

Practice and Pedagogy of Indian Classical Dance (ICD): Analysis in Comparison with India's Folk and Bollywood Dances

Ojasi Sukhatankar¹

Abstract

This article studies practice and pedagogy of three dance genres, namely folk, classical and Bollywood dance that co-exist in today's India. First, it studies India's folk and Bollywood dance genres, based on which are drawn five parameters of comparison. Second, it analyses the practice of Indian classical dance forms (ICDs) under these five parameters. Third, it discusses the pedagogic practice of all the three genres, and analyses how the traditional pedagogic manner (*guru-shishya parampara*) of ICDs has contributed to maintenance and expansion of their knowledge-repertoires. The article concludes by presenting core similarities and differences in the practice and pedagogy of all three genres.

Keywords: Bollywood, Classical, Dance, Folk, Genre, India

Introduction

Folk, classical and modern are the three dance-genres commonly accepted under dance-studies.^[i] India is rich with all the three. Under each genre there is found a wide variety of dance-forms that belong to different states. Each folk dance-form such as Garba of Gujarat, Koli dance of Maharashtra, Bhangra of Punjab has distinct features by which each gets a unique artistic identity among all others. Similarly, India has eight classical dance-forms namely Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Kathakali, Kuchipudi, Manipuri, Mohiniyattam, Odissi and Sattriya. Their practice flourished in different states of India, though their theory has a common origin in *Natyashastra* the ancient scripture on performing arts. Each Indian classical dance-form (henceforth referred as ICD) adheres to this theory in its own unique way. As the *Natyashastra* theory is intricate with every detail of bodily movements, its performance, expression and practice, ICDs have a highly sophisticated (scientific / *shastriya*) style of dancing. With advent of media and film industry in twentieth century, India has created a third genre of cinema-dances. They are most popularly known as 'Bollywood' dance which is a nickname inspired from the name 'Hollywood'. There are cinema-dances with other nicknames too, such as Tollywood and Mollywood. These names refer to dances used in Telugu and Malayalam films, respectively.

¹ Mrs Ojasi Sukhatankar (Master of Arts in Dance Cultures, Histories and Practices from University of Surrey, Guildford, UK & Bachelor of Engineering from University of Pune, India) is a classical Kathak exponent, teacher, choreographer, performer, dance-critic and software engineer, with national and international experience. Email: ojasidances@googlegmail.com

Today all three dance genres, Indian folk, classical and Bollywood are found to co-exist in the same lands of Mother India. They are all cultural heritages of the nation. However, their practice and pedagogy is diversified in many aspects. This article discusses the same. First, it studies India's folk and Bollywood dance genres, based on which are drawn five parameters of comparison. Second, it analyses the practice of ICDs under these five parameters. Third, it discusses the pedagogic practice of all the three dance genres, and analyses how the traditional pedagogic manner (*guru-shishya parampara*) of ICDs has contributed in maintenance and expansion of their knowledge-repertoires. Lastly the article presents core similarities and differences in practice and pedagogy of all three dance genres.

Indian Folk Dance Genre

As the name suggests, folk dances are danced by common folks usually of a particular community. A community or a group of people living together often shares a common life-style. Especially in villages, it has its own collective living which is bonded by certain common socio-cultural norms. Such collective living provides its people common occasions to relax, rejoice, celebrate and enjoy. History shows how each folk dance in India originated in a particular community of such kind. India's folk dance genre thus finds its context in the collective-living of its people. Reflection of this common bonding of people's lives is found in the artistic spirit of all folk dance-forms. Some features are illustrated below.

1. Almost all folk dances are group dances. Their choreography is such that it can accommodate large number of dancers. This is supported by simple-to-follow dance-formations such as dancing in circles, in pairs, in straight lines, and so on. The dance-movements render a free expression to emotions of joy and affection, dynamism, and also valour in some cases. The entire group of dancers shares these emotions. A strong bonding among all dancers makes a folk dance performance highly vibrant.
2. It is found that folk dances are danced in their respective villages or communities even today. This is found more predominantly in rural, less urbanized parts of India. All who belong to that community, who are born and brought up with the same life-style, naturally participate in their community's folk dance. It is noteworthy that in such villages, dance is not considered as an activity, hobby or a profession that exists as something 'other' than one's routine daily living; be it personal, social or professional living. Folk dance rather exists as an integral part of one's own and a community's life-style.
3. As folk dances are originally danced in villages for the sake of mutual-sharing and community-bonding, their dancing style is irrespective of any presence or absence of audience. In other words, folk dances in their original context give no deliberate emphasis on presenting the dance-art to any viewers, though they are in themselves artistically presentable. In current times they are performed professionally at national and international theatrical forums before a large number of audiences. In spite of their transition from a community-setting to a professionally set-up stage, their overall artistic spirit that is found in their choreography, performance and quality of dance-movements has remained unaffected.

Indian Cinema-Dance / Bollywood Dance Genre

Cinema-dancing has now become an inseparable factor of Indian film industry. A typical Bollywood film of three hours usually has four to six dance-numbers choreographed and performed on various songs. All dance-numbers are presented as a part of the film-story. They are a significant attraction when a film is displayed at a cinema-theatre. A dance-number that gets huge mass-appreciation enhances the chances of the film being viewed by more number of people, in turn adding to the financial profit for the film's producers. This has affected the central artistic spirit of cinema-dancing. Some insights are as given below along with their comparison with the folk dance genre.

1. Choreography and performance of Indian cinema-dance is highly audience-centric. The focus is almost always, to capture attention of viewers, create a strong audio-visual impact on them, and gain their appreciation. It must be noted that Bollywood is after all a commercial industry that has all the features of mass-communication and mass-production. Hence consumerism is an unavoidable feature of a film and its dance-numbers. Unlike the folk dance genre of India, place of audience in Indian cinema-dance is like that of consumers or customers of a product where, like any other business, customer-satisfaction becomes an essential key for success. Naturally the movements of Bollywood dance are made to be attractive and spectacular, which would not only seize public-attention but also satisfy their demand for audio-visual pleasure. The same in turn gets reflected while choosing the dancers' attire, background scenery, audio and visual effects of filming-technology, and so on.
2. The understanding and the meaning of dance as an art is quite different in cinema-dancing than that found in folk-dancing. Whereas folk dances are a part of a community's life-style; Bollywood dance can be one's leisure activity, hobby or profession, but not a part of one's life-style in itself. Moreover, one chooses to practice Bollywood dance irrespective of one's belongingness to any community.
3. Like folk dances, cinema-dances too are performed in national and international theatrical settings where the same dance-numbers videoed as a part of a film are performed on stage, directly before audience. Like folk dances, the artistic spirit of cinema-dances has remained unaffected by this change in their performance-setting.

Parameters for Analysis and Comparison of Dance-Genres

The aforementioned discussion shows that dance genres in India can be analyzed and compared based on certain parameters. These parameters can be used for finding similarities as well as differences among all the three dance genres. As drawn from the aforementioned discussion, these parameters are namely;

1. Context of origin
2. Context of performance (Originally and currently)
3. Primary nature of dance-movements / choreography
4. Position of audience in performance, and
5. Position of dance in life (Originally and currently)

The genre of ICDs can now be analyzed under each of these parameters.

Indian Classical Dance Genre (ICD)

As already stated, India has eight ICDs. Each ICD possesses its own repertoire of dance-poses and movements, along with its own repertoire of traditionally choreographed and performed dance-items. Each also has a particular conventional structure of a performance, which is followed by all dancers while offering a complete classical dance concert. The practice of ICDs is now discussed in relation to five parameters mentioned above. Insights on their comparison with folk and Bollywood dance genres are given wherever found appropriate.

1. Context of origin

The origin of ICDs bears a religious context. The religiosity of ICDs is reflected in their dance-items that have been performed traditionally and been passed on from one generation of artists to the next. Born out of temple-worship, their traditional repertoires are full of devotional items such as *Raslila* of Manipuri, *Vandanas* of Odissi, *Shabdams* of Bharatanatyam, and dance-dramas of Kathakali. These repertoires include invocation and worship of various gods and goddesses such as Sri Krishna, Lord Shiva, Lord Ganesha, Durga and Saraswati by dancing on devotional poetry. Some dances additionally give dramatic representations of themes or narratives from Hindu mythology (*puranas*) and from epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata. Thus religiosity and sacredness are intrinsic to the artistic spirit of all ICDs since their birth till today.

2. Context of performance (Originally and currently)

Context of performance for all ICDs originally lies in the religious environment of temples of ancient India. Today it is shifted to a theatrical setting where ICD-performances are recognized and welcomed across the globe. Though their context is changed, their artistic spirit has not lost its touch of religiosity and sacredness.

3. Primary nature of dance-movements / choreography

Compared to folk and Bollywood dance-movements, the nature of ICD-movements is highly sophisticated. All ICD-gestures include a lot of technicalities in the way a dancer is expected to move in a given framework of space and time. In every ICD, the manner of expressing beauty and rhythm are intricately defined. The manner of depicting themes or stories and of conveying emotions also have a clear artistic framework. Yet like folk dances, the ICD-movements provide a free scope for the dancer to express herself. Though ICD-movements are choreographed such that they would be aesthetically presentable to the audience, their performance is not done in the way they are done in Bollywood dancing of Indian films. In ICD, the dancer performs before the audience, not for the sake of pleasing or entertaining them but for the sake of presenting the audio-visual aesthetics of the dance-form and corresponding dancing skills.

4. Position of audience in performance

Unlike folk dances, a classical dancer always bears in mind the presence of the audience. Yet unlike Bollywood dance, ICD-choreography and performance are oriented around the idea of expression and communication to the audience, and not around the idea of capturing their attention or gaining their appreciation. In short for an ICD-performance, audiences are like static witnesses who enjoy, not the 'dancer', but the 'art of dancing'.

5. Position of dance in life (Originally and currently)

Like folk dances, ICDs were an integral part of the community of dancers in ancient times. The community of Kathakars in case of Kathak, of Devdasis in case of Bharatanatyam, and of

Mahaaris and Gotipuas in case of Odissi, are some indications for the same. However in current times ICDs have become a profession or a hobby for many.

Place of Pedagogy in Practice of Dance

All ICDs have existed in India for thousands of years. They have endured in the constantly changing Indian society even during its lengthy time-spans of various foreign rules. Now the practice of ICDs is flourishing even more to find newer dimensions in today's globalizing world. This matter of fact gives rise to some interesting questions. One, how could all ICDs overcome their phases of decadence, and yet flourish as soon as opportunities became available? Two, how could they successfully preserve their tradition, and yet cope with the rest of the world that was constantly undergoing huge changes in its religious trends, socio-cultural norms, and economic and political situations? Three, from where did ICDs get this strength for their survival? The answers are found in their pedagogic tradition.

All ICDs have a pedagogic tradition called as the *guru-shishya parampara*. It is one unique feature of Indian civilization where *guru* or the teacher who is the abode of knowledge passes on his/her knowledge to disciples (*shishyas*). The traditional (*paramparic*) *guru-shishya* relation, interaction, and imparting and reception of knowledge, is something more than a mere teacher-student relation and interaction that is understood in current times.

Some insights on this pedagogic tradition and how it is the true backbone for survival and successful practice of ICDs are given below. For the sake of comparison, the contemporary pedagogic manner in case of folk and Bollywood dance genres is first explained briefly.

Pedagogy of Folk and Bollywood Dance Genres

Both folk and cinema-dances do not have a specific tradition of pedagogy in the way the term 'tradition' is understood in relation to ICDs. In their original village-context, folk dances are a part of a community's life-style. Hence they are not needed to be specially taught, because they are learnt how one learns a community's life-style merely by growing up in that community. Bollywood dance being a genre born only in previous century, there does not exist a pedagogic tradition as such in the way it is understood in relation to ICDs. However, today both folk and Bollywood dance genres have started off with a pedagogic practice of professional quality.

Today in India as well as abroad we find professional coaching classes for all kinds of Indian folk and Bollywood dances. Though it is a different matter to discuss why, not all folk dance-forms of India have reached the global platform as yet, under the domain of coaching classes there is still found a wide variety. Some provide classes for those who want to learn dance as a hobby. Some courses are run at academic schools and colleges and are made compulsory for all students. They are a part of academic curriculum and are usually conducted under the category of physical education. Some courses are designed to suite elementary, intermediate and advanced levels. They are usually conducted at autonomous dance institutes and are designed for those who wish to become professional dancers in their future. Some Bollywood dance institutes even help their students in getting professional dance-assignments in film-industry. In this way the pedagogic practice of folk and Bollywood dance genres is found to be highly professionalized today.

Same is found in case of ICDs as well. In fact, as far as India is concerned, ICDs have achieved yet another dimension in the process of institutionalization by conferring academic degrees (Diploma, Bachelor's, Master's and Doctorate) to dancer-students and by certifying them to be prospective dance-professionals. Nowadays the same model is followed by countries other than India, under the category 'South Asian dances'. However, what is still acting under this institutionalization of ICDs in India as well as in other countries is its conventional pedagogic manner of *guru-shishya* style.

Guru-Shishya Pedagogy of ICDs

Under *guru-shishya* style of pedagogy, a *guru* usually teaches to several generations of *shishyas*, which get formed one after the other. This happens because a *guru's* teaching-tenure usually lasts as long as the *guru* remains physically capable to impart the knowledge of dance. Older the *guru*, more revered he/she becomes in the artists' world. A classical dance *guru* gives to a *shishya* all dance-knowledge and training, and teaches what all can be considered to be traditionally fit in that dance-form. The *shishya* in turn by her sincere perseverance becomes a *guru* at right phase of her life and generates newer batches of *shishyas*. Thus every *guru* who pursues the *guru-shishya* manner of pedagogy has been a *shishya* to preceding *guru*. In short, every *shishya* in turn becomes a *guru*, and the lineage carries on. Such *guru* broadly accomplishes two things under the teaching-tenure.

One, to pass on all the knowledge learnt from one's own *guru* to all the *shishyas* who are potentially worthy of receiving it. This knowledge is passed on 'as it is', that is, without modifying the dance-movements and dance-items. This is done as strictly as possible. The benefit of this happens to be that, all the knowledge existent at a given point of time in history gets preserved and remains available for all the future generations of dancers.

In case of ICDs, this direct passing of knowledge has a very important role. It was extremely important in times when no facilities of audio-visual recording were present for archiving dance-items. It is still equally important, though today it is possible to have a complete audio-visual recording and digital archiving of dance-items. This is because, in the domain of dance, the actual 'usable' knowledge which involves a wholesome training of body, mind and emotions is best preserved in a live 'human being' than in any other artificial archival resource.

Two, to seek and create something new, something of his/her own accord and thus contribute to the growth of existing knowledge-heritage. Benefited by this, all ICDs have grown hugely in terms of the repertoire of dance-items. Additionally, this has helped in moulding ICDs to suit to the constantly changing religious trends, socio-cultural norms and political-economic conditions of Indian society.

It is noteworthy here that in spite of numerous new artistic productions continuously been generated by different *gurus* in India, the core artistic features which shape the uniqueness of each ICD have remained unshaken. Thus on one side each ICD remains strongly unique and conventional, and on the other side it provides a lot of scope for a constant quantitative and qualitative enhancement of its knowledge-repertoire of dance-items, their choreography and presentation. This paradox gets resolved when we take into consideration the kind of extensive technical (*shastriya*) training a *shishya* undergoes before venturing to be a *guru*. One is put to a rigorous training of all that is traditionally handed down previously in the lineage of *guru-shishya*. For such training a *shishya* not only spends a substantial amount of time and energy, but also imbibes in body, heart and mind the very essence of the dance-form. One lives so much in the

environment of a heritage-oriented dance-training that when one passes from the phase of a *shishya* and gradually becomes an experienced *guru*, then whatever comes out as one's own new creative product aptly adheres to the core artistic essence of that dance-form. In this way, a *shishya*-turned *guru* remains within the framework of the form, and yet experiences and experiments freely with newer artistic creativity. In short, the *guru-shishya* style of pedagogy of ICDs dynamically combines both preservation and innovation of knowledge-repertoire. Thereby it benefits the practice of dance by keeping it always alive.

Concluding Remarks

Based on the analysis given in this article, the similarities and differences in the practice and pedagogy of India's folk, classical and Bollywood dance genres can be best explained in a tabular structure (See Table 1).

	Indian Folk Dance Genre	Indian Cinema-Dance Genre	Indian Classical Dance (ICD) Genre
1. Context of Origin			
	Collective living in community, especially in villages	Film industry, technology & mass-production	Religiousness
2. Primary Nature of Dance-Movements			
	Free expression & sharing of joy / other common emotions of community	Attractive & spectacular with attempt to make impact on audience & create mass-appeal	Sophisticated (technical) dancing along with expression of religious sentiments
3. Context of Performance			
a. Originally	In rural parts of India / On socio-cultural occasions	On screen, as part of a film	Initially temples, later in royal courts in some cases
b. Currently	Professional performances at national & international theatrical forums, in addition to rural community-dancing in villages	On screen performances, in addition to dancing in theatres directly before audience on various get-togethers and cultural events	Theatrical performance (in majority), in addition to performances in religious contexts

4. Position of Audience in Performance			
	Performance is irrespective of any presence or absence of audience	Choreography & performance are highly audience-centric	Audience as witnesses who appreciate art of dancing
5. Position of Dance in Life			
a. Originally	Dance as integral part of one's own and a community's life-style	Dance as leisure activity / hobby / profession but never a part of life-style	Initially as life-style, later as initiative for maintenance & expansion of cultural heritage
b. Currently	Dance as hobby / profession, but still a life-style in village-communities	(Same as above)	Dance as profession / hobby / activity for physical education
6. Pedagogy			
a. Originally	No need of special pedagogy in community-living	No long history of pedagogy as genre was born only a century ago	<i>Gurukul</i> style of pedagogy (<i>Guru-shishya parampara</i>)
b. Currently	Professional coaching classes with variety of short & long-term courses	Professional coaching classes with variety of short & long-term courses	Professional coaching classes of traditional <i>guru-shishya</i> style along with institutionalization & conferring of degrees

Table 1: Similarities and Differences in Practice and Pedagogy of Folk, Bollywood and Classical Dance Genres of India

Endnotes:

ⁱ Studies are also found regarding post-modern dance. Questions are raised as to what may come after the phase of post-modernism is gone. Since dance-genres discussed in this article have Indian context, the scope is kept limited to first three genres.

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