**Dance in South Asia**

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~~‘A pioneer of modern dance in India~~

~~Sangeet Natak Akademi’s Citation for Award for Creative Dance, 1995 to Astad Deboo~~

I WOULD LIKE TO KEEP THIS QUOTATION AS AN EPIGRAPH IN ORDER TO HAVE A SOUTH ASIAN ARTIST’S VOICE AT THE TOP RATHER THAN STARTING WITH A QUOTATION FROM TAYLOR. I WILL DELETE THIS QUOTATION OF DEBOO’S WHEN IT COMES UP AGAIN LATER IN THE ESSAY.

The number one problem of modern social science has been modernity itself. By *modernity* I mean that historically unprecedented amalgam of new practices and institutional forms (science, technology, industrial production, urbanization), of new ways of living (individualism, secularization, instrumental rationality), and of new forms of malaise (alienation, meaninglessness, a sense of impending social dissolution).

Charles Taylor, “Modern Social Imaginaries” Taylor, 2002, 91)

Modernization involves the transformation of an entire way of life, with or without a population’s consent. As Charles Taylor notes above, modernity involves new forms of social living that emphasize the individual versus community, new communications technologies, and new modes of social and economic organization.. Such dramatic changes profoundly affected the arts. However, as Taylor adds, ‘we need to speak of *multiple* modernities, the plural reflecting the fact that non-Western cultures have modernized in their own ways and cannot be properly understood if we try to grasp them in a general theory that was originally designed with the Western case in mind’ (original emphasis, 91). Such ‘multiple modernities’ are significant in analyzing dance in South Asia.

In this essay, I redefine the parameters of modernism as relevant for dance in South Asia. Modern initiatives in dance make changes 1) in the form of a dance style (such as the Indian classical style of bharatanatyam, which was transformed by including modern dance movements); 2) in collaging two or more dance styles together (such as kathak, modern dance, and odissi); 3) in choreographing new themes from current social issues such as gender and ethnic identity, poverty, and the environment; or 4) in using voice, silence, story-telling, and theatre techniques with movement creating hybrid dance *cum* theatre works.

A chronological trajectory for analyzing dance in South Asia is useful: the ‘modern’ generally spans the period from early twentieth century (revival of classical Indian dance styles) until the 1960s and 1970s. Next, the ‘contemporary’ period in the arts extends commonly from the 1980s with globalization and technological advances. Moving into the twenty-first century, artistic practices from pre-modern, modern, and contemporary times continue along with growing use of computer technology, innovative lighting, theatre and multimedia tools. Modern dance in South Asia is a palimpsest of old and new, traditional and contemporary.

In the geopolitical territory named South Asia (demarcated by super-powers vying for political allegiances after the Second World War), India occupies the largest landmass along with Pakistan, Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan), Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon), Nepal, and Bhutan. Since the modernizing of dance is more prevalent in India than in other South Asian nations, I will discuss Indian dance more extensively, although the pre-modern period, prior to the nearly 200-years of British colonization (ending in 1947) encompasses all of South Asia.

In analyzing when modernism began in South Asia, what traditions it rejected or incorporated, it is necessary to remember that there was more than one period of modernization in the region. Different genres of art—visual, architectural, numismatic, engraving, ancient Sanskrit drama, folk dance—evolved at their own pace without outside interventions. Modernization as understood today (industrialization, new communication methods), however, was introduced and imposed by British colonizers; once colonization took root, pre-modern South Asian societies could not evolve over time and arrive at alternative modernities best suited to their cultures. Additionally, British attitudes of superiority denigrated local customs as backward, leading to ironic pressures on local people in the nineteenth century to prove that their indigenous traditions, such as classical Indian dance were also ‘modern’ in terms defined and understood by Westerners. IS ANOTHER WORD REPLACING “WETERNERS”? OR DOES THE SENTENCE END AT ‘MODERN.’

Further, the British modernized South Asia selectively and for the benefit of the colonial administration. At times, the results were beneficial, at others, destructive or somewhere in between. The English school system, as imposed on India under Macaulay in the 1850s aimed primarily to train native functionaries for colonialist administration, but simultaneously created an educated class who could – and eventually did – use their knowledge to overthrow British rule. British-built railways both facilitated colonial rule and benefitted local people by expediting the transport of people and goods. Conversely, the introduction of cheap factory-made clothing from England into the Indian market destroyed local *swadeshi* (hand-woven, indigenous cloth) endeavours. Such modernizing moves also played havoc with long-standing traditions and customs, at once destabilizing many aspects of Indian society and leaving intact other horrible practices. For example, the British did not challenge such traditions as *sati* (widow-immolation) in deference to Brahmins, and in fact took many years to pass legislation banning *sati*, though they were quick to outlaw other practices that interfered with economic and political modernization. The resulting unevenness of British modernization in India – beneficial, detrimental, and at times both at once – was all too often viewed by the colonizers as an unmitigated good despite its profoundly selective and self-serving implementation.

In the performing arts, the British stigmatized the tradition of *devadasis* (servants of god) who danced within the temple and who were ‘married to the temple deity’. *Devadasis* in Southern India (whose *sadir* dance became bharatanatyam), as *tawaifs* (courtesans) in North India (whose *nautch* dance was revived as kathak) preserved dance and music traditions (See Kothari, 1989; Chakravorty, 2008). Wealthy patrons who also expected sexual services supported these art connoisseurs. The contested histories of reviving bharatanatyam and kathak are significant since these classical styles inspire modernizing idioms unfolding at the intersection of classical and modern.

Social reformers countered colonizers’ ignorance by demonstrating a different form of Indian modernity rooted in ancient, even timeless Indian culture distinct from Western modernity. This endeavour to invent, even ‘culturally engineer’ an Indian past within which classical Indian dance belonged was a complex process undertaken by Brahmins and educated elites; effectively, they marginalized *sadir*’s actual community of practitioners (see Coorlawala, 1996; Allen, 1997, O’Shea, 2007, O’Shea, 1998). In their excellent revisionary history Indira Viswanathan Petereson and Davesh Soneji remark that ‘The genealogy of the classical in modernity and its location in the spiritualized inner realm of the indigenous suggest [YES]Q]why upper-caste elites and middle-class nationalists became the chief engineers of the classicization of indigenous dance and music in both northern and southern India,’ thereby proving its unique modernity to the colonists (Peterson and Soneji, 2008: 6)

One key player in bharatanatyam’s revival was Rukmini Devi Arundale who institutionalized bharatanatyam by establishing the Kalakshetra Dance Academy in 1936 (see Medhuri, 2005; Samson, 2010). Born into the Brahmin caste, she broke tradition at sixteen to marry George Arundale of The Theosophical Society in Madras. This marriage enabled Devi to travel extensively and view different artistic traditions. The famed Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova inspired her to study ballet; Pavlova was also instrumental in persuading Devi to explore her own Indian dance traditions – encouragement that led Devi to study *sadir* with *devadasi* Mylapore Gowri Amma and to be involved in its ‘revival’.

Although Devi asserted bharatanatyam’s traditionalist base, she modernized dance presentation via modern stagecraft and lighting that rendered the dance theatrical. Simultaneously, Devi worked against modernizing the style in asserting its spirituality, claiming to ‘purify’ *sadir*, replacing sensuality with religiosity. This approach dismissed *devadasi* practice that embraced the sensual, sexual and spiritual as integrally related. The legendary *devadasi*, T. Balasaraswati strongly objected to Devi’s ‘Brahminized’ dance, describing it as ‘vulgar’(T. Balasaraswati, 1988: 38)). Nationalist fervour influenced Devi and the Theosophical Society’s role in reviving the dance with ‘almost religious idealization’ that was itself, according to Amit Srinivasan, ‘an effect of westernization’.

In the 1920s and 1930s, American dancer Ruth St. Denis inspired the reformer Madame Menaka to transform the North Indian dance style, *nautch*, which had fallen into disrepute into ‘a modern aesthetic expression,’ namely kathak. Like Devi, Menaka also introduced modern stagecraft and created new dance-dramas relying on Hindu myths. Uttara Asha Coorlawala notes that St. Denis’s initial inquiries about *nautch* dancers were met by ‘silence’ and ‘embarrassment’ since *nautch* was considered debased. Nonetheless, St. Denis met Bachwa Jan, a famous *nautch* dancer. The rest is history as St. Denis and Ted Shawn created many dances with the Denishawn Company such as *Nautch Dancer* (1932), and *Radha* (1906) (See Coorlawala, *Dance Chronicle*: 29; Desmond, 1991; Priya Srinivasan, 2011, and 2007)

As the sun was setting on the British Empire, India and Pakistan were divided into two nations in the bloody 1947 Partition. The British-drawn national boundaries – created without regard for separating peoples of the same ethnicity, language, and religion – continue to be problematic even today. Since independence, India and Pakistan have fought two wars, and to this day, each rival, now with nuclear weapons, views the other with suspicion. In Islamic Pakistan today, the arts are not encouraged though they persist in the margins. Political suspicion accompanies anathema to Indian dance styles—bharatanatyam is shunned since it translates as ‘dance of India’, and is associated with Hinduism. However, classical Indian dances influence its neighbours to the East, in Bangladesh and to the South in Sri Lanka.

To de-center the dominance of India in any discussion of South Asia, I will discuss dance in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, before returning to India. The climate for dance in public in Pakistan’s Islamic State is restricted. Since 1947, Pakistan’s mostly military governments follow conservative, even fundamentalist interpretations of Islam that do not foster dance or creative experimentation.

Prior to Partition, prominent dancer Indu Mitha train in the Uday Shankar style (discussed below) with Zohra and Kameshwan Sehgal in Lahore. Mitha visited India to study bharatanatyam in Delhi and Chennai with Lalita Shashtri, returning to Pakistan after her marriage. She continued to teach bharatanatyam even during General Zia’s repressive regime (1978-1988) when dance performances were relegated to private homes. Mitha adapted her signature bharatanatyam style to include Urdu songs attuned to Pakistani cultural identity although there is no distinct modernizing of the form. Modern influences come from Pakistanis who have moved abroad, such as Mitha’s daughter and disciple, Tehreema Mitha, who moved in 1997 to the US. In the landmark First National Dance Festival (1995), Tehreema Mitha along with Sheema Kirmani (odissi), and Nighat Choudhry (kathak) returned from abroad to present innovative, modern choreography that challenged women’s domination in their homeland’s Islamic, patriarchal society.

In Bangladesh (independent since 1971), although predominantly Muslim, the climate for the arts is more liberal than in Pakistan. Bangladesh is receptive to classical Indian dance along with modernizing the styles. A modern innovation of Rabindranath Tagore’s dance-drama, *Tasher Desh* is noteworthy as a transnational collaboration between Bangladeshi dancer Warda Rihab specializing in Manipuri and UK’s Rachel Krische.

In Sri Lanka, modernising dance includes the use of traditional forms and modern dance as in Mohan Sudusinghe’s Meranga Dancing Company. Another artist, Nilan Maligaspe of Arpegio Creative Dancing Academy teaches creative dance (a phrase also used for Uday Shankar’s innovations in Modern Indian dance), ballet, and modern dance to underprivileged children.

Uday Shankar in early twentieth century is recognized as the first pioneer of Modern Indian Dance, and the first to bring Indian classical dance to the West. Shankar’s ‘Creative Dance’ combined Indian dance with new movements and story-telling, searching for a dance language that would communicate Indianness to varied audiences.[[1]](#endnote-8) Recent scholars, challenging earlier dismissal of such efforts as ‘orientalist’, have reassessed Shankar’s contributions; scholar Joan Erdman calls him ‘India’s first modern dancer. [Further] Shankar’s translations for the West become both a success in their own time and a significant reference for contemporary attempts in modern and ethnic dance production’ (84).

Once again, Pavlova enters Indian dance history—Shankar toured with her and choreographed two pieces, though he received no recognition from local reviews. Pavlova advised him (as she encouraged Devi) to return to India and explore his own traditions. Shankar did so in 1938, establishing his Culture Center in Almora where students studied Indian classical movement (not entire items), music, improvisation, and fine arts. Shankar’s goal was the body’s free exploration unrestricted by classical styles’ rules, hence, traditionalists criticized his appropriation of classical vocabulary. Another of Shankar’s key modernizing contributions was in works like *Labour and Machinery* (DATE?) critiquing the increasing mechanization of life. Such choreography about current themes is a mode used by contemporary South Asian artists.

In India, modernizing of dance forms is rooted in the rich tradition of the classical styles. The eight classical dance styles recognized by the Indian Government’s major arts organization, Sangeet Natak Akademi are: Bharatanatym, Kathakali, Kuchipudi, Mohiniattam (from Southern India), Kathak (from the North), Odissi, Manipuri, Sattriya (from the East). Bharatanatyam and kathak are used most commonly with modern dance techniques (use of the floor) and abstract movement (non-narrative content) in new, multi-layered choreography. However, curiously, the key characteristic of modern Indian dance, even when influenced by modern dance, is its persistent *Indianness*—not as narrow or monolithic, but multifaceted, varied regionally, with different languages, musical, folk, and martial arts traditions. Along with modern dance influences, Indianness is visible in costume, sound, affect and expression of *navarasas* (nine primary human emotions--love, anger, fear, disgust, compassion, valor, laughter, sorrow, and peace) first discussed in the ancient Indian treatise of drama, dance, and dramaturgy, *The Natyasastra* (2nd-5th century BCE). The *navarasas* appear, for instance, in pioneer Astad Deboo’s creative modernizing of Indian dance where he uniquely uses modern dance techniques such as non-narrative abstract dance communicated not via the impassive face common in Western modern dance but with profound emotion rooted in the Indian aesthetic tradition of the *rasas--*Deboo’s signature modern Indian dance.

Deboo’s nearly forty-year career includes his early innovations in the 1960s and 1970s combining kathak with modern dance that were not welcomed at that time by Indians who saw it as ‘too Western’ (i.e. influenced by modern dance), and by Westerners who judged it as ‘not Indian enough’ (i.e. not classical Indian dance). In the mid-1960s in Bombay, Astad saw a performance by American modern dancer and choreographer, Murray Louis and was deeply affected by the ‘attention to physicality’ (Deboo, 2003) Deboo travelled extensively around the world in the 1960s on his own initiative, as he worked towards creating his own signature style. During the 1960s, ironically, Indians embraced innovations in theatre, visual arts, music, and literature—all art forms except classical dance, partly because of its connection to the sacred. Even in the 1970s and 1980s Deboo’s creative pursuits combining Indian movement with modern dance received lukewarm reception in India although outside India, at that time, imitating the west and embracing modern dance were all the rage.

Not until the 1990s did Indian audiences grow receptive to Indian dancers’ combining traditional with new, modern idioms of movement, partly influenced by the internet and globalization. My focus here is on mostly modern forms that are based in classical Indian and other dance vocabularies such as modern dance. I am not dealing here with folk forms such as *bhangra* (originally from the Punjab in North India) or with the popular Bollywood style dancing in movies that have proliferated across the world with the influence of globalization In 1995, India’s Sangeet Natak Akademi recognized Deboo as ‘a pioneer of modern dance in India’ conferring on him the Award for Creative Dance. And in 2007, he received the Padma Shri, one of the highest honours given by the Indian government to artists, recognizing him as a pioneer of contemporary Indian Dance. Indeed, Deboo’s artistic career has made key contributions both to the early modernizing. and more recently, the contemporizing of Indian dance. Today, Deboo, who in his 60s remains a vibrant performer, respected as an elder statesman of Indian modern and contemporary dance, a mentor and inspiration for young artists.

Deboo’s stunning signature style, characterized by minimalism, technical virtuosity, draws integrally from modern dance that emphasizes the body along with his signature style of conveying movement with expressive *rasa*. His modernizing of Indian dance includes collaborative initiatives such as with Manipuri *thang-ta* (martial arts) and *pung cholam* (drum dancers). Deboo integrates classical Indian and modern dance in his twenty-year creative choreography with the deaf as with Chennai’s Clarke School for the Deaf for whom he created *ContraPosition* (2005) that uses bharatanatyam, modern dance along with danced representations of the *rasas* of fear, disgust, and compassion. Deboo’s work with street children of Salaam Baalak Trust (established by filmmaker Mira Nair after *Salaam Bombay’s* success in 1988) in *Breaking Boundaries* (2010) uses modern dance techniques that emphasise the dancers’ bodies in difficult balancing poses, incorporating a global soundscape with classical piano and opera music—all profoundly challenging to these disadvantaged youth exposed only to Bollywood music and dance.

Another icon in innovating Indian dance was the wholly original artist Chandralekha (also known as Chandra). Chandra, like Deboo used abstract movement (less common in the 1970s than today) to evoke *rasa*, demonstrating that emotional responses were *not* confined to narrative dance—part of her legacy for future Indian dancers. Chandra trained initially in bharatanatyam, but rejected its superficial religiosity, over-ornamentation, and reliance on epic stories and myths.

Although, like modern dancers, Chandra embraced the human body in her various works beginning with *Angika* (1985) and ending with *Sharira* (2001) — both translate as the ‘body’—her vision was grounded firmly in Rustom Bharucha’s words, in ‘the Indian psychophysical tradition’ including martial arts such as Kerala’s *kalaripayattu*. Chandra never claimed that she was doing anything new or modern. Nevertheless, she was a risk-taker and gives new meaning to truly working on the edge.

Chandra leaves a lasting legacy as a pioneering foremother for artists in India and the diaspora using abstract movement with *rasa*—reverberating in bharatanatyam dancers Anita Ratnam (Chennai-based) and Hari Krishnan (Toronto-based), Artistic Director of InDance, a multi-ethnic dance company. Krishnan and Ratnam collaborate transnationally between Chennai and Toronto, both deploying modern dance with *rasa*, and transforming bharatanatyam from within, as well as re-interpreting India’s epic figures in contemporary choreography. Ratnam’s *A Million Sita-s* (2011) and Krishnan’s *Owning Shadows* (2009) delve via abstract movement into human emotions of love, lust and greed.

Chandra’s legacy is also alive in Los Angeles-based Shyamala Moorty who works with The Post Natyam Collective (with members in Los Angeles, Kansas, and Germany) to create ‘long-distance choreography’ via the internet (Katrak, 2011). Moorty’s solo entitled *Sensitize*, represents female desire and pleasure via movement and *mudras* (from classical bharatanatyam) reminiscent of Deboo’s and Chandra’s use of abstract movement infused with *rasa*. Among other Indian-descended diaspora artists, Los Angeles-based Sheetal Gandhi, and New York-based Parijat Desai embrace a vibrant post-modernity that breaks down the body lines even further than in modern dance; their jagged choreography works against linear meaning-making.

Movement-based groups that encourage innovative modern work along with national and international collaboration, workshops and mentoring young artists in India include New-Delhi-based Gati Dance Forum (www.gatidance.com) since 2007 and Bangalore-based ‘Attakalari: Center for Movement Arts’ (since 1992) that also offers a Diploma in Movement Arts and Mixed Media (www.attakalari.org).

Among other Indian performing artists using elements of modern dance in their work are Madhu Nataraj, trained in kathak by her mother Maya Rao and in Contemporary Dance in New York. Nataraj is Artistic Director of Bangalore-based Natya STEM (Space, Time, Energy, Movement) Dance Kampni (since 1995), recognized as one of India’s leading contemporary dance companies, showcasing how ‘tradition and modernity co-exist’ ([www.stemdancekampni.in](http://www.stemdancekampni.in)). Chennai-based Padmini Chettur trained in bharatanatyam danced from 1991-2001 in Chandralekha’s works, then formed her own company creating works with impeccable bodily rigour and virtuosity., Unlike Chandra, Deboo, or Ratnam, Chettur elects to wear black leotards and tights and not evoke Indian idioms in her presentation. ([www.padminichettur.com](http://www.padminichettur.com)).

Thus far, I have analyzed modern dance techniques influencing the *form* of Indian dance. Modernity is as importantly expressed via dance and theatre representations of *modern themes* concerning women and the poor by Ahmedabad-based bharatanatyam dancer Mallika Sarabhai. She creates modern, feminist works against gender discrimination (as did her mother Mrinalini Sarabhai earlier, in critiquing dowry-related deaths in dance) by drawing upon female icons such as Sita (from *The Ramayana*) and Draupadi (Sarabhai played Draupadi in Peter Brooks’ *Mahabharata*)(1985) Her one-woman dance-theatre work, *Sita’s Daughters* (with over 500 shows) valourizes women who question rather than acquiesce to males in their lives.

Anita Ratnam ([www.arangham.com](http://www.arangham.com)), founder/Director of Arangham Trust and Dance Company (since 1992), retains, like Chandralekha, an Indian aesthetic affect in her choreography along with modern dance movements. Ratnam’s wholly modern take on traditional goddess traditions and parallel mythologies from India, Tibet, China, and Egypt lies behind her non-linear, non-narrative choreography that uses abstract movement with *rasa* in works such as *7 graces* (2005) (that adapts the Tibetan goddess Tara’s qualities)..

Ratnam created a key modern tool that has become indispensable for anyone interested in Indian dance worldwide—a web portal for Indian dance, [www.narthaki.com](http://www.narthaki.com) (since April 2000) that includes reviews, interviews, announcements, and interactive segments. Ratnam is renowned as a visionary curator of cutting-edge Indian performing arts events, and for her pioneering co-production of “The Other Festival”, 1998-2006 ([www.theotherfestival](http://www.theotherfestival).com) that provided a platform for experimental dance.

British-Indian bharatanatyam-trained Shobana Jeyasingh uses modern and contemporary dance most skillfully in her choreography as does British-Bangladeshi Akram Khan, trained in kathak and contemporary dance. Recently, Khan performed *Desh* (*Homeland*, 2011) in Bangladesh, his parents’ home. *Desh* evokes immigrant dilemmas of cultural identity and belonging ([www.shobanajeyasingh.co.uk](http://www.shobanajeyasingh.co.uk) and www.akramkhancompany.net).

In conclusion, the legacy of distinctive South Asian modern dance continues to evolve. Today, artists create choreography regionally and transnationally, reinventing their rich dance traditions along with openness to global dance influences in vibrant new work.

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