



Left: Classroom at Kalakshetra, Chennai. Kalakshetra is primer school for performing and visual arts. Centre: Chhau dancers

# Asserting dance in Indian culture

An overview by **Dr Sunil Kothari** with **Anusha Subramanyam** and **Ken Bartlett**

**Dance and movement have always been accepted as part of social occasions, festivals and community cohesion.**

With its staggering variety, its multiplicity of forms, and plural vocabulary of movements, dance in India in its classical, tribal and folk traditions reveals a vast panorama in practices and performance.

Under British rule the arts were denied the opportunity to flourish. The colonial elite looked down on Indian arts in general and dance in particular.

With the emergence of the independence movement, leaders such as the poet Tagore, dance maker Rukmini Devi, reasserted the arts as an expression of culture and identity. Initially amongst the intellectuals as it underpinned the philosophical ethos of Indian culture it eventually spread more widely. And over time Indian arts were re-established, revitalised, evaluated and restored to their rightful place.

As time went by a number of individual pioneers emerged who envisioned and developed a growing infrastructure for the arts in India. And dance particularly benefited from the establishment of a number of groundbreaking arts centres across the country.

With the institutionalisation of the arts including dance at the centres like Shantiniketan, Kerala Kala Mandalam, Kalakshetra, Nrityalayam, Uday Shankar's India Culture

Centre, Indian dance received great fillip. With the advent of women from the upper Brahmin class (in the Indian caste system Brahmin is in the highest caste and consists of priests and scholars) like Rukmini Devi, Kalanidhi Narayanan, and others the stigma attached to dance was removed. A climate for the revival of Indian classical dances was created.

After achieving independence, in 1953, the government established three Academies, for Literature, Plastic (Visual) Arts and Performing Arts. The National Academy of Dance, Drama and Music known as Sangeet Natak Akademi is the supreme body (equivalent to the Arts Council in the UK) and gives grants for preservation and continuing development of the performing arts.

It provides several schemes to support artists, their institutions and performances and provides scholarships. Alongside it, the Ministry of Culture, of the government of India, gives financial support for the salaries of the staff of dance centres and offers production grants to companies. In addition the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) under the Ministry of External Affairs builds bridges between countries and under this scheme supports cultural exchange programmes. There are six regional cultural zones supported by the Ministry of Culture, offering support for various dance forms. In addition to the support of classical dance they



demonstrating at Spaces in Chennai. Right: Gypsy children performers on the streets of Delhi. All photos: Vipul Sangoi [www.raindesign.info](http://www.raindesign.info)

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support tribal and folk forms in each.

The corporate sector supports dance by providing a percentage of their income through a corporate cultural responsibility scheme. Dance companies and dancers seek out private donations as part of their fundraising strategies from individuals and corporate companies. The corporate sector gets tax concessions from the government when they offer financial support to the arts. However taking into account the scale of India and the scale of need, even from all these sources, the financial support available is barely adequate.

Dance is taught formally and informally in the school system and offered up to PhD level at universities. However it is private classes run by gurus and dancers that offer practical training to aspiring dancers.

Electronic media, films, cinematic dance, YouTube, TV reality shows and dance competitions have had an incredible impact on promoting dance and people's participation and freedom of expression.

Since the government passed the Disability Act in 1995 and a National Policy in 2006 to provide equal opportunities, the rights of disabled people to participate fully in society have been recognised.

Some dancers and dance organisations have begun to use dance to empower disabled people and developing

powerful programmes of work in participation and performance.

Dance has always been used, as in the UK, in the areas of health, education and wider social contexts.

Community dance is included historically in the large umbrella term of tribal, folk and social dances. The Ministry of Tribal Welfare supports many initiatives in the regions, in addition religious festivals offer opportunities to geographic communities to perform together and celebrate through dance. In urban areas social dances are performed on different New Years of various communities throughout India.

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India has a treatise called Natyashastra, written between 2nd Century BC and 4th Century AD, it says all that one wants to know about dance, but it also admits to changes and new forms, for dance is a dynamic art and continues to grow, reflecting the aspirations of people and their world views.

**contact** Dr Sunil Kothari [sunilkothari1933@gmail.com](mailto:sunilkothari1933@gmail.com) / Anusha Subramanyam [anusha@beeja.com](mailto:anusha@beeja.com) / Ken Bartlett [ken@communitydance.org.uk](mailto:ken@communitydance.org.uk)