



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Arts

THE RELEVANCE OF MYTHS AND MYTHOLOGY IN CLASSICAL DANCE IN 21ST CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

Classical dance is ancient and highly structured, with a history spanning over 3, 000 years. The Natyashastra, a comprehensive and foundational text, gives detailed descriptions of classical dance, music, and drama. Dance is intimately connected to Nataraja — the cosmic dancer, Lord Shiva, who symbolizes the rhythm of the universe. The depiction of age-old myths in classical dance forms, particularly in Hindu mythology with figures like Shiva, Radha, Krishna, and Durga and others has been a long-standing tradition in Indian art. While these stories are indeed ancient, their relevance continues to spark debate, especially in the context of contemporary issues like climate change, war, social justice etc.

INTRODUCTION

Shiva as Nataraja is the **cosmic dancer** who maintains the balance of the universe through the continuous cycle of Creation (Srishti), Preservation (Sthiti), Destruction (Samhara), Concealment (Tirobhava), Grace (Anugraha). He is both immanent (in the world) and transcendent (beyond it). His dance is not just artistic, but cosmic—a profound representation of the universe's rhythm and the eternal flow of time and consciousness.

Iconography Of Lord Shiva As Nataraja (Cosmic Dancer)

- Right Hand Holding The Damru (Drum)**
 - Symbolism:** Creation, rhythm of the universe
 - Meaning:** The Damru represents the primordial sound (*Nada*) from which the universe originates. This is the beat of creation — time and space coming into being.
- Left Hand Holding Fire (Agni)**
 - Symbolism:** Destruction or transformation
 - Meaning:** Fire symbolizes the dissolution of the cosmos — not an end, but a necessary transformation, making way for rebirth.
- One Hand in Abhaya Mudra (Protective Gesture)**
 - Symbolism:** Protection, reassurance, fearlessness
 - Meaning:** A blessing to devotees, showing that Shiva is the protector from evil and ignorance.
- Other Hand Crossing the Body Gracefully**
 - Symbolism:** Connection between different forces
 - Meaning:** This often points toward the raised foot (liberation), indicating the path to salvation and grace.
 - Legs And Posture**

Right Leg Pressing Down a Dwarf Demon (Apasmara)

- Symbolism:** Suppression of ignorance and ego
- Meaning:** Apasmara represents spiritual ignorance. By subduing it, Shiva allows enlightenment and wisdom to prevail.
- Left Leg Raised And Pointing Upward**
- Symbolism:** Liberation (*moksha*), transcendence
- Meaning:** The raised leg signifies escape from the cycle of birth and death—freedom from worldly attachments.

Facial Expression And Presence

- Calm And Balanced Expression**
- Despite the dynamic movement and cosmic forces he embodies—creation, destruction, preservation—Shiva remains **still, serene, and centered**, representing the **inner stillness** and **balance** within chaos.

This depiction carries immense philosophical and spiritual meaning within Hinduism.

Classical dance like Odissi, Kathak, Bharatanatyam, kathakali,

Mohininattam, Kuchipudi , Manipuri and Sattriya often draws from mythological and spiritual narratives. These dances are not just about telling stories—they are vehicles for transmitting cultural values, aesthetics, and moral lessons. The stories of Krishna, Durga, or Mahishasura represent the eternal battle between good and evil, the triumph of righteousness, and the significance of divine intervention in the world.

These themes remain relevant today because they speak to the struggles we face in our own times—whether it's fighting injustice, standing up for what's right, or finding inner strength. While the characters might be ancient, the underlying themes resonate across time.

The Ancient Stories Often Serve As Metaphors For Struggles That Transcend Historical Periods. For Example:

Mahishasura's Defeat By Durga: In some modern interpretations, Durga's battle against the demon can be seen as a metaphor for fighting environmental destruction (Mahishasura representing forces of greed, exploitation, and ecological harm), while Durga represents nature, purity, and resilience.

Krishna And Radha's Love: The dynamic between Krishna and Radha can symbolize the relationship between the human spirit and nature, divine love and connection. In today's context, their relationship could be reinterpreted to explore themes of compassion, mutual respect, and balance between human progress and the natural world.

The Power Of Storytelling:

Dance is not just about the physical movement but also about storytelling. Through classical dance, performers often reinterpret traditional stories to highlight contemporary issues. For example, climate change could be symbolized by the destruction and renewal cycles in nature, using the graceful and expressive movements of classical dance to communicate urgency and the need for harmony.

Bridge Between Tradition And Modernity:

Many classical dancers and choreographers are re imagining these stories to reflect current social and political issues. Contemporary adaptations can give ancient narratives a modern twist. For instance: dancers might integrate the struggle for gender equality, environmental conservation, or anti-war themes into traditional forms, thus making the classical dance form more relevant to younger, global audiences.

Creating A Dialog Across Cultures:

One reason why these age-old myths are still depicted is that they offer a universal language of myth, art, and spirituality that transcends cultures. When Krishna or Durga is shown in classical dance, it's not only for an Indian audience—it can be

appreciated by anyone familiar with the concept of good overcoming evil or the archetypes of the divine feminine and the hero's journey.

Cultural Identity And National Pride:

In a globalized world, these myths and their artistic expressions also help to preserve cultural identity. They're a way for the younger generation to connect with their roots, understand the past, and maintain a sense of cultural pride. The retelling of these stories helps to ensure that cultural heritage isn't lost as society modernizes.

CONCLUSION:

The relevance of these classical dance performances is not in the literal re-enactment of ancient myths but in the layers of meaning they offer that transcend their original time and context. They invite reflection, spark conversations, and adapt in ways that speak to the concerns of the 21st century.

Perhaps, in a dance performance today, Krishna might still symbolize divine guidance, but Durga could embody the fierce protector of the earth, fighting off modern-day Mahishasuras—those threats to the planet, peace, and human dignity. Durga, the primordial goddess, shines as the first eternal symbol of women's empowerment in society. The allegories of Radha and Durga, shows how classical dance holds within it layers of meaning that can transform individuals and society. When we talk about Radha as her soul's yearning for the divine Krishna, it adds a universal, spiritual layer to the dance. It's not just a story—it's an inner journey that the dancer and the audience embark on together.