SOCIOLOGY OF INDIAN BALLET

Uday Shankar

Limitations of Bourgeois Expression

Shanti Bardhan

The Story of a Thwarted Rebel

VINAYAK PUROHIT

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Dedicated to
Uday Shankar and his colleagues,
Shanti Bardhan and Prabhat Ganguly,
and to
Narendra Sharma, Mrinalini Sarabhai,
Sonal Mansingh and Gul Bardhan,
who sustained and deepened
my interest in ballet studies.

Uday Shankar

LIMITATIONS OF BOURGEOIS EXPRESSION

I can still vividly recollect, after a lapse of over forty years, the electrifying stage presence of Uday Shankar as he danced his way into my heart in the resplendent form of Kartikeya, as he presented the very personification of our raga **malkauns.** Since, the mid-thirties, when listening to **malkauns,** I have so often been transported back to my childhood, and to the rippling muscles of the figure Kartikeya-Shankar.

I did not know consciously at that time that much of what had moved me was pure showman-ship, sheer impressario magic, skillful display and organised stagecraft. It was much later that I realised that Uday Shankar's forte was his ability to evoke disciplined effort, nay devotional response, from the naive and the enthusiastic who surrounded him and with their aid to achieve a pre-designed impact on the audience.

He had himself been naive and enthusiastic in the circle around Anna Pavlova in the twenties. It was Willy Rothenstein, his painting teacher at the Royal Academy in London, who had induced Uday to try to help the prima ballerina put up a Hindu item in her multi-national repertory, after she had broken away from the Diaghilev ensemble. Uday had rushed where others would have been wary to tread. And Pavlova had demonstrated that a little choreography, and a lot of decor, lighting, costumes and make-up were enough to lift up any set of movements which may today be called 'Hindu Wedding' and with a little alternation "Radha Krishna Dancing" tomorrow.

Uday Shankar had not taken long to grasp this algebraic character of western balletic movements. To enrich and enliven his libretto, he had merely to add naturalism. This is how, I believe, he was pushed towards contemporaenity in expression. He observed life flowing around him particularly as initially he lacked the equipment to try

anything more than a mimesis of modernity. Later, he did obtain the assistance of classical gurus, but by that time the die had been cast. And let us give him credit that he deliberately chose not to bury his sensibility in traditional cliches. He did lean upon the classical elements, whether Bharat Natyam, Kathakali, Manipuri or Kathak - and in those days, the classical repertoire did not extend much further than these four and Mohini Attam - but he did so as an enlightened tourist. He placed himself in the situation of the visitor from abroad, who wanted to sample Indian cuisine, admire Indian customs and costumes and savour the typical neckmovements with which Indians accompanied even their most ordinary conversations. The Shankar Troupe carried this tourist's vision of India to the non-tourist audiences abroad.

Thus Uday Shankar devised "Labour and Machinery" and "Ramlila" and innumerable little items displaying the fairs and festivals, the foibles and fables, of India and Indians. The "naturalistic detail" would neatly dovetail into the "algebraic sweep" across the stage, the angular thrust characteristic of a specific craft occupation would meld into the vague hippy strut of the chorus-line, the sharp bird-like flutter of the fingers would dissolve into the ponderous, awkward, splayed thighs chaired-legs walk of the royalty.

To complete the line-up for the comprador and contemporary Indian bourgeois expression for Indian dance that Uday Shankar was seeking, all that needed to be added was S. Hurok's polish in presentation and economy in execution. This he acquired by studying the master's strategy and tactics as he repeatedly toured abroad under the Hurok banner. "All that glitters is not gold" was Hurok's motto, and Uday soon proved that "all that glitters is tinsel".

He also made his troupe compact. One man had to fulfill multiple functions - as dancer, musician, lightsman, property-man, stagehand, makeup-man, sweeper, cook, tailor and what not. Versatility was at a premium, since a small group had to be self-sufficient and travel right round the world on a shoestring budget, whilst supporting Uday Shankar's luxuries. This was possible only by split-second timing on-stage and iron discipline behind, which naturally

broke down now and then - once in a memorable and violent crisis reported by Hurok, and at another time when Uday closed down the Almora Centre to make the film "Kalpana" in Madras.

"Kalpana" brought to the surface all the weaknesses of Uday Shankar and of the Indian bourgeoisie which had arrived too late on the historic scene. The maudlin sentimentality, the flimsy and irrational plot structure, the meaningless bravura, and the futile, pompous and self-satisfied gestures, the emptiness and the hollowness of the message - all these made the movie a fantastic failure. That "Kalpana" could have been attempted is Uday's triumph. That the attempt should have failed was inevitable.

By the late forties, Uday was exhausted. "Shadow-play" and "Shankerscope" could not hide the reality of loss of vigour and vision. He had given that he could. And it is to Uday Shankar's eternal credit what despite the iron discipline that verged on the dictatorial, he did not finally stunt the growth of his pupils. In fact, his need for the versatile response forced him to stimulate them and shake them up fundamentally. Shanti Bardhan, Narendra Sharma, Prabhat Ganguli, Sachin Shankar, Guru Dutt, and many more, carried forward the search for the contemporary expression that Uday Shankar's life had come to epitomise. Uday was himself too much a child of his times and circumstances, far too naive and simplistic in his outlook, far too bewildered by the problem that is India, to offer anything more than half-hearted suggestions, muddled answers, and most of the time, just anxious questions.

But let us recollect with affection and gratitude even the half-liberation that he sought. At least he tried to put behind him, our terpsichorean feudalism, and forge ahead towards a modern idiom, of the last fifty years. That Indian history did not provide much scope for the freeplay of the bourgeois idiom is a tragedy that must be actuely felt by a segment of our society. We can only record the tragedy and look forward to the triumph of other classes to come. But when it comes, that future triumph forged by the working masses of India would necessarily include an absorption of the lessons that Uday Shankar taught all of us.

Shanti Bardhan

The Story of a Thwarted Rebel.

I

Deposing before the John Dewey Commission of Inquiry into the Moscow Trials, a few years before his assasination by Stalin's agent, Leon Trotsky said, in response to a question about his life's tragedy, that "he was happy to have been an instrument in the hands of historic forces and had found fulfillment in so acting." There is an air of flamboyance about this statement, which suited Trotsky's polymathic personality, and which sentiment he reiterated in the manifesto **Art and Revolution** that he had issued just at the outset of World War II, jointly with Diego Rivera and Andre Berton, in which the authors had stated: "In the contemporary crisis it was impossible for art not to be revolutionary".

Historic forces apparently cover a large territory. Actually, they are quite easy to interpret and understand. They primarily mean the socio-economic compulsions that operate within each specific politico-cultural environment. We all exist and work within these gross sociological parameters. We are all creatures of the society in which we are born. We function within the time capsule that envelopes us and we all can have only those goals which societal processes impose upon us. Who can opt out of the national space within which we move and escape the revolutioary or non-revolutionary choices which the critical times have forced upon us?

That is how and why biography merges into social history. So it was with Shanti Bardhan.

II

The formative period of Shanti's life was spent at Uday Shankar's Almora centre in the late thirties.* Almora was an idyllic retreat in the foothills of the Himalayas located far from the madding crowds of Calcutta, Bombay, Delhi and Madras. It lay crushed by a triple backwardness forced upon India by British imperialism - the retardation of the country as a whole, secondly of rural India, and tertiarily of taluqdari Uttar Pradeshi hill area. The centre was financially sustained by private charitable donations of a confused conglomerate, ranging from Ahmedabad and Delhi textile magnates and sundry landlords and princelings to middle class **bhadralok** of Bengal and elsewhere.

Uday Shankar's personality and discipline were overwhelming. From the time that he had helped, in the mid-twenties, Anna Pavlova to compose fairy tales and costume shows based on **Radha-Krishna** and **Hindu Wedding** themes, Uday Shankar had been on the international impressario circuit, catering to the imperialist and Euro-American taste for the exotic, the naive and the barbaric.

But this was the late thirties and war clouds were gathering on all the continents. The Great Depression had left its mark. A new 1935 constitution had been promulgated. Communal fires were being stoked rigorously by the alien rulers. Regional linguistic movements, small-scale no-rent peasant campaigns and sporadic working class strikes were springing up here, there and everywhere. The revivalist trend in dance, heavily promoted through Shantiniketan, Adyar and Kalamandalam by Tagore, Rukmini Devi and Vallathol Menon could not suffice. Something new had to be attempted.**

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* See companion study "Uday Shankar : Limitations of Bourgeois Expression", **Bhumika,** Vol.1, No.2, Nov.80. to Jan. 81.

** For a study of wider trends see Vinayak Purohit, **Arts of Transitional India : 20th Century,** Vol.1, 1986, and Vol.2 (1988).

We cannot say exactly who was responsible for the conception of **Labour and Machinery.** It is certain that Uday Shankar had the final say. But Shanti seems to have played a significant part in the realisation of the conception. The execution was impeccable. Hands, legs and torsos moved with fiendish mechanical precision. But this technical virtuosity portrayed what ? Merely human exhaustion, frailty, boredom, frustration and pain. No revolutionary alienation or confrontation was in evidence anywhere. A marvellous theme petered out into a descriptive pantomime.

III

Shanti's second period encompassed the years that his troupe*** spent in touring and entertaining imperialist army units as members of the Indian People's Theatre Association's dance division. The IPTA was the cultural front of the Communist Party of India. That was the time of Communist collaboration with imperialism. We may also include the immediate post-war years when the IPTA group broke up and Shanti and his colleagues were lured by or gravitated towards the Nehruite - socialist-oriented Indian National Theatre which presented the **Discovery of India** ballet based on Jawarhalal Nehru's amateurish eponymous historiographical effort, at the Asian Relations Conference, New Delhi, in 1947.

Some people have considered this to be Shanti's best period. I do not personally subscribe to this view. I think that the best was his third and last period.

Anyway, one can see the logic of the development. As members of the IPTA troupe, Shanti and his colleagues had to emphasise entertainment values and showmanship which they had imbibed whilst sitting in Uday Shankar's lap. The mercenary troops reresented a cross-section of rural India. Thus regional folk-dances and songs evoked

*** Perhaps the troupe was not exactly his but its leadership was democratically shared between Simkie, Devendra, Rajendra and Ravi Shankars, Ali Akbar and Shanti Bardhan.

an automatic response. These were also the Popular Front and People's War heydays. Lots of cultural concessions had to be made to the so-called progressive bourgeois art forms.

It was easy to make the transition to Nehruite pseudo-history which in any case was heavily weighed down in favour of white man's myths and imperialist Euro-American fantasies. It was a history without economics, a body without bones. It was a fable of kings and rulers and exploiters, bereft of the slightest understanding of social forces. Not only the body was boneless, it was also without a soul. No ideology informed Nehru's **Discovery of India,** since its author was self-confessedly "a child of both the East and the West, at home nowhere".

It was a perfect comprador set-up and mix-up. At one end was Nehru in search of an international role with his Congress Culture and his Congress co-conspirators who were acquiescing in and promoting the partition of the country. There was also Simkie, Uday Shankar's ex-partner working for the All India Radio, French Broadcasting Section. There was Lala Shriram, New Delhi's textile tycoon, real estate magnate and Uday Shankar's old patron. There were the Socialists, still members of Congress Working Committees, who carried the halo of the 1942 movement and were projecting the Asian Relations Conference as the event of the epoch. There were the army generals Wavell and Mountbatten who were overseeing the organised imperialist retreat and who had known of the IPTA troupe's entertainment potential.

Discovery of India was to proclaim the eternal unity of the nation so as to camouflage the real activity of partitioning, dividing and vivisecting the country, so as to mask the capitalist economy of the country behind socialist slogans and shibboleths and to cover up shady compromises with an aura of high cultural and spiritual values.

The upshot was that the DOI ballet became a revue, a series of pretty and sweet episodes, eclectically strung

together, a panoramic tourist delight, a potpourri of styles and a melange of extravagent gestures.

Shanti was probably uncomfortable with the politico-cultural role thrust upon him. But how could he swim against the overwhelming current ? He had been let down by Uday Shankar and the IPTA. Now he was being betrayed by Nehru, Congress Culture, Socialists and the INT.

He could and did rebel.

IV

Shanti's third period, as we have noted, was his best. He moved away from the superficial concoction of mixed styles. He needed a thematic unity and a structural continuity. Thus came into being **Ramayana,** in single-minded puppet style. No deviations were to be admitted or tolerated. It was pure dance, deliberately restricted with defined, predetermined movements. It was a terpsichorean delight. It was a triumph of creative stylisation.

Then came **Panchatantra** with selected stylised animal movements and several more productions. Shanti would sit under the giant banian tree at the Andheri bungalow and think out new and fresh ideas and permutations. Shanti possessed a deceptive simplicity which appeared to belie the depth of his thinking. He had a directness of approach that would produce startlingly simple choreographic solutions. He was a complete performing artist, more complete than any past or present product of the National School of Drama or of the Oxbridge literary circles that I know of. He could light up a scene with poor equipment like a genius, he was a scenic designer par excellence, he could arrange music and synchopate or harmonise body flexions at his will. He was a master costume designer and an expert make-up man. He could do anything he liked on or with the stage. His memorable dictum as a showman, which he once whispered to me, was : "Give the audience just less than enough."

He was a warm friend and a considerate leader of his dancing colleagues. He was modest to a fault, unassuming to a degree that is indeed rare. He was loyal to his old friends and to fond memories. He had wit and charm. He was aware of the world around him. And he was lost in this world.

Life had beaten down his rebellion. **Labour and Machinery** had managed to say nothing. The IPTA had made **Immortal India** into an imperialist propaganda affair. Nehru and INT had turned **Discovery of India** into a pseudo-socialist stunt. He had been thwarted everywhere. But his spirit would go on struggling. **Ramayana** and **Panchatantra** represent the highest achievements of our contemporary dance. The themes were old, for the bourgeoisie in India lacked the historic thrust that can uncover new themes. It could not confront and recreate. It must temporise, compromise and compradorise. This is the tragedy of our times. Shanti Bardhan was a child of our tragic times and a rebel innovator who was inevitably thwarted.

Vinayak Purohit

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The Arts of Transitional India : 20th Century, Popular Prakashan, 1988

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