

A Critical Study of Classical Dance Education in Indian Universities

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Abstract

Art, in India, is a sadhana aimed at achieving the eternal bliss, ananda. Indian Classical dance practice, through ages had formulated a comprehensive grammar for the beautiful language of movements. 20th Century witnessed performing Arts such as Traditional and Classical Dance forms being officially categorised as 'Classical Dances of India' by the Department of Culture, Government of India and soon after, these forms were accepted as major disciplines for higher studies in many of Indian Universities. All the ten Classical Dance forms are taught in a Universities these days. However, as the years passed, 'performing side' of the dance disciplines weakened and the thrust area remained 'the theoretical and procedural areas' associated with academics and finally, half-baked possessing higher Degrees in dance were pumped into the society by such a faulty 'dance for degree sake' system in place. Later, those possessing such higher degrees seen bypassing the real talents and becoming teachers in the undergraduate and postgraduate departments. For Indian Classical Dancing to emerge as a fully matured discipline encompassing all the areas associated with it, a lot more to be done jointly where University Grants Commission & affiliated Universities, state & central Academies, Cultural Departments, revered Gurus, subject experts, media, art critics, rasikas etc have critical roles to play. And thus, a system skillfully blending the 'art' with academics is to be devised and implemented by the U.G.C without much delay.

Keywords: Performing Art, Indian Classical Dance, UGC, Kerala Kalamandalam, Kalakshetra

Article 14 of Indian Constitution¹ envisages equality at all levels. Our educational system crafted in accordance with the democratic and secularist principles, ensures almost unconditional access to every aspirant of study. In tune with the research and development happening around the world, certain disciplines which were once considered as minor areas of study have become major subjects over a period of time. Pure science and literature was further split up to be offered as undergraduate and postgraduate programs by Indian universities.

¹ Art 14. The state shall not deny to any person equality before the law or the equal protection of the laws within the territory of India.

A handful of institutions such as Kerala Kalamandalam, Kalakshetra etc founded much before independence with a vision to offer serious training in performing arts are continued to be engaged in offering in depth studies in classical dance and music even today. It is true that at a time when those institutions were started functioning; only very few aspirants could reach on to them. Both the management as well as the students had faced many hardships during their initial days of inception. In due course, many universities and academies were seen setting up departments in all the styles of classical Indian dance and music and started offering diploma and post diploma programs.

By the close of 20th century, diploma courses were almost discontinued. Fresh undergraduate and postgraduate courses were started in line with the direction issued by the University Grants Commission. However, it is worth noting that while issuing regulations that are having the force of a central Act, the U.G.C. has always been dealing with performing art disciplines in equal terms with other subjects such as physics, mathematics or linguistics. Pertinent point for consideration is whether a performing art discipline that demands active participation and total involvement of students can equally be treated with other subjects such as science, literature or technology? What will be consequential to such a move? Let's examine.

Performing arts training is special in many ways. Here in this article, the scope of discussion is limited to classical dance training in universities due to fear of elaboration. From curriculum to the very objective of training, age and physical condition of aspirant, timing and duration of training, evaluation methodology etc everything differ in the pedagogical approach of a classical dance subject.

A. Age and physical condition of the aspirant

Many universities admit students between 18-25 years of age to undergraduate programs in dance. Some universities do not restrict any age limit at all. It is also not mandatory² for a candidate seeking admission to degree courses in dance disciplines to possess prior knowledge of dancing as a prerequisite.

Not just the taste or talent that matters in dance education. Dance as a performing art, demands total involvement of one's entire body and soul. The student should be physically fit to practice for four to five hours a day. As per the age old training practice, it is recommended to start dance training before attaining the age of ten. This is important for getting one's body tuned to a particular classical style in which the training is sought. But, this is impossible in a present functional framework of universities, and only way to overcome this situation is to give more

² University Grants Commission regulations issued from time to time under UGC Act, 1956

rigorous practice to the students for a larger time duration. But, there also, UGC places a time stipulation, as a result, it is difficult to offer a program for more than six hours a day.

B. Curriculum with lesser space for ‘performance’ in dance

In the first and second years of undergraduate course, out of the total 25-30 hours week schedule, the core subject of dance will be allocated with only 5-6 hours a week and the rest will be occupied by 2-3 languages and a complementary or subsidiary subject. In the half-yearly semester system followed these days, the teachers will be under huge pressure to complete the portions assigned to them within 15-16 weeks. With the total 80-90 hours allotted for the core subject in a semester, the entire drama is to planned and executed such as teaching intricate *varnam(s)*, *hastas*, *charis*, *adavus* etc. And what more to be expected from a graduate who comes out of a university with such a degree in dance?

Dance is a performing art and it is said to be a beautiful language of movements. Learning the very grammar of such a comprehensive language of movements takes time and further building up on it, requires utmost dedication on the part of an attentive student. Time is an essential component in a performance art education. There should be deliberations focused on reducing the number of other subjects and allocating more hours to the performance side of dancing. We cannot blame the students for the deterioration in quality. The UGC and universities under it, should act to provide a conducive environment with sufficient time allocation for practical side of dance. Do the students of dance really need to study 2-3 languages and other subsidiary subjects? Let’s rethink.

C. Time of study, unexpected strikes and holidays

It is true that an inquisitive student can learn theory from texts or other media. However, the performance aspects of a classical dance cannot be mastered without the able guidance of a guru. The more time is allocated for practical studies the better will be the outcome of program. As the studies prove, it is better to provide physical training in the early hours of the day when the mind and body are fresh. Strikes are common in the institutions of higher studies in our country. And with the red-inked holidays already marked on the calendar, it is difficult to ensure at least 180 days of teaching in a year. At this juncture, discussions must be initiated among the stakeholders as to whether dance be offered strictly as a residential program by universities so that more productive early hours of training can be ensured. Being a subject dealing with our culture and tradition, can we free dance campuses from strikes and restrict the total number of holidays?

D. Involving Academies, Doordarshan and panel of Gurus in dance education

Indian society is yet to accept dancing as a full-fledged profession. In any professional studies, a regulatory bodies of experts are also made part and parcel of such programs offered by the universities, be it Medical Council of India and Indian Medical Association in the case of

Practice of medicine, Bar Council of India and Bar Associations in the case of Legal education and practice etc. However, even after many decades of functioning, UGC has not adopted a single step in this direction. The state and central cultural departments and academies functioning under them should have a say in the dance education. Doordarshan, the national TV channel authorised to grading of artistes must also be a party in such programs. *Sabhas* and other event organisers may be requested to offer platforms for blooming talents while doing the program. A panel of legendary Gurus associated with each style of dance must be constituted and given the responsibility of supervising the graduate programs to ensure the quality in classical dance education.

Aadya Kaktikar, in her scholarly article writes: “why do we dance and why do we teach? What do we teach/What meaning does it create? Who do we teach and who do we leave out? Where will we go from here? Is dance to remain the pursuit of the elite few who make it to the professional stage? Can the scope of training in dance be expanded? Can dance be a legitimate source of knowledge creation? Will dance ever move from extra-curricular to mainstream curriculum? These are dance teachers need to ask themselves.”³

Firstly, we need to be clear about the objective of dance programs offered in Universities. With these programs in place, are we in the process of making dance scholars or the real practitioners of dance? A world which is full of theories and scholarly people will be desolate and barren without a handful of beautiful dancers around, talented enough to stand strong against the test of time and capable of carrying forward the rich tradition and legacy of this land.

³ Aadya Kaktikar, *Dance Education in Indian: Some Issues and Questions*, (2015)
<https://globalrasika.com/2015/03/17/dance-education-in-india-some-issues-and-questions/>