

A shock reminder on dance

Art

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A quarterly magazine *Pulse* published from England surveys the dance scene in Britain, and also critically analyses the situation in India and Pakistan

By Sarwat Ali

Recently a quarterly magazine '*Pulse*' has started publication from London to survey the dance scene of the Asians in Britain as well as that of Pakistan and India. From the magazine, it appears that the Asian community in Britain is quite active — and for a good reason. Myriad influences now seem to be working in the evolution of a new dance form which is more in line with the breaking of the established forms of dance. This accepted multi-ethnic society is drawing heavily on the cultural patterns of various communities, especially the larger ones in that country.

Actually one does not need a magazine like *Pulse* published from Britain to remind us of the pathetic state of dance in Pakistan. Still seeing in print of what we have done to it comes as a shock. As a serious form of art, it is non-existent, and not a part of a living tradition.

Dance in Pakistan has suffered the most on two accounts. One, it is considered to be *leh o l a a b*, and


off, and yet another campaign was started to reinvent Pakistani culture by placing it on the foundation of Islamic Socialism.

Since it was a left-of-the-centre government there was immense pressure to discredit the classical arts as remnants of the aristocratic feudal era. Fortunately, there were a few enlightened individuals who resisted such boorish understanding of the arts and stressed on the necessity of continuing with the classical tradition. But as soon as those enlightened individuals were no longer on the scene the campaign against the classical arts was reinvigorated.

Nahid Siddiqui, the most promising of our artists was forced to leave the country as the avenues for her to perform were closed one after the other and even the folk dancers were left to wither on the vine. There was a definite gender bias as all dance by women was discouraged and only men were permitted to perform.

The irony is that dance in film was never banned and it continued to be a crowd-pulling ingredient. In the absence of dance as a living form of art the dance in film only operated in a vacuum. If dance was a

living form in society then the dance in film would have been reflective of society — but it only repre-



but it only represented *tamaash beeni*. And in the absence of any continuous classical tradition, it relied very heavily on borrowed sources — the dances from Indian or Hollywood films. It was definitely not home grown and hence not very original.

It also strengthened the view that has existed in society that dancers are a breed or a caste apart and do not form

two that in an effort to carve out a distinct national identity a break from the past was considered a necessity. It was assumed, though erroneously, that all the classical arts, especially the performing arts were too directly identified with the Hindus.

What was left for Pakistanis to fall back upon was the folk tradition. Though the areas which comprised the new state of Pakistan had a vibrant tradition in dance, yet it was folk — it had the vibrance of folk art but not the well-wrought finesse of the classical arts. Ideally, the two should have worked together to forge some kind of an innovation but unfortunately as the one was severed from the other, both were robbed of their mutual richness in vitality and sophistication.

Pulse surveys the dance scene in Britain and also critically analyses the dance situation in India and Pakistan. Actually it was only in the last issue that Pakistan was also included in the magazine, otherwise it was all about India and not without an adequate cause. The scene in Pakistan makes a sorry reading.

In the early years of the country, some classical dancers migrated to Pakistan and soon found out that it would not be easy to survive in an environment that was not very conducive for the promotion of the arts. Rafi Anwar, Ghunsham, Madame Azuri, Ghulam Hussain Kathak and Faqir Hussain Saga struggled to find a niche in the definition of culture of the new country but they stayed with the losing stragglers in the battle. After the separation of East Pakistan, the battle was finally lost as the cultural lifeline of the Bengalis was cut

part of the respectable sections of society.

This view unfortunately did not result in specialisation and virtuosity as it was supposed to be in the hands of pure profes-

sional. But it only degenerated because it was meant for popular taste. The effort of every filmmaker in Pakistan was to cater to the lowest common denominator and not to take the risk of expecting the audiences to raise their level and appreciate something that was not salacious.

Many dancers struggled on their own — so that dance did not totally disappear from society, like Sheema Kirmani, Nighat Chaudry and now Fasih ur Rehman. Many festivals were organised, the biggest and the most successful being the Dance Festivals by the Rafi Peer Theatre Workshop.

Can the situation be salvaged? Recently, the Pakistani National Council of the Arts proposed to revitalise its dance group. The Performing Arts Group, as it is commonly known, had not made much headway in this respect. The blueprint for its improvement is probably lying in cold storage more because of a lack of sensitive comprehension of the problem that ails this art form than the mere lack of funds.

As had been proposed, there should be proper courses for the teaching of art, and the training conducted in full seriousness according to the laid out syllabus. And this perception of a quick fix solution, and of dancers being hobbled together for a performance of a visiting dignitary should be laid to rest. Forever.