



## **CHAPTER 6**

### **COMING OF FILMS AND TELEVISION FURTHERED THE DOCUMENTATION OF SOLO CLASSICAL DANCE IN INDIA**



The 'moving pictures' or movies, or films, or cinema came into the global entertainment arena with a storm in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. While the initial efforts were 'silent' with live music played and dialogues spoken from the 'pit', as the filming technology developed, 'sub-titles' came in, displayed within the frame itself. And then it was only a matter of time before sound could be incorporated in the framework, with the actors 'talking', thus leading to the new form being also called 'talkies'.

Cinema had its roots in theatre, but combined dramatic narration, song and music, dance and performance. The fact that it allowed multiple screenings at a fraction of the cost of going to a theatre performance, made it an extraordinarily popular medium with the classes and the masses. Unlike in Western (American and European) cinema, song and dance hardly played any role except in a genre called the 'musical', in Indian cinema, song and dance are an integral part of the film, often taking the narrative forward in a significant way. In fact, song and dance from Bollywood films also have a life of their own outside the film. In India, movie-making quickly became a huge industry, with Hindi language cinema establishing its roots in Mumbai (Bollywood). But also steadily, film-making in regional languages became equally if not more popular. In this process, many theatre actors as well as trained classical dancers, also made their transition to this new medium which made them better known amongst the masses and earned them much more money than theatre did.

It is important to remember here that both cinema and television (and videography), using the technology of moving imagery, are extremely realistic, honest and true-to-life documenters of the dance as it is performed. Since the documented material can be recorded and accessed for later use and study, these technologies become invaluable in the scholarly study of dance movements. As the camera can also zoom in and out, it can also capture intricate footwork, gestural movements, as well as facial expressions with extreme and normal close-ups.

## HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF CLASSICAL SOLO DANCE IN INDIAN CINEMA

Though now a new genre of dance called Bollywood dance has developed and is also a subject of study, in the early days of the movies, directors and screenwriters often incorporated classical and folk dance in the narrative weave of their film. Since most of the older actresses were trained dancers, they held audience attention well. Though it must be mentioned that often the dance styles were considerably compromised to fit in the needs and time-band of the film's movement. It was natural that in most films produced in the southern states of India, dance performances slanted mainly towards Bharatanatyam, while in Hindi and Bollywood films, Kathak, or rather 'mujara' performances, were preferred, especially when the character performing was a 'tawaif' or 'kothewali'. Examples are films like *Pakeezah* and *Umrao Jaan Ada* (both versions) where the main heroine is a *tawaif*. In the first version of *Umrao Jaan Ada* which had actress Rekha in the lead role, her dance guru was the well Kathak maestro, KumudiniLakhia. These films had several instances of solo performances.



**Fig. 1 : Meena Kumari in Pakeezah**

It is interesting to know that some of India's most well-known dancers of the pre-Independence era were quite enamoured of this medium. The legendary Uday Shankar acted in, directed and produced a black and white film, *Kalpna*, that had a thin storyline carried forward by numerous choreographed solo and group dances. The film has become a legend for its most creative treatment to dances. Gopi Krishna and Sitara Devi, both extraordinarily talented Kathak dancers choreographed and often danced in several films that they were associated with.



**Fig. 2 Udayashankar's Kalpana**

There were also director-actors like V. Shantaram, who did not dance themselves but understood the power of dance and therefore chose excellent choreographers to direct the dance sequences and good dancers as leading ladies. Their characters, even when they were not dancers, needed to dance ever so often in the films like *JanakJanakPayalBaaje*, *Navrang*, *Do Aankhen Baraah Haath*, *Pinjara*, *Jal Bin MachhliNritya Bin Bijli*, and so on. *Janak Janak Payal Baaje* in fact had Gopi Krishna in the lead role of a dance teacher and the film focussed on issues of what constitutes classical dance and what does not.



**Fig 3. Smt. Vyjayantimala Bali Devadasi Dance in Piya Milan**

Amongst the known dancer-actresses of the 1960s and 1970s era were Smt. Vyjayantimalabali, Smt. WaheedaRehman, Padmini, Sandhya (who mostly acted in only V Shantaram's later films and had serious dancing roles), Asha Parekh, HemaMalini. Their dancing prowess (both in classical and folk styles) was known to their film producers and directors who often 'wrote' for them roles that helped them exploit this talent. These roles were often that of *apsaras*, devadasis, courtesans, court dancers, *tawaifs*, and such often even magical serpents (*Nagin*) who can take human form.



**Fig.4. Ms. Sandhya and Shri Gopikrishna *Jhanak Jhanak Payal Baje***

Many of these famous films are *Amrapali*, *Nagin*, *Madhumati*, *Ganga Jamuna*, *Sanghursh*, *Devdas*, *Prince*, *Raj Tilak*, *Jewel Thief* (all of Vyjayantimala); *JisDeshmein Ganga Behti Hai*, *Payal* (of Padmini). Padmini acted in more South Indian films than in Hindi ones. *Guide*, *KaagazkePhool*, *Pyasa*, *Neel Kamal*, *MujheJeene Do* where LachhuMaharaj was the choreographer, *TeesriKasam*, *Shatranj Ke Khiladi*, *Dharti*(WaheedaRehman); *Navrang*, *Jal Bin MachliNritya Bin Bijli*, *Pinjara*, *JanakJanakPayalBaaje*, *Do Aankhen Bara Haath* (by Sandhya). Sandhya learnt dance from Gopi Krishna, the choreographer in most of her films). *Dil Deke Dekho*, *Caravan*, *MeraGaonMeraDesh* of Asha Parekh, are mostly known for folk dances though she was a trained Kathak dancer. *Lal Patthar*, *Kudrat*, *Dream Girl*, *Abhinetri*, *Mehbooba*, *Kinara* all of HemaMalini in lead, who is trained in Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi and is still an active classical dance performer at global venues. The important fact here is that in most of these films the actresses performed solo numbers. A popular dramatic turn in many films of this era was often a dance-duel between the heroine and the vamp or the heroine and a musician to ascertain who was better, more talented, and so on. This also gave an opportunity to the dancer-actresses to show off their dancing skills in solo dancing, as for example *Azad* of 1955.



Actresses from south India, Vyjayantimala, Padmini, HemaMalini did dancing roles in several Tamil, Kannada, Malayalam, Telegufilms as well. It is also well worth noting that directors employed accomplished classical dance gurus such as Guru Shri Muthukumar Pillai, Vazoovur Ramaiah Pillai, KN Dhandayudhapani Pillai, Adyar K lakshman, Udupi Lakshminarayan, U. S. Krishna Rao, Shri V. P. Dhananjayan and many more choreograph dance sequences in their films. It was done to maintain the purity of movement and sensitivity of facial and

gestural expression, especially when a song would last barely three to five minutes and needed to convey dramatic narrative as well. (Fig. 5: Ms. Sadhana Bose in *Raj Nartaki*)



This underwent drastic change with the next generation of filmmakers and a special category of dance choreographers, some trained in classical dance but more leaning towards Westernized styles of popular dance, rose on the horizon of Indian films. But still the gurus or well trained classical dancers choreograph the classical number even now. (Devdas –Pt. Birju Maharaj, Aaja Nachale-Vaibhavi Merchant)

**Fig. 6: Ms. Sudha Chandran in movie *Nache Mayuri***

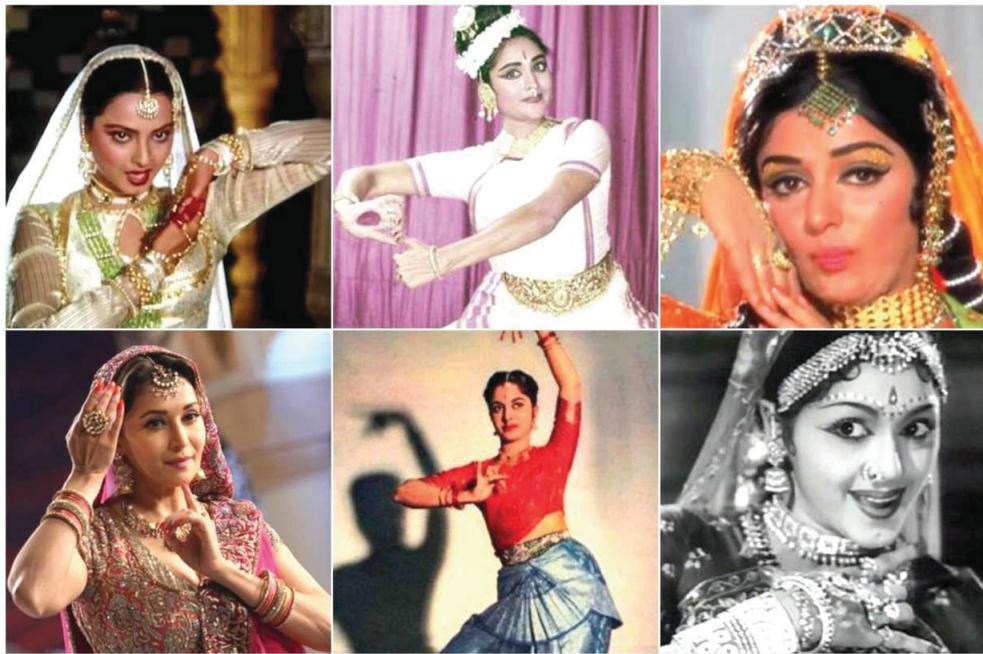


**Fig. 7 Ms. Rekha In Umrao jaan**

The next generation of dancer-actresses (1980s-1990s) were Rekha, Sridevi, Meenakshi Seshadhri, Jaya Prada, Madhuri Dixit. And for the first time, there were male trained dancer-actors too – Kamal Hasan, Govinda, Prabhu Deva. These actresses were trained in classical dance; but while some of the early films, such as *Umrao Jaan Ada*, had a classical dance guru choreographing the dance sequences as did the famous Tandav dance in *Damini*, and Madhuri Dixit's dances in *Devdas* and *Dedh Ishqia* (Pt. Birju Maharaj is believed to have trained the actress for these), the rest of the dances began to have less of a classical angle, and even if they were performed solo they had begun to adopt steps from several dance traditions across the world as well as 'mixes' or fusion of all and sundry. But this period also saw an interesting film like *Nache Mayuri* which was a kind of biopic on dancer-actress Sudha Chandran, a trained dancer who suffered a horrific accident in which she lost a leg but the passion to dance was so strong that she attempted to do so with the artificial Jaipur leg. Sudha Chandran herself acted the role. Where the male dancers

were concerned, the Tamil movie *Sagara Sangamam* starring Kamalahasan, saw a spurt in boys and young men to take dance lessons (this also happened post the release of his Hindi film, *Ek Dujhe ke Liye*). Kamal Hassan proved to all those parents who are afraid of their sons joining in dance studios that male version of classical dance is glamorous, masculine, tasteful and elegant. Even though he was trained in BharataNatyam, in this film Kamal Hassan performs many other styles too.

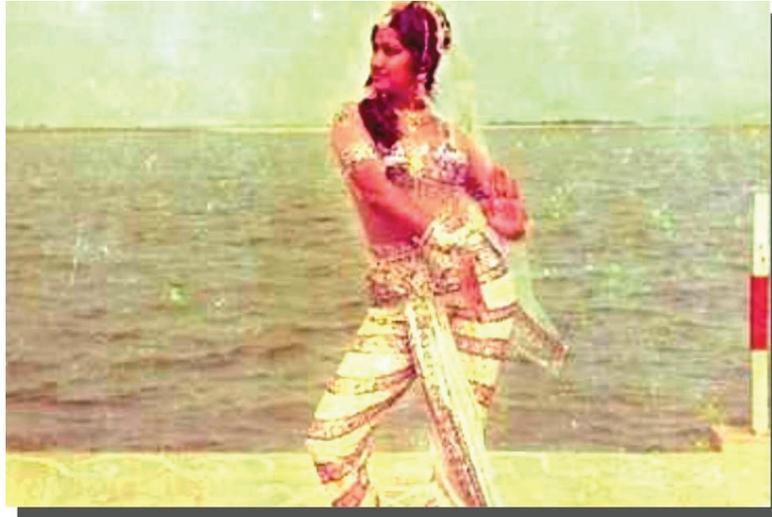
The next generation of actresses (2000s and 2010s) were offered films that included classical dance only if the story narrative demanded it. One example is the film *Bhool Bhulaiya* where the heroine VidyaBalan's character suffers from a psychological disorder and imagines herself as a court dancer in a past birth. Very few of the heroines in this period have any long term training in classical dance forms. There is only one director, Sanjay Leela Bhansali, in whose period films, *BajiraoMastani* and *Padmavat*, extensive dances are presented though most are very elaborate folk dances.



**Fig. 8: All Dancing Queen of Bollywood**

However in the cinema of all the southern states (and regional cinema here is almost as big as Bollywood), classical dance is extremely well appreciated amongst the masses and so BharataNatyam, Kuchipudi, Mohiniattam, even small sequences from

Kathakali, are often featured in their films even today. Most actors and actresses from South India continue to be trained and talented classical dancers. There are many south Indian movies that have even complete though short solo performances of Bharat Natyam and Kuchipudi in them.



**Fig. 9 : Ms. Manju Bhargavi in Shankara-Bharanam**

Some of the examples of South Indian films that were entirely or majorly based on classical dance depicting solo performances have been *Thillana Mohanambal* (Padmini), *Shanakarabharanam* (Manju Bhargavi), *Kannikaa* (Muthukumar Pillai as Nattuvanar), *Sagara Sangamam* (Kamalahasan, Jaya Prada), *Enakkul Oruvan* (Shobhana), *Vanaprastham* (Kathakali artistes), *Anand Bhairavi* (Girish Karnad as priest-teacher of Kuchipudi with a little girl as student), *Dance like a Man* (Shobhana), *Sringaram* (Manju Bhargavi, Aditi Rao Hydari).



**Fig.10 : Ms. Aditi Rao Hydari in Sringaram**

**SOME EXAMPLES OF EXTREMELY POPULAR SOLO CLASSICAL DANCES IN INDIAN MOVIES:**

***Kannagi* ( Tamil- 1942)**

The Tamil epic film *Kannagi* is directed by R.S Mani. It is based on *Shilapadikaaram*, one of the Five Great Epics of Tamil Literature and was released in 1942. Before *Poompuhar*, *Silapadikaaram* was the first Tamil film based on the epic. *Poompuhar* also based on the epic novel, was released in 1964, and was directed by R.S Mani, Lyrics by Udumalai Narayana Kavi and music by S. V. Venkatraman.

R.S. Mani directs *Kannagi*, a mythological fantasy based on *Silapadikaaram* the first century A.D. Tamil saga. The film revolves around Kovalan (played by P.U. Chinnappa), married to the faithful *Kannagi* (actor P. Kannamba). Kovalan subsequently falls in love with the beautiful Madhavi, the dancer (played by N.S. Saroja), who becomes the reason for his ruin. Coming in the last moment *Kannagi* saves him from almost death. She offers to sell her golden anklet to restore the funds.

And such goes the story. In the end, after razing Madhavi's village to the ground, *Kannagi* ascends to heaven.

### **Poompuhar (Tamil 1964)**

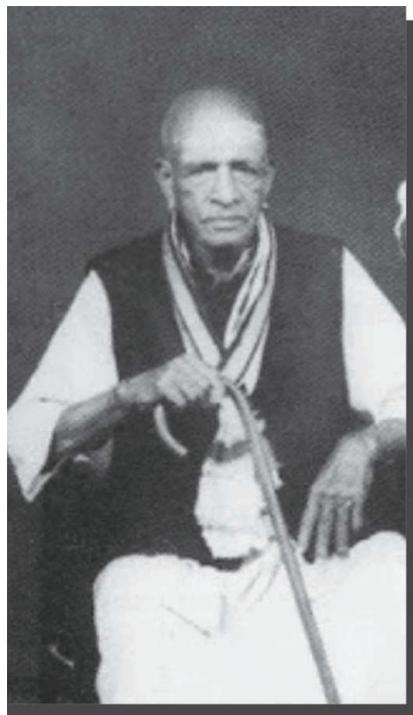
*Poompuhar* is a Tamil epic film directed by P. Neelakantan based on *Silapadikaaram* in 1964. After *Kannagi* in 1942 this is the second movie based on *Silapadikaaram*. C. R. Vijayakumari, Rajasree, SS. Rajendran, and K. B. Sundarambal played the leading roles. It was directed by P. Neelakantan, lyrics by Mayavanathan, and music by R. Sudarsanam

### **Kannika (Tamil, 1947)**

*Kannika* is the first documented Indian film in which one can see a short solo classical dance performance. Kum. Hemamalini Arni was the young dancer being trained by the great Mutthukumara Pillai as the natuvanar. The dance is performed to the famous Kirtanam, 'Natanamadinar ...'.



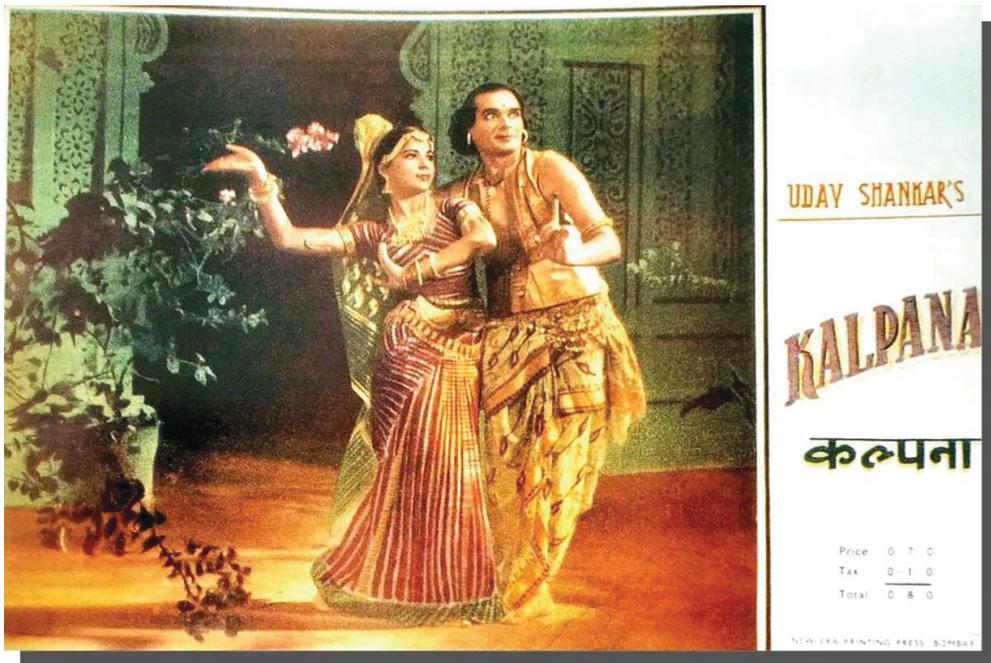
**Fig. 11: Ku. Hemamalini Arni**



**Fig.12: Shri Mutthukumara Pillai**

### ***Kalpana* (Hindi, 1948 )**

*Kalpana* is one of the highly acclaimed, visually breath-taking, very imaginative film whose narrative centered around dance. Almost everyone is a dancer in this film and it has some of the finest examples of group and solo dance choreography. It is also of great documentary value as it has UdayShankar in actual performance. This was the first film to present an Indian classical dancer (and a male one at that) in the leading role, and was entirely shot in the lower Himalayas as a dance ballet and a fantasy.



**Fig.13:. Uday Shankar in *Kalpana***

### ***Piya Milan* (Hindi, 1958)**

In this film, Vyjayantimala plays the role of a young devadasi, adept at dancing. So there are many sequences of solo classical dancing throughout the film. The film became a wonderful platform for the young dancer-actress to showcase her skills and natural talent for classical dance in *abhinaya*, *nritta* and *nritya*. Many critics have noted the delicate hand *mudras* and sharp feet movements of the young Vyjayantimala, predicting a great future for her as a classical dancer. Directed by T R Raghunath, he took the trouble to get authentic *devadasi* costumes of *ChinnaMelam* to create a realistic effect.



**Fig. 14 : Vyjayanthimala as devadasi in *Piya Milan***

***Chittor Rani Padmini* (Tamil, 1963)**

The role of the beautiful queen Padmini was also played by Vyjayanthimala in this film. She dances a solo Bharatanatyam piece choreographed by guru Muthuswami Pillai. What is noteworthy about this piece is that the dancer clearly reveals the strict discipline of Bharatanatyam training since young age with stress on elegance and clarity of movement.



**Fig.15: Vyjayanthimala in *Chittor Rani Padmini***

As Padmini, she also uses the dance as the voice of her venerable cultural tradition and history. In that sense, the Bharatanatyam performance goes beyond the mere fulfilment of the need for entertainment (as for *devadasis*), to something much more spiritually superior.

### ***Amrapali* (Hindi, 1966)**

*Amrapali* is a historical Hindi film that traces the tumultuous life of a court dancer, Amrapali or Ambapali. This role was also played by Vyjayantimala. As the royal courtesan (also called *nagarvadhu*), the narrative is based in ancient Indian city of Vaishali around 500 BC, and focuses on court intrigue and the competitive nature of the *ganikas* (royal dancers) at the Court. This leads to several solo and group dance performances in the film. Vyjayantimala even performs the *Chakradhar Paran* during one of her numbers. The performances include elements of Kathak and Kuchipudi as well. This is indicative of the first instance of the movie medium slowly moving away from classical performances *per se*, not necessarily interested in maintaining the purity of one form or style, and experimenting with a mix of different styles.

### ***Abhinetri* (Hindi, 1970)**

By definition *Abhinetri* means a performer (dancer/actress) and in this film, the trained Bharatanatyam dancer Hema Malini acted and danced in the lead role. While the narrative focuses on the marital disharmony caused by the dancer-heroine who refuses to stop dancing after marriage (an equally important issue), there is not much in terms of actual dance in the film except for some shots of *teermanams* as indicative of the lead actress' professional passion.

***Shankarabharnam* (Telugu, 1979)**



**Fig.16 : Ms. Manju Bhargavi as Tulsi in *Shankarabharnam***

This hit Telugu film explores the relationship between a teenage girl born in a *devadasi* family and her dance guru in contemporary times. Real life classical dancer Manju Bhargavi plays this role which requires her to dance (Bharatanatyam) – during practice sessions, dancing for pure bliss only for herself, and during formal performance.

***Saptapadi* (Telugu, 1981)**

*Saptapadi* featured Sabitha Bhamidi pathi as the Kuchipudi dancer Hema. Hema is the granddaughter of the feared and orthodox Brahmin priest Yajulu (JV Somayajulu) associated with the local Hindu temple. The film featured a full-length performance in Kuchipudi by Hema.



**Fig.17: Ms. Sabitha Bhamidipathi in Saptapadi movie**

***AnandBhairavi* (Kannada, 1983)**

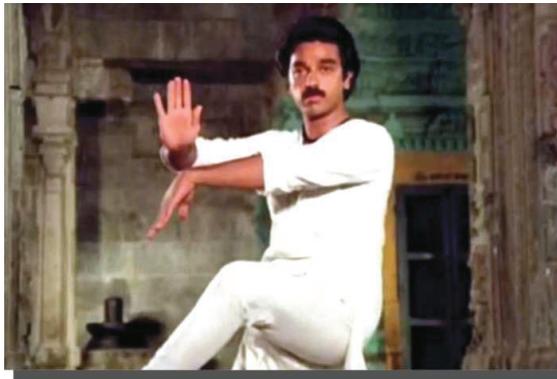
This film tells the delightful story of a dance guru and a Brahmin priest (played by Girish Karnad) who takes upon himself to teach a little girl in his village the Kuchipudi dance. The innocence of this gesture, the relationship between the two and the several wonderful dance sequences and teaching moments all focus on spirituality and physicality of the dance form. The solo dance competition in the film allows for a good number of dance performances.



**Fig. 18: Girish Karnad as teacher in Movie *AnandBhairavi***

### ***SagaraSangamam* (Telugu, 1983)**

Kamal Hasan plays a dance critic in this film. When he puts in a critical review of a dance performance, he is pressurized to apologise to the dancer for his ‘impertinence’ for she accuses him of being an ignoramus who knows nothing of dance who has written the uncomplimentary review. So Kamal Hasan demonstrates to her each and every line of the lyrics of the dance she danced to the way it should have been done. In fact, he takes it further by demonstrating not just in Bharatanatyam but in Kathak and Kathakali versions also.



**Fig. 19: Kamal Hassan as dancer in *Sagarasangamam***

### ***Rangam* (Malayalam, 1985)**

The fabulous success of *Shankarabharanam*, led to a large number of films produced across south India in the 1970s, 80s, 90s that had classical dance at the focus of the story they were narrating. *Rangam* was one of these. It featured both Bharatanatyam and Kathakali performances.

### ***NacheMayuri* (Hindi, 1986)**

This film begins with a shot of Mayuri (SudhaChandran), the heroine, admiring a woman practising Bharatanatyam on a nearby patio, and then dancing on her own. I was only 12 years old when I saw this film for the first time and it filled me with a very warm feeling and I felt true love for Dance. It is a story of true dance love, how dance became your strength it described clearly in this movie. Because Mayuri suffers a tragic accident soon after in which her leg has to be amputated. Abandoned

by her boyfriend, Mayuri drags herself to her first love, dance, and with the help of the artificial Jaipur foot, she gets up on her feet and begins her dance practice all over again. The film ends with Mayuri giving a laudable performance of Bharatanatyam with a wooden leg.

***Vanaprastham* (Malayalam, 1999)**

*Vanaprastham* features Kathakali dance sequences photographed with a rare sensitivity.

***Sringaram*(Tamil, 2006)**

*Sringaram* is a Tamil period film about *devadasi* dancers. It received the National Film Award in 2005. The *devadasi* dancers are played by Madhura (Aditi Rao Hydari) and Kama (HamsaMoily), and Manju Bhargavi also plays a role in the film and dances in a number.

The above films (and these are only a small percentage) are strong enough proof of the unbroken tradition of solo classical dance having survived over the last many centuries in this country. Over the last two hundred years, this has been recorded in Indian cinema as well. But if mainstream and regional Indian cinema is fictional, then we must remember that a number of documentary films have also been made on classical dancers and dance. These have often featured solo dances in short clips to illustrate the point that the director may be making. The most well-known documentary is *Bala* on the legendary Balasaraswati by eminent filmmaker Satyajit Ray. Doordarshan's weekly National Programmes of Classical Indian Dance have featured hundreds of dancers over the last five decades, featuring all forms of classical dance as well as their dialects.

In recent times, with the ease of filming (can be done on a mobile phone at virtually no cost and shared with thousands of viewers on social media platforms), several dancers also film their own productions and upload them on You Tube.

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