

Folk and Traditional Dance in Indian Culture: A Review.

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Abstract: India is a vibrant tapestry of cultural heritage, characterized by a rich diversity of folk and traditional dance forms. From Sambalpuri to Gotipua, these dance styles encapsulate both indigenous and ceremonial traditions, often imbued with profound religious significance. Indian folk dances serve not only as sacred expressions of faith but also as celebratory activities, reflecting the simplicity and joy inherent in communal life. These performances are integral to various life events, including childbirth, festivals, and weddings, embodying timeless forms and rhythms. Characterized by minimalistic yet energetic movements, Indian folk dances evoke enthusiasm and a sense of community.

Keywords: *Folk Dance, Traditional Dance, Indian Culture, Kuchipudi dance, History of Dance, Present Scenario*

I. Introduction

Folk dance in India represents a unique confluence of artistic expression, cultural heritage, and social identity. It is defined by its rhythmic movements, which are accompanied by vocal or instrumental music, drawing from a rich historical background. These dance forms serve as an enriching medium for daily life, conveying deep emotional and social narratives. Far from being merely simplistic, folk dances encapsulate complex themes and artistic value. Their collective nature emphasizes communal spirit and emotional resonance over individual technical virtuosity. Indian folk dance is a living tradition, passed down through generations, thriving in communal settings where elders impart their knowledge to younger practitioners. This tradition is intricately woven into the fabric of everyday life, enriching social interactions and fostering cultural continuity.

II. History of Folk and Traditional Dance in India:

Folk dances play a significant role in the social fabric of communities across India, especially during gatherings such as weddings, festivals, and harvest celebrations. These dances invite participation from individuals of all skill levels, making them accessible and inclusive. The organic evolution of these dance forms occurs within specific cultural contexts, reflecting the unique societal values, traditions, and historical narratives of the communities they represent.

Historically, folk dances emerged as a means of expression for the common people, often evolving from agricultural practices and communal rituals. For instance, many folk dances are directly linked to agricultural cycles, celebrating the harvest or invoking blessings for a good crop. These dances often embody the rhythms of daily life, capturing the joys, struggles, and aspirations of the community. As such, they serve not only as entertainment but also as vital expressions of cultural identity, forging a deep connection between individuals and their heritage.

The reverence for folk dance as an art form is evident in the support it receives from governmental and cultural organizations. These bodies recognize the importance of preserving and promoting folk dance, facilitating its presence in national events such as film festivals and Independence Day celebrations. By showcasing folk dances on these platforms, they affirm their cultural significance and foster a sense of national pride.

In contemporary settings, folk dances are often presented in elaborate costumes that enhance their visual appeal, reflecting the vibrancy of local traditions. Each dance is typically accompanied by music that underscores its social significance, utilizing traditional instruments crafted from wood, metal, or other materials. The diverse range of instruments—including drums, flutes, and stringed instruments—contributes to the unique soundscape of each performance, enriching the overall experience and providing a sonic context that amplifies the dance's themes.

India boasts a rich tapestry of folk dances, each with its own historical roots and cultural connotations. For example, in Odisha, dances such as Sambalpuri, BaghaNacha, Savari, Ghumara, Painka, and Munari not only showcase the region's artistic heritage but also reflect its agrarian society and communal spirit. In Andhra Pradesh, forms like VilasiniNatyam, Bhamakalpam, Veerاناتyam, Dappu, TappetaGullu, Lambadi, Dhimsa, and Kolattam illustrate the region's diverse cultural influences and social narratives.

Moreover, folk dances often serve as platforms for storytelling, preserving legends, historical events, and communal values. They encapsulate the essence of human experience, from joyous celebrations to communal mourning, effectively bridging generational gaps and fostering intergenerational bonds.

In summary, the evolution of folk dance in India is a dynamic process that reflects the interplay between cultural traditions and contemporary societal values. These dances are cherished not only for their artistic merit but also for their role in maintaining cultural continuity and community cohesion. As they continue to adapt to modern contexts while honoring their historical roots, folk dances remain a vital expression of India's rich cultural landscape, celebrating both diversity and unity.

The history of traditional dances in India is a rich tapestry that reflects the country's diverse cultural heritage, regional identities, and social practices. Spanning centuries, these dances have evolved through various influences, including religious beliefs, royal patronage, and social customs. Here's an overview of the historical development of traditional dances in India:

III. Ancient Roots

Origins in Rituals: Traditional Indian dance can trace its roots back to ancient rituals and ceremonies, often intertwined with religious practices. The *NatyaShastra*, a foundational text attributed to the sage Bharata Muni, dates back to around 200 BCE to 200 CE and codifies the principles of dance, drama, and music. This text outlines the elements of performance, including expression (*abhinaya*), music (*gāna*), and dance (*nṛtta*), establishing the framework for classical and folk traditions.

Temple Dances: Many traditional dances developed in temple settings as forms of worship. Dances like the **Mahari** and **Gotipua** in Odisha were performed by temple dancers to honor deities, blending spirituality with artistic expression. Similarly, dances like **Bharatanatyam** and **Kathakali** have their origins in religious rituals, embodying the narratives of Hindu mythology.

IV. Influence of Royal Patronage

Mughal Era: The arrival of the Mughals in the 16th century introduced new forms of dance and music, influencing regional styles. The interaction between Mughal and Indian classical dance led to the emergence of new genres, including **Kathak**, which incorporates elements of storytelling and rhythm influenced by Persian aesthetics.

Regional Courts: Various princely states and regional kingdoms, such as the Marathas, Rajputs, and Vijayanagara Empire, fostered their own dance traditions, often as a means of showcasing cultural richness and artistic patronage. Dances like **Kuchipudi** and **Manipuri** flourished under royal support, incorporating elaborate costumes and theatrical narratives.

V. Colonial Impact

British Colonial Rule: The colonial period saw a decline in traditional dance practices, as British authorities often viewed Indian cultural expressions with disdain. However, this era also sparked a revival of interest in folk and classical dances among Indian intellectuals and artists, who sought to reclaim and promote their cultural heritage.

Cultural Renaissance: The late 19th and early 20th centuries marked a cultural renaissance in India, with movements aimed at preserving and reviving traditional art forms. Notable figures such as Rabindranath Tagore and Rukmini Devi Arundale played pivotal roles in revitalizing classical dance, bringing it to modern stages and academic institutions.

VI. Post-Independence Era

National Identity: After India gained independence in 1947, traditional dances became symbols of national identity and cultural pride. The Indian government supported folk and classical dances through festivals, cultural exchange programs, and funding for artists, recognizing their role in fostering unity amidst diversity.

Global Recognition: In recent decades, traditional dances have gained international acclaim, with performances showcased at global cultural events. The fusion of traditional dance with contemporary styles has also emerged, allowing these art forms to adapt and thrive in modern contexts.

VII. Present Scenario of Traditional Dance:

The term "traditional dance" is frequently used interchangeably with "folk dance," yet it encompasses a broader spectrum that includes ceremonial forms and performances deeply embedded in cultural and historical contexts. Traditional dances serve as vital expressions of a community's heritage, reflecting the customs, beliefs, and historical narratives that have shaped them over time. While folk dances typically arise from the daily lives and recreational activities of ordinary people, traditional dances often highlight specific cultural lineages and may carry significant ceremonial weight.

In the present scenario, traditional dances remain crucial to cultural expression across India. For instance, ritualistic dances such as Mahari and Gotipua from Odisha exemplify this distinction. The Mahari dance, traditionally performed by temple dancers, embodies spiritual devotion and is characterized by its intricate movements and expressive gestures. Similarly, Gotipua, performed by young boys dressed as girls, combines devotion with theatrical elements, often conveying stories from Hindu mythology. These dances are not merely performances; they are steeped in tradition and continue to play a pivotal role in religious and cultural festivities.

In contrast, forms like Andhranatyam and Vilasiniatyam from Andhra Pradesh showcase the classical dance tradition that is often performed in temples and at cultural events, emphasizing the lineage of the art form. These dances are characterized by their elaborate costumes, rigorous training, and the integration of storytelling through expressive movements. They are performed not just as entertainment but as a means of preserving and passing down cultural values and spiritual narratives.

Musical accompaniment plays a significant role in enhancing traditional dance performances. A diverse array of instruments enriches these dances, including vocals, violin, acoustic guitar, flute, whistle, pipes, accordion, melodeon, mandolin, harmonica, and tenor banjo. Each instrument contributes to the unique soundscapes that define different dance forms, setting the emotional tone and rhythm for the performance. The interplay between dance and music is vital; it creates an immersive experience that engages the audience and enhances the storytelling aspect of the dance.

In contemporary contexts, traditional dances are experiencing a renaissance, spurred by increased interest in cultural heritage and identity among younger generations. Educational institutions, cultural organizations, and community groups are actively promoting traditional dance forms, integrating them into cultural festivals and academic curricula. Workshops and training sessions are organized to teach these dances, ensuring that the knowledge and skills are not lost to modern influences.

Moreover, the rise of digital platforms and social media has allowed traditional dances to reach wider audiences. Performances can now be shared globally, fostering greater appreciation and understanding of India's diverse cultural heritage. This exposure encourages cross-cultural interactions and dialogues, enabling traditional dances to adapt while maintaining their essential characteristics.

In summary, while the term "traditional dance" encompasses a variety of forms, its significance in the present day remains profound. Traditional dances, distinct from folk dances, continue to play an essential role in cultural preservation and community identity. They thrive in both ceremonial contexts and contemporary settings, supported by efforts to educate, promote, and innovate within the rich tapestry of India's dance heritage.

VIII. Present Scenario of Folk Dance:

Folk dance in India is not just an art form; it is a vibrant expression of cultural identity that plays an integral role in the social and communal lives of people across the nation. Each region of India proudly showcases its own distinctive dance traditions, which are intricately woven into the social fabric of their communities. These dances often serve as a means of storytelling, conveying the history, beliefs, and values of the people. They encapsulate the unique customs and identities of various ethnic and cultural groups, highlighting the rich diversity that characterizes Indian society.

In urban centers, the landscape for folk dance has evolved significantly. Professional dance troupes and cultural organizations have taken the initiative to present these traditional art forms on contemporary stages, including theaters and festivals. This shift not only revitalizes interest in folk dance but also positions it within a modern artistic context. Public events and cultural festivals, often organized by municipal and state governments, provide platforms for folk artists to perform, thus elevating the visibility of these traditional forms.

The advent of social media and digital platforms has further transformed the reach of folk dance. Artists can now share their performances with a global audience, transcending geographical barriers. This digital exposure fosters a greater appreciation for regional dance forms and invites cross-cultural dialogues. Online platforms allow for the documentation and dissemination of folk dance traditions, enabling younger generations to engage with their cultural heritage in innovative ways.

Efforts to preserve and promote folk dance in India are supported by a variety of stakeholders, including government agencies, cultural institutions, and grassroots organizations. These entities recognize the importance of maintaining cultural continuity and have initiated programs aimed at safeguarding folk dance traditions. Specialized academies and training centers have emerged, dedicated to teaching traditional dance forms to younger audiences. By focusing on education and mentorship, these institutions ensure that the skills and knowledge associated with folk dance are passed down through generations.

Despite the challenges posed by modernization—such as the influence of global pop culture and urbanization—folk dance remains a cherished expression of cultural identity. It plays a vital role in significant life events, including weddings, festivals, and religious ceremonies, acting as a catalyst for community cohesion. These dances foster intergenerational bonds, as elders pass on their wisdom and skills to the younger generation, reinforcing a sense of belonging and continuity.

In summary, folk dance in India is a living tradition that not only reflects the country's diverse cultural heritage but also adapts to contemporary contexts. Its presence enriches social gatherings, reinforces community ties, and preserves the essence of regional identities amidst a rapidly changing world. As both a celebratory and communal practice, folk dance continues to thrive, serving as a powerful testament to India's dynamic cultural landscape.

IX. Conclusion

Folk dance is a profound reflection of the cultural and social identity of a region or country. It is crucial to differentiate folk dances from ethnic dances, as the former often emerges from communal life and lacks ritualistic origins. The preservation of folk dance is vital, as it constitutes a significant aspect of our heritage and identity. By passing down these dances through generations, we ensure their continued relevance and existence. The government's role in preserving folk dance in India is multifaceted, encompassing various initiatives:

1. **Cultural Policies and Funding:** Development of cultural policies and allocation of funds for folk dance preservation programs.
2. **Establishment of Cultural Institutions:** Creation of academies and cultural centers dedicated to the documentation and training of folk dance forms.
3. **Documentation and Archiving:** Support for recording performances and traditional practices, ensuring the preservation of these cultural expressions.
4. **Promotion and Public Awareness:** Government-sponsored events and campaigns to enhance public engagement with folk dance.
5. **Integration into Education:** Inclusion of folk dance in educational curricula to foster appreciation among younger generations.
6. **Support for Artists and Artisans:** Provision of grants and incentives to folk dancers and musicians.
7. **International Collaboration:** Partnerships with global organizations for knowledge exchange and cultural enrichment.

Through these comprehensive efforts, folk dance continues to thrive, embodying the rich cultural heritage of India.

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