

The Sacred Dance: A Great Classical Art is Adapted to the Liturgy

By George Proksch, S.V.D.

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The usual theme of the classical dance of India, in whatever form, is a religious event or sentiment...Actually Shiva is considered the creator of the dance and its greatest comic performer...Coomaraswamy says that "Whatever the origins of Shiva's dance, it became in time the clearest image of the activity of God which any art or religion can boast of." According to Kadavul Mamunivar's *Tiruvatavurar Puranan* the special significance of Shiva's dance is the "Our Lord is the dancer who, like heat latent in firewood, fills all bodies, moving all souls into action." And the *Unwai Vilakiam* says: "Creation arises from the drum; protection proceeds from the hand of hope; from the fire proceeds destruction; the foot held aloft gives release." Thus, to the Hindu mind Shiva's dance is not a show, but a kind of cosmic activity, which is the basic motif of the dance. In this connection, Chidambara's Mummani Kovai prays: "O my lord thy hand holding the sacred drum has made and ordered the heavens and earth and both the conscious and unconscious order of thy creation. All these worlds are transformed by thy hand, bearing fire. Thy sacred foot, planted on the ground gives an abode to the tired soul struggling in the toils of causality. It is thy lifted foot that grants eternal bliss to those who approach these. These five actions are indeed thy handiwork." And the "Vision of the Sacred Dance (Tirukettu Darshana) further explains the central idea of the dance: "His form is everywhere; all pervading in his Shiva-shakti; ,,,,as Shiva is all and omnipresent, everywhere is Shiva's gracious dance made manifest." This is the dance of Lord Shiva. Its deepest meaning is perceived when it is realized that the dance takes place within the heart and the self. "The dancing foot, the sound of the tinkling bells, the songs that are sung and the varying steps, the forms assumed by our dancing Gurupara – find these out within yourself, then shall your fetters fall away." Shiva alone may dance in man's heart, and he dances in order to give release to those who seek him.

This close relation between the dance and religion in Hindu thought should inspire Christians. One wonders if the dance might not be a vehicle of conveying Christian religious thought, India is accustomed to seeing religion expressed...in exquisite poetry that is always chanted and, whenever possible, accompanied by a harmonious movement of body, hands and face. The Hindu is so used to seeing religion expressed in this graceful way that the Western presentation of it seems unnatural and incomprehensible. I have often thought that if I were a Hindu and had grown up with those beautiful hymns to Lord Shiva and Lord Vishnu, and knew the fascinating stories of Ram and Krishna portrayed in music and dance, I would not be easily influenced by Christianity. Why should we not follow the Hindu's example and try to present the glory of Christ's good tidings within the context of Indian culture. All of the forms of this culture help to make Christ's message better understood, more profoundly inspiring and expressive of the deepest meaning.

Some attempts to do this have been made. The first was at the National Mariam Congress at Bombay several years ago. Cardinal Gracias has asked me to present, in Indian music and dance, as aspect of Our Lady's part in the Redemptive work of Christ. ...We created a series of dances showing scenes of man in paradise, the temptation of the devil, the fall into sin, the prophecy of a Redeemer and the coming of Our Lady as the bearer of the Savior. The all followed the traditional music and dance of India; there was a cast of 300 dancers and 1,000 singers. Thirty thousand people among them Christians, Hindus. Muslims, Parsees and Jews, saw the dances and the impression made on them by this depiction of Christian thought in Indian cultural forms was tremendous. Later we were asked to go to the Eucharistic Congress in Munich to perform a sacred dance before the Blessed Sacrament. At the steps of the altar, just before the Tantum Ergo, with 300,000 people watching, an Indian dance of praise, thanksgiving and adoration was performed by twelve Catholic girls, accompanied by six Hindu singers, and musicians. Impressive presentations like these encouraged us to continue to experiment in introducing India's rich culture at least into the paraliturgical rites of the Church.