

REFLECTIONS ON RANDOM THEMES

15. DANCE



*Waltzes, Polkas, Lancers, Gallops, Glides;
Portland Fancy, Quadrilles, Reels and Slides!
High-lows, Didos, how we danced them all!
I'll never forget that time, you may bet
I went down to Old Fellows Hall.*

- Jacob Wendell, Jr.

Like other aspects of humanity's culture dance is universal, and very ancient too. Anthropologists have unearthed relics of dancing dating back to millennia. As with music, there seems to be no visible biological reason why human beings initiated and cultivated this fascinating art which has found expression in various ways among the peoples of the world.

Dance may be solo, in pairs, or in groups, on stage or on a floor. The aesthetic movements resonate with accompanying musical rhythms, but in moments of exhilaration some people dance in sheer delight. Dance is poetry in motion: the rhythms in the motions are like the rhymes of a poem, and the graceful gestures remind one of the meters and stanzas of verses. As Francis Bacon put it, "A dance is a measured pace, as a verse is a measured speech."

Every culture has its characteristic dance. Indeed many dances are associated with particular countries or cultures. Thus we speak of the Argentine Tango, the Viennese Waltz, the Chinese Lion-dance, the Spanish Flamenco, the Adumu of the Masai and so on.

Some dances are affiliated to religions or religious sects. Thus, the Noh plays of Japan have Shinto origin. The thirteenth century Sufi mystic Rumi inspired his followers (the Mevlevis) to perform a spinning dance as part of their spiritual mode. In the Cherokee vision a solar eclipse occurs when the Sun's daughter dies as a result of a snake-bite, and she (the Sun) covers her face in grief. To console the bereaved Sun the people sing and do the Sun Dance which brightens back the black sun. It is also a healing process for the community.

Some dances have been banned. The Sun Dance was not allowed in the United States until the late 1970s, as other Native American dances were once prohibited in Canada. The British banned Bharata Natyam in India. Because of the erotic *Dance of the Seven Veils*, the opera

Salome was not allowed in England at one time. In modern Iran dance is regarded as perverse and sinful. At one time any type of dancing was banned in Elmore City, Oklahoma, as depicted in the movie *Footloose*. On some specified days *Tanzverbot* (Ban on Dance) was common in Some German and Swiss cities. In the 1920s the Mevlevis dance was banned in Turkey. These were not as brutal Nazis treated some Swingjugend (a jazz group).

One of the most ancient books on dance is the *Nátya Shástra*. Dating back to the second century C.E. it is attributed to a sage by the name of Bharata. His treatise is on the performing arts: drama, music, and dance. For many centuries the dance it discusses was performed in temples. Eight styles of dancing emerged from it Of these Bharatanatyam is the most famous. Others bear such names as Manipuri, Mohiniattam, Odishi, and Kathakali.

A thesis in Indic mythopoesis is that the dynamic universe came to be by the dust stirred up by the rapturous Divine Dancer, known as Nataraja. In the city of Chidambaram in South India is a temple of Nataraja. The icon represents the Cosmic Dance. This symbol of universal energy is sculpted as a bejeweled eternal dancer with four hands, holding drum and fire, and in a blessing posture, his left foot raised and his right foot crushing a human form that signifies the grand illusion that veils the true nature of Ultimate Reality.

The Nataraja is one of the great sculptures to evolve from the mind and hands of an artist. This work of spiritual creativity has inspired more commentaries than any work of Hindu art. It has inspired great music and dancing in the culture. It is magnificent in conception, profound in symbolism, and penetrating in its vision of the transcendent.

The insight implicit in the symbolism of the Nataraja has been compared to some fundamental findings of modern physics relating to the substratum of the world where matter and energy incessantly create and annihilate each other in eternal dynamism. The emergence and disappearance of hadrons and leptons in the space time continuum bear fascinating parallels to the vision of a cosmic spirit dancing eternally to create the phenomenal world.

Fritzfjof Capra pointed out that “Modern physics has shown that the rhythm of creation and destruction is not only manifest in the turn of the seasons and in the birth and death of all living creatures, but also in the very essence of inorganic matter... For modern physicists, Shiva’s dance is the essence of subatomic matter.” Not surprisingly CERN (The European Council for Nuclear Research) in Switzerland has a huge Nataraja installed there.

With due respects to humanity, it must be pointed out in fairness that some creatures like dogs and cats can be taught to dance. Honeybees are known to communicate by dancing. Cockatoos have danced to specific tunes. Some nosy biologists with scant respect for low-life privacy, have observed and reported that peacock spiders in Australia do a dance routine as part of their mating ritual.

V. V. Raman: 4 April 2020