It is amazing how some performers in India believe that Bharatanatyam and other styles of modern classical dance are several thousands years old and have been described in the Rāgveda. This opinion is usually based on a vague notion of 'etymology'. Historical documents aside, even a comparative study of Sanskrit manuals on dance reveals great differences between the performing traditions of various times. One of the most interesting aspects of such a study is tracing back the development of the technical terminology used by the dance practitioners to codify the nuances of their art.

By Marine V. Orlitskaya

Very few Sanskrit works on dance are extant today. The main textual material comes from medieval treatises on the dramatic art and musicology, which occasionally provide a separate chapter on dance technique. As a rule, these chapters on dance are dealt with by the scholars with another main field of research. Indeed, there was hardly any demand for a detailed investigation of long lost visual art forms. A detailed catalogue of Sanskrit works describing dance has never been compiled. Few such treatises have ever been published or translated.

The current situation exists for several reasons. The Sanskrit terminology used in the dance manuals is extremely complicated and was not taken into consideration at the time of preparation of the Sanskrit dictionary. It happens that the terminology found in different manuals from the same region and time period will differ significantly in their usage, due to the multiplicity of contemporary dance schools. Sometimes even the same word is used to express quite different meanings. Moreover, those very terms can have one meaning in the context of drama or music and a completely different meaning in the context of dance. As a result, it is quite difficult to interpret and compare the sources of a dance chapter in a treatise on music or dramatic art. Most of the modern classical Indian dance styles are simplified and modified versions of territorially limited schools and are not of much help in the study of contemporary systems of Sanskrit works on dance.

Much information has also disappeared with the loss of numerous texts due to suppression of this art in certain periods. The practice of codification systems of Sanskrit works on dance reveals great differences between the performing traditions of various times. One of the significant features of Sanskrit manuals on dance reveals great differences between the performing traditions of various times. One of the significant features of Sanskrit manuals on dance publications, substitutions, and anonymous quotations. Authors and compilers of manuals have tended to include large textual portions of previous major works into their own, without naming the original sources. This leads to further confusion amongst scholars, wrong interpretations, and even to mistaking such complications for original sources. The lacunae occur due to various historical and philosophical characte

The special works on histrionics had already existed at the time of Panini (fifth or fourth century BC), who calls them natasvarga, and were apparently quite common by the time of the Nāṭyāyana (circa 200 BC to AD 200). Although this term is regarded as the oldest available manual in the field of Indian histrionics, there could be a number of fragments of older works kept in the manuscript collections of South India. The Natyayana demonstrates, apart from other things, the existence of fairly developed forms of canonical (classical) dance, which are distinguished from the regional (popular) dances. Being constantly in progress, the ancient canonical choreography was gradually blending with various aspects of the regional dances, thus producing various dance styles that began to prevail in certain geographical areas. In time, the innovations were regarded as the ones canonized by some competent preceptors and were gradually noted down as inapplicable parts of classical dance in Sanskrit manuals on performing arts. Nearly one hundred Sanskrit texts dealing with dance are extant today. Such texts have been discovered or are embedded in other manuscripts or as being mentioned or quoted in subsequent works. Unfortunately, most of them have been irretrievable until now.

The technical vocabulary of instruction to performers of modern classical Indian dance contains a comparatively small part of the terminology used in old Sanskrit manuals. Even then, the interpretation of many terms varies significantly from text to text. Another problem is the lack of collaboration between practising dancers and scholars of Sanskrit. Sanskrit does not help the situation. In fact, major establishments of classical dance training in India do not have much contact with the scholars on the technique of their art, giving the reason that young dancers 'become confused' over the discrepancies between many theo-

In view of these circumstances, I have undertaken the project of compiling an encyclopaedic dictionary of the technical terms used in the original Sanskrit texts on dance technique, with the etymological references whenever possible. The data is being collected from all the available manuals, starting with the Natyayana and including those of the eighteenth century AD. The passages of some lost works, quoted in later treatises and commentaries, are also being taken into account.

Preparation of the dictionary is proceeding in consecutive steps. Various editions and the available manuscripts of the Sanskrit texts are being compared word by word. The terms, their definitions, and usage are analysed to trace-back their origin and the possible ways of development. Often, references to non-technical sources of Sanskrit literature are required in order to determine the meaning of certain dance terms in various periods of time. One of the significant features of the dictionary is that the extensive lists of the uses prescribed for postures and movements of bodily limbs in dance and drama (nayikya) are being included and compared as well.

I sincerely believe that, upon completion, the dictionary will be able to be used by scholars from various fields, as well as by the practising dancers of various styles. The comparative methods developed in the course of my research can be employed to produce other manuals on technical grounding, generally speaking, through their popular forms. The dictionary will be of great help in the preparation of translations and critical editions of unpublished Sanskrit treatises on dance and, perhaps, even in reconstructing the actual technique of old Indian dances.