

India Culture Comes to You: Dances of India

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Dance is a form of communication that brings out the innermost feelings and at the same time depicts the cultural aspects of a civilization. Classical dances of India were born in the temples and they are the dances of the mind, soul and divine. They still follow the rules set by Bharata (the master teacher and a saint) in his Natyashastra (Science of Dancing) from second century AD. Since then, the art of dance has passed on to the next generation in a Guru Sishaya Parampara (teacher to student tradition).

Classical dance, along with folk dances, present a spectacular aspect of this magnificent and continuous dance tradition. The beautiful choreography of these dances reflects highly complex technique and elegant mime. Every simple gesture has a meaning. The intricate movements — eye, finger and facial expressions are all symbolic. Due to the dances' expression of devotional life and relationship to spirituality, each rehearsal, recital or presentation still begins and ends with a prayer.

There are mainly seven styles of classical dances. Each style lends itself to both solo or group performances. The professional has a substantial knowledge and appreciation of the thematic and philosophical content of India's storehouse of myth and legend, in addition to a thorough grounding technical skill. The expression of various forms of poetic verse pose a challenge to the dancer. In these, she or he assumes the role of the main character of a theme and depicts a whole range of reactions given to a situation.

To be able to express subtle emotions, a dancer has to be sensitive, abundantly creative and inspired. The dancer's ability to present a story at several levels of meaning absorbs the attention of the audience. The dancer in Indian classical forms is visually among the most colorful and fascinating. The dancer is adorned from head to foot in such an array of costumes and jewelry that one wonders how she or he is able to move at all.

The majority of the dance styles are rooted in Hinduism, more specifically, in Hindu myth and custom. This is clearly evident in the verses used for interpretation, the sculptural evidence in ancient Hindu temples and in the very philosophy underlying the dance style. It includes melody, rhythm, poetry, drama and mime.

"Pure dance" at its best should bring unalloyed joy, uncontaminated by either more subtle or stronger moods. In Indian dance, attention gets drawn to the expression on the dancer's face rather than to the line of the body or of the movement. This is in contrast to the art of ballet, where the dancer's expression and execution of movements are strongly influenced by the role he or she is portraying. Here, "pure dance" is not a vehicle for expressing varying moods. It is a decorative passage of dance.

To appreciate this, the artist and the viewer have to be trained about the culture: not merely in terms of knowledge of a particular art form or mere expertise, but in terms of a total awareness and appreciation of life, people, manners and customs.

Pre-Show Activities

Activity One

There are several dance styles in India. On a map of India, identify where these dance traditions have originated. What similarities and differences do you find between them? Describe how the surrounding culture and religion have influenced dancing in India.

How does this relate to dance in North America? How did the surrounding cultures and lifestyles influence dance in North America? Use the library and internet as your resource.

Activity Two

A feature of Hinduism (most predominant religion in India) is its caste system, a set of cultural rules which place individuals in a particular socio-economic status. The major groups are: Brahmins (priest caste), Kshatriyas (warrior), Vaishyas (merchant), and Sudras (laborers).

Within these groupings are several sub-castes. The Hindu caste system has an overt set of societal rules. Within every culture there exists a system of group distinctions. How does the Hindu caste system differentiate from classifications in the North American culture? Are there life style differences among these different groups in the United States? How does the Hindu caste system relate to the hierarchical system in the U.S.? On a map of Cincinnati, outline the different neighborhoods. Comment on the similarities and differences.

Activity Three

Gandhi led the people of India to independence from British Rule. He is still admired today for his belief in nonviolent opposition. Discuss the concept of nonviolent resistance. What are the things that fascinate you about Gandhi's life? Discuss how Gandhi influenced Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Civil Rights Movement in America.

Activity Four

Ramayan and Mahabharat are the most famous and the longest epics in the world (you can find shorter versions and children's versions of it too). All the heroes and heroines are worshipped by the Hindus all over the world, even today. Which character(s) fascinate you the most, in these epics and why? Compare them to the stories in the Greek mythology and stories from American culture.

Activity Five

The British and other westerners experienced a bit of culture shock when they first viewed Hindu sculpture. European art had developed a different set of aesthetic criteria than their counterparts in India. Since the Renaissance, artists in Europe produced realistic art, depicting the world as it appears. Conversely, Hindu art is symbolic, the images do not appear how we see them. Certain features are emphasized to express a particular meaning or a message. Compare and contrast the opinions on the visual and symbolic representation of sculptures and paintings of gods and goddesses of Hindu religion and its relation to art.

Post-Show Activities

Activity One

Pretend you are planning to visit India. Design a travel plan that includes all the details. Use a map to plan your travel and describe the reasons for choosing this route and the significance of the place(s) you would like to visit. Describe the weather conditions, food habits, currency exchange, language difference. Discuss how you will work out these cultural differences to make your travel fun.

Activity Two

Clothing in India is most elegant and breathtaking. Designing costumes can be a challenging effort. Choose a time period, religion, socio-economic level and design male and female (boy or girl) costumes. Use creativity in selecting the needed materials. Describe the research you have done in creating them. Explain how costume/clothing of people represents their lifestyles. How does climate effect costume/clothing?

Activity Three

All the holidays in the world have a unique story behind them. These stories help us in understanding the culture of the people in that society. Select an Indian holiday and describe it. How does understanding the holiday help you in learning to appreciate cultural diversity?

Activity Four

Homeopathy and Ayurveda are ancient and very popular medical tradition in India and its neighboring countries. Yoga and meditation are part of curing diseases. What are the advantages and disadvantages between Western and Homeopathic medicine practices? Do you believe Homeopathic medicine still has relevance in today's world, why or why not?

Activity Five

The Taj Mahal is one of the wonders of the world. It stands as a loving memory by the King Shajahan to his wife. This magnificent structure has an intriguing architectural value.

- Build a model of Taj Mahal with the materials of your choice. Describe the process you had to go through to recreate the Taj Mahal (include details on blue print, mathematical calculations, geometry, etc.) Dedicate it to the most important people in your life. Explain why you chose this individual.
- Have your students study the building of the Taj Mahal. Have a local architect come in and talk about the mathematics of architecture.