#FASHION & BEAUTY

The cultural language of classical dance jewellery



What if I told you that every ornament worn in a dance form has a story to tell, whether we notice it or not? From the placement of a crescent moon in Bharatanatyam to the intricate silver jewellery of Odissi, or even a simple pair of ghungroos, these ornaments are far more than decorative additions to a costume. They carry cultural identities, religious beliefs, artistic traditions, and sometimes even personal memories.

Arthy Ahmed, a Bangladeshi Bharatanatyam dancer, teacher, and activist, stated, "Ghungroos are almost like a deity to us."

Dancers treat them with great respect, avoiding shoes while wearing them and never placing them on the ground.

Each classical dance form has its own distinctive style of jewellery. Bharatanatyam is known for its gold-toned temple jewellery, usually decorated with colourful stones.

Odissi dancers wear intricate silver ornaments, particularly silver filigree, along with a distinctive white headpiece called Tahia. Mohiniyattam has its characteristic side-bun ornament, known as Rakudi, while Kathak has its own style of jewellery.

Antora Akter, another Bharatanatyam dancer, choreographer, and teacher, sees ornaments as more than finishing touches to a costume.

Having trained in Bharatanatyam, Manipuri, and Kathak, she has seen how each form uses jewellery differently.

"Salangai is very meaningful because it is connected with rhythm and footwork," Akter explains. She believes ornaments do more than make a dancer look beautiful. They also help audiences understand the traditions and cultural background of a dance form.

"I think ornaments help the audience understand the character, especially when we perform without speaking," she added.

Ahmed explains that the crescent-shaped moon, worn on the left side of the head, represents Parvati, while the full-circle sun on the right represents Shiva. The waist belt, or Oddiyanam, often carries images of gods and goddesses. The long braid extending below the waist is traditionally associated with the spine.

Traditional ornaments, crowns, and other visual details can offer clues about the character being portrayed, while facial expressions, hand gestures, and movements complete the storytelling.

For Abu Ibney Rafi, a Kathak dancer with a background in painting and ceramic art, ornaments are also a form of visual storytelling. He pays attention to their colours, shapes, and textures, much as he would when working on a painting.

"In the Natya Shastra, Aharya Abhinaya includes the visual elements of a performance, such as costumes, jewellery, and makeup," he stated.

"My personal favourite ornament is the ghungroos, which are an essential part of Kathak because they connect the dancer's footwork with rhythm and music."

For Rafi, ghungroos also serve as a reminder of the discipline, patience, and dedication that dance requires.

There is probably no end to this conversation, because every dance form and every ornament has its own story. But there is one thing that feels a little sad. In Bangladesh, dancers often struggle to find the right ornaments when they need them for a performance.

Some have to borrow from fellow dancers, while others go through the trouble of bringing them from abroad. It makes you wonder why something so closely tied to our artistic traditions should be so difficult to find.

Shouldn't we be making it easier for these traditions to live, grow, and find their place on our stages?

Ahmed recalled organising a programme with around 200 Bharatanatyam students. Even after collecting jewellery sets from vendors across the country, there were not enough for everyone. Some performers had to go on stage without the traditional ornaments, while others arranged sets from abroad.

For her, this points to a larger need for local artisans to produce good-quality temple jewellery. Cheap imitations, she worries, can gradually lose the details and craftsmanship that make the original pieces special.

These ornaments deserve more attention, not just from dancers but also from the people who make them. If young dancers are to learn and carry these traditions forward, they should be able to find the jewellery that belongs to their dance forms.

The steps may teach them how to dance, but the ornaments help them understand what they are carrying onto the stage.

By Sabrin Zawad Ritu
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