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Bombay

Christian Themes through Bharatanātyam

The urge for expression and communication is innate in every human being. All of us want to express our spiritual experience, our ideas, feelings and emotions to others, to ourselves and to God. Dance may be considered a mental projection of inner thoughts and feelings into movement, rhythm being the mould through which the creative life flows in giving its meaningful form. To attain this as meaningful art-form the fusion of inner and outer form should take place. The unseen, inner form or dance is the organization of the mental attributes into content; the outer is the observed dance form, the movement which is the result of the organization and the execution of the motor elements. The aesthetic quality or the value of the art-form will depend on how perfectly the inner form (unseen dance) and the outer form (visual dance) are fused.

Art is ever the same, the efforts of man to interpret and represent life. Only the forms change. As an age or an individual accumulates more experience, new horizons of outlook and meanings are gained by the mind. The ideas, mode of life, principles, ideologies and religious experiences release new intellectual forces with the accompanying emotions. Hence, new forms have to be discovered and developed to express adequately the newly sensed emotions and experience.

Thus, to give expression to my experience of Christ and his message, I had to find new and adequate external forms (visual dance) to give life to the internal form (unseen dance). So, under the garb of Bharatanātyam I have invented new forms to give expression to the Christian experience. In other words, it is an attempt to present Christian experience through Bharatanātyam.

In this brief essay, efforts have been made to analyse the purpose, relation and nature of Dance. A search in the Christian scriptures and a short historical survey are also provided to show how dance has been

always an integral part and parcel of the Holy Bible and in the life of the early Church. Christ is seen as the Lord of the Dance, the dancing Prophet. Finally, I have enumerated a few innovations and works of mine in presenting Christian themes through Bharatanātyam.

Dance : Communication and Expression

All of us love to tell or express what is in our hearts. But most of us just manage to communicate what we really mean at only three or four peak moments in our life-time, and then, perhaps, only to a few friends. All works of art, especially Indian classical dance are a medium through which men communicate what lies beyond ordinary speech. There is a scene in the famous Sanskrit classic *Mrichhakatikam* where Vasantsena, the court dancer says to Charudatta: "When my words fail to express my meaning and my song cannot depict the yearning of my soul. I shall dance to you. O Charudatta, so that my entire being becomes the messenger of my love for you."

From time immemorial dancing has been the highest and the most complete expression and communication at the deepest level at the command of the artist. This includes music and rhythm, line and colour, emotion and sentiment, harmony and melody. "The feet take up the rhythm, the body depicts the tune, the hands express the meaning, and the eyes speak the emotions. Thus, the body of the dancer sings, it speaks, it moulds space and it flows like molten gold." As the flower communicates its nature through the movement and shape and unfolding of its parts so the human body is the mirror that reveals and communicates the emotional and spiritual nature of a person the movement of the soul and heart.

The dancer tries to be aware of his own self and conveys to others the many feelings and ideas that make up the human person that he is. This is done by understanding the elements of dance that comprise rhythm, dynamics, shape and use of space; the instrument, of course, is the human body. These are the vocabulary of dance, the language that is spoken by the whole person—body, soul and spirit.

The language of dance is superior to all spoken languages and transcends the barriers of a particular human society. McNeil Dixon, who gave the Gifford lectures at the University of Glasgow during 1937-39 said, "The dance is a vernacular, a dialect of the soul." This

dialect of the soul breaks down all the distinctions and isolations of the body and soul as separate compartments. It also breaks down all the distinctions that society has established.

Dance is primarily meant to express and communicate one's feelings, emotions and inner experience to one's fellowmen. It is not restricted to any particular caste, creed, society, religion or place, or laws laid down by society. It is an expression where the dancer expresses his innermost experiences and emotions. The mode and style of the expression depends on the dancer and his training in the use of the body to express himself becomes a creation. To express his inner experiences he creates different forms and images. Thus, the incarnation of his inner experience takes place simultaneously in time and space. The forms come into existence and disappear. Thus the purpose of dance (communication and expression) is served because the experience of the dancer and his message are transmitted to his fellowmen and they in turn make them their own each according to his power of receptivity. So, we can say that dance in itself has been and is one of the best media of expression and communication, perhaps the best one.

Religion and Dance

Ted Shawn, one of the most outstanding dancers of the 20th century, is of the opinion that dance and religion at the beginning were one and the same activity. The form was dance and the content was religion. There is no religion whose essence and beliefs were originally far better expressed by any other means. Havelock Ellis in his book *Dance of life* gives references to the source materials concerning the unity of religion and dance. Nietzsche once said, "I should only believe in a God who knew how to dance." The Persian poet Rumi said, "Who-soever knoweth the power of dance, dwelleth in God."

Historically and in practice we find that religion is inseparable from dance. In Japan, Shinto, one of the native religions of the country, held dancing in great favour. *Geisha*-girls, like the *Devadasis* of India, originally did enjoy a life of long maidenhood and dedicated their lives to the service of the gods. The dancing girls of Japan had made a profession of their great and noble art, and the old stories relating to the origin of dance in Japan are still remembered as popularly charming anecdotes. Today we rarely find the religious aura in the popular

dances of Italy, yet history records that "to the Romans dancing was absolutely a part of religious ceremony. They hated to see performance of dance for pleasure's sake only." Greek philosophers looked upon dance as something proper and fitting for worship. We find that the ancient Greeks employed music and dance in the worship of the various deities.

In ancient Egypt the dancing girls held their daily displays of dance and music in every temple. "Even the early Christians advocated dancing during the time when their service carols were sung. The Christmas carols of today bear testimony to the early association of dancing with such mass singing at the church. Later however dancing was forcibly divorced from the church singing." Among the Muslims a group of them known as *Darbesh*, consider dancing as an essential way of sending prayers to the Almighty. "The art of dancing in India has a romantic religious aura about it and is steeped in cosmic symbolism, natural inspiration and aesthetic idea. It is much above mere imitation of emotions, mere pleasure of the senses or mere faith or religion. Though the art of Indian dance owes its origin to divine conception, it has besides an appeal that goes to stir up every human heart."

Recognizing the power of dance to enable man to express his highest spiritual aspirations, religions utilized it for their worship, perpetuation and propagation. Thus, in every religion dance has been the prime medium for expression and communication of spiritual experiences. In the process dance has become an integral part and mode of religion.

Dance : A creative art experience

All arts, especially dance, is the expression of man's emotional experience, transformed by thought and intentionally given form in the body by means of rhythm, dynamic, shape and space. In other words, "dance is the rhythmic motor expression of feeling, states, aesthetically valued whose movements symbols are consciously designed for the pleasure and satisfaction or re-experiencing, of expressing, of communicating, of exercising and of creating form." So, dance stands for man's need and desire to express internal self, to discover his relation with himself, nature, man and God. For this purpose dance as an art has to be creative. And "this creative activity of the intellect, in constructing form, of the emotions, the motivating force for expression, of the body, whose active joints (the skeletal instrument) and muscles (the movement

medium) furnish the materials for the organized external form and finally of that intangible aspect of human personality, the spirit which animates these activities with great significance. A created dance is born of the personality. In creating the external form, the personality is expanded in achieving a form of expression and communication. Thus the personality is active in all its entirety”.

In the process dance becomes a creation. “For the artist it is creation by expression; for the appreciator it is creation by evocation. These two principles complete the cycle, abstractly and briefly they are the whole story of art. To be responsive to the needs of life and its emotional appeal is the first condition of *artistic* creation. By new combinations of material elements to bring emotion to expression in concrete, harmonious forms—themselves charged with emotion and communicating it—is to fashion a work of art.” So, dance as an art, when understood, is the province of every human being where man tries to create new forms to give life to his internal feelings and ideas. This artistic activity is not restricted to a particular creed, religion or sect. The language of dance is universal. In 1933, commenting on Uday Shankar’s innovations, Tagore wrote to him, “There are no bounds to the depths or to the expansion of any art which like dancing, is the expression of life’s urge. We must never shut it within the bounds of stagnant ideal nor define it as either Indian or Oriental or Occidental. Such finality only robs it of life’s privilege, which is freedom.”

After analysing the purpose (communication and expression), relation (Religion) and nature (creative) of dance, I went to find out the place and use of this art-form in the Christian scriptures and in the life of the Church.

Dance : In the church

Many Christians are ignorant and have no knowledge about the use and place of dance in their own scriptures and in the worship of the early Church. This is due to the adverse historical development, mainly because of the false asceticism which dominated right from the dark ages and, secondly, the abuse of this art for the sensual purposes by a section of the society. In India although singing has remained an essential part of the public and private worship, in many Christian circles dance is yet to make an impact as a tool for worship and communication of religious experiences. This is because the early preachers

were overtaken by the colonial influences and failed to be true to the Gospel message which says that Christianity is supposed to adapt itself to the culture of the country where it is planted.

Dance : In the Bible

In the Old Testament, dance was not only part of profane celebration but was also used for sacred functions. Dance was part of Yahwe's victory over Egypt (Ex. 15:20-ff), the procession in which David brought the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem (Ps. 6:5-ff) and the celebration of the Golden Calf (Ex. 32:19). Jeremiah sees maidens dancing in the joy of the messianic Israel (Jr. 31:31). The dance which David performed before the Ark is described by a word not occurring elsewhere; it must have been unusually vigorous, to judge by the criticism made by Michael (2 Sam. 6:14; 16:20). The conduct of Saul with the Prophets (1 Sam. 10:10ff; 19:20ff) suggests that the companies called Sons of the Prophets conducted a cultic worship of songs and dance. In many of David's Psalms he offers praise to God through singing and dancing: "Praise him with timbrel and dance. Praise him with strings and pipe" (Ps. 150:4).

"Let them praise his name with dancing making melody to him with timbrel and lyre" (Ps. 149:3).

Even in the New Testament we find references to dance when Jesus speaks of children singing and dancing in the street (Lk: 7:32; Mt. 11:17ff). In all, more than seventeen times dance is mentioned in the Bible and not once with disfavour. Thus, it is a clear sign that religious dance was a regular form of ritual and worship and was very much integrated into the life of the people.

Historical Development

In the history of the early Church dance was very much a part and parcel of the ritual worship. Curt Sachs in his book *World History of Dancer* quotes a gnostic hymn of the second century and makes use of it in one of his chapters. Many of the hymns of this early date were evidently works which accompanied dance rituals in the Christian Church, and were dramatic and symbolic. Sachs tells us in this connection that there is an apocryphal saying of Jesus, "Whosoever dance not, knows not the way of life." He then gives an interesting quotation, "Whosoever knoweth the power of the dance knoweth the power of God."

In Egypt, when the organized Church had reached a high level of culture and when the priests were all-powerful, dance was the chief medium of religious purposes. In the early Christian Church, dance was the chief medium of religious purposes; dancing was accepted as a normal and suitable means of worship and praise of the Lord. Speaking of the existence and use of dance in the early Church, Ted Shawn says: "I engaged in a research to pile up evidence that in those first vital centuries when our own Christian religion was fresh and ungenerate, the dance was used as the chief expression of ritual and worship."

Summarizing the prominence of dance in the Church up to the medieval period, Margaret N. Hisoubler writes: "Primitive dancing had always possessed a central place in the religious life of all primitive and ancient races. The records of sacred meetings show that until the medieval period dancing had always been essential in vital religions; nor did early Christians frown upon dancing. It was only when the early simple teachings of Christ were distorted into a fanatical asceticism, that dance, along with all the natural, healthy pleasures of man, fell into disfavour." From this period onwards dance was gradually divorced from the worship and rituals of the Church. But, in some cases religious ballets survived to the 20th century, the most notable being the "Baile da los Seises" of Spain.

Jesus as the dancing prophet

Christian theology says, when man by his own fault, turned from his Creator, chaos succeeded crime and man became inbroiled in discord and deadly fraternal strife and was no longer able to communicate with his fellowman and God. It was God who in Jesus Christ made the first move to make contact with mankind. In the fullness of time, he communicated. His very self to mankind (Heb. 1:2) and the word was flesh (Jn. 1:14).

While on earth Christ revealed himself as the perfect communicator, through His incarnation, He utterly identified Himself with those who were to receive His communication and He gave His message not only in words but in the whole manner of His life. He spoke from within; that is to say from out of the press of His people. He adjusted to His people's way of talking and to their patterns of thought. And He spoke out of the predicament of their time and accomplished the work of salvation through His Bodily form (Incarnation). Thus, the

mystery of the Incarnation teaches us the dignity and holiness of body. We learn to make a pliant instrument for the spirit within us (Your body, you know, is the Temple of the Holy Spirit, 1 Cor. 6:19), seeking ways of expression for an overflowing dynamic nature.

There is a beautiful hymn written by S. Carter in 1963, which addresses Christ as the Lord of the dance. Here the word dance stands for actions of Christ as creative and redemptive :

Chorus : Dance then wherever you may be

I am the Lord of the Dance said He

And I'll lead you all wherever you may be

And I'll lead you all in the Dance said He.

1. I danced in the morning when the world was begun,
And I danced in the moon and the stars and the sun
And I came down from heaven and I danced on the earth
At Bethlehem I had my birth.
2. I danced for the scribe and the pharisee
But they would not dance and they would not follow Me,
I danced for the fishermen, for James and John,
They came with Me and the dance went on.
3. I danced on the Sabbath and I cured the lame,
The Holy people said it was a shame,
They whipped and they stripped and they hung Me high
And they left Me there on a cross to die.
4. I danced on a Friday when the sky turned black
It's hard to dance with the devil on your back
They buried My body and they thought I'd gone
But I am the dance and I still go on.
5. They cut Me down and I leap up high
I am the Life that'll never, never die
I'll live in you f you'll live in Me
I am the Lord of the Dance said He.

Thus, Jesus was truly a dancing prophet who danced His way through and communicated His message in and through His body. Nietzsche once said, "and now there dances a God in me, if one moved by the divine feeling one is moved by the rhythm."

Christian themes through Bharatanātyam

Thus, after analysing the nature of dance, its place in the Christian scriptures and in the life of the Church and identifying Jesus Christ as the Lord of the Dance, I went ahead to present Christian themes through Bharatanātyam. As I started the work, I encountered many technical problems.

Bharatanātyam is known for its *Śringāra rasa* (sensual experience), the role of *Nayakis* and *Nayakas* (heroes and heroines) is very prominent. In the New Testament there are very few incidents that fall under this category. But in the Old Testament I found plenty of material for the purpose, mainly Genesis, Joab, Samuels, Isia, Ezekiel, etc. At the same time Psalms and the New Testament give enough scope for *Bhakti-Śringāra*. I have used quite a few Psalms in my recitals especially, Ps. 41:120, 149. 150.

The mode of the recitals is mostly dominated by *Bhakti-Śringāra*, of course, all the nine *rasas* have their role in the compositions. This trend is quite in line with the tradition and the purpose of dance as it is mentioned in our *Shāstras*, where dancing was considered to be the highest form of worship. *Vishnudharmottara Purāṇam* tells us that "to worship God by *nṛitya* (dance) is to fulfil all desire, and to him who dances the paths of salvation are unfolded."

The second main problem I encountered was concerning the *Āngika-Abhinaya*, which is unique in Indian dance because of the gestures of the hands (*hastas*) and postures. In the *Abhinaya Darpaṇam Nāṭya Shāstra*, *Bharatanava* and other treatises we have different categories of *hastas* (hands), namely, *Nṛitya*, *Abhinaya*, *Deva*, *Castes* etc. I would use all of them as they are, but *Deva*-(deities) *hastas* I couldn't because the nature and the significance of the Bible personalities are quite different and unique. Thus, with the knowledge of Christian theology and studies made on our dance treatises, I invented a number

of *Deva-hastas*¹ to suit the personalities of the Bible to make the presentation genuinely Indian and Christian.

Simultaneously, I had to invent new postures to suit the theme, Christian theology and artistic correspondence with the message and the personality to be depicted. For example, invented a posture for crucifixion where Christ is hung on the cross. The right leg is placed on the left and the whole body is lifted a little higher putting the whole weight on the front part of the left leg. The body is held straight. The hands are held 45 degrees higher from the shoulder level in *Arthachandra hasta*. In the *hastaviniyoga*, Abhinaya Darpanam assigns the use of *Arthachandra* for prayer. According to the Christian theology Christ's Crucifixion is the supreme prayer and sacrifice. The posture expressed aesthetically and symbolically the meaning and significance of Crucifixion. Similarly, I invented postures for the Resurrection of Christ, Mother Mary, God the Father, Holy Spirit, etc. with a definite meaning corresponding to the artistic expression in the bodily form, keeping in mind the nature and speciality of the personality and the situation to be depicted.

My Innovation and Work

It is only after learning Bharatanāṭyam and studying the dance treatises for ten years I could think of venturing into this new field in presenting Christian themes through the above art.

1. Key to the New *Hastas* (Hand-gestures):

Gesture No. 1. God the Father: God the Father is the first person in the Christian Trinity. The right hand is held in *Śikara* (peak) to the right side of the body to denote 'Father'. The left hand is held in *tripatāka* (a flag with three) to denote a crown signifying king, the greatest.

Gesture No. 2. The Son of God: The Son of God is the second Person in the Christian Trinity. The right hand is held in *arthapatāka* (half flag) to denote the second Person of the Trinity. The left hand opens in *ālapadma* (lotus) in front of the abdomen and moves to the right side of the body to denote the birth of the Son only by the Father. The gesture is shown in the right side because it is said in the Apostles' Creed that "the Son is sitting at the right hand of the Father."

Gesture No. 3. The Holy Spirit: He is the third Person in the Trinity. The right hand is held in *hamsasya* (swan-like position) which is used to denote Holy or Blessing. The left hand is held in *tripatāka*, symbolizing rising flame, here used for the Spirit. In the Sacred Scriptures the Spirit is conceived as a dynamic entity by which God accomplished his plans.

Dance Recitals

I have already presented two full *margams* (a complete dance recital) on Christian themes.

Something beautiful for God

Under this title in 1978 I presented my first ever dance recital on Christian themes. It was mostly based on the Salvation History and the life of Christ. After the traditional item *Aḷaripu* and *Jāthiswarām* I started the *Abhinaya* items with St. John's Gospel (Jn. 1:1-2) which says: "In the beginning was the word. . .", which was expressed from the sounds produced on the Mridamgam. Then I went on to the beginning of creation in the eight works of God in six days (Gen. 1:1-2:4a), man as the supreme creation. Then the fall of man (Gen. 2:4b-3:24) and the promise of Salvation (Gen. 12:50). In the *Varnam*, the main item of the recital, I took the Psalm No. 41.

As a deer longs
for flowing streams,
So longs, my soul
for thee, O God.

My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.
When shall I come and behold
the face of God?

My tears have been my food
day and night,
While men say to me continually
"Where is your God?" . . .

Here, I incorporated all the main incidents in the life of Christ, mainly, annunciation where Mary is told by the angel of God that she is to give birth to the second person of the Trinity, the son of God. Birth of Christ in Bethlehem, the three kings' visitation, Christ giving sight to the blind men and the passion, death and Resurrection of Christ. All these were enacted in the *sanchari* (improvisations) form. Then, in the second half of the recital I took *Kirtanams* on Mother Mary and Jesus Christ. After *Tillana* I concluded the recital with a *Mangalam* sung on Christ.

This recital was tuned to Carnatic music with Hindi lyrics. The music and choreography were by Guru Kubernath Tanjorkar, one of the few well-known traditional artists we still have. This was staged in many major cities like Baroda, Indore, Pune, Puri, etc.

Nṛityanjali is the second *mārgam* on Christian themes. The themes are specially chosen from the Acts of the Apostles. We began this recital with the traditional *Pushpanjali* where the dancer offers flowers to God and asks for his blessings on the performance, the audience and himself. To this the *Esu Stotra* was added, a praise-offering to Jesus. In the first *Tirmanam* of the *Varṇam* we symbolically choreographed this design by the foot-work on the stage. This particular sign symbolizes Christ. The episodes like martyrdom of saints, St. Paul's conversion, the two thieves on the cross, etc., were used as *sancharis* (improvisations). In the second half we used Hindustani music and form of singing like *Gazal*, *Bhajan*, etc., for the dance. In the *Sahitya of the Tillana* I danced the popular mystery of Christ which is sung at the celebration of the Mass.

In this we used mainly Tamil lyrics. The music compositions and choreography were done by Prof. C. V. Chandrasekar, Head of the Dance Department of M. S. University, Baroda. This recital was staged in Baroda, Pune, Bombay and Bangalore.

Sound and Slides Programme

I got my inspiration and idea of producing the above type of programme from the temple sculptures of India where dance poses and dancing deities are depicted. They express a lot of live movement and message.

1. *Prem—Avatar*: This was the first of this kind where the Salvation history upto the Birth of Christ is depicted. The photography was by Fr. Thomas Thudi SVD, music by Ustad Khan and it was produced by NVSC², Pune. Here I used a group of dancers and I myself took the main role. This has been well received both in India and abroad.

2. *The Story of Man*: This is a new production where the whole Genesis is depicted. This is produced by Fr. Hagenmair SVD, and

2. NVSC: National Vocational Service Centre where priests, religious and lay people are trained for Christian/religious life (Ed).

photography by Mr. Braganza, a famous cinema-photographer. This one is posed by myself alone portraying different personalities by facial expression, poses and hand gestures. Both the productions have Hindi, English and German versions.

Conclusion

In one of the reviews of my programmes, The Indian Express had this to add, "Fr. Francis Barboza, perhaps is the only dancer who presents Christian themes through Bharatanātyam—the classical dance medium. He has invented several *hastas* to develop a truly Christian theme."³ It was a little melancholic and at the same time a happy note on the history of Christianity in India. Melancholic because it had to take place so late, after nearly 2000 years of Christianity in India. It was a happy tidings because finally, something positive has happened in accordance with the original Christian teachings.

The Church is often seen rejecting the culture of the people. It has happened especially in India where, still the European culture and customs are dominating, may be due to the various historical factors, in the life of most Christians. Christianity is not restricted to any culture. Christ never asked his followers to preach the culture or customs but only the message. It is a message, beautiful as it is, that fits into any culture, in accordance with the mystery of Incarnation (Jn. 1:5).

We, Indians, have a very rich, noble and beautiful culture and art-forms. It will be wonderful if a healthy and perfect fusion of these and the Christian message takes place. Then, we will have something really beautiful for God and the people who come after us. Adaptation is a must for different religious believers to live together harmoniously and understand each other. Let the cultures and religions of India build bridges and not walls for human communication and co-existence.

3. Bombay Ed. 13th Dec. 1980.