**Creative Dance in India**

**Summary**

Creative Dance in India showcases dynamic movement, innovative uses of lighting and space, and collaborations with visual designers, musicians, and martial artists. This style has come to prominence since the 1980s, influenced by modernizing impacts of globalization, the internet, and transnational travel. Artistic innovations unfold at the intersection of Indian classical dance styles, most commonly bharatanatyam and kathak, two of eight classical dance styles that figure overtly or subtly in this evolving field.[[1]](#endnote-1) Creative dancers also draw upon modern dance techniques of abstract, non-narrative movement (different from abstract foot-work in Indian classical dance), and use of the floor, along with theatre techniques, and multimedia.

**Early Creative Dance Artists**

Although creative expression has exploded since late twentieth century, note-worthy pioneers modernized Indian dance in early twentieth century: Uday Shankar (1900-1977), credited with being the first to bring Indian dance’s movement and affect (as in costumes and jewelry) to the West, and Ram Gopal (1917-2003), who intermingled Indian classical and folk dance, creating what was labelled ‘Hindu dance’, presented with elaborate costumes, and head-dresses.[[2]](#endnote-2) The American dancer La Meri discovered Gopal and toured with him in 1936. Shankar’s ‘Creative Dance’ combined Indian imagery with new movements and storytelling, searching for a dance language that would communicate Indianness to varied audiences.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Recent scholars, challenging the earlier dismissal of such efforts as ‘Orientalist,’ have reassessed Shankar’s contributions, describing him in Joan Erdman’s words as ‘India’s first modern dancer.’[[4]](#endnote-4) According to Erdman, ‘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).

Shankar and Gopal learned the technical aspects of dance presentation such as lighting and stagecraft from the West. Shankar toured with Anna Pavlova and choreographed two pieces for her, though he received no recognition in local reviews. Pavlova advised him to return to India and explore his own traditions. In 1938, he did so, establishing his Culture Center in Almora where students studied Indian classical movement, music, improvisation, and fine arts. Shankar’s goal was the body’s free exploration unrestricted by the rules of classical styles, hence, traditionalists criticized his appropriation of classical vocabulary. Another of Shankar’s key modernizing contributions appears in works like *Labour and Machinery* that dealt with current themes.

**Later Artistic Leaders**

Shankar’s disciple, the late Narendra Sharma, studied at Almora (1939-42), later establishing Bhoomika Creative Dance Center in 1972 in New Delhi. This company combines dance and theatre to explore contemporary themes such as education and gender discrimination.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Innovator Chandralekha’s (1928-2006) formative influence is rooted in her wholly original choreography from the 1970s onward. The human body, the central role of the spine, and male and female energies remained primary in Chandra’s various works beginning with *Angika* and ending with *Sharira* (both translate as the body). Chandra (as she was called) was trained initially in bharatanatyam though she rejected its superficial religiosity, over-ornamentation, and reliance on epic narratives and myths. Chandra used abstract movement (less common in the 1970s than it is today) that could evoke *rasa* (emotional response), demonstrating that such a response was not confined to narrative dance.

Although Chandra distanced her creative process from traditional Indian dance, her vision was grounded firmly, in Rustom Bharucha’s words, in ‘the Indian psychophysical tradition’ including martial arts such as Kerala’s *kalaripayattu.*[[6]](#endnote-6) She also explored connections between dance and society and the integral linking of the sensuous, sexual and spiritual in dance as in Indian aesthetics.

Festivals have fostered experimentation in Creative Dance in India. ‘The Other Festival: Dance, Drama, Music, Art’ (1998-2006), co-produced in the heart of tradition-bound Chennai by Anita Ratnam and Ranvir Shah, provided space for ‘an international contemporary arts festival.’[[7]](#endnote-7) Today, there are many dance festivals sponsored by local newspapers and government bodies such as Annanya Dance Festival in New Delhi among others.

Movement-based groups that encourage innovative modern work along with national and international collaboration, workshops, and mentoring young artists include the New-Delhi-based Gati Dance Forum (since 2007) and Bangalore-based Attakalari: Center for Movement Arts (since 1992) that also offers a Diploma in Movement Arts and Mixed Media.[[8]](#endnote-8) Gati ‘focus(es) on the evolution of new languages’ as noted on their site, ‘through innovation and experimentation in the context of existing dance practices in India.’

Selected artists in Creative Dance include the following artists who innovate from classical kathak and bharatanatyam. Astad Deboo trained in kathak, kathakali, modern dance, and pan-Asian styles, and is recognized today as a pioneer of Contemporary Indian Dance. Aditi Mangaldas was trained in kathak by Kumudini Lakhia and Birju Maharaj, and is Artistic Director of Drishtikon Dance Foundation that specializes ‘in classical kathak and contemporary works based on kathak.’[[9]](#endnote-9) Madhu Nataraj, trained in kathak by her mother Maya Rao and in Contemporary Dance in New York, is Artistic Director of Bangalore-based Natya STEM (Space, Time, Energy, Movement) Dance Kampni (since 1995). STEM is recognized as one of India’s leading contemporary dance companies that showcases how ‘tradition and modernity co-exist.’[[10]](#endnote-10) Daksha Sheth’s creative works ‘aesthetically combine tradition with Contemporary Dance.’[[11]](#endnote-11) She was trained in kathak by Kumudini Lakhia, and later by others in *mayurbhanj chhau*, *kalaripayattu*, and in the martial arts of Maharashtra that use ropes, called *mallakhamb.* Sheth is the first to introduce ‘aerial technique (since 1996)’ in her dance creations.

Artists innovating from bharatanatyam include Anita Ratnam, who trained at Kalakshetra Dance Academy and Mallika Sarabhai, who was trained by her mother, Mrinalini Sarabhai, among others. Ratnam and Sarabhai draw upon Indian epics’ female icons such as Sita (from *The Ramayana*) and Draupadi (Sarabhai played Draupadi in Peter Brook’s *Mahabharata*) to create modern works revealing the gender discrimination and other types of discriminations facing Indian women today. Sarabhai travels to rural communities to create theatre-in-education works dealing with maternal health and other social issues: ‘say enough to all this is wrong.’[[12]](#endnote-12)

Anita Ratnam, described as a ‘contemporary classicist,’ retains an Indian aesthetic affect along with a contemporary sensibility in her work. She draws on goddess traditions and ‘parallel mythologies’ from India, Tibet, China, and Egypt to create non-linear, non-narrative choreography that uses abstract movement. Ratnam works collaboratively with Toronto-based Hari Krishnan. She is the founder/Director of Arangham Trust and Dance Company (since 1992), a dance company that encourages collaborative work between dancers, musicians, and visual artists.[[13]](#endnote-13) The highly valuable web portal for Indian dance, [www.narthaki.com](http://www.narthaki.com) (since April 2000), was Ratnam’s brainchild. She is renowned for her pioneering work in co-producing The Other Festival and as a visionary curator of cutting-edge Indian performing arts events. In December 2011, Ratnam curated the Natya Darshan conference and performances in Chennai on the theme of ‘Mad and Divine’ exploring India’s beloved saint-poets such as Andal and Mira among others. In December 2012, Ratnam will curate a similar conclave of scholars and performing artists exploring the theme of ‘Epic Women.’

Padmini Chettur (Chennai-based), trained in bharatanatyam, danced from 1991-2001 in Chandralekha’s works, then formed her own company creating works with impeccable bodily rigor and virtuosity. Chettur’s work ‘takes contemporary dance in India . . . to radical dimensions.’[[14]](#endnote-14)

In the early twenty-first, Creative Dance in India continued to thrive. Along with training in one or more classical styles that continue to be taught widely, artistic innovations increased. Young, mostly urban artists have developed new works with local mentoring and exposure to dance events worldwide via the internet and travel. Audiences have welcomed local Indian artists’ new works performed in India and abroad.[[15]](#endnote-15)

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**Notes**

1. 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) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Leela Venkataraman, “Ambassador of Indian Dance”, *The Hindu*, October 24, 2003. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See Urmimala Sarkar Munsi, “ Boundaries and Beyond: Problems of Nomenclature in Indian Dance History”, in *Dance Transcending Borders*, ed. Sarkar Munsi, Urmimala (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2008, 78-98 for a good discussion of early pioneers. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Joan Erdman, “Performance as Translation: Uday Shankar in the West” TDR: The Drama Review (1987), 31:1, 64-88; See also, Urmimala Sarkar Munsi’s essay in *Dance Transcending Borders*, ed. Munsi, U.S. (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2008, 78-98. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. (http:// bhoomikadance.blogspot.com) [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Rustom Bharucha, *Chandralekha: Woman/Dance/Resistance* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 1995) [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. [www.arangham.com](http://www.arangham.com) Also see www.theotherfestival.com. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See [www.gatidance.com](http://www.gatidance.com) and www.attakalari.org. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Noted on Mangaldas’ site: www.aditimangaldasdance.com [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Noted on STEM’s site: [www.stemdance](http://www.stemdance)kampni.in See also [www.natyamaya.in](http://www.natyamaya.in) for information on Maya Rao [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Noted on Sheth’s site: www.dakshasheth.com [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Noted on Sarabhai’s site: www.mallikasarabhai.com [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. See [www.arangham.com](http://www.arangham.com) for further information. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Noted on Chettur’s site: www.padminichettur.com [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Other creative dancers in India and their websites include the following: Mayuri Upadhya (Bangalore-based) founded Nritarutya Dance Collective (2000): <http://nritarutya.com>. For an extensive listing by different regions in India see [www.narthaki.com](http://www.narthaki.com) under “Address Book: Contemporary” with the subtitle: “Rooted in tradition; seeking new horizons.”

    **References and Further Reading**

    Chakravorty, Pallabi, and Gupta Nilanjana, editors, *Dance Matters: Performing India*. London, New York, New Delhi: Routledge, 2010

    Includes essays on Indian nationalism and dance, gender and memory, ‘dance as healing’, ‘negotiating identity’, ‘local/global histories of bharatanatyam’ among others

    Katrak, Ketu H. *Contemporary Indian Dance: New Creative Choreography in India and the Diaspora.* Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011

    Delineates Contemporary Indian Dance as a new language of dance—multi-layered and multi-vocal—in India and the diaspora, and makes interconnections among artists in sites as distant and disparate as Toronto to Chennai, and London to Los Angeles

    Kothari, Sunil, Editor. *New Directions in Indian Dance*. Mumbai: Marg Publications, 2003

    Includes essays by performing artists such as Chandralekha, Astad Deboo among others, along with the historical evolution of innovative directions in Indian dance

    O’Shea, Janet. *At Home in the World: Bharata Natyam on the Global Stage*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2007

    Examines the history and evolution of bharatanatyam in India and beyond, analyzing issues of nationalism, identity, and the politics of cultural expression

    Peterson, Indira and Soneji, Davesh, editors, *Performing Pasts: Rewriting the Arts in Modern South India*. Oxford, New York, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)