatyam, many other dance forms like Kathakali, Yakshagana, Odissi, Manipuri and Kathak went through similar experience and struggles. Try to find out about them too.

Key words
1. Cymbals
2. Anklets
3. Alma
4. Mime
5. Tarangam

Improve your learning
1. Correct the false statements:
   a. All dance forms emerged as part of devotion.
   b. Historically artistes were supported by big Zamindars.
   c. Bharatnatyam was adopted to mobilise people.
   d. Today Bharatanatyam is largely taught by nattuvanars.
2. Discuss the changes that have come about in the lives of folk artistes during the last 50 years.
3. Do you think folk arts are declining? What loss do you think it will cause to our culture?
4. Is it possible to orient folk arts to new requirements of modern life and revive them?
5. What are the major changes that have taken place in Bharatanatyam dance since the days of Sadir?
6. Who among the following were the supporters of devadasi system and those who opposed it and those who wanted to reform it:
   - Balasaraswati, Rukmini Devi
   - Veerasingham, Bhagya Reddy
   - Krishna Iyer, Bangalore Nagarathamma
7. Why has it always been difficult for artistes to earn their livelihood by practicing their art? How can artistes be supported to stand on their own feet?
8. Do you think institutions like Kalakshetra can help to revive folk arts too?