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THE STORY OF Dr MAYA RAO

TORCH BEARERS

BHARATI SHIVAJI:
A NAME SYNONYMOUS
WITH MOHINIYATTAM



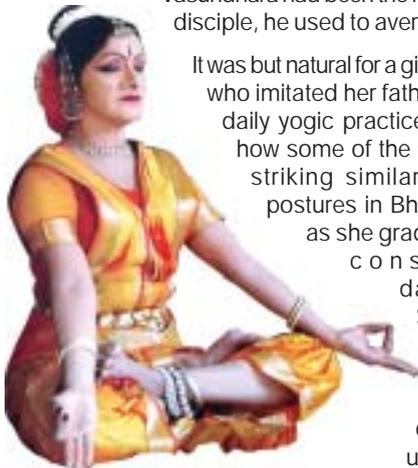
NATYA-YOGA DARSHANA BY DR VASUNDHARA DORASWAMY



Text: **George S Paul**, Cultural Critic

Anyone who has ever witnessed a Bharatanatyam performance by Dr Vasundhara Doraswamy is sure to comment, "She is a phenomenon in the dance scenario of the country". And I have personally heard the same from many on various occasions both in India and abroad. What is the secret of the stability of her aesthetically rich poses? What is the source of her inexhaustible energy that helps her perform for hours on end, that too without a break? Why sathwika abhinaya is predominantly delineated during her performance?

There are ever more questions for which the answer is simple - Her bewitching artistry as a dancer apart, Vasundhara is a practitioner and an acclaimed Guru of Yoga. Sure, there are many dancers who practice yoga and pontificate about its merits. But among the fraternity of dancers, she stands out for the incessant practice and teaching of this traditional Indian discipline, decades before it became the buzzword at the international level. And in this pursuit, she benefited from her Guru Pattabhi Jois of Mysore, a legend whose disciples included celebrities like Madonna. Admittedly for Jois, Vasundhara had been the most favourite disciple, he used to aver.



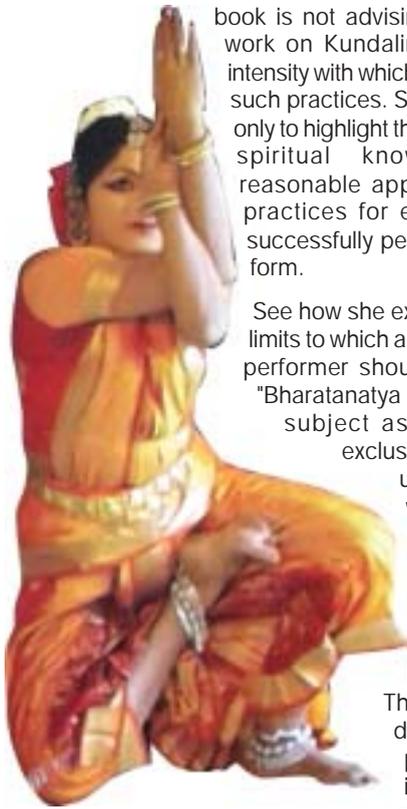
It was but natural for a girl in her teens, who imitated her father during his daily yogic practices, to realise how some of the asanas bore striking similarities to the postures in Bharatanatyam as she graduated into a consummate dancer later. Small wonder that she opted for a systematic disciplining under Jois.

Digging deep into the tenets of Yoga and Bharatanatyam, she could eventually bridge the philosophy of the two. While this fetched her doctorate for the thesis "Bharatanatyam and Yoga", the book under review is the end-product of this passionate research.

Composed in 19 chapters, the book opens with the evolutionary trail of Natya from Brahma to the contemporary time. The very origin and evolution of Yoga Darshana are treated elaborately in the second chapter. She explains how yoga existed even during vedic times but it was Sage Pathanjali who was instrumental in imputing to it the status of a distinct philosophy. Sankhya and yoga are among the six main schools of philosophy pertaining to spiritual matters. Interestingly, it was Abhinavagupta, the commentator of Bharata's Natyasastra and author of Abhinavabharati, who successfully established a direct relationship between Natyasastra, sankhya and yoga. She underscores the inevitability of spiritual knowledge on the part of the performer that has a significant bearing on the magnitude of understanding the very concept of dancing.

The third chapter is entirely devoted to an exhaustive discussion of the philosophy of dancing. It is replete with quotes from Abhinavagupta, Bharata and Pathanjali which are really didactic. In this connection, Abhinavagupta's obeisance to Lord Shiva is worth mentioning: Viswabeeja orahorathram, mooladharathaya stitham/ Dharthri saktimayam vandhe dharaniprupam Eswaram - I bow to that Eswara who is the primordial cause for the creation of this world, and who abides in the mooladhara chakra like Earth which supports that creation.

Anyone practising yoga and tantra cannot fail to comprehend the importance of mooladhara chakra in pursuit of knowledge. It is said that he in whom Kundalini is aroused is an exceptional orator and scholar (Shat chakra nirupanam). But Vasundhara points out that the



book is not advising a dancer to work on Kundalini in the same intensity with which a yogi pursues such practices. She refers to this only to highlight the importance of spiritual knowledge with reasonable application of the practices for effectively and successfully performing the art form.

See how she expatiates on the limits to which a Bharatanatyam performer should carry yoga. "Bharatanatyam is not a spiritual subject as specific and exclusive as yoga, the ultimate aim of which is liberation from rebirths. Moksha is not essentially the aim of Bharatanatyam. The dance form is destined as a powerful media in carrying the spiritual theme to

the common man through easily comprehensible artistry that embodies all the contemporary subjects. Ultimately it makes a deep impact on the spectators inspiring them to follow the path of righteousness in the interest of the society. Also, it elevates him to higher intellectual and spiritual plane". Anchoring on the Natyasastra, she once again supports the argument of Abhinavagupta by establishing that yoga entails a comprehensive and aesthetic use of the ingredients Jnanam, Shilpam, Vidya and Kala.

Bhava is discussed against the backdrop of spiritual perspective and yogic practices in chapter 4. This is rather exhaustive. When the actor identifies himself with the character as if there is no difference between him and the character, the theme under interpretation is instantly transformed into bhava. This is possible by realising the essential difference between dhyana and dharana on his part. For the spectator, the actor is the object of meditation (dhyana) and is further the character personified in entirety. A commonality in experience between the actor and the spectator is then established which in turn, through abhinaya, evokes the desired Rasa in the spectator. The chapter concludes with the assertion that a dancer should imbibe the principles of yoga in its true spiritual sense to achieve divine success on the

basis of Abhinavagupta's interpretation of the spiritual aspects enshrined in Natyasastra. "Abundance of absorbing emotions supported by intense involvement while the spectator watches spell-bound untainted by any distortion, and above all a packed auditorium signify 'divine success'. Once again the author avers that this is impossible to achieve unless the dancer is proficient in the eight limbs of yoga viz. Ashtanga Yoga which is elaborately treated in chapter 8.

Abhinavagupta is the preceptor of shantha rasa, the ninth one which is not mentioned by Bharatha. According to the former, Shama is the corresponding sthaya bhava. The author confirms that Shama sthaya bhava is the primordial of all sthaya bhavas. Shama (calmness) is more a means to an end and that is shanta rasa. While Shama is demonstrable on the stage, shantha rasa can only be made to experience. Just as it is possible to enact rasas like sringara through bhavas like rati, it is equally possible to demonstrate Shama sthaya bhava and elicit shanta rasa. In this connection, a vivid description through charts is given in chapter 5 to drive home the parallels between the principles enunciated by Pathanjali and Abhinavagupta. This is really singular.

Chapter 6 is noteworthy for the discussion of Rasa from a spiritual perspective. The charts depicting a schematic representation of rasa sutra with reference to Sringara rasa and Shanta rasa are laudable. Interestingly, a whole chapter (7) has been devoted to elaborate on Shanta rasa, an indication of the prime importance of this rasa in the portrayal of characters.

The remaining 11 chapters are singular as they delve deep into the Natya and yoga directly. Illustrated with alluring colourful pictures, they spell out the objectives, methods, mental states and applications of almost all asanas that are beneficial to a dancer. The finesse of each asana speaks for the dexterity of Vasundhara, hard-earned through assiduous disciplining over years. No student of dance can afford to miss this part, even if she/he fails to comprehend in full the philosophical treatment of Natya and Yoga explained in the previous chapters.

The sub-title of the book 'Impact of Spiritual Practices on Bharatanatyam' is proof enough of Vasundhara's perception about dance - "Dance is a spiritual exercise for me". The cover photo of the dancer in Padmasana epitomises her approach to the terpsichorean art.

Natya-Yoga Darshana is the first-of-its-kind, correlating Natya and Yoga and really an invaluable treasure for Indian classical dance.

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