

# Hindu Dance, the Noble Language of the Gods

By Sarab Magalhães

“Āṅgikam bhuvanaṁ yasya vācikaṁ sarva vāṅmayam āhāryam candra tāradi  
taṁ numaha sātvikam Śivam”

We bow to Him the benevolent One  
Whose limbs are the whole universe.  
Whose song and poetry are the essence of all languages.  
Whose ornaments are the moon and the stars...<sup>1</sup>

Every traditional culture offers its people multiple ways of participating in the ultimate aim of human life, which is consciousness of Absolute Reality. By “traditional culture” we intend to make clear from the beginning the crucial distinction between people whose worldview is theocentric in contrast to those whose worldview is humanist, rationalist, materialist, civilizationalist or some modality of these latter. Our foundation is decisively in the former, based on the principle that there is a spiritual Reality—intangible to our physical senses but knowable by the spark of divine Intellect inherent in mankind—that is above the plane of our everyday experience and which determines it, whether we are aware of this or not.

For millennia in India, traditional Hindu dance has held a place of high honor as a “language of the gods”. Traditional dance—which has its origin in a timeless, sacred source and which has been perpetuated with fidelity through the *guru-śiṣya* chain of transmission—encompasses the functions of both manifestation of the Divine as well as man’s reintegration into It. There is an intrinsic and inalienable connection

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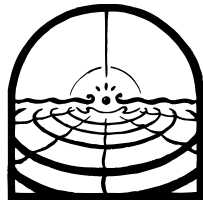
<sup>1</sup> Dhyāna Śloka in praise of Maheswara.

between that which is inmost in man—the uncreated Intellect—and that which is outmost—the forms that surround us in our earthly life. As Plato said: “Beauty is the splendor of the True”. What may come as a surprise to many of our contemporaries, however, is the fact that it is the realm of principles and of the celestial archetypes lying beyond our sensorial experience that is the Real, the True. This being at the foundation of our perspective, it is important to draw the consequences of this in everything that concerns forms, including the performing arts in general and traditional dance in particular. “The ontological coincidence between the true and the beautiful brings up the question of knowing ‘why’ something is deemed beautiful. According to the subjectivists, it is because it pleases us—which is absurd—whereas in reality it pleases an intelligent and normal man because it is beautiful. . . . The human body for example is beautiful . . . because it expresses the dimension *Ānanda* proper to *Ātmā*.”<sup>2</sup> In order to have a deep appreciation of traditional Hindu dance, one has to see it as it truly is: a manifestation within the world of forms that comes from and leads back to a heavenly Reality in which Truth and Beauty are eternally united in a divine play.

It is important to make it clear that when I mention the nomenclature “Hindu Dance” I am referring to its substratum; to the very seeds that in the course of time, developed into the 8 styles of Indian classical dance. I explore this art form not from a temporal point of view but as manifestations of the archetypal dance inherent in traditional Indian dance. Nowadays we would never address the dancer as a ‘*dāsī*’, a servant of the gods. This word gradually lost its significance for the modern mentality due to historical facts and misunderstandings about the ancient tradition of *devadāsīs*. For thousands of years, the Hindu temples in South India had dancers-priestesses called *devadāsīs* who would sing, play musical instruments and dance the *Dāsī Aṭṭana*, the old version of Indian classical dance as a form of worship. In the pristine origin of this tradition, *devadāsīs* led a very strict and celibate life and were not allowed to have a family. They were literally married to God. In the course of time, as the dance entered the royal courts, the dancers were called *Rājanartakīs*, who performed in the royal courts and gradually became royal concubines. Finally, with the British colonial rulers, the

<sup>2</sup> Frithjof Schuon, “In the Face of Contingency”, *The Play of Masks*; World Wisdom Books, Bloomington, Indiana, 1992, pp. 44-45.

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