



International Journal of Engineering, Science and Humanities

An international peer reviewed, refereed, open-access journal
Impact Factor: 7.2 www.ijesh.com ISSN: 2250-3552

The Life and Legacy of Mrinalini Sarabhai: A Journey Through Dance and Social Reform

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ABSTRACT:

Mrinalini Sarabhai (1918–2016) was one of the most celebrated figures in Indian classical dance, whose life embodied the fusion of art, innovation and social conscience. As the founder of the Darpana Academy of Performing Arts, she not only mastered and taught Bharatanatyam and Kathakali but also pioneered choreography in India, creating more than 300 productions that addressed social issues such as gender inequality, caste discrimination and environmental concerns. This paper traces her journey from childhood and early influences to international acclaim, marriage into the distinguished Sarabhai family and her transformative contributions to the arts. Drawing on her autobiography and other sources, it highlights her dedication to dance as a personal passion and as a tool for social change. The study illustrates how she overcame personal loss, cultural challenges and societal biases, establishing herself as a trailblazer in the performing arts and a voice for marginalized communities.

Keywords: Mrinalini Sarabhai; Bharatanatyam; Kathakali; Indian Classical Dance

INTRODUCTION

According to Mrinalini's autobiography (2004), she has been asked, "What is dance to you?" on a constant basis over the years.

My typical response is,

'It is my breath, my passion, myself'"

One of the most recognizable figures in Indian classical dance was Mrinalini Vikram Sarabhai, who lived from May 11, 1918, to January 21, 2016. The daughter of a social worker and a former member of parliament, Mrinalini Swaminathan came into this world in Kerala on May 11, 1918. Mrinalini wed the renowned Indian physicist Vikram Sarabhai, often hailed as the program's progenitor, in 1942. Mallika, her daughter and Kartikeya, her son, both became famous in their own right as dancers and actors. In Ahmedabad, she established the Darpana Academy of Performing Arts to teach students puppetry, dance, drama and music.

For her extensive contributions to the arts, she was recognized with numerous prizes and citations. She instructed more than 18,000 people in the Kathakali and Bharatnatyam dance forms. She was not just a dance instructor and choreographer, but also a master of the classical Indian dance forms of Kathakali and Bharatanatyam. She was a dynamic figure who thought that new dance forms do



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change through time, but that it's crucial for them to start with classical principles. She broke new ground as the first classical dancer from India to focus on choreography.

Among the danseuses who helped elevate the dance form from the devdasi underground, Mrinalini stands out. She had choreographed more than 300 dances by the time she stopped performing publicly regularly, nearly seven years ago. Mrinalini was an innovative trailblazer who brought attention to important social issues through her works that drew on the movement language of several traditional dance idioms. Additionally, Darpana's productions covered a wider spectrum of topics, including but not limited to: environmental degradation, caste-based discrimination, communalism, intolerance and women's empowerment. Among Mrinalini's notable works are "Manushya" (1958), "Shakuntala" (1971), "Chandalika" (1977) and "Ganga" (1985). En route, she set up Darpana's Centre for Non-Violence via Performing Arts to provide a platform for artistic reflection on societally divisive disputes. She also founded Prakriti, a children's nature club, to inspire kids to find ways to connect with nature.

Writing was another of Mrinalini's life's passions. Her works include a compilation of letters exchanged between Sarojini Naidu and Mahatma Gandhi, as well as works on mythology and dance, which she thoroughly liked writing. "People ask me, 'What is dance to you?'" Mrinalini says in her autobiography. "It is my breath, my passion, myself" is my typical response. In addition to detailing her formative years as a girl, her interactions with her parents and in-laws, her maturation into an exemplary wife, mother and grandma and her ongoing battle to realize her dream of being a professional dancer is all part of her story.

She has been a responsible mother of two notable individuals, Mallika Sarabhai and Kartikeya Sarabhai, in addition to being a loving wife of the famous personality, Vikram Sarabhai. The moment she steps foot onstage, she is transported to a world where she is free to act out her every bodily move—within the bounds of technique, of course. She thinks that by letting her mind wander while dancing, she may draw the audience into her craft.

The media took notice of Mrinalini Sarabhai after her outstanding performance as a dancer at the Palais de Chaillot in Paris, sometimes referred to as "the Mecca of the Arts," where she performed for thousands of international spectators. People in Paris are more critical, "knowledgeable and powerful, the best in the world" (Mrinalini writes) and detail-oriented. "They had watched so many artists and had the power to make or break a career in the west." This shows how astute and well-rounded the French critics were. She had what it took to perform in front of such a critical and appreciative audience and win their admiration and respect. Newspaper reports stated, "Mrinalini Sarabhai has captivated Paris – a great dancer, a great art!" following her performance. In her memoirs, Mrinalini extols this particular time when her career took a dramatic change after receiving positive reviews from Paris critics: "Our reviews were ecstatic, contracts poured in and I became a celebrity in the western world, a professional in the toughest profession – show



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business!" As she says, it not only helped her regain self-confidence, but it also enhanced her appreciation for beauty and the arts.

1. EARLY LIFE

Since her mother had already become a famous lawmaker by that point, she truthfully states that she was too busy to care for her children. Mrinalini was an only child who never felt loved by her parents. For some reason, she internalized the belief that "the fear, that if I loved someone, he would disappear and leave me all alone, was deep-rooted in me," which caused her to become afraid of being loved and shy. To succeed, I had to master self-sufficiency. When Vikram passed away, my world crumbled and I still had to cope with the emotional wounds he left behind. The phrases "'work, work, child'" echoed in her head as she struggled to come to terms with her father's departure from her life. In 2004, Mrinalini penned:

"... I felt miserable not knowing what to do with myself. A tremendous restlessness seized me. At night, under the mosquito net, I tossed and turned feeling alien and uprooted. The word 'college' came up. Mummy wanted me to go to Oxford. But for me, all education had only one title and that was dance".

She was the only member of her prominent family who had any interest in dancing; everyone else had other interests. Dr. Swaminadhan was a well-respected barrister and principal of the Madras Law College; her mother, Ammu Swaminadhan, was a prominent freedom fighter and legislator; Dr. Lakshmi Sehgal, her older sister, was the head of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose's Indian National Army; and Govind Swaminadhan, her older brother, was a highly regarded attorney general for the Tamil Nadu state and a well-known barrister of Madras.

Mrinalini writes: "... I had wanted to dance ever since I was a child. There was absolutely no tradition of dance or music in our family. I had no one to guide me in my career. But I knew that I was a dancer. My mother could not understand my fierce determination and like the rest of the family, took it as a passing phase! (p. 49)

"Nothing could stop me from dancing" (Mrinalini, 2004, p. 46), a statement that encapsulates Mrinalini's unwavering drive and strong resolve to follow her dancing passion. She began her training in the Western dancing style of Dalcroz while she was a child, when she was taken to Switzerland. For a brief period, she even attended the prestigious American Academy of Dramatic Arts in New York City. According to Mrinalini, it was the product of his diligent training over many years.

Even as a young child, she had the potential for a successful dancing career. Her father was the one who pushed her to pursue her artistic passions without restriction. "My father Subbaraman Swaminadhan was the pivot of my existence," she recalls as she digs into her history. Even now, I can still feel his presence - his genuine grin, his compassionate, sparkling eyes and his unwavering assurance that this girl would make a name for herself in the future.



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Her father's prophecy came to pass; he was a genius. She became a true master of Bharatanatyam classical dance with his help and encouragement. "Always called me "child"—which, to me, is now one of the most evocative phrases of endearment in the English language—is how Mrinalini describes her father, to whom she was very close as a youngster. When I refused to practice the piano, that was the only time he was unhappy with me.

The instrument was unappealing to me. Sitting motionless was excruciating for me because I enjoyed being active. The qualities of movement and energy captivated her. She talks about how, at the age of five, she had her very first theatrical performance at Chennai's Museum Theatre. On a wooden horse, she gracefully recounted the nursery rhyme "To ride a cock horse" while also circling the stage. She had never learned to stop, so even when the horse's head suddenly broke off and fell to the stage, she continued racing with it nonetheless. "Perhaps the seeds of professionalism were sown on that day!" argues Mrinalini on this incident. Afterwards, at the behest of her "Carb Uncle," Harindranath, she made her professional acting debut at the Museum Theatre in Chennai as a boy in a play titled "The Parrot" when she was just eight years old. Writing, "For me, too, the stage was magic!" she expresses her overwhelming joy for dance. And I realized, more than before, that dancing was my life's work. She mourned the loss of motivation and was shocked by her father's unexpected death, with whom she had a close relationship. It left a hole in her soul. When asked about her father, Mrinalini said, "My father was my entire life."

An expression that captures Mrinalini's unfaltering determination and unfaltering will to pursue her dance passion is "Nothing could stop me from dancing". When she was a little girl, her family moved her to Switzerland so she could learn the Dalcroz method of Western dance. She went so far as to attend New York City's esteemed American Academy of Dramatic Arts for a short time. It was the result of his years of dedicated training, says Mrinalini.

She has the makings of a great dancer's career from an early age. The person who encouraged her to follow her creative dreams uninhibitedly was her father. "As I delve into my history, the pivot of my existence was my father, Subbaraman Swaminadhan," she recalls. His genuine smile, his kind, sparkling eyes and his unfaltering belief that this girl will become famous someday are all things I can still sense in his presence.

Because her father was a genius, his prophecy came true. His guidance and support helped her reach her full potential as a Bharatanatyam classical dancer. After developing a strong bond with her father when she was a child, Mrinalini says, "Always called me "child"—a term that has become one of the most charming expressions in English. The one occasion he expressed disapproval was when I declined to practice the piano.

I found the instrument to be unattractive. Because I thrived while I was moving about, sitting still was a torture for me. She was enchanted by the qualities of motion and vitality. She recounts her first theatrical performance at the Museum Theatre in Chennai when she was just five years old.



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Reciting the nursery rhyme "To ride a cock horse" and gracefully circling the stage on a wooden horse were her musical accompaniment. Despite the horse's head unexpectedly breaking off and falling to the stage, she persisted in racing with it because she had never learned to stop. "Perhaps the seeds of professionalism were sown on that day!" contends Mrinalini in reaction to this event. Later, at the urging of her "Carb Uncle," Harindranath, she had her professional acting debut at the Museum Theatre in Chennai as a boy in a play called "The Parrot" at the tender age of eight. "For me, too, the stage was magic!" she writes, describing her ecstatic delight in dancing. Plus, I came to the realization that dance was my calling even more so than before. She was devastated by the sudden loss of her father, with whom she had a deep bond and by the accompanying lack of drive. It shattered her very essence. The question of her father's legacy prompted Mrinalini to declare, "My father was my entire life."

2. PASSION FOR DANCE

Shantiniketan was the place where Mrinalini's dream came true; it was there that her dancing flourished. "Shantiniketan was the heart and soul of India's tradition and progress," she writes. When I was there, I made friends for life and discovered who I really was. "He was my guru in every sense of the word and his dance dramas have been the inspiration for much of my work," Mrinalini adds while discussing Rabindranath Tagore. Mrinalini gained Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore's utmost admiration and adulation when she added Bharatanatyam to Tagore's dance tragedies and he went on to cast her in the lead role in his drama Chandalika, which she choreographed independently. It seemed like a part of her was freed and granted permission to be herself after hearing this and she was ecstatic.

I will never forget the pure happiness I had at that time; the light of his affirmation of my uniqueness, more than his words, illuminates my heart. She trained under the renowned Kunju Kurup in Kathakali and Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai in Pandanallur Bharathanatyam. She was taught Mohiniattam by the living legend, Kalyanikutty Amma. Gurus like C. R. Acharyalu, Chokalingam Pillai and Muthukumaran Thatha had a profound impact on her life's work. In 1937, she underwent the rigorous instruction of Bharatanatyam with Muthukumara Pillai at Kalakshetra. Mrinalini describes how her teacher was quite strict with her, but how she obeyed him to the letter. Her diligence and determination were recognized by Pillai. Given what Mrinalini has said about how they became very attached to one another as guru and pupil, he was able to anticipate her talent. He assured me that he would share all of his knowledge with me since he saw a unique talent in me. My actual training started at this point. His words, "I'll stop the lesson," would escape him on occasion whenever I erred or was careless. the most significant danger because dancing was my life and the only activity I truly enjoyed. He was also quite skilled at using that threat!

Even when she was in such much pain from her dance classes that she could hardly walk, she would still accept his words with love and follow him wholeheartedly. She continued practicing



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even after getting married and having a child. Her guru admired her perseverance, honesty and dedication to her craft. Instead of caring about anything or anyone else, Thatha would just hang out with me and teach me. I was always welcomed into his family by him. He told me I could do what it took to keep Bharatanatyam alive and I vowed to him that I would. "Look at this person, who is not only dedicated but also intelligent and understanding; they can really take my style of dancing anywhere," he would tell the "vidwans" who would come to our practices."

Mrinalini performed in Bangalore alongside the famous dancer Ramgopal. Ramgopal failed to grasp the profundity of her "innermost vision" in her dance, she realized after a while. Perfection as an artist was less important to him than the constant praise from fans, accolades and awards. After breaking away from him, Mrinalini developed into a classically trained artist with a flair for the creative. Mrinalini writes: I started to question, when did I become an adult? Did that happen after my dad passed away? When does one reach adulthood? Indeed, it is. Becoming a witness to oneself while simultaneously being totally absorbed in the act of living was a new role that the young, emotional child had to play in life, even though she didn't recognize it at the time. Most people think that studying dance and music is just like taking up a new hobby. When Mrinalini was growing up, it was considered unseemly to focus one's whole career on dancing. Even when she got married, her family assumed she would stop dancing. Although I was born into what was deemed a "respectable and well-known family," the Swaminadhans, Mrinalini describes how many did not take her job seriously. "Once I got married, they thought, I'd forget about dancing like other society girls," they said. She mentions other art critics who dissuaded her, including G. Venkatachalam. Even after her marriage, she persisted in her unorthodox work path. It wasn't until Mrinalini wed Vikram Sarabhai that she received widespread praise from the public.

3. LIFE POST MARRIAGE

After falling for Vikram Sarabhai, Mrinalini faced a difficult decision regarding their marriage. Marriage, she realized, might bring difficulties. The prospect of marriage and moving to an unfamiliar place filled her with fear for the future. I was anxious and apprehensive due to my dance. It was clear that Vikram was not like other men. They became one spirit and each brought forth the best in the other. "It was some deep yearning within me that found a perfect answer in him," Mrinalini says of her lover, explaining that he understood her dedication to dance and it made her love him even more. To a respectable household Vikram belongs.

She had Vikram's full backing. The Indian Space Programme and nuclear testing were both started by him, a famous scientist in his own right. He encouraged his wife to follow her dreams after seeing her potential. She recalled that a deluge of marriage proposals arrived just as her fame was rising.

He was firmly anchored in his culture despite having studied abroad. She was able to keep dancing because of his encouragement. The family's reputation, however, stood in her way. "When I used



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to say, 'Being is what my dancing is,' they hardly understood.'" This woman's words reveal how many failed to grasp the profound impact that dance had on her life beyond her professional career. "Well, she can dance, after all she is a Sarabhai!" was an insult to her abilities made by an audience member after her performance. Being born into a wealthy household is no guarantee that you will excel as an artist. It took a lot of hard work and determination to get where you are now. In her autobiography, Mrinalini states that she owes her success to Vikram's encouragement. He never missed a performance by Mrinalini, whether it was in India or overseas. When Mrinalini travelled with her troupe, he would often stay behind to take care of the house and their children. The relationship was two-way since she had a hand in his rise to scientific stardom as well.

Their mutual admiration and affection disprove the idea that the scientific and artistic communities are inherently separate. A scientist discusses the secrets of space beyond Earth in Mrinalini's writing. Meaning is sought by a dancer through internal places. We had an indescribable bond as dancers and scientists, Vikram and I. But being a member of a well-respected family meant she had to endure many constraints, so marriage wasn't enough to make her life complete. Her book recounts the events leading up to her marriage into a prominent Gujarati family from her humble beginnings as a girl living in a Kerala tharavad. Adjusting to a marriage between people of different castes and cultures is never easy.

The whole family made her feel lonely and unwelcome. Gujarati was beyond her comprehension. It seemed like no one cared about her. She was distressed by her mother-in-law's coldness and lack of care. To her, it seemed like she belonged nowhere. Marrying into a foreign culture may be incredibly traumatic for a female, but few people understand this. Maybe that is why families in India still try to arrange marriages as much as they can... In this place, I was afraid to ask for what I wanted, so I went hungry. Unless we were together for lunch or dinner, it was as if I didn't exist. It was all quite much to take in. Little things that happened, but they hurt like hell! Mrinalini writes of the upheaval her country lived through as a child during the independence war in her memoirs. She may not have been an active participant in the movements herself, but her in-laws and relatives were.

4. HER LIFE THROUGH HER WORDS

There used to be a dearth of memoirs written by women that detailed their careers in public service. After entering the marriage orbit, a woman's life revolved solely around her husband, his career and their children. This was because women were expected to conform to the traditional roles of daughters, wives and mothers assigned to them by society. The only topics that women were allowed to discuss were their love affairs, marriage and life after marriage. Regardless of her accomplishments, Patricia Spacks (1980) claims that she was unable to document them in her memoirs:



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Although each author has significant, sometimes dazzling accomplishments to her credit, the theme of accomplishment rarely dominates the narrative. Indeed to a striking degree they fail directly to emphasize their own importance, though writing in a genre which implies self-assertion and self display. (p. 113-114)

According to Sarah Gilead (1988), women triumphed over numerous trials and adversities on their path to becoming public figures and housewives:

“the conflicted subject dramatises not only universal problems of identity, the desiring self-forced by the exigencies of civilisation to relinquish or rechannel desires, but the particular problems of women who in patriarchal societies are cast into the contradictory roles of culture-preserver and culture-threat” (p. 43).

Because of their marginalization in traditional autobiographical discourse, they felt compelled to write about their lives and the things they had accomplished. It has been noted by Jane Marcus (1988) that:

“What seems significant is not the female struggle to enter male public discourse, which feminist scholars have documented, but the recognition of the inability of that discourse to include their voices in its history” (p. 114).

Autobiographies written by prominent women challenge long-held assumptions about the traditional format of such works. In most male-authored autobiographies, there is a singular voice that serves as the author's voice. Autobiographies written by prominent women challenge the traditional understanding of the genre. These books showcase an experimental take on autobiography, with polyphonic narrative structures that include the author's voice alongside that of their friends, relatives, family and media figures. Autobiographies are a great way for celebrities to celebrate and memorialize their success in the public domain. Many celebrities include interviews, images, news stories from popular print and electronic media, journals, magazines and newspapers in their works, which can make readers nostalgic.

The incorporation of interviews and photographs into autobiographies by these prominent women highlights two elements of their life writing: first, the visual representations highlight their relational selves; and second, these images demonstrate their appreciation for the mundane. These prominent women have made it a point to prioritize both their public and private lives, as they openly discuss their struggles to do so in their memoirs. The astute observation made by Jane Marcus (1988):

As public figures of great intellectual or artistic achievement, the women . . . used their autobiographies to show that they were also women, creatures for whom relationship and community were very important. Their achievements were brilliant, but they show themselves in the mediocrity of their lives as women who are connected to community by the ordinariness and materiality of their womanhood. (p. 127)



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Mrinalini writes of the upheaval her country lived through as a child during the independence war in her memoirs. Despite her lack of involvement, members of her own family and her in-laws were heavily involved in the movements. Nevertheless, it was amidst one such storm that she endured the most terrible tragedy of her life. Her eyelid was split open and her entire face was severely injured when a shell exploded in her face, caused by a police officer's gunshot. Due to the severe infection, the doctor wanted to remove one of her eyes; however, her father-in-law was opposed, claiming that the procedure would end her dancing career.

Mrinalini writes:

After then, my arduous journey to wellness started. Not knowing whether I would ever see or dance again, I lay bewildered for several days. Cry no more, I was told. I was frightened with the total absence of light. God, prayer and Vikram saved me from giving up.

'I have been born to dance,' I consoled myself. 'This is a passing phase, a deep suffering in order to test me'. The nights were difficult, the feeling of isolation more profound even though I tried to pray. There was no way that the mind with its fears could be silenced. Every minute became more precious, every loved one more dear. Life becomes valuable only after such harrowing experiences. It is a process of growing up inwardly. (p. 99-100)

In addition to the physical suffering, she endured excruciating emotional anguish as her self-confidence and strength dwindled and the fear of losing her dancing abilities gripped her. "After hearing that a portion of my vision would never return, I was certain I would never dance again," Mrinalini says. I felt overwhelmed by despair and a desire to withdraw from society after having to face the reality, which was a terrible ordeal.

Mrinalini began to doubt her abilities. Because her life was meaningless apart from dance, this was the most painful time for her. Sitting on the floor of her bathroom, she sobbed night after night, trying to hide from everyone, especially Vikram. Both art and artists develop through adversity and Mrinalini's emotional anguish did just that. She still lacked self-assurance that she could confront the crowd after her recovery. Her self-assurance returned as time passed. She used her art as a means of expressing her pain. According to Mrinalini, she would still feel so terrified that she would nearly need to be prodded onto the stage in order to resume dancing. My concerns would melt away as soon as I was beneath the arc lights, but I would feel a shiver run down my spine for hours afterward. Before I could confidently address an audience, it needed years of rigorous treatment and discipline as well as Vikram's tremendous understanding and promises.

Indian traditional dancing was Mrinalini's eventual passion and she wanted to share it with the people of Gujarat. To realize her goal, she toiled away at it nonstop. She established Darpana, an Ahmedabad-based dance, theater, music and puppetry school, in 1948. She revitalized Gujarati culture, which was renowned for its traditional traditions, by introducing Bharatanatyam and Kathakali. Classical Carnatic music and dance from southern India did not formerly have well-



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received lyrics. People in her conservative community were both hesitant to send their girls and hostile toward her:

PEOPLE IN AHMEDABAD TOOK A LONG TIME TO UNDERSTAND

The tremendous physical work required to be a dancer. Many remarked that being married to a 'Sarabhai' I should not dance. Someone wrote to Papa commiserating with him that his son had married a dancing girl! . . . The long hours of hard work that I put in, the efforts to keep up with my career and to run a home, were of course completely ignored. (Mrinalini, 2004, p. 123) (capitalization in the original text)

Darpana gained notoriety on a national scale and grew in popularity in Gujarat over time. Prejudice and bias were defeated by Mrinalini. "The children who came to me were like unopened buds," Mrinalini writes in her autobiography, reflecting on the students she taught at Darpana, who came from all over Gujarat and the nation. It was my hope that they would softly blossom into blossoms that would reflect their rich artistic and historical background. "Darpana" translates to "mirror," and I believe that we all contain a mirror image of the universe (p. 157).

A realization of Mrinalini's ambition came to fruition when she assembled a group that went on to play all over the globe, showcasing the vibrant cultural heritage of India. Additionally, Darpana prevented the demise of traditional Gujarati puppetry and theater by bringing it back to life. Over the course of fifty years, Mrinalini not only mentored hundreds of pupils but also garnered numerous accolades for her tireless pursuit of artistic perfection. The students at Darpana affectionately refer to Mrinalini as "Amma" and treat her like a dancer-daughter.

"My women friends had in the past often tried to persuade me to buy expensive jewellery but I would boast, 'My diamonds and emeralds are my dancers in Darpana,'" she says with pride of her students, adding that this type of relationship between teachers and students is rare (Mrinalini, 2004, p. 266-67).

At 93 years old, Mrinalini is still going strong. According to Mrsinalini (2004),

"Each mudra has to be understood in its deeper context" (p. 12),

which is something she thoroughly enjoys teaching her students. She and her dance company have won accolades for their innovative performances around the world. In her memoirs, she describes her many foreign journeys in great detail, including those to Egypt, Indonesia, France, Africa, China, Switzerland and the United States of America. The Shankar family, which included Ram Gopal, Uday and Amala Shankar, had already achieved legendary status as classical dancers by that point in time. Mrinalini had a hard time making it outside of India. As a result of her hard work, commitment and persistence, she became known as a prominent dancer of her era. She never considered making a permanent move abroad, despite her meteoric rise to fame as an artist.

"But I wanted to live in India and dance," she says, expressing her deep affection for both her dance and her homeland. I will always be rooted to where I came from." (Mrinalini, 2004, p. 74).



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After achieving national and international fame, Mrinalini turned towards reformation of society through dance. She believed that social evils can be eradicated using the art of dance. She felt a responsibility towards society especially to work for the upliftment of the women who are the marginalized in our society. Mrinalini has grown up in matriarchal society in Kerala. It was only in Ahmedabad she observed very closely how women are subjugated under patriarchal system of our society. She felt the need to bring about a public awareness about gender discrimination and domestic violence that women of every class daily endure. Both Mrinalini and her daughter, Mallika, through their creative dance sought justice and freedom from subjugation and violence for women. For decades, both of them singly or jointly performed to spread this social message through their dance: But I felt the need to express my own thoughts in dance dramas, not only for a freedom of form but also to make the performances more varied and creative. I felt that dance had a social role to play and could speak powerfully through traditional techniques. Dance is an inward journey, a deep personal equation which unfolds before the audience. It is the self, speaking. (Mrinalini, 2004, p. 113)

Increasing number of dowry deaths of the unfortunate, poor and hapless brides about whom she read every day in the local newspapers left her in state of shock. Newly married girl were forced to commit suicide or were burnt. She pondered how can a man destroy another man's life just only for dowry? Can the man-made custom of giving and accepting dowry be completely erased from the Indian scenario? These questions disturbed her repeatedly and she composed *Memory*, a dance drama based on this social malady. Mrinalini writes in her autobiography, "It was the first time that Bharatanatyam spoke of a social problem.

Editorials were written by leading newspapers on how for the first-time dance spoke of contemporary problems. My creative urge had at last begun to find fulfillment and direction (p. 227-28). With only three women characters and incorporating South Indian classical songs as its background music, *Memory* reflected the four parts of a woman's life, beginning with the vibrant life of a young innocent girl full of gaiety, attaining age she falls in love with a young lover, then her marriage that ultimately crushes her inner self enduring tortures of greedy in-laws asking for dowry and then ending her life by committing suicide. With it, Mrinalini achieved fame and "had touched chords in the hearts of women everywhere" (Mrinalini, 2004, p. 229).

Gradually, social problems that obsessed her took form in her dance. Students in *Darpana* still use dance as a powerful medium for the rehabilitation of victims suffering due to various forms of violence in our society. Another of her creation, *Manushya* (1949), is a story of man narrated by using only the technique of Kathakali but not its inept costumes. This bold experiment made her reach the heights of her innovative endeavours and led her to compose many dance dramas concerned with social issues and she begins "each performance with a small talk on the reason why I felt compelled to take up that particular issue" (Mrinalini, 2004, p. 230).



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Impact Factor: 7.2 www.ijesh.com ISSN: 2250-3552

Mrinalini explains the process of her creation in her autobiography: Creativity is very difficult to describe, because though it springs from inspiration it cannot be achieved without the hard training that leads to technical articulation. It is an inner knowledge of which movement is exactly right in a certain situation. In classical dance it was an individual's effort and imagination that made new designs and new patterns in the classical repertoire. (p. 232)

5. CONCLUSION:

Mrinalini Sarabhai's life reflects a unique blend of tradition and innovation, personal discipline and artistic freedom. From an early age, she demonstrated unwavering commitment to dance, inspired by her father's encouragement and later honed by legendary gurus. At Shantiniketan and Kalakshetra, she developed not only technical mastery but also a deep sense of cultural and social responsibility. Marriage to physicist Vikram Sarabhai broadened her horizons but also presented challenges of cultural adjustment, which she overcame with resilience. Her career marked several firsts: she was among the earliest Indian classical dancers to emphasize choreography, she made Indian dance accessible to international audiences and she used the stage as a platform for dialogue on social justice issues. Productions like *Memory* and *Manushya* showed that art can both preserve heritage and question society. Through Darpana Academy, she nurtured generations of artists, restored traditional forms and created an institution that continues to promote creative and social expression. Her writings and performances reflected a philosophy that dance is not merely movement but a language of the self—"my breath, my passion, myself." The legacy of Mrinalini Sarabhai is thus not only artistic but also humanitarian: she showed that a dancer could be a reformer, a teacher and a visionary. Her life reminds us that art can transcend aesthetics to become an instrument of change, inspiring future generations to pursue excellence and social commitment through creative expression.



International Journal of Engineering, Science and Humanities

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Impact Factor: 7.2 www.ijesh.com ISSN: 2250-3552

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