



### **Natya-Katha**

Story telling or Katha is an ancient art in every part of the world but in India it acquires extra dimensions when Dr. Sonal Mansingh interlinks narrative stories, myths and legends with philosophy, social issues, history and other popular dimensions. Touching upon a wide range of issues pertaining to women, environment, ecology and socio-political situations, she is able to convey the perennial messages to communicate a sense of harmonious beauty.

Live music aptly supports the singing of many popular bhajans, poems and shlokas in 5 of the many languages spoken in India i.e. Hindi, Gujarati, Marathi, Oriya & English. Her narrative skills bring alive the episode's grandeur and deeper import of the events. She combines her classical training in dance, music, Sanskrit, iconography, philosophy and languages seamlessly. Screen projections of beautiful miniatures relevant to the flow of the narrative add to visual richness and delight.



## KRSHNA

In the galaxy of divinities worshipped by Indians, the name of Shri Krshna rings many bells. His name alone sends tingling vibrations of delight and joy. The enigma of this divine-human has not yet been unraveled except in allegorical and metaphysical terms. Saints and poets have written and sung, extolling his form and beauty, his life and deeds. Seers and sages have been given the benefit of his Darshan in their deepest meditation. Men and women, old and young, rich and poor, people in every corner of India and the world have opened their collective hearts and offered their prayers, aspirations and complaints.

He is also synonymous with the principle of Cosmic Law; Vishnu, maintain balance between diverse and mutually antagonistic forces. He is known by many names; all pointing to the centrality of his function; as the many-tiered Reality, the upholder of Creation.



In a land touching the Himalayan heights and reaching down to the south where three oceans meet, from the lush green eastern boundary with Myanmar and China to the deserts of Rajasthan and Gujarat bordering Pakistan in the west, India harbours a staggering variety of cultures and sub-cultures. With teeming millions of people who follow numerous religions and social beliefs, speak many languages and dialects, practice a bewildering array of customs and manners, the wonder remains – the wonder of those commonly shared pan-Indian attitudes, mores and beliefs that cut through deep ravines and high mountains, thick forests, sandy wilderness and gushing but unpredictable rivers.

Legends and myths that have endured through millennia and are still active in various strata of society have held this astonishing multiplicity together. In the Indic tradition, myths are not just fairy-tales. Legends and myths are based on real events. These are called *Puranasin* Sanskrit, meaning ‘that which happened a long time ago but has been stored in collective memory of many generations’. Thus began the two systems of accruing knowledge – *shruti*, that which is heard, and *smruti*, that which is stored in memory.

A student or seeker stores up the lessons, observations, experiences, names, ideas and their contexts in his memory. At an exact moment the information is summoned and it flows out smoothly, having marinated and matured in the meanwhile. *Shruti* insists on concentrated listening by a routinely lazy or mindless ear because otherwise it can never receive and convey the exact phrase or word to the mind. Given the nuances, diction and pronunciation of letters in Sanskrit and many other Indian languages, a student is supposed to be an attentive and perfect listener. In the second phase, the word and its meaning is carried to the mind’s storage bin and places in the appropriate slot. At a signal, the slot opens to allow the relevant information/ knowledge/ recitation/ context to tumble out. This is *smruti*. Indian dance works on the assumption of further exploration and enhancement of any given idea. Cutting across geographical, social, religious and linguistic barriers, the ideas, images, and legends have endured to form a pool of water in which every dancer is baptized, regardless of the style of dance she pursues.



For a quick glance through the kaleidoscope of commonly found names, ideas and metaphors, let us first consider the long list of names of divinities who inhabit the common spaces in philosophical, religious, social and art traditions. To begin from the beginning, the first sound is *aum*.

The three letters are supposed to denote the three qualities or *guna* (in creation), namely *sattva* (pure), *rajas* (self-conscious) and *tamas* (dark, hidden) or the three tenses or *trikaala* – *bhuta* (past), *vartaman* (present) and *bhavishya* (future) or the three levels, - *akaash* (heaven), *prithvi* (earth) and *Pataal* (netherworld). The sound itself is called the life-breath of creation and is the first manifestation of energy waves which vibrate and galvanize all inert matter. Because energy waves emanate from one centre, the point of balance between unmanifested and manifested creation, it is called Brahman,

meaning ‘the vast expanse’. Thus Indian thought begins with *aum* and is carried to the ordinary man through dance and music to become an integral part of the ethos of dance.



The different aspects of creation (energy) are given different names which are derived from their role in maintaining the life cycle on earth and the cycles of the ever-expanding and contracting universe. This has also been the case of every ancient civilization. God is called *agni* to signify a blazing fire in the form of the Sun, hunger in the stomach, fury in temperament, sexual desire and worldly ambitions. Prefixes are added to distinguish one form of fire from the other. A dancer should be able to delineate *kamagni*, the fire of sexual desire, from *jatharagni*, the fire of hunger through her delineation. Yet the god of fire, Agni's icon, remains constant where he is shown possessing seven tongues symbolizing seven flames with the aggressive ram as his vehicle. Similarly the gods of wind, rain, thunderstorm and water, each with their own weapons, vehicles and consorts are common motifs in dance sculptures. There is Saraswati, the goddess of learning and knowledge, who holds a beautifully carved stringed instrument called the *veena*, showing her as a patron of music and every other art form. Her vehicle is a white swan which conveys purity of the soul. The goddess of wealth is Lakshmi, wherein the root word, *lakshmi* meaning 'restless' is worshipped and requested to stay put in a household or business, so that she does not vanish. Stories of sisterhood and sibling rivalry are favourite themes with dancers. There are many stories of billionaires and kings turning penniless overnight for not respecting the presence of Lakshmi. Further, there are presiding deities for every direction and angle, for every hour of day and night, for every element in Nature to convey to the egoistic human the importance of humility and consideration towards everything around. In the hierarchy of divine beings, those who are in the highest realm are Devi, Shiva, Vishnu, Krishna and Ganesha.

The Indian dancer is at once a scholar, linguist, philosopher, musician and believer. If the dancer does not know or understand the meanings of names, their symbolism and iconography, their connection and context to each other and to the world of humans and the wider cosmos, then she is unable to convey the essential flavor and meaning of the concept.

This and much more go into the building up of a dancer's training to a point when situations, stories and characters do not remain strange but become an intimate part of her inner world. Then, without the aid of props, special lights, and technology, she creates a world of magical happenings and characters. Using the power of transforming mundane happenings and situations into extraordinary and describing the art, the Indian dancer today is adept at comprehending contemporary issues like environmental degradation, ecological balance, women's rights, human rights, child abuse, world peace, problems of survival in a mechanized society and much more. The rich and varied vocabulary of dance becomes a handy tool to pinpoint these without becoming banal and pedestrian.

The term 'Bharatanatyam' has two connotations – first, Bharata is considered to be the name of a sage-scholar to whom is attributed the first comprehensive treatise on theatre, music and dance, called the *Natya Shastra*; the second connotation breaks up the word *Bharata* into three syllables: *bha* for *bhava* (emotion), *ra* for *raga* (music) and *ta* for *tala* (rhythm). The term *natyam* implies theatre, though today the term signifies a classical dance system that has made the southern states of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka its home. In the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, this dance was also known as Sadir, Nautch or Dasiattam. The origins, as with other classical styles, are in the time-honoured traditions systematized and codified by Bharata. This dance form consists of *nritta* and *nritya*, meaning 'pure dance' and 'narrational dance'. Let us consider the components of each separately, beginning with *nritta*.

Once the student masters the coordination of movements, she moves forward to complicated patterns involving flat-footed stamps, jumps on toes, beating of the foot in toe-heel combinations, sitting on toes and then leaping up like a released spring and movements, circular or lateral, with arms held above the head or outstretched at the chest, weaving a design of crisscross squares and triangles while the hands fold and unfold in flower-like movements to make different *hasta* (hand gestures used in pure dance). Bharatanatyam revels in neatness of line which gives the pure dance a geometrical majesty comparable to the architectural grandeur of the south Indian temples. There are nine groups of *adavus*– each group consisting of three or more variations which become successively complicated in execution.

There are a set of exercises for the concerned limbs – the feet, ankles, knees, waist, torso, shoulders, wrists, fingers and head to tune the body before physical and visual music of dance can be produced.

The student now proceeds to manipulate the 10 fingers separately or together to produce a myriad images, which infuse colour into the words of a song, vivifying the situations and characters. According to Bharata, there are 24 gestures through the use of both hands and 28 with one hand. The technical terms for these are *samyukta hasta* and *asamyukta hasta*. *Hasta* means 'hand' in Sanskrit. Each *hasta* has a name which either refers to the literal meaning of the word or simply describes the mechanics of arriving at the gesture. For example, the hand gesture called *allapadma* means 'a full-blown lotus'. The gesture itself resembles a lotus flower in which the fingers are outstretched from a curved palm to look like the petals of a lotus. Here the Sanskrit term, its literal meaning and the hand gesture combine together to create a total image.



There are others, like the *tripataka*, which is a method of forming the hand gesture, *tri* meaning ‘third’ and *pataka* meaning ‘the flag’ which is the first gesture of the series. Thus, by bending the third finger into the *pataka* gesture, one arrives at the *tripataka*. Among the double hand gestures, the most easily recognizable is *anjali* ‘an offering or obeisance’.



It is performed by joining both the palms of the hands in a typical Indian salutation called *namaskar*, *namasteor pranam*.

Each gesture can denote or connote objects and ideas. To illustrate this, let us consider the *allpadma* gesture which has the possibilities of showing the lotus, a flower, a full moon, the sun, a place, a mountain, a beautiful face, the bosom, an elaborate hairdo, etc. These are all recognizable. The same hand gestures can now be used to show beauty and oneself – questioning, mockery, dalliance. The treatise and commentaries like *Abhinaya Darpana* (Mirror of Gestures) by Nandi Keshwara list many usages, hinting that a dancer is at liberty to use her skill and intelligence in creating new connotations.

Hands are not alone in their quest for expression. The face, specially the eyes, play an equally important role, sometimes even rendering the use of hand gestures unnecessary. Each component of the face is brought into play, but before one can gain a mastery over their use, their direction and movements are essential. The eyebrows have to move separately or together – up and down, quivering or knitted. The eyes are mirrors of the soul, a man’s searchlight spanning the three worlds.

Eyes that encompass spheres, directions and emotions, indeed are creations. The shape of the eye has been compared to a lotus petal or a fish; the glance to a gazelle or as hypnotic as a cobra’s. Indian classical literature is full of allusions about the beauty and propensity of eyes. Thus, it is not surprising that Indian dance has also laid so much emphasis on *drishti* (glance, the look). To be able to convey emotions – subtle or gross, the eyes must be trained to move vertically, horizontally, in half or full circle, zig-zag or slantwise, with the pupils dilated or contracted. To facilitate a clear movement, the eyes are opened twice the normal size by pushing the upper eyelids upwards with the index finger and the lower still lower with the thumb while doing the exercises. This also strengthens the eyes muscles which might explain the comparative absence of bespectacled dancers.

Great dancers have been known to perform *abhinaya* for a considerable length of time purely with their eyes – summoning, rejecting, yearning, mocking or beseeching. The ancient verse is translated below sums up the concept of aesthetics of movement and expression very aptly: where the hand goes the glance follows; where the eyes go, the mind follows; where the mind is involved, emotions arise; and where emotions ripple, *rasa* (flavor) permeates the work of art.

The nostrils are capable of showing happiness and sadness by looking pinched or dilated. The mouth is capable of remaining natural, pursed to show displeasure, drooping downwards to express contempt and mockery, slightly open to show surprise, and extended to express joy, mirth and happiness. The neck, which has been compared to a lotus stalk or a swan or a conch, has an important role to play – that of holding the head at an angle appropriate for a particular situation.

Having taught the prescribed format called *margam* which includes the repertoire from *allaripu* to *tillana*, the guru makes preparations for the formal presentation of the pupil to the dance world. The event is known as *arangetram* or *rangapravesh* – *ranga* meaning 'stage', and *praveshis* 'entry'. If the assembled critics and connoisseurs judge the student to be worthy of any future as a dancer, she can then continue her training with the guru. Thereafter, she can also appear in stage performances, usually at the discretion of the guru.

The repertoire as danced today is a creation of the Tanjore quartet, the four brothers – Chinayya, Ponayya, Shivanandam and Vadivelu – who were great scholars and musicians. Before that, Bharatanatyam was a matter of performances going on till the early hours of morning, the dancer haphazardly picking up a few items here and there with long intervals for refreshments and possibly, a snooze. Solo dancing in the temple and in the court was known as *Sadir*, until early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which it was christened Bharatanatyam.



The region known as Odra-desh, meaning land of Odra people, formed a strong cultural bond with the adjoining land of Magadh which is part of Bihar state today. Commonality in practice of performing arts merited mention of the dance style as Odramagadhi in the treatise called *Natya Shastra*. Odra-desh, Kalinga and then Utkal merged into the political identity of Orissa state from where the dance style derives its name, Orissi or Odissi. Down the centuries dance continued to flourish with royal patronage and popular support so that when temple-building activity started, dancing became an integral part of the temple rituals. Following the ruler's preferred religion, the temples had Shiva, Vishnu, *Surya* (Sun), Devi and their various manifestations as presiding deities.

The Parasurameshwar temple of 6<sup>th</sup> century AD has some interesting sculptures of Shiva as Lakulisa, in strong dance postures. In a unique concept of worship, the temples sported a plethora of sculptures on the outer walls showing not only geometrical patterns, tresses, flowers, birds and animals, stories from the well known texts like the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and *Bhagwad*, but also vivid figures of female dancers in postures described in the *Natya Shastra*.

They played on musical instruments, held a mirror to look at their own beauty, stood languorously awaiting a lover or just lazing under a tree, held a parrot or warded off a monkey pulling at clothes, squeezed out water from long, washed hair, drops from which fall into the eagerly open beak of a swan, played with a ball or combed thick hair into an elaborate hairdo, applying *kajal* (kohl) to their fish-shaped eyes or a *tilak* on the forehead. Women were depicted as a dancer, a lover, a musician, a mother, a traveler, a teacher, a goddess, as if life was one huge temple in which everything around the human being was reconciled and beautified.

As if to counterbalance the galaxy of female sculptures, many temples show images of a dancing Shiva in various forms pertaining to the many Saivite legends. Shiva as the loving husband of Parvati, Shiva riding the Nandi bull, Shiva as Bhairava, Shiva as Tripura Samhara and many more sculptures adorning the temple-walls became books in stone from which iconography of each god and goddess could be learnt. It is very important for an Indian dancer specially a dancer of Odissi, to know the stories connected with each Divinity and his depiction in stone sculptures or wood panels and in mural paintings for they form the vocabulary of the danced texts peopled with divine and demonic characters, sages and kings, lovers and mendicants. As with Shiva, so with Vishnu in his 10 incarnations or in the deep ocean lying on a serpent-bed with Goddess Lakshmi, his consort, or standing alone with the four arms holding a conch, discus, mace and lotus. Vishnu as Krishna, the naughty blue god with a flute, is usually shown in the *tribhanga*, the three-bend posture, as he plays on the flute, or dances with the women in Vrindavan and Gokul, the pastoral villages on the banks of River Yamuna. He is also shown killing the demonic forces appearing in various forms – as a huge crane, an uncontrollable horse, a crazed elephant, an endless python, a wicked sorceress, a gust of terrifying storm, an unquenchable fire. He was also tested by an angry and arrogant Indra who caused torrential rains and storms for seven days and nights, drowning the entire region when Krishna lifted Mount Govardhan to provide shelter to people of Vrindavan.





His love for cows and calves, whom he took to graze in the forest, his mischievous pranks, his uncanny ways of pleasing men, women, children, bird and beast alike, his hunger for sweet butter churned by the women of Gokul for which he could break into homes or forcibly take it from the women – all these and more form the basis of the narrative dance in Odissi. Stories, parables, poems, and plays, both in oral and written traditions, tell us of the great love of Krishna for an older Radha who was the epitome of love, grace, beauty.

Radha and Krishna have long been a symbol of unconditional love and of transcending all known human barriers that belittle and trivialize love. Among the vast number of literature on the subject, the *Gita Govinda* by poet Jayadev stands out as an all-time great love-poem. He lived in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and was married to a beautiful dancer, Padmavati. Both were devotees of Jagannath, lord of the universe, whose majestic temple stands at Puri on the south-eastern shores of India. The interchangeability of names, forms, attributes as well as stories of one god with many of his own incarnations and manifestations have confused many, who are unaware of the simple truth at the root of this seemingly confusing multiplicity. The truth is about ourselves and our many faces, moods and forms during one single day, not to speak of a lifetime. Therefore, Vishnu in his eighth incarnation is called Krishna. Both share common attributes of form and intent. Krishna wears a *peetamabara*, a yellow garment, which shines like the golden streak of lightning on his blue body and so does Vishnu. For any interested reader, the symbolism of blue as space and yellow as the shimmer of cosmic light would be amply clear. Vishnu is at once dark, black-blue. As Jagannath he represents the unmanifest, that which existed before creation. Here he is accompanied by Shakti, the cosmic energy, that triggers, empowers and galvanizes pure matter which is still dark and unknown. She is golden and is called Subhadra. At the touch of energy, vibrations begin and the black and unknown, the pure matter revealing itself in myriad forms. Therefore the manifested form is white and is known as Balabhadra.



Thus Vishnu as Jagannath and Vishnu as Krishna are equal to Jagannath. Krishna's life history and geography of his various peregrinations are recorded in the *Srimad Bhagavad* and the epic *Mahabharata*. The Odissi dancer smoothly sails across these various streams to find the one essence – that divine from which enchants the mind, fills the eyes and enriches the life.

Of similar nature and scope are the other characters of Devi, the great goddess with a million names; Ganesha the elephant-headed god of wisdom; the Sun-god with the lotus symbol and riding a chariot pulled by seven horses (which stands for seven days); and Shiva, who alone does not have any incarnations and yet is always present as this popular verse suggests: "The universe is his body; every sound, vibration, word, music are his speech; the Sun, moon, and stars adorn him as jewels, to such cosmic beatitude, called Shiva, to whom I bow."

To imbibe and translate grand ideas, images and concepts, the dancer has to go through a regimen of exercises and postures while learning different kinds of walks, jumps, leaps and runs typical to the style of Odissi. Although Odissi shares a family resemblance to Bharatanatyam, it is informed by a totally different philosophy of form. By using the upper torso as an independent unit, Odissi makes the torso glide from side to side in a smooth sway. Combined with the frequent use of *tribhanga* (thrice-bent posture) and the gentle, oblique movement of the neck, Odissi can remind a viewer of watching a piece of fine filigree or a creeper gently swaying in a soft breeze. Yet Odissi is not just *lasya*, feminine grace. The *chowkabhangi*, creating a square with the half seated posture, both knees turned outwards and both hands stretched at shoulder level and then bent outwards from the elbow, can be heavy duty, more so when various leaps, jumps, and stamps to a given rhythmic cycle (*tala*) have to be executed according to a demanding choreography. Most basic dance patterns are learnt both in *chowki* and *tribhanga* postures in fully seated (on toes, knees out) or half seated (on toes, heels or flat feet) or standing in *sama*, *abhanga*, or *tribhanga*.

Odissi found its modern *avtar* in 1959 when a repertory was built by combining elements from the prevalent performing art traditions of Orissa, like Chhau, Sabda-Swara, Patha, SakhiNaach, GeetiNatya, Ras Lila, etc.



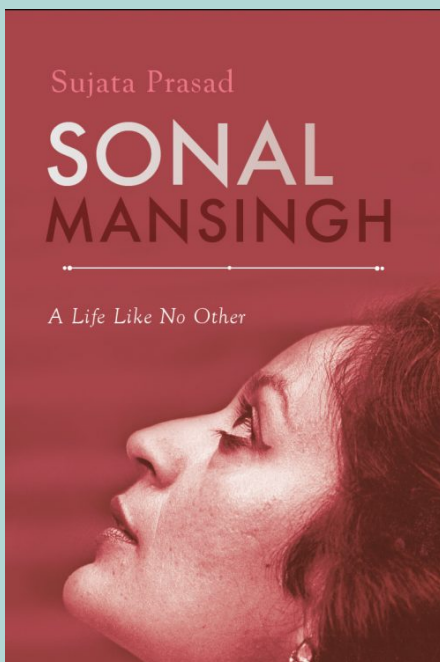
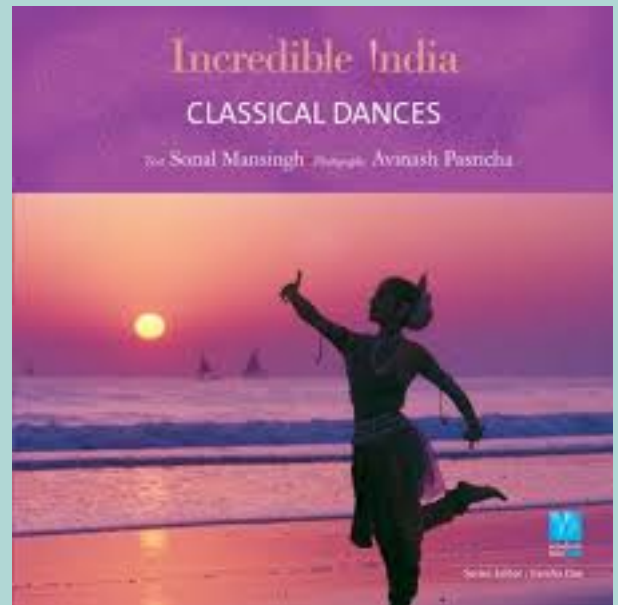
Since then, the repertory includes *mangalacharan* (auspicious beginning, a prayer), *batu* or *sthaayi* (composition showing typical postures of Odissi mostly seen in sculptures), *Pallavi* (a music composition in a particular musical mode), *raga* (with a complex rhythmic pattern), *geet*, *sloka*, *champu*, *ashtapadi* (poems as music compositions allowing for detailed treatment of expansive and communicative *abhinaya*) and *natangi* or *mokshya* as the final homage to creation through dance. Odissi has spread its scope immensely and now boasts of choreographies on every conceivable theme using ancient, medieval and modern poetry. The accompanying music needs special mention as being truly indigenous to Orissa and comprising many *ragas* and *talas* unique to Odissi. The orchestra for the dance usually consists of a vocalist, a *pakhawaj* (percussion instrument), a flute and violin or the *sitar*.

## Resources:

Dr Sonal Mansingh has written the informative book on Indian Classical dances illustrated by the famous photographer, Shri Avinash Pasricha who has photographed Indian artists for many decades.

The text from this e-brochure and many of the pictures are from this book.

*Incredible India, Dr Sonal Mansingh, Avinash Pasricha, Wisdom Tree, 2007*



The apt sub title 'a life like no other', tells the story of Dr Sonal Mansingh's illustrious career and life. From the time she was a young girl in Gujarat, through the turmoil of braking her spine in a terrible accident to the un-paralleled position she holds today as a dancer and a powerhouse of knowledge of Indian classical culture. Cultural connoisseur Sujata Prasad has written a beautiful account of her rich life.

*SONAL MANSINGH, a life like no other, Sujata Prasad, Random House Publishers India Pvt. Limited, Apr 17, 2017*

You can follow Dr Sonal Mansingh on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#)

She runs the world renowned dance institute "Centre for Indian Classical Dances" where she teaches students in the true Guru-Shishya parampara.

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