

India Honors the Classical Dances of the Nation

By DANIEL KEREN

SPREAD throughout a territory of approximately 1,200,000 square miles, with a population that is rapidly approaching the 700 million mark, the giant land of India dominates the entire Asian subcontinent and is home to a wide assortment of ethnic groups. Together, they form a most unique national entity. Over 1500 distinct languages and dialects are spoken by the diverse groups that have, since the abolishment of British colonial rule in 1947, combined to develop this ancient land into one of the major emerging global superpowers.

Classical Dances

As in all nations blessed with a rich and ongoing creative culture, India has, over a period of many millenium, developed a rather advanced style of classical dance. The art form has been refined to an exquisite level and as such continues to both educate and entertain. These classical dances play a major role in the social and cultural awareness of today's Indian populace. For many tourists, these dances allow a

rare insight in the unique traditions that have enabled the Indian people to overcome recent centuries of colonial interference.

Regional Dance Variations

Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan has, in an essay on Indian dance, explained that most of today's classical dances have their roots in the early civilizations of both the Mohenjodaro and the Harappa, cultures which arose from within the Indus Valley around the year 3,000 B.C. The many regions that comprise the Indian nation have, because of their previous isolation, managed to create interesting variations in certain basic dance forms. That we know such dance styles of today are indeed derived from the original creations of a few thousand years ago, is supported by what Mrs. Vatsyayan terms as literary and sculptural evidence. From the basic work, the "Natyasastra", is found textual descriptions of the six dances that form the basic classical dances of India today. Of course, in recent centuries, the individual dances have gone

through some noted revisions. But the basic style can still be traced to the early creations of the Mohenjodaro and Harappa civilizations.

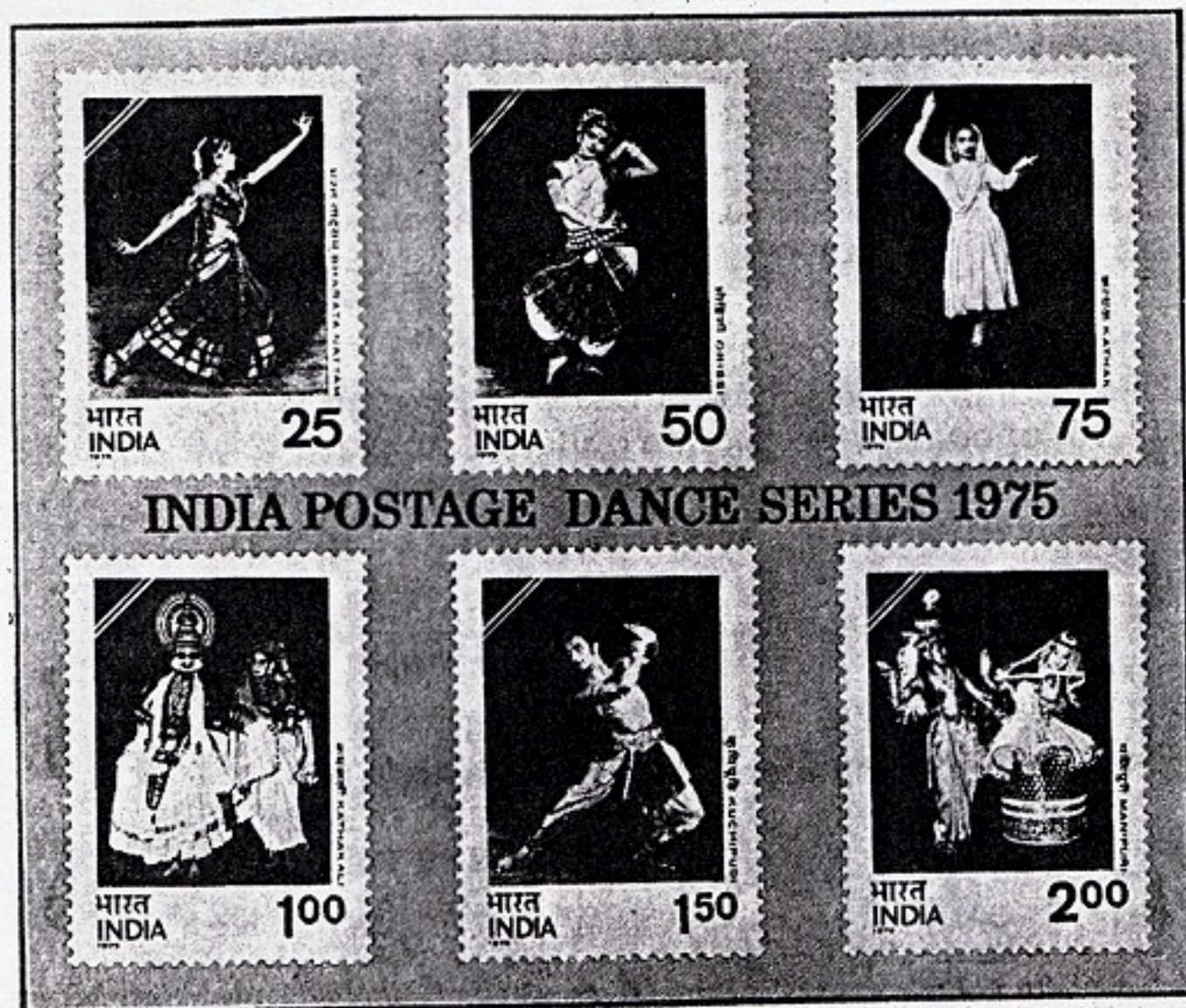
To focus attention on their valuable cultural heritage, the India Post Office released a series of six stamps on October 20, 1975. Designed and printed by the staff of India Security Press, this issue has become one of the most popular Indian issues of recent times.

Developed in South India, the "Bharata Natyam", which in its current style was formed some two centuries ago, is featured on the 25 paise stamp. It is a basic component of the traditional drama-dance form titled "Bhagvata Mela". For the most part, the "Bharata Natyam" is a solo dance which is noted for combining such dance techniques as straight lines, diagonals and triangle.

Another style somewhat similar to the "Bharata Natyam" is the "Orissi", which is depicted most elegantly on the 50 paise value. Dance scholars believe that the current form was influenced from the sangita-nataka, a type of musical play, and the akharas. The akharas were special gymnasiums in which special dances were conducted. Remains of 2,000-year-old sculptures (2nd century B.C.) have been uncovered that testify to the early origins of the Orissi dance form. Written records of the "Orissi" are to be found in abundance from around the 12th century of the common era.

Turning to the north, one comes across the Kathak dance (75 paise). Richly communicating a sense of the sophisticated urban dance culture, it displays qualities of intricate craftsmanship and artistic virtuosity. The dance was very popular in the court of the Nawabs. The Kathak style of today is a merging of different dance methods, including techniques applied in the dance-dramas of the Mathura and Brindavan temples, along with the more sophisticated style of the Nawab court.

The popular art form of dance-drama is best epitomized by the "Kathakali". This classical dance utilizes epic mythological subjects for its theme and has the capacity to transmit a sense of



otherworldliness to its viewers. The productions of the "Kathakali" are somewhat gaudy, with over-sized costumes employed to present the image of enlarged human proportions and masks that communicate complex symbolism which involve color; line and design.

The fifth dance depicted on the Indian issue features the "Kuchipudi", which is very similar to the "Bharata Natyam". This narrative dance is most popular in the Andhra Pradesh region. The basic difference in this classical dance mode from that of the "Bharata Natyam" is that the "Kuchipudi" enjoys a style that is recognizably freer and less severe.

The final classical dance of India that is featured on the 1975 issue is that of the "Manipuri". A popular lyrical dance, the "Manipuri" was developed in Eastern India. The current dance mode was fashioned in the aftermath of the rise of the Vaishnava cult. It includes a number of rather sophisticated dance forms which were incorporated from the different religious and ritual dances that were popular within the region from times past.