

Sanskrit Manuals on Dance

Research >
South Asia

‘These days, the dancers are stupid, and the scholars are not practitioners’
(Vācanācārya Sudhākalaśa)

It is amazing how some performers in India believe that Bharatanatyam and other styles of modern classical dance are several thousands years old and have been described in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. This opinion is usually based on a vague reference to ‘some old texts’. Historical documents aside, even a comparative study of the Sanskrit manuals on dance reveals great differences between the performing traditions of various times. One of the most interesting aspects of such a study is tracing back the development of technical terminology used by the dance practitioners to codify the nuances of their art.

By Marina V. Orelskaya

Very few Sanskrit works on dance are extant today. The main textual material comes from medieval treatises on dramatic art and musicology, which occasionally provide a separate chapter on dance technique. As a rule, those chapters on dance are dealt with by the scholars with another main field of research. Indeed, there was hardly any demand for a detailed investigation of long lost visual art forms. A detailed catalogue of Sanskrit works describing dance has never been compiled. Few such treatises have ever been published or translated.

The current situation exists for several reasons. The Sanskrit terminology used in the dance manuals is extremely complicated and was not taken into consideration at the time of preparation of the Sanskrit dictionaries in use. It often happens that the terminology found in different manuals from the same region and time period will differ significantly in their usage, due to the multiplicity of contemporary dance schools in existence, even within a single dance tradition. Moreover, those very terms can have one meaning in the context of drama or music and a completely different meaning in the context of dance. As a result, it is quite difficult to interpret the technical nuances of a dance chapter in a treatise on music or dramatic art. Most of the modern classical Indian dance styles are simplified and modified versions of territorially limited schools and are not of much help in the study of codification systems of Sanskrit works on dance.

Much information has also disappeared with the loss of numerous texts due to suppression of this art in certain periods of Indian history; on the other hand, several spurs for temporal flourishing of dance had caused a number of medieval authors to produce manuals that were influenced by short-lived local traditions. Ultimately, the remains of once rich literary sources are slowly disintegrating in present-day manuscript collections, with almost nothing being done to improve the situation.

Professional dancers today usually lack sufficient knowledge of Sanskrit and are not required to analyse the manuals that they learn by heart during their dance training. The secrets of the performing arts in India have always been conveyed personally from teacher to pupil, and questions arising during the learning process were answered in accordance with the competence of the teacher. Quite often, the old manuals were altered to fit a later, more familiar dance tradition. In this way, the original concepts were misinterpreted and occasionally changed. As a result, any attempt to work with Sanskrit manuals on dance technique becomes a difficult task, which is further impeded by innumerable textual interpolations, substitutions, and anonymous quotations. Authors and compilers of manuals have tended to include large textual portions of previous major works into their own, without naming the original sources. This leads to further confusion amongst scholars, wrong interpretations, and even to

mistaking such compilations for original sources. The laconic references to various historical and mythological characters and events in these treatises added even more complications. Should we be able to trace back these textual portions, however, such borrowings could play an important role in the reconstruction of actual texts as well as the paths of development of dance theory and practice.

Having studied technical Sanskrit works on Indian dance for over a decade, and being familiar with the practical dancing, I have come to realize that, in contemporary Indological and cultural studies, there is a considerable lacuna caused by the absence of a complete etymological and encyclopaedic dictionary of the authentic terminology used by the ancient dance experts.

Although there are some special glossaries of the Indian performing arts, including modern classical dance, none of those works provides either the etymology or the history of development of the terms. Moreover, most of these works are written in Indian languages, and that considerably narrows the availability of information.

The original Sanskrit sources allow for tracing back the development of some dance terminology to the Vedic times. Dance is mentioned in the *Rgveda*, and although there are no special terms found in this text, investigation of later literary sources reflects the existence and development of a dance-related vocabulary with a considerably narrowed sphere of usage. Some of the words had been later dropped, while others were fixed into terminological groups used by professional dance instructors. Sometimes, with the rise of new performing traditions and the fall of old ones, the original meaning and etymology of such terms were lost and later on substituted by medieval authors and commentators on the Sanskrit treatises. Also, a number of terms were replaced by equivalents from the Dravidian languages. With the course of time, the dance manuals were becoming more and more intricate, because almost every author tended to complicate the subject by cramming all possible information known to him under a single title.

The special works on histrionics had already existed at the time of Panini (fifth or fourth century BC), who calls them *naṭasūtra-s*, and were apparently quite common by the time of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (circa 200 BC to AD 200). Although this treatise is regarded as the oldest available manual in the field of Indian histrionics, there could be a number of fragments of older works kept in the manuscript collections of South India. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* demonstrates, apart from other things, the existence of fairly developed forms of canonical (classical) dance, which are distinguished from the regional (popular) dances. Being constantly in progress, the ancient canonical choreography was gradually blending with various aspects of the regional dances, thus producing various dance styles that began to prevail in certain geographical areas. In time, the innovations were regarded as the ones canonized by some competent preceptors and were gradually noted

down as inseparable parts of ‘classical dance’ in Sanskrit manuals on performing arts. Nearly one hundred Sanskrit texts dealing with dance technique, in at least one chapter, have been discovered either as (in)complete manuscripts or as being mentioned or quoted in subsequent works. Unfortunately, most of them have been irretrievable until now.

The technical vocabulary of instructors and performers of modern classical Indian dance contains a comparatively small part of the terminology used in old Sanskrit manuals. Even then, the interpretation of many terms varies significantly from school to school and very often is far from correct. The lack of collaboration between practising dancers and scholars of Sanskrit does not help the situation. In fact, major establishments of classical dance training in India do not seem to encourage dancers to study Sanskrit treatises on the technique of their art, giving the reason that young dancers ‘become confused’ over the discrepancies between many theories and the practice they learn. The vast gap between scholars and dancers had already been registered in the middle of the fourteenth century AD, when Vācanācārya Sudhākalaśa wrote in his *Sanḡitopaniṣatsaroddhāra* (VI.129): ‘These days, the dancers are stupid, and the scholars are not practitioners. There is no practice without dancers, there is no success through theory without this [practice].’ Apparently, the complex and highly codified system in which the dance technique has gradually developed was not easily understood by the practical dancers even at that time. Generally speaking, their reluctance to go through the additional burden of learning the extensive collection of various terms and their interpretations in Sanskrit, on one side, and the impossibility or unwillingness of the competent Sanskrit scholars to undergo the actual training in dance, on the other, unmistakably resulted in a gradual division of the dance experts into theoreticians, who described the dance technique in their scholarly treatises on performing arts, and practitioners, who preserved the knowledge of dance by passing it in oral and visual forms to the next generation of professional performers. The scarcity of the original texts being edited and translated, the absence of dictionaries of ancient Indian dance terminology, and the aversion of the majority of modern practical dancers to study the past of their art have all combined, in the end, to restrict the number of competent specialists in the field. The situation can be clearly observed even at the present time.

In view of these circumstances, I have undertaken the project of compiling an encyclopaedic dictionary of the technical terms used in the original Sanskrit texts on dance technique, with the etymological references whenever possible. The data is being collected from all the available manuals, starting with the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and including those of the eighteenth century AD. The passages of some lost works, quoted in later treatises and commentaries, are also being taken into account.

Preparation of the dictionary is proceeding in consecutive steps. Various editions and the available manuscripts of the Sanskrit texts are being compared word by word. The terms, their definitions, and usage are analysed to trace back their origin and the possible ways of development. Often, references to non-technical sources of Sanskrit literature are required in order to determine the meaning of certain dance terms in various periods of time. One of the significant features of the dictionary is that the extensive lists of the uses prescribed for postures and movements of bodily limbs in dance and drama (*vinīyoga*) are being included and compared as well.

I sincerely believe that, upon completion, the dictionary will be able to be used by scholars from various fields, as well as by the practising dancers of various styles. The comparative methods developed in the course of my research can be employed to study other manuals on Indian performing arts, including their popular forms. The dictionary will be of great help in the preparation of translations and critical editions of unpublished Sanskrit treatises on dance and, perhaps, even in reconstructing the actual technique of old Indian dances. ◀

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