

# Dance like an Indian!



*India: the vast continent, a mosaic of cultures, languages and ethnic groups, the classical dance of India reflects the same in its varied expressions. In her tryst with dance Mireille-Joséphine Guezennec, French writer and photographer, having studied these art forms in depth provides us an enlightening perspective.*

## Bharata Natyam & Kuchipudi

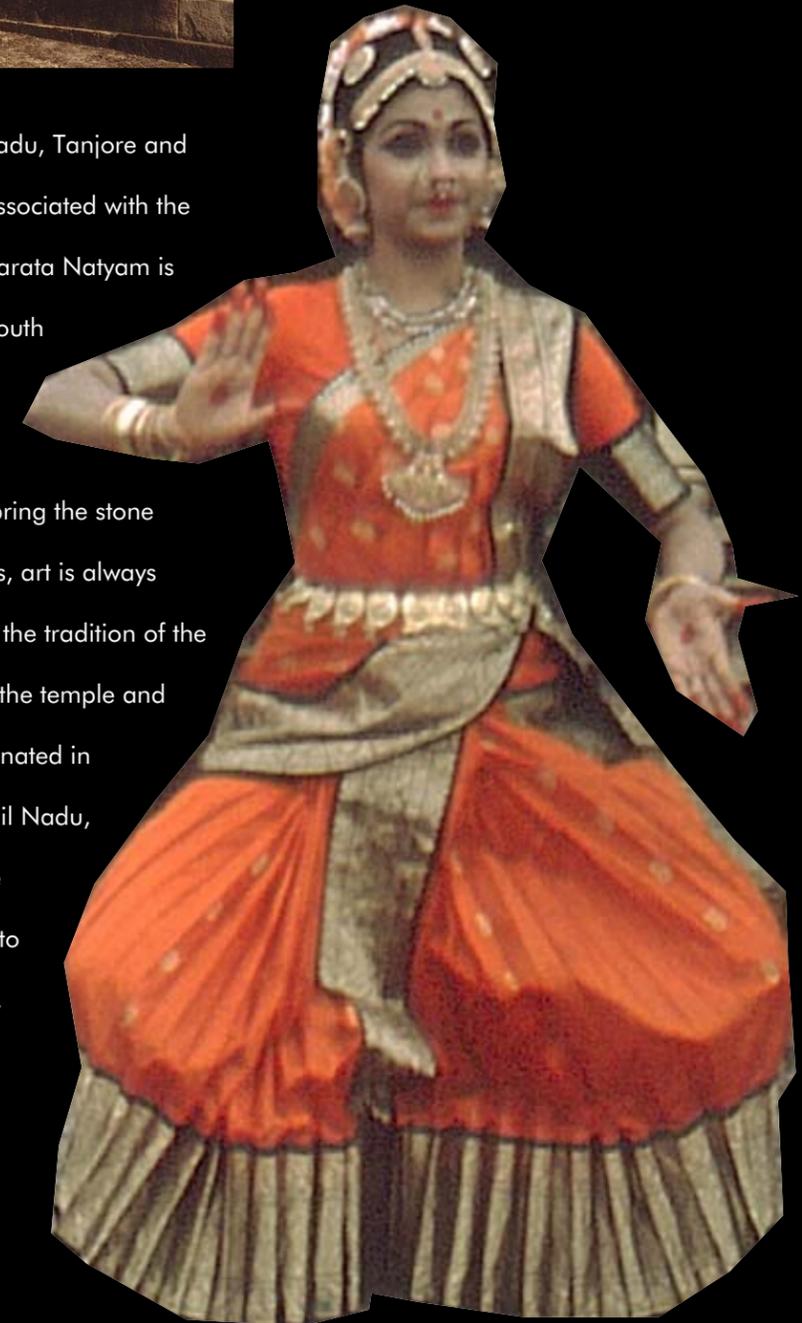
**A**nchored in the age old tradition of India, the classical dance is an art-form that elaborates codified aesthetics, echoing the spiritual aspirations of the nation. From its very conception, dance has been a celebrated auxiliary of the sacred and ritual life. It is precisely this anchoring that contributes to give it the radiance and the richness which is extraordinarily expressed in its multitude forms and manifestations in different regions of India.

Strictly speaking, all the classical dance forms of India should rightly be called Bharata Natyam, i.e. 'dances or Natya of Bharata', since they all belong in varying degree, to the "Natya Shastra", a treatise of theatre or rather the performing arts composed by Bharata around the 2nd century before our era. Thus, the various dance forms, initiated from an identical 'stage' to be enriched and diversified into different traditional styles pertaining to their geographical location and regional specifications.

The Seven officially recognized traditional styles are: Bharata Natyam, Kuchipudi, Mohini Attam, Kathakali, Odissi and the Manipuri. Each style testifies within itself the historical, ethnic and linguistic characteristics that reflect the political, religious, artistic or socio-cultural influences which, at a given moment, left their indelible mark in the choice of lyrics and the compositions as in the rhythm, the gestures and the attire of the dancers. Let us make a tour of India to briefly acquaint each from its origin.



**B**harata Natyam that originates in Tamil Nadu, Tanjore and Chennai is a sacred dance form mainly associated with the worship of Lord Shiva. The tradition of Bharata Natyam is intricately woven with the richly carved temples of south India. In Tanjore (as in Chidambaram), the carvings of musicians and dancers on the walls of the temples and on the large towers or gopurams bring the stone structures alive. In temples and culturally rich places, art is always considered sacred. The texts mention, for example, the tradition of the anointed dancers or 'devadasis' ritually devoted to the temple and resolutely present for specific rites and rituals. Originated in Andhra Pradesh, a state located slightly above Tamil Nadu, Kuchipudi owes its name to the cradle of this dance form, a village of the same name. The dance used to be initially performed by men in the form of ballets, kind of operas, which with immense grace and sensitivity recalled mythological episodes traversing the lives of valiant heroes or the gods.



# Kathak, Odissi & Manipuri

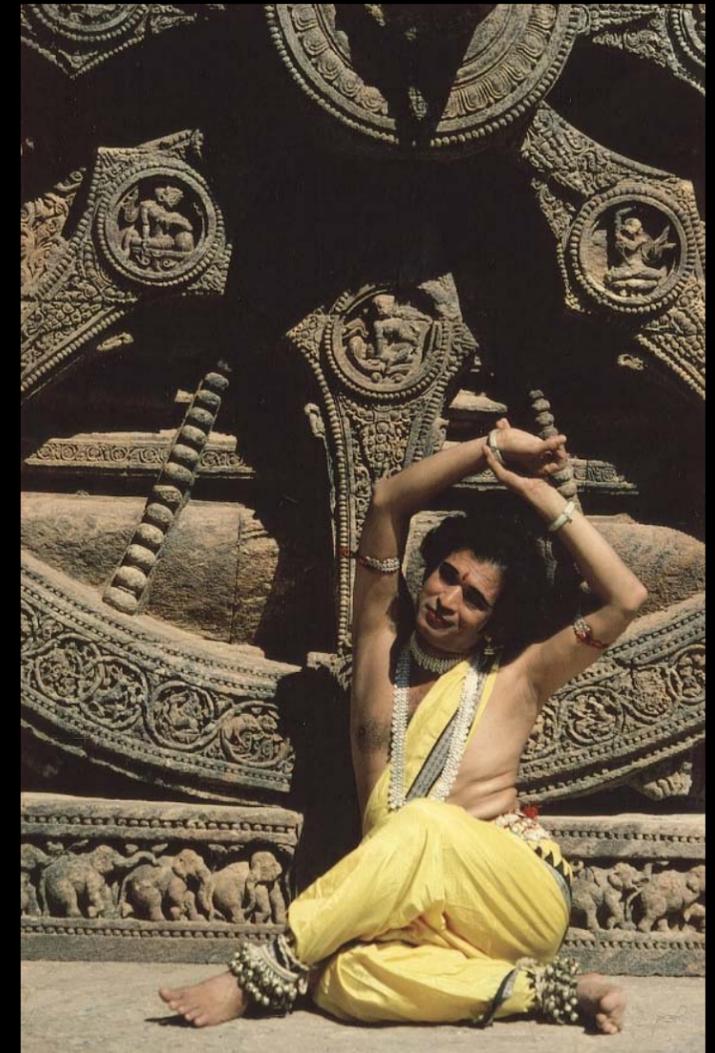
**K**athak, as the name suggests, narrates stories, katha vachan, and thus, is an extremely vibrant dance form, rejoiced in the courts for its brilliant narrative virtuosity. Kathak, which was initially associated within the religious activity of the temples in north India, later began to see contradictory changes starting from the 12th century onwards due to the consecutive Muslim invasions. Thereafter, encouraged by the Mughals, Kathak became predominantly an art form patronised by the royal courts.

Practised in Orissa, the very refined dance Odissi is also



related with the sumptuous religious fervour of the temples of Orissa, such as the Konarak and Puri. The dance form reached its zenith around the 12th century. It was in this period that with the advent of the Vaishnavite worship, king Chodagangadeva built the large temple of Puri, dedicated to Lord Jagannath, i.e. lord of the universe. The repertory of dance and song was essentially borrowed from 'Gita Govinda', a lyrical work that accentuates devotion tinted with eroticism in celebrating the divine couple Radha-Krishna. The emotions in love and sublimated sensitivity culminate in a mystical union with the divine one, Radha representing the human souls in their merger with the universal soul of Krishna....

What confers amazing grace to this elegant style is the incomparable position of 'tribhanga', where the body anchored in its vertical gravity achieves three extreme intonations starting from the knees, the hips and the neck. Within this dance, the feeling of bhakti or devotion prevails. Just like in the Manipuri style, where the divine love for Krishna by the Gopis, is eloquently expressed by the shepherdesses passionately in love with the Lord, in a circumambulatory dance, 'Ras Leela', around Radha-Krishna.





How many feminine hearts were charmed by the marvellous sound of Krishna's flute, Murali?

One must also mention two other dance styles from the north which recently attained the status as an official dance form: the masked dance of Chhau from Bengal,

Bihar and Jharkhand which proposes a rich

repertory integrating the martial arts, and the

Satriya dance of Assam which also has its

origin in the Vaishnav temple tradition.

Interpreting majestic themes and epic narration judiciously chosen from the epic poems such as the Ramayana and the

Mahabharata or from the lyrics. The theatre

and dance which aesthetically join together

under the general term of 'Natyā' render the foundation

of an attractive and pulsating civilisation that beats to a

cosmic rhythm since the definition of time. Time that is

fabled is said to have been created to the beat of the

damru that Shiva holds in his hand. Forever the human

souls dance in rhythm to this divine beat.

A cosmic dance, the creation of Shiva-Nataraja, lord

of dance, who at the beat of the drum awakens the

spectator to experience rasa, the aesthetic pleasure

that transports us far from the mundane, where reign the

illusion of Maya, to the realms of sublime joy Ananda,

joys of divine excellence!