

## Review / Report

### Book on 'Mohan Khokar - The Father figure of Indian dance history' released

- Vijay Shanker

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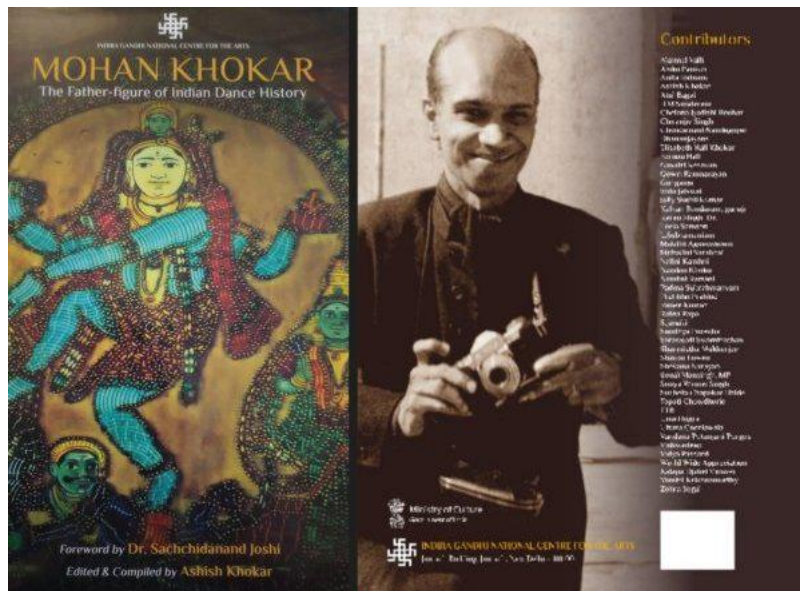
February 25, 2024

Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) in association with Sri Shanmukhananda Fine Arts and Sangeetha Sabha celebrated the centenary of Prof Mohan Khokar with the release of the book 'Mohan Khokar: The Father Figure of Indian Dance History', edited and compiled by his son Ashish Khokar on February 7 at the Sri Shanmukhananda Lion Ashok Mehta auditorium in Mumbai. Prior to the release of the book, a brief film on the life of Prof Mohan Khokar, pertaining to his outstanding and matchless contribution towards the propagation and enrichment of Indian dance on the global platform was screened.



The book is published by IGNCA with a grand 300 pages on Mohan Khokar. Beautifully designed, it is an amazing compilation by his equally illustrious son Ashish Khokar, well known arts personality. 50 rare articles by Mohan Khokar have been selected from thousands he wrote from 1940-2000 with the additional 50 tributes by top dancers and other personalities who were closely connected with him and his work, from Alarmel Valli to Zohra Segal and several others. Priced at Rs. 2000, it is a collector's book of archival value and can be obtained from [Amazon](#). Reading each page shows history and heritage of Indian dance and culture and the enormous contribution of the Khokar family - Mohan Khokar, MK Saroja and Ashish Khokar.

Mohan Khokar first started learning dance from Zohra Segal, the Uday Shankar style and later Bharatanatyam from Kalakshetra and was passionately interested in all forms of dance. In 1949 he married Madras Kadirvelu Saroja (M K Saroja). He was appointed the first head of the first University in India offering dance at the graduate level. At 25, he was the founder head of the University in Baroda. In 1965, he moved to Delhi and was actively associated with the Sangeet Natak Akademi. Internationally too his name and fame spread as an honest scholar, able administrator and respected critic. He was invited to most countries and conferences. He headed the UNESCO'S Asia Documentation Project and CORD conferences in USA and Europe.



The book is beautifully printed and presented with vintage value, as every article is juxtaposed with the print of the original article for the benefit of the readers. In the selection of 50 articles, the first article showcased is *The Play of Rama* with relation to Valmiki's Ramayana and the annual tradition of the enactment of Ram Lila in Ayodhya and other parts of Uttar Pradesh, the portrayal of the 'Maryada Purush', his ideology as the true practitioner of dharma and karma and the enormous impact on the audience, as thousands wait anxiously to witness the unique dramatic extravaganza (published in Swatantra, Nov 2, 1947). The second article is *Dance in Kashmir - Part of Nature and Man* (Indian Republic on Sunday, Feb 13, 1949). The third is *The Devil Dances of Tibet*, which is part of the religious and secular practices of the people and are essentially performed by Tibetan monks or Lamas. The demons they represent are supposed to be the nature spirits which the Tibetans held in great veneration and worshipped, prior to the introduction of Buddhism (Indian Express, Sunday Express, May 14, 1950).

Pathakam and Ottan Thullal are traditional and secular dances of Kerala that gives scope to three kinds of histrionic expressions, dancing, singing and acting. *Pathakam - A Traditional Dance of Kerala* (Times of India, December 19, 1954) and *Ottan Thullal - A Traditional Kerala Dance* (Souvenir of Indian Institute of Fine Arts, Madras 1953-54), *Nritya Sabha - Chidambaram's Famous Hall of Dance* on biggest Shiva temple in the country (Sunday Hindustan Standard, Sept 5, 1954), *Bharata Natya's Greatest Guru* on Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai (Illustrated Weekly of India, Nov 14, 1954) are enlightening articles. One of the most unusual articles titled *Temple of Visiting Eagles* (The Sunday Hindustan Standard, October 30, 1955) is about the incredible tradition in Tirukalikunram also known as Pakshithiratham, 50 miles away from Chennai, where at noontime, eagles come to partake the 'prasadam' porridge of rice and jaggery from the hands of the priest.

*Tamil Ritual Dances*, which are of two kinds, are Karagam and Kavadi, performed by priests who have suffered certain austerities (Anon, October 14, 1956). In *E Krishna Iyer - Pioneer in the Revival of Bharata Natyam*, the writer explains the unique contribution of advocate E Krishna Iyer who donned female attire in order to induce girls from respectable families to learn and practise Bharatanatyam as earlier Bharatanatyam was known as Sadir natyam and was practised by devadasis, servants of the Lords (Sunday Standard August 11, 1957). *Little Known Classical Dances* deals with little known styles like Koothu, Thullal and Kudiattam besides Bharatanatyam, Kathakali, Manipuri and Kathak that are widely known (The March of India, 1959). *Kerala Kala Mandalam* (Illustrated Weekly of India, October 30, 1960) traces the years of its existence.

*Gods and Goddesses in Indian dance* (Roop Kala Kendra, Bombay, 1961), *Egypt, World's Earliest Centre of Dancing* (The Bharatiya Music and Arts Society, souvenir, 1963), *The Shiva Theme in Indian Dance* (Indo-German Dance review, October 1964) cover a variety of themes. *The World's Oldest Ballet School* (Illustrated Weekly of India, October 30, 1966) in St Petersburg, presently Leningrad, was considered the cradle of Ballet. Later, Ballet moved to Europe and America. *Ghalib in Kathak* (Hindustan Times, February 19, 1969), *Kalakhshetra - Abode of the Arts* (Hindustan Times Weekly, Sunday March 23, 1969), *Uday Shankar Abides*, a touching tribute to the great master performer (Secular Democracy, October 1977), *The Saliyamangalam Plays*, pertaining to the tradition of Bhagavata Mela natakams (NCPA, Quarterly journal, volume xii, no: 4, Dec 1983), *A Momentous Transition* pertaining to the tradition of devadasis and its varied implications (Sangeet Natak Akademi, Number 84: April-June 1987), *Dances with a Brush* (Sunday Review, The Times of India, Aug 4, 1991), *Kuchipudi Then Kuchipudi Now* (Sruti, June 1997), *Male Dance in America - The Original Catalyst* (Sruti, March 1997) and *Dancing for Badam Halwa* (Attendance, 1998) which was the last article written by Mohan Khokar before cancer claimed him in Sept 1999 offer a wide spectrum of knowledge on culture and the Arts. Other articles on Chhau, Manipuri, Odissi, Geeta Govinda, Kathak, folk dance forms etc make for absorbing reading.

In the tributes paid to him by personalities from the art world and outside, one thing that comes across clear is Mohan Khokar's great passion to collect and document everything connected to dance, a passion that lasted a lifetime.

In his welcome speech, Dr Shankar of Shanmukhananda said that India is among the most unique countries of the world and believes in the philosophy "Sarva Dharmam Samanvayam." Embracing all religions with equal devotion, with 28 states and 8 union territories, several languages and dialects are spoken throughout the country. In spite of such cultural diversity, unity prevails, hence Indian classical music and dance is a reflection of India's rich cultural heritage which is acclaimed internationally and he was extremely pleased to release this book on

the great writer Mohan Khokar



Darshana Jhaveri said, "I was very young and it was the start of my career as a Manipuri dancer, along with my sisters Nayana, Ranjana and Suvarna. He was a simple and kind man and encouraged us a lot with his wonderful reviews of our performances. I am grateful and will always remember him and am glad the legacy moves forward with his scholar son Ashish."

Veteran Kathak dancer Sunayana Hazarilal shared that, "It was the start of my career and I was looking forward to chances to exhibit my talent. I was disappointed and wrote to Sangeet Natak Akademi and did not expect any reply but was surprised to receive a reply from Mohan Khokar as he was the secretary and stated in the letter that I must meet him in the office. I went and met him and was surprised as he was so kind and understanding and organised my show and the response was amazing. I am extremely grateful to him and am happy that Ashish has taken this great initiative."

Dr Sandhya Purecha, chairperson of Sangeet Natak Akademi was "extremely delighted to be releasing this great book on Mohan Khokar, the father figure of Indian dance history, and I appreciate the efforts of Ashish Khokar and Dr Sachidanand Joshi of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts. I will soon try to get it digitalised to promote wider reach and for the benefit of future dancers as well."

The function was grand. Veteran guru Kalyanasundaram inaugurated and SNA chair Dr Sandhya Purecha released the book. Senior dancers present on the occasion included Uma Dogra, Daksha Mashruwala, Dr Jayshree Rajagopalan,, Uttara Coorlawala, Maya Kulkarni, Jhelum Paranjape, Malathi Agneswaram, Vasantasena, and several other young dancers like Pavitra Bhat, Sujatha Ramanathan and Sirirama.



**Vijay Shankar is a Kuchipudi and Kathakali exponent, teacher, bilingual journalist, arts critic and actor.**

#### Response

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Thank you for providing such a comprehensive review of the book 'Mohan Khokar: The Father Figure of Indian Dance History'. It's wonderful to see the celebration of Prof Mohan Khokar's centenary and the release of this significant book. The compilation by his son Ashish Khokar, along with the selection of 50 rare articles by Mohan Khokar himself and 50 tributes from top dancers and personalities, truly makes it a collector's book of archival value. The rich history and heritage of Indian dance and the immense contributions of the Khokar family are beautifully showcased within its pages. The event itself, held at the Sri Shanmukhananda Lion Ashok Mehta auditorium in Mumbai, seems to have been a grand affair, attended by esteemed dancers and dignitaries. Kudos to IGNC and Sri Shanmukhananda Fine Arts and Sangeetha Sabha for organizing such a momentous occasion. This book undoubtedly stands as a testament to the lifelong passion and dedication of Prof Mohan Khokar and his invaluable contributions to the world of dance. It's heartening to know that his legacy lives on through this remarkable publication.

- Jahanshah (Feb 25, 2024)

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## Review / Report

### Mohan Khokar Centenary start at Kalakshetra, Chennai

- Diwakar

January 9, 2024

The 30th of December 2023 was a red-letter day in the world of Indian classical dance. It marked the beginning of the centenary year of Prof. Mohan Khokar, India's foremost and most generous dance historian.

Prof. Khokar's centenary year celebrations were kicked off at, fittingly, Kalakshetra, Chennai, where he came as a youngster with the single-mindedness to learn an art form which was as alien to him as was the food and the culture. As with everything else that he did, Prof. Khokar threw himself heart and soul into dance and he mastered both the art form and the academics of the art form, a distinction that should not have to be made but current climes necessitate it.



Ashish Khokar pays homage to his father

His art collection, which he so selflessly and singlehandedly built over decades and with great forethought donated to the country is one of its kind, a collection so large, eclectic, and thoughtful that it is pretty much a

has followed in his illustrious father's footsteps and has taken on the mantle of curating this collection which is now a part of the IGNCA. Ashish Khokar has inherited a legacy that he lovingly treasures and nurtures and shows impeccable taste in everything that he does as was evident in the short programme at Kalakshetra.

The well attended event started with an invocation sung by Dr. Gayathri Kannan and on stage were the doyen Guru Kalyanasundaram Pillai, Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam and Dr. Sonal Mansingh, MP in addition to Ashish Khokar and Sanjay Jha.

A short film about Prof. Khokar and the dance collection followed - the screening featuring footage on him made by Jamini Roy's grandson Debabrata, brought back memories of the man. However, it was marred by a few technical glitches initially but nevertheless gave the audience an overview of the great person and his legacy. How IGNCA had organised the Collection in Delhi and Ashish Khokar on screen elaborated the process. It was a tight film of seven minutes made by Film Karigar, Mumbai.

Gopal Jayaraman of IGNCA, Pondicherry, gave the welcome address speaking mainly in Tamil, which was a welcome change from the norm. However, his speech was too personal and long. Welcome address should be to the point as many star speakers were there on the dais to speak after him. Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam's keynote address was well planned and just long enough to be informative without one wondering when it would end. Here is an academic dancer who knows the audience well and threshold of absorption.

Dr. Sonal Mansingh as chief guest spoke very well, from the heart and with the wealth of personal interactions with the Khokar family. Her speech was studded with anecdotal gems. She was emotional too on stage, a north Indian quality.



Ashish Khokar, Guru Kalyanasundaram Pillai, Dr.Sonal Mansingh, Dr.Padma Subrahmanyam

A hefty commemorative book of 50 rare articles by late Prof Mohan Khokar, written as critic and scholar from 1940s to 2000 and 50 tributes from the A to Z of the Indian dance world was released symbolising 100 years (50+50) edited by Ashish Khokar with Foreword of IGNCA head Dr. Sachchidanand Joshi. The book was launched by the dignitaries on stage and copies given to some of the contributors present in the hall like stars of the

Narthaki's Lalitha Venkat, Sruti Janaki and Gowri Ramnarayan. To see a galaxy on stage and in hall like veteran guru Janardhanan, Vasantalakshmi, Nalli Kuppaswami, Roja Kannan and others showed the respect and affection the Khokar family has in the dance community, even if they don't live in Chennai anymore.

Guru Pillai, the nonagenarian, was clear, strong and fluent in both his thoughts and his speech. A subtle sense of humour underlined his talk and his spontaneity while inviting and honouring Saraswati, great granddaughter of thatha Muthukumaran Pillai, was extremely heart-warming.

Ashish's vote of thanks was sincere and heartfelt and the love and respect that he has for all the legends on and off the stage was evident in his words, tone, and demeanor. He certainly made his parents, Prof. Mohan Khokar and the inimitable dancer Saroja Khokar, immensely proud.

The programme ended with a short Shiva stuthi performed by 13-year old Aditya Natraj who showed great poise, skill and commitment for someone his age and danced with confidence on that hallowed stage in front of a galaxy of dancing greats. Aditya shows immense potential and it is to Ashish's credit that he offered him such an opportunity and ensured that the youngster's performance was not rudely cut off for lack of time.

It was a Saturday evening well spent, with a healthy dose of art and values and a harbinger of greater things in store for all in the new year.

**Diwakar is a Madras based software dinosaur with a keen interest in music, reading, traveling and cricket and occasionally dabbles in writing.**

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**Sangeet Natak Akademi**

8 Feb 2024 ·



Glimpses of the celebration honouring Prof. Mohan Khokar's 100th birthday, marked by the release of the book Father Figure of Indian Dance History in the presence of Dr Sandhya Purecha, Chairman, Sangeet Natak Akademi, Guru Kalayanasundaram Pillai, Dr Darshana Jhaveri, Dr Maya Kulkarni, Guru Uma Dogra, and Dr Kumar Sanjay Jha. The celebration was hosted by Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts in association with Sri Shanmukhananda Fine Arts & Sangeetha Sabha at Mumbai.

**#artists #music #dance #drama #CulturalUnity #SNA #SangeetNatakAkademi**

**PMO India Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India Kishan Reddy Gangapuram Arjun Ram Meghwal Meenakshi Lekhi Sandhya Purecha Ministry of Culture, Government of India**



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## Book Review

### 'Mohan Khokar - The Father figure of Indian Dance History'

- Dr. Uma Anantani

e-mail: rasanant92@yahoo.com

March 3, 2024

It is always difficult and complicated to apply an appropriate, praiseworthy epithet to Prof. Mohan Khokar. He was the one who had travelled wide and far in search of dance and dance material. And now in the year 2024, commemorating his birth centenary, a book titled 'Mohan Khokar - The Father figure of Indian Dance History' published by Indira Gandhi National Center for the Arts and edited and compiled by Ashish Mohan Khokar, has 'travelled' for its launch and will continue to do so through many big cities of India and abroad; this will reinforce and concretise the dance history of past many centuries and create an awareness among readers of generations to come.

The tour itinerary in association with IGNA of this extremely attractive compilation in 300 pages, this state-of-the-art volume began with its inaugural release on 30th December 2023 at Kalakshetra, Chennai, followed by release on 7th February, 11th February and 12th February 2024, at Mumbai, Vadodara and Ahmedabad respectively. At Mumbai, the release event was organised in association with Shri Shanmukhananda Fine Arts Sangeetha Sabha and Ministry of Culture, GoI; at Vadodara, it was in association with Anjali Memorial Committee and the Dance Department, Faculty of Performing Arts, MS University and at Ahmedabad with JG College of Performing Arts. For every release, the mesmerising feature was screening of a short film on Mohan Khokar and his works and interesting talks by practitioners and scholars on dance and dance history.







Ashish Khokar pays tribute to his father

Photo: Gowri Ramnarayan

It is believed that it is our parents' blessings, it is their silent motivation and inspiration that works on whatever we do; we have a most befitting example in Ashish Khokar whose life's only selfless goal is to understand and study Indian culture through Indian dance and carry forward the legacy of his legendary father Mohan Khokar and mother MK Saroja and generate interest and spread an awareness.

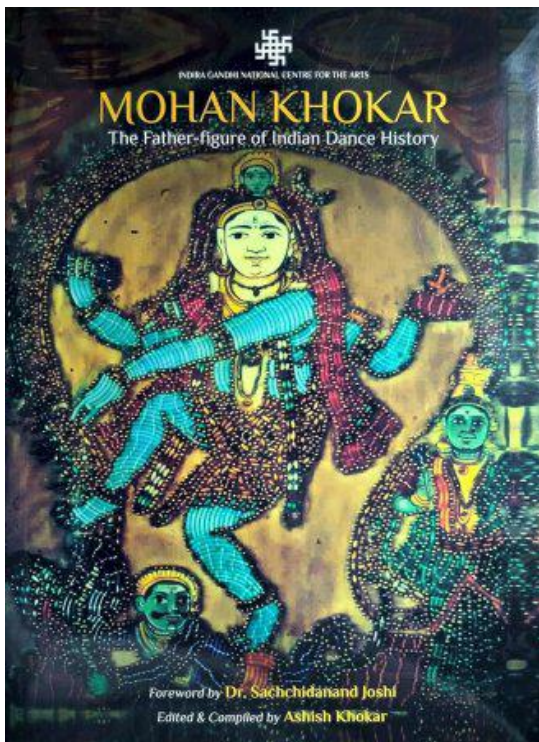
The name 'Mohan Khokar' was mentioned often to us during our years of learning Bharatanatyam in early 60's by our Guru Ilakshiben Thakor, a fresh graduate from MSU, Department of Dance of which Mohanji was the Founder/ Head at just 25 years of age. Since then, an unimaginable impression of 'someone who must have been really great' had been imprinted on my mind. As time passed, that hazy impression began to unravel, and as study became more serious, what began to reveal gradually was the charisma of a genius that was Prof. Mohan Khokar. His is an unparalleled persona associated with Indian dance and Indian culture of our time, one who was far ahead of his time.

This book would leave an impression, an impact and its influence permanently on someone whose interest delves in dance and dance culture of India. It transports one to the past, as if sharing a train or bus journey with Mohanji criss-crossing the length, breadth and every corner of our diverse land, not for a year, not a decade, a century but for centuries, at least past 2 to 3 if not more.

Along with the information on dance, its history and revival, what we imbibe in article after article, page after page is the picturesque description of our vast land, the story-telling tradition through performances, vivid reflections of varied human emotions on and off the performance area, and many more in subtle narratives handled with profound aesthetics. Everything feels woven in the fabric of socio-cultural tradition, ritualistic divinity and spirituality.

And so as one reads, one feels the chill of Kashmir and next, the moisture of Kerala; one smells the fragrance of Chidambaram and hears the chants of ashtapadis of North East and tinkling of ghungroos; one perceives the vivacious colours and patterns of attires spread all over, fathoms the beauty and talent of Devadasis, one pays homage to the determination and devotion of gurus, salutes the genius of composers and choreographers!





This volume encapsulates just 50 of the numerous articles written by Mohan Khokar between 1947 and 1998, covering a span of 50 long years. Each moment is enjoyable, profitable, enriching and enlightening. Mohanji appears aristocratic, cosmopolitan, and civilized and at the same time culturally so rooted that one would sense as if he has walked on our land barefoot. His views are democratic, secular and stuffed with the virtues of credibility, honest courage and inclusiveness. The reading leaves no confusion or doubt, no question unanswered, and no curiosity unsatiated in the mind of a reader. This is the power of Mohanji's writing, encompassing essentially every significant information without shortening, and yet nevertheless with precision which exhibits his command over language.

Another remarkable feature of his writing one would sense with astonishment is that he appears to be a mature writer for an article written in 1947 when he was just 23, and his passion for writing for dance in 1998, after five long decades when he was 74, unmistakably reflects the same genuine curiosity. The flow of simplicity and lucidity in writing has remained invariable, uniform. How can a man be so consistent, for decade after decade, in his mission! May be because of his absolute commitment to the art, and trust in his readers.

And, his readers vary from those of Swatantra, Indian Republic, Sunday Standard, Indian Express, Times of India, Hindustan Standard, The Illustrated Weekly, The Pioneer, The March of India, IIA Madras, Sevika, Indo-German Review, Secular Democracy, India Calling, The Hindu, SNA Journal, NCPA Journal, Sruti, AttenDance... What a range!

His topics cover dances, ranging from classical to folk and tribal, classical theatre to folk and people's theatre, painting and sculpture in relation to dance, western ballet and dance scenarios of countries like Egypt, Tibet, Lahore of undivided India, Sri Lanka, America, Europe, Russia etc., from the celebrities to the lesser known Gurus and practitioners and finally lesser known dance and theatre practices.

Mohanji was a reporter, a reviewer, a writer, a genuine critic, a historian, a collector, photographer, a coordinator, an administrator, an academician, a rooted researcher, a scholar, an aesthete, a man of mission and vision, a patriot, a friend to many national and international who's who. But to us, he is a guide and guru to make us understand DANCE. A quote from his writing is so genuine, "It is the body dynamics, the kinetic expression that contribute to create a form which adds a new dimension to the concept of abhinaya as it is generally understood". How contemporary and visionary he was! His writings carry the mood of exceptional aesthetic sensibility and sensitivity; they have universal appeal and kind of a global sophistication.

For Mohanji, dance was not merely gathering knowledge about performing arts. It was 'flesh of his flesh.' His love for



depth of dance. His magnificent obsession of collecting and documenting anything and everything related to dance made his single self a veritable museum of dance. Today, a senior student of dance can quench his curiosity about accurate dance history of 2 to 3 odd centuries of current India. His single-handed task of collecting dance related material under a single roof earned him a title from his peers, the 'Nataraja on typewriter.' His unique dance related activities made his passion known as 'Khokarism'.

The second part of the book carries 50 tributes to Mohanji from those in the field of art, of dance and culture. Each tribute is so personal and makes an interesting reading. Zohra Segal, in her article 'Mohan's name remains forever', pays her tribute thus, "Mohan suffered a lot for his honesty and it is sad this country didn't honour him or his work. He got no National award..." Here is a man who has given recognition to so many, has helped many recognise and realise the depth of Indian dance and glory of Indian culture. Perhaps, he is beyond any formal recognition.

This year in 2024, dancers and dance enthusiasts in many other cities such as Delhi, Amritsar, Chandigarh, Kolkata, Bhubaneswar, Imphal and Bangalore will be benefitted by similar book launch events. The book, not to be missed, is also available on [Amazon](#).



**Dr. Uma Anantani is the director of Rasadhvani, Ahmedabad.**

### Response

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Very well written review. Mohan Khokar, a great scholar, was born to serve the Art forms of India and left a treasure for the future generations. Congratulations, Ashish ji, for your contributions..

- Gayatri Keshavan (March 6, 2024)

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Mohan ji's "Khokarism" has trickled into the veins of his son, Ashish ji, who is carrying forward his father's legacy in the most dignified and artistic way. Awards are not the only measure of achievements. Mohan Khokar ji has left for the world, such invaluable work in the field of arts which many can't even achieve in multiple lifetimes!

- Rashmi Khanna (March 5, 2024)

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Wow!!! What a journey... of documenting dance history. Such an abundance of information for the current and next generations. So articulately expressed by Dr. Uma ji. Congratulations and kudos, Ashish ji, to share so generously with everyone.

- Murali Mohan Kalvakalva (March 5, 2024)

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Truly, it is parents' blessings for Ashishji. He himself is Mohanji's eternal award - who is carrying forward his incredible work for today's generations. He is proud of you, Ashishji, that you carry his vision. He lives through you and your works. Congratulations and heartfelt gratitude.



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Congratulations! Your book is full of deep dedication and a lot of active love. And it is a great resource and tribute.

- Uttara Coorlawala (March 4, 2024)

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Very well written article. Insightful. What a significant contribution to Indian culture!

- Subramanian Ramamurthy (March 4, 2024)

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It's a very valuable article by Dr.Uma Anantani about Sri Mohan Khokar. He was indeed a highly respected individual. His vision of documenting art-related matters for future generations is commendable. I also believe that Ashish Khokar, with his strong command of literature and excellent oratory skills, undoubtedly inherits his father's qualities. My sincere gratitude to the legend who has left behind a wealth of valuable information for all art lovers.

- Meera Das (March 4, 2024)

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VOL. XXXV NO. 1 MUMBAI, SUNDAY, JANUARY 7, 2024

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# Kalakshetra's FIRST SIKH DANCER

How Mohan Khokar from Lahore came to Madras to learn bharatnatyam from Rukmini Devi Arundale and then went on to establish one of the largest collections of dance artifacts and memorabilia in the country



Ashish Khokar

**IN FOCUS:** (top) Ashish Khokar (left) with dance guru Kalyanasundaram Pillai and dancers Sonal Marsingh and Padma Subrahmanyam release a book on Mohan Khokar at Kalakshetra; (right) Khokar with M K Saroja



her as though south India was one city and there was only one banyan tree and one lady? But he found her, alright: Rukmini Devi Arundale of Kalakshetra. She took one look at Khokar, blackened by soot from a seven day journey in a steam locomotive and told him to "wash first, eat and settle down". And thus, Khokar became the first Sikh dancer in Kalakshetra.

Atthal, as Rukmini Devi was called by all, had no children. She adopted the young sardar as a son. She told the hostel kitchen to make rotis for him for he was not used to eating rice three times a day.

Two years later, half of Punjab had become part of Pakistan after the Partition. Khokar, who had been at Kalakshetra for just two years, had no home to return to anymore as his family had been displaced and his father could not support him financially anymore. But his indomitable spirit found solace in the Adyar Library where his then dance teacher, Periya Sarada, got him a night job. He read voraciously and copied entire books in pencil, as the photocopier had not been invented.

These notebooks turned out to be valuable later as the Adyar library caught fire and many books perished.

In Madras, he also found his lady love Madras Kadirvelu Saroja, a budding bharatnatyam dancer. He had first seen her in Lahore with Mrinalini Sarabhai. They married in 1949 at the Thiruvanniyur temple near Kalakshetra.

Meanwhile, he had been writing for mainstream media and the Marg magazine, and was the only non-Indian writer on Indian dance forms. His writings were noticed by MSU Baroda, the first university in India to offer dance at the graduate level, and he was invited to join. At 25, he became the head of the dance department, where he taught and also helped set up a dance course which is still going strong. He also employed many traditional dance gurus who had no real patronage in post-independence India, and would invite experts like E Krishna Iyer and Sambhamoorthy to Baroda to give lectures.



## MOHAN KHOKAR (1924-1999)

### STEP BACK IN TIME

Mohan Khokar was born to defence commissioner Sardar Bhagat Ram and Udayati Khokar on December 30, 1924

To earn a living, while he studied at Kalakshetra, Khokar worked at the Adyar Library at night, copying books in pencil, which became valuable after a fire destroyed many books

At a time when not many possessed a camera or could afford to buy a film, he was the only photographer on dance in India and clicked more than 10,000 black and white photos of performances from the 1930s to the 1960s

He took one lakh photos but he didn't let himself be photographed. Camera-shy, there are only seven photos of his that have been published

Married M K Saroja (1931-2022) in 1949. A well-known classical dancer, she was also in Tamil films in the 1940s. She helped internationalise bharatnatyam in the 1960s when very few Indian dancers went abroad. She was awarded the Padma Shri

The Mohan Khokar Dance Collection, valued at ₹6 crore, has been donated to the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts in Delhi

where he was commissioned to join the culture department under the Union ministry of education in 1965. He was placed at the Sangeet Natak Akademi, where he served for the next 18 years, during which time he helped get grants to gurus of Koodiyattam, Chhau and Manipuri dance. In Delhi, he was also in charge of the cultural shows at the Rashtrapati Bhavan and headed the National School of Drama and the Kathak Kendra briefly. He also wrote many definitive books on various classical dance forms and folk dances and a biography of Uday Shankar.

At a time when not many possessed a camera or could afford to buy a film, he was the only photographer on dance in India and clicked more than 10,000 black and white photos of performances from the 1930s to the 1960s and more than 20,000 colour photos from the 1970s to the 1990s. His only aim was to document dance and he never sold a photo. He sold ancestral property in Chandigarh and Delhi to maintain his madness.

Khokar was not interested in material things but bought rare books, artefacts and memorabilia as the British who were slowly leaving India by 1946 started selling them for a song. His wife also added to the collection. Today, these form the backbone of the Mohan Khokar Dance Collection. Valued at ₹6 crore, the Khokar family donated the collection to the nation at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts in Delhi.

Today, the collection is the best document of 200 years of dance in the form of one lakh press clips, thousands of photographs, books, artefacts, costumes and more. Gurus loved him and dancers trusted him. Khokar's last contribution was the creation of India's first yearbook on dance - Attention Dance - now in its 25th year of publication.

On December 30, 2023, Khokar's birth centenary celebrations kicked off at Kalakshetra by the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts.

(The writer, Mohan Khokar's third son, is a dance critic and curator)

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## Tribute to a pioneer

APARNA U

Celebrating the pioneer Mohan Khokar, who was instrumental in documenting dance in his 70-year-long career, the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), New Delhi, organised his centenary celebrations at Kalakshetra on Saturday. "It all started with the camera he possessed as a youngster in Punjab in the 1920s. Thereby, he documented everything around him. This was the period when cameras were very rare, photo frames were imported and India was not independent," shared Ashish Khokar, Mohan's son, trustee and curator of Mohan Khokar Dance Collection and advisor, IGNCA of the dance professor.

A short film that encapsulated the vision of Mohan with rare footage of him from the archives was screened. "For him, dance was the most transient and momentary art form that could not be repeated. He believed that the beauty of the photos from his collections is that they speak a lot about the history and the journey of how Bharatanatyam came to Western and Northern India," he said. Padma Shri awardee K Kalyanasundaram Pillai inaugurated the event attended by Sonal Mansingh, Rajya Sabha MP and trustee of IGNCA, and danseuse Padma Subrahmanyam. The archives were donated to IGNCA by the inheritors Saroja MK and Ashish. Sachchidanand Joshi, the executive academic head of IGNCA, shared in the short film, "It was unbelievable to witness these many collections which explained the history of Bharatanatyam which was over 60 years old. It even had photos of Padma Subrahmanyam's first dance performance as a child which brought happy tears for her." Ashish reminisced, "Mohan Khokar was a man of many parts, a visionary, father figure, an author of seven books and many others. But at heart, he remained a *rasi-ka*, a celebrator of art where not one photo was sold nor not one ornament was disposed from the collections as he believed that they are the nation's history and collective wealth which many generations of dancers, gurus, scholars, devadasis, academicians, media and filmmakers had gifted him."

Following the screening Kalyanasundaram, Sonal, and Padma released the Book of Tributes. The event concluded with Aditya Nataraja taking to the stage with his dance performance, Shiva Stuti.