

## *The Spirit of Dance in India*

Adapted excerpts from the NDA textbook, *Dance and Culture: an Introductory Reader* (Oliver, W., Ed.)

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In ancient times, young Indian girls dedicated to temples honored their gods by dancing in religious ceremonies. A small statue from 5,000 years ago—the oldest known image of dance in India—depicts such a girl adorned with bracelets standing in a confidant, perfectly balanced pose, with one knee and one elbow bent.

In India, temple carvings and writings are like scores that document historical dances. Because of this, we can better understand the aesthetic and also reconstruct or create new dances. The *Natya Sastra* a 2,000-year-old written account of Indian dance, lists 108 *karanas* or units of movement. These *karanas* are represented in temple carvings at Chidambaram in southern India, which is dedicated to Lord Shiva, who appears in India's classical dance. The great Shiva, one of the three primary gods, bears the title of *Nataraja*, or Lord of the Dance.



*Nataraj  
Dancers.  
Courtesy  
of  
Ranjanaa  
Devi,  
artistic  
director*

Today, Classical Indian dance has six main styles:

- ◆ Odissi (also called Orissi)
- ◆ Bharata Natyam
- ◆ Kuchipudi
- ◆ Kathakali
- ◆ Manipuri
- ◆ Kathak

While each style is unique, they all share *nritta* (movements with rhythm) and *nritya* (storytelling in movement and gestures). *Nritta* are based on *tala* (rhythm) with changing tempos. In *nritya*, the gestures of the hands and face, especially the eyes, move with the rest of the body to communicate with the audience. *Nritya* includes *mudra* (hand gestures) and *abhinaya* (expression).

*Mudras* are gestures of one or both hands to convey ideas or symbols. They also represent animals such as a deer or elephant and elements of nature, such as the sky or water. *Abhinaya* convey emotion of a story, mood, and a character's role. Dances can tell a story or just be pure movement.

In many of the classical dance styles, performances are seen at festivals, where dancers first honor the ground with their fingertips. With folded hands they greet a statue of a god placed on an altar. This statue usually represents Shiva. The master teacher is then acknowledged. In the first dance, one hopes to gain favor from the gods; *nritta* dance with rhythmic variations follows. A *nritya* dance, in which a story is told through movement, concludes the performance.

## Master Teachers

Master teachers, often called gurus, train classical Indian dancers in the carefully preserved styles that have been performed for centuries. Students often dance in early childhood through their adult years. Today, students continue the ritual of following strict codes of conduct in class that emphasize respect for their teachers and for discipline.

Dances of India are as varied as the country itself. They may reflect one of the many religions, like the Hindu Bharata Natyam or regional folk traditions such as the energetic Punjabi dances, the historical Moghul court dance of Kathak or popular Hindi movie dances (often called Bollywood). Kathak is unique for its thick mask-like make-up, heavy skirts, and turned-in feet. Traditional Kathakali, performed only by men, depict epic dance dramas that utilize the ancient martial arts.

*Kathakali dancer. Photo transferred to Commons by [User: Jovianeye](#)*



*Kathakali dancer. Photo transferred to Commons by [User: Jovianeye](#)*

Original contemporary dances are now created throughout the Indian culture, which reflect not only the ancient texts but issues, both joyous and controversial, of modern times.

*The classical dances of India are honored throughout the world for their beauty, power, and expression of the spirit.*

## Reference

Oliver, W., ed. *Dance and Culture: An Introductory Reader*. National Dance Association, 2009