

dance matters

PERFORMING INDIA



EDITORS

PALLABI CHAKRAVORTY

NILANJANA GUPTA

ROUTLEDGE

Dance Matters



(Photograph Courtesy Dancer's Guild, Kolkata)

Dance Matters

Performing India

EDITORS

Pallabi Chakravorty

Nilanjana Gupta

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON NEW YORK NEW DELHI

First published 2010
by Routledge
912 Tolstoy House, 15–17 Tolstoy Marg, New Delhi 110 001

Simultaneously published in the UK
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2010 Pallabi Chakravorty and Nilanjana Gupta

Typeset by
Star Compugraphics Private Limited
D–156, Second Floor (Opposite Metropolis)
Sector 7, Noida

Printed and bound in India by

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage and retrieval system without permission in writing from the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-415-55375-9

*In celebration
of the legacy of Manjusri Chaki-Sircar*

Contents

| | |
|-------------------------------------|-----|
| <i>Preface and Acknowledgements</i> | x |
| <i>List of Figures</i> | xii |

| | |
|---|------|
| Introduction | xiii |
| Pallabi Chakravorty and Nilanjana Gupta | |

I Can the Subaltern Dance?

| | |
|--|----|
| 1. Dancing Off-stage: Nationalism and its 'Minor Practices' in Tamil Nadu <i>Kalpana Ram</i> | 3 |
| 2. Another Time, Another Space — Does the Dance Remain the Same? <i>Urmimala Sarkar-Munshi</i> | 26 |
| 3. Folk Culture in Front of Serious Challenge: A Case Study on the Tribes of North Bengal <i>Samar Kumar Biswas and Somenath Bhattacharjee</i> | 40 |
| 4. The Problematics of Tradition and Talent in Indian Classical Dance <i>Shreeparna Ghosal</i> | 55 |
| 5. Dance as Healing: Kolkata Sanved <i>Sohini Chakraborty</i> | 62 |

II Globalization of Indian Dance

| | |
|--|-----|
| 6. The Ownership of Indian Classical Dancing and Its Performance on the Global Stage <i>Mandakranta Bose</i> | 73 |
| 7. Negotiating Identity: Dance and Religion in British Hindu Communities <i>Ann R. David</i> | 89 |
| 8. Local/Global Histories of Bharatnatyam <i>Payal Ahuja</i> | 108 |

III Aesthetics: Embodied and Embedded

9. It Matters for Whom You Dance:
Audience Participation in *Rasa* Theory
Uttara Asha Coorlawala 117
10. Manipuri Dance: A Lyrical
Manifestation of Devotion
Sruti Bandopadhyay 140
11. Swayed by Love: Dance in the Vaishnava
Temple Imagery of Bengal
Pika Ghosh 150
12. Remixed Practice: Bollywood Dance
and the Global Indian
Pallabi Chakravorty 169

IV The Gendered Dancing Body

13. The Daring Within: Speaking Gender
through Navanritya
Aishika Chakraborty 185
14. Re-Exporting 'Tradition': The Transcultural
Practice of Kathak in Kolkata and the Creation
of a New Female Body
Monica Dalidowicz 205
15. The Lords of Dance: Changing Fortunes
Vikram Iyengar 225

V Alternative Histories

16. The Politics of Memory: The Rise of the
Anti-Hero in Kathakali
Mundoli Narayanan 237
17. Guru Surendranath Jena: Subverting the
Reconstituted Odissi Canon
Alessandra Lopez y Royo 264

| | |
|---|-----|
| 18. Courtesans and Choreographers: The (Re)Placement of Women in the History of <i>Kathak</i> Dance <i>Margaret Walker</i> | 279 |
| <i>About the Contributors</i> | 301 |
| <i>Index</i> | 306 |

Preface and Acknowledgements

Dance exists both as lived experience and observable phenomenon. But rarely is it thought of as a subject for debate regarding democracy, interdisciplinary learning, or subversive thinking. Yet, the overwhelming response to the call for a symposium on Indian dance forms from the School of Media, Communication, and Culture at Jadavpur University, Kolkata was a reflection of this urgency to place dance at the center of social analysis and critical discourse. The organizers, Pallabi Chakravorty (Swarthmore College, USA) and Nilanjana Gupta (Jadavpur University), mindful of the innate link between dance as an object of analysis and the embodied nature of its practice, envisioned the symposium as a forum to bring scholars and practitioners together on the same platform. Perhaps for the first time in India a space was created for exchange and dialogue between experts and students, scholars and dance practitioners, and established and emerging choreographers to engage in a critical evaluation of Indian dance forms within national, postcolonial, and global contexts. The call for papers went out to a wide variety of people and institutions, dancers and gurus, scholars and teachers, and was circulated locally, nationally, and internationally. The symposium was extended to three days from two due to the length and breadth of the submissions. The preview began with local students in a dialogue and movement workshop on contemporary interpretations of Kathak with Pallabi Chakravorty.

The keynote address was given by Mallika Sarabhai, the eminent social activist and danseuse who has worked hard to link dance to social justice issues. She reminded us (as she does through her work at Darpana Academy) that dance matters from the micro to the macro level for community development as well as social justice issues. There were various short lecture demonstrations within the symposium itself, plus an evening-length work presented by noted Manipuri dancer and contemporary choreographer Priti Patel. The papers that were presented at the symposium spanned a wide range of topics. A few more essays were added to this present volume by eminent scholars

working on Indian culture to give the volume coherence and depth. This book merges theory and practice to foster independent thinking and critical debates surrounding Indian dance, nation, globalization, and subjectivity.

The editors would like to thank the School of Media Communication and Culture for making this event possible. In addition, we would like to thank Professor Gautam Gupta for making sure the new Vivekananda Hall was completed on time for the conference and dance performances; Professor Moinak Biswas for his technological assistance; Sundari Haldar and Abdul Bashir for their constant availability; Cynthia Lee for her editorial assistance in an earlier phase of this manuscript; Pinaki De for the cover design; and Mallika Sarabhai and Priti Patel for gracing the occasion.

The symposium was funded from the University Grants Commission (UGC) Programme—‘University with Potential for Excellence’—which was awarded to Jadavpur University for the period 2003–2007. One part of the programme was to conduct ‘Studies in Cultural Processes’; the symposium was one of many initiatives of the programme.

List of Figures

| | | |
|-------|---|-----|
| 11.1. | <i>Krishna and Radha</i> , eighteenth century. | 151 |
| 11.2. | Altar with relief figures of Nityananda and Chaitanya, and three-dimensional icons of Krishna and Radha, Radha Shyam temple, Vishnupur. | 152 |
| 11.3. | Wooden figures of Chaitanya and Nityananda on display at the Raash celebration in the Krishna Lalji temple Complex, November 2007. | 153 |
| 11.4. | Rasa-mandala, South Façade, Shyam Ray temple, Vishnupur. | 154 |
| 11.5. | South Façade, Shyam Ray temple, Vishnupur. | 156 |
| 11.6. | Avatars of Vishnu with the figure of Chaitanya located second from top left, Keshta Ray temple, Vishnupur. | 163 |
| 13.1. | Women dancers performing <i>Shyama</i> as Tagore watches. | 192 |
| 13.2. | <i>She Said....</i> , Ranjabati's last choreography with Dancers' Guild. | 200 |
| 18.1. | <i>Janasheen ki Gat</i> (Heir's Gat) <i>Sarmaya-i Ishrat</i> : 165. | 286 |
| 18.2. | <i>Gat Chehre ki</i> (Face Gat) <i>Sarmaya-i Ishrat</i> : 168. | 287 |
| 18.3. | <i>Kathak</i> Dancer Sudeshna Maulik in costume with a veil. | 289 |

Introduction

PALLABI CHAKRAVORTY AND NILANJANA GUPTA

Whether it is the gyrating figure of a Bollywood item girl, the ecstatic body of a Sufi saint, the cosmopolitan airs of an avante garde performer, or the precise aesthetics of a classical dancer, Indian dance in myriad performative and social settings is an enduring and vital human activity. Dance is an expression of human behavior that is at once social, aesthetic, spiritual, political, economic, sexual, and semi-otic; in short, it is art and labor, physical and metaphysical, personal and social. India has a long tradition, both textual and oral, of producing knowledge about the art-ritual-practice of dance. This volume is an attempt to look at dance as a lived and practiced phenomena in contemporary times. The uniqueness of this volume is that it tries to bring together the thoughts and experiences of both theorists and practitioners, and indeed several of the contributors are both scholars of dance and practitioners. Amitav Ghosh's moving essay "Dancing in Cambodia" (1998) is an interesting exploration of the ways in which the meaning and significance of dance can shift in changing historical and political regimes. In *Dance Matters*, dance is explored in many of its manifestations—contemporary and historical, classical and folk, commercial and aesthetic—in an attempt to bring together a range of ways of understanding a form of human expression that has remained curiously unexplored by academic discourse.

It is now well-established that the construction of an Indian national identity (in the early part of the twentieth century) drew on the dancing figures of Nataraja, Shiva, Krishna, Radha, and Mira as most representative of Indic civilization and heritage. Eminent scholars and literary figures such as Coomaraswamy, Tagore, Vallathol, and more recently, Vatsyayan, Khokar, Kothari, and Massey created a significant body of literature on Indian dance to establish such a narrative. Reginald Massey's summary of the fall and subsequent rise of dance practices in India is typical of a history that claims that

By the latter half of the 19th century dancing had generally come to be regarded with reservation. This feeling intensified into hostility. There are many reasons for this which stem chiefly from the decline of aristocratic patronage and the consequent fall in the status and reputation of the dancers. There was also in India at about this time an upsurge of Victorian middle-class morality which sapped the creative energies of the people. It was only the efforts of anti-philistines like Tagore, Vallathol, Menaka, E. Krishna Iyer, Rukmini Devi and Uday Shankar and the inspiration of Western dancers like Pavlova, that finally led to the resuscitation of this ancient art form. (Massey 2004: 39)

Sunil Kothari ended the first chapter of his volume *Kathak: Indian Classical Dance Art* with the following paragraph after lamenting “the state which our classical dances had descended to”:

But with the advent of Uday Shankar on the scene, Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore’s epoch-making attempts at introducing the education of classical dances at Shantiniketan, poet Vallathol’s starting of Kerela Kala Mandalam in the thirties in Kerela, Rukmini Devi and E. Krishna Iyer’s historic work in re-establishing Bharata Natyam and the beginning of Kalakshetra as a major institution where a galaxy of great masters began to impart training in dance and music, the awakening of the national spirit in the wake of our fight for freedom from alien rule and similar awakening among the intellectuals contributed in salvaging our precious heritage of classical dances, among which Kathak too received a renewed patronage at the hands of performers from social strata other than the *baijis* and the prostitutes. (Kothari 1989: 17)

This anthology makes a dramatic shift from these established narratives of dance history and practice to bring to the forefront debates on history, aesthetics, identity, and globalization, embedded and embodied in and through dance. As a result, it catapults dance, often considered simply a super structure, into the vortex of debates in social theory. The essays collected here reflect the multi-dimensional aspects of Indian dance by locating it within disciplines such as cultural studies, anthropology, art history, dance history, religious studies, postcolonial and feminist studies. It does so without excluding the voice of the practitioners, so that theory is grounded in practice and practice is informed by theory. It contributes to the new and emerging field of dance studies, where scholarship on Indian dance is prominent, and expands its scope beyond the boundaries of Euro-American centers. This attempt at

re-territorialization of the contemporary discourse on Indian dance infuses the global with local voices, issues and concerns.

The School of Media Communication and Culture at Jadavpur University, Kolkata was a pioneer in opening up the contemporary postcolonial and global stage for dance matters in India. This book is based on an international symposium on Indian dance entitled “Dance Matters” that brought scholars and practitioners together on the same platform at Jadavpur University on May 10–12, 2006. The organizers of the symposium, Pallabi Chakravorty (Swarthmore College, USA) and Nilanjana Gupta (Jadavpur University, India), sensitive to the innate link between dance as an object of analysis and the embodied nature of its practice, envisioned the symposium as a forum to bring scholars and practitioners together on the same platform. It was the first instance in India where a space was created for exchange and dialogue between exponents and students, scholars and practitioners, established and emerging choreographers, to enter into critical evaluation of Indian dance forms within national, postcolonial, and global contexts. However, this selection is not limited to collecting these conference papers for publication. In order to make this volume truly representative and as inclusive as possible, some scholars were invited to write on particular aspects, and we are happy that several of them responded.

The keynote address was given by Mallika Sarabhai, the eminent social activist and danseuse who has worked hard to link dance to social justice issues. In her presentation, she spoke about her experiments which, while using modes of classical dance, broke the traditional language and structure, to address and comment on contemporary social and political issues such as violence. One of the central concerns of her body of work relates to gender. Several of the compositions she discussed and showed recordings of challenged the conventions of using the female body. Her attempt to create a new vocabulary for dance brings together “classical” Indian practices with a modern sensibility. Rather than “remaining true” to an imagined tradition, she expands the claims of dance as a serious contemporary art form. In a way, Sarabhai’s presentation set the themes of the discussions that followed by establishing that dance does matter and how one dances matters too.

The eclecticism of the essays gathered in this collection is indicative of the importance of dance both in its diverse manifestations and collective expressions. They span a wide range of topics and cross-cut

various disciplinary boundaries. They may be uneven in their critical and analytical orientations. But together they form an important narrative regarding the contradictions as well as commonalities in Indian culture, tradition, and modern forces of change. The essays are divided into five sections. However, these sections are not discrete or discontinuous and many essays overlap in their ideas and issues.

The first section is titled, "Can the Subaltern Dance?" The section opens with an essay by Kalpana Ram which situates the tone of the book. While assessing the various areas of dance writing, she specifically critiques theories of the dancing body that have emerged from recent scholarship on classical Indian dance. Through ethnographic immersion in subaltern aesthetics, she analyzes new ways of theorizing the body that incorporate the sensory and the experiential. Ram, and others like Urmimala Sarkar-Munshi, Samar Kumar Biswas, Somenath Bhattacharjee, Shreeparna Ghosal, and Sohini Chakraborty explore from various positions, the veiled subjects of Indian dance, who are marginal to the privileged discourses on Indian dance and culture that are mainly associated with metropolitan centers. Biswas and Bhattacharjee pose the problems faced by little-known folk dance traditions in Bengal that are disappearing due to the onslaught of deforestation and development. Sarkar-Munshi launches a critique of urban dance choreographers and practitioners who are appropriating folk and tribal forms to make their own products exotic and marketable, thereby suppressing the original context and the voices of the indigenous practitioners. She argues that the government also functions to facilitate this process of "Sanskritization" of indigenous forms. Chakraborty uses her own institution, Samved, to restore such cultural and class divides by using dance within a framework of advocacy. She illustrates how she uses dance therapy to restore confidence among women who are victims of sexual exploitation and violence. Ghosal's essay poses the conundrums of traditional pedagogy within a contemporary context in Kolkata. Although speaking for classical Indian dance and from a metropolitan setting, she positions herself as relatively marginal to the *avante garde*. From a practitioner's perspective she examines the social construction of "tradition" and "talent" within a fragmented classical dance scene. Together, these essays try to go beyond the now conventional wisdom of a history of the privileging of particular forms and enshrining them as 'classical'. They raise the important issues of modernity and the conscious and unconscious processes—often deeply problematic—by which a new formulation of "modern India" is emerging.

From deeply local and situated contexts the narrative trajectory connects to the global and the transnational. This next section titled “Globalization of Indian Dance” explores how Indian identities are negotiated through the interaction of the global and the local to form contemporary Indian identities. The essays by Ann R. David, Payal Ahuja, and Mandakranta Bose show how, in different ways, identities are re-invented through the practice and scholarship of classical, folk, and contemporary dances. Bose offers a broad survey of classical Indian dance history and its reinvention in the global context driven by market forces. She argues that the female dancing body has always provided labor while the male controlled her artistic output. This division of labor, she argues, is dramatically changing due to globalization. David uses an ethnographic framework to illustrate how dance forms such as Garba, Bharatnatyam, and Bollywood function to construct the ethnic identities of the Gujarati and Tamil communities in the UK. She argues that this happens within religious and ritual contexts such as Navaratri or temple festivities, thus reinventing a Hindu identity for the Indian diaspora in the UK. Ahuja focuses on dance pedagogy and scholarship within a transnational perspective. She contrasts the different perspectives of dance history offered by national institutions such as Nalanda based in Bombay and Roehampton (in the UK). She argues that the cultural narrative of Bharatnatyam taught at Nalanda or other national performing arts institutions should be combined with transnational approaches to Indian culture for charting dance history.

The next section is titled ‘Aesthetics: Embodied and Embedded’. It engages with the specificities of Indian dance aesthetics derived from the *bhava-rasa* system. All three essays in this section, by Uttara Asha Coorlawala, Sruti Bandopadhyay, and Pika Ghosh, engage with *bhakti* as the core semiotic of Indian dance practices. Coorlawala situates the cultural meaning of Indian dance and the relationship between performer and audience within a cross-cultural perspective. Bandopadhyay explores the distinct aesthetics of Manipuri dance that combines the *bhakti* elements of the Raslila with Laiharaoba traditions. Ghosh’s essay examines through art history the role of dance as a vital visual mechanism in upholding the model of *bhakti* in the context of Gaudiya Vaishnavism. She argues that the dancing and singing of *sankirtana* formed the social glue that helped to forge a Vaishnavite identity among the Chaitanya worshippers in Bengal. All of these essays argue in their own ways for the need to introduce more nuanced approaches

to understanding history and the practice of Indian dance, both as it existed and as it is practised today.

The following section, titled “The Gendered Dancing Body,” unfolds as a lively dialogue between practitioners and scholars on feminism, dance, and male sexuality. The essays by Aishika Chakraborty, Monica Dalidowicz, and Vikram Iyengar explore this topic through classical, contemporary, and popular/film dance forms. Chakraborty’s essay traces the work of a dance pioneer from Bengal, the late Manjusri Chaki-Sircar, who evolved a new contemporary dance language, *Navanritya*, within the backdrop of the modern dance movement in Bengal. She illustrates how Chaki-Sircar was able to portray the contemporary ethical woman through her choreographies. She argues that Chaki-Sircar’s works offered a critical lens to re-evaluate the classical traditions and re-imagine the female body in a modern context. Dalidowicz’s essay in contrast looks at Kathak guru Chitresh Das’s reinvention of this classical style within a strict traditional mode to inscribe contemporary women’s bodies. Iyengar analyzes Kathak dance in Hindi films and his own practice to argue that despite the fact that male dancers such as gurus continue to be beacons of national identity, the male body of an Indian dancer is enmeshed in stereotypes and social stigma. The complexity of the positioning of both women and male performers within contemporary discourses of gendering in the context of a ‘modern India’ is brought into the debate about dance practices. While more and more dance schools attract young girls from middle and even lower middle classes, how far are they successful in ‘allowing’ women—and men—to escape traditions of molding the human body and becoming a creative practice that women, especially, can use as a means of self-exploration and self-expression?

The last section is titled ‘Alternative Histories’ and moves beyond the accepted historical narratives that have now become established. In this section Mundoli Narayanan, Margaret Walker, and Alessandra Lopez y Royo analyze the history of three classical forms (Kathakali, Kathak, and Odissi) in new ways. Narayanan makes a radical departure from the conventional history of Kathakali. By contextualizing the performance of Kathakali in colonial India, he shows how the dominant values of the myths were inverted through the rise of the anti-hero; that is, from Rama to Ravana. He further argues that this reformulation was a political move against the dominant colonial power for forging a Malayali identity. Royo focuses on the works of late Odissi guru Surendranath Jena to reveal a different historical strand of the dance.

She argues that rather than focusing on the dominant stories of Radha and Krishna, Jena choreographed from the poetics of the *yoginis*, a genre that is outside the classical canon. Walker returns the history of Kathak dance—that has remained mainly a patriarchal narrative—to its unsung practitioners: the courtesans of the past, and female practitioners or gurus of the present.

Yet, these sections are not discrete in themselves. Several of the essays speak to each other as the larger ideological concerns frame the work of the individual scholars.

This collection of ideas, practices, and narratives innovatively and cogently places Indian dance at the center of social, political, aesthetic, and historical analysis. It situates dance within experiences that are integral to South Asia. There is an increasing tendency among scholars and practitioners to view dance through the lenses of choreographic conventions and politics of representation. Although these are critical to the discipline of Dance Studies, there is a lack of engagement with ethnographic immersion and embodied aesthetics. The discipline of Dance Studies entered the Euro-American academy and institutional settings through theorizing the body grounded in textual terms. Scholars of dance at last could analyze the “body” and claim the archives of choreography as objects of study. The term ‘choreography’ derived from a textual understanding of the body is rooted in Cartesian philosophy. The postcolonial scholarship of Indian dance that emerged in recent times also drew on textual strategies of subaltern historiographies. These epistemological underpinnings of dance are fundamentally different from the phenomenological understanding of the body in Indian philosophy, which does not separate mind from body. Hence, on the one hand, we now have scholarly output that continues to describe Indian dance in purely aesthetic terms with little engagement with the recent critical interventions about power and politics; on the other hand, we have scholarship with no engagement with embodied aesthetics but only politics and power. As new methods of understanding, analyzing, and teaching emerge, we need new thinking and investigation to merge politics and poetics of emotions in meaningful ways. The essays in this collection show how the body is both discursive and non-discursive, dance is both ritual and theater, globalization is both situated and trans-local, human agency is both conscious and unconscious, and power is both centered and de-centered. Overall, the collection makes dance a foundational socio-cultural and a lived phenomenon that is local and global, critical and emotional, and personal and political.

References

- Ghosh, Amitav. 1998. "Dancing in Cambodia." In Amitav Ghosh, *Dancing in Cambodia: At Large in Burma*. Delhi: Ravi Dayal Publishers.
- Kothari, Sunil. 1989. *Kathak: Indian Classical Dance Art*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publishers.
- Massey, Reginald. 2004. *India's Dances: Their History, Technique and Repertoire*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publishers.

I

Can the Subaltern Dance?



Dancing Off-stage: Nationalism and its “Minor Practices” in Tamil Nadu*

KALPANA RAM

Dance scholarship in India over the twentieth century has been impeded by weaknesses that have rendered it unable to realize the exciting potential it holds. That potential is nothing less than achieving the synthesis of social theory with an appreciation of embodied aesthetics.

The body of work produced *within* the professional field of dance performance by professional dance criticism and writing creates its own particular limits of discourse. Dancers themselves have dominated the production of discourses on dance. In what appears to be a possible contrast to dance discourse in the west, a long line of professional dancers have led the way in writing books on dance, from Mrinalini Sarabhai (1986) to Yamini Krishnamurti (1995), Leela Samson (1987), Kanaka Rele (1992), Padma Subrahmanya (1979), and others. In a corpus that fully deserves the title of “a body of work,” these texts pay attention to the lines, stances, postures, and characteristic movements of each style. The writing is lit up from within by the luminous aesthetics of Indian dance traditions. But the very tightness of the embrace between dancer and discourse means there is virtually no space for the potentially unsettling questions of social theory, those that concern the wider social, political, and historical horizons within which these traditions are shaped and reshaped. The world of “the arts” becomes the defining and taken-for-granted world.

A version of the relationship between India’s past and present has become an ingredient of the Indian middle class’s “common sense.” Yet, in the absence of tools equipped to interrogate that version, the

field of dance writing simply reproduces that common sense. What is by now common sense has flowed from more conscious and improvised responses forged by Indian nationalism to the challenges posed by colonialism. Dance choreography and dance writing were themselves a constitutive element of that nationalism. I refer here in particular to the contribution of Bharatnatyam. This dance form has occupied a privileged position on the stage on which a broad and diffuse nationalism performs its claim to a live and continuous Hindu tradition. Many of the common figures of discourse through which every representation of the relationship between Bharatnatyam and *sadir attam* seems destined to pass were constructed in the early part of the twentieth century. A dozen examples could be taken from books and spoken preambles to performances by way of illustration. This is Leela Samson:

Until the early years of the 20th century, dance was still a vital part of temple ritual. Traditionally, the temple was maintained and patronized by the local ruler or chief. . . . During British rule, however, a period of degeneration set in. *Devadasis* began to dance in the courts of princes and in the homes of rich landlords. The religious significance of dance was forgotten. Poets began to write eloquently on the greatness of their patrons and dancers began to interpret these poems. The temple dancer became a court dancer, often of ill repute. (Samson 1987: 30)

Such a narrative goes back to the founding moments in which dance was “rescued” from such degeneracy. Rukmini Devi’s first two productions are *Kutrala Kuravanji* (1944) and *Kumarasambhavam* (1947). The first represented a significant reworking by Rukmini Devi of an existent piece that was still being performed by *devadasis*, entitled *Sarabhendra Kuravanji*. Dissatisfied by the fact that this piece was performed in honor of the Tanjavur ruler Sarabhoji, she searched for years until she found the “right” and “original” *kuravanji*—one which celebrated God (Ramnarayan 1984b: 27). Yet her aversion was hardly in keeping with the “tradition” it sought so ardently to revalidate. That tradition had been shaped by quite the opposite set of values. Tamil elite culture is the product of a long and rich history of mutual interpenetration between courts and temples, between the model of the king and the model of the male deity. This history extends from the imperial eras of the Cholas (850–1279 AD) and Vijayanagara (1336–1565 AD), reaching its apotheosis in the Nayaka kingdoms of Tamil Nadu in the sixteenth century and continuing until their

annexation by the British in 1865. By the time of the Nayakas, “temple and court, once similar but separate . . . re-defined themselves as explicit images of one another” (Narayana Rao et al. 1992: 187). Indeed, even a cursory reflection by those who are ready to admit that temple and art required patronage by the local ruler or chief should lead them to wonder how dependency on such patronage could have left temples and artistic traditions untouched.

It is precisely at this point of instability that feminist scholarship, Marxist and postcolonial cultural studies have made their incisive intervention. What has mattered to intellectuals in *this* field, as opposed to the field of dance scholarship, is the construction of a gendered middle-class respectability that is simultaneously upper caste, Brahminic, modern, and westernized in its sensibility (Sangari and Vaid 1989; Kaviraj 1995; Sinha 1997). Dance participates in this field only insofar as it provides a further instance of the complex negotiations between nationalists, colonial agencies, and social reformers over the constitution of “tradition” and “modernity.” But the work in this field has elicited a rich understanding of the *relational* character of the way in which middle-class culture has been constructed—not as an autonomous entity, but through relationships of exclusion and inclusion with other caste communities, creating new forms of marginalization for the professional dancers, the devadasis (Srinivasan 1985; Anandhi 1991; Nair 1994). Investigations in other parts of India have similarly explored the new tendencies of marginalization which began to afflict particular styles of performance. The mix of eroticism, professional identity, and public performance was destined to fall foul of the new morality of a respectable nationalist construction of “Indian culture” (see, for example, Oldenburg 1991 on the *tawayafs* of colonial Lucknow).

Yet, for all its insights into the political construction of gender and nationhood, this body of work betrays a singular imperviousness to the aesthetics or the embodied experience of dance or performance. The politicized treatment of performance draws on a tradition which, for all its more sophisticated manifestations, has little time for embodied aesthetics, except insofar as it reveals something about power relations between the elite and the subaltern or allows the researcher to adjudicate between the progressive and the backward tendencies of politics. Yet politics, as the language of maneuvering, shifting, and taking up of “positions” itself implies, relies implicitly on having a body and being in a body.

Since my own earlier attempts to bring the two strands together (see 2000a, 2000b, 2002, 2005) the outlook has changed, as this volume and its antecedents in the conference of 2006 testify. Writers have appeared who are both trained in Indian dance practices and have a wider range of critical theoretical tools at their disposal. The recent publication of O'Shea's book (2007) represents a logical culmination of a succession of inquiries into the construction of "Bharatnatyam" by writers themselves trained in the discipline (Gaston 1997; Coorlawala 2005; Meduri 2005). New attention is paid to the choreographing of dance pieces as active sites in which wider historical and political processes can be seen at work.

Yet we have a considerable way to go in developing the kind of theoretical framework that will allow dance and other embodied forms of experience to properly illuminate the fact that "the body" is not some kind of technical tool for our various projects. The body does not simply occupy "space" like any other object, nor is it a "container" in which an inner "I" resides. We *are* our bodies. "The body" is not somehow mysteriously identical with us and our projects; it is above all, the very *basis* for our sensory connection with the world, for our having a world at all. Dance, with its mobile and labile qualities, emphasizes that "the body" is not a static entity. It is through the process of moving and sensorily exploring the world that we come to know and constitute both ourselves and the world around us.

There is another fundamental theoretical weakness. We have not sufficiently allowed Indian dance and performance traditions to inform our epistemology and methodology in the social sciences and humanities. Reflected on carefully, these aesthetics and performance values hold rich lessons in understanding and in instructing us on the nature of human subjectivity in more general terms. The supreme emphasis implicit in all performance traditions in India on communicating *to* an audience, in *addressing* others—writ large, for example, in the importance of facial expressivity and narrative performance in so many of the traditions—ought to heighten our awareness that subjectivity is shaped and shared in relationships with one another and to the material world. It is not an expression of an "inner" nonmaterial essence residing inside a container-like body: "A meaning which touches the heart creates *rasa*; the entire body feels the *rasa* like fire consuming a dry stick" (Rangacharya 1996: 65).

Dance in the Form of a Minor Practice

I turn in this essay to that even more neglected sphere of subaltern aesthetics that has been consigned to the realm of “folk” practices to see what we might learn from *non*-Sanskritic traditions that inform and are vital to present-day cultures of dance and performance. I have had the privilege as an ethnographer of inhabiting for a time a habitus very different from the one into which I was born. Thanks to ethnography, I have been exposed to versions of what it is to “dance” that have challenged to the very core my assumptions about religion, gender, illness, and affliction that I inherited as an upper-caste urban Hindu woman. Since the 1980s I have lived for periods of time in Kanyakumari District (Tamil Nadu) as an ethnographer of the Mukkuvar fishing caste, the Nadar agricultural castes who live in the hinterland away from the coast, and later, in the 1990s, and to a lesser extent, the Dalit agricultural laboring castes in Chengalpattu District of Tamil Nadu.

According to the formulations of elite culture, this subaltern world is allowed at best to produce “folk” (*natu*) dances and music—a classification that consigns these life-filled genres to a past that has already receded. But if we were to view elite nationalism from the perspective of these subaltern castes, the entire debate around the reconstitution of “dance” in Tamil Nadu and Indian classical tradition would be shown to have presumed far too much. The arena for that debate is that already provided by nationalism and by nationalist constructions of what constitute significant events. The frame within which we contest this nationalist history—despite the defining manifesto of subaltern studies—has been overwhelmingly determined by the archives of the colonial and postcolonial state. The figures whose significance we debate, such as Rukmini Devi Arundale, Dravidian nationalists, Tamil Brahmin revivalists, social reformers, and even the relatively subaltern figure of the devadasi, are in a sense spotlighted on the stage of nationalism by the gaze of the state, whether colonial or postcolonial.

The practice of ethnography is not to be opposed to working with archival texts, but it does open up possibilities of reevaluating the present through the lenses of practices that are consigned to the past even though they are in fact part of the fabric and texture of everyday rural life. The practices I wish to discuss receive no form of recognition whatsoever. But it is this very lack of recognition which might allow us to produce fresh hypotheses and interpretations that challenge the disabling mixture of historicist, evolutionary, and

rationalist understandings we have inherited and which we continue to reproduce as a way of understanding our past, present, and future.

I take inspiration from Michel de Certeau's methodological orientation, which is to write *against* the grain of Foucault's monumental studies on governmental modernity. Instead of writing about the sites privileged by modern panoptic apparatuses, he asks: "What is the status of so many other series which, pursuing their silent itineraries, have *not* given rise to a discursive configuration or to a technological systematization? They could be considered as an immense reserve constituting either the beginnings or traces of different developments" (1984: 48). De Certeau designates such practices as "minor practices." In this essay I consider *attam* as a minor practice. Attam is an integral aspect of the history of Tamil constructions of the body, yet it is not a figure on the stage of nationalism, either at the regional or at the national level. In his study of the Tamil ritual theater form called *terukkuttu*, Frasca describes attam in the following terms: "*Attu* (or *attam*) is a nominal form derived from the Tamil verb meaning 'perform' or 'dance'. The derivatives of this verb have a general sense of 'performance' that must be qualified by a descriptive or taxonomic item preceding it" (Frasca 1990: 15). Thus attam may occur in *sadir attam*, the polished dance performances of courts and temples that formed the precursor of Bharatnatyam, but it may also occur in very different ritual contexts as *veri attam*, the dance associated with *veri*. *Veri* is described by Frasca as

a term that to this day has an important and specific meaning in the context of Tamil culture. It carries the sense of a frenzy, a sudden, often violent fury that can overtake an individual. This frenzy can occur at any time but has a particular application to the possession rituals still extant in Tamilnadu today. In these ritual contexts the onset of *veri* is understood as a violent, powerful possession by a specific deity or spirit. (Frasca 1990: 15)

Dance and swinging recur constantly in the field notes I took down in the course of witnessing my first experience of a day-long ritual festival honoring Icakki Amman, sovereign deity of the fertile heartland of Kanyakumari. Her shrine, at Muppandal Koil, greets the worshipper outside the temple precincts with fierce clay dolls that are an immediate challenge to twentieth-century upper-caste Hindu aesthetics. But far more of a challenge is to unfold in front of the somewhat bemused gaze of the upper-caste ethnographer:

By afternoon, a crowd has gathered around these performers [the performers of the *villu pattu* or the bow song genre, epic songs dedicated to the birth of the goddess or the death of local heroes who turn into deities], and a swing has been erected, decked with flowers. We are told the Amman will swing on it. In front of the singers dance some women. The very presence of dance among women in a public place signals the “presence” of possession. An old woman dances with her tongue clenched between her teeth. A young woman dances, her hair out, *talappu* [upper part of sari] tucked at the waist, later she jumps on one spot, her hands outstretched and clenched. A young woman has brought with her a garland, a red towel, and a turmeric colored cloth. She joins the dancers late, after placing these items around her neck and hitching her sari at the waist. Her expression may be one of suffering—the rest just seem rapt. An old woman in a white sari and no blouse and another older woman wearing a saffron sari, holding the goddess’s *vepa ellai* [margosa leaf], dance rhythmically, and offer the leaves to onlookers. My friend Stella later recounts she saw a woman clasping her hands like an empty cradle, and rocking it. I think of all the reproductive disasters that seem to inevitably accompany women’s possession in the village. The women among the onlookers ululate from time to time, covering their mouths while doing so—I recall my grandmother reproving me when I did this, telling me this was inauspicious, done only at mourning—but here it is part of worship. Then a man comes through, who has been worshipping Cutalai Matan. His body is smeared in *viputhi* [sacred ash], his white *vetti* soaked after a ritual bath, carrying a *vel* [the goddess’ trident], a *val* [curved sword], and a thick club under his arm. He looks gaunt and fierce. Later, a male priest comes out in a state of possession. He comes in front of the *villipattu* [bow song] singers and dances—first barely twitching, then more vigorously. His feet are planted firmly apart, bracing his body, and he mainly shakes his head. At one point he lurches toward the swing, and is helped to sit on it. Other priests push from behind and the women sing an *uncal pattu* [swing song]:

*Amman is on the swing
She will answer and banish our woes
Celebrate the Amman on the swing*

The swing stops and there is a stampede to have the goddess tell *kuri* or prophesy. The possessed priest places his hand on the head of different individuals, randomly, and tells *kuri* after *kuri*. Then when he seems to run out, the swing is restarted. The swing is like the dance of possession—a kind of mechanical dance, which supplies the rhythm and fuel. From time to time there is ululation, but intent on

the *kuri* and the swing, I have not noticed what is going on on the right. I turn around and experience shock—the ground runs red with rivulets of water turned red with blood. The “Cutalai Matan” worshipping priest is standing with his *val* in hand, and there are two headless black goats lying on the ground. A third black goat is held by two men. It stands still—and then, “Ore vettu” shouts someone admiringly, “[In just] One stroke!”—the head has been severed with one blow, evidently regarded as a worthy skill. Several chickens are slaughtered by the same man. These are also offerings brought by worshippers. He charges a few rupees and takes the head of the creature as commission. I am soaked with rain and sickened by the blood, so I wander off. I find another hub of activity at the next shrine. A giant pot of water thick with turmeric is slowly heating up over a smoking fire, a slow fire in all this rain. Round it dance a man and woman holding a bunch of coconut fronds and flowers; the man is bare-chested, and the woman wears no blouse. Inside the shrine, the drums, *nadaswaram* [oboe-like instrument] and bells all create a rhythmic music to dance to. The drums subside and then rise to crescendo. The two dance at varying tempi as well, the man occasionally dipping his hand in hot liquid and flourishing his hand at the crowd. He smears the liquid on his face, and his face is also red with *kum kum* powder, as is his tongue, which he brings out occasionally. He plucks the *veppa ellai* off branches he carries and throws it in the pot. A long while later, the pot finally comes to a boil, and the crowd begins to surge forward and ululate. The two begin to dip the flowers into the boiling liquid and slap their heads and bare backs with it. The liquid sprays, steam rises off their bodies and the fronds are clearly visible against the overcast sky. They dance around the pot, and another goat is sacrificed. The crowd melts away within minutes (Field Notes 1991).

Attam as a Bodily Technique for Breaking with the Body of Habit

Dancing and swinging are themselves part of a very specific sensory milieu that is deliberately heightened as a way of arriving at an emotional climax. It is a milieu made up of the heady mix of the sonorous portentous sound of the *tavil* drum, the piercing high pitch of the *nadaswaram*, the contagious tensions in the crowd leading up to

the severing of the heads of the goats, the smell and look of blood, the ululations from the women.

Moreover, there is no tight boundary that seals this experience off from other experiences in which some of these ingredients repeat themselves: the unmistakable sound of the *nadaswaram* is used in that most significant of life cycle ritual occasions, marriage, and it accompanies ritual processions that take the deity out of the temple to stake the claims of sovereignty over the territory of the *ur*. Narrative performances charged with the emotions of unjust murder, rape, and the bloody revenge of the goddess by professional performers of the *villu pattu* genre link the context of temple festivals to the affective world of popular cinema and everyday popular notions of justice and injustice, especially in the realm of gendered embodiment (Ram forthcoming). But what makes these connections between different contexts far more efficacious than a series of sensory echoes is the capacity of rhythmic dance and swinging to actually alter our kinesthetic sense of bodily boundaries between self and the world and all that it contains. In the context of subaltern rituals in Tamil Nadu, “dance” or *attam* is valued not simply as performance, *but as a tangible, material means of breaking with the everyday forms of bodily comportment, of breaking with or altering the body of habit*. Our everyday psychological and social sense of stability is supported, quite literally, by certain habitual postures. Exploring the work of Merleau-Ponty in relation to Schilder’s work on the body image, Weiss (1999) describes those primary postures which are physiologically most comfortable and maximally effective in achieving perceptual goals, such as an upright posture with the head facing forward in alignment with the rest of the body. Breaking with our everyday ways of relating to the world can therefore be effected by deliberately breaking with these postures, by not allowing the body to stay in a relaxed familiar position.

In *attam*, the postural schema of the body which is centrally related to the role of gravity and balance becomes singled out for explicit attention. Of particular importance here are two categories of sensations—those associated with exteroceptive sensations, which provide a person with information about external objects, and those linked to proprioception, which provide “a person with information about the state of her deep tissue, her own movements and activity, and the effects of her own displacement in space” (Guerts 2002: 9). We are dealing with “bodily techniques,” in Mauss’s sense of the term (1991), for altering or modifying the sensory modes in which

we normally establish and maintain our self/world relations. In an ethnography of the Muria people of Bastar who also experience trance states at the height of their rituals, Gell (1980) explores the way in which some of the activities of play in children, such as swinging, can be deliberately used as “bodily techniques” in order to effect entry into states that go by the general name of “trance.” Drawing on Diekman’s research on meditation, Gell describes the break with the body of habit as “de-automatisation.” Actions and percepts normally carried on unreflectively are reinvested, by subjects engaged in passive meditation experiences, with a heightening of awareness. The forms of play that the Muria of Bastar engage in are described as deliberately inducing a state of becoming “vertiginous.” In such forms of play, the quality of “equilibration” is taken out of the habituated and taken-for-granted role it has in our everyday activities:

Swinging and riding make use of a physical support whose independent activity permits the behavioural abstraction of equilibratory skills: Muria trance is only more complex than this in that it is the body itself, in its own semi-autonomous role as a vibrating, shuddering entity that has been separated out, and divorced from its normal integral place in consciousness. (Gell 1980: 237)

Such vertigo-inducing movements form a central part of Tamil ritual performances that are used to “call,” summon, or invoke deities. In his ethnography of the rural Tamil *terukkuttu* performance style, Frasca draws our attention to the central use of a spinning movement called the *kirickki*, which he traces to the onomatopoetic root *kiru-kiru*, whose primary meanings are “to be confounded, disconcerted, confused, giddy.”

[The *kirickki*] is considered the male movement par excellence for two important reasons. First, its kinetic focus is not just the feet but the entire body. Second, and most essential, its nature as a continuous, rapid, almost frenzied spin makes it the *terukkuttu* step most expressive of power, violence, heroism, and anger. . . . It is particularly important . . . that the *kirickki* be forceful and continuous. . . . During all sequences for which it is used the music and rhythms employed are of a very abstract nature. . . . According to performers, these particular moments of musical and kinetic abstraction when the *kirickki* is executed are the most directly linked to the occurrence of possession. Possession can manifest itself among performers or audience members, but is most predictable among the former. (Frasca 1990: 103–5)

In South Asia, it is not only human beings who enjoy the altered sensations of swinging, dancing, and play. The deities and supernatural beings also deliberately engage in these activities, excel in dance, and enjoy being swung in temples. I do not have to re-elaborate certain well-known features of South Asian deities, their legendary prowess and pleasure in performing dance and music, their love of food, their enjoyment of sexuality and so on. Rather, the point that needs to be made is that these shared aspects of ontology between humans and deities also facilitate a particularly fluid set of ontological exchanges and shifts, so that deities and spirits can readily find a “home” in the human body on occasions when the body is at its most porous. Indeed, subaltern deities seem to positively desire such experiences. Such a conjuncture occurs precisely at the height of ritual performances such as *terukkuttu* and *villu pattu*, where not only performers but spectators may have been engaged in *attam*. The altered ontology of the body is signaled by the “collapse,” often a literal swooning, of the human subject and the acquisition of powers which, being well beyond the normal capacities of the human subject, are understood as indicating the presence of the deity or spirit.

But the fluidity of meanings attached to *attam* does not stop here. The meanings of “religion” are fluid in ways unfamiliar and alien to the upper-caste version of Hinduism, especially as this has been re-constituted in the twentieth century. For in this world, the attributes of deities are not sharply distinguishable from those of demons, blessings from the deity are not to be understood as the opposite of illness and misfortune, and the rituals for ecstatically welcoming deities into one’s bodies are not markedly different from the rituals of exorcism to drive unwanted spirits out of the body. The missionaries perceived goddesses like *Icakki* as demons and called the bow song cult “demon worship.” They were half right. The distinction between good spirit and evil spirit or *pey* is particularly blurred in rural Tamil Nadu. The woman who dies in childbirth may be described as *pey* or *dire* spirit, but her behavior as *pey* is not very different from *Icakki*’s behavior as goddess. This blurring of meanings is old in Tamil Nadu. Drumming is later overlaid by the hierarchies of caste and becomes polluted by virtue of its association with leather, but it derives its original significance from its association with power that is both sacred and dangerous. Such meanings are thoroughly unfamiliar to the Indian middle class. They require us to recognize elements that are alien not only to Sanskritic values but also to *bhakti* or devotional worship. *Bhakti* has

a long history in Tamil Nadu, going back to the saint poets called the Alvars, who worshipped Krishna with poetry and song in the eighth and ninth centuries AD (Hardy 1983). But we are not dealing here with the more familiar divide between Brahminic religion and bhakti. The cult of Icakki Amman, for example, repeatedly foregrounds narratives and experiences to do with disease, sterility, birth, and death to highlight the maverick and arbitrary quality of power, leaving human beings no recourse to either *dharma* or bhakti as a means of securing divine favor. Instead, all that can be done by someone marked out by the ambiguous attention of such deities is to acknowledge the uncontrollable nature of this power, to try to cool down the “hot” desires of the deity or spirit, and, in the case of exceptional individuals, to try and channel that power through their body.

In this sense, attam is the sign of a wanted presence—as in the culmination of rituals of propitiation. But it is also a sign of an unwanted or undesired presence of a spirit or deity in one’s body. This was particularly brought home to me by living in the villages, away from the spotlight of “performance.” Here, I came across many instances of attam as a fundamental feature of the body’s way of evincing the presence of an unwanted, maverick, and volatile being. This move away from “performance” to trying to achieve a broader understanding of everyday experience within which performance is located also allows us to shift our attention from the sphere of attam in which men predominate—the ritually valued forms of dance and possession that occur at the climax of ritual worship—to the world of women’s attam, which is less valued and a sign of trouble. Women may certainly become possessed as members of the audience in ritual temple performances associated with possession, as we saw in my description of the rituals at Icakki Amman’s temple. However, they seldom take up the central positions of value in these performances. In the world of the villages, hidden from the gaze of the Indian upper class and from ethnographers who restrict themselves to formal “performance,” attam and affliction lodge themselves at the heart of what is culturally constructed as the embodied ontology of what it is to “be a woman,” that is, in the capacity to be a mother. The presence of an unwanted spirit is suspected, typically, through its effects on the body of female fertility, in disasters that overtake the capacity of women to conceive, to give birth and to successfully nurture the child through the critical years of early infancy. To give just one example, a coastal woman called Santi had seen spirits from the time she came as a young bride to her

husband's home, known to have been built on the site of an old Hindu temple. As she matured, the spirits interfered cruelly with her capacity to become a mother:

I lost two more babies to the spirit, one at four months, the other at two. The abortions were cured only after a *vaittiyar* [doctor] gave me a *kotal* [charm] with medicine in it. But I lost one of my babies to *mulai kachal* [brain fever], not because of the spirits. I also had trouble urinating. After the last birth, I had such a bloody and massive flow that it was as if I had given birth to ten babies.

In an effort to find cures, Santi was taken to many Catholic shrines as well as to the temples of Icakki Amman, where the spirits would “dance” her. Such agency on the part of the spirit can play havoc with the body to which the human subject later “returns.” Santi relates the dance of the spirit hurling her against the stone walls of the shrines or driving her into the surf that pounds right next to many of the shrines of Catholic saints in these villages:

I went to all the shrines of importance: Raja Ur where I stayed for one month, Manlikarai, St. Michael of Trivandrum, where I stayed for three months, the shrine of Amman in Mandaikkadu. Wherever I went there was *attam*. At Manalikai [a coastal village], the *attam* would take me and fling me into the surf [*katalle tuki kondu podum*].

Finally, at Valiathurai, a healer told me that it was a temple spirit which had me, and that it would take its own time to leave. (Field notes 1991)

Santi eventually reached a kind of accommodation to the presence of the spirits. When I last saw Santi, in 2006, it was one year after the tsunami. The baby that survived the departure of the spirit, Cinci, was now a young woman.

The troubles and afflictions unleashed by unwanted spirits *follow* the contours of gendered embodiment. The reproductive troubles of women's spirit attacks have no parallel in the cases of male experiences of affliction by spirits, and such attacks are in any case far less numerically salient.

However, I have also argued earlier that swinging and spinning movements of attam alter the sense of bodily stability which literally supports everyday social relations. The potentialities of deautomatization in attam also allow women to effect a *break* with the gendered body of habit. In the shrines of saints and goddesses where the

possessing spirit “comes out of hiding” and makes its identity felt, striking transformations take place in the bodily comportment of women. The sari is transformed from a modest garment to its athletic version, ready for the strenuous dancing that will follow. The talappu, normally trailing over the shoulder, is tucked into the waist. The sari is hitched to the waist, occasionally by care-takers, as the women turn into acrobats. One woman called Sugandhi took matters a step further and wore her husband’s clothes when she danced in the shrines, much to his dismay. Language, which must normally express the restraints of femininity, now expresses coarse and foul abuse. Deference to mothers-in-law, to elders, to saints, and to men generally, is transformed into vilification. The female body runs, jumps, leaps in the air, shins up pillars, and makes men afraid. As one man described it to me, women suddenly possess “the strength of tigers.” In the shrine at Raja Ur in Kanyakumari groups of young adolescent girls run in packs, shinning up pillars, swinging off them, turning acrobats, allowing the play of young children to reenter their repertoire at precisely the time when social pressures to mold their bodies into contained forms of speech and comportment are at their most acute.

When men get possessed in the context of affliction, their bodily behavior and break with the everyday gendered body is less dramatic, precisely because the daily disciplines of containment in movement, gaze, and language, the disciplines of how the body inhabits the materiality of place, are less salient in the first place.

The Politics of Rationalism and Religious Nationalism

The categories that attam in rural Tamil Nadu embodies are not the fixed and static categories of “ritual” or “religion,” as these have come to be framed by Oriental and nationalist discourses. Although we are, by now, with more than a decade of scholarship on Bharatnatyam behind us, well aware of all the editing that had to be done to make even the “ritual” dances of the “high” temple traditions of Tamil Nadu fit the rubric of pure spirituality, attam remains, quite simply, unknown in the canons of both regional and national tradition. Yet, in terms of the yearning for an unbroken continuity with an honorable past that nationalism feeds on, attam could have supplied rich fodder for a different genre of nationalism. The early Tamil texts that have been such an integral part of Tamil literary nationalism (Ramaswamy 1997) are rich in descriptions of worship remarkably similar to the

practices conducted at the shrine of Icakki Amman. This is Clothey (1978) on early Tamil poetry's description of worshipping deities such as Murukan, still the center of richly emotional cults in Tamil Nadu and in the Tamil diaspora:

There is evidence in the early poetry that religious practices associated with Murukan were fairly widespread, at least among the hill tribes. In Narr 288 a priestess (*kattuvicci*) is asked for a diagnosis of a maiden's languor. The diviner, be it priest or priestess, is believed to be possessed of the god and thus have access to the god's will (Tol. Porul 115). . . . In one such ritual of divination, the site is spread with sand and decorated . . . with red kantal flowers. Before the dance the priest offers an invocation to the hills. The dance is accompanied by musical instruments and songs. The priest elevates a puppet to take the illness from the maiden; a ram is sacrificed and its blood offered to Murukan. The staff of the *velan* is then held up over the kalanku nuts as if in benediction. The priestess . . . is dressed in two colors. She is given paddy which she throws into the air. She perspires, shivers, smells her palms and starts her rapturous singing in praise of Murukan. The paddy is counted by four's. If one, two or three paddy grains are left over, Murukan is believed to be the cause of the malaise; if the count is even, something else is the cause. (Clothey 1978: 27)

The similarities with the practices of worship, possession, and divination I have described as occurring at the shrine of Icakki Amman, even down to the terms used today to describe the dance of possession—“*veriattam*”—are striking enough to potentially fund an alternative version of Dravidianism which could have found in possession an equally unbroken and authentically Tamil “tradition.” Yet attam lacks representation at the level that matters most to postcolonial intellectual life. It lacks any presence at the level of discourses about state and nationhood. How has such a situation come about? Through what kinds of discursive division of labor is it possible for the attam of possession to lead such a marginal existence on the modern Indian stage?

The history of transpositions between upper-caste hierarchies of religious practices and evolutionary rationalism is yet to be fully explored. At least one of the key moments in this process can be located in the work of A. K. Iyer in the early twentieth century. I turn to his work for two reasons. He is one of the earliest Indian anthropologists to write about the south of India. Second, he is my maternal great grandfather, and his work therefore is directly a part of my own postcolonial genealogy. Iyer's work centered on the “princely” states of Cochin, Mysore, and Travancore and spanned the turn of the nineteenth

century and into the 1930s. I have explored his work elsewhere (Ram 2007) and will confine myself here to his essay on religion in the third volume on the state of Mysore, published in 1935 (vol. 3, 111ff). The essay effortlessly absorbs an evolutionist schema, while maintaining for Brahminic religion its place on the top of the “Indic” civilizational ladder. But in order to achieve this under modern conditions, Brahminism is distinguished from the religion of “lower castes” and “tribes” in new ways that draw on specifically anthropological contributions to the colonialist enterprise. Brahminism is now distinguished from the provinces of “totemism,” “magic,” “sorcery,” and “animism.” The religion of the upper castes consists of named, organized bodies of thought. It includes the hymns and sacrifices of the *Rg Veda*, the philosophy of the *Upanishads*, doctrines of *karma*, as well as the challenge of organized discourses such as Buddhism and Jainism and the *advaita* philosophy of Sankaracharya. Magic and sorcery on the other hand are nominated as the province of non-elites:

Primitive tribes all over India and other countries of the world believe that magicians and sorcerers can assume the figure of any animal they like. The Parayan and Panan sorcerers have powers of witchcraft. The Mundas of Chota Nagpur have similar beliefs in transformation. . . . The Todas and Badagas are mortally afraid of the Kurumbas who are believed to possess the power of destroying men, animals and property by witchcraft. Thus, sorcery is a living article of faith among the ignorant and backward people as also among the jungle folk. (Iyer 1935: 275)

With this maneuver, the elite reestablish their respectability in colonial terms. However, with this increase in respectability came a loss, not only the obvious loss to the non-elites who are thereby robbed of cultural capital, but a lesser cost borne by the elites themselves. As “magic” is exorcised from social practices and projected onto the “animism” and “spirit cults” of the non-elites, Indian elites lose the capacity to acknowledge, at least in official discourse, the patently magical elements in their own Brahminic practices such as the hymns and sacrifices of the *Rg Veda* or the doctrines of *karma*, in favor of a purely intellectualist understanding of religion. Henceforth, “Hinduism” can be defended only in terms of metaphysical doctrines as true “beliefs,” or, as with the discourse on a “Hindu science,” as so many prefigurations of “science” from the time of the Vedas onwards (Prakash 1999).

Most critiques of Orientalist nationalism stop with a critique of Brahminic constructions. What is less often noted is that the sundering of local meanings has also affected the avowedly “anti-Brahman” Dravidianist versions of religion, which in the twentieth century attempted to distance themselves from village practices such as possession and the use of animal sacrifice and liquor in worship (Ramaswamy 1997). In an inversion of Sanskritization, these features have been projected onto the coming of the Aryans to south India. If a Brahmin intellectual such as Iyer mapped out an intellectualist history of Hinduism through the *Rg Veda*, the *Upanishads*, the advaita philosophy of Sankara, etc., then Dravidianist intellectuals mapped out equally intellectualist understandings of south Indian religion based on the metaphysical philosophy of Saiva Siddhanta. One of the earliest ways adopted by Tamil intellectuals to defend “Dravidian” culture from the charge of primitivism was the “neo-Saivite” revivalism, declared by Tamil intellectuals to be the authentic, non-Aryan religion of the Tamil people. It was not only “Aryan” elements that had to be purged from this definition of Tamilness. Along with this essentialist identity came a need to expunge practices that could not be defended as “rational.” Popular practices of worship became particularly indefensible. An instance of this is the way in which middle-class film critics write about Tamil popular religious cinema (Ram forthcoming).

Intellectual representations of possession cults and of the attam that is a central component of them, are to be found scattered, dismembered in various dusty corners reserved for the bypassed and superseded aspects of the past: in collections of “folklore,” in anthropological studies of performance and ritual, in religious studies in western universities where there are flourishing scholarly accounts of the myths, legends, and textual accounts of “demon deities” of southern India. At the level of science, it exists as a medicalized discourse on psychiatric disorders. At the level of a popularized elite sociology, this division is translated into an association with sections of the population pre-designated as backward: that is, the poor, the “uneducated” rural masses, women, and the lower castes.

Performance and Nationalism: Agency and the Involuntary Entry of the World

The newly honed modern cultural distinctions between upper and lower castes are centrally at stake in the disappearance of attam from the stage on which nationalist-inspired versions of culture are

performed. Yet this language of “performance” which we use to describe dance in India is inadequate for characterizing attam since it does not entail subjects who are entirely conscious, nor, in the manner of *rasa* aesthetics, fully deliberate, at the moment in which they exercise certain emotional effects in their audience. The emotional flows of attam are, if anything, even more intense than in *rasa* aesthetics, and they may be the culmination of highly professional performance practices, as in the *terukkuttu* and *villu pattu* traditions. But the goal of these practices is to lose control and consciousness, and the audience’s reaction to this culminating moment is equally a loss of control. In attam, bodily movements of spinning, swinging, and convulsive twitching are valued precisely as the bodily techniques that accompany extreme emotion to produce the excesses of *veri* and *avesam*, another Tamil word that describes extreme excitation. *Veri* and *avesam* have the capacity to contagiously leap the boundaries between body and body, between performer and spectator, between human body and the deity. While the charged moments may be the climaxes of performances of the epic exploits of the goddess or local heroes who die unjust and gory deaths, I have emphasized what I have also learned as an ethnographer—that attam can erupt also as part of the lived tragedies in the lives of ordinary women, whose afflictions and disorders cut to the heart of what it is to be a woman. In their lives too, attam is simultaneously an expression of disorder, of being “danced” by the random forces of life’s affliction, and an expression of the spirit’s identity, a step towards a cure from affliction.

A more accurate characterization of the phenomenology of attam can help to alter the way we speak not only of “performance” but of the various realms of practice to which we have begun to apply the term “performance” in the social sciences and humanities. We now speak of culture as being performed, and we talk of nationalism being “performed” and “constructed.” While such transpositions of the terms bring a certain agency to the discussion, just what kind of agency are we inferring?

Let us consider agency in the context of attam in order to clarify this question. Attam entails radical transformations of ontology. It cannot be taken out of its sensory context. Guerts uses the term “sensorium” to indicate a “pattern of relative importance and differential elaboration of the various senses, through which children learn to perceive and to experience the world and in which pattern they develop their abilities” (2002:5). The sensorium, among many subaltern communities

of southern India, is one that centrally invokes and allows a transformation of embodied ontology, as women and men become deities and spirits. But at the very moment of transformation, they are no longer agents in the sense we commonly attribute to the term. This is no longer “performance” in the prevailing sense, since in attam men and women are “danced by” the agency of the occupying spirit or deity. The shift of agency away from the human subject to the occupying spirit is of central importance. This transformation of ontologies is achieved not at the level of mental will, decision, or choice, but by the adoption of meanings that are appropriate to and which match the *involuntary* effects that flow on from bodily techniques that work to alter the sensory basis of subjectivity. Although some have argued against the term “possession” as Eurocentric, preferring a semantic domain that connotes attachments (Hancock 1999: 172), we have to reckon with the fierce “claiming,” the desirous marking of the body of the human being that is characteristic of subaltern goddesses and spirits. These goddesses are known as much through the marking of the body by the heat of smallpox as by their capacity to imbue the bodies of their devotees with unnatural powers. They desire in ways that are volatile, unpredictable, and not always desirable from the perspective of human beings. Attam reflects and engages all these meanings. It may come about as the culmination of rituals that devotees enter with conscious desire, but the desire is to ultimately relinquish their own agency, to become one with the deity. Attam may also come unbidden and unwanted, as the culmination of a series of afflictions, part of a cure in which the superior powers of a higher deity or a *mantravadi* flushes out the presence of the afflicting spirit and makes it declare its identity and demands.

I have argued that Dance Studies needs to take larger lessons, methodological ones, projecting these from its study of dance into the sphere of social theory. Attam offers a potentially different way to understand the relationships between human beings and the world. It emphasizes and *values* the involuntary aspects of our relations to the world. How does this alter our analysis of nationalism as “performing culture?” It suggests that even a practice such as Bharatnatyam that has been given full spotlight on the stage of nationalism is not the pure “performance” of “culture.” Caste and gender are as much a matter of involuntary embodied “taste” as conscious pure distinctions. Bodily tastes are not a “substantialization” of class and caste as is suggested in some recent formulations (see Hancock 1999), formulations that

still manage to make it sound as though class and caste are constituted somewhere else other than in the body. Marxism has had a ready answer as to where this “somewhere else” might be located—in the relations of production, economic, and political power. But is it possible to conceive of “relations” that fail to pass through bodies? Do they not entail practices that build up bodily qualities and tastes?

The challenge ahead of us in studying dance is to use it to overcome a series of destructive polarizations between politics and agency as pure conscious decision making, and body as non-agential materialization of a “social” that is constituted elsewhere. Caste and class enter into one’s primary socialization to become part of the body itself. They are part of the sensorium. As such they represent enduring aspects of one’s being and bring with it strongly affective orientations—tastes and disgusts, that which we can bodily ingest and incorporate and that which we spit out and find repulsive. At the same time the body is not fixed forever by these habits. Over time, new tastes can be created, new forms of repulsion engendered. But such fresh constructions take place within limits. The story of the transformation from the *sadir* *attam* of the *devadasis* to the Bharatnatyam of Brahmin women, can be told in two quite different ways. At one level, the story is one of dramatic *transformations* in the habitus as dance moves from the *devadasis* to the Brahmins. Yet at another level, it is the story of dance being changed to accommodate patterns both preexistent and emergent in the Brahminic middle-class habitus of the Madras Presidency. Rukmini Devi’s re-choreographing of Bharatnatyam was not only shaped by conscious choreographic *decisions*. It was also shaped by the strong involuntary affect of disgust and aversion. We have glimpsed some elements of this aversion at the start of this essay—the horror at the “mixing” of pure religion with the sullied elements of worldly power in the dances and songs that praised rulers and gods indiscriminately. Equally striking is her aversion and disgust when presented with the mixture of religious piety and the expression of sexual desire which characterized the dance styles of the *devadasis*:

Perhaps my interpretation of *sringara* was different from the way in which most people conceived of it. *Sringara* is not sensuality. It also means a love of a great kind, such as the love of Radha for Krishna as depicted in *Gita Govindam*. In fact devotion itself is love in a higher form. Even sex is not coarse in its right place. Children are born of sexual relationship, but it is not only sex but love that creates a child. So if it has been said that I am against *sringara*, I can only say that the inference is wrong. But there are

certain types of *padas* that I have objected to. From one *vidwan* I learnt the old *padam* tamaraksha with a lot of sanchari bhavas of the languishing *nayika* [specified category of heroine in the typology of heroines] separated from her lover. She describes not only her love but the whole process of physical contact and in gestures at that! To depict such things is unthinkable for me. A famous man gave me a book on *sanchari bhava*. When I read it I just felt sick. (quoted in Ramnarayan 1984a: 23, emphasis added)

To explore all the elements in this extraordinary speech, to trace it to the different styles of being in the world that characterize caste differences is beyond the scope of this essay. We can take away with us a more general lesson to apply the next time we are told that culture is a performance. As with Rukmini Devi's version of Bharatnatyam, cultural processes are a *mix* of voluntary decisions—in this case to eliminate certain gestures particularly involving the mouth and lips regarded as “lewd” (Gaston 1997: 43)—and certain involuntary, affect-laden tastes which do not have to be *thought* in order to exist and to exercise powerful effects. Such elements may be politically adjudicated as so many attestations to the obduracy of power inequalities. But they are also a testimony, as dramatized by attam, to the involuntary way in which the world we live in and all it contains are able to enter into us and enjoy there a live presence.



Note

*I wish to thank Pallabi Chakravorty and Nilanjana Gupta for the invitation to give a plenary address to the exciting conference they organized in Jadavpur University in Kolkata in August 2006. I wish to also acknowledge the funding awarded by the Division of Society, Media, Culture and Philosophy, Macquarie University, which enabled me to attend.

References

- Anandhi, S. 1991. “Representing Devadasis: ‘Dasigal Mosavali’ as a Radical Text.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 26 (11–12): 739–46.
- Blackburn, S. 1988. *Singing of Birth and Death: Texts in Performance*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Clothey, F. 1978. *The Many Faces of Murukan: The History and Meaning of a South Indian God*. The Hague: Mouton.

- Coorlawala, U. 2005. "The Birth of Bharatanatyam and the Sanskritized Body." In A. Meduri, ed., *Rukmini Devi Arundale*, pp. 173–94. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- de Certeau, M. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Frasca, R. 1990. *The Theater of the Mahabharata: Terukkuttu Performances in South India*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Gaston, A. M. 1997. *Bharata Natyam: From Temple to Theatre*. New Delhi: Manohar.
- Gell, A. 1980. "Gods at Play: Vertigo and Possession in Muria Religion." *Man* 15 (2): 219–48.
- Guerts, K. 2002. *Culture and the Senses: Bodily Ways of Knowing in an African Community*. Berkeley: University of California.
- Hancock, M. 1999. *Womanhood in the Making: Domestic Ritual and Public Culture in Urban South India*. Colorado: Westview Press.
- Hardy, F. 1983. *Viraha-Bhakti. The Early History of Kṛṣṇa Devotion in South India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Iyer, A. K. 1935. Vol. 3 of *The Mysore Castes and Tribes*. Mysore: The Mysore University.
- Kaviraj, S. 1995. *The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and the Formation of Nationalist Discourse in India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Krishnamurti, Y. 1995. *A Passion for Dance*. New Delhi: Viking Penguin Books India.
- Mauss, M. 1991 (1935). "Techniques of the Body." Reprinted in J. Crary and S. Kwinter, eds, *Incorporations*, pp. 454–77. Zone 6, N.Y.: Urzone Inc.
- Meduri, A., ed. 2005. *Rukmini Devi Arundale (1904–1986): A Visionary Architect of Indian Culture and the Performing Arts*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Nair, J. 1994. "The Devadasi, Dharma and the State." *Economic and Political Weekly* 29 (50): 3157–167.
- Narayana Rao, V., D. Shulman and S. Subrahmanyam. 1992. *Symbols of Substance: Court and State in Nayaka Period Tamilnadu*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Oldenburg, V. 1991. "Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow." In D. Haynes and G. Prakash, eds, *Contesting Power: Resistance and Everyday Social Relations in South Asia*, pp. 23–61. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- O'Shea, J. 2007. *At Home in the World: Bharata Natyam on the Global Stage*. Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press.
- Prakash, G. 1999. *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India*. New Jersey: Princeton.

- Ram, K. 2000a. "Dancing the Past into Life: The Rasa, Nr̥tta, and Raga of Immigrant Existence." *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* special issue 12 on "The Politics of Dance" 11 (3): 261–73.
- . 2000b. "Listening to the Call of Dance: Re-thinking Authenticity and Essentialism." *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* commentary on special issue on The Politics of Dance 11 (3): 358–64.
- . 2002. "Stranded Between the 'Posts': Sensory Experience and Immigrant Female Subjectivity." In Colin Barron, Nigel Bruce, and David Nunan, eds, *Knowledge and Discourse: Towards An Ecology of Language*, pp. 34–48. UK: Pearson Education Ltd. UK, Language in Social Life Series, Gen. Ed. Christopher Candlin.
- . 2005. "Phantom Limbs: South Indian Dance and Immigrant Reifications of the Female Body." *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 26 (1/2): 121–37.
- . 2007. "Anthropology as 'Ananthrology': L. K. Ananthakrishna Iyer (1861–1937), Colonial Anthropology, and the 'Native Anthropologist' as Pioneer." In P. Uberoi, S. Deshpande, and N. Sundar, eds, *Anthropology in the East: Founders of Indian Sociology and Anthropology*, pp. 64–105. New Delhi: Permanent Black.
- . Forthcoming. "Bringing the Amman into Presence in Tamil Cinema: Cinema Spectatorship as Sensuous Apprehension." In Selvaraj Velayuthan, ed., *Tamil Cinema: The Cultural Politics of India's Other Film Industry*. London: Routledge.
- Ramaswamy, S. 1997. *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India. 1891–1970*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Ramnarayan, Gowri. 1984a. "Rukmini Devi: A Quest for Beauty — A profile," Part 1. *Sruti* 8: 17–29.
- . 1984b. "Rukmini Devi: Restoration and Creation." *Sruti* 10: 26–38.
- Rangacharya, A., trans. 1996. *The Natya Sastra*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers.
- Rele, K. 1992. *Mohini Attam: The Lyrical Dance*. Bombay: Nalanda Dance Research Centre.
- Samson, L. 1987. *Rhythm in Joy: Classical Indian Dance*. New Delhi: Lustre Press.
- Sangari, K. and S. Vaid, eds. 1989. *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*. New Delhi: Kali for Women.
- Sarabhai, M. 1986. *Creations*. Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing.
- Sinha, M. 1997. *Colonial Masculinity: The "Manly Englishman" and the "Effeminate Bengali" in the Late Nineteenth Century*. New Delhi: Kali for Women.
- Srinivasan, A. 1985. "Reform and Revival: The Devadasi and Her Dance." *Economic and Political Weekly* 20 (44): 1869–76.
- Subrahmanya, P. 1979. *Bharata's Art, Then and Now*. Madras: Intermedia.
- Weiss, G. 1999. *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality*. London: Routledge.

Another Time, Another Space — Does the Dance Remain the Same?

URMIMALA SARKAR-MUNSHI

This essay examines issues concerning the trends of appropriation of indigenous dance styles by urban practitioners, encouraged by the trend of “Sanskritization.” This has been an ongoing process since the early twentieth century that has even been undertaken and encouraged by the Government of India since independence. It also analyzes the need for change felt by indigenous practitioners, the search for an “as yet unexplored” and thus marketable dance style by the urban dance practitioner, and the necessity for proper acknowledgment of each dance style as it is de/re-contextualized, or placed in a different space at a different time.

Introduction

As a dancer I understand the need felt by performers of dance forms to make changes in keeping with the changing needs of time and space. This urge stems from the performer’s need to express new things, to perform for a new audience, to experiment with different movement patterns, to expand the dance’s vocabulary, and to make his/her product more “marketable.” Yet at the same time the anthropologist in me agonizes over the unrestricted and almost irresponsible appropriation of indigenous dance styles. These indigenous forms are chosen for their yet undisclosed and unexplored status or their exotic value by practitioners from totally alien backgrounds who lack the proper knowledge of the social, political, and religious relevance and background of the particular style within the original practicing group. What seems to

be more harmful is the fact that some movement patterns of these indigenous dance styles are learned during short trips and stays with the community or during workshops. And that empowers the learner to say that he/she has “learned” the dance and is performing it. Many times the style that is danced in the name of the indigenous style is hardly recognizable by the original teachers who may have initially hosted this practitioner.

The issue of concern is actually not what was just discussed, but the fact that the international and national platform and market that the urban performer creates for a so-called “indigenous style” gives birth to a new acceptable and standardized dress code, a dance movement repertoire, and an overall new imagery for the indigenous dance form, which now makes the indigenous performer feel that the style needs to be changed to fit the newly established code, or else.

It is often argued that it is in the best interests of the indigenous forms to get a bigger market, which in turn will generate interest for the form and give the indigenous performer a much needed economic boost and a profession as a performer, while also helping the form survive.

It is also true that culture is not a static phenomenon. Changes are inevitable. In the era of globalization, unchecked market economy and explosion in communication, no community is isolated in its lifestyle and culture anymore. The changing needs to keep up with the changing socio-political environment affect each of the hitherto isolated groups, which in turn bring about changes in the socio-cultural practices. Performing art in general, as one knows, is the first one to be affected. But in all performing art traditions, especially in dance, we are seeing a dual process: (i) a natural, inevitable change from within brought about by the experiences of the indigenous community in the changing world and (ii) a more powerful change from without forced on them by outsiders searching for a larger variety of dances to perform/market.

Beginning of the Restructuring Process

Like many of the other countries of Asia, India has been through a long period of colonization; however, its reactions and adjustments to its colonial past have been unique in many ways. Long before independence, many of the dance forms had been going through stages of degeneration for almost three centuries due to the decline in their

social acceptance, the lack of patronage and the active discouragement of the rulers. As the Indian nationalist movement gained force, there was an underlying motivation for all the reform movements taking place in different parts of the country. And that was to gain acceptability in the eyes of the modern world by doing away with India's somewhat distorted social and cultural practices. Thus the practices of keeping "nauch" girls and exploitation of women temple dancers, which earned a bad name for Indian dance, became the focus of the ongoing reform movement. Till the 1930s, Indian society did not hold a positive view of women dancers from respectable families performing onstage. The women who took up dancing were considered to be courtesans who were actually professional entertainers of specific patrons. The spirit of the nationalist movement also inspired efforts at revival of dance forms as a part of the nation's image building. It was a conscious effort to present India as a cultural whole despite its enormous diversity. As a part of the movements in the 1930s, Rabindranath Tagore, Rukmini Devi Arundale, and Vallathol drew attention toward the rich traditions of dances which had fallen into disrepute as a result of neglect. Rabindranath Tagore's dance-dramas were among the first ones to be choreographed and performed onstage with the participation of girls from 'good' families. At about the same time, Uday Shankar, a Bengali, was exposing Indian dance culture to the west with his company of Indian dancers. There were a number of girls from respectable families in his troupe too. One important thing that was happening in many cases was that dance was being moved from its religious performing space to a secular proscenium. The other thing that was happening side by side was the awakening of the understanding that Indian culture at its exotic best could be presented to and would be very well accepted by an uninformed western audience.

At this juncture, awareness about Indian dances was raised in and outside India by performers like Uday Shankar, Rukmini Devi Arundale, and Ram Gopal, who presented choreographed solo or group dances from different parts of India to international audiences for the first time.

After independence, it was a conscious decision on the part of the policy makers to encourage the already active process of cultural renaissance by helping actively in the recovery and restructuring of the lost and forgotten arts. The government set out to form academies for promotion and patronage of visual and performing arts, establishing the *Sangeet Natak Akademi* (Academy of Music and Theatre) in 1953

and the *Lalit Kala Akademi* (Academy of Fine Arts) and the *Sahitya Akademi* (Academy of Literature) in 1954. Maulana Azad's lecture at the time of setting up of these academies sums up the outlook of the government: "In a democratic process the arts derive sustenance only from the people and the State, and as the organized manifestations of the people's will, it must therefore, undertake its maintenance and development as one of its fine responsibilities" (Vatsyayan 1998: 489).

Thus started an active process of government encouragement and participation in restructuring dance forms.

Starting before independence, the first decade after 1947 saw activism in the form of campaigning by different cultural luminaries to work against the social stigma that dance had gathered around it, particularly regarding women dancing in public places. The general population's exposure to traditional dance forms was very peripheral at the time. As the knowledge grew a little by accidental exposures to a form or by designed trips to certain parts of the country to learn about their culture, it was acknowledged that the knowledge and expertise of these forms were in the hands of the traditional hereditary performers. These practitioners were brought from their remote villages and established in urban centers to teach their art. This was the stage during which tradition first encountered urban requirements, a new patronage and a new group of interested learners who were totally removed from the traditional context.

Let us take the example of Bharatnatyam here. According to Kapila Vatsyayan, Bharatnatyam seemed to have chiefly developed in the south and gradually came to be restricted to what is now known as Tamil Nadu. From the fourteenth to the seventeenth century, there were a lot of sculptures in the temples of the south, from which it can be understood that dance was a living and a vigorously practiced art. The south Indian saint-poets and musicians contributed a lot to the development of the art too. Bhakti or the devotional cult at its finest and purest was infused into this form. The literary content of Bharatnatyam was thus provided by them, and their musical compositions made up the musical repertoire of Bharatnatyam. The Maratha Court of Tanjore provided the milieu for further growth of this art form in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. The content was different: sometimes the king was made the center of all adoration rather than the god. The only difference between the temple and the court dancers seems to have been in their attitudes. Vatsyayan explains that the solo dance form of Sadir Nritya received a definite

shape and design in the hands of the poets, musicians, the kings, and their distinguished courtiers. *Sadir* means “to present” in Marathi, and this form is also known as Dasiyattam.

The temple and court dances continued till the early part of the twentieth century. The *devadasi* (temple dancer) continued to perform her devotional dance in the temples as part of her *seva* (serving) of the god. The professional court dancers continued to perform a slightly different version in front of their patrons, that is, the king and his court.

The Madras Presidency banned temple dancing altogether as a part of the social reform movement. This act was meant to stop exploitation of helpless women performers and to change the low status accorded to the devadasis, and it resulted in the whole tradition coming to a halt in 1910.

However, soon there were powerful protests against the social stigma attached to the art, and by 1935, the reconstructive movement was already well-established. As Vatsyayan writes, “there was an awareness of the rich tradition which was being thrown away in the name of social reform” (1974: 223).

There were two distinct streams which restructured Bharatnatyam:

- The first stream was made up of traditional dancers who were descendants of traditional devadasis. They now began to perform outside the temple and court. One of the important proponents of this stream was Balasaraswati, a dancer from a family of former devadasis who decided to perform in public. The first of such performances of Bala was in 1935 in Varanasi.
- The second stream was made up of girls and women from affluent backgrounds and high social status. They were products of Brahmin society and therefore had the backing of many social and cultural activists. Important dancers of this category were Rukmini Devi and Km. Kalanidhi. Rukmini Devi learnt Bharatnatyam from grand old master Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai and from Mylapur Gauri Amma; she gave her first solo performance in 1936.

The two streams came together in 1930, bringing together the strength of authenticity from traditional performers like Bala and the social backing generated from participation and legitimization of the art by high society people like Rukmini Devi.

Institutionalization of Bharatnatyam began with institutions started by Rukmini Devi, recitals by Balasaraswati and disciples trained by Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai such as Shanta Rao.

The traditional hereditary performers were brought from remote villages by people like Rukmini Devi to teach their form of dance to urban learners. Uttara Asha Coorlawala describes how these dance gurus held on possessively to their inherited secrets. She says, "It is no secret that Rukmini Devi resorted to texts as the *Natyasastra* and the *Abhinaya Darpana* to establish an alternative authority to that of the living tradition" (Coorlawala 1994: 196). Sadir was renamed "Bharatnatyam" by Rukmini Devi, linking it firmly with the *Natyasastra*, which was supposed to have been written by Bharata. This is one of the first instances of a process of appropriation; it later led to Bharatnatyam being established in its current grammar, form, and dress code—all of which are far different from the original forms that have contributed to its origin and concept.

History of Appropriation

The same process of de-contextualization was going on with other classical dances as well. A folk dance form is not only something which entertains but is also representative of the culture of a particular community. A folk dance form plays an important part in its culture's religion and rites of passage; it is also an important tool for maintenance of in-group solidarity. Removing it from its context means taking away most of its functions and leaving it with only one overwhelming task, that of entertaining the audience. This in turn makes it absolutely necessary for the form to be attractive enough to do the job of entertaining to the hilt. Thus arises the need to gift-wrap the performance in what is "acceptable," "attractive," "presentable," and "refined" to its new bigger, varied, and cosmopolitan audience.

Uttara Asha Coorlawala has used M. N. Srinivas's concept of Sanskritization in dance, and she has said:

Sanskritization in the context of dance, is a legitimizing process by which dance forms designated as "ritual," folkdance," vulgar entertainment or simply insignificant, attain social and politico-artistic status which brings the redesignation, "classical". Sanskritizing a dance form involves examining what is current in the oral tradition relating it to texts and either re-discovering or re-inventing its methodology. It involves "refinement", a process of adapting costume, repertory and technique to sophisticated urban sensibilities. (Coorlawala 1994: 35–6)

Analyzing the history of each of our classical forms, it is apparent that the same process of Sanskritization has brought many other forms into the so-called mainstream of Indian culture. And in all cases the final formalized classical dance that we see is actually made up of several local folk forms, brought together, synthesized, and orchestrated by patrons of the past centuries or a few powerful and ambitious people in the recent past. For example, Kathakali emerged as an independent, highly formalistic dance drama form in the seventeenth century.

Kathakali is an all-male dance form. It was not born out of temple dances. However, it was a popular art form, performed in the temple courtyards of the coasts of Malabar (now known as Kerala). It was a form which had the freedom to be performed in kings' courts, villages, any open space gathering, and inside or outside the village before it reached the urban stage.

The coming of the Brahmins into this area resulted in a mixture of elements from Aryan and Dravidian culture. Kathakali is the outcome of that mixture. The warrior caste, the Nayars, equal to the Kshatriyas of elsewhere, also came into being. Racially they are said to be half-Dravidian and half-Aryan. The coming together of the two very different ethnic groups brought about a combination of the dance, religion, and culture of the Dravidians with the sophistications of the Aryans. The Dravidians were peaceful by nature and worshippers of Bhagavati, mother goddess of the earth.

The Nayars were a highly organized military caste, and they adopted Kali as their patron goddess. In time Kali came to be identified with Bhagavati. Nayars established the *kalari*, the gymnasiums, where Kali images are still found. The skill of wielding weapons was taught early on to small boys. Special massages and exercises began every day at 3 a.m. and continued till late night. They accompanied mimes, gestures, and acting. A part of the training was in the form of martial dances, fencing, and combat exercises. A warrior was supposed to learn the art of gaining psychological advantage over his opponent by portraying his superiority and by arousing uncertainty and fear in his opponent.

The origin of Kathakali is attributed to two kings. The first one is said to have been Zamorin of Calicut in the seventeenth century. He wrote plays on Krishna, which had lyrics made up on the lines of *Gita Govinda*, and these were called Krishnattam.

The second king or patron named in the local legend is the Raja of Kottarakara, who supposedly requested Zamorin of Calicut to send

his troupe to Travancore to perform Krishnattam. It is believed that Zamorin refused this request. Angered by the refusal, the Raja of Kottarakara wrote a series of eight plays with Rama as the hero instead of Krishna. These were called Ramanattam by him. So it was either the reaction to Zamorin's refusal or the independent urge of the Raja of Kottarakara that brought about the birth of the form that finally gave birth to Kathakali.

The dances which influenced Kathakali were the following:

- Kudiyaattam or the Sanskrit theater, whose origin can be traced back to the tenth and eleventh century. Kudiyaattam has heavily influenced the hand and face gestures of Kathakali.
- Teyyam and Tirayattam were pure dances without content. Masks and face paint were used by performers in these dances, which were performed to please different forms of goddesses.
- The third source of influence was the variety of martial dances known to Kerala, which is famous even today for numerous martial dances and the kalaris which train male performers in various physical and acrobatic skills. The body training massage, jumps, leaps, and fantastic leg extensions have been assimilated from those martial dances into Kathakali.

In some remote villages, some of the older Dravidian dance forms like Pampin Tullal, Bhagavati Pattu, Teyyam, Tirayattam, Mutti-yettu, and others barely survive today.

Folk theater and ritual dance forms like Teyyams and the Bhagavati cult dances continued even in the early twentieth century. However, temple dancing and folk forms like Kathakali, Kudiyaattam, Krishnattam and Ramanattam stopped altogether or became very disorganized in many places.

As an active member in the revivalist movement, poet Vallathol of Kerala restructured and revitalized Kathakali. In order to reestablish the fast-disappearing form, he started Kerala Kala Mandalam in 1932, which was formally established in 1936. Many great traditional experts were brought by him to his institution. He gave Kathakali the form by which we recognize it now. By 1941, the Kerala Kala Mandalam was taken over by the government, as it already was acknowledged as the institution that was steadily training a lot of students. Vallathol was appointed as its director.

In those years and later, the all-night performance of Kathakali went through a lot of changes in the hands of its performers; these

changes were in keeping with the necessities of the changed space that the performers were using. Actors restricted themselves to elaborate mime, and the musicians sang the lyrics. Gradually this practice of acting without words and pantomime was further refined. The dramas slowly changed themes as well. From Rama and Krishna, the themes changed to the *Puranas*, *Mahabharata*, and *Shiva Purana*.

In this context, Gopinath and Ragini Devi are two names which cannot be omitted from a history of Kathakali:

- They shortened the length of performances.
- Simplified its techniques.
- Adapted it to the modern stage.

Behind each of the classical forms in the constantly growing list of classical dances of India is a story of appropriation and restructuring, which has prompted scholars like Kapila Vatsyayan to call them “neo-classical” instead of “classical.” This designation acknowledges the fact that they have all been restructured or reconstructed in order to fit a model, unknowingly prepared to cater to a group of norms built to fit western performative models as well as Sanskritic aesthetic requirements.

It must be acknowledged that this restructuring has definitely gained India the image its political planners wanted. It has also made possible for some urban performers to make dance into a profession, and the world has definitely gained in terms of the rich movement repertoire of these dances.

The Result . . . an Ongoing Process of Free Appropriation

Once appropriation became a trend from which some people benefited, how could the others be stopped from trying to benefit too? During the first two decades after independence, the classical dances were already “redesigned” or were well on the way. They had also become recognized as representative forms of the so-called Great Tradition of the Indian Civilization. So the focus was now placed on the folk forms, particularly during major government festivities such as the Republic Day parade and celebrations or at the times of welcome functions for visiting dignitaries. Now began the time of “improvement” of such lesser-known authentic forms, which were initially brought out to represent their own part of the country. There were

norms or standards that were set by the organizers, in most cases the organizing bureaucracy, who were either partially or totally unaware of the anthropological implications. Sometimes, even without any outside interventions at all, the indigenous performers also tried to shape their performance to suit the taste of the organizers, so that they would get a fair chance at the time of selection. Thus the new time, new space, new audience, new requirements, and the need for survival in a greater tradition simultaneously decontextualized and recontextualized performances.

An irreversible process of restructuring by urban researchers and dancers, moving constantly in search of newer unexplored territory, started affecting the lesser-known dance forms as well. Dances like Chhau and Sattriya attracted the attention of scholars and dancers. Much attention was paid to the form (movement pattern), neglecting the socio-religious background. The dances became divorced from their contexts and started getting new narratives, facelifts in terms of costumes, and shortened presentable items; the original form was altered, manipulated, and restructured to fulfill the requirements. Urban female performers started learning and performing dance forms that were traditionally performed by only male performers.

But what has happened to the original performers? In all cases the legitimized, Sanskritized form has become the public face of the dance form of the area from which it originally came. In some places the original form continues among the locals; in some places nothing of the older forms exists.

The requirement of discussing this issue of totally insensitive appropriation became essential to me as an anthropologist some days ago. I was talking to an enthusiastic young dancer, and she told me that she was going to use Chhau and Nachni dance in her next choreographic venture. I wondered, what was the movement form of Nachni?

Nachni is a dance tradition found in some parts of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa. Nachni women are professional folk performers skilled in both dance and music. They are accompanied by their male partners, the *rasiks*, in performances. Traditionally the *rasik* is a trainer for the Nachni—he is a musician, a gifted singer, and a poet who composes and sings Jhumur (a local song form with themes centering mainly on the love of Lord Krishna and Radha). At present, many times a Nachni performs alone to musical accompaniment and songs, as she is the main crowd puller. The influence of Vaishnava religion is profound on this tradition, and both the Nachni and the *rasik* are devotees of Lord Krishna. The tradition goes back to the days of local kings and

big land-owners who used to patronize these artists. But now, with the disappearance of the traditional patronage of rich landlords and kings, the Nachni women perform at different fairs and rural festivals organized by the government and the local communities for a particular fee. There is no fixed dance movement in this form; the Nachni expresses the narratives of the songs in keeping with the requirements of the audience—that is, she does sensuous, sometimes even lewd movements, which are appreciated by a crowd which is basically attracted by the female dancer performing in public.

The women who are lured into the profession or brought into it perforce or against payment to their family, become social outcasts. The rasik can be married and have a family of his own. But the Nachni has to live the life of a concubine in an outhouse provided by the rasik. She and her children do not have any right to the rasik's property, and the children cannot use the father's name.

The rasik is known as a person of loose virtues but a connoisseur of performing arts. His keeping of the Nachni is regarded as an expression of overt irrepressible artistic interest. But the Nachni, of course, is a fallen woman. The audience, which loves her performance, is afraid to cross her shadow for fear of becoming polluted. Her income as an entertainer makes her the principal bread earner during lean seasons, her contribution as a working hand in the agricultural work of the rasik's family is a must, her position in her family of origin is non-existent, and her status in the rasik's family and in the society is that of a concubine. Thus, at the end of their lives Nachnis are economically ruined outcasts living in the shadows of the society they have served for their whole lives.

As is clear from the above discussion, Nachni women are not skilled performers of patterned grammatical movements. They are performers of a folk tradition, expressing narratives rather than dancing fixed and stylized dance movements. And naturally, given their socio-economic position at a time when it is "in" to talk about women's exploitation, they have attracted a lot of attention from filmmakers, TV serial makers, researchers, scholars, etc. This becomes another area that is less exposed but is full of possibilities in terms of its exotic value.

As I sat listening to the dancer describing how she has restructured the exaggerated hip and chest movements and has already advised the Nachni woman that she is working with about the unacceptable qualities of such movements to an urban audience, I thought, here was another appropriation process happening right in front of my eyes.

Maybe, a few years hence, Nachni will become a style being taught in mushrooming institutions all over West Bengal, if not the whole of India.

Conclusion

As Judith Hanna says:

Dance is a whole complex of communication symbols, a vehicle for conceptualization. It may be a paralanguage, a semiotic system, like articulate speech, made up of signifiers that refer to things other than themselves. Substantively, information necessary to maintain a society's or group's cultural patterns, to help it attain its goals, to adapt to its environment, to become integrated, or to change may be communicated. (Hanna 1979: 26).

This is a natural process of change that is being discussed here by Hanna. The need for organization or reorganization within a form of a given society is something that is encountered everyday by every society on its own terms, as the whole nation moves towards the future.

But the high-handed acquisition and adoption of dance forms to make them “presentable” or truly representative of Indian culture has pushed the living repertory of the tradition towards a Brahminized and Sanskritized form to authenticate its line of descent. It has left the traditional performer baffled as he/she is taken as a museum specimen to international festivals and seminars, then discarded and forgotten as the form gains acceptance of the media and the funding bodies, allowing the new urban performer to take over. In most cases, the name of the dance is kept unchanged because that authenticates the new performance of the urban performer. He or she does not have to prove his or her own worth in producing a new dance experiment. The authentication of the traditional name, whether or not applicable to the new performance, is exploited, and there is no one coming forward to fight a case for violation of intellectual property rights.



Note

*This essay was first published in Urmimala Sarkar-Munshi, ed. 2005. *Time and Space in Asian Performance: The Changing World of Dance in Asia*. Kolkata: World Dance Alliance-West Bengal.

References

- Banes, Sally. 1994. *Writing Dance: In the Age of Postmodernism*. Hanover and London: Wesleyan University Press.
- Bharucha, Rustom. 1990. *The Theatre and the World*. New Delhi: Manohar Publications.
- Coorlawala, Uttara Asha. 1994. "Classical and Contemporary Indian Dance: Overview, Criteria and a Choreographic Analysis." Ph.D. diss., New York University.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books Inc. Publishers.
- Hanna, Judith Lynne. 1979. *To Dance is Human: A Theory of Nonverbal Communication*. Austin and London: University of Texas Press.
- Jung, Carl. 1964. *Man and his Symbols*. New York: Doubleday.
- Khokar, Mohan. 1972. *Traditions of Indian Classical Dance*. New Delhi: Clarion Books.
- Kothari, Sunil. 1989. *Kathak: Indian Classical Dance Art*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications.
- . 2001. *Kuchipudi: Indian Classical Dance Art*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications.
- Kothari, Sunil and Avinash Pasricha. 1990. *Odissi: Indian Classical Dance Art*. Bombay: Marg Publications.
- Lannoy, Richard. 1971. *The Speaking Tree: A Study of Indian Culture and Society*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Narayan, Shovana. 2003. *Performing Arts in India: A Policy Perspective*. New Delhi: Kanishka Publishers and Distributors.
- Parimoo, Ratan and Indramohan Sharma, eds. 1995. Vol. 2 of *Creative Arts in Modern India*. New Delhi: Books & Books.
- Samson, Leela. 1987. *Rhythm in Joy*. New Delhi: Lustre Press Private Limited.
- Sarabhai, Mrinalini. 1986. *Creations*. Ahmedabad: Mapin International Inc.
- Sarkar-Munshi, Urmimala. 2000. *Reflections of Society and Gender in the Nachni Dance. Lost Voice Series: 1*. Kolkata: Women's Study Research Centre, University of Calcutta.
- . 2003. "Dance as a Mirror of Changing Perceptions of Socio-cultural Identity: Santal and Bhumij at the Face of Social Change." *The Journal of Indian Anthropological Society* 38 (2–3): 193–99.
- Singer, Milton. 1980. *When a Great Tradition Modernizes*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Sinha, Surajit. 1981. *Tribes and Indian Civilization: Structure and Transformation*. Varanasi: N. K. Bose Memorial Foundation.
- Spencer, Paul. 1985. *Society and the Dance: The Social Anthropology of Process and Performance*. Cambridge, London, New York: Cambridge University Press.

- Vatsyayan, Kapila. 1974. *Indian Classical Dance*. New Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India.
- . 1978. *Traditions of Indian Folk Dance*. New Delhi: Indian Book Company.
- . 1982. "Some Terms of Indian Arts: An Analysis." Paper presented at the International Seminar on "In Search of Terminology," Central Institute of Indian Languages, New Delhi.
- . 1998. "The Crafting of Institutions." In Hiranmay Karlekar, ed., *Independent India: First Fifty Years*, pp. 489–503. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Folk Culture in Front of Serious Challenge: A Case Study on the Tribes of North Bengal*

SAMAR KUMAR BISWAS AND SOMENATH BHATTACHARJEE

India is the second-most populous nation of the world. It is a multi-cultural and multiethnic country. Being a multiethnic country and a nation of diversified landscape, India has a rich cultural variability. Culture is the determinant of human life. The cultural norms, values, and customs are keenly related to the surrounding environment. Within this multiethnicity, the tribal population has their own identity and heritage. If we look into the formation of Indian society and civilization it can be found that before the invasion of the Aryans, non-Aryans were predominant throughout the entire country. Thus, if we want to know India's national culture, then the cultural heritage of the tribals must be kept in mind. These people are scattered from east to west and north to south in all corners of India. Mostly they live in the hilly, forested, and isolated areas. They have their own dialects, cultural practices, as well as cultural heritages, and these are very much interrelated with their ecological habitat and their mode of occupation. Naturally their dialect has a great influence on their traditional cultural practices. But particularly because of the access to modern facilities of lifestyle and the gradual influence of urban culture, modernization, and globalization, the dialect and traditional cultural practices of the tribals are not getting adequate importance. This is especially common amongst the younger generation. As a result, the traditional dance, music, and other cultural practices are losing their importance among these people. The whole of north-east India is a zone rich with tribal cultural heritage, and this area is especially well-known for the culture of Mongoloid-originated tribal people. This essay is an attempt

to discuss how the practices of folk culture of the ethnic minorities are facing a serious challenge in this era of globalization; this issue has been examined among the few tribes of North Bengal.

Introduction

Culture and Its Components

Culture is a set of shared rules or standards whose members produce behavior that falls within a range of variation that the members consider proper and acceptable. Anthropologically the term “culture” is used in a much broader sense to refer to all of the learned and shared ideas and products of a society. According to E. B. Tylor (1871: 1), “culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, law, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” The unique capacity for culture in the human species depends on learning. Culture is obtained through the process called enculturation, that is, the process of social interaction through which people learn and acquire their culture. Human beings acquire their culture both consciously through formal learning and unconsciously through informal interaction. Culture consists of the shared practices and understanding within a society. These publicly shared meanings provide designs for surviving and contributing to the society. Culture is also within the minds of individuals. In the context of society, culture has its own application to the ways of living common at any one time to all mankind, to the ways of living peculiar to a group of societies between which there is greater or lesser degree of interaction, and to the patterns of behavior peculiar to a given society. The tendency is for all aspects of a culture to function as an interrelated whole, which is called integration. This integration prevails through its economic, political, and social aspects. The formal appearance of every culture comes into existence due to the organization of different small units or traits which are indivisible in nature. They are interrelated and interdependent, which maintains the equilibrium in culture as well as in society. The fundamental components of every culture are its material and nonmaterial aspects. Material culture consists of the physical products of human society, whereas the nonmaterial products are intangible goods like values, beliefs, norms, morals, and customs. The surrounding environment has a very close affinity with culture. The response of human beings to a particular environment ultimately determines their cultural appearance. Culture helps human

beings adjust in beneficial ways to the environment in which they live. Culture produces behavior that is adaptive to the environment.

Multiculturalism in Indian Society and the Interaction between Great and Little Traditions

India is a multiethnic country of multiple religions. Along with its multiple ethnicities, its cultural variability is diverse in nature. With the variation of geographical landscape, culture has become different from one region to another. Besides the factor of multiculturalism, Indian society manifests unity in diversity. Presently, India is the second-most populous nation of the world, and 8.2 percent of its population consists of tribal people (Census 2001). Furthermore, 72.2 percent of its total population lives in rural areas, and 27.8 percent are urban dwellers. In Indian society there is a continuous admixture of diversified culture in the rural and urban areas. In rural culture, often, we observe that the cultural elements are informal, verbal, unwritten, and “unreflected many,” which work themselves out and keep themselves going in the lives of unlettered village communities. On the contrary, in the urban cultural milieu, the cultural elements are mostly formal, written literary documents, and “reflected few,” which are cultivated in schools and temples located at different places (Upadhyay and Pandey 1993: 373). In anthropology these two opposite forms of culture are known as the little and great traditions.

The cultural heritage of India is the formal appearance of prolonged interaction between its great and little traditional elements. If we look into the historical development of the Indian civilization, it is clear that a continuous integration prevails from time immemorial. According to the classical evolutionists, civilization is the developed form of culture. In this period, knowledge of refining natural products with implements of metal, art, the phonetic alphabet, and writing were acquired. Since the early period of civilization, the material culture of each people has included the production of *art*, and the prevalence of cave art can be seen in the early prehistoric period. Basically the art of the prehistoric period can be appreciated in two distinct ways: (i) from an aesthetic point of view as an artistic creation and (ii) in relation to other activities of the people concerned.

When considering civilization, the importance of language cannot be ignored. Language is created through the ordered arrangement of alphabets. Language is a system of communication using sounds and gestures that are put together in a meaningful way according to

a set of rules. The acquisition of language helped people to express their thoughts in the form of adequate representation, and the *art and artistic creativity* of the human mind reached a new dimension with the linguistic applications. *Artistic expression* is done in enormous varieties and forms. Gradually with the introduction of *lyrics*, the arranged sentences turned into songs. The mental expression of songs created a co-relationship with physical appearances and attitudes, which ultimately turned into dance. Both dance and songs are the expression of human thought, where language provides the medium and way of approaching each other.

Folklore of the Tribals

In the context of multiculturalism in India, tribal culture has its own importance. The tribals are the early inhabitants of this land. Most of the Indian tribes live in the forests, hills, and naturally isolated regions. They are known by their distinguishing names, meaning the people of forest and hills or the original inhabitants and so on. The tribal communities of different regions have been divided by Prof. B. K. Roy Barman into five territorial groups: (i) the Himalayan region (north-eastern, central, north-western region), (ii) the Middle India region, (iii) the western India region, (iv) the south India region and (v) the island region. The daily lives of the tribal people are closely related to their surrounding environment. The tribal culture has its own heritage, and it is nourished in the lap of nature. The predominance of unanimous consciousness has been well-observed in their society. As a result their cultural heritage and their cultural traits and elements are not merely for the individuals; rather, they are for the entire community. Being closely related to nature and the environment, their cultural practices are not only for recreation but for devotion and obedience to nature. In this way they offer their prayers to nature for protecting their property and wealth as well as to provide for continuous access to natural resources.

The term “folk culture” includes unity, tradition, community dependence, and the collective awareness and consciousness of the concerned people. This term was first coined by W. J. Thomas in 1846 (in Vidyarthi and Rai 1977: 309), and it is recognized universally. C. F. Potor (in Baske 2001: 2) has defined folk culture as “a lively fossil which refuses to die.” Tribal folk culture mainly includes folklore that is a collective combination of myths, legends, tales, proverbs, riddles,

ballads, folk songs, folk dance, folk music, folk carvings, etc. Their folk literature is primarily based on oral tradition. It has been preserved and transferred from generation to generation. This tradition is mainly based on dance and song with musical tunes that are based on various natural tunes, notes, and chords that come from nature. The sounds of the birds, the flow of the river, and the sounds of the winds are the source of their music. These are practiced by them during their free time during the off season and in the evening hours. In these activities, age is no barrier, and persons of all ages actively take part, though the youth cherish these activities the most. Various aspects of their social life, economic life, conjugal life, sacred life, their cattle, and natural products are amply represented in their folklore. Their keen observation of nature and the powers of graphic and symbolic description may easily be noticed in their folk art. In other words folklore is the mirror of tribal art and tribal culture as a whole. All of their occasions, whether personal or social, are celebrated with music, song, and dance. Right from the birth ritual to marriage or even in death, dancing and singing are very common. On festivals during farming, labor in forest, or elsewhere, singing and dancing are common. During their musical performances two things are very common, which are bonfires and the consumption of liquor. One thing is quite evident: *the folklore of the tribals reduces and prevents clashes and conflict in their society by creating a social solidarity among them.* Their social interactions and neighborhood relations are more unified by their traditional cultural practices. Being an oral tradition the tribal folk culture needs enculturation in their heritage as well as the predominance of their dialect generation after generation. As language is the vehicle of culture, cultural heritages can be carried out from generation to generation only through their language and means of verbal communication.

Dr. D. N. Majumdar opined that tribal artistic life is reflected mainly in three forms of art: folklore, folk music and dance, folk art handicraft and acrobatics (in Vidyarthi and Rai, 1977: 314–38). Folklore is the oral literature of the simpler societies, and it is perpetuated by oral tradition. Folklore can share a verbal dwelling by the use of tales, riddles, and proverbs. Their songs are of several kinds, reflecting different forms of the life cycle. These songs are performed by groups, by couples, and sometime even by individuals. Simultaneously, their dances also include group performances, performances of couples, and individual performances.

Folk Culture Among the Tribes of North Bengal: Tradition and Transition

North Bengal is situated in the northern region of West Bengal and consists of six districts, namely Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur, and Malda. The geographical landscape of North Bengal can broadly be divided into hills, sub-Himalayan foothills, and the Barindh plains. Throughout the entire territory a number of tribal groups have been dwelling in different places for a prolonged period of time. The traditional culture has its own importance for the livelihood of these people. But with the gradual degradation of the natural environment and the development of communication with outsiders through rapid urbanization, modernization, and globalization, their folk culture has suffered a major setback. To understand this matter, a few case studies have been briefly mentioned in the following sections.

Folk Culture of the Totos

The Totos are one of the primitive tribes of West Bengal. They live in a small hill area at the foothills of the Himalayas just to the south of the border between Bhutan and West Bengal. This area is named Toto Para village and is under the Madarihat police station of Jalpaiguri district. The turbulent river Torsa flows eastward of Toto Para. In the west there is “Pudua” hill; in the north “Hispa” hill is present, and Titi forest and a bit of Jaldapara range are in the south. The entirety of Toto Para village is bounded by the natural environment, and the Totos have a very close affinity with it. Earlier they were totally dependent on the forest and river for their livelihood. From the natural surroundings, they could get all that they required for their daily needs. Their livelihood and culture were closely interrelated with the environment. Thus, their folk culture was dominated by demonstrations of their obedience to nature and natural resources. Community worship was concentrated on their devotion to deities related to the hill, sky, sun, forest, and other such elements for their protection and for a peaceful life. As dusk descended on earth the village would fill with songs accompanied with the soft tunes of musical instruments. The prime musical instruments of the Totos were two drums called *bakung* that were kept in the *dhemsa* (temple). These two drums were used during the worship of Mayu and Ongchu rites, whereas it was prohibited to

play on other occasions. Mainly their priests performed worship, and related songs were sung during these occasions. Their songs were not composed only for leisure; rather, there were some social, religious, as well as economic needs behind their composition. Broadly, their songs can be divided into religious songs and secular songs. The religious songs are further subdivided into *congregational songs* and “*leti gehuas*” or dreamers of visions. Congregational songs are very primitive, and they were performed in chorus; they were prevalent through the media of hearing and recollection.

Any song performed in particular religious festivals is divided into parts. The first part is known as *Dhire*, which gives a description of materials gathered for worship, arrangement of functions, and dedication to the deity. The second part is called *Tashi Tawa*, where prayers are offered to the deities: the sun, moon, river, stream, and other natural elements. These were *performed for the peace and welfare of the entire Toto society*. The main theme of their religious songs is related to their peaceful survival, that is, through preservation of nature, good health, and environment by which everything can survive effortlessly. It is a commonly held belief that through the grace of deities, special types of men get the authority to compose songs. Their spells and incantations were devoted to religious rites, penance, and obsequies. In earlier times, the younger generation gathered at the dhensa to protect their village and crops and to listen to aged persons tell about the myths and tales of heroism of their ancestors. But gradual changes over time resulted in a number of consequences to their environment and habitat. From 1951 to 1980, India lost a total of 4.3 million hectares of forestland (De 2005: 83). Jalpaiguri district, where the Totos resided, had been mostly covered by dense forest, but now only 28.75 percent of this district is forestland. Earlier, Toto Para and the nearby areas were fully covered by dense forest, but now there is no extensive forest. Thus their source of natural products and their nature-based livelihood suffered a lot. Simultaneously, people from outside started to move into Toto Para for permanent settlement. According to the official estimate in 2003, 73.92 percent of people in the village were non-Totos. Due to continuous influx of other people, the authority and rights over the land, forest and their resources, which belonged to the Totos before, has been shared with others. In the 1961 Census Handbook, Toto Para Mouza had 1,996.76 acres of land, all

of which was owned by the Totos, but now they have only 343 acres of land. The influx of non-Totos and the accompanying degradation of the environment forced many common Toto people to search for jobs outside of their locality. Now many of their families have to depend on Bhutan for their economic livelihood. As a result the males have to stay outside of their community for a long time, devoid of their family members as well as kin. Thus, because of the search for jobs to maintain their livelihood, disintegration is taking place in the entire Toto society; this disintegration can be observed from the familial level to the level of the whole community. They cannot always share their joys and sorrows together as they could earlier. Their cultural performances, which were once based on entire community involvement, now are not getting adequate attention from the existing individuals of their society because they have no time to spend in leisure. Their kinship bonds are becoming loose, and thus the younger generations do not get adequate affection from their grandparents. As a result, socialization, enculturation of their members, as well as cultural heritage are suffering a major setback. In their search for jobs, most of the Totos have been coming into close contact with the adjacent urban centers. Consequently, the application, practice, and prevalence of their dialect in their daily life has been seriously reduced and largely replaced by others. All of the Totos were very familiar with their mother tongue, but due to the change of economic livelihood and the continuous contact with outsiders, the influence of the Bengali and Nepali languages was felt by 43.2 percent and 55.01 percent of the people, respectively (field study 2005).

Due to all of the factors mentioned here, the younger generation in particular does not show the same interest in their traditional folk culture as was common earlier. Ultimately, it has lost its previous attraction and importance to young minds. In this circumstance, folk culture is gradually getting drowned in the darkness, whereas popular Hindi film songs and western music and songs are attracting them. Their religious performances are losing their earlier devotion, value, and community participation as a whole. Thus the cultural attributes related to ritual gestures can be seen no more. All of these factors are influencing and deeply affecting the folk culture of the Totos. A few of their folk-based cultural practices as well as ceremonies are briefly mentioned here:

| <i>Name of the worship</i> | <i>Season and time</i> | <i>Purpose</i> | <i>Participation</i> |
|----------------------------|---|--|--|
| <i>Choisung</i> | In the morning of any day and during any season. | For household peace. | Family members. |
| <i>Shakra</i> | July–August and December–January; in the morning of any day of the said months. | For better crop production. Also performed to welcomenewly married brides. | Community members. |
| <i>Sadingpa</i> | In the morning of any day and during any season. | Household peace and cattle wealth. | Family members. |
| <i>Pudua</i> | From 1pm to 7pm in any day and during any season. | To avoid physical illness and to ensure good health. | Community members. |
| <i>Satring</i> | In the morning of any day and during any season. | For better crop production. | Community members. |
| <i>Muti devi</i> | In the morning of any day and during any season. | To avoid the destructive effects of the Torsa river. | Community members, except unmarried girls and elderly women. |
| <i>Gorea</i> | The day after <i>Janmastami</i> and from morning to noon. | For safety and protection of the entire community. | Community members. |
| <i>Mayu & Ongchu</i> | August–September. 3pm–7pm. | For safety and protection of the entire community. | Community members above 18 years of age. |

Folk Culture of the Meches

Adjacent to Toto Para village, another Mongoloid-originated tribe, the Meches, have their own settlement called Mech Para. Mech Para is in the same jurisdiction as Toto Para, Ballalguri Gram Panchayat, which is nearer to the subdivisional town of Madarihath than Toto Para village. Over time they came to settle in the plains of North Bengal, which is also very near to the hills. Their present settlement is closely related to nature. Adjacent to their village are Torsa river and a bit of Titi forest. Formerly, their daily livelihood was very much dependent

upon the surrounding environment. But due to continuous degradation, the forest's natural resources were no longer plentiful. As a result, the Meches engaged in other occupations, and most of them mainly depended on a sedentary agricultural lifestyle.

The folk culture of the Meches is quite interrelated with nature. Their musical instruments are very few. The drum is called *kham*, and the bamboo flute is known as *shiphung*. The songs were based on the beauty of nature and the activities of their daily life. They had a water fetching song. The women and the young girls went to fetch water from the stream in the afternoon, and they sung this song with great merriment. Their marriage songs were sung to praise the bride and to ensure a peaceful family life for the newly married couple. They performed a song in the *Hagra madai puja*, where the deity was worshipped to protect their cattle from tigers and other wild beasts and also for their further breeding. It is to be mentioned that the Meches had two very important songs named *Rongjali* and *Gadan bathor*. *Rongjali* was their inaugural song, an appeal to celebrate together and to maintain the community's social solidarity. *Gadan bathor* was performed at the beginning of the first day of the Bengali New Year. It emphasized the scenic beauty of nature along with the wish for a prosperous and happy new year. It also offered a prayer for better crop production and peace and prosperity for the whole community. In these festivals both males and females participated, irrespective of age and sex.

They had a number of festivals where dances were performed. Individuals, mostly adults, performed song and dance before transplantation of the crops. They believed that the onset of the first monsoon makes the soil fertile, and this was compared to women's menarche. They correlate the fertility of nature with the fertility of a woman (Field Study 2006). It is to be mentioned here that the cult of Venus with swollen breasts and tapering legs, which was from much earlier times, was a symbol of fertility. In this context, the Meches most likely also try to find the relationship between nature and woman, as both of them are fertile and have the power and capacity of production. They performed *Mosanaï* dance as a group performance that resembled the delight of a peacock observing the dark clouds and onset of rainy season. Another important dance was the *Borainai* dance. It highlighted a welcome to newcomers, where strangers are welcomed as deities. But these traditional practices and cultures are presently confined to the senior members and to festive occasions. They are presently not performed nearly as much as in earlier times. The members of the

younger generation have a close affinity with official jobs, business, and the urban centers. The Meches were well-versed in their dialect, but at the same time everybody among them except little children know the Nepali and the Bengali languages. Their formal education is in the Bengali medium. Thus, both their language and traditional culture were seriously affected and deeply influenced by modernization, urbanization, and the global cultural nexus. Enculturation of their folk heritage stopped; the younger generation did not show an interest in their folk-based culture. Moreover, due to some religious conversion, a division had taken place in their society. Their animist faith and relevant gestures had become confined to a few. In the lyrics of the songs, each word has a specific meaning, which was very much related to their life and nature; these songs were performed by most of the people. The folk culture was the base of their social solidarity, but due to continuous interaction with others, environmental changes, and the major influence of globalization, their dialect was getting confined to a few individuals. As a result, it could not reflect the same social solidarity and collective consensus as earlier. The influence of urban-based culture has had a serious toll on their folk culture, and it may be obliterated very soon.

Folk Culture of the Plain Land Rabhas

The Rabhas are also Mongoloid in origin, and they fall under the larger Bodo group. Their early place of inhabitation was in the hilly forested region of Assam. But due to a number of factors, some of them moved towards the western Brahmaputra valley, ultimately crossing and moving further towards the plains of Bengal. One such group lives in the plain land of Bochamari village in the Cooch Behar district. In contrast, most of their counterparts were forest-dwelling and still depended on hunting, gathering, and shifting cultivation. The plain land Rabhas differed from their forest-dwelling counterparts both socially and economically. Among them most people were settled agriculturists with sufficient amounts of agricultural land. Besides this, they were also engaged in official government jobs and other services. Simultaneously, some people were involved in business sectors; in this context, they had greater opportunity to engage in close interaction with adjacent urban centers than those people pursuing the two previously mentioned occupations. This urban-based culture influenced their traditional culture and dialect a lot. Considering the folk culture, people had a number of musical instruments and

dances that were performed in a number of festivals. Their musical instruments were the *baroyat* (plate-like instrument), *handa* (a type of sword), *boushi* (adze-like instrument), *boumshi* (bamboo flute), *sum* (heavy wooden instrument), etc. Besides these they also had some other instruments, such as the *dhansi*, *kalbansi*, *kalhurang*, and *chingbakak*. Traditionally, their dances were termed *basili*. All of their labor, rejoicing, and sorrows were expressed through dance. During transplantation and cultivation, they performed a community dance called *Hangai Sani*. This was performed by all of the individuals irrespective of their age and sex. When they went to catch fish in the river they performed the *Nakchung Reni* dance. One of their earlier dances was *Handar Buru*, a pseudo-war dance that was performed by both males and females with swords in hand. Basically it was shown for the strength and solidarity of the community members. During the procession of a dead body, they performed song and dance called *Mairbar Changi* with musical instruments like *kalbansi*, *hamn*, etc. But their continuous interaction with the Rajbansi population and adjacent communities as well as their ultimate acceptance of the Hindu religion resulted in a number of changes taking place in their traditional folk culture. They were Vaishnabized and Kshatryaized in 1935 and 1970 respectively; furthermore, in 1990 they came under the influence of Satsangha Behar of Thakur Anukul Chandra (Field Study 2004). Naturally the influence of Hindu religious gestures and Hinduized culture has become prevalent among them. At the same time, they have been forgetting their traditional cultural heritage. Their young generation was totally unfamiliar with their mother tongue of Cochakrow. As a result, their musical instruments were in the dark corner of their room and were no longer used frequently. Modern Bengali songs, popular Hindi films and songs, western music, and pop songs attracted the youth very much. The folk cultures of the Rabhas are now being altered by a modernized, urbanized, and globalized culture; as a result, plain land Rabha society is on the path of abolishment. Some of their forms of worship are briefly given in table on page 52.

General Observations

Tradition means continuity. Themes encompassing the entire social system of Indian society prior to the beginning of modernization were organized on the basis of hierarchy, holism, continuity, and transcendence. Folk culture helps in the common participation and involvement of its people. These cultural practices show their obedience to

| <i>Name of the ceremony</i> | <i>Season and period</i> | <i>Purpose</i> | <i>Participation</i> |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------|---|-------------------------------------|
| <i>Viswakarma puja</i> | April–May. Any day in the morning. | Onset of agricultural season; for better crop production. | Adult male. |
| <i>Laxmi puja</i> | July–August. Any day in the morning. | Plowing and broadcasting of seeds for better crop production. | Adult male. |
| <i>Maihana</i> | December. Any day in the morning. | For the paddy harvest. | Family members. |
| <i>Sur and Masan</i> | March–April. Any day in the morning. | For ceremonial hunting. | Adult male member of the community. |

nature in order to ensure protection, the survival of nature, and the continued access to products that can be obtained from the surrounding environment. For the enculturation of folk-based cultural traits, the importance of dialect cannot be ignored. Thus, when language is changed, folk culture faces a serious challenge for its continued existence. The abolishment of the elements of folk cultural tradition has seriously affected the folk music, folk dance, legends, myths, and lyrics of the concerned people. In addition, when the physical environment is altered, the cultural practices suffer because the deities and the totemic objects of the tribals are closely related to the forest. Due to environmental degradation these people are forced to leave their native land in search of jobs and settlement. In this way they gradually become familiar with the languages of others and become attracted to other cultural domains. Ultimately environment is related to language, and the language is very much related to enculturation and socialization. Thus, if any alteration happens in any of society's relevant aspects, it creates an acute crisis in that society and its earlier traditions. Confinement of folk culture to a few individuals creates a serious challenge to the sentiment of community and consensus amongst common people. In tribal society, nature is very much related to man. The influence of the outer world has changed their folk culture a lot, and that is why their cultural heritage is suffering a major setback. On the other hand, due to environmental degradation and

continuous communication with outsiders, the elements of the little traditions are losing their importance and are now on the path towards abolishment. As a result the influence of urban-based culture and global cultural trends are gradually engulfing the unwritten oral traditions, documents, and folk-based cultural heritages. Folk tradition has now merged into the global nexus. Folk culture is rapidly getting altered by the global cultural milieu by its interaction with adjacent urban centers. The overall scenario has created an acute identity crisis and raised the problem of social solidarity in simple societies. Modern accessories of livelihood are required for development, but this should not be at the cost of traditional culture. Though development has occurred in a number of ways, their traditional cultural heritage is suffering a major setback. For the survival and existence of these people and their folk culture, the protection of their surrounding environment and ethno-cultural heritage is a primary need. Should this circumstance occur, they would be able to lead their life without the inconveniences of struggling for survival and could practice their traditional culture.



Note

*Thanks to the Department of Anthropology, North Bengal University.

References

- Baske, D. 2001. *Adivasi Samaj O Palaparban*, Lokosanskriti O Adivasi Sanskriti Kendra. Tathya O Sanskriti Bhibag: Government of West Bengal.
- Biswas, S. K. 2004. "Samataler Rabha: Samajo O Sanaskriti Parivartaner Prekshapat" In Goutam Roy, ed., *Uttar Banger Luptopray Lokosanskriti*, pp. 120–36. Siliguri, Darjeeling: Baitanik Patrika Gosthi.
- . 2006a. "Impact of Globalization on a Tribal Community." *Journal of Social Anthropology* 3 (1): 51–67. New Delhi: Serials Publications.
- . 2006b. "Effect of Land Alienation: A Study Between a Scheduled Caste and a Primitive Tribal Group." In S. H. Samel, ed., *Rights of Dalits*, pp. 89–114. New Delhi: Serials Publications.
- Census of India. 2001. New Delhi: Government of India.
- Chowdhuri, M. K. 2005. *The Totos*. In S. K. Chaudhari and S. Sen Chaudhari, eds, *Primitive Tribes in Contemporary India*, vol.1. New Delhi: Mittal Publications.

- De, S. 2005. *Participatory Forest Management and Democratic Decentralisation In India: Focus on the Pioneer State*. Siliguri: N. L. Publishers.
- Deogaonkar, S. G. and S. S. Deogaonkar. 2003. *Tribal Dance and Songs*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company.
- Fernandes, W. and G. Menon. 1987. *Tribal Women and Forest Economy: Deforestation and Status Change*. New Delhi: Indian Social Institute.
- Fernandes, W. and E. Ganguly Thukral. 1989. *Development, Displacement and Rehabilitation*. New Delhi: Indian Social Institute.
- Gisbert, P. 1978. *Tribal India*. Jaipur: Rawat Publications.
- Haviland, W. A. 1970. *Cultural Anthropology*. London: Harcourt Brace College Publication.
- Lowie, R. H. 1961. *Primitive Society*. New York: Harper Torch Books.
- Majumdar, B. 1991. *Toto Folk Tales*. Kolkata: Asiatic Society.
- Narayan, S. 1989. "Forest and the Tribe." In B. Chaudhuri and A. K. Maiti, eds, *Forest and Forest Development In India*, pp. 401–7. New Delhi: Inter India Publications.
- Piddington, R. 1957. *An Introduction to Social Anthropology*, vol. 2. London: Oliver and Boyd.
- Roy Burman, B. K. 1957. "Drama of Two Drums: Mayu Festivals of the Totos in India." *Indian Folklore* 2 (1–2): 25–38.
- . 1959. "Dynamics of Persistence and Change of a Small Community: The Totos" (unpublished). Kolkata University.
- . 1982. *Report of the Committee of Forest and Tribals*. New Delhi: Govt. of India.
- Sanyal, C. C. 1973. *The Meches and The Totos: Two Sub Himalayan Tribes of North Bengal*. Darjeeling: University of North Bengal.
- . 2002. *The Rajbansis of North Bengal*. Kolkata: Asiatic Society.
- Sarkar, A. 1993. *Toto: Society and Change (A Sub-Himalayan Tribe of West Bengal)*. Kolkata: Firma KLM Private Limited.
- Scupin, R. 2000. *Cultural Anthropology*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Tylor, E. B. 1871. *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art and Customs*. London: J. Murray.
- Upadhyay, V. S. and G. Pandey. 1993. *History of Anthropological Thought*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company.
- Vidyarthi, L. P. and B. K. Rai. 1977. *The Tribal Culture of India*. New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company.

The Problematics of Tradition and Talent in Indian Classical Dance

SHREEPARNA GHOSAL

It is important to be able to view tradition with unbiased perspectives and reevaluate certain automatic linguistic definitions that the word evokes. This essay will explore this concept in its first part. Contemporaneity is assuming complex connotations in today's global system of the creative arts, and this will be reviewed briefly taking into account that I am a teacher-performer interested in the various functions of "dance." Dance activism will be considered as well. The essay will approach these issues as assuming different connotations through the years of a developing dancer. It will examine in detail the system of classical dance training as it used to be and as it is now. Since tradition and the degree of talent are social constructs and are highly subjective beyond a point, the reexamination of the critical brigade also becomes important. The economics which underplay tradition and talent are thus bound to come under scrutiny. This essay will pose many questions trying to identify the various changes that plague the scene of classical dance in India in its global context.

"Tradition" and "talent" are terms that we come across very frequently in India. They have been used and overused till they have started to sound like empty clichés. It is worth examining both the terms more closely than is normally done. Where art forms are concerned, in India there are generally two diametrically opposite approaches: one, where tradition becomes more of an imposition and talent a burden, and two, where the hunt for something different in the name of creativity leads one to flout tradition altogether, and aesthetic norms become something that are more honored in the breach than in the following.

The Compact Oxford English Dictionary defines tradition (ORIGIN Latin, from *tradere* "deliver, betray") as a noun which has three

meanings: 1. the transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation; 2. a long-established custom or belief passed on in this way; 3. an artistic or literary method or style established by an artist, writer, or movement, and subsequently followed by others. More often than not we see a conglomeration of all three. And our sense of tradition becomes traditionalism which is literally defined as a noun meaning the upholding of tradition, especially so as to resist change. We tread the path of conservatism; not only do we resist change, we slowly become averse to it. Any art form is a living form because it is integrally entwined with the culture, region, religion, language, and politics of a particular country till it becomes a custom (defined as a particular way of behaving or doing something that is specific to a particular society, place, or time). Thus, it has both a spatial and temporal existence, a fact that we tend to overlook when we talk loosely of a tradition. It necessarily follows that without change the art form will not evolve further, and survival will become a question.

The Indian classical art forms have always followed the master-disciple relationship or the *guru-shishya parampara*. Because the fine arts are a spiritually uplifting experience, the guru comes second only to god. I repeat a section of the famous Sanskrit *stotram* or verse, which every child learns as part of the initiation into the fine arts:

- i. *Andhkar timirandhsya jnanajana shalakaya*
Chakshurunmilitang jena tasmayee shri gurave namaha
- ii. *Akhandalamandala karam vyaptang jena characharam*
Tatpadang darshitang jena tasmayee shri gurave namaha
- iii. *Guru Bramha, Guru Visnu, Guru deva Maheshwara*
Guru sakshat Parabramha tasmayee shri gurave namaha

In essence the verse likens the knowledge given by the guru to a beacon of light that dispels the gloom of ignorance. It also tells of how the sight of a guru's feet has the same impact as experiencing the whole world, thereby implying total submission and surrender on the part of the disciple. The last two lines liken the guru to "Parabramha" or the greatest undivided power or energy that forms the base of creation itself and combines the forces of the Creator, the Destroyer, and the Preserver according to the Vedic beliefs. Thus it was not for the disciple to question why; he or she would have to accept unconditionally the dictum handed down by the guru. The guru was omniscient, and his word was never to be doubted. Even till fifty years ago this tradition worked successfully. But it had its pros and cons. On one hand it maintained a certain authenticity of the art form as far as certain

stylistic ground rules were observed and followed down generations. Incidentally, purity and authenticity are two other controversial terms that come up the moment tradition is being discussed. Considering the rigorous training over a large number of years that is required to be a good Indian classical dancer, it was necessary for this kind of unquestioning submission to be enforced. On the other hand it created an insular mentality in the artists. Considering the number of years that the artist spent under the tutelage of the guru, the comfort zone of one's own art form was so great that no need was felt to venture out of it. The richness and completeness of the Indian classical art forms nurtured this feeling even further. This psyche is very strong in south Indian classical dance, and I will be talking more about Bharatnatyam than any other form, as I am a practicing artist as well as a teacher in that field.

The concept of "tradition" and "purity" is so deeply etched in the Indian psyche that it has affected the very outlook of us dancers. Even two decades ago it was rare for a dancer belonging to a particular form to watch another style. In the commonly practiced way of teaching a classical dance style, first of all, practice time eats into the profession of the dancer. Here it is necessary to state that in our country it is rather difficult to make dancing one's full-time profession, so most dancers have to work to earn their living. Thus rigorous practice schedules leave one with very little time to watch as many outside programs as one ideally should. Second, gurus would only encourage viewing of recitals by a few select experts belonging to the same style. Again the guru-shishya parampara did not make space for any questions. The favored argument was the imminent dilution of a style if exposed to another style. I personally believe it to be true that during the years of initial training, it affects the honing of the body parts if it is practically subjected to other classical formats of dance or music. But it is equally true that watching or listening to other styles and genres of performing arts only serves to enhance one's understanding of one's own art form. In fact, it should be a necessary part of one's training process—if not for anything else, at least to teach by differentiation. It even helps in proper identification of distinguishing stylistic aspects. But the thing called "tradition" in the world of dance eventually and ultimately boiled down to an ego problem regarding styles of actual rendition, as Indian classical dance was ultimately geared towards performing before a well-informed audience. The audiences in India are for the most part well-attuned to the classical repertoires and go with expectations which must be fulfilled.

On the other hand we have the progressive brigade, who believes that any tradition has to be broken or stepped upon in order to create a “modern” or “contemporary” style of dance. I have marked the terms “modern” and “contemporary” within quotations, as the very terms themselves are often confused by most. What we tend to overlook is that what we label “tradition” started off as contemporary at one point of time. It is the enduring qualities that enable something to become a “tradition,” not the outward trappings but the underlying principles of structure and discipline. Tradition has a timeless quality, which is solely due to the fact that it encompasses and fuses the past and the present in a way that T. S. Eliot envisioned. Novelty is possible only through tapping into the core of tradition, understanding it, studying it, and then readjusting it in keeping with general aesthetic principles. A new work of art can initially disrupt the workings of tradition but should eventually be successfully accommodated within the framework of tradition.

The legendary Uday Shankar created a whole new style based on various Indian classical dance forms. Let us also take, for example, the well-known history of Bharatnatyam. This dance form as we know of it today was actually formatted by Rukmini Devi Arundale in an effort to contemporize a socially ostracized style of dance. She raised it from a stigmatized dance form performed by women of questionable repute to a status of international acceptance. But this was not how the original dance form commenced. It was not even called Bharatnatyam. It was called Dasiattam, then Sadir. It was performed by the devadasis in temples in honor of the Lord God to which they were married; then performed for the kings when the system fell to corruption and turned these talented artists to little better than learned prostitutes. Each step in the history was a process of evolution aimed at the survival of the art form itself; each form evolved from the previous as a necessary effect of the contemporary social, political, economic, and religious changes that breeze through any society. The costumes and the teaching techniques were also formalized by Rukmini Devi. There is no evidence of any adavu system such as that which we are familiar with in Bharata's *Natyasastra*. The fact that Rukmini Devi belonged to the upper-caste Brahmin community that was the effectual keeper of the contemporary South Indian society, that she was married to a European, and that she had exposure to western ballet all played a role in making Bharatnatyam the dance form as we know it today.

Natyasastra itself claims to be a modern text, a very contemporary treatise arising out of the then existing social and artistic trends.

The author himself says that “dress and speech should conform to the regional usage of spectators; the actors and producers should observe the local modes of speech and manners and conform to them and not necessarily to what I have described” (Rangacharya 1996: xx).

Paradoxically, more often than not, we violate this very instruction.

This is where the question of “talent” steps in. This word is usually defined as natural aptitude or skill. The *nattuvannars*, who were mostly men, could create items and combinations with their imagination and talent that brought out the intricacies of Bharatnatyam and forced the dancer to explore the potential offered by her body. Every generation saw great “gurus” who became legends through sheer dint of talent. This talent is not just one that makes for a skilled performance (the phrase, “a talented artist,” is often used) but also the talent that makes for a holistic understanding and assimilation of the art form. It is this aspect of the inherent talent that enables one to see how one is placed in context of the “tradition” one is constantly talking about and how being creative within one’s own tradition does not hamper the “purity” and “authenticity” of the art form that the critical brigade are so paranoid about. Our classical forms, having taken off from the various aspects of the *Natyasastra*, enable enough flexibility within each proclaimed style without breaking the definitive principles that rule each distinctive style. Thus, in order to be creative, we neither need to disown Indian classical dance and music altogether and look only to the west for innovation, nor do we need to maul the ground rules that govern that particular style. Unfortunately, a rising trend toward these very urges seems to be the fashion among new choreographers, most of whom neither have the necessary know-how nor body training required to achieve international standards of western dance.

Our gurus were extremely creative, but because they were too conscious of consolidating their individual styles, they tended to fall into a creative rut that induced a certain sameness. Though this identified and differentiated one school from another, it also worked to isolate the form rather than share it. It was left to the disciples training under the gurus to carry on their work, but for some strange reason, independence is not looked upon kindly in the Indian culture, be it within the social structure of the family or as a unit of the artistic community. The ensuing friction between a guru and the disciple who wants to strike out on his or her own creative journey is a common occurrence. As a result it is the art form that suffers, for what could have been a

guided process involving less mistakes and more technical perfection remains confined to a path of trial and error where more artists go astray than necessary.

Both the conditions of “tradition” and “talent” are also subject to another major factor—the economic viability of an institutionalized art form and the recent spurt of commercialization accompanying aggressive consumerism. Now it has become a necessity for the artist to market himself. More importantly, with package deals being in vogue, the artist is often forced to opt for shallow superficial additions to add glamour to the art form, in the process failing to impose the stringent training schedule, which in itself acted as a quality control factor. Add to this the rush of parents who are so eager to keep ahead in the competition for the “most talented child” that they are more concerned about the number of public performances the children have to their credit rather than whether their children have learned to imbibe and appreciate the art form at all. Add to this the plethora of half-baked reality shows, which in turn are leading to more and more mushrooming schools that are riding piggyback on so-called “contemporary” or “western” styles (both used as blanket terms) to retain students, as training time becomes the least of the worries. Indian audiences, especially in the eastern zone, have had no exposure to a Martha Graham, Isadora Duncan, or Merce Cunningham rendition, and in no way are we qualified to judge what is the real concept of “free movement” or the principles of “core stability,” for example. In order to be “with” things we are ready to accept the first hand incomplete information that reaches us. The proverbial vicious circle is indeed a powerful one.

This is happening more because of the isolated “ivory tower” quality that Indian classical dance has acquired; we do not feel it to be directly related to our lifestyles as much as it was even two decades ago. The onus now lies squarely on the shoulders of teachers and performers to reintegrate art with life. The principles underlying a classical form are so scientific and all-encompassing that it is an education in itself and not just relegated to the physical level. The Indian classical forms comprise a whole philosophy of living. Mercifully, the time for reawakening has come, and there are a number of individuals who are redefining parameters by reestablishing a link between the arts and daily life. There are people who are doing the uphill task of demonstrating how tradition, like a phoenix, is capable of reinventing itself with the help of talent that does not stop at individual performances

but has the spirit to accept and learn from other art forms. But as in any process of learning, the most important investment is that of time, particularly in terms of exposure and training. We cannot afford to be caught in an artistic warp, undecided on which way to move, drifting along with the ever-changing demands of a branded, short-lived, consumerist existence. This is where we need the help of the art critics who should honestly serve the cause of the arts and go beyond personal definitions of what a style is and what it should be. This is exactly what a body like the World Dance Alliance is endeavoring to do. Educating the general audience is as much a critic's task as that of a teacher or performer, and a critic should also be in the sharing mode. This is more so because the critic has the power to make or break.

Here more than anywhere else, we need to realize the exact role of tradition. Teachers and critics alike should help young aspirants to free their minds of individualist baggage, encouraging them to relocate themselves within the evolving role of art that forms the fluid framework of tradition. In order to do this we will have to first shed our own inhibitions and equip ourselves with more than rudimentary knowledge outside our own purview of expertise. Compartmentalization is out. The fine arts will have to be viewed in its totality of the physical, mental, spiritual, and of course, social aspects. The most important curriculum is to renegotiate the function of the arts with everyday society in the true collective spirit.

Art is a living thing, and the performing arts are more alive and breathing than anything else. It needs to change and evolve but retain its attachment to the roots. It forms an essential part of the cultural identity of a person. Each individual is welcome to make a contribution, but no individual can claim it as his or her sole property. Performing arts is as much for the performer as for the audience, and the collective has as much a role to play as the individual. The way to enrich the arts is to continually be in the sharing mode. That way it makes for an honest evaluation of the artistic self as well. The process of reintegration has already begun. Let us not lock up our art form for fear of it being stolen. Let us heal ourselves along with it.



References

Rangacharya, Adya. 1996. *The Nāṭyaśāstra*. English Translation with Critical Notes. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd.



5



Dance as Healing: Kolkata Sanved

SOHINI CHAKRABORTY

Introduction

Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) is growing internationally as an alternative and creative approach to counseling, psychosocial rehabilitation, self-expression, and empowerment. Without any dialogue, movement serves as a means for inspiring people to open up and share their stories and embody their true emotions. Through our organization Kolkata Sanved, we have used this holistic therapy to reach out to community populations who are vulnerable and underprivileged, to provide them with a method for coping, and to help them rediscover their physical autonomy and voice.

Through workshops and classes in the community, Sanved is able to reach people from a wide range of backgrounds, including victims of violence and trafficking, street and platform children, at-risk youth living in red-light areas and slums, people facing mental illness, and people living with HIV/AIDS. Living in these circumstances often makes it difficult to relate to one's body, spirit, and mind in a positive way. Instead it becomes more common to see the body as a shameful means of labor and mechanical source of income-generation, or worse still as a commodity that does not belong to them but to the highest bidder. Survivors of trauma and violence often have an aversion to their bodies and acquire an "inhibition that blocks self-expression, movement freedom, and spontaneity" (Levy et al. 1995: 45). Kolkata Sanved tailors its program development to directly relate to these specific needs within the community, and the basic framework curriculum entitled *Sampurnata* (fulfillment) places its main focus on

a participatory learning process. The approach values creativity as more important than technique and empathy as more necessary than sympathy. It explores what the body can do rather than stressing what it cannot do and, perhaps most importantly, employs a non-judgmental attitude with a promise of confidentiality and trust. The personalized program allows for the development of a safe environment for all participants—socially, emotionally, and physically. Breaking through barriers of traditional counseling and therapy, we have been able to use movement and dance to enable individuals who came out of abusive histories such as these to reclaim their bodies and cultivate positive self-perceptions through a newfound source of peace and confidence.

Situation and Need

In South Asia, as in much of the rest of the world, the unfortunate truth is that women and girl children often live on the fringes of society due to a lack of economic freedom, gaps in education and awareness, and repression of emotional and mental health needs. While we cannot realistically meet every need, it is important to have a bigger picture of their circumstance before we can attempt to make change.

One of the main demographics that we work with consists of women and children who have been rescued from sex trafficking. West Bengal is a major source area for young women and children who are sold into the red-light areas of the metropolitan cities throughout India, across which the flesh trade is thriving. “According to an ILO estimate, 15 percent of the country’s estimated 2.3 million prostitutes were children, while the UN reported that an estimated 40 percent were below 18 years of age” (US Department of State Bureau of Consular Affairs 2004). Many of these women and children continue to be trafficked from surrounding rural areas in the name of marriage or the promise of a sustainable job, but subsequently they are sold into the brothels of a metropolis. South 24 Parganas, the southernmost district of West Bengal, is one such area in which unfortunate circumstances push individuals into prostitution as a necessary means of survival. Sanlaap, an NGO working against trafficking in Kolkata, was able to conduct a directed study in the area in 2006 and found that the majority of the population consists of adolescent minors between the ages of nine and thirteen whose “low levels of education thrust them into a situation [where] they become easy prey to exploitation.” Families are otherwise engaged in daily manual labor receiving minimal wages, and because

girls cannot usually contribute as much financially, child marriage and prostitution present viable and often attractive options at the unfortunate expense of the girl and her mental and physical health and future (Bhattarcharya et al. 2006: 19). The relative deprivation and discrimination against girl children, especially girls who have been raped or involved in prostitution, instils in them a profound sense of low self-esteem which they carry with them even into adulthood. The complex interconnection between poverty, religion, women's reproductive capacity, and their disempowerment gives rise to negative feelings about the value and potential of their bodies and minds.

As a part of our program we also reach out to children living on railway platforms who are similarly burdened by daily violence, abuse, and extreme poverty. Fighting their way through life, these children are forced to mature quickly and rarely have the chance to explore their bodies and minds as tools for empowerment for moving beyond their current circumstance. Additionally, we work with mental health patients residing in shelter homes and hospitals. While perhaps a step up from platform life, these state-run programs in West Bengal are still direly inadequate as very little attention is given to the developmental needs of the patients. They are often treated as prisoners living in a jail-like environment without basic rights. The activities in the homes are monotonous leaving the patients feeling hopeless and under-stimulated. As mentioned before, people suffering from HIV and AIDS are also reached by the programs of Sanved. These people tend to struggle with a negative outlook on life and sometimes act recklessly because of their expectations of a limited future. They often feel estranged from their bodies which seem to be working against them and only causing them pain. Our reception and the amount of work we can do with these groups depend on their health and ability to participate, but in many instances we are able to make great progress.

Intervention Approach

The core training team of Kolkata Sanved comprises fourteen survivors of trafficking and violence. After participating in a two-year long intense training, these women are now able to use movement to share their life stories with the objective of sensitizing people, cautioning them on the consequences of trafficking, and building awareness of other relevant social issues. The process is sustainable and organic as our trainers have risen as girls rescued from trafficking and now

are respected dance therapy trainers who are acting as advocates for change within their very own communities. Through performances, classes, and workshops, participants and trainers are able to express together their desire to break stigmas and create new bonds of support. The process has three stages. First, dance is used as a supplement to traditional counseling to transform traumatized populations into confident, bold, and expressive artists/advocates in their own rights, and to integrate them with the mainstream. Second, comfort with both the body and the mind is built, thereby strengthening the spirit to take charge of one's life. During this stage trainers are provided with professional training, not only as dancers, but also as peer educators and activists. They are taught to use performing arts to direct public attention, manage stress and trauma, and speak out. Third, participants begin to live through the program and build open and accepting societies through the learned techniques.

Trainers develop classes and workshops that draw on the therapeutic elements of multiple traditional Indian dance forms to create a unique and holistic approach for dealing with psychological issues of trauma and everyday life. The Kolkata Sanved dance movement therapy process includes need assessments, different dance-oriented games and activities, fun dance time, group movement activities, team-building processes, trust-building exercises, body-mind coordination activities, anger management movement, group discussions, relaxation, storytelling exercises and more. Spontaneous movement is another important aspect of the therapy process where participants have the freedom to self choreograph. Additionally, music provides the backdrop for all of our activities. In one workshop footsteps might be taken from the Kathak tradition to trigger a release of anger while in another workshop shape and body placement from the Bharatnatyam tradition might be used to rethink the body and its relation to space. Teamwork is developed through the incorporation of folk dance, hand gestures are portrayed as tools for storytelling, and facial expressions become the keys to revealing emotions. Because this technique respects the body and values all dance traditions, it allows for a high degree of flexibility in working with each target audience. Because no step is considered out of bounds, all movement originates in response to the experiences of the participants. Claiming full ownership to every aspect of the dance, they are able to act out their own stories and truly express their deepest unspoken emotions.

When we first establish a program participants are usually very shy and show low energy, low self-esteem, and minimal confidence. They express negative feelings of shame about themselves and their bodies, but they begin to show a gradual improvement and increase in comfort throughout the activities. Slowly they begin to express themselves, but the process is very time-consuming, as it takes weeks for them to just come out of their shell and most often a minimum of six months for them to rebuild self-respect. However, some results are more immediate. In one case, after attending a two-day residential workshop, a woman returned to her parents and requested a detailed background of her groom to be. She later postponed her marriage with a renewed dedication to first becoming economically independent.

As previously mentioned, activities are developed based on the needs of the community after communicating with representatives and other local NGOs. When working with the children of railway platforms peaceful movements and different types of anger management techniques are used in response to their high levels of stress and pent up aggression. The children learn to relax their bodies and slowly break down the emotional walls that have kept back their feelings of peace and joy that they are entitled to as children. When working with mentally challenged patients we use the class to stimulate them in new ways through different colorful props such as stretchable cloths, balloons, streamers, fitness balls, and *dupattas*. We encourage them to use these props in their dances and to creatively and imaginatively explore the space around them. The caregivers in these shelter homes often become frustrated because they cannot control them so we are currently trying to equip them to be able to initiate dance and movement with patients even when Sanved staff is not present. In our work with victims of violence, at-risk, and vulnerable groups we use theme-based movement, including trust-building exercises, to help them learn how to re-open their bodies and minds to people around them. Since survivors often choose to disassociate from their bodies as a means of separating themselves from trauma, initially these groups refused to sit with counselors and talk through their issues and emotions. However, through this multi-faceted training approach many women have been able to come to terms with their original reasons for dissociation and work towards mending their body-mind split (Levy et al. 1995: 48). With child HIV/AIDS patients we strive to bring joyful movement and color to lives that are often otherwise fated to depression. With fun movement games and dance that incorporates

colorful props and storytelling, patients are able to once again feel excited about their histories and value their perspectives. No matter the demographic, the Kolkata Sanved process is distinct in that there is no power differential between the “counselor” and the “survivor.” Everyone participates equally and spontaneously in the movement and collectively works to build and trust relationships through which they can express themselves more easily.

In addition to directly influencing target groups through classes and workshops, Sanved additionally reaches a larger audience through performance. Onstage survivors are able to speak to civil society and powerfully voice their concerns through their own originally developed movements. During the performance a respectful link and relationship is established between dancer and audience enabling both to learn from one another. In the past many of these women and children were abused, exploited, violated, and their bodies seen only as tools for reproduction and labor, but through this process they have transformed themselves into creative and vocal agents of expression and advocacy.

Conclusion

Facilitating dance therapy programs across South Asia, Sanved hopes to build a new consciousness of the power of movement by cultivating a rebirth of body and mind. Together we are removing dance from the limits of performance and helping it to re-emerge as a unique process of therapy, education, psycho-social rehabilitation—especially well-suited to those populations who are most often silenced. While the process and the realization of its empowerment potential are thus far uncommon in most of South Asia, the movement is steadily growing. Within our organization participants’ lives and attitudes are changing pace and shifting positively and dramatically, and attendance is growing by word of mouth. Across India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Thailand NGOs are increasingly interested in our work, and similar initiatives are finding their beginnings.

To date, Sanved has worked directly with 1,500 children and youth through regular training classes and 300 youth through workshop-based programs. Through performances, seminars, and campaigns we have indirectly reached over 3,000 people both locally and internationally. This has enabled us to engage in a productive dialogue with society to reshape conceptions of marginalized communities

and to build leaders, peer educators, youth motivators, and dance therapists out of those who grab hold of the chance.

While dance movement therapy cannot stand on its own as the sole key to providing empowerment, we can affirm that as a supplement to grassroots initiatives aimed at capacity building and rehabilitation, this approach is remarkably effective in dispelling inhibitions, abandoning shame, and moving a population forward. It provides an expressive relief and encourages the building of bonds through collective creativity in response to both positive and negative shared history. Together they dance to tell their stories, inspire their communities, and slowly speak truth to power.

Afterword

Since 2006, Kolkata Sanved has spun countless success stories of wide-eyed children spilling their biggest secrets and dreams on the dance floor; of women discovering the strength to scream through their first rhythmic steps. The organization has bloomed and blossomed and could easily boast of its newly polished awards like the Beyond Sport Award and international distinctions, but instead the core creators have kept the group impressively grounded. As a grassroots organization, Sanved continues to pair up with community-based organizations to bring programs directly to the people and to extend the potential of dance movement therapy to the farthest stretches of the imagination. Outreach has increased and now directly impacts over 3,000 individuals and has indirectly reached over 7,000 people through performance. The organization now has over thirty implementation partners worldwide and the target population has come to include new populations including mainstream school children and domestic workers. Trainers have been able to reach out to newly inspired spirits who have become the new trainees hoping to dance their way up through the program and put their stories to music. Initiatives and program curriculums have grown and evolved to accommodate every new voice ensuring that the approach will never lie flat. Kolkata and South Asia at large continue to be swelling with humanitarian concerns, and despite both community-based and government efforts the level of human trafficking continues to rise. According to the 2009 Trafficking in Persons Report, sex trafficking in sub-cities has not subsided and India remains a prime destination for the commercial sexual exploitation of women and girls from Nepal, Bangladesh, and

surrounding countries. However, we cannot let our measurement of development rest only on a number. To get a true sense of reality, we must consider the quality and sustainability of every step taken forward. Sanved is dedicated to fighting for this cause, and is unique in its mission because community women and children are standing with hands locked at the frontlines. This comprehensive approach to therapy that acknowledges the depth of each person's struggles is what Sanved and dance therapy thrive on, on world stages and local streets alike. Sanved continues to actively transform movement into a face with which to confront the real world as dance becomes a livelihood and a language of its own—a language of strength, resistance, liberation, and change.



References

- Benov, Ruth Gordon, ed. 1991. *Collective Works by and About Blanche Evan*. Blanche Evan Dance Foundation.
- Bhattacharya, Lopa, Sonali Paul, and Annapurna Sanyal. 2006. *Sanlaap: Tracking our Children*. Kolkata: Dilip Printing House.
- Kashyap, Tripura. 2005. *My Body, My Wisdom: A Handbook of Creative Dance Therapy*. New Delhi: Penguin.
- Levy, Fran J., Judith Pines Fried, and Fern Leventhal. 1995. *Dance and Other Expressive Art Therapies: When Words are Not Enough*. New York and London: Routledge.
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, United States Department of State. 2009. *Trafficking in Persons Report 2009*. June. Available at <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4a4214b4c.html>.
- US Department of State Bureau of Consular Affairs. 2004. *India Human Rights Report: Trafficking in Persons 2004*. July. Available at <http://www.ncbuy.com/reference/country/humanrights.html?code=in&sec=6f>.
- Whitehouse, Mary Starks. 1999. "The Transference and Dance Therapy." In Patrizia Pallaro, ed., *Authentic Movement*. London and New York: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

II

Globalization of Indian Dance

The Ownership of Indian Classical Dancing and Its Performance on the Global Stage

MANDAKRANTA BOSE

How an artist is related to his or her art is not an easy question to answer. It is difficult to see how and to what extent the artist's individual creativity flourishes within the dictates of the conventions of "classical" art. How, as T. S. Eliot asked almost a century ago, do tradition and the individual talent shape one another? (Eliot 1920) In the case of the classical dancing of India, this question has long intrigued me, because it is a tradition in which the individual artist's subjective creativity is under pressure not only from the historical authority of a codified tradition but also from the gendered organization of its practice. Working under such conditions, can the artist claim ownership of the art? Or is the artist merely a mechanical vehicle of an unchanging aesthetic regime? These questions are assuming special importance today because classical Indian dancers, the majority of whom are and always have been women, are beginning to use their art to speak more and more for themselves as their art begins to break out of its long seclusion within India.¹ These are questions relevant not only to the artist but also to audiences: if the idea and practice of classical Indian dancing are under interrogation and perhaps reformulation by artists expressing their subjective creativity and searching for personal idioms, does their art continue to be a local phenomenon accessible only to particular audiences? Or does it open up to a global audience because dancers aim their art beyond the aesthetic and ethical boundaries of their received tradition?

Taken in its global setting, Indian classical dancing is a particularly interesting cultural phenomenon because for almost a hundred

years now, it has secured for itself a confirmed place in the world's inventory of cultural capital. Through the past quarter century in particular, its stock has risen enormously and it now commands the kind of unchallenging reverence that is reserved for establishment art. In contrast with when I took my first steps into classical dancing, today there are hundreds of dance academies around the world. Although the center of energy is still in India, vigorous offshoots have sprung up outside India. What used to be merely a matter of local concern, a cultural mystique impenetrable to outsiders, has opened up to global participation and increasing communication. This is partly because the South Asian diaspora has marked Indian art as a signifier of its cultural identity. But another important reason is that classical Indian dancing has become an arena for women to subject their experience of the world to questions that apply globally as they sweep across national and cultural borders. This is not surprising because classical Indian dancing has developed through the ages primarily as a woman's art, despite the occasional rise of brilliant male artists, which makes Indian classical dance a particularly appropriate instrument of women's self-expression. What *is* surprising is that in the Indian performing arts tradition women were not themselves in charge of their art, which they practiced under male tutelage and patronage; today, the ownership of dance has ceased to be a male monopoly at the same time as it has broken out of its exclusively Indian location.

A historical overview will explain why I call classical Indian dancing a women's art. Early historical accounts make it quite apparent that dance in India was organized along gender lines. In theory, the performer could either be a man or a woman, but in practice the labor was gendered. In both abstract and representational forms of dancing, gender values such as feminine grace and masculine vigor were assigned to movements and expressions. This gendering of performance extended to the organization of dance as an activity. The dancers were predominantly women, the very word for a dancer, *nartaki* (literally, a female dancer), denoting femininity.

As a result, the female performers became dependent on their male mentors and guides, losing their artistic autonomy in the choice of both subject matter and style. This relationship originated centuries ago and to a degree continues today, given that dance has always been a highly structured art form with stylized movements, set repertoires, and traditional legends, conditions that do not easily promote change. Consequently, within the formulaic processes of classical Indian dancing,

the free expression of personal experience has not been an issue of importance in the performance tradition. This is precisely where one is compelled to ask who has traditionally owned the parcel of cultural capital called dancing. The female dancer or her male teacher and manager?

Before I go any further with the gendered division of labor in dancing, I must note that India's cultural history shows a disparity between dancing and the other major performing arts, such as music and acting. From their beginning, Indian music and drama have been performed by both male and female performers. From textual and visual records of music we learn that there were both male and female performers of vocal and instrumental music. In the Indian classical theater too actors could be either male or female. But the case was different in dancing: although men are not forbidden to dance, the dance texts—dating from the earliest days till the eighteenth century—show only women as the actual dancers. The aesthetic reason is not hard to find. The discourse on dancing recognized from the beginning that it was an art of the body, a dynamic system of capturing the beauty of motion and of representing ideas and experience. Because it was an art that had to be inscribed upon the human body, it could not remain untouched by gender identities. In both abstract and representational forms of dancing, gender values such as feminine grace and masculine vigor were assigned to movements and expressions.

These ascriptions go a long way back in time, having originated with Bharata, whose second-century AD work on the performing arts, the *Natyasastra*, formed the basis of all subsequent views on theater, music, and dance in India until modern times.² But let us note that although he associated certain movements with masculine vigor and others with female grace, he did not correlate them with the gender of the performer. That is to say, he did not require vigorous movements to be executed only by men and never by women. In time, however, the vigorous style came to be associated with the masculine temper and the gentler style with the feminine. The crucial point here is that this gendering of styles rests upon the classification of movement and feeling by gender: the assumption is that delicate movements and feelings are essential correlatives of femininity while vigor lies in the province of masculinity. This gender division was taken for granted when the classical dances of India were revived in the early twentieth century and led to the modern perception of male and female dances as separate categories, so that vigorous dances are commonly assigned

to male dancers and gentler dances to females. Though there are exceptions, they are rare.

But the evidence of the *Natyasastra* suggests that if modes of dancing were gendered by the early theorists and presumably by dancers themselves, they were gendered by style, not by the gender of the performer. That is to say, dance was considered masculine or feminine according to whether the body moved vigorously or gently. It follows that the gender of the performing body itself was immaterial and that the performer could be either a man or a woman, for it was to the dance that gender was attributed, not to the dancer. So it is not surprising that female dancers performed vigorous, “manly” dances. The surprise lies elsewhere: first, there is no evidence of male dancers in the early history of dancing; second, not just the art but the profession of dancing was entirely gendered in its division of labor. Why were there no male dancers? There is not one description of a dance in the *Natyasastra* performed by men. Thus, even though Bharata does not enunciate any rule holding males unsuitable as dancers or reserving the art for women, he seems to be reporting as a social fact that dance was an art solely practiced by women. This specialization by gender might not have been a theoretically dictated position but evidently a part of public reality, as testified by the many musicological authors who wrote on dancing after Bharata. Sculpture provides further support. Of the innumerable dancing figures carved in stone not one is that of a man. One of Bharata’s most illustrious successors, Sarngadeva, tells us, “Generally in nr̥tta, the person fit to perform the dance movements is a female dancer” (1976, 7.1224).

Nothing could make it more emphatically clear that the dancers were women. On the other hand, the dance teachers and stage presenters were men. Stage presenters in Sanskrit drama were always men, as were the writers of the many treatises on dancing. This division of labor placed the pedagogy and organization of dance in the male domain, divided the art along gender lines, and split dance as a cultural enterprise into two areas of responsibility determined by gender identities.

We must in particular understand the full weight of the authority of the dance teacher. He was not simply a trainer but a guru, a preceptor in the profoundest sense of spiritual guidance, to whose authority submission must be total. This relationship is a standard of such durability that its force remains almost unaltered today in music and dance. Would it then be too much to claim that the female dancer was not the

mistress of her art, that she was a product of her master? The dancer's preceptors, whether in the persona of the writer of dance treatises or of her direct trainer, determined to the last detail what movements she must perform and in what sequence. I am not suggesting that the dancer was a mere puppet, for her execution of the blueprint handed down to her depended upon her skill and artistic intuition. Interestingly enough, from the early seventeenth century onwards some of the dance texts provide room for individual interpretation. Nevertheless, the prescriptive rigor of the training regime remains unaltered. Given the fact of the master's all-encompassing authority, should we not conclude that the rendering of the feminine, of women's graces and emotions, was a product of the male imagination?

This premise is strengthened by the consensus developing through the first millennium that dance was properly a woman's art. The thirteenth-century Sanskrit text *Sangitaratnakara*, one of the most influential of the treatises on music and dance, gives a detailed list of the bodily attributes that it considers essential for dancing, asserting in conclusion that no talent or skill can take dancing to the highest levels of joy without the support of a beautiful body. The description that leads to this conclusion is unambiguously that of a female body, identifying particularly such priceless feminine treasures as red lips and full breasts (Nandikesvara 1957: 23; Sarngadeva 1976, 7.1226).

The correlation of masculinity and femininity with categories of feelings and movements has a remarkable similarity with classical Javanese dancing which, though not as old as classical Indian dancing, is of great antiquity and was well-established as an artistic tradition by the fifth to the sixth centuries AD, judging by sculptural and literary evidence. As in the Indian tradition, the gender division seems as entrenched and survives with undiminished authority today, as Clara Brakel-Papenhuyzen points out: "This distinction between female and male dancing is not only found in the Javanese courts and villages, it is paralleled in Balinese dances, where females tend to perform the gentler dances, while males delight in showing off their courage and skill in warrior battle dances" (1995: 25).

By early medieval times, then, the gendering of dance had been set as the norm rather than the exception not only in India but elsewhere within its sphere of cultural exchange, at least in Indonesia. In 1927, the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore noted, as Brakel-Papenhuyzen did later, that in Bali, delicate and graceful dances were performed only by young girls (Tagore 1961: 637, 647). As against this, the virile

dances that characterized dance-dramas were danced by men or in some cases by women playing male roles, thus associating vigor with masculinity (*ibid.*: 649). My limited knowledge of South East Asian dance traditions prevents me from making absolute historical judgments, but there seems to be no evidence of gender-neutral conceptions and practices of dancing in South East Asia. For instance, the majority of performers of ancient dances who appear in the important account of Balinese dancing by I Madé Bandem and Fredrik deBoer are young women, except for dances that are explicitly ritual acts and dance-dramas. The Legong dance is “delicate, refined, and very intricate” and is “performed by two or three pre-adolescent girls” (Bandem and deBoer 1981: 76).

The historical evidence suggests, then, that the terms in which dance was originally conceived in India were such that it became a women’s art managed by men. The subsequent history of the art confirmed and reinforced that relationship. The invasions and wars that shattered India from the sixth century onwards drove classical dancing in India into seclusion and obscurity, putting female performers ever more under male control. Molded in the formulation of her art by her male preceptor, the dancer was equally subject to male authority in the practice of her art because her stage appearance was managed by the male presenter of the performance and authorized by male patrons in the persons either of priests or princes. The balance of artistic autonomy and social agency was thereby tilted decisively away from the performers themselves towards their male mentors, managers, and patrons. This relationship remained fixed for centuries and to a degree continues today, given that dance has always been a highly structured art form with stylized movements, set repertoires, and traditional legends, conditions that do not easily promote change. The complex and elaborate vocabulary of dance creates beauty, expresses emotions, and tells stories, but does so in set patterns of movement and narrative mostly related to religious themes from myths and legends distanced from social concerns.³ As a result, within the formulaic processes of the dance styles that became canonized as the classical styles, the free expression of personal experience never became an issue of importance. Only in the past dozen years or so have we seen efforts towards authenticating personal expression in dance, and it is no accident that these efforts have been made by women who use dance as a feminist reading of the world. I shall come back to this later.

The strict and changeless regimen demanded by classical Indian dancing entrenched the relationship of control and dependency between performer and teacher. The separation of responsibilities between female dancers and male trainers, between teachers and theorists created a relationship that remained unchanged till the nineteenth century, as testified by accounts found even in relatively modern texts.⁴ What we find in that relationship is the paradox that classical Indian dancing began as and remains for the most part an androcentric domain populated by women. But the relationship is also inherently one of power imbalance since the dancer has little scope for self-determination, which has resulted in placing her social status into question until relatively recent times.

In early times the status of the dancer was high, for she was a participant both in worship and in art. Dance was practiced by girls of noble origin: Sanskrit dramas of the fourth and fifth centuries AD mention female dancers of royal descent.⁵ Till the mid-twentieth century, there was at least one cultural region, the relatively remote Manipur in eastern India, where the lead roles in dances remained the prerogative of princesses of the ancient royal house of Manipur. We may see here a parallel with Thailand and Kampuchea where the art of dance was born within the royal court and was often performed by the members of the royal household (Mehta n.d.: 13). It still continues to be supported by royal patronage in Thailand. Similarly, the Yogyakarta tradition of Java has been restricted to the royal family, while the bulk of secular dancing in the Balinese tradition appears to have its source in royal initiatives (Bandem and deBoer 1981: 76, 81, 88–89, 90, 95).

But in early India the high status of the female dancer did not stem from her social origin. It was her artistry that gained her admiration, as we learn from references to courtesans who were admired as artists because they excelled in dancing. This tradition of approval and praise, however, did not continue for long. Women's dependent role in dancing eventually led to subordination in life as well, especially with the growing practice of consecrating young girls to temple service as *devadasis*. I must emphasize that the custom was most definitely not part of early Indian society but a product of troubled times and the grip of authoritarianism on state and society in medieval India. The custom presumably began as a devotional act by well-born young women who were ritually married to the god they served. The term *devadasi* literally means a servant of god. To please their divine spouse and master, these girls were trained in the sixty-four arts traditionally prescribed for women, including painting, music, and dancing.

But since the term *dasi* means a female servant, it leaves in little doubt the real attitude of society towards these women. The temples were run by priests under royal patronage. Given into the care of the temples or courts at a very young age, devadasis lived wholly under the will of temple priests and royal patrons, a situation open to abuse, and in its most debased form the custom turned many of these women into sexual victims. By the ninth century the status of dancers in general plummeted, and they came to be regarded as prostitutes, their art stigmatized along with them (Kalhana 1961: 61; Shastri 1975: 28–30). No longer would a daughter from a respectable family devote herself to dance. The families of temple dancers kept the art of dance alive as part of temple rituals, but even as they performed this necessary part of the process of worship, they lost respectability and so did their art. One might say that dance and dancers fell victim to circular reasoning: dancers were disreputable persons because they practiced a disreputable art, while dance was disreputable because it was the art of disreputable women. This stigma attached also to male dancers but only to the milder degree of the suspicion of effeminacy. Here again we see the identification of dance as a woman's art. It is true that the downgrading of dancers and their art can be directly traced to the unsettled conditions and political turmoil as India fell to waves of invaders from the sixth century AD, but I cannot help but wonder whether the devaluation of dance was not an intrinsic function of its feminization. The reasoning seems clear: dance was a woman's art, and women were of lower worth than men. How then could dance itself not be of low worth? A clue to this undertone of dismissal, no matter how muted, lies in the foundational legend of the origin of dance. Recounting how Lord Shiva taught humankind the art of dancing, the sage Bharata explains why it was brought into the world: "The Vedas are not to be used by women or sudra castes. Therefore, create another Veda, meant for all varnas. Let it be thus . . ." (Sarngadeva 1976, 1.12–13).

This is why I believe dance was compromised from the beginning by its gendered identity, a conceptual weakness that made the decline of dance in troubled times inevitable.

By the time a degree of stability was achieved under the Mughals around the fifteenth century, dance had already degenerated as a profession and had lost its status as a form of devotion and as an art of subtle representation. Whether at court or inside temples, dance came to be associated with sexual license precisely because dancers were women, wholly under male control and thus exploitable.

Dancing as a profession and as an art dropped to its lowest point during the rule of the British, who thought of it as the debased art of prostitutes and termed it “nautch” (a corruption of the Hindi word for dance). Countless memoirs of the English in nineteenth-century India agree that “nautch girls” were a pitiful lot. The Marquess of Hastings thought that “nothing can be more tiresomely monotonous” than their dance (Dyson 1978: 338). Even kindly observers like Bishop Heber of Kolkata and his wife found their movements “strained” and “monotonous,” while Mrs Fenton, a less sympathetic visitor, declared that the dancer she saw was “an odious specimen of Hindoostanee beauty . . . a wretch,” whose “frightful contortions with her arms and hands, head and eyes,” and her “poetry of motion” was so ridiculous that the spectator “could not even laugh at it” (Dyson 1978: 339, 340–41). Some Englishmen did patronize the nautch but they did so not out of artistic engagement but as part of their pretensions to Nabob status in the conquered land.

Unaware of the richness and beauty of Indian dance or of its original intent, the British tried to suppress what they took to be a vulgar and degenerate pastime (Ambrose 1983; Gopal and Dadachanji 1951; Vatsyayan 1953, 1968). The older dance styles of India were explorations of the aesthetic and dramatic capabilities of the human body in motion; these traditional styles were hidden from alien gaze in temples or remote villages. The dances that were being publicly performed capitalized on the sexual potential of the body. So inescapably gendered was the practice of dancing that a dancer could be conceived only as a woman, to the extent that male dancers, if any, had to adopt feminized personae, except in dance-dramas that celebrated the legends of heroes or in battle and hunting dances that had been imported into mainstream performance traditions from aboriginal or tribal cultures. In temple schools, for instance, well into the twentieth century young boys who were trained as dancers were taught feminine movements and expressions, and they performed in female attire. When in the opening years of the twentieth century a lawyer, E. Krishna Iyer, in the city of Madras (now Chennai) attempted to reclaim the lost place of classical dancing by presenting public performances himself, he dressed and performed as a woman.

Because femininity had become a correlative to dancing, it came to signal eroticism and loss of masculinity, both viewed as threats to the moral health of society. This was the moral logic behind British proscriptions against dancing, which put the seal of state power on

the stigmatization of women as dancers. Not till the beginning of the twentieth century was this degradation reversed. Mainly as part of the nationalist impulse to claim self-worth by reconstructing past glories, the classical dances of India were revived in the opening years of the twentieth century by a handful of poets and artists, notably Rabindranath Tagore and Mahakavi Vallathol. Tagore encouraged girls of his own family and those of his friends to learn dancing, and at his school in Santiniketan he made dance a part of the curriculum. Vallathol followed Tagore by setting up a dance school in Kerala. Validated as part of the glorious past glimpsed behind India's debased present, dance regained its prestige and dancers their self-respect.

This revaluation of dance was vital in recasting women's role in it. In the present century, particularly since the 1970s, women have claimed a progressively decisive presence in the world of dancing as performers, teachers, and dance scholars. More and more women are taking charge of dance education as well as performances. But perhaps the most significant development has been one on a deeper level. I have spoken earlier of the apparently cast-iron structure of dancing, both as to form and substance. Little or no individual choice is permissible in the regimen of body movements, while the narrative contents have tended to remain equally unalterable, being the ancient legends of gods and heroes. But recent classical dancing in India has begun to break out of this mold; grounded in the technique of its heritage, it employs that technique to give expression to hitherto unexplored areas of experience, to reinterpret tradition and to relate itself to contemporary social reality. The leading role in these innovations has been consistently if not exclusively taken by women; though it has historically constrained women to a subordinate position, dance today is slowly turning into an arena for women to challenge their world. The pace of this challenge is as yet slow and its force but little felt. Little change is apparent in the performance repertoire of dancers and a viable iconography and mythology of modern sensibility is yet to appear. Most of the narratives on which dance dramas are based are still those of the mythical icons of tradition. The secular action or experience reflected as yet in dance performances is minimal, even though in recent years some front-ranking dancers such as Mallika Sarabhai, Kumudini Lakhia, Avanti Meduri, and Menaka Thakkar have attempted to address social issues or to reinterpret myths, the young dancers crowding the numerous dance schools in India and elsewhere are still being trained in the conventional articulation of

medieval myths and socialized identities. But even in this rootedness we can see women beginning to reclaim their spirituality as an autonomous decision rather than action coded by others. Religion, usually restrictive, has been remade by these women into a space for self-definition where the dancer's dedication to the spirit is a personal choice rather than a surrendering to tradition. One can still find powerful examples of dance offerings made by young girls and young women in south Indian temples. The dancers are often not formally attired, and their audience is often irrelevant to them. The performance is a matter between a dancer and her god. This private alignment is common to dancers today, and I suspect it has always been so but has not been valorized in public life as it is today, because women simply did not have the power to claim their performances as their own.

As I have said before, the paradox—a troubling one—of the history of classical Indian dancing is that it has been traditionally an art form practiced by women but controlled by men. Yet this seemingly retrograde gendering of dancing has resulted in the emergence of a feminine initiative in claiming it as a fertile territory for women's experiences and women's imagination without relinquishing the aesthetic heritage of its tradition. In a reversal of power relationships in the enterprise of dance as a performance, the traditionalism and gender restrictions that once worked to subordinate women are now being re-tooled as instruments of self-recognition and perhaps of liberating action.

At issue here is the essential question of the roots of creativity in art. Where is the creative impulse located? In the formulae of construction and presentation that historically develop within the cultural institutions of particular societies? Or does it arise from the artist's subjective response to experience, modulated no doubt by the artist's historical and social context but ultimately free in its perception and self-expression? These questions are of particular relevance to classical Indian dancing because, as my historical survey will have shown, it developed through centuries into an art form that has the perfection of high cultivation, but precisely because of the cultivation it suffers from an absolute codification which holds the individual artist in the stranglehold of precedence and convention. A classical dance performance is an event of exquisite beauty and of dramatic emotional power but its perfection is that of a finished artifact that can only be emulated by the individual dancer but cannot be in any substantial sense developed by the dancer. This again raises the questions of

ownership and its gendered nature: if the art is actually an institution, can it be claimed as a personal possession by the artist? Is the dancer free to project her autonomous subjectivity in an act of creation?

The answer is beginning to emerge from the efforts of women dancers in recent times. As I have said earlier, dancers in the classical Indian styles undergo the most rigorous training imaginable in the traditional technique and compositional concepts of the art. Many, indeed the majority, conduct their artistic lives within those structures without pushing their boundaries. But some dancers have attempted to infuse their received aesthetic code with subjective responses both to life and to art that reclaim the art for the individual from institutional ownership. Important steps in this direction have been taken by some of the pioneers in the renaissance of classical dance in India. Their work reaches out beyond traditional renditions of ancient legends and philosophical ideas to set them into modern contexts, experimenting with non-traditional compositions. A substantial part of their effort is directed at using dance as a direct intervention in contemporary social issues, which they do by creating new dance pieces that they use to bring the awareness of these issues to audiences, particularly rural women.

As a dance historian and as a woman I find this development deeply satisfying. At the same time, I cannot shake off some unease. While the ownership of dance is indeed being claimed by the women who are its primary practitioners, is it not also true that the spread of classical Indian dancing around the world is subjecting it to global market forces? Dance concerts, whether in India or in Europe or North America, are now large enterprises that require very considerable capital outlay. A dance concert is no longer the village or temple event of the past, including the recent past, when access was open to the community at large. If in the past dance had to depend upon the taste of royal or religious patrons, today it is no less dependent upon the patrons of the entertainment industry.

I am by no means saying that being part of a global entertainment industry in itself debases an art. To the contrary, the shrinking of the globe has brought together creative spirits that have led separate lives of the imagination for too many centuries. The union of different traditions can at once produce exciting amalgams and enrich each stream of artistic creativity. Efforts at fusing Indian and western dance and theater are increasingly underway, most often in England because of its large population of people of South Asian origin.

I had the opportunity recently to see a striking example of the meeting of east and west at the Theater Spektakel in Zurich in August 2001. Titled "Total Masala Slammer—Heartbreak No. 5," this was a mixed media dramatic performance designed and directed by Michel Laub. Based partly on Goethe's *Werther* and partly on a typical Indian romantic film of the popular variety known as a Bollywood (that is, a mix of Bombay and Hollywood) soap opera, both ironically treated, the play examined and questioned literary paradigms of passion, walking a thin line between romantic delight and skeptical laughter. The performance made use of multiple stage areas and levels and of live performance as well as video projections. What is relevant to my present subject was the use Laub made of classical Indian music and dance styles, performed with superb skill by musicians and dancers from India. These segments of the play provided almost the entire subtext of passion and stood as the bedrock of erotic aesthetic against the caricatured and fragile examples of love in *Werther* and Bollywood films. Layered upon the performance was the frequent on-screen projection of Indian scenes and of the training of Indian dancers, including the demonstration of the language of gestures by their instructor. In terms of negotiations between the local and the global, these projections were an astute and effective invention, for they mediated between the spectator attuned to western art and the aesthetics of Indian social life and art.

Yet, I have to qualify my admiration for these experiments with some misgivings. No doubt the choreographers, dancers, and directors of performance events such as Laub's are pushing the boundaries of a tradition-bound art form to reexamine not only the social world but the expressive potential of the art itself. But its application as an idiom often seems arbitrary, playing more to the needs of cultural tourism than to those of an organic reading of the world in which perceptions of identity and power are seamlessly bound together in an aesthetic as well as political vision. I am not convinced that scoring a quick point with audiences by serving up a novelty does not figure powerfully in endeavors such as Laub's. One might raise the same question about recent excursions into what are claimed to be feminist creations in classical Indian dancing. Can it be that dancers today, even those who are impelled by a radical interrogation of their art, are altogether immune from the pressures of what sells best? Radicalism, whether political or aesthetic, is unfortunately one of the hardest currencies of the global marketplace. Do the new artists of classical Indian dance

run the risk of turning their questioning of the world into coins of that marketplace?

I do not yet have the answer to these questions, which means that I am neither sure who exactly owns the classical dances of India today nor how their spread across the world will affect them. But I can at least affirm that the dance artists of the present generation are raising questions that are permanently altering the ways in which we view classical Indian dancing and those who devote their lives to it.



Notes

*This is a written and revised version of a 2002 lecture that was published in German by the Institute of Theory at the University of Zurich. Singulaitaten-Allianzen. Interventionen 11. Zurich, Wien: Instituts fur Theorie der Gestaltung und Kunst (ith), Hochschule fur Gestaltung und Kunst Zurich (HGKZ), 2002, pp. 109–28.

1. It is necessary to emphasize that I am speaking of the majority of dancers, for there certainly have been male dancers of great renown and superb artistry, such as Uday Shankar, Ram Gopal, and Birju Maharaj. Nevertheless, the largest number of dancers, from the youngest trainees to mature artists, is made up of women.
2. Although Bharata's is the earliest extant work on the performing arts, he had predecessors in the field whose works are now lost. The fourth century B.C. grammarian Panini refers to still earlier dance manuals, none now extant (Bose 1970: 2 and 1991a: 7). There are at least thirty available texts in Sanskrit after Bharata's time that describe dance in detail.
3. The earliest accounts describe sixty-four hand gestures and thirty-six eye movements. By now the numbers of these movements have reached over 100 for the eyes and more than 500 hand gestures in different classical styles of dancing. Movements for other parts of the body have also multiplied.
4. Not a single manual is by a woman. For the modern texts, see the fifteenth-century *Rasakaumudi* by Srikantha, [chapter 8](#), and the sixteenth-century *Nartananirnaya* by Pundarika Vitthala, [chapter 4](#). Other later texts follow the same pattern.
5. In his play, *Malavikagnimitram*, Kalidasa describes the dance performance of princess Malavika, who has been trained by her master Ganadasa, a male teacher.

References

- Ambrose, Kay. 1983. *Classical Dances and Costumes of India*. 2nd ed. with revisions by Ram Gopal. New Delhi: Allied Publishers.
- Bandem, I Madé, and Fredrik Eugene deBoer. 1981. *Kaja and Kelod: Balinese Dance in Transition*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.
- Bharata. 1934–64. *Natyasastra of Bharatamuni with the Commentary Abhinavabharati by Abhinavagupta*, ed. M. Ramakrishna Kavi. Vols. 1–4. Baroda: Gaekwar Oriental Series.
- Bose, Mandakranta. 1970. *Classical Indian Dancing*. Kolkata: General Printers & Publishers.
- . 1991a. *Movement and Mimesis*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- . ed. 1991b. *Nartananirnaya* by Pundarika Vitthala. Kolkata: General Printers.
- . 1995. *Dance Vocabulary of Classical India*. 2nd rev. ed. New Delhi: Indian Book Centre.
- . 2001. *Speaking of Dance: The Indian Critique*. Delhi: D. K. Printworld.
- Brakel-Papenhuyzen, Clara. 1995. *Classical Javanese Dance*. Leiden: KITLV Press.
- Chattopadhyaya, Aparna. 1967. “The Institute of *Devadasi* According to Kathasaritsagar.” *Journal of the Oriental Institute* 16: 216–22.
- Dyson, Ketaki Kushari. 1978. *A Various Universe*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Eliot, T. S. 1920. *The Sacred Wood*. London: Methuen.
- Gopal, Ram and Seroz Dadachanji. 1951. *Indian Dancing*. London: Phoenix House.
- Kalhana. 1961. *Rajatarangini*, ed. M. Aurel Stein. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Kautilya. 1909. *Arthasastra*, ed. R. Sharma Shastri. Mysore: Government Oriental Library series, No. 37.
- Kersenboom, Saskia. 1987. *Nityasumangali*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Marglin, Frederique Affel. 1985. *Wives of the God-King: The Rituals of the Devadasis of Puri*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mehta, Julie. n. d. “The Glory of Khmer Classical Dance.” n. p.
- Mudgal, Madhavi. 1986. *Given to Dance: India’s Odissi Tradition*. Video. Madison: Center for South Asian Studies (distributor).
- Nandikesvara. 1957. *Abhinayadarpana*, ed. M. M. Ghosh. 2nd ed. Kolkata: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay.
- Sarngadeva. 1976. *Sangitaratnakara*, trans. K. Kunjunni Raja and Radha Burnier. Vol. 4. Madras: Adyar Library.
- Shastri, Ajay Mitra. 1975. *India As Seen in the Kuttanimatam of Damodaragupta*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Srikantha. 1963. *Rasakaumudi*, ed. A. N. Jani. Baroda: Gaekwad Oriental Series, no. 143.

- Tagore, Rabindranath. 1961. *Java-Yatrir Patra, Rabindra-Racanavali*. Vol 10. Kolkata: Government of West Bengal.
- Varadapande, M. L. 1976. "Performing Arts and Kautilya's Arthasastra." *Sangeet Natak* 41: 45–54.
- Vatsyayan, Kapila. 1953. *Classical and Folk Dances of India*. Bombay: Marg Publications.
- . 1968. *Classical Indian Dances in Literature and the Arts*. New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi.
- . 1974. *Indian Classical Dance*. New Delhi: Publications Division, Government of India.
- Vitthala, Pundarika. 1991. *Nartananirnay*, ed. Mandakranta Bose. Kolkata: General Printers.

Negotiating Identity: Dance and Religion in British Hindu Communities*

ANN R. DAVID

Introduction

This essay is concerned with the complex, changing identities of British Asians as they negotiate their cultural, ethnic, and religious identities through the expressions of religious ritual and dance. Using an ethnographic methodology, it examines the practices of the Gujaratis at the annual Hindu festival of Navratri, revealing how the folk dance forms of Raas and Garba are used to present, reconfirm, and transmit a particular British Gujarati Hindu identity along with its affiliated religious aspects.¹ How have the Gujaratis, predominately a dislocated community from East Africa, adapted and reacted to the dominant culture of the British host community, and how has this process of adaptation affected their ritual processes and dance practices? How are the global forces of Bollywood film dance influencing the interest of the young people in their traditional folk forms and classical dance styles?

In the same vein, the essay interrogates the dance and ritual practices of the Tamil community in Britain, a community that is predominately Sri Lankan. The increased interest in the transmission and performance of Bharatnatyam at Hindu religious festivals and in temple practice is evidenced in recent fieldwork and discussed in the light of Tamil nationalism and the local and global modalities at play in these British communities. How much are the newly emerging performances of Bharatnatyam in the Tamil temples a signifier of

Tamil cultural and religious identity? What are performers' and devotees' current perceptions of the place of dance within religious worship? This essay documents and analyzes this rich vein of Hindu community dance—expressions which articulate questions of identity, ethnicity, authenticity, and religious beliefs in a diasporic setting in today's Britain. It maps a situation that is evolving, growing, and which appears to be at an important moment of transition in the twenty-first century.

Ethnographic work that I have carried out amongst these British Asian groups, questioning how a community utilizes dance in its expression of religious faith, reveals that British Gujaratis and Tamils invest significant time, energy, and commitment and reveal considerable socio-cultural self-consciousness in their cultural and religious practices.² These "hidden" practices include not only dance but music, ritual, and language. They remain, for the most part, hidden from the non-Asian public eye and receive little or no money from the public purse. Yet they are not covert events and play a fundamental role in the cultural and social lives of British Hindus of all ages. They do not, however, feature as part of mainstream arts interest, and most non-Asians are unaware of their existence. It is in this sense that I term them "hidden." A secondary sense is also applicable: these practices remain hidden in academic research, shown by a dearth of writing and by scant interest in this area. Thus the world of local dance practices remains "partially veiled" (Finnegan 1989: 4) not just to outsiders but also to many of its own contributors. Young people studying Bharatnatyam dance in one of the London Tamil weekend schools were unaware of the names of prominent London professional Bharatnatyam dancers and were not encouraged to see performances; Leicester Kathak and Bollywood dance teachers were uninformed of the London Tamil dance scene; and perhaps understandably and more importantly, those performing and teaching were not aware of the importance and scope of their work in the wider field of dance activity in Britain.

The dance practices of the Gujaratis and the Tamils framed by a religious setting become, I argue, "performances of faith" for these communities, displayed through the gestures and postures of their devotional action in homes, temples, and at religious festivals. In the British Sri Lankan Tamil groups, there is widespread practice of dance activities that include Bharatnatyam performances and training and trance dance as an integral part of their religious and devotional practices. These "cultural performances," to quote Singer's original term

(1972: 71), that I call “performances of faith” are a mode of exhibiting an adherence and commitment to Hinduism—to the performers, to fellow devotees, and community participants and to any “outside” audience (researchers, visitors, and others).³ For a community in an alien environment, where first-generation members grew up surrounded by the signifiers of religion in their homeland, cultural practices such as those described help to construct, exhibit, and reinforce those religious and cultural symbols. These performances confirm and display not only a general Hindu identity but also a specific Tamil religious identity, located as they are within Tamil temple ritual and at Tamil-specific festivals, just as the Gujarati events signify a specific Gujarati Hindu identity. Interestingly, despite this display of “performance of faith,” the sense of being veiled to non-invited outsiders still persists.

Diasporic Loss

In addition to performances of Bharatnatyam dance and trance dance during festival times, there is a growing phenomenon of Bharatnatyam dance classes for young Tamil women both in Britain and in the worldwide Tamil diaspora (Cunningham 1998; Ram 2000; Chakravorty 2004; Katrak 2004). Kalpana Ram argues that the conscious move to transmit and represent heritage through cultural practices indicates that there is already a sense of loss, a breakdown of the continuity of that heritage (2000: 262). Ketu Katrak writes of second-generation Asian Americans in their relocated diaspora spaces as “insider-outsiders”—insiders as South Asians but outsiders to their family traditions (2004: 84). In my interviews, first-generation immigrants in Britain frequently alluded to their concerns at the compromises they have had to make in their children’s cultural upbringing because of both internal and external pressures, and many have set up and now actively run classes for young people to imbibe their language and culture. Second-generation Asians in many cases now continue their work.⁴ This indicates a level of awareness of loss and a sense of anxiety about the stability of tradition: the idea, as Ram states, that “what is most representative and prestigious about Indian civilization” (2000: 264) may be lost.⁵ The presence of these dance classes situated within several major London Tamil temples signifies a new contemporary link of the dance with religious ritual and religious expression in the diasporic setting, and the increased importance assigned to its dissemination within religious practice. Given the contested history

of Bharatnatyam's relationship with the temple (well-documented by other scholars such as Srinivasan 1983, 1985; Gaston 1996; Meduri 1996), this occurrence is not without a certain irony. In fact, I would suggest that different strands of *devadasi* temple dance are being replicated in the contemporary Hindu diaspora in a creative, transplanted, and often unconscious manner.

Gaston's work in particular analyzes to what extent the new, evolved form of Bharatnatyam that we see today is based on the ritual of the devadasis. The irony is revealed in some of today's "religious" practices within the dance form, as much of what had been rejected when the dance was "purified" and "made respectable" by the reformers is now an integral part of *arangetrams* and other performances. Gaston points out that the ritual first lesson for the young devadasi, although not currently followed in that form, has been replaced by a similar ritual offering of fruits, flowers, and gifts to the dance guru at the commencement of study. The worship of the bells on stage, the offering of flowers (*pushpanjali*) and the form of the arangetram all closely follow the devadasi pattern.

Other innovations of a quasi-religious type have also appeared. As a result, Bharata Natyam has more rituals and ceremonies attached to it today than it had during the period of its revival, when strenuous efforts were made to dissociate it from *sadir* [devadasi dance]. (Gaston 1996: 312)

Two arangetrams that I attended in London dedicated the first twenty minutes of the long evening to an elaborate, on-stage *puja* and the ritual blessing of the bells for the dancer and the *talam*.⁶ Prayers were chanted, offerings of fruit, flowers, and gifts made and full obeisances performed by the dancer to her gurus, the priest, and her parents in front of a beautifully decorated shrine at downstage left. Discussing this later with one of the dance teachers, she explained that if the families wished, a full *puja* was performed at the temple the day before or on the morning of the arangetram rather than onstage. During this ceremony, the priest chants special Sanskrit verses dedicated to Shiva, and the bells and costumes are blessed. Some of the Tamil parents make a vow at this stage that after their daughter's (or son's) arangetram, a performance will be given to the temple as an act of devotion, called *Samarpanam*. Other aspects of arangetrams follow the traditional devadasi or temple ritual; for example, the *mallavi*, a musical piece played on the *nagaswaram* exclusively for the temple

deities when they are brought out of the temple, is now choreographed for Bharatnatyam. One arangetram I attended offered this as the opening item.

Dance as an Ethnic and Cultural Identity Marker

If the same question is asked of the British Gujarati Hindu community—how dance is utilized in its expression of religious faith—the festival of Navratri reveals that the folk movement forms of Garba and Raas form a central and essential element in the social, cultural, and religious performance of Gujarati identity in India and elsewhere in the diaspora. For Gujaratis, Navratri is synonymous with the performance of these dance forms, and, as commentator Naseem Khan emphasizes, “In East Africa, where so many British Gujaratis come from, garbas and dandias were central to their religious identity” (2004: n.p.). The Leicester Gujarati population, mainly immigrants from East Africa, is well-known for its religious affiliations (Jackson 1981; Williams 1984; Dwyer 1994), and its well-established patterns of worship that were consciously and confidently practiced in East Africa and then imported to Britain. In Leicester, not only were religious groups established in private houses before any temples were built (or converted), but Garba and Raas were organized at Navratri festivals in the mid-1960s even before the large exodus from East Africa. My respondents talked of the significance of the religious aspects of Navratri and endorsed the fact that the dances were seen as part of their Gujarati religious heritage.

The symbiotic relationship of the Navratri movement forms and Gujarati religious faith is exemplified during each evening’s event of the nine-day festival in halls and large spaces set up as temporary temples. The performance of Garba (clapping dance) within the sacred or ritual space begins the evening, and the repetitive nature of the movements helps to create the concentrated, devotional state of mind and body for the evening’s religious ceremony. The prayers and *arati* (worship) around the shrine form the central item of the event and are followed by the Raas, the stick dance. In this way the specific Gujarati dances construct a frame that focuses on the central sacred religious ritual. These vibrant, energetic, and participatory folk dances displayed at Navratri are an expression of the Gujaratis’ faith in their deities as encapsulated by the Hindu Vaishnavite tradition—a

tradition that has for hundreds of years accentuated religious faith through performance of dance, music, and drama in its mode of *bhakti*, or devotion.⁷ It is clearly evident that Navratri is the locus for the transmission of ethnic Gujarati religious and socio-cultural practices and a powerful confirmation of *jati* identity. In a similar way as demonstrated by the Tamils, playing the folk forms at Navratri in Britain constructs not only an ethnic Hindu identity, but a specifically Gujarati Hindu identity.

Ethnicity

The concept of ethnicity, like identity, offers two differing perceptions: how an ethnic group perceives itself and how others view it. Fieldwork from this research and other studies shows that both aspects of ethnic identity are currently to be discerned—that of reinforcing boundaries and distinctiveness and that of “ever-shifting concepts of self and belonging” (Hyder 2004: 3). These factors often become part of political debate when notions of “race relations” and “minority issues” are introduced. In fact, some commentators argue that the use of the term “ethnicity” perpetuates old distinctions of race (Ballard 1997; Mattausch 2000). For example, “in Britain, the term ‘ethnic minorities’ is used to refer primarily to non-white immigrants” (Guibernau and Rex 1997: 4), whereas the larger population of Irish, or Polish immigrants do not see themselves and are not generally seen by others as ethnic at all. The “Asian ethnic community” or the “Asian minority” are labels imposed from the outside, often from government sources, revealing how politically weighted the term has become. Ethnicity as a category first appeared in the 1991 British Census, but the presence and formulation of such a question have been open to much debate (Ballard 1997; Dale and Holdsworth 1997). Ballard argues that by offering in the census the possibility of ticking a box that states “White,” or six pre-set other ethno-national categories (Black-Caribbean, Black-African, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Chinese), it reinforces “the popular view that ethnicity is solely a characteristic of exotic non-white others. Secondly, and even more seriously, it both confirms and legitimates the (majority) view that ‘ethnic’ is both a convenient and an appropriate euphemism for people of color” (Ballard 1997: 194).

Nowadays, implications of “other” and “minority” are common in the use of ethnic as a description of a group as opposed to the dominant group or dominant culture. The term has gained further negative

associations too with the phrase “ethnic cleansing,” first used in eastern Europe in the 1980s and 1990s, in Rwanda in 1994, and at other sites of ethnic conflict.⁸ The sense of ethnicity as a positive feeling of belonging within a cultural group appears to have now been subsumed by these more recent connotations.

Ketu Katrak’s study of Bharatnatyam dance in Southern California led her to question how ethnicity is inhabited in the physical body that performs the dance, and she notes how it “is represented differently by first- and second-generation Indo-Americans” (2001: 14), as in India there is no need to display one’s Indian ethnicity. She comments too that overt presentations of religiosity in the dance are in fact attempts to show such ethnicity—an ethnicity that frames the performer in a nationalist Indian identity, superior “in comparison to American culture, which is after all not as ancient as India’s” (ibid.: 25). Katrak notes too that for many second-generation dance students Bharatnatyam is the vehicle to learn about Indian culture and that it still remains a carrier “to inculcate and instill certain traditional values about womanhood and the conventionally acceptable roles of wife and mother” (ibid.: 5).

Cultural Identity

For many immigrant Hindu groups the concept of cultural identity *is* directly linked with ethnic identity. A number of South Asian performers, choreographers, and writers have interrogated the idea of their own “ethnic” identity, attempting to use their work in the expressive arts to comprehend and communicate the complex and often ambiguous sense of who they are and where they belong. Some have coined new terminologies in this endeavor; Jatinda Verma, British Asian playwright and director, writing an analysis of multi-cultural productions proposed the term “Binglish.” This word was appropriated from contemporary Singaporeans’ description of their spoken language as “Singlish.” He explained: “I use it to suggest a form of spoken English as much as a process: Asian and Black life in modern Britain is self-evidently ‘not-quite English’; and, equally, is characterised by a striving to—and at times an insistence upon—‘be English’” (Verma 2001: 1). Verma’s production of *Journey to the West*, a play charting the lives and backgrounds of young British-born Asians, cleverly coined the terms “multi-culti” and a “hyphenated breed” to describe

the leading character, who is part-Muslim, part-Hindu, part-Indian, and part-British.⁹

Sanjoy Roy, in his examination of the urban siting of contemporary Indian dance and its relationship to migration, uses the term “double consciousness” to denote the awareness of belonging to two cultures at once.¹⁰ He explains, “it is also the paradoxical sense of being inside and outside at the same time, what I shall call ‘inexclusion’” (Roy 1997: 72). Choreographer Shobana Jeyasingh has famously spoken of her multi-layered background (Christian, Tamil, Malaysian, Indian), describing how “my heritage . . . has been mixed as subtly as a samosa has mixed itself into the English cuisine” (1998: 48). Her contemporary dance-making seeks to be freed from any misconceived external labeling of ethnic identity and at the same time strives to deconstruct the segregations and myths of east versus west.¹¹ She vehemently challenges the simplistic use of terms such as “hybridity” and “East–West collaborations” as descriptions of her work; terminology also denounced by Roy (1997: 81) and British Asian dancer Vena Ramphal (2002: 18). Salman Rushdie adds his voice to the debate, describing the sense of finding himself constantly in a minority group—a Muslim in India, an immigrant in Pakistan, and Asian in Britain—thus: “Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools” (1992: 15). The title of his collected short stories, *East, West* (1994) exemplifies this point, writes Susheila Nasta: “Importantly, too, the *East* and *West* of the title of the collection are not divided, or hyphenated; they are placed side by side as *simultaneous* realities existing in different and sometimes parallel temporal and spatial locations, not either/or, but both—separated only by a pause, a comma” (Nasta 2002: 133). Nasta argues that Rushdie sees himself as that comma, or alternatively, the comma represents the space where he lives. Rushdie’s proposal is that living simultaneously in two cultures can be used to advantage in nourishing the creative intellect. He believes that he and other Indian writers in Britain have access not only to their own history and traditions, but to a second tradition that is “the culture and political history of the phenomenon of migration, displacement, life in a minority group” (Rushdie 1992: 20).¹²

Jeyasingh too seeks recognition for her unique choreographic art, not as an “Asian,” an “Indian,” or “a Bharatnatyam dancer and choreographer,” and therefore her dance work deliberately does not promote the classical Bharatnatyam style. Whilst she, Rushdie, and many

others rebel against cultural labeling, there are South Asian dance artists and teachers in Britain who, along with a great majority of their own communities, perceive the classical status of music and dance to be an essential part of their tradition and their cultural life. Their work seeks above all else to preserve their tradition. Questionnaires and interviews during this research with dancers and teachers reveal a belief that cultural identity *is* confirmed through the learning of classical South Asian dance styles, and that the dance forms are vehicles for expressing their own Hindu religious faith and devotion. However, some of the younger (second- and third-generation) people who have grown up in Britain gave mixed responses to questions about the place of South Asian dance in relation to their sense of identity.

Yet, for many young people, their “cultural” identity is a syncretic, fluid amalgam of past and future, Asian and British, black and brown—an identity that is multi-layered and multi-faceted. This more versatile, complex, and developing sense of identity of the younger generations expresses notions of culture and religion that are more personal and less circumscribed by the beliefs of the preceding generations. It is indicative of an eroding of ethnic boundaries and of a greater influence of globalization in areas such as music, fashion, religion, and politics. Many of the Leicester Gujarati dance students interviewed acknowledged dance to be a part of their Hindu faith, but one-third of those interviewed disagreed and saw no correlation between their dance practice and concepts of faith or religion. “I dance as a hobby,” said twelve-year old Ashka, and Meena, aged fifteen, simply stated, “It is nothing to do with religion.”

Yet within the Tamil and Gujarati communities, the stake-holders in tradition, that is, the first generation and some of the older second generation, place a high value on their dance and music praxis as a vehicle for Hindu identity through their own traditions. Interestingly, so do some of the third-generation teenagers. Seventeen-year old Neha told me, “The dance style is part of who I am—my roots, culture, and belief,” and fifteen-year old Anjaree endorsed that “through dance we pray.” These comments can be contrasted with young Asians for whom Asian and western club music is an essential part of their distinctiveness and individuality. Clubbing, attending music festivals, driving with loud music in cars are modes of expressing a contemporary “Asian Kool,” a global identity that may either sit happily with traditional practices or eschew it altogether.¹³ Hyder comments that music, like dance, is “a site of cultural negotiation and change,

where identities are performed and transformed,” suggesting that this is evidence of a more hybrid, fluid notion of cultural and ethnic identity (2004: 5).

Shifts in Cultural and Ethnic Identity

Asian actress and writer Meera Syal, describing her upbringing in Britain in the West Midlands, has commented that many British Asians live in “a sort of immigrant bubble,” a bubble that has become a type of time-warp in comparison to their compatriots in India. “They have no hang-ups in this way in India—they have moved on. Bangalore is like silicone-chip city,” she remarked (2003). Indeed, she uses the term “cultural schizophrenics” to describe her generation. The clinging to traditional practices and ways of life by first-generation migrants is a common pattern in diaspora groups, evidenced not only in this research but in work carried out in Polish communities living in London and the Yugo-Swedish community in Stockholm.¹⁴ It is also clear, however, that the Hindu communities under consideration in this research are at a crucial point of change. This is most evident with the Gujaratis, who have been well-established in Britain since the early 1970s and some a decade earlier. Thirty to forty years of residency in Britain, first marked by efforts for financial survival, then by the successful establishment of their communities, and followed by very prosperous business lives for some (Barot 1991: 193), have brought significant changes to their social and cultural life. Second and third generations are beginning to emerge who appear to have no strong ties to the homeland (India and East Africa) and who see themselves as British, British Hindu, or British Asian, straddling both cultures and bound by neither. There is a growing sense among the young of participating in a “global youth culture” (Saldanha 2002: 340) and of having a “global identity” (ibid.: 345) rather than simply being individuals bound to their own or their ancestors’ maternal homes. The impact of globalization with its factors of increased ease of travel and ease of communication influences their cultural and social lives and often contributes to a sense of discontentment if they are required to follow the more traditional lives of their parents.

These young people, rather than experiencing the stress of living between two conflicting cultures, appear to have developed what commentators have described as a “multiple cultural competence” (Jackson and Nesbitt 1993: 175), enabling them to move with ease between

home and school, east and west, and tradition and change. Modes of behavior are modified to suit the particular context, and “most young Asians are very skilled at doing just this,” writes Ballard (1982: 196). Wenonah Lyon’s ethnographic study of a multiethnic community theater group in Oldham, Greater Manchester, reveals how the British Asian members of the group identified themselves by different names at different times—a use of assorted multiple identities to suit the requirements of specific situations. At times, they would stress their religious affiliation such as British Muslim, or just Muslim, British Hindu or Hindu, but in other contexts they might choose the terms Asian or Pakistani. Lyon notes that the classifications they used included “Asians, British, black, white, by area of origin . . . by subregion within the area of origin . . . by religion . . . or language” (1997: 187). This way of classifying oneself and others, a naming of ethnicity, demonstrates Barth’s definition of ethnicity as “the characteristic of self-ascription and ascription by others” (1969: 13). A similar response to the concept of being “British” was found by Les Back in his ethnographic studies of young working-class black and white groups in London. This study examined “new and challenging forms of cultural practice and identity formation that had been produced within metropolitan contexts” (Back 1996: 3). Some respondents were content with the terms “Black” and “British” as an indicator of their identity; others had abandoned the notion of Britishness entirely. For many of the black young people, the islands of origin of their parents featured as an important aspect of their “new ethnicity.” Other black youngsters spoke what Back terms a “harmony discourse,” describing how color was of no importance to them and how everyone on the housing estate integrated freely (*ibid.*: 8). Back comments that the youths’ description was of “a place where people can move in and out of different kinds of self-presentation” (*ibid.*: 8) as they willed (see also Eade 1997).

An anthropological understanding of identity carries with it an ambiguity already noted in previous examples—the sense of both the uniqueness and individuality of each person’s own identity, and the sense of sameness and belonging as part of a particular group. The latter creates a perception of difference with other, outside groups, which in turn creates highly complex and multi-dimensional boundary systems. For some, however, the situation is not so complex. Ramphal speaks confidently of identifying both with her own “Britishness” and her Indian forebears:

I am a dancer of Indian descent and British by birth and education. My upbringing has seen a combination of both “Eastern” and “Western” cultures; influences from both have moulded my being. I am very conscious of this, but the two have not remained separate as two different parts of my consciousness. They are intrinsically fused. I do not identify individually with two separate cultures. They are both part of my identity. (Gheerawo 1997: 51)

Rather than creating an inner conflict, Ramphal’s identity is enriched by the influences of both cultures; being British does not exclude her from being Asian, and conversely, being Asian does not preclude her from being British. As she states, they fuse in her being as one complete whole. It is possible too that this is symptomatic of her more privileged background (private school education followed by university and access to training in music and dance, for example) that perhaps allows a greater ease in the relationship to the dominant host community, and that is indicated through changes in identity affiliation. Jeyasingh, giving the keynote address at Akademi’s conference *South Asian Aesthetics Unwrapped* (March 24, 2002) spoke similarly of her ease with her multi-layered identity, stating, “I was a Tamil in Sri Lanka, Christian in India, Hindu in East Malaysia and Indian in Britain. I don’t feel fractured, I feel whole.”¹⁵

Bollywood influences

In relation to burgeoning interest in Bollywood dance, it is evident that for the young people, its freer, more modern, and more overtly body-conscious mode has begun to appropriate interest from the established traditional Gujarati folk forms, despite their popularity at Navratri amongst the teenagers (David 2007). Bollywood appears to offer numerous attractions—a breaking away from Hindu cultural taboos on the expressivity of the female body, the provision of a “cool” image with its hip-hop music and fashions, the lack of formal training and discipline needed to learn the form, and the possibility that anyone can copy the dance moves from videos/DVDs and create their own choreography. It too reveals a tension between the valuing of traditional community participation and a more western individualistic ethos. Comments from some of the young people learning classical dance in Leicester included fifteen-year old Rekha who said, “My favorite style is filmi because it is one dance style within which you can incorporate many others.” For Beena, aged twelve, who

enjoyed Bollywood dance most out of all the styles that she learned, “it is exciting and you can do any moves you like.” Others spoke of loving the film music, songs, and the beat. For these young students, Bollywood offers a global, expressive, fun, glamorous, modern, and cosmopolitan image that contrasts starkly with their local, traditional, perhaps more mundane existences in a working-class environment. One seventeen-year old Bollywood dancer at the Leicester Mela was determined that her dancing would give her entry into the Bollywood dance film world—“a fairytale good luck story that thousands of British Asians dream of” (*The Times*, February 7, 2004: 3) but which few have managed to achieve. Echoes of these stage and film ambitions can be seen in the dominant host culture in highly successful television programs such as *Strictly Dance Fever*, *Pop Idol*, and *Fame Academy* and the program *Bollywood Star* for young British Asians, where young amateur performers are selected out of thousands of applicants to compete in a chance to win fame and fortune in the performing arts world.¹⁶

Traditional opinions maintained by the older generations and by the more religious devotees in both groups of Gujarati and Tamil Hindus are discouraging of overtly sensual dance epitomized by Bollywood films. This view is also maintained by many of the classical dance teachers in Leicester and London. Yet it remains a multi-layered picture, as judgments regarding the type and quality of dance are manifold, with many differences of opinion as to what type of dance can be categorized as “filmi” and what constitutes a classical form. Young Tamil girls in London learning Bharatnatyam admitted to me (in quiet voices so their teacher could not hear), that they loved Bollywood dance and practiced it at home and at school whenever they could. All the Tamil Bharatnatyam teachers interviewed, however, had no time for film dance and were not interested in discussing it at all. Perhaps it is the equivalent of asking certain traditional classical ballet teachers whether they are interested in disco dance.

As we have seen, a group’s cultural, ethnic, and religious identity may be articulated through dance, acting as a symbol of both continuity and change, and its presence in the diasporic setting can be a powerful marker of the group’s distinctiveness and presence. The expressive South Asian cultural forms rely heavily on dance, drama, and music for their enactment both in a secular and in a religious milieu, and the performing of religion and entertainment has spawned a multitude of embodied styles and disciplines. The dancing body stems directly from

a religious discourse, and the concepts of that heritage still remain. Dance and related movement styles form an essential part in the production or performance of faith within Hindu worship—practices that are perhaps accentuated in a diasporic setting where certain cultural patterns that may be at variance with the dominant host community have to be consciously transmitted. Performing faith is a way of actualizing one's faith, of making it a reality in an embodied form.



Notes

*Research and fieldwork in Leicester and London was carried out with the support of a three-year grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). The author would also like to thank colleagues at the "Dance Matters" Conference in Kolkata in August 2006 for their comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

1. Originally from the state of Gujarat in north-west India.
2. Fieldwork was initially undertaken in 2001–3 as part of an AHRC-funded doctoral study and continues now as part of a international and comparative research project on transnational religion funded by the Ford Foundation through the Social Science Research Council, USA, entitled "The Religious Lives of Migrants and Ethnic Minorities: a Transnational Perspective—London, Kuala Lumpur, Johannesburg."
3. I am aware of Phillip Zarrilli's dissatisfaction with this terminology, critiquing it for its sense of culture as a fixed essence rather than "the fluid process of creating meaning characteristic of any act of performance" (1998: 255). He prefers to use the term "mode of cultural praxis" (*ibid.*: 254).
4. An example of this is found at the Shree Ghanapathy temple in Wimbledon where the son and one daughter of the founder of the temple now assist their mother in the financial, organizational, and cultural running of the temple. Geetha, in her thirties, arranges the children's classes in Tamil, Hinduism, Bharatnatyam, and classical music, and she is concerned that they have a good "spiritual" education at the temple. The classes were started originally when devotees at the temple asked for them and are mainly offered for children four–fifteen years old. The older teenagers are encouraged to help with the classes.
5. Ram admits to experiencing the "magical assuaging of immigrant anxieties" despite all her intellectual training when she watched her seven-year-old daughter performing Bharatnatyam in full costume on stage in Australia (2000: 265). This is stressed too by Stuart Blackburn when he writes that "the performative presence is sometimes so visually

and aurally powerful that it appears to silence our critical faculties” (1998: 4).

6. *Talam* are the metal cymbals played to beat the foot rhythms in a Bharatnatyam performance by the *nattuvanar*, who also speaks the rhythmic syllables.
7. Vaishnavites—devotees of God Vishnu and the largest part numerically of mainstream Hinduism, which is divided up into several sects. “Vaishnavism is characterised by *upasana* (ritual worship) . . . Vaishnavas subscribe to *ahimsa* (non-violence), vegetarianism, selfless and active altruism. Vaishnavism has brought forth an extremely rich literature both in Sanskrit and Indian vernaculars as well as artistic productions (music, dance, sculpture, architecture)” (Klostermaier 1998: 196).
8. The term “ethnic cleansing,” a literal translation of the Serbo-Croat *etničko ciscenje* (Bolaffi et al. 2003: 90), came into use during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the 1980s and 1990s. “The term was initially used by journalists and politicians who later applied it to other crisis situations, but it has also been adopted as part of the official vocabulary of UN Security Council documents and by other UN institutions and governmental and non-governmental international organizations” (Petrovic 1994: 1). The later genocide in Rwanda in 1994 and the crisis in Sudan (2004) have also been described as “ethnic cleansing,” and of course, the concept was not unknown in the Second World War.
9. See program notes for the production of Verma’s *Journey to the West* (2002).
10. The term “double consciousness” is taken from Paul Gilroy’s writings on the black American diaspora, *The Black Atlantic* (1993). It was developed originally with regard to race relations by the intellectual black activist William E. B. DuBois.
11. Jeyasingh views her work as a product of global culture. Her dance piece *Making of Maps* (1992) redrew world boundaries, charting an artistic territory where east and west were no longer separate cultures.
12. See also Homi Bhabha where he speaks of the space between the boundaries of languages and communities and of creatively “crossing over” that space. He describes it as “moving in-between cultural traditions” (2000: 140–41).
13. For more on “Asian Kool,” see Sharma et al. (1996).
14. See Owe Ronström’s dance and music ethnographic work carried out on the Yugoslav community in Stockholm (Ronström 1999) and M.A. ethnographic research carried out by this author on Tatry, a Polish dance group based in west London, March 1999 (David 1999).
15. The Academy of Indian Dance, set up in 1979 “to encourage excellence in the practice of South Asian dance in Britain” (www.akademi.co.uk).
16. *Pop Idol* ran on ITV for two series in 2002 and 2003 and was a highly successful blend of traditional talent show and reality TV. Its format

has been launched in over a dozen nations worldwide. Fifty contestants were selected from 10,000 applications. *Fame Academy* ran on the BBC between 2003 and 2005, with two major and two specialist series. It too drew thousands of applicants from all over the UK. These two shows focused on pop singing and song writing. *Strictly Dance Fever* was shown in 2005 and was a competitive dance series for couples in popular styles.

References

- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. 1998. *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*. London: Routledge.
- Back, Les. 1996. *New Ethnicities and Urban Culture: Racisms and Multiculture in Young Lives*. London: UCL Press.
- Ballard, Roger. 1982. "South Asian Families." In R. N. Rapoport, M. P. Fogarty, and M. Rapoport, eds, *Families in Britain*, pp. 179–204. London: Routledge.
- . 1997. "The Construction of a Conceptual Vision 'Ethnic Groups' and the 1991 UK Census." *Ethnic & Racial Studies* 20 (1): 182–94.
- Barot, Rohit. 1991. "Migration, Change and Indian Religions in Britain." In W. A. R. Shadid and P. S. V. Koningsveld, eds, *The Integration of Islam and Hinduism in Western Europe*, pp. 188–200. Kampen, Holland: Khok Pharos Publishing House.
- Barth, Fredrik, ed. 1969. *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*. Illinois: Waveland Press.
- Bhabha, H. 2000. "The Vernacular Cosmopolitan." In Ferdinand Dennis and Naseem Khan, eds, *Voices of the Crossing*, pp. 133–42. London: Serpent's Tail.
- Blackburn, Stuart H. 1998. "Looking Across the Contextual Divide: Studying Performance in South India." *South Asia Research* 18 (1): 1–11.
- Bolaffi, Guido, Raffaele Bracalenti, Peter Braham, and Sandro Gindro, eds. 2003. *Dictionary of Race, Ethnicity and Culture*. London: Sage.
- Chakravorty, Pallabi. 2004. "Dance, Pleasure and Indian Women as Multisensorial Subjects." *Visual Anthropology* 17 (1): 1–17.
- Cunningham, Jean. 1998. "Parent and Student Perceptions of the Classical Dance of India in Vancouver, British Columbia." In David Waterhouse, ed., *Dance of India*, pp. 283–91. Mumbai: Popular Prakashan.
- Dale, Angela and Clare Holdsworth. 1997. "Issues in the Analysis of Ethnicity in the 1991 British Census: Evidence from Microdata." *Ethnic & Racial Studies* 20 (1): 161–81.
- David, Ann R. 1999. "'Tatry' (Traditional Polish Folk Song and Dance Group): Contemporary Issues Revealed through Dance Practices." M.A. thesis, University of Surrey.

- David, Ann R. 2007. "Beyond the Silver Screen: Bollywood and Filmi Dance in the UK." *South Asia Research* 27 (1): 5–24.
- Dudrah, Rajinder K. 2002. "British Bhangra Music and the Battle of Britpop: South Asian Cultural Identity and Cultural Politics in Urban Britain." *Migration* 39 (40/41): 173–93.
- Dwyer, Rachel (1994). "Caste, Religion and Sect in Gujarat." In Roger Ballard, ed., *Desh Pardesh—The South Asian Presence in Britain*, pp. 165–90. London: C. Hurst and Co.
- Eade, John. 1997. "Identity, Nation and Religion: Educated Young Bangladeshi Muslims in London's East End." In John Eade, ed., *Living the Global City: Globalization as a Local Process*, pp. 146–62. London and New York: Routledge.
- Finnegan, Ruth. 1989. *The Hidden Musicians: Music-making in an English Town*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gaston, Anne-Marie. 1996. *Bharata Natyam—From Temple to Theatre*. New Delhi: Manohar.
- Gheerawo, Vena [Ramphal]. 1997. "South Asian Dance: The British Experience? Holism and Individualism." In Alessandra Lopez y Royo, ed., *South Asian Dance: The British Experience*, pp. 51–53. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers.
- Gilroy, Paul. 1993. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. London and New York: Verso.
- Guibernau, Montserrat and John Rex, eds. 1997. *The Ethnicity Reader: Nationalism, Multiculturalism and Migration*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hyder, Rehan. 2004. *Brimful of Asia: Negotiating Ethnicity on the UK Music Scene*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Jackson, Robert. 1981. "The Shree Krishna Temple and the Gujarati Hindu Community in Coventry." In D. Bowen, ed., *Hinduism in England*, pp. 61–83. York: Bradford College.
- Jackson, Robert and Eleanor Nesbitt. 1993. *Hindu Children in Britain*. Staffs, UK: Trentham Books Ltd.
- Jeyasingh, Shobana. 1998. "Imaginary Homelands: Creating a New Dance Language." In Alexandra Carter, ed., *The Routledge Dance Studies Reader*, pp. 46–52. London: Routledge.
- Katrak, Ketu H. 2001. "Body Boundarylands: Locating South Asian Ethnicity in Performance and in Daily Life." *Amerasia* 27 (1): 2–33.
- . 2004. "'Cultural Translation' of Bharata Natyam into 'Contemporary Indian Dance: Second-Generation South Asian Americans and Cultural Politics in Diasporic Locations.'" *South Asian Popular Culture* 2 (2): 79–102.
- Khan, Naseem. 2004. "Garbas, Dandias and Bhangras." In S. Bhuchar and K. Landon-Smith, eds, *Strictly Dandia*, not paginated. London: Methuen.
- Klostermaier, K. K. 1998. *A Concise Encyclopedia of Hinduism*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications.

- Lyon, Wenonah. 1997. "Defining Ethnicity: Another Way of Being British." In Tariq Modood and Pnina Werbner, eds, *The Politics of Multiculturalism in the New Europe: Racism, Identity and Community*, pp. 186–205. London and New York: Zed Books.
- Mattausch, John. 2000. "A Case of Mistaken Identity: Why British 'African Asians' are not an 'Ethnic' Community." *South Asia Research* 20 (2): 171–81.
- Meduri, Avanthi. 1996. "Nation, Woman, Representation: The Sutured History of the Devadasi and her Dance." Ph.D. diss., New York University.
- Nasta, Susheila. 2002. *Home Truths—Fictions of the South Asian Diaspora in Britain*. Hampshire, UK: Palgrave.
- Nodwell, Evelyn. 1996. "Taking Indian Dance Seriously: Vancouver's 'Ethnic' Dance Scene Through the Eyes of Its Indian Community." *Bansuri* 13: 19–30.
- O'Shea, Janet. 2003. "At Home in the World? The Bharatanatyam Dancer As a Transnational Interpreter." *The Drama Review* 47 (1): 176–86.
- Petrovic, Drzen. 1994. "Ethnic Cleansing—An Attempt at Methodology." *European Journal of International Law* 5 (3): 1–19.
- Ram, Kalpana. 2000. "Dancing the Past into Life: The Rasa, Nr̥tta and Raga of Immigrant Existence." *Australian Journal of Anthropology* 11 (3): 261–73.
- Ramphal, Vena. 2002. "Roots/Routes." *Dance Theatre Journal* 18 (2): 16–19.
- Ronström, Owe. 1999. "It Takes Two—or More—to Tango: Researching Traditional Music/Dance Relations." In Theresa J. Buckland, ed., *Dance in the Field: Theory, Methods and Issues in Dance Ethnography*, pp. 134–44. Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan.
- Roy, Sanjoy. 1997. "Dirt, Noise, Traffic: Contemporary Indian Dance in the Western City." In H. Thomas, ed., *Dance in the City*, pp. 68–85. London: Macmillan.
- Rushdie, Salman. 1992. *Imaginary Homelands*. London: Granta Books.
- Saldanha, Arun. 2002. "Music, Space, Identity: Geographies of Youth Culture in Bangalore." *Cultural Studies* 16 (3): 337–50.
- Sharma, Sanjay, John Hutnyk, and Ashwani Sharma, eds. 1996. *Dis-Orienting Rhythms: The Politics of New Asian Dance Music*. London: Zed Books Ltd.
- Singer, Milton. 1972. *When a Great Tradition Modernizes—An Anthropological Approach to Indian Civilization*. London: Pall Mall Press.
- Srinivasan, Amrit. 1983. "The Hindu Temple-Dancer: Prostitute or Nun?" *Cambridge Anthropology* 8 (1): 73–99.
- . 1985. "Reform and Revival: The Devadasi and Her Dance." *Economic and Political Weekly* 20 (44): 1869–76.
- Syal, Meera. 2003. Interview by Sue Lawley on *Desert Island Discs*, BBC Radio, May 4.
- Verma, Jatinda. 2001. "The Challenge of Bilingual: Analysing Multi-cultural Productions." Available at <http://www.uktw.co.uk/articles/article3.html> (July 2004).
- . 2002. Program notes for *Journey to the West*.

- Williams, Raymond B. 1984. *A New Face of Hinduism: The Swaminarayan Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Zarrilli, Phillip B. 1998. *When the Body Becomes all Eyes: Paradigms, Discourses and Practices of Power in Kalarippayattu, A South Indian Martial Art*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Local/Global Histories of Bharatnatyam

PAYAL AHUJA

My initial foray into the art form of Bharatnatyam was at the tender age of three. For a child of that age, dance is not perceived as an art form or a vehicle to spiritual realization; neither is it a means to attain aesthetic bliss. As a matter of fact I don't think it "meant" anything at all to me; it was only about accurately mimicking my teacher's gestures and movements. When other children my age spent their evenings with slides and swings in parks, I spent them with *adavus* and *jatis* in my dance class. Dance was the only thing I knew, and dance was the only thing I did. My initiation into the field of professional dancing was when I set foot in the indisputable home of classical Indian dance in India: Nalanda Nrtyakala Mahavidyalaya. It was at Nalanda (as it is popularly called) that I was first introduced to the theoretical as well as practical aspects of the art form. However, I belong to a world that has become a phenomenon of globalization and global networking, a world where horizons keep stretching a little further and boundaries collapse. I was fortunate that my intuitive quest to broaden my horizons with respect to this art form was supported by the technological phenomenon of our age: the internet. Thanks to the World Wide Web, I secured a place in the M.A. South Asian Dance Studies program offered by Roehampton University, London, and soon found myself moving from the commercial capital of India, Mumbai, to the cultural capital of the world, London. My education at Roehampton opened up new vistas for me in the field of dance studies. I was intellectually stimulated and challenged when, for the first time, I was introduced to theoretical frameworks that focused on the research, history, theory, and practice of the form. The history of Bharatnatyam was examined from the framework of global modernities and transnationalism.

Having had the privilege and opportunity to study dance history in both India and the UK, I am empowered to describe the similarities and differences in the two pedagogical approaches to Bharatnatyam. I will therefore adopt a local/global perspective and discuss questions revolving around the history and historiography of the art form.

A strong academic approach to dance at the university level and recognition of dance as a full-fledged discipline for scientific research are the two pioneering achievements of Nalanda, which have justifiably earned it a premier position. The practical side of teaching is still done in the traditional *guru-shishya parampara* or master-disciple tradition. All the same, the university curriculum has added innovative theoretical dimensions to the traditional practical training. The students are systematically taught the *shastric* sanction and basis of extant dance practice. This information is of utmost importance if the dance is to be appropriately comprehended and maintained but is absent from today's traditional methodology of training. Students at Nalanda study the history of Bharatnatyam from a cultural perspective, where the development of the form is understood by beginning with the Indus Valley civilization. This perspective views the dance's history as an unchanging cultural stream bearing the treasures of a mythic past. Knowledge of ancient aesthetic theories with a strong foundation in Sanskrit, including a detailed study of the magisterial treatise known as the *Natyasastra*, is also imparted. The antiquity of this text, the unexpected expanse of subject matter that it considered relevant to performance, as well as its detail of classification and categorization are all examined in great detail. There is yet another medieval text, Nandikesvara's *Abhinaya Darpana*, that the students follow to learn the basic classificatory vocabulary of dance. As Mandakranta Bose suggests:

The ancestry of every classical style seen today can be traced back to the post-Bharata range of dance styles that are recorded in texts written centuries after the *Natyasastra*. The reason why the *Natyasastra* is as routinely invoked as the ultimate authority is that it constructed a research methodology that became the standard for speaking for dance.

(1998: 252)

The study of the *Natyasastra* thus becomes an important source for tracing the cultural history of Bharatnatyam, as this text assigns the dance a particular history by locating its origin in a mythical event and validating it as a ritual worship. This cultural historiography thus

sketches a 5,000-year-old unbroken tradition, its connection to the temples and to the male teachers, its apparent death in the nineteenth century owing to the advent of British colonialism and its consequent revival in the twentieth century by Indian nationalists. As such, it inscribes the dance's history within the geographical space of the Indian subcontinent.

Having said that, the academic training at Nalanda is not insular. Though the focus is on Indian dance forms and their respective historiography, the history of western theatrical art forms like western ballet is also studied. Students become familiar with the tenets of the *Natyasastra* and ancient history of Mohenjodaro, on the one hand, and study the history of classical ballet beginning from the Renaissance period in Italy, on the other. Additionally, the historiography of South East Asian art forms is also carefully examined.

As a result, at the end of the five-year degree program a student has adequate knowledge of Sanskrit texts like the *Natyasastra* and *Abhinaya Darpana*; the epics, the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*; tenets of South and South East Asian art forms from Bali, Java, Sumatra, Indonesia, or Sri Lanka and the different versions of the epics prevalent in these places; along with the history of classical ballet, the Romantic period, and the contributions of Balanchine, Graham and Cunningham.

Alternately, at the post-graduate level students take comparative theory papers on aesthetics, choreography, and world theatrical traditions. The program at Nalanda, in other words, is international from an Indian point of view.

At Roehampton, however, there is no practical training of the dance because it is conceptualized as a vocational training program, and the focus is instead on research, history, theory, and practice. However, the difference in this international program of study is that the history of Bharatnatyam is not studied from a cultural or civilization-based perspective. An attempt is made to shift mainstream understandings of South Asian dance as a "local" or "national" form that developed autonomously from the global history of Euro-American dance to a framework of global modernities and transnationalism. The focus at Roehampton is primarily on the modern history of Bharatnatyam, beginning with the nineteenth century. We understand its developing history in relation to broader intellectual and artistic movements of western interculturalism, modernism, postmodernism, diaspora formation, globalization, and contemporary dance. This comparative framework juxtaposes Bharatnatyam with ballet and raises intercultural questions. For example, the intercultural travels of Ruth St. Denis

and Anna Pavlova and their contribution to the revival of Indian dance have often been discussed. However, through this program we also attempted to examine how Rukmini Devi Arundale, one of the pioneers in the Indian dance revival, articulated an alternative “classicism” for Bharatnatyam by drawing from the principles of ballet. We thus moved beyond the west–east intercultural paradigm in order to grapple with larger questions of global modernities and looked at dance as a socio-historical practice in which global modernity was reconfigured as an indigenous practice. By rearticulating the intercultural question by shifting the center, we were able to reverse the Eurocentric perspective and understand the phenomenon of Asian modernism for the first time. We were therefore able to understand globalization as a multi-accented term realized differently in different historical locations.

Another distinguishing feature of the M.A. South Asian dance program at Roehampton is its interdisciplinary approach. It includes a wide range of important elements from drama, ritual, and story-telling within its performance arena; these elements are used as structural or thematic devices. We were also introduced to a number of research methodologies, such as practice-based choreological, dramaturgical, or performance research that explores the intersection between dance, drama, theater, and performance. In relation to this, we were given the option of taking up a module called “Practice as Research,” wherein knowledge is accrued through the moving body and through the process of dance-making. The body becomes generative and informs the research work, and application of theory to practice becomes essential. However, initially I was not too keen on pursuing this module on practice-based research, since it was an entirely alien concept for me as a student from India. Besides, this was the first year of the M.A., which meant that I would probably face logistical problems in pursuing a module of this kind. In addition, I planned to return back to India after the completion of the course, which led to the obvious question of how this practice-based module would benefit me when it is not widely practiced or known in India.

It was later, during our intensive sessions within the classroom and while reading Dr Avanthi Meduri’s performative writing work entitled “What is in a name? History as performance/performance as history,” where the imperative to translate or embody theory into practice became stronger. This led to a collaboration between Shalini Bhalla, another student of the M.A. program, and myself. We started exploring conceptual images in order to produce thoughts and theoretical concepts through choreography. The brainstorming sessions in the

classroom, coupled with valuable input from our program convener, Dr Avanthi Meduri, led to the creation of a piece titled *Asmakam—The Quest*. Drawing on Arjun Appadurai's (1991) concept of global ethnoscapas and various theories of the diaspora, this piece was a search to find harmony between the conflicting Indian and British cultural norms that the diaspora faces in a world of travel and global networking. Using dance movements from Bharatnatyam, western contemporary dance, and Bollywood, as well as the spoken word, we started our story by depicting women in the Indian cultural arena and subsequently in western culture. When these two worlds meet, they experience conflict and tension, which, when resolved and negotiated, ends in harmony and celebration between the two cultures.

An absence of any kind of infrastructural support led to the creation of our dance company, through which we produced a show of this work that was completely sold out to a very appreciative audience. This company now functions both in London and Mumbai. Through the M.A. South Asian Dance Studies program, we were not only able to gain a cross-cultural understanding of dance as an interdisciplinary discursive entity but also to interlink theory and practice, allowing our dance knowledge to benefit from embodied experience as well as a strong theoretical foundation.

As someone who has now been exposed to both approaches, that of dance studies in India and the UK, I find myself a little confused, as I seem to be caught between at least two different histories of the dance, one international and the other local. In this essay, I want to urge us to combine the two perspectives by putting them in conversation with each other.

In my opinion, the cultural history that we study at Nalanda is as important as the modern history that we are exposed to at Roehampton. But how are we to juxtapose the two perspectives when we in India do not have access to knowledge sources such as western publications? Do conferences like "Dance Matters" help create new networks that will reterritorialize international dance studies in the local milieu and enable us all to speak about questions pertaining to modernity and postmodernity in dance from different geographical locations? In fact, the question is: where do we begin the process of making the local into global? To quote Arjun Appadurai:

Although the emergent cosmopolitanisms of the world have complex local histories, and their translocal dialogue has a complex history as well, it seems advisable to treat the present as a historical moment and use our

understanding of it to illuminate and guide the formulation of historical problems. Especially in regard to the many alternative cosmopolitanisms that characterize the world today, and the complex transnational cultural flows that link them, there is no easy way to “begin at the beginning.”

(1991: 356)



References

- Albright, Ann Cooper. 2003. “Channelling the Other: An Embodied Approach to Teaching across Cultures.” *Research in Dance Education* 4 (2): 177–82.
- Appadurai, Arjun. 1991. “Global Ethnoscapes: Notes and Queries for a Transnational Anthropology.” In Richard Fox, ed., *Recapturing Anthropology Working in the Present*, pp. 191–210. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.
- Bose, Mandakranta. 1998. “Gender And Performance: Classical Indian Dancing.” In Goodman Lizbeth, ed., *The Routledge Reader in Gender and Performance*, pp. 251–55. London and New York: Routledge.
- David, Ann. 2003. “Where Have All the Courses Gone?” *Pulse*, winter/autumn 4 (1): 6–9.
- Grau, Andree. 1997. “Dance, South Asian Dance and Higher Education.” *Choreography and Dance* 4 (2): 55–62.
- Meduri, Avanthi. 2004. “Bharata Natyam as a Global Dance: Some Issues in Research, Teaching and Practice.” *Dance Research Journal* 36 (2): 11–28.
- Meduri, Avanthi and Jeffrey Spear. 2004. “Knowing the Dancer: East meets West.” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 32 (2): 435–48.

III

Aesthetics Embodied and Embedded

It Matters For Whom You Dance: Audience Participation in *Rasa* Theory*

UTTARA ASHA COORLAWALA

Rasa theory since ancient times has consistently noted an inter-influencing relationship between performance and audiences. As dance discourse addresses subtler processes of embodied knowing, Indian theories of perception and the reception of performance become more accessible. From this vantage point, it is astonishing to note the extent to which Abhinavagupta's list of "obstacles" to *rasa* can be read in the conventions and structures of current traditional Indian classical forms. His profound but practical observations of the ways that performance can shape the audience's experience presaged postmodern concerns with the spectators' participation, complicating narratives with layered images and multiple perspectives.¹

Before moving in on the obstacles, this essay locates the writer's relationship to practice and summarizes current terms derived from *rasa* theory with examples from actual performances and an often-told legend.

The reign of Emperor Akbar, the Mughal ruler, is celebrated in tales and performances as a period when Hindus and Muslims went beyond respect and tolerance to explore the arts, concepts, and lifestyles of each other. In this story, Akbar's court was graced by the musical genius of singer Tansen, whose renditions of *raga* were so accurate on the subtle realms of sound that they could induce rain or fire. One day Tansen sang a song, composed by the blind seer and poet Surdas, that deeply touched Akbar's heart. Emperor Akbar summoned Surdas to the royal court, but his messengers dallied in Surdas's presence. Eventually, they returned transformed but without the singing sage.

Noticing their state, Akbar decided to visit Surdas in his forest hermitage. After returning to his court in Agra, Akbar began to needle Tansen: “O Tansen, I always thought you were the most amazing and wonderful singer alive, but now I have heard Surdas. Tell me, how is it that the impact of his singing is exceedingly more profound than yours?” Tansen replied, “O Jahanpanah, undoubtedly Tansen sings for the Greatest Emperor on Earth, but Surdas—he sings for God.” The implication could not be stated more effectively that a performer is only as great as her/his audience.² Despite its tit-for-tat humor, this legend propels us straight to the core of the interactive aspect of the aesthetic theory of *rasa* that has resonated on a personal level for me. This legend illuminates my own experience as a performer in India in the 1970s, when television, internationally convertible currency, and globalism had not yet inflected the lives of most urban persons. Performing the same solo concert in major Indian cities and for not-so-metropolitan audiences taught me that performance is an ongoing dialogue between performer and audience.

Audience members cast votes on the performance by the ways in which they attended to it—drawing closer, becoming restive, still, or discussing the dance even as it was occurring! Some audiences gave love and support; others drained energy into a consuming black hole. Some bore witness to an inner journey, adding their intensity and experience into the mix of my body memories. Others withdrew in resistance. Then, in the early 1980s, came the great excitement and joy of performing on three separate occasions for the *rasika* (ideal spectator) of my innermost desires, my spiritual guru Swami Muktananda Paramahansa or Baba.³ These experiences intensified and clarified my consequent awareness of audiences and of dancing. Then, seeking to further understand the nature of the dialogue between performer and audience, I found it exemplified in live performances, in stories about performers and most profoundly, in the theoretical expositions of *bhava* and the ways that dances can be deliberately structured to ensure that viewers remain active and alert. Understanding and conceiving of *rasa* became an intertextual game of reading written and performed texts. This is not to suggest that Indian theater and dance have not changed since the 1970s or that there have been no diasporic or intercultural dialogues. However, this essay aims to show embedded structures that might at first glance be taken as exemplary of global influence.

The Ideal Spectator or Rasika

The performer–audience relationship has historically been considered crucial in determining the quality of performances. If a performance is to be successful, there must be *rasa*. But it is not the performer's responsibility to evoke *rasa*. The performer's role is to represent the prescribed emotional moods or *bhava* with sustained clear focus. *Sattva*, or the luminous communicative energy ("presence" serves as a partial synonym) that results from the performer's bodily activities and mental focus becomes flavored, as it were, with the appropriate emotion or *bhava*. The sympathetic (*sa-hridaya*) but critically discerning viewer (*rasika*) apprehends the emotions within a performative context, not as a cathartic experience but as a state, *rasa* (Bharata 1956–67, vol. 27: 49–58). *Rasa* literally translates to that which is tasted, relished. *Rasa* is a reflective experience of actively tasting rather than of devouring or being devoured by emotions. *Rasa* involves seeing with an inner eye, hearing resonances, and touching inner spaces.⁴ Until the poem is read, it has no existence. Unless the spatial aesthetic and symbolic characteristics of a sculpture are apprehended, it is no more than inert stone. An image of a deity in the temple, a *moorti*, remains just another icon until the worshipper is transformed in its presence. Without at least one viewer to taste (even when that viewer is The Unseen Witness), there cannot be a performance.

This leisurely inner savoring of a performance, poem, or artwork is not only a mental practice assiduously cultivated by those educated in traditional Indian arts and literary forms. The intensity of this experience of *rasa* is the measure by which success is evaluated. *Rasa* may involve a spontaneous experience of insight (*pratyaksha*). Very often, a performer of Indian dance will attribute a spontaneous flash of creative improvisation to the presence of *rasika*(s). Accomplished and master performers build audience dialogue into their presentations:

After performing a few items Birju Maharaj said he was very uncomfortable and requested that the overhead nontheatrical lighting be turned on, so that he could see the faces of the audience. He spoke in English (which he rarely speaks) for his invited guests who were unfamiliar with *Kathak*. Once the lights were turned on, he appeared to be more at ease, structuring his presentation according to the responses of the audience and playing off their moods. At the end of the performance, when he was being showered with applause, he said in wonder that it was the heart of the audience that

had inspired him, that he had found himself performing with insights and subtleties that surprised him; he did not know from where they came, but that it had to do with “the heart of the audience.” He said that the *rasa* of this performance would surely remain with him for a week. (Coorlawala 1991: 36)

And the reverse unfortunately holds true too. At one of Balasaraswati’s appearances at the Jacob’s Pillow theater, she is said to have cut short her performance. When asked about this, she is said to have felt that the audience had been insensitive to her art. However, she declared that she would not be averse to performing for the students and faculty that same evening after the paying public went home. Apparently she did just that and held them enthralled. So goes this story told by Ted Shawn in one of his “curtain speeches” to educate American dancegoers as to the performer–audience conventions of other cultures.⁵

In Mumbai, I was attending a concert featuring the well-known singer Bhimsen Joshi. Beside me a gentleman slouched back in his chair, his eyes half-closed. About forty-five minutes into the performance he suddenly sat up alert and beaming. Noting my interest in his changed demeanor, he bubbled over, “Now—now he has warmed up! Now [music] begins.” How I had misperceived this person! Now clearly his patience, stamina, generosity, and discerning expectations all signaled “*rasika*!”

Rasa Theory

In order for the reader to better follow how *rasa* theory informs the performer–audience relationship, I need to make a brief digression to summarize how *rasa* is currently generated in performances of Indian dance that may be new but are in accordance with historic prescriptions. The concept of *rasa* has generated written texts of philosophical inquiry, which involve dialogue between various scholars (Bharata, Bhatta Lollatta, Shri Shankuka, Bhatta Naayaka, Abhinavagupta) on the nature of perception and how a work of art (poetry, dance, or theater) accomplishes its affect.⁶ There are also practical manuals (*shastra*) of summarized instructions that were and still are being invoked as evidence of the early existence of multiple lineages of dance (examples include the *Natyasastra*, *Abhinayadarpana*, *Kama Sutra*, *Sangitaratnakara*, *Vishnudharmottara*, etc.).⁷ In addition, there are numerous references to dance and *rasa* in various regional

languages and in the Indian arts, from poetry and drama to sculpture and music.⁸

In current practice, lineages of concepts of dance appear and reappear side by side and layered over each other as a palimpsest of performative knowledges. Performers were known to circulate throughout the subcontinent as patronage shifted with the political fortunes of local rulers. Whereas scholars agree that praxis (here, organized notions of training, vocabulary, syntax, form, etc.) preceded the writing of these historic manuals, today performers often assume the reverse, that is, that practice followed the writings. This assumption more accurately reflects our present relationships with these movement texts as well as recent processes of recovering and reconstructing Indian dances as classical forms. In this time of global diasporic movement, it is hard to hold on to the slippery meta-narrative spanning two millennia of geo-culturally specific performance practice. Accumulating traces from previous models of *rasa* in performance, philosophic inquiry and imaginative play continuously layer and transform meanings with each act of interpretation and each performance.

The following description summarizes performative conventions generalized from both praxis and the principles listed in the *Natyasastra* and the discourse it generated.⁹ A poet, director, performer, or playwright will first determine a thematic or base mood (*sthyayibhava*) that will permeate the performance, choosing from the nine generic emotional states of delight (*rati*), laughter (*haasa*), sorrow (*shoka*), anger (*krodha*), heroism (*utsaha*), fear (*bhaya*), disgust (*jugupsa*), wonder (*vismaya*), and peace (*shanta*). Kathakali dance dramas excel in representations of heroism and martial accomplishments, whereas Bharatnatyam dancers might focus on the theme of delighting in love of the eternal (*bhakti-sringar*). Buddhist dance dramas are likely to choose peace (*shanta*) as their dominant bhava.

Then proceeds the task of developing complex, multi-layered narratives that digress, return, interconnect with and intensify the dominant mood or *sthyayi bhava*, as it is termed. Productions may involve several characters played by different performers or a solo performer of either gender who will play all the roles including that of narrator. Building narrative calls for imagination in developing differentiated and plausible situations to which the protagonists will respond, each according to his or her assigned nature. The causes (*karana*) of visible behaviors (*karya*) in daily life are aestheticized. In performance these are represented as motivating factors (*vibhava*)

recognized by the behaviors (*anubhava*) that they engender. A dancer's gestures may indicate heat emanating from her body. Then she might sigh as the back of her hand wipes off drops of perspiration. The indication of perspiration is recognized as *anubhava* and the heat as its *vibhava*. Whether her actions signal climatic heat, the heat of her passion, or both, will unfold. As she continues to wait for her Beloved, the dancer may transit through various *vyabhichara bhava* or transient emotions such as anxiety, joyful anticipation of his arrival, anger at the delay in his arrival, or fear lest he may have been harmed. Since all these passing emotions arise from her being in love, the thematic *bhava* (dominant emotional state) of this dance remains love (*sringara*). The *Natyasastra* lists thirty-three of these complementary states (*vyabhichari bhava*) that might be used to build one of eight durable states (*sthyayi bhava*). The *Natyasastra* also lists eight extreme emotional states called *satvika bhava*, which in real life would be inferred from involuntary symptoms such as perspiration, trembling, change of color, etc.

It has puzzled some readers that although characters are types and emotions are generic, the *Natyasastra* lists numerous synonyms for each category of emotional state.¹⁰ Performance is above all practical and calls for shades of interpretative activity, even when ascribed to characters hierarchically typed as "superior," "middling," and "inferior" in the *Natyasastra*. It is said that while each human being functions according to a mix of three *guna* or qualitative characteristics, the one that predominates endows his or her personality with its categorized characteristic. In god-like heroes, *sattva*, or luminous clarity, predominates. Villains (often more theatrically rewarding roles) are usually characterized as *rajasa* or passionately infatuated. Comic foils are often characterized as *tamasa* or lethargic and slow-witted. King Rama (God and *sattvika*) would show his anger in a much calmer way than, say, King Ravana (*rajasika*), the demon king who steals Rama's wife.¹¹

In solo dances, the lines of the accompanying song might be repeated several times, allowing the dancer space to improvise transitional states (Subramaniam 1998). A dancer may develop a dominant *bhava* by narrating several exploits of the addressed Beloved, collapsing different narratives, times, and places into one. Or, she will infer an entire episode by a mere gestural reference, assuming that her audience is familiar with the story, and that the association itself will trigger devotion. Kalanidhi Narayan, a leading exponent of the art of

abhinaya (performing narratives) in classical solo dance forms, believes that the convention of stringing episodes together (sometimes called monodrama) is a practical but unimaginative response to demands that erotic implications should be minimized or erased; she believes that focusing exclusively on the spiritual aspect of the dance restricts possibilities for excavating interior landscapes and for developing a rich and complex layering of resonances. Thus, each performer, each dance, and each play might orchestrate a pyramid of emotional states differently, creating a broad base of many passing emotions that accumulate as one (*sthyayi bhava*) generic emotional state. When these resonate for the viewer as a lingering aftertaste, then there is said to be *rasa*.

Abhinavagupta's "Obstacles"

In *Abhinavabharati*, Abhinavagupta's commentary on the Sixth Adhyaya (or chapter) of the *Natyasastra*, Abhinavagupta lists seven obstacles that will obstruct an audience's tendency to "rest in consciousness" rather than get empathetically swept away by emotions (Gnoli 1985). Abhinavagupta compares *rasa* to *ananda*, or the spiritual ecstasy of the yogi. But he argues that whereas the accomplished yogi (*siddha*) is able to achieve and maintain steady continuous objectless focus, the average person needs some object to contemplate that will call forth this ongoing stream of attentive energy; performance offers just this.¹² Emotions must be performed so that they compel engagement. At the same time, what is performed must be clearly unreal so that the viewer remains detached and does not identify his or herself with the protagonists, their circumstances or drift into a non-discriminating sentimental haze (Gnoli 1985: 64). According to Abhinavagupta, empathetic identification with the protagonists must be avoided at all costs if there is to be *rasa*. For this he lists various presentational conventions that he calls "obstacles" to identification.

First Abhinavagupta secures the hook. As the purpose of all performance is to teach and enlighten those who do not have direct access to the written literatures (Bharata 1956–67, vol. 1: 7–12), Abhinavagupta addresses the problem that the events, situations, supernormal feats being performed *need to be believable* or relate to the spectators' own experience in some profound way. He suggests that plots can be more plausible when they include familiar characters

of mythic status, characters who have inhabited the consciousness of the viewers extensively over time. In both the classical and vernacular performances of today, stories link with iconic figures such as Rama, Bhima, Radha, and Satyabhaama. Comparably, week after week on television, familiar cartoon characters such as the Simpsons and Tarzan invite us to contemplate moral dilemmas!

What prevents the spectator's consciousness from being seduced into fascination with his or her own desire or obsession with the live performers? Abhinavagupta suggests stylization of expression (*natyadharmi*) and spatial and linguistic (*bhasa*) conventions.¹³ Particularly in classical forms, fantastic costumes, makeup, and jewelry separate performers from individualized personalities and everyday life, endowing each role with a "typical" look that signals a socially constructed generic identity for each character that hides the specific identity of the actor. To further remove the possibility of identifying with or being repulsed by the characters, the time and places within the narrative need to be non-specific or non-existent on the daily level of material existence. Sets and realism cannot be part of this aesthetic. Locations are inferred by poetic text, descriptive gaits (such as going up and downhill, entering or leaving an abode), symbolic gestures (the temple of Tillai), and by conventional spatial zones (Bharata 1956–67, vol. 14).

What will overcome the spectator's personal history of emotions and associations and ensure attention to apprehending the subtleties of *rasa*? To divert the spectator from habitual predilections, Abhinavagupta suggests judicious use of visual pleasure, as in a beautiful performance site (*aharya*) or dances and songs (*sangita*). To sustain attention, he suggests alternating modalities of perception with verbal (*vachika*) and bodily conventions (*angika abhinaya*)—very much in the mode of performance art today.¹⁴ Even naturalistic representations (*lokadharmi*) and representations of local usages (*pravritti*) might be deployed here.

Abhinavagupta's arguments and suggestions so far might seem reminiscent of Brecht's concept of the Alienation Effect, advocating that the spectator be distanced from narrative to remain alert to issues of veracity and relevance.¹⁵ But the two systems differ vastly in practice and performance. This disparity lies in Abhinavagupta's recommendation that performance should direct the movement of the senses inwards towards reflection and subjective experience rather than towards external and discrete sense objects.¹⁶ This notion

is consistent with concepts of consciousness mapped out by Kashmir Shaivism and in Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* but would seem to contradict notions of theatrical engagement. What performative structures of text and body could sustain this? To ensure that reception engages the senses but via the mind, sensory information needs to be encoded, rerouted via social constructions, symbolic behaviors, and abstract dance.¹⁷ In abhinaya or expressive movement, literary metaphors of desire are embodied by the precise gestures of the hands, face, and eyes. For example, lovemaking might be shown through hand gestures enacting the metaphor of the vibrating (male) bee seeking honey or the female protagonist drinking the soma of ecstatic union. Stylization of body shape, finesse in movement, the performer's changing visual focus, and conventions of representing gender as a location rather than a bodily given in solo forms continually call upon the viewer to minutely observe and actively decode what is presented.¹⁸

Female or male performers will play the part of narrator, the leading female character (*nayika*) and the male or female persons that may be addressed or encountered. The performance of gender does not merely remove the necessity for seeing both sexes engage on stage, it also enables the performer to construct his or her bodily text in accordance with her or his own gaze and to stage both subject and object positions within the same person.

Abhinavagupta's prescription for theatrical representation presages the concerns of recent feminist performers. Sue Ellen Case writes, "The notion of the collective subject is the most radical concept in recent work on women in the subject position. Many feminists consider it the most forward looking construction in the feminist field" (1989). She goes on to describe how a transpersonal protagonist can mark a work with multiplicity rather than dichotomy. Case is more specific here than Abhinavagupta. For her, collective representation involves woman as a site of difference. In Indian dance performances, collective representation is hijacked to support patriarchal agendas at least as often as it subverts established hierarchies of caste and gender. In Koodiyattam and other classical forms, an exceptionally perceptive and adept master performer can orchestrate pathways of access to the viewer of alternating gazes.¹⁹ He can delve into sensual and sexual imagery and experience without resorting to an "in-your-face" kind of performance of female sexuality or "X" rated pornography. Yet it comes so close.

I attended the *Krishna Gana Sabha*, an annual festival in Chennai of specially curated presentations on different aspects of classical Indian dance. Held during the Christmas break, it is attended by dance lovers from all over India and from the global Indian diaspora. In 1995, the focus was on *Purush* or the male as dancer. Dr K. Ayappa Panikker, scholar, author of Malayalam books and editor of English anthologies on Koodiyattam, explained during his introduction to the performance how Koodiyattam was perhaps the sole surviving form of classical Sanskrit theater, and that it has been sustained by the continuity of socio-cultural traditions where Chakyar men perform the male form, and Nambiar (a subcaste) women perform its female counterpart, as Nambiar men accompany the dancer on percussive instruments. This tradition has historically been the exclusive preserve of the Chakyar and Nambiar caste and subcastes and continues to be so.

The passage performed that morning was a retelling of the fifth act of the *Ramayana*, where Ravana enters his garden after kidnapping Sita. Contemplating the exquisite beauty of Sita, Ravana recalls how Brahma was called upon to judge between the beauty of a strand of Sita's hair and a peacock feather. This becomes the frame launching Margi Madhu's performance, where he first takes on the roles of Brahma and the peacock and then goes on to re-envision, through Ravana's desiring but worshipful perspective, the exquisite beauty of Sita's entire anatomy—part by part, from her head down to her toes.

As a spectator, my first response was alarm at being invited to participate in the patriarchal and voyeuristic act of undressing Sita, but curiosity prevailed, and I stayed for one-and-a-half hours watching this scenario unfold through eye, face and hand gestures to the sound of three different percussive instruments.

In Koodiyattam, the performer's face is painted into a fantastic mask as in Kathakali, but unlike Kathakali, the performer simply sits on a chair and "narrates" with hand gestures and eye movements. We were invited to focus our attention on the performer's eyes, to observe how the eyelids would quiver in synchrony with the percussive rhythms of the accompanying orchestra. Actually, it was not only the lower lids of the eyes, but at different times the eyebrows and lips also "danced" in this rhythmic way.

In order to follow the narrative, I had to stay closely observant not only to the performed actions but also to the way they connected to make puns, metaphors and other poetic conceits. Occasionally I would lose the narrative and look over to my rasika friend, the dance critic

and Sanskrit scholar, Sunil Kothari. Sunil would oblige with a running commentary, just like a sports commentator on television, “translating” for me. Here at Chennai, instead of being disturbed by this, members of the audience around us would lean over to listen in and join in the commentary. I was very grateful for this, for surely I would have missed so many wonderful finer points of the performance but for their participation. Disturbing the performer’s delicate concentration was not an issue here, as in many traditional performance venues in rural India, where performers include the audience in their focus, acknowledge latecomers, and ignore the crying child. We were intent on accessing and appreciating Margi Madhu’s every nuance.

The peacock would appear from time to time on Brahma’s left as Margi Madhu would stand up and move to the left of the chair. Then to show Brahma’s response he would return to the chair. Each transition between the chair and the peacock’s spot was undertaken casually but precisely and unhurriedly, as he would unfold his foot off his thigh, stand up, adjust his costume, turn around, and move into place . . . each of these transitions allowed us all to relax our attention a bit so as to return and re-focus afresh. “Am I not more beautiful than the hair?” the peacock kept insisting. Initially, Brahma responded with consideration, “Indeed you are beautiful.” But as the peacock became insistent, Brahma became more and more absentminded in his responses, until finally he just pushed the peacock out of the door and bolted it tight. Then he returned to his seat to contemplate the exquisite hair.

When Margi Madhu performs Sita, he has a demure slightly downcast face, but at the same time the corners of his mouth turn up in a very slight smile. His Sita has an ineffable “I am beautiful” look. There is no doubt this is a beautiful princess! As Ravana, he contemplates Sita’s thick and beautiful hair, her eyebrows, her eyes . . . the snakelike hairline that rises from navel to chest and hides trembling under her full breasts . . . on and on, till the final moment of climax. Here his two hands, palms facing down, with the thumbs wiggling excitedly, move towards and onto one another to unite in the gesture of swimming fish. Its meaning is clear. Then he simply sits, showing contemplation for about five minutes continuously, and holds our attention throughout! The representation of this “thinking” stays alive by changing in minute gestures, as the eyeball, for example, moves very slowly around the upper circumference of the iris. His head drops ever so slightly, as if lost in a recollection, and then lifts. There is a mere indication of a headshake, a wondering nod, and so on.

To conclude, the actor returned from first person representation to his role as narrator and summed up the event with danced and formal gestures. It is at this point that I realize that we have been watching intently for nearly two hours, that despite the excessively erotic content, we are not titillated or angry, but realize that our ongoing focus is nestled in a gentle, quiet inner space—*rasa*. By appealing to the senses via the mind (Walimbe 1980), by calling for minute observation and continuous interpretation of signs, the performance eschewed titillation and sexual desire and instead offered an idealized, aestheticized, and dreamlike vision, demonstrating the effectiveness of Abhinavagupta's "obstacles" while also showing how they are embedded in Koodiyattam.

Subtle Dimensions of Performance— A Discourse of Emotions and Bodies

A discourse of emotions informs the reception of traditional Indian performance. Rather than perceiving emotions as passive, irrational, natural, universal, and female, they are culturally viewed as appraisals, as judgments of situations based on learned beliefs and values. Secular and theological discussions of the relationships between emotions, perception, body, and meaning form a major part of various historical commentaries on *rasa* theory, so that today there is already an entire discourse with key words that trigger specific networks of associations (these key words do not translate, much like the many names of Krishna; in different languages each carry their own specific and generic associations). For example, Krishna with Radha signals *bhakti* in a religious context and amorous dalliances in a secular context. Krishna with Arjuna, however, signals concepts of action without personal motives, war, and martial arts. This shared discourse of emotions enables communion between performer and audience. Malavika Sarukai, an exquisite performer of Bharatnatyam who resides in Chennai, is constantly extending her own research in the dance tradition that she performs internationally. Sarukkai feels that in her best performances, there is no time lag between transmission and reception but instead an astonishing simultaneity of images, emotions, and ideas. Sarukai recalled a performance that took place outdoors on a makeshift stage at a village festival where she had experienced *anukirtana*, a moment of communion between her metropolitan self and women in a rural Gujarat. It was Choolaband, she said, so on that day, no one cooked so that all could participate

in the celebration. She had selected what she would dance carefully, choosing the language and dialect of the text accompanying the dance because of its local genesis (selected from Tulsidas's *Ramayana*) so that it would resonate with this particular audience in Gujarat.

In *janatavam*, Kunti asks Yashoda, "What deed must you have done that He calls you mother?" When I was doing this piece, there was a moment when I was holding Krishna here (gestures to her lap); I looked at Krishna—isn't he beautiful? Then I looked towards the audience. They were nodding! Yes, nodding! We were seeing Krishna together!

It was as we say *anukirtana* (a re-creation, making anew). The moment with Krishna: it is a presence at *that point* of time. It is not always there, nor is it a presence for which you have rehearsed. It is *a kind of first time*...²⁰

Sarukkai went on to distinguish between this kind of audience and the secular audience of classical dance lovers in Chennai, where esoteric references and complex renderings are expected of a performer of her experience and stature. Sarukkai feels that the audience is so knowledgeable that "they *know* that here she is going to take off and do this little *sanchari* (elaboration), and they are waiting for it. . . . They *know how* you will structure it. There is an excitement in that too." Indeed, at the 2006 conference of Bharatnatyam in Chicago/Toronto, the dancer Priyadarshini Govind, counting on the knowledgeable audience's expectation of symmetrical repetition, withheld the repeat movement! Instead she waited as she watched her audience respond with surprise and delight at the playfulness of the moment.

Emotion and ideas are both said to be received in body-mindscape that accord with Ayurvedic and yogic theories of the body, which identify two to several systems (also called bodies) through which the individual navigates the world. Starting with mastery of the material body (*sthula sharira*), the dancer moves to the wider frame of mastery of the principles for structuring movement and developing dances and develops in more subtle abstracted and interior ways. The culminating attainment is the *turya* state of the supracausal or transcendent body (*turya* or *neelbindu*) of which there are various versions. (One of them, the witness or *atma*, is revisited towards the end of this essay.) In-between the material and the transcendent "bodies" is the subtle body (*sukshma sharira*), consisting of energy centers (*chakra*), subtle organs of perception, and mind (*manasa*), a center of reason, judgment, and emotions. Also, a range of sheaths function as intermediary systems involving both physiological and psychological functions.²¹

This physical–emotive–cognitive configuration of the senses seems to inform Sarukkai's own practice:

Dance is a yoga. At first, you practice and practice. Then your body intentions take over and move you in a particular way. These days, I internalize a lot more. Now I spend hours internalizing.

Revisiting Abhinavagupta's prescription that the physical and the erotic should be transmitted via mental processes bypassing the senses, one realizes that eroticism and spiritual ecstasy need not be mutually exclusive.²² Dance itself is discourse when it depends upon the presence of the *rasika* for its consummation (O'Shea 2000), when it involves cognizing movements, melodies, rhythm patterns, sculptural information, histories, mythic texts, images, syntax, and vocabularies. But what happens to *rasa* when there is no *rasika* to share the meanings of the symbolic gestures and to illuminate the finer points of performance? What happens when a highly stylized and subtle, performance of, say, Koodiyattam, is performed abroad? Or any Indian traditional dance for that matter? Vatsyayan, recalling Kathakali performances of Ramana Krishna Kutty in the Soviet Union, said:

We need to address what has been done by this overexposing of dance to uninitiated audiences. It is the presented surface body that we are looking at, not the experienced body. The attitude of "how I will be seen by you" makes for a completely different aesthetic experience than a concern with experience and communication. (quoted in Coorlawala 2000: 107)

How are traditionally trained artists to present this art abroad, where the criteria for excellence are different than their own? I recall such yawning differences being negotiated in the early 1970s during the performances across the United States of sitarist Ravi Shankar and his *tabla* playing partner, Alla Rakha. Watching them make their music visually accessible, I noticed that each was his partner's best listener; in fact, they were performing for each other! Ravi Shankar might look over to his percussionist with a questioning or challenging glance, as if to say, "And how did you like that?" Alla Rakha might respond, "Vah! Vah!" or tilt his head from side to side with enthusiastic approval. Each musician supported and challenged his colleague, thus eliciting better performances.

Mumbai-based music and dance critic, Roshan Jagatrai Shahani, explained that this camaraderie was not unusual. In fact, it is a performance convention called *sangati dena*. For example, she explained,

a vocalist like Kishori Amonkar sings with her palm laid over her ear.²³ Not only does this custom have an acoustical effect for the singer, but it also announces that the singer is listening and so should you. In this moment of getting everyone to focus, her harmonium accompanist Shree Purshottam Walavalker may cue listeners as to which notes she may sing or harmonize with by playing these suitably in advance. Conventions like these heighten expectations. When Amonkar completes an exquisite climactic moment, Walavalker and the tabla player may respond by taking their hands off their instruments in delighted acknowledgement. Or one of them might twist his shoulder, leaning his head on it in a gesture of ecstatic listening. Thus physical responses make the musical dynamics visible, educate listeners, and demand their continued attention. Kathak dancers involve similar processes to cue their audiences and ensure their active participation.

In India, dancers will explain the import of each dance before they perform it. In the United States, this approach is seen as didactic and incompatible with the American vision of art as phenomenologically accessible to all. Most dancers in Euro-American situations resort to program notes. Kritika Rajagopalan, who lives in Chicago, introduced bilingual narrations to accompany her dance and builds the “explanation” into the body of both the dance and its accompaniment. In doing this she is actually extending the traditional convention of performing a summary of the narrative before beginning to elaborate upon its nuances.

Chandralekha, the recently deceased dancer-choreographer who was based in Chennai, successfully extended the performer–audience dialogue beyond culturally specific locations to the extent that her work came to be seen as a model for diasporic dancers. In Chennai, an astounding proportion of the population either dances or sings in the demanding traditions of Carnatic music and its dance, Bharatnatyam. Chandralekha, responding to what she perceived as the loss of physicality and integrity of the dance, resorted to modernism and its conventions of simplicity and pared-down form to readdress Bharatnatyam. In *Angika* (1985), she incorporated a demonstration of the elements of Bharatnatyam technique as taught at Kalakshetra and Kalaripayattu training exercises into the choreography. For many in India and abroad who had not known of the existence of this martial movement tradition, this was an exciting work. But those already steeped in these traditions were offended by its didactic mode of

address, which reduced the active educated role of the rasika to that of a passive receiver of a simplistic message. Chandralekha opted for didactic minimalism over layered complexity at the same time as her works began challenging conventional patriarchal representations of women. Those who would resist her unconventional representations of gender roles had also to resist her reorientation of conventional audience–performer relationships. Furthermore, *Angika* even deliberately conflated the two relationships.

At the 2001 Bharatnatyam dance conference in Chicago, it was as if Chandralekha's challenge to rasikas of Indian dance had completed a cycle.²⁴ While the movement vocabulary of her work *Sharira-Fire/Desire* did not even reference Bharatnatyam, rasikas from Chennai, imported to Chicago for this conference, agreed that their appreciation of her work had evolved to new levels of understanding. In *Sharira-Fire/Desire*, slowed-down abstract movement served to aestheticize a steamy duet. The singers, the Gundecha brothers, layered secular eroticism with spiritual associations as they sang about the union of Shiva and Parvati in Dhrupad, a style of singing that tends to be meditative and focuses on subtle transitions of tone and tempo.

Responding to Chandralekha's new work *Sharira-Fire/Desire*, US-educated dance critics noted precision of movement, attention to minute detail, containment, the detached cool presence of performers, and how the choreography challenged traditional spatial hierarchies by maintaining continuous horizontality. However, the dancers and rasikas educated predominantly in Indian dance traditions focused on how they had been transported by this mating ritual to several levels of inner experience. They simultaneously saw the self in union with a perfect mate and desire and its mechanisms, while also seeing the transcendent aspects, not only in content but also in its exceeding of culture-specific boundaries. The two categorically different kinds of responses to the same work exemplify how two sets of aesthetic criteria (the rasa of inner touching versus the marking of what is materially observed) informed perception differently and how Chandralekha's work holds interest for both sets of perceptions. In the global market, performers today ideally seek out both kinds of audiences. The affirmation or criticism of the local audiences educates the performer and provides a kind of authenticating history, which is then useful in marketing the performer internationally. Performing abroad endows the performer with yet more (or less) authority when he or she returns to his or her local culture.

Embedded within the Indian performance tradition are at least two more rasika gazes that have intercultural applicability. Dancers often cultivate the mental practice of transforming the stage into a sacred space and offer the performance inwardly, privately, or publicly to a personal Loved One.²⁵ By doing this the performer develops a permeable independence from her actual audience, for her mental practice has forged another eye, another rasika, whose judgment will always “see” the dancers’ state and intent intimately and from afar.

Who is this Loved Other for whom dancers dance?²⁶ An archetypal Gazer? A meta-rasika? The *Shiva Sutras* say that for the accomplished yogi, one’s own inner senses are the spectators of the dance on the innermost stage of the Self.²⁷ So here is the gaze of the dancer herself watching her material body participate in her performance of designated emotions. In this sense, the performer is both detached and involved in her performance. This inner seeing-while-doing would generate the blissful rasa of value-free witness consciousness. So here is one more gaze, that of the inner spectator which is closest to but is not necessarily identical with the metagaze of The Loved One.

In keeping with the Indian narrative tradition of frames within frames, this essay has included three kinds of stories. I have offered here the socio-cultural frame of traditional Indian dance within its present-day multicultural urban environment and global performance scene. I have offered a synopsis of rasa theory as it is read and utilized in constructing and reading performance; this theory functions within a worldview where thought is action, with all the karmic consequences of action. And I started from my personal autobiographic experience which led to the awareness that *it matters for whom you dance*.

It matters for whom one dances because each audience writes upon the dancer’s interpretative body of dances its own reading of those dances. Each audience writes anew on the dancer’s body its own collective narrative.²⁸ Each imprinting will season the way that each performer will inflect her next performance as well as consequent audience readings.²⁹ So each body performing today bears on its surface a history of audience readings, while the structure (the body of the dance) carries its aesthetic equivalents of that same history.³⁰ Thus, the audience itself can be read as history, from those who supported secular dancing (as represented in Silappadikaram in the second century AD) to theological dancing (Abhinavagupta), erotic devotional dances (Kshetrappa, Jayadeva), twentieth-century Victorianized sanitized dances, and dances that decolonize, unpack, and reconstruct

identity through representing cultural bodies.³¹ This writing back and forth continues with intercultural interaction. An immediate history of audience responses becomes the history of each individual dancer. This history is embedded in the representations of the classical Indian dance. And that brings me full circle back to the story of Tansen, Surdas, and Akbar. A dancer is as good as her audience.



Notes

*This essay is reproduced with permission from Greenwood Publishing Group. "It Matters For Whom You Dance: Reception in Rasa Theory," in Susan Kattwinkel, ed., *Audience Participation: Essays on Inclusion in Performance*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger Press, 2003. Diacritical marks have been removed at the request of the editor, so the spellings do not necessarily approximate pronunciation or meaning. Other words are spelled as used in the source textual translations, which in turn marks the political and practical perspective of those writers.

1. The irony of such a retro-history where theories re-circulate and take on the terms and symbolic capital of their new locations would be another essay!
2. The music historian Dr Thakur Jaideva Singh posits that Surdas, the blind poet and singer, lived for 103 years from 1478 to 1583 AD and sang of his love for Krishna "in matchless music" in the Shreenath (Srinatha) temple, Govardhana. Singh notes that this incident is recorded in a book called *Caurasi Vaisnavana Ki Varta* written in the seventeenth century in Braja-bhasa, a regional language associated with devotional literature. Jaideva Singh also cites the *Akbarnamah*, where the traveling Arab historian, Abul Fazl, notes that Tansen was enrolled in Akbar's service in 1562 and died in 1589. In the *Ain-I-Akbari*, the same Fazl comments on Tansen's musicianship (Singh 1995).
3. All these three performances were at the *Siddha Yoga Dham* in South Fallsburg, New York, July and August 1982.
4. The following aphorism from the *Abhinayadarpana* (verse 249), an injunction for performing abstract dance movement, summarizes the process:

Where the hand goes, the eye goes.
Where the eye goes, the mind goes.
Where the mind goes, there is *rasa*.

5. Ted Shawn, conversation with author, 1967, Jacob's Pillow, Massachusetts.
6. Walimbe (1980) and Gnoli (1985) present the theoretical arguments of various thinkers as represented by Abhinavagupta in his *Abhinavabharati*. There are also several different theories of *rasa* not mentioned here, generally taken to refer to poetry and others such as Rupa Gosvami's, to religious performance. Of the latter, much remains to be incorporated into dance theory, at least at the level of discourse in the English language.
7. In the twentieth century, references to local dance usages (*pravritti*) in the *Natyasastra* 4:26–27 and 12:37 have been taken to authorize both classicism and antiquity. Also see Coorlawala on Sanskritization (1994, 2004).
8. Kapila Vatsyayan (1968) has enumerated numerous sources of information about dance in historical literature, legends, myth, art, sculpture, and music.
9. The accompanying notions of perception reflect complex discourses that are minimally referenced in this essay.
10. Bhava and *rasa* are said to be generalized in the observer's experience by an innate susceptibility to that kind of emotional state. Perhaps Bourdieu would describe these as *habitus*, embedded in the context of beliefs (monism and dualism) and theories of karma such as Kashmir Shaivism, Tantrism and Samkhya. The perspective of the various commentators on *rasa* is inflected by the paradigms they inhabited.
11. This is not to justify the obvious patriarchal bias of scribes who delineated characteristics of the woman, who are rarely classified as superior. The "superior" type of female character (e.g., Sita) was expected to display an abundance of submissive traits, such as attentiveness to superiors, shyness, etc.
12. Patanjali describes contemplation as the mental ability to maintain a steady uninterrupted focus on a single object of contemplation in his *Yoga Sutras*, Book III, Sutra 2.
13. For more on *natyadharmit*, see *Natyasastra* (6:25, 13:70) and Raghavan (1940).
14. This refers to the four modes of performing listed in the *Natyasastra* 6:23 and 11:4 that lead to *rasa*. They are *angika abhinaya* or bodily expression; *vachika abhinaya* or the oral–aural mode; *aharya abhinaya* or the connotations of costume, make-up, etc.; and *satva* or clear-focused performance.
15. John Willett (1964) notes that it has been abundantly documented that Brecht came to this conclusion after having been inspired by Chinese opera forms.
16. I am indebted to Cara Gargano for her observation that the two systems differ in practice more obviously than in theory and that this prescription for overcoming the "third obstacle" might in fact be the radical distinguishing difference between the two systems.

17. Gnoli observes that “only sense-data taken through hearing and sight can be tasted independently of any association with the ego in a generalized way (*sadharanīkṛta*)” and that the senses of touch, smell, and taste distract from the reception of *rasa* because they involve bodily responses and as such are not mediated through the mind.
18. For baby Krishna, the gaze is focused at knee or thigh level, for the lover Krishna one focuses at or slightly above one’s own face level, for God Krishna, the eyes turn upwards and inwards as the eyelids half close.
19. See Coorlawala’s “Darshan and Abhinaya” (1996), where Kelucharan Mohapatra’s representations of Krishna and an active initiating Radha combine with the custom of *darshan* to offer spectators an alternative to the inevitable male gaze postulated in feminist film theory.
20. Taped personal communication with Malavika Sarukkai, September 8, 2001, Chicago, USA
21. This body construct particularly informs the practice of yoga, martial arts (Kalaripayattu), and the performing arts (Paramahansa 1977 and 1978; Taimni 1975; Coorlawala 1994; and Zarilli 1998).
22. Owen Lynch (1990) has drawn attention to the social constructs of emotion, and Marglin has pointed out how ballet is structured for visual viewing, whereas Indian ritual dance involves language, linguistic structures, and the senses.
23. Kishori Amonkar is a leading exponent of the Jaipur–Atrauli gharana tradition of singing. Personal communication with author, June 26, 2001.
24. The performance took place on Saturday, September 8, 2001 at Columbia College, Chicago and was followed by a discussion the next morning as part of the Natya Dance Theatre’s Conference on “Bharatanatyam in the Diaspora.”
25. Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra* (2:45). The practice of *īśvara-pranidhana* consists in bringing the individual will into alignment with the cosmic will by mentally dedicating actions to *īśvara* or God.
26. Most Indian philosophic systems maintain that the purpose of all effort is to “know” that the Loved Other is actually one’s own self.
27. *The Siva Sutras*, a ninth-century text, was said to have been revealed by Shiva to Vasugupta. It contains a commentary by Ksemaraja and is considered to be authoritative on the perspective of Kashmir Shaivism. See the English translation and commentaries by Swami Muktananda Paramahansa (1977) and Jaideva Singh (1979). The *sutras* are: *Nartakatman* (the *atman* is the blissful dancer, Shiva) (3:9), *rango’ntaratma* (the inner self is the stage) (3:10), and *Prekshakani indryani* (the senses are the spectators) (3:11).
28. This idea resonates with the perception of the performer as *patra* or leaf upon which are written the techniques and rule structures of the dance form.

29. Susan Leigh Foster elaborates this concept of the body upon which is inscribed the characteristic and particular movements prevalent in one's environment.
30. Randy Martin (1997) theorizes that an audience's evanescent presence and responses offer a way of marking performative histories and the profound interactive consequences of the audience's gaze.
31. V. Subramaniam (1980) argues that before the sixth century, love poetry, music, and dance were secular arts. Kshetraraya's *padams* are danced in most performances by seasoned Bharatnatyam dancers. A. K. Ramanujan et al. list the three major poets of the *padam* tradition as Tallapaka Annamacarya (1224–1503), Kshetraraya, and Sarangapani (mid-seventeenth century) (1994: 2–5). Barbara Stoler Miller places Jayadeva's literary activity at 1205; his *Gita Govinda* was known throughout India by the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and is the subject of many dances today, particularly in the form of Odissi (1977). The idea that the history of Indian dance is embedded in the current image of the dancer was earlier proposed in my dissertation (Coorlawala 1994).

References

- Adigal, Ilango. 1965. *Shilappadakaram (The Ankle Bracelet.)* Trans. Alain Danielou. New York: New Directions Publications.
- Aranya, Swami Hariharananda. 1983. *Yoga Philosophy of Patanjali*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Bharata. *The Nattyaśāstra Vols. I and II*. 1956–67. Trans. and ed. Manmohan Ghosh. Kolkata: Manisha Granthalaya Private Limited.
- Case, Sue Ellen. 1989. "From Split Subject to Split Britches." In Enoch Brater, ed., *Feminine Focus: The New Women Playwrights*, pp. 126–46. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Coorlawala, Uttara Asha. 1991. "Kathak Master Birju Maharaj." *News India*, New York, March 8.
- . 1994. "Classical and Contemporary Indian Dance: Overview, Criteria and a Choreographic Analysis." Ph.D. diss., New York University.
- . 1996. "Darshan and Abhinaya: An Alternative to the Male Gaze." *Dance Research Journal* 28 (1): 19–27.
- . 2000. "Kapila Vatsyayan—Formative Influences: An Interview." *Dance Research Journal* 32 (1), Summer: 103–9.
- . 2004. "The Sanskritized Body." *Dance Research Journal* 36 (2), Winter: 50–63.
- Foster, Susan Leigh. 1995. *Choreographing History*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Gnoli, Raniero. 1985. *The Aesthetic Experience According to Abhinavagupta*. Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office.

- Lynch, Owen M., ed. 1990. *Divine Passions: The Social Construction of Emotion in India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Maharaj, Birju. 1991. "An Evening with Kathak Master Birju Maharaj. Interview by Uttara Asha Coorlawala." *News India*, New York, March 8.
- Marglin, Frederique Apffel. 1990. "Refining the Body: Transformative Emotion in Ritual Dance." In Owen M. Lynch, ed., *Divine Passions: The Social Construction of Emotion in India*, pp. 213–37. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Martin, Randy. 1995. "Agency and History: The Demands of Dance Ethnography." In Susan Leigh Foster, ed., *Choreographing History*, pp. 105–180. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- . 1997. "Dance Ethnography and the Limits of Representation." In Jane Desmond, ed., *Meaning in Motion*, pp. 105–18. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Miller, Barbara Stoler, ed. and trans. 1977. *Love Song of the Dark Lord: Jayadeva's Gītagovinda*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Nandikesvara. 1975. *Abhinayadarpanam* or *The Mirror of Gesture*. Trans. and ed. Mahmohan Ghosh. Kolkata: Manisha Granthalaya.
- . 1977. *Abhinayadarpanam* or *The Mirror of Gesture*. Trans. and eds. Ananda Coomaraswamy and Gopala Kristnaya Duggirala. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal.
- O'Shea, Janet. 2000. "Technique and Theory in the Work of Kapila Vatsyayan." *The Kapila Vatsyayan Honorary Papers, Dance Research Journal* 32 (1), Summer: 82–86.
- Paramahansa, Swami Muktananda. 1977. *Siddha Meditation: Commentaries on the Siva Sutras and other Sacred Texts*. Ganeshpuri, India: Shree Gurudev Ashram.
- . 1978. *The Play of Consciousness*. San Francisco: Harper and Row.
- Raghavan, V. 1940. *The Number of Rasas*. Adyar, Madras: The Theosophical Publishing House.
- Ramanujan, A. K., Velcheri Narayana Rao, and David Schulman, eds and trans. 1994. *When God is a Customer*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Singh, Thakur Jaideva. 1979. *The Siva Sutras the Yoga of Supreme Identity*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- . 1995. *Indian Music*. Kolkata: Sangeet Research Academy.
- Subramaniam, V. 1980. "The Sacred and the Secular: Symbiosis and Synthesis." In V. Subramaniam, ed., *The Sacred and the Secular in India's Performing Arts*. New Delhi: Ashish Publishing House.
- . 1998. "Rasa Bhava and Sanchari: Textual Prescription and Changing Practices." *Sruti* 171, December: 71–79.
- Taimni, I. K. 1975. *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*. 4th ed. Wheaton, Illinois: The Theosophical Publishing House.
- Vatsyayan, Kapila. 1968. *Classical Indian Dance in Literature and the Arts*. New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi.

- Walimbe, Y. S. 1980. *Abhinavagupta on Indian Aesthetics*. New Delhi: Ajanta Publications.
- Willett, John, trans. and ed. 1964. *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Zarilli, Phillip. 1998. *When The Body Becomes All Eyes: Paradigms, Discourses and Practices of Power in Kalaripayattu, a South Indian Martial Art*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Manipuri Dance: A Lyrical Manifestation of Devotion

SRUTI BANDOPADHAY

Coming from a land of diverse anthropology, the people of Manipur amalgamated into a civilization through the forces of ethnicity, traditions, and culture. The seven major clans of the Khaba, Cenglei, Luwang, Khuman, Moirang, Angom, and Ningthouja integrated to form the Meiteis. Even the hill people like the Nagas, Kuki-Chins, and the Mizos contributed appreciably to the ethnic culture of the state. The martial character of the people derives to a great extent from the Nagas, as in Takhousarol or the decorative dance with the spear; the origin of many of the dance's steps is attributed to the Kabui Nagas. In Colom dances, Haobakpam Ojha, who was a descendant of the Naga tribe, introduced the movement of *colom areibi*. All these facts have been found to be true during my study. So we can say that in Manipur, the hill people and the valley people, the tribes and the mainstream population all survive as a whole community; each group has offered its unique contribution to the mainstream culture of India.

Manipuri classical dance stands out amongst the multiplicity of Indian classical dances for its special features, derived from the inter-mixing of the diverse people of the area. The other classical dances of India, which traveled from temple to stage, experienced modifications with the shift of the arena. Gradually, the temple premises, that is, the place of origin, lost its importance. Current stage presentations are the only identity of those dance forms. But in Manipur the classical dance is still presented as a temple performance, and it follows all the detailed rituals as was done at its origin. The reason behind the continuity till date of this tradition is the participation of the community. The dance was never extracted from social festivities or ritualistic practices to be performed by individuals. The duty of the principal

dancer is to lead a group of dancers to the place of performance and guide their involvement in the ritual. This is evident in both Laiharaoba and Rasalila. In Laiharaoba the *maibis* lead the group, while in Rasalila the *makokcingbi* guides the rest of the female artists in enacting the *gopis/sakhis*. The ceremony of rituals is always around the deity and on the public premises of the temple. For Laiharaoba the areas in front of the village temples are used for celebration. Since the whole neighborhood joins in, the room of the deities becomes insufficient to accommodate the large number of people. So the deities, Laibou and Lainingthou, are brought out of the temple and placed in the open ground. The maibis face the shrine and dance the *laicing jagoi*. It is also believed that god becomes a part of this celebration, and thus Laiharaoba or the merrymaking of gods persists. The same procedure is followed in case of the Rasalila too. The deities Krishna and Radha are brought out of their rooms in the temple and placed in the center of the *rasamandali*. The participants go around the deities, facing them singing and dancing. In Gosthalila the deities are taken out to the meadows, and dances are performed on the ground. Interestingly, the maibis's dance genre is reflected in the dances of Bhangi Pareng. The *Khuntum*, *Khutsa Jagoi*, and the *Khujengleibi* hand movement are used repeatedly in Bhangi Parengs. The age-old symbol of "the snake biting its own tail" called the *Pakhangba* manifests itself in all Manipuri dance movements. Thus the curve of the number eight has become the foundation of the technique of the dance form. The maibis in Laiharaoba move making complex figure eight patterns called the *lairen mathek* on the ground, the *pungoibas* in *Samkirtana* move with the *pung* making the interweaving movement of eight on the ground of the *mandap* and the *gopis* in Rasalila show signs of eight in the torso, hand, and feet movements.

In Manipur women have always held an admirable position in society. The social norms follow the patterns of a matriarchal society, and this can be perceived even in their social festival structures. So the rituals are carried out by women as maibis in Laiharaoba and *gopis* in Rasalila. They perform the primary formal procedures. The accompanists like the *penakhongbas* and *laipubas* of Laiharaoba and the *sutradharas* and *pungoibas* of Rasalila are all male artists. The *Samkirtana* is the devotional song group and is a product of Vaishnavism's direct impact. So the features of the *palakirtana* of Bengal are more dominant here, making this a male-dominated form. But a special *pala* of the women called the *Nupipala* also came into

existence, and this, again, is Manipur's own creation and complies with its matriarchal nature. The freedom of women's love is another aspect that is seen in the society and also reflected in its folklore and *puranic* stories. The characters of Laiharaoba, Khamba, and Thoibi experienced extra-marital love. This has always been very humbly but openly performed as the theme story of Laiharaoba since early days. No prejudice is witnessed in the society against such an inclination. This might be a possible reason that the *parakiya* love story of Krishna and Radha was easily accepted in this state, and the philosophy behind such a relationship transformed the whole race to a divine realization of human consciousness.

The techniques of Manipuri dancing have fascinated the audience all over the world for their lyrical manifestation of devotion. The hand gestures used in Laiharaoba are the seeds of expression of Manipuri dance. The communication of the substance is through the position of the fingers placed in space. The hand gestures used are decorative, interpretative, and suggestive. The movement patterns in space write the basic vocabulary of the dance form. The facial expression is not stressed much. The face bears a subdued, devotional, and eloquent look. This is followed in Rasalila too. In addition, the dancers' faces are covered with a veil to divert the attention of the onlookers from the face of the artist. The total body articulations follow the basic motif of eight, which is embedded in the hierarchy of the race. This is highlighted in every step of the dance.

From this discussion we may identify the characteristics of Manipuri dance as the following:

- **Devotion**—This is the pivot on which the dance has evolved since time unknown.
- **Temple premises**—The performance place of this dance had always been the temple premises, and it is still so. They are the only race to continue to use dance in the rituals of the everyday life cycle.
- **Technique**—The *tandava* and *lasya* styles are distinctly present in this dance. The male and the female take part spontaneously, demonstrating individual uniqueness in both Laiharaoba and Rasalila. The graceful and lyrical movements are the identity of the form. It follows intricate rhythm patterns.
- **Abhinaya**—In Laiharaoba the sequences of hand gestures provide the expressive aspect of this ritualistic dance presentation.

In Rasalila the emotive sentiments are from the Vaishnava texts. Based on *bhakti rasa*, the dance takes into account the sixty-four varieties of sentiments as laid down by the Vaishnava scholars. In addition, the eight states of the heroines in love are elaborated into sixty-four states of love.

- **Accompaniment**—For singing, the *kirtana* songs are followed, but the style of presentation is different. For instrumentation, the special percussion instrument, the *pung* (a kind of *Khol*) is major. Other instruments are the *moibung* (conch), *pena* (kind of violin), flute, etc.
- **Costume**—The costume is designed to accommodate the devotional aspect of the dance.

When bringing Manipuri to the stage, we find two ways of its application. In the first, the form is given the most significance. Devoid of its original context, the technique is taken and applied to lyrics other than *padavali*, which was the libretto on which it was originally composed. Rabindranath Tagore took this step. It was Tagore who was attracted to the Manipuri form purely for its grace and beautiful movements. He brought Manipuri dance masters to teach the form in his residential institution, Shantiniketan. This was the first time that Manipuri was brought out of its geographical boundaries. Tagore adapted the technical part of the dance with the intention of giving his lyrics a visual form.

The second way of its application is as piecemeal items, like in Bharatnatyam, Kathak, or Odissi. Uday Shankar first made this attempt under the guidance of Ojha Amubi Singh. Later, innovations guided by tradition followed.

The community dance of Laiharaoba came to the stage as a theater presentation. Naturally, its indigenous rustic air was curbed to fit the demands of space, time, and the audience. The characters, Khamba and Thoibi, usually placed as a part of the indigenous festival, are clipped off to weave around them a tone fitting the theater, appropriate for a presentation for the proscenium stage. Also, the performers gained importance. If we look at the evolution of dance in Manipur, we find that individual importance was never given to any performer. Laiharaoba, which should be understood as a community affair, is organized by the society, and the *loisang* or the village religion committee is in charge of it. Even the maibis are engaged as conductors who follow the strict discipline of the presentation. But onstage, it is the

responsibility of the performers to make the characters come alive for an urban audience. The festive mood takes a serious turn for the stage, the repertoire is edited to fit into the time allotted, and the songs and the percussions are restricted for this presentation. The dance's original purpose as a religious practice takes a back seat, and the aesthetic purpose gains in importance.

The same is true for the classical dance of Manipur, the Rasalila. Originally a whole-night affair, the Rasalila is divided up for the stage by selecting the more entertaining parts and modifying them according to concepts of modern choreography. The basic circular formation is also broken down to face the spectators. In Manipur only children are allowed to take the role of Krishna or Radha, but onstage a Krishna Nartan or a Radha Nartan is expected to be presented by a mature artist. This is a total departure from tradition. The costume of Rasalila is an elaborate one. Onstage the artists refuse to put on such costumes which embody more of devotional attitude rather than facilitating the exhibition of movement. Such costumes dazzle the spectators initially, but artists are unable to exhibit their techniques to the utmost extent. Moreover, in the temple the face of the artist remains covered with a veil, which if this practice were followed onstage, would restrict the display of emotions and facial expression. Thus, the changes that took place when bringing the Manipuri dance from the temple to stage are the following:

- Shifting the dance's essence from religious presentation to aesthetic presentation
- From an open arena to a closed one
- From a circular presentation to a proscenium presentation abiding to the concepts of modern choreography
- Allocation of importance to individual artists
- Modifying certain *angika*, including creating attractive movements for stage presentation
- Exploring the rhythmic canvas of fast tempo
- Developing the facial expression along with traditional concepts
- Selection of costumes suited to stage

The question now arises: where do we exactly stand after such efforts at change? We know that the diversity of our country has always given us a unique culture that is constantly in the process of evolution

and taking forms that embody the stamp of modern times. These oscillate between the “known” and the “unknown.” We recognize some, but some we do not. But such efforts are always welcome.

Uday Shankar invited Ojha Amubi Singh to compose stage items of Manipuri dances. Amubi’s composition, *Nilakamaladalaulyama*, came out as a complete presentation of Manipuri dance, incorporating its technique, songs, and rhythms for the stage. This should be treated as a “milestone” in the stage repertoire of Manipuri dance. After this Amubi had many other compositions structured for the stage: *Dasavatara*, *Gita Govinda*, *Krishna Nartan*, etc. After him, his followers like Ojha Babu Singh, Suryamukhi Devi, Devjani Chaliha, Jitendra Singh, Nadia Singh, and others worked to further develop stage repertoire.

The most vibrant step to make an attractive stage repertoire was taken by Ojha Bipin Singh. He exploited the *tandava* and the *lasya* aspect of this dance and combined them to give an absolutely different look to the stage product. His experiments brought about a distinctive style, which bore the stamp of his concepts. If we “post-mortem” his items, not only do we come across the intelligent blending of technique but also a scientific approach to the composition of the rhythmic syllables. He was the first person to conceptualize a solo repertoire for stage that could be in line with the repertoire of Bharatnatyam or Odissi. In recognition of his effort, Sri Damodar Singh, then the secretary of Manipur State Kala Academy, initiated a solo dance festival in Imphal in the 1980s.

This was the time when Chandralekha’s production *Angika* took India’s dance scene by storm. The martial arts of different regions gained importance. Thang Ta, the indigenous martial form of Manipur, was now brought onto the stage. Its quicksilver movements and gimmicky stances instantly won the applause of the audience. This was like the acrobatic movements of Colom dance of Manipur receiving instantaneous applause from the audience. Naturally the presentation of Thang Ta became a part of the repertoire of Manipuri. This sudden diversion from classical repertoire gave a different profile to Manipuri onstage. The importance of the classical repertoire gradually declined. After Ojha Bipin passed away, the developments in the classical repertoire for stage receded, and at present most Manipuri dancers are engaged in experimental productions. Watching these productions, one finds a concentration on only the presentational aspect, while the compositional aspect is losing ground. Most stage productions are

using whatever is commonly available, mixing and matching them to garnish the presentation. Recently, forms other than from Manipur have been blended with Manipuri to give expression to each individual choreographer's endeavor. The depth and understanding of the form are not coming to the forefront.

But still this is not a grim phase because efforts to experiment with this form can only bring about the new vista for which everyone is looking. "Modernity blended with the indigenous tradition" is perhaps the sole aim of today's performances.



References

- Ahluwalia, B. K. and Sashi Ahluwalia. 1984. *Social Change in Manipur*. Delhi: Cultural Publishing House.
- Allen, B. C. 1980. *Naga Hills and Manipur: Socioeconomic History*. Delhi: Gian Publications.
- Bhattacharyya, Haridas. *Religions*. Vol. 4 of *The Cultural Heritage of India*. Kolkata: The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture.
- Bheigyachandra, L. 1987. *A Critical Study of the Religious Philosophy of the Meiteis before the Advent of Vaishnavism in Manipur*. Imphal: Author.
- Birachandra, N. 1993. *Early Settlements and Early Names of Manipur (Meitei)*. 2nd ed. Imphal: privately published by Tomchou Singh.
- Chaki-Sircar, Manjusri. 1984. *Feminism in a Traditional Society*. New Delhi: Shakti Books.
- Chakravarti, Janardan. 1975. *Bengal Vaishnavism and Sricaitanya*. Kolkata: Asiatic Society.
- Chatterjee, Suniti Kumar. 1974. *Kirata Jana Kriti—the Indomongoloids—their Contribution to the History and Culture of India*. 2nd ed. Kolkata: Asiatic Society.
- Cinthamlen, Wankhem. n.d. *Kámleipakshaknam*. n.p.
- Datta, Birendranath, ed. 1990. *Traditional Performing Arts of North East India*. Guwahati: Assam Academy of Cultural Relations.
- Dayal, Leila Row and Geoffrey Cumberlege. 1951. *Manipuri Dances Lasya Lahari*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Dev, B. J. and D. K. Lahiri. 1987. *Manipur: Culture and Politics*. Delhi: Mittal Publications.
- Devi, K. Sobita. 1998. *Traditional Dress of the Meiteis*. Imphal: Bhubon Publishing House.
- Devi, Pratima. 1400 (Bengali year). *Nitya*. Shantiniketan: Visva Bharati.
- Devi, Ragini. 1972. *Dance Dialects of India*. New Delhi: Vikas Publications.
- Devi, Ranjana. 1983. *Manipuri Natasamkirtana*. New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi.

- Ghosh, Shantidev. 1396 (Bengali year). *Rabindranáth o ádhunik bháratíya nitya*. Kolkata: Ananda Publishers.
- Gopala, Rama and Serozh Dadachanji. 1951. *Indian Dancing*. London: Phoenix House Ltd.
- Haorokcham, Sankhya Ibotombi. 2007. *Bhangi Pareng Achouba*. Imphal: privately published by M. Thoiba Singh.
- Hodson, T. C. 1908. *The Meitheids*. Delhi: Low Price Publication.
- Ibungohal, L. 1963. *Introduction to Manipur*. Imphal: privately published by author.
- Indira, Elam. 1997. *Láiharáobági Wákhlo Parió*. Imphal: privately published by author.
- Iyer, K. Bharata. 1980. *Dance Dramas of India and the East*. Bombay: Taraporevala. *Jawaharlal Nehru Manipur Dance Academy Magazine*. 1991–92.
- Jhaveri, Darshana and Kalavati Devi. 1976. *Manipuri Nartan*. Kolkata: Manipuri Nartanalaya.
- Joshi, Saryu, ed. Vol. 41, No. 2 of *The Drum and Cymbal: Classical Dances of Manipur*. Mumbai: Marg Publications.
- Kabui, Gangmumai. 1991. *History of Manipur*. New Delhi: National Publishing House.
- Kulachandra, Ng. 1963. *Meitei Lai Haraoba*. Imphal: privately published by author.
- Kumar, Kh Ratan. n.d. *Laiharaoba of Manipur*. Imphal.
- Kumar, Tarun. 1977. *Meitei Jagoigi Ahanbá Lamjam*. Imphal: JNMDA.
- Maharaj, Bhagavat, ed. 1987. *úræüræbhaktiratnákara of Narahari Chakraverty*. Kolkata: Gouriya Mission.
- Maibi, Naigbam Kumar. 1988. *Kamlei Umamlei Haráobá*. Imphal: Saraswati Book House.
- Manipur State Kala Academy Quarterly Journal* 5 (2).
- Manipuri Sahitya Parishad. 1982. Seminar Proceedings of Classical Manipuri Dance.
- Mukhopadhyay, Sri Sitaram. 1975. *Rajasri Bhágyacandra*. Birbhum: Mukherjee Book Supply.
- Parrat, Saroj N. Arambam. 1980. *The Religion of Manipur*. Kolkata: Firma K.L.M. Pvt. Ltd.
- Parrat, Saroj N. Arambam and John Parrat. 1997. *The Pleasing of Gods: Meithei Láiharáobá*. New Delhi: Vikas Publications.
- Phalgun*. 1919. Shantiniketan monthly newsletter of 1326 (1919), February–March.
- Proceedings of Seminars on Sources of History of Manipur and the Adjoining Areas in Manipur. 1983. University at Imphal and New Delhi: National Publishing House.
- Rabindra Bharati University Annual Journals.

- Raghavan, V. 1956. "Variety and Integration in the Pattern of Indian Culture." *The Far Eastern Quarterly* 15 (4): 495–98.
- Sanajaoba, Naorem. 1991. *Philosophy, Culture, and Literature*. Vol. 2 of *Manipur Past and Present*. Delhi: Mittal Publications.
- . 1988. *History, Polity and Law*. Vol. 1 of *Manipur Past and Present: the Heritage and Ordeals of a Civilization*. Delhi: Mittal Publications.
- . ed. 1995. *Nagas and Kuki-chins*. Vol. 3 of *Manipur Past and Present*. Delhi: Mittal Publications.
- Sharma, Atombapu. 1952. *Manipur Sanátan Dharma (The Traditional Religion of Manipur)*. Trans. Gourkisor Singh. Imphal: Manipur Viswa Bharati.
- Sharma, H. Thambal. 1980. *Meitei Jagoi Khut thek*. Imphal: privately published by Ibachuba Sharma.
- Sharma, S. Manihar. 1969. *Rása*. Imphal: privately published by author.
- Singh, Amubi. 1982. *Manipur Jagoi*. New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi.
- Singh, Ch. Manihar. 1985. *Laiharaoba: Its Origin Philosophy and Features*. Imphal Manipuri Sahitya Parishad, Golden Jubilee Publication, April 23.
- Singh, E. Nilakanta. 1982. *Aspects of India Culture*. Imphal: Jawaharlal Nehru Manipur Dance Academy (JNMDA).
- . 1991. "Manipuri Nata Sankirtana: Rituals and Philosophy." Paper presented at the International Cultural Conference on Culture for Peace, November 27–December 2, Imphal.
- . 1993. *Fragments of Manipuri Culture*. New Delhi: Omsons Publications.
- Singh, Kanthoujam Sanatan. 1981. *Naôasaôkærtana Colom*. Imphal: privately published by author.
- Singh, Kojeibam Dhana. n.d. *Meitei Puya Vári Macam*. n.p.
- Singh, Kulachandra. 1963. *Meitei Láiharáobá*. Imphal: privately published by author.
- Singh, M. Kirti. 1988. *Religion and Culture of Manipur*. Delhi: Manas Publications.
- Singh, N. Tombi. 1975. *Manipur and the Mainstream*. Imphal: privately published by N. N. Singh.
- Singh, O. Kumar. 1991. *Neolithic Stone Tools of Manipur*. Kakching: privately published by author.
- Singh, Thanil. 1999. *Naôasaôkærtana Rága Puólol*. Imphal: JNMDA.
- Vatsyayan, Kapila. 1974. *Indian Classical Dance*. New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.
- Zarina, Xenia. 1967. *Classic Dances of the Orient*. New York: Crown Publishers Inc.

Websites accessed August 2007

<http://www.manipuri.20m.com>

<http://www.manipuri-dance.com>

<http://www.in.news.yahoo.com/070110/139/6b08w.html>

<http://www.shubhayatra.com/manipur>
http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manipuri_dance
<http://www.manipuri.stormloader.com>
<http://www.connectindia.com/manipuri.htm>
<http://www.geocities.com/Vienna/226>
<http://www.webindia123.com/dances/manipuri/manipuri.htm>
<http://www.nartaki.com>
<http://www.mythinglinks.org/asia^india^dance.html>
<http://www.artindia.net/manipuri.html>
<http://www.northeastindiadiary.com/manipur-travel>

Swayed by Love: Dance in the Vaishnava Temple Imagery of Bengal

PIKA GHOSH

Dance lies at the heart of the devotional practices of the Gaudiya Vaishnava community that cohered around Krishna in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.¹ The charismatic Bengali saint Chaitanya (1486–1533), led his followers in *nagar samkirtan*, dancing and singing songs praising Krishna, most often describing the episodes and emotions of his relationship with his beloved, Radha.² These sessions lasted through the night, and they were so powerful that they induced visceral responses of tears, trembling, and even fainting. The throngs of worshippers overflowed into the streets of his hometown Nabadwip; the popularity of the *nagar samkirtan* soon spread through sixteenth-century Bengali towns that resounded with the name of Krishna. These processions gradually swept Bengal in the east and Vrindavan in north India in a frenzy of passionate song, dance, and ecstatic devotion.

Chaitanya thus offered a path to salvation through singing and dancing to the names and deeds of Krishna.³ Not surprisingly, the temples constructed for worship, and the visual vocabulary that emerged in seventeenth-century Bengal, articulate this preoccupation.⁴ The predominant foci for temple worship in this tradition, metal and stone sculpted forms of Krishna with his beloved, Radha (Figures 11.1, 11.2), and the deified saint Chaitanya, usually paired with his companion Nityananda (Figures 11.2, 11.3), are depicted in dynamic poses that capture bodily movement, a key component of the devotional practices of the community.⁵ Likewise, Krishna's circular dance (*rasalila*) with the cowherdesses (*gopis*) of Vrindavan, the geographic locale where his youthful exploits were mapped in north India, has

enjoyed immense popularity, circulating through a variety of visual media (Figure 11.4).⁶ Despite this centrality of dance as a medium for articulating the community's most deeply held convictions, however, the significance of dance in the visual imagery of this tradition in this context remains to be understood.

Focusing primarily on the temple icons that represent the key figures of the tradition, this essay preliminarily explores the role of dance as a



Figure 11.1: *Krishna and Radha*, eighteenth century.
(Photograph courtesy The Newark Museum)



Figure 11.2: Altar with relief figures of Nityananda and Chaitanya, and three-dimensional icons of Krishna and Radha, Radha Shyam temple, Vishnupur. (Photograph by the author)

potent visual mechanism for articulating distinctively Gaudiya beliefs and practices to a recently converted populace in Bengal. I look at the choices made to represent each of the figures of Krishna, Radha, and Chaitanya on temple altars to embody movement. I then examine the



Figure 11.3: Wooden figures of Chaitanya and Nityananda on display at the Raash celebration in the Krishna Lalji temple complex, November 2007.
(Photograph by the author)

techniques employed to further mobilize these figures, cast or chiseled in dance poses, through visual and verbal narrations. Through these strategies, the figural forms serve to uphold models for devotion, and remind the devotional community of the power of samkirtan as the path preferred over all other available ones for salvation. Chaitanya is thus depicted in performance of the distinctive style of worship that he initiated to provide his followers the opportunity to access the divine realm, and participate in Radha and Krishna's playful activities (*lilas*) in the eternal Vrindavan.⁷ Moreover, a close examination of the choices made in the representation of Chaitanya suggests that the figural form assists in asserting the radical Gaudiya claim that Chaitanya is not only an incarnation of Krishna, but is Krishna conjoined with Radha in a single body, a belief that distinguishes this community from other groups of Krishna worshippers emerging in north India at this time.



Figure 11.4: Rasa-mandala, South Façade, Shyam Ray temple, Vishnupur.
(Photograph by the author)

This is accomplished by depicting Chaitanya as a dancer, rather than engaged in any other activity, drawing upon the dancing figures of Krishna and Radha, thus layering those bodies through shared poses.

I want to begin by looking at the typical image of Krishna enthroned in the temple altars of the Gaudiya tradition (Figures 11.1 and 11.2). While most scholarship has classified this figure of Krishna as a flute player, probably based on epithets such as Muralidhar (Holder of the Flute), Vamsivadana (He who Plays the Flute), and Venugopal (Gopal with Flute, or Gopal as Flute Player), these images also depict him poised to dance. He balances, seemingly effortlessly, with the weight primarily on his vertical left leg, while the right leg crosses over in front, only touching the ground lightly. The dynamic energy of that right leg rises sinuously up to his hips, tilted in an S-curve (*tribhanga*)

to counterbalance the sway of the upper body to the right. His head, in turn, leans toward Radha, inviting her to join in his dance, while the frontal gaze of his wide eyes engages the devotee in *darshan*. Krishna's hands are raised to bear the flute that creates the music to which his body sways in response. Three-dimensional images used in worship bear a silver flute, which is slipped in between his fingers by temple priests. A flute is therefore added to the dancing body, suggesting that a more accurate description of this form is Krishna as both a flute player and a dancer.

While the degree to which these metal and stone icons may be embellished with jewelry, decorative fabrics, and flowers varies significantly, the basic dancing form remains the focus of devotional attention in Bengali Vaishnava temples. It is typically given primacy through size and placement on the altar over the region's other popular forms of Krishna such as Nadu Gopal, the crawling infant clasping the sweets stolen from his mother's kitchen, or the triad of Jagannath with Balarama and Subhadra.

Terra cotta depictions of the rasalila on the walls of Gaudiya temples appear to release the body of the dancer who stands immobile, even if in a dynamic pose, on the altar (Figure 11.4). These reliefs set in motion his sensuous dance as Krishna engages with the gopis in the famous circular formation of the rasalila. One of the earliest dated temples to remain standing, Vishnupur's Shyam Ray temple of 1643, displays a pair of exquisitely detailed renditions of this dance (Figure 11.5).⁸ They dominate the temple's main public south entrance, while a third medallion fills the back of the sanctum niche. Together, they frame the altar for the worshiper standing in the courtyard. When the temple was in use, these terra cotta forms would have created a backdrop for the stationary, enthroned figures of Krishna and Radha, as if animating them. The placement of these roundels in the temple's ritually most potent areas indicates the significance of dance as a medium for devotional expression in this community.⁹

At the center of the circular formation, Krishna sways to the sound of his flute, attended by Radha, echoing the iconic version in the altar, while a second gopi complements her on his other side. Two concentric rings of dancers encircle them. Outstretched arms, bent knees, soaring sashes, and flying hair create angular patterns, and the reduplication of each perfectly poised body completes the rings inscribing the central trio. The dynamic rhythm of their dance is rendered infinite by the circular composition. Drummers and flute players provide the music for their performance from the corners of the square panels.



Figure 11.5: South Façade, Shyam Ray temple, Vishnupur. (Photograph by the author)

Creepers, deer, and peacocks, drawn by the music, also hover at the periphery, locating the performance in the green groves of Vrindavan.

The *Bhagavata Purana* offers the first full description of this episode.¹⁰ The tenth book narrates how Krishna lured the gopis into leaving their husbands and homes to join him at the river's edge.¹¹ Here, protected by the woods, they danced the circular *rasa* dance on a full-moon autumn night. As their fingers interlocked to form a circle, Krishna miraculously appeared between each pair of gopis so that he danced simultaneously with each woman, fulfilling her desires. As the text describes:

Thoroughly exhausted by (participation in) the *rasa* dance and with her bangles slipping (from her wrists) and jasmine flowers dropping (from her braid), another Gopi caught hold by her arm, the shoulder of Krishna who

was standing by . . . another Gopi smelt how Krishna's arm placed on her shoulder, was fragrant like a lily and was anointed with sandal paste, (and losing herself) she (actually) kissed it. . . . To another Gopi who rested on Krishna's cheek . . . rocking in the course of dancing Krishna gave his half-chewed betel. . . . Another Gopi, standing by his side was fatigued with singing and dancing, making all the while a jingling sound of her anklets and girdle . . . pressed to her bosom his blissful lotus-hand. Obtaining Achyuta (. . . Krishna), . . . as their beloved, the cowherd women with his arms round their neck extolled him in song and played (danced) with him.¹²

The terra cotta medallion, with its multiple figures of Krishna, reiterates the miraculous act of reduplication that is emphasized in this passage. Both text and image implicitly offer the promise that Krishna will also replicate himself for the devotee, and draw her or him into the swirl of dancing bodies, which can potentially expand infinitely in concentric rings from the sacred icon at the center.

This circular dance form also provides a model for and thus sanctions the most distinctive ritual practice of this community, the performance of *kirtan*, dancing to the devotional songs praising Krishna. In the *Bhagavata* description, the cowherdresses sang of their love for Krishna in chorus and danced holding hands, while each experienced his exclusive attention within the structure of the circular formation. This emphasis on collectivity, while affirming the deeply personal nature of *bhakti* or devotion, is invoked in the local community's nightly performances. It is also signaled in the terra cotta representation in which each agitated dancer is depicted as distinct yet also part of a pattern. The rings of terra cotta figures thus point to the relationship of the ideal community and the living one performing it.

If we turn to the figure of Radha accompanying Krishna on temple altars, at first glance she may appear more static because both her feet are planted firmly on the ground (Figure 11.1). However, she leans toward Krishna, as if responding to the invitation to dance issuing from the call of his flute. The curves of her more petite form echo the more pronounced twists of his. When stripped of the fabrics, floral garlands, and jewelry, the bare metal form also reveals the forward thrust of her upper body, the sensuous arched back bending from the fold at the hips, accentuated by lines incised into the metal. Her outstretched right hand reaches for his bent elbow, bearing a lotus bud in offering. The left hand extends outward to balance her leaning body.¹³ The figures of the divine couple are invariably sculpted with

such precision that her elevated arm aligns with, and leads, the eye to his flute, which initiates the music for the dance. The composition seems to capture the moment of anticipation before the divine dance ensues.

Gaudiya Vaishnava literary works would indicate that this somewhat restrained body is poised to launch into a far more sensual dance, one that can be witnessed if the viewer has the devotional eye to see it. A passage from the *Prem Vilas*, a seventeenth-century work by Nityananda Das, describes an ecstatic vision experienced by Dukhi Shyamananda, an important spiritual leader of that period, in which a metal image of the type discussed here stepped out of the small, dark temple altar into the more capacious courtyard, to dance passionately for her divine lover:

Dukhi stayed one evening in a temple and beheld the images of Radha-Krishna, there. He was so overpowered by his mystic reveries, that he forgot the hour and stood silent in a corner of the courtyard, till the five-lights that were waved by the priest before the figures went out, the blower of the conch desisted, and the drummer retired, the cymbals played no more, and the sacred offerings were shared among the crowd who gradually dispersed. But Dukhi, transported to another region by his reveries, forgot time and place, and the vision of Radha-Krishna appeared vividly before his senses. And he was so fascinated by the celestial sight that he lay transfixed to the spot and did not know how time had passed. A strange vision here revealed itself to his eyes; he saw in the courtyard Radha dancing before Krishna. She was in the height of her delight and every movement of her arms and feet indicated the joy which belonged to the paradise of love in which she was the dweller. The morning dawned and the dance did not end—the fair dancer waving her arms and swiftly whirling round and round with her feet—with a delirious joy which bespoke the dedication of herself to the beloved deity before whom she danced. Hours passed away like seconds; the dancer knew not how they fled, nor did her mortal spectator, who with silent tears in his eyes beheld this wonderful spectacle. When the rays of the morning sun first burst on the golden-cupped pinnacle of the temple, the goddess who came to her senses and was ashamed of her long stay on earth, disappeared with all swiftness; but in the quickness of her movement left behind her a golden *nupura* [anklet] which had adorned one of her feet. Dukhi found it, and he offered it to the temple.¹⁴

In this ecstatic vision we follow the beholder, Dukhi's eyes to the figure of Radha as she dances with complete abandon. The description powerfully communicates the rapture arising from her movement, and her longing to stay in that trance-like state of exhilaration. And Radha's

elated movements invoke the potential of dance as a deeply personal and intensely emotional expression of devotion, and an opportunity for complete immersion in Krishna, the primary path to salvation in this tradition. The twirling of her metal limbs thus mobilized the transcendence of the earthly temple courtyard to the site of the gods' eternal play.

Radha's frenzied dance follows from that of the living community. It is likely that the temple's evening services of *arati* and kirtan involved worshipers spontaneously swaying to the rhythm of the drums and cymbals, their hands rising and ankles turning to the lyricism of the songs, not unlike the response of devotees today. From being more passive recipients of the lights and music in the darkness of the sanctum during this performance, the divine figures seem to have been moved to emerge into the public space of the courtyard to revel in the kinds of activities their human devotees had engaged in. Radha's feverish dance can perhaps be understood as a culmination of the heightened emotional state that had already been kindled by that earlier performance of the evening. This performative and emotional continuum reiterates Radha's role in this tradition as a model for the worshiper to aspire to. The Gaudiya community emphasized her deeply passionate love for Krishna, and upheld it as the paradigm of selfless love. Radha's capacity to long intensely for him, to serve him, and to risk everything for him, was the ideal emotional experience for devotees to emulate.¹⁵ Married to another man, Radha had to undergo great difficulties, take enormous risks, and compromise her position in society for the sake of her love for Krishna.¹⁶ The performance described in Dukhi Shyamananda's vision equally embodies these values: Radha's ability to lose herself in the intensity of her dance, and to chance being observed by mortal eyes. She is utterly absorbed in her performance for her lover, oblivious even of the earliest rays of the dawn, and the imminent danger of getting caught in the act.

Dukhi Shyamananda also exemplifies these ideals and serves as a conduit to the divine. Like the metamorphosis of the metal image of Radha into a whirling dancer, he transformed from a silent spectator in the corner of the courtyard to a participant in the play of the divine. His experience, like Radha's unselfconscious dance, upholds intimacy of engagement with the divine. Such visions were recognized as the highest aspiration of this devotional community as it was gaining momentum in Bengal at the end of the sixteenth century. They were bestowed such power and authority that the experience could catapult

a lower-caste figure like Dukhi, who was subsequently renamed Shyamananda (One whose happiness is Shyam or Krishna), to the spiritual leadership of the movement.

As reward for his faith, Dukhi received Radha's anklet. The choice of the anklet, an ornament for adorning dancing feet, and a tool for keeping rhythm and creating music for the performance, is a powerful reminder of the potential for the inanimate metal figure of Radha on the temple altar to whirl about the courtyard in ecstasy. Anklets are also popularly given to young girls, and the tinkling bells of pattering feet can bear associations of beauty, femininity, chasteness, and auspiciousness as much as they connote eroticism in the context of Radha's dance described in this passage. Anklets may also be removed in multiple contexts: slipped off deliberately to avoid making noise and avert attention, for example, when a woman is wending her way to a secret rendezvous as in many Vaishnava songs; and they are typically unclasped from a woman's feet at the death of her husband, part of the ritual stripping of her jewelry.¹⁷ Falling off the dancer's furiously moving feet as she hurried away, the stray anklet left at the site of the performance can also bring to bear such associations of illicitness as well as loss and longing. These multiple and ambiguous evocations are further complicated by this tangible artifact serving as a material trace of Shyamananda's intangible, but profoundly moving, encounter. And like the anklet, the image of Radha upon the altar, poised to dance, provides a material starting point for such heady experiences, which were clearly cherished over the more mundane ritual acts of service to the enthroned deities.

Like Krishna and Radha, Chaitanya is also typically depicted in motion that captures his overflowing love for Krishna. Indented in the niche behind the altar of the Radha Shyam temple dedicated in 1758 at Vishnupur, he dances with Nityananda (Figure 11.5). The figures of the two men are almost interchangeable as they bend at the knees, rising from the balls of their feet. The angular silhouettes, with protruding knees, flying sashes and outstretched arms, are reminiscent of the dancers in the terra cotta circle of the rasalila. Their hands reach out, as if to rupture the column that separates them and lock fingers. The only element that distinguishes the two dancers may be the position of their other hands. Here, the figure to the right, usually identified as Nityananda, has both arms raised, while the other, usually recognized as Chaitanya, has a hand raised and the other lowered, reverberating Radha's hand movements. In other examples, however, such as the

large wooden three-dimensional icons used predominantly at festivals, the pair may share the same hand gestures (Figure 11.3).¹⁸ In the altar of the Radha Shyam temple, the relief forms of the two dancers thus share iconographic elements with the three-dimensional forms of Radha and Krishna, and also provide a backdrop for them (Figure 11.2).¹⁹ The repetition of formal elements and the superimposition of the two- and three-dimensional figures serve to visually reinforce the identity of Chaitanya with the god Krishna as well as his beloved Radha.

This overlay had been proposed in the sixteenth-century biographical accounts of his life, particularly in the *Chaitanya Charitamrita* of Krishnadas Kaviraj, which has become accepted as the most authoritative in the tradition. In one of the numerous accounts of kirtan described in the *Chaitanya Charitamrita*, when Chaitanya danced around the Jagannath temple in Puri with Nityananda supporting him, “[t]ears flowed from his eyes like a stream from a fountain and the people all around him were wet.”²⁰ As the performance proceeded, Chaitanya ordered his four major disciples present to dance in four groups around him:

Many people danced and sang all around, and all saw that “Prabhu is looking at me.” Prabhu wanted to see the dance of all four, and because of that desire he manifested his divine power. Each one thought that he was looking only at him, absorbed in his gaze; how he could look in all directions cannot be known. It was as when Kṛṣṇa was in the center . . . and all around his companions said— “He is looking towards me.”²¹

The passage suggests the identification of Chaitanya with Krishna through the conflation of their activities, a shared predilection for dance. The formation, with four groups of dancers moving around the central dancing figure of Chaitanya replicates the circular form choreographed in Krishna’s original rasalila with the gopis. The imagery of Chaitanya’s fountain of tears preceding this dance formation, seeping through the crowds and drenching them in Krishna *prema* also evokes the rasalila’s fundamental radial emanation from the center. Chaitanya’s dance stems from his desire to observe the emotional engagement of his followers, just as Krishna had wanted to know the depths of the gopis’ love for him. To do so, he manifests the same divine power. Like Krishna who multiplied himself for the cowherd women so that each fancied she danced with him alone, Chaitanya too became available exclusively to each of his followers.

By the seventeenth century, Chaitanya had been recognized as an incarnation of Krishna, and the overlay of Chaitanya upon the figure of Krishna was gradually asserted in temple imagery as, for example, on the walls of Vishnupur's Keshta Ray temple of 1655 (Figure 11.6). Here Chaitanya is incorporated into the conventional set of Vaishnava incarnations (*Dasavatara*).²² It is hardly a coincidence that he is paired with the other historical figure, the Buddha, and placed before the final avatar, the horse rider Kalki, who is yet to come. Second from top right in this sequence is the Buddha, depicted as an ascetic, seated in meditation, with matted hair flying. Chaitanya, on the other hand, is presented dancing, with one hand raised, sash flying, knees bent, and one leg poised on the ball of his foot, this last feature echoing the dancing form of Krishna. The preference for a dancing figure asserts continuity from the original. Further, Chaitanya is depicted in performance, the raised hand and bent foot indexing the new ritual practice and theological message he had introduced. This figure takes the place that Krishna typically fills in the set of Vaishnava incarnations, and the replacement implies that he can replace Krishna because he is revered as his incarnation. This insertion of Chaitanya into the set of Vaishnava incarnations is located at the back of the Keshta Ray temple, perhaps a tentative experiment tucked away from the visual focus of the monument. A hundred years later, the deified Chaitanya is brought to the forefront, and located in the most potent area of the Radha Shyam temple (Figure 11.2). He dances at the altar with Nityananda, the juxtaposition with the icons of Krishna and Radha making their identification explicit.

Chaitanya is also identified with Radha in the Gaudiya tradition (Figure 11.2). Krishna is believed to have descended as Chaitanya not only to save the earth from dissolution like the previous incarnations of Vishnu, but also because he was curious to experience Radha's undiluted joy in him. Thus Chaitanya represents both Radha and Krishna, locked in eternal embrace. He shares Radha's golden coloring, and is hence also called Gauranga (Golden-Limbed), even though he takes the male physical form of Krishna. He expresses Radha's emotional intensity, and both convey their passion through the medium of dance. The dancing figure of Chaitanya in the Radha Shyam temple altar echoes her hand movements. Devotees gazing upon his dancing form would likely recall the intensification of his emotional state during kirtan sessions, with Chaitanya weeping, trembling, sweating, shouting, even collapsing, sweeping the crowds with his overwhelming love for Krishna. And the force of his expression is not unlike that of Radha,



Figure 11.6: Avatars of Vishnu with the figure of Chaitanya located second from top left, Keshta Ray temple, Vishnupur. (Photograph by the author)

who forgot herself and the passage of time as she reveled in her love for Krishna through her spontaneous and delirious dance.

This brief discussion of the imagery of dance in the Gaudiya tradition points to a range of performance contexts, from the street and temple processions to relatively more private events. And these activities served multiple functions for the emergent religious tradition. Swept by the intensity of their passion, the dancing forms of Chaitanya, as well as Radha and Krishna, adored in Bengali temple altars offer worshippers the hope of attaining that same trance-like state, and gaining access to the divine realm, itself conceived as the eternal circular *rasa* dance with Krishna dancing at the center as well as a partner for each entrant. The public and processional dimension of his dance drew huge crowds to the ecstatic figure of Chaitanya, increasing in intensity and volume despite the disapproval of local Muslim authorities such as the qazi, who seems to have been unable to quell the exuberance of the swelling crowds.²³ At the same time, as a vehicle for conveying the intensity of Radha and Chaitanya's all-consuming passion for Krishna, dance helped establish the ascendancy of a deeply personal emotional approach over other forms of expression preferred by other religious communities for achieving access to the divine. In so doing, it provided a powerful channel for asserting the Gaudiya premise of Chaitanya's divinity, embodying not only Krishna as the *yugavata*r, but also as the conjoined form of Krishna perpetually intertwined with his beloved Radha. Thus the depictions of the dancing figures of Krishna, Radha, and Chaitanya in temple contexts would have served as a primary mechanism for consolidating the Gaudiya community, and providing a template for performance for later generations in the temple courtyards.



Notes

1. The movement gets its name from Gaur (Gaud), the sixteenth-century capital of the independent Sultanate of Bengal, and this Bengali origin distinguishes this community from others dedicated to the worship of Krishna/Vishnu in north India such as the Pushti Margis, Radha Vallabhis, and Nimbarkis. For overviews of this *bhakti* tradition that coalesced under Chaitanya, see De (1986); Kennedy (1981); Chakravarti (1985); Dimock (1999) (all references to the *Chaitanya Charitamrita* are to Dimock's translation). For a study of the more esoteric Vaishnava Shahajiya groups, see Dimock (1989a).

2. For a description of nagar samkirtan in a Bengali village in Midnapore district see Nicholas (1969: 34).
3. "For prem comes to Krishna from sravan and kirtan: and that is the highest end of man, the limit of the goals of men." *Chaitanya Charitamrita* 2.9.241. Krishna's name was believed to be so powerful that simply uttering it would ensure salvation for the devotee, see Hein (1976: 15–32).
4. On the reorganization of temples in the seventeenth century, shaped by as well as shaping these activities, see Ghosh 2005.
5. *Ashtadhatu*, an alloy of eight metals in specific proportions, is believed to be particularly suitable as a vehicle for these deities. Dark stone is also popularly used for Krishna, who is also Shyam (the dark-skinned one), and these figures may be paired with the more shiny metal that radiates Radha's golden hue.

Wooden icons of Chaitanya and Nityananda are also in use on temple altars throughout the region.

6. These include Gujarati, Rajasthani, Pahari, and Orissan illustrated manuscripts, Bengali temple terra cotta reliefs and Battala woodcuts, Punjabi embroideries, as well as numerous performance traditions and literary manifestations.
7. On the term *lila* in the Gaudiya Vaishnava context, see Dimock (1989b: 159–73) and *Chaitanya Charitamrita* 2:21.44.
8. These roundels are probably the earliest extant representations of the circular dance form in a dated architectural context in the region. The temples were patronized by the local Malla dynasty in control of the Vishnupur region at this time. Recently reconstructed Malla family trees and oral tradition locate the first historical ruler, Vir Hambir, at the end of a long line of local kings, but there is little corroborating evidence to confirm this lineage. The precise dates of Vir Hambir's reign and conversion remain uncertain and contested among historians. However, most agree that he ruled from the last decade of the sixteenth to the second decade of the seventeenth century. The only contemporary source to mention his name is the *Akbarnama*. A detailed discussion of this issue is available in Chakravarti (1985: 222–28). See also Saha (1995: 24–28).
9. The local Malla dynasty in control of the Vishnupur region embraced the religious tradition when they came into contact with the Gaudiya spiritual leader, Srinivas Acharya, who stopped in Vishnupur on his return to Bengal from Vrindavan, bearing the texts formulated there by the six theologians (*goswamis*) who formulated the primary theological textual corpus of the tradition. According to local legend, the king employed bandits to steal the treasures carried by Srinivas, who subsequently recovered them. Srinivas then proceeded to impress and convert the king to Vaishnavism, giving him a new name, Haricharan Das. This legend is recorded in *Bhaktiratnakar*, Ch.7, and *Prem Vilas* Ch. 13. See Sen (1917: 83–183); Chakravarti (1985: 213); Saha (1995: 172–78). On the strategic

significance of Vishnupur for the consolidation of Gaudiya Vaishnavism in Bengal at this time, see Ghosh 2002.

10. Most scholars attribute this text to the tenth century, and ascribe a south Indian origin. See Farquhar (1929: 232); Van Buitenen (1966: 23–40); De (1986: 6). On the Alvar devotional literary context in which this text is believed to have originated, see Friedhelm Hardy (1983) and Ramanujan (1981).
11. While scholars agree that the Kuravai dance described in the early Tamil works, the *Silappadikaram* and *Manimekalai*, is not the rasalila of the Sanskrit tradition, it shares elements with the later *Bhagavata Purana* vision of the rasalila. These include the arboreal setting—gardens, trees, birds—and includes his favorite young female partner (Pinnai). In the *Silappadikaram*, its re-enactment takes the form of a circle with seven young cowherding girls, each singing of the deeds of Krishna and the beauty of Pinnai. However, Monius, in a carefully contextual reading, situates the references in the narrative, and points to the ways in which it is deployed, departing from the message of the *Bhagavata Purana* (2005: 139–50).
12. *Bhagavata Purana*. 10.33.11–16.
13. Radha's form, with one hand raised, balanced by the other stretching back, is a pose that also belongs to the repertoire of present-day Kathak dancers. According to the oral lore surrounding this dance practice, when a dancer assumes the pose in which Radha is depicted, the upward reaching hand is understood to represent the peacock feather of Krishna's headgear, and the other, lowered one is Radha. The dancer thus embodies both figures simultaneously. I thank Pallabi Chakravorty for sharing this observation from her teacher, Bandana Sen.
14. *Prem Vilas* 12: 101–3; summary translation from Sen (1917: 104–5). I use Sen's summary over other extant variants because this version locates the event in the temple courtyard and in the context of temple performance.
15. Edward Dimock has pointed to the element of self-sacrifice: "only when the heart is given unconditionally . . . is such love pure and thus efficacious." (1995: 29).
16. The danger and excitement involved in an adulterous relationship, and her self-sacrifice in taking that risk, provides the paradigm for the worshiper's quest for the divine beloved. *Parakiya*, the doctrine celebrating the especially delectable qualities of longing and sacrifice in an illicit love, was celebrated by Rupa Goswamin, the earliest of the theologians of the Gaudiya tradition, in his *Ujjvala-nilamani*. "A parakiya woman is she who, having no dependence on ordinary dharma, belonging to another, is attracted to a man and causes him to be attracted to her, but who does not enter into marriage with him. A swakiya woman is she who has been

taken in marriage according to the accepted rites, who is obedient to the wishes of her husband, and she does not depart from the dharma of her wifely vows" (Dimock 1989a: 17).

17. I thank Pallabi Chakravorty for this observation.
18. The people with whom I discussed these two figures at Vishnupur were not in agreement as to which figure represented whom. For some, the larger represents Nityananda and the smaller Chaitanya, while others understand that Nityananda usually stands to the right of Chaitanya.
19. Note that icons of Radha and Krishna are portable unlike the reliefs of Chaitanya and Nityananda, so that the present combination of figures is not the only one possible. For example, in another arrangement that I saw in earlier years, the wooden icons of Chaitanya and Nityananda were placed in front of the reliefs, while Krishna occupied the second altar on the western side of the sanctum. However, that combination also evoked the complementarity of the two pairs of figures observed in the present grouping.
20. *Chaitanya Charitamrita* 2.11.206.
21. *Chaitanya Charitamrita* 2.11.213–216–225.
22. Rising from the bottom the avatars are paired as follows: Matsya with Varaha, Kurma with Narasimha, Vamana with Rama, Parasurama with Balarama, Chaitanya with Buddha, and finally Srinivas, the leader who brought Vaishnavism to Vishnupur, with Kalki.
23. *Chaitanya Charitamrita* 1.17.115–219.

References

- Chakravarti, Ramakanta. 1985. *Vaishnavism in Bengal 1486–1900*. Kolkata: Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar.
- De, S. K. 1986. *History of the Vaishnava Faith and Movement*. Kolkata: Firma KLM Private Limited.
- Dimock, Edward C. 1989a. *The Place of the Hidden Moon: Erotic Mysticism in the Vaishnava-Sahajiya Cult of Bengal*. 1966. Reprint Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- . 1989b. "Lila." *History of Religions* 29 (2): 159–73.
- . 1995. "Bhakti." In Michael W. Meister, ed., *Cooking for the Gods: The Art of Home Ritual in Bengal*, pp. 26–31. Newark, N.J.: The Newark Museum and Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- . 1999. *Chaitanya Charitamrita of Krishnadasa Kaviraja. A Translation and Commentary. With an introduction by Edward C. Dimock, Jr. and Tony K. Stewart*, ed. Tony K. Stewart. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Farquhar, J. N. 1929. *An Outline of the Religious Literature of India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Ghosh, Pika. 2002. "Tales, Tanks and Temples: The Creation of a Sacred Center in Seventeenth-Century Bengal." *Asian Folklore Studies* 59 (2): 193–222.
- . 2005. *Temple to Love: Architecture and Devotion in Seventeenth-Century Bengal*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Hardy, Friedhelm. 1983. *Viraha-Bhakti: The Early History of Krishna Devotion in South India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Hein, Norvin J. 1976. "Caitanya's Ecstasies and the Theology of the Name." In Bardwell L. Smith, ed., *Hinduism: New Essays in the History of Religions*, pp. 15–32. Leiden: E. J. Brill.
- Kennedy, Melville T. 1981. *The Chaitanya Movement*. New York: Garland Publishing Inc.
- Monius, Ann. 2005. "Dance Before Doom: Krishna in the Non-Hindu Literature of Early Medieval South India." In Guy L. Beck, ed., *Alternative Krishnas: Regional and Vernacular Variations on a Hindu Deity*, pp. 139–50. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Nicholas, Ralph. 1969. "Vaisnavism and Islam in Rural Bengal." In David Kopf, ed., *Bengal Regional Identity*, pp. 33–47. East Lansing, MI: Asian Studies Center, Michigan State University.
- Ramanujan, A. K. 1981. *Hymns for the Drowning: Poems for Vishnu by Nammalvar*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Saha, Prabhat Kumar. 1995. *Some Aspects of Malla Rule in Bishnupur 1590–1806*. Kolkata: Ratnabali.
- Sen, Dinesh Chandra. 1917. *Vaishnava Literature of Mediaeval Bengal*. Kolkata: University of Calcutta.
- Tagare, Ganesh Vasudeo trans. 1994. "The Bhagavata Purana." In J. L. Shastri, ed., *Ancient Indian Myth and Tradition*, vol. 10, 1978; reprinted Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Van Buitenen, J. A. B. 1966. "On the Archaism of the *Bhagavata Purana*." In Milton B. Singer, ed., *Krishna: Myths, Rites and Attitudes*, pp. 23–40. Honolulu: East-West Center Press.

Remixed Practice: Bollywood Dance and the Global Indian*

PALLABI CHAKRAVORTY

India is going through tumultuous change. In a world where borders are no longer possible, classical Indian and popular film dances coalesce to foreground postmodern hybridity. This essay engages with the intersection of embodiment, practice, dance, film, and cultural identity. The focus is on the popular dance form from Bollywood. Though the term “Bollywood” is new, Bombay films have been around from the 1930s. In recent years, Bollywood’s role in shaping the “national-popular” domain of Indian culture has come under increasing scholarly scrutiny. Scholars such as Ashis Nandy (1998), Madhav Prasad (1998), Mukul Kesavan (1994), Sumita Chakravarty (1993), Ravi Vasudevan (2000), and many others have shown that Hindi films are vital for forging a unified national identity. However, despite the ubiquity of song and dance sequences in Hindi films, there has been little scholarly attention on their cultural importance. Like the films themselves, the song and dance sequences have been important for creating notions of Indian cultural identity or “Indianness” in postcolonial India. This repertory has been an exhaustive mix of Indian dances from classical to folk, with a multitude of forms borrowed from all over the world. In this essay, I argue that the narratives and sensibilities of “Indianness” once circulated through Hindi film song and dance sequences have undergone a significant shift in recent times.

I begin from the premise that the past Indian national identity was created through a particular narrative of tradition that drew on aesthetic emotion (*bhava-rasa* structures of feeling), deep subjectivity, and a long civilizational lineage. Various dances were selectively deployed to construct this modern national identity (Chakravorty 1998, 2004). These dances were based on a model of durable and reproducible

practice (inculcated through terms such as *guru*, *riyaz*, *parampara*), that created a sense of place or a habitus. However, this habitus that was achieved through a grounded experiential and emotional patterning has come unmoored due to economic globalization and the explosion of consumer culture in India. I look at how a particular narrative of tradition that once formed the habitus of Indian dances is now transformed into what is popularly termed “remix.”¹

The larger argument in this essay is that the habitus that connected identities to territorial locations has been reconstituted and deterritorialized. I unpack the terms “habitus” and “practice” (Bourdieu 1977) as they pertain to my exploration of Indian dances, and the terms “embodiment” and “identity,” and explore their meaning in three sections. In the first section, I look at the relationship between Bombay film dance and national identity. In the second section, I look at the changing aesthetic codes and practices associated with Indian dances. Since film dance has drawn on the existing performance traditions, I analyze the changing perceptions of affect (associated with traditional Indian aesthetics) and its changing context in relation to the dancing body in Indian films. In the last section, I focus on a song and dance sequence from *Dhoom 2* as a quintessential example of the cultural phenomenon of “remix.” Overall, I argue that Bollywood dance and the practice of “remix” are possibly the most important sites for analyzing the aesthetic and cultural transformations that are redefining the narratives of national identity in India.

“Practice” is an important analytical node in dance scholarship. Practice refers to both social theory and the corporeal actions of the body. Pierre Bourdieu’s conceptualization of “habitus,” drawn from a phenomenological understanding of practice, has been important in movement scholarship (Fraleigh 1996; Bender 2005). It enabled bodily meaning to be located outside discourses of representation, in the realm of experience and emotion. It connected meaning to memory that was not nostalgia, but was lived in a more immediate way. Interestingly, at the same time, habitus arising from durable and embedded systems of bodily comportments grounded particular bodies in particular places which evoked specific aesthetic sensibilities and emotional patterns (see Chakravorty 2004). In the context of classical Indian dance and music, the cultural rootedness of practice (however reconstructed, re-invented, transnational, and hybrid) is embodied through the practice of a particular student–teacher relationship de-rived from *guru–shishya parampara* and the aesthetics of *bhava* and *rasa* (Vatsyayan 1968). Indian dances and their embeddedness in

traditional systems of knowledge were reformulated to construct the authentic Indian identity of post-independence India (Meduri 1996; Chakravorty 2008, among others).

However, I argue that this particular embedded notion of practice produced through a sense of place and a long civilizational lineage is changing as a new form of dance practice is re-articulating and transforming the aesthetics and politics of Indian dances. This new practice is represented through the term “remix,” where the notion of authentic, stable, or durable practice is replaced by a fluid, changeable, and ephemeral one. In this new form of practice (originally created by DJs mixing various musical tracks to create new hybrid forms), high and low, classical and folk, Indian and western cultural forms absorb, influence, co-opt, plagiarize and cannibalize one another. I argue that remix is evidence of the postmodern notion of consumption of pastiche where the lines between culture and commodity are blurred (Jameson 1991, 1998; Harvey 1989). The song and dance sequences in Bollywood capture this new global Indian modernity, perceptible through a new mediatized, technicized, and commercialized habitus. It is marked by the indeterminacy of the body in postmodernity as it exists in a flux between the experiential-subjective and the objective continuum. I will analyze this new deterritorialized habitus, where cultural and individual memory is unsettled due to media and migration (as Appadurai [1997] states), in relation to dance practice. I will chart this trajectory as it has evolved from traditional notions about practice associated with riyaz and the embodiment of affect (derived from bhava-rasa structures of feeling) to consumption of images. My foci here are both ethnographic engagement and analysis of a song and dance sequence of the high-tech thriller *Dhoom 2*. The song and dance number I discuss in the last section is titled “Dil Lagaa Na Dil Jala Se Dil Jala Jaayegaa.” By drawing on my fieldwork among dancers in Bombay dance halls and analyzing “Dil Lagaa,” I explore the changing relationship between dancing bodies and cultural identity that is reshaping the landscape of affect and habitus in contemporary India.

Mixing Film Dance to the Narratives of Nation

Indian dances have been an important feature of Bombay cinema from its inception. Both have been integral to the project of nation-building and fostering a sense of collective national identity (Chakravarty 1993). I refrain from giving an account of the vast range of dance scholarship or Indian film scholarship that in recent years has argued this point.

However, what is interesting is that both cinema and dance have used similar cultural and aesthetic codes for meaning-making, affect, and identity construction. Both genres have drawn on mytho-poetic narratives and traditional aesthetic forms for establishing a deep sense of cultural identity. Classical and folk dances ranging from Kathak and Bharatnatyam, to Nautanki and Raslila have been the staple of Bombay films. Sangita Shrestova (2003) has analyzed the peculiar cyclical migration of film dance from a medium that was influenced by existing performance traditions of classical and folk dance to a legitimate form of staged concert dance called Bollywood.

Many famous dancers and choreographers have appeared on the silver screen; the list includes names such as Gopi Kishan, Waheeda Rahman, Vyjayanthimala, Kamal Haasan to Hema Malini and Madhuri Dixit. Born out of Parsi theater (which blended local idiom with received colonial aesthetic forms), Bombay cinema has been the fulcrum of creative hybridity (Mishra 2002: 1–33). It has always grappled with two competing modes of representation: melodrama and realism. This negotiation has reflected the larger cultural discourse surrounding tradition and modernity in India as both continue to shape the narrative of democracy and citizenship (see Prasad 1998).

If Bombay cinema (and its recent reconstitution as Bollywood) is the sole model of national unity in India (Chakravarty 1993: 310), then, I argue, the song and dance sequences are its throbbing, pulsating, techni-colored national soul. The song and dance sequences recently re-invented as “item numbers” offer myriad possibilities of heightened pleasure through emotional and visual drama. They function as a bridge between past aesthetic codes associated with classical dances and new ones from MTV, Broadway musicals, music videos, and Euro-American structures of choreography. Simply put, Bollywood dances are the quintessential locus of the complex negotiation between tradition and modernity. They function as engines of change for ushering in new understandings of culture, power, and democracy. Booth traces the changing conventions of song and dance representations in Bombay cinema in these words (2000: 128).

The visual images in these scenes have filled Indian theaters with a stylized vocabulary of dance and gesture ranging from maidenly brushes of the 1940's Lila Chitnis to the brazen bump and grind of the 1990's Madhuri Dixit. Thus, when a song and dance scene appears in a film (of course, its very appearance is a narrative convention) the conventions inform not only the musical, visual and kinesthetic content, but also types of meaning

one can expect and the coded elements that will be used to construct that meaning.

In the past two decades a paradigm shift has taken place in the musical, visual, and kinesthetic content of the song and dance sequences that have challenged the established norms, codes, and meanings. The earlier codes were predominantly drawn from the mytho-poetic semi-otic world of Bhakti and Sufi based on love mysticism. In Hindi films such as *Devdas*, *Guide*, *Pyaasa*, *Kinara*, and many others, the soul's longing for union with the divine was reimagined in song and dance sequences that expressed the lover's desire for his beloved. But these representations of erotic emotions in romantic cinematic spectacles have been replaced by gyrating figures endlessly on display. These latter roles once only reserved for the "vamps" (played by Helen or Nadira in the past) are now coveted by lead heroines. As the song and dance sequences have taken on a new format and movement idiom, they have increasingly dissociated from the plot. Consequently, more value has been added to their commodity status. They now create the repeat value of a film and circulate as music videos and item numbers on television channels, iTunes, and YouTube. They function like franchise productions, transforming the notion of cultural production into the notion of a rhizome, where one product leads to other kinds of merchandise (connected to this is the rise of the multiplex theater as production houses). The song and dances of the earlier times evoked a cultural habitus that was consistent with the embodied aesthetics of the classical and folk forms that connected to a sense of tradition in nation. These dance numbers resonated with the ideology of dance practice derived from a particular kind of social organization and a method of knowledge transmission. Many films directly incorporated this special training and relationship (*guru-shishya parampara*) in their plot. Films such as *Jhanak Jhanak Payal Baje*, *Ganga Jamuna*, *Sursangam*, *Shankaravarnam*, and *Umrao Jaan* show this specific practice-oriented disciplining of the body in narrating the story of a dancer or a musician.

Locating through Ethnography

To locate these ideological and perceptual shifts of the dancing body in a grounded cultural context I began my ethnographic research in the dance and film studios in Bombay. The dance studios are called dance halls. In these studios (such as Satyam in Juhu) dancers and

choreographers gather to choreograph and practice item numbers. The cultural landscape of dance halls in Bombay reflects the new style of dance practice. The dance halls are impersonal, commercial spaces much like the neutral cubic studios in the western world. Although they are not new in Bombay, many have sprung up in recent years due to the demands of a new breed of dancers and choreographers. The *tabla* player or the musicians and the teacher or guru of a typical dance context have been replaced by DJs, big stereo systems, the choreographer and her assistant, and a schedule to keep track of the renters.

The erosion of cultural and aesthetic codes connected to traditional methods of imparting knowledge of the body was echoed by many dancers and choreographers in Bollywood. Geeta Kapoor, who has some Bharatnatyam training, and is now assistant to the eminent choreographer Farah Khan, talked about the emergence of “item numbers”:

In college people asked me to do fashion shows. I got partnered with dancer Javed Jafar. I worked with Ken Ghosh (the music video director of the hit music video “ishk vishk pyar vyar”). I have done forty or so videos with him. I have been working with Farah Khan as her assistant from 1994. I have choreographed *Arman*, *Ashoka*, *Pyar Me Kabhi Kabhi*. I also do a lot of film shows and events. This is the time of the item numbers. Dancers have specific looks, glamour, they are professionals. We know that dancing is all about having a good frame of mind and creating a good look. (Fieldwork, Bombay 2006)

The dancing girls of Bollywood films (previously known as film extras) are now a well-paid professional group with their own union. However, as I roamed the dance halls and film studios in Bombay from Satyam to Film City, it became apparent that none of the choreographers and dancers mentioned being taught by gurus/dance teachers as it is customary among classically trained dancers (although that is also changing as classical training merges with workshops and dancercise, a topic for another essay). The younger dancers could not give me any specifics about their training. Many said they learned from television and were not familiar with classical dancers or Bombay film choreographers who were also classical gurus such as Lachchu Maharaj, Sitara Devi, Gopi Kishan, or Sohanlal. Classical forms to them were exotic and a relic of the past. The training and dance practice were tailored to the item number at hand. Most successful choreographers

were themselves dancers in the past and began as an assistant to an established choreographer or a dance master (in a semiformal apprentice system). They and the dancers spent as much as twelve hours a day in the studios (rehearsing and putting the choreography together). They also spent hours on the set giving shot after shot till the director was satisfied. Geeta Kapoor explains:

We don't have formal dance training schools for Bollywood dances except for so-called Shiamak Davar. Earlier, people got training in Bharatnatyam, Kathak, folk styles etc. But you have to remember that earlier, dancers were fillers in Bombay films. Choreographers have given the dancers a presence in Bombay films. They make Rs 2,500–3,000 a day. We have a union. Now young people learn their moves in fashion shows. They also learn from music videos. Often their first encounter is Bollywood dance numbers on television. They imitate them.

One dance context where classes seemed personal in the old-fashioned way was Begum Habiba's school. This was despite the presence of the DJ, the mirrored studio, and the tank tops and tights I saw all around me. Here I found Kathak classes tucked away with other classes such as western, Bollywood, etc. I was told by a Bombay film person that Begum Habiba is not commercially successful and is not on par with "real" choreographers. But, these reputations were also attached to notions of trends, which changed very often following the discourse of fashion. The director of Dance Directors Association (established in 1975), an umbrella organization that represents the main choreographers in Bollywood, confided in me that when a classical dance instructor who belonged to his association died recently, no one even came to ask about his absence in classes.

The Bombay cultural habitus, much like the larger dance habitus in India, is in tremendous flux. In Bollywood, the changes are not only encoded in the nature of dance practice once associated with traditional embodied aesthetic, but in its negotiations with new editing techniques, computer graphics, and a new impetus to represent bodies that are inspired by commodity images. These sculpted dancing figures very often merge with fashion models, as fashion shows and film dance numbers unite for a common platform to showcase commodities.

The emerging embodied aesthetics of Bollywood dance, dancers, and choreographers is an intertextual field that represents decontextualized bodies in music videos, fashion shows, and films. These bodies

are not embedded in any particular cultural aesthetics. They represent bodies that are floating signifiers of a montage of images. They reflect the commodity-oriented consumption practices of a global Indian modernity. But the cultural products coming out of Bollywood are not homogenous. Directors such as Suraj Barjatya are interested in creating Bollywood films that harken back to past notions of culture and tradition in an auto-exoticizing mode. On the sets of *Vivah* (a film about arranged marriage), in Film City, the award-winning choreographer, Ajai Borade, shared with me his thoughts:

I don't like the present situation. Choreographers don't concentrate on lyrics at all. They just imitate MTV moves. No concept, no situation, just dance for the heck of doing a song number? No one has discipline. Everyone is after money. I avoid working with such groups. I look at the script and then I see the situation. I care about the camera angles. I learned from working fourteen years as an assistant. Now they shoot a music video in one day. I have say in designing the sets, costumes, screenplay and the execution of the song through movements. (Fieldwork 2006)

Borade, who still cares about context in choreographing for item numbers, was stating an interesting fact about the new practice and representation of bodies in dance today. I often found during my fieldwork that choreographers and dancers were working on a song unaware of the title of the film, the script, or the story line. They were given the song by the director of the film and the choreographer put the moves to the song while a DJ played, stopped, and replayed the music. The dancing bodies were instruments on which movements were crafted like cut-and-paste techniques. Therefore, various movements were uprooted from specific contexts and remixed. The next step involved editing the film that was produced after intense rehearsing with the choreographer and his or her assistant. The ultimate product was polished in the hands of the director in collaboration with the choreographer. The rapid and jerky editing techniques reinforced the compressed and fragmentary time and space narratives of postmodernity. The obvious disjuncture that we experience as an audience between film narrative and the song and dance sequences in many Bollywood films is a product of this practice.

This realm of practice creates a habitus where the script or the lyrics seem unimportant; content and context are immaterial; the spectacle of the dance sequence is complete in itself. Many choreographers and dancers I spoke to stressed the importance of the visual: the sets, the

costumes, the lights, and the camera angles. These they say have to work with the choreography to produce a good visual. Sunita, Ajay Borade's assistant expressed her difficulties, "it was easy to choreograph big groups in huge scenes as the dancers are all professionals, but the difficulty is when they have close-ups. It is difficult because you have to express feelings. In Indian dance you can express feelings, but nowadays it is not so important."

Hence music and dance numbers are visual images and fleeting sensations. It further reinforces the idea that the meaning or affect connected to any kind of cultural memory is a mere sensation. This aesthetic sensibility reflects another kind of disjuncture within the habitus of Bollywood—the one between bodily action and embodied subjectivity. Thus habitus as durable systems of bodily comportments that once embedded particular bodies in particular places, connecting them to a specific cultural identity, are unmoored from such cultural specificity. Jameson (1991) and others have noted this absence of overarching narrative in postmodern culture as an end of the coherent self-centered subject based on feelings and emotions. This is summed up by Mazzarella in these words:

The more "culture" itself becomes commodified (the argument goes) the more total is the abstracting rule of exchange value. Signifiers that used to be anchored in particular socio-historical locations increasingly float free of such local referents; instead, they function as tokens in a more or less self-referential, electronically mediated global. (2003:39)

This argument is further extended to exemplify the lack of embodied experiences and deep subjectivity under global capitalism. On a more fundamental level it is connected to the "crisis of the quotidian" (Wolputte 2004: 260). Accordingly, the former habituations and daily routines that gave structure and continuity to experience are constantly interrupted through travel, violence, or multitasking patterns of behavior.

Postmodernists call it the crisis of memory. Embodied practices such as riyaz in dance training created such connections to the past as I have noted elsewhere (Chakravorty 2004). Therefore, as cultural borders become more porous, destabilizing or uprooting bodies from places, a counter narrative emerges of inflamed borders, ancestral homeland, and the preservation of sacred places and environment from the hand of capitalist development.

***Dhoom 2* and Aesthetics of Aspiration**

In the last two decades, due to globalization of media, new technology, and democratization of consumption, a decontextualized visual field of images has replaced an earlier embodied cultural identity. Rather, embodiment has changed from an earlier kind of *rasa* associated primarily with erotic desire in dance (such as *sringara rasa*, encapsulated in *cherchar* in the song and dance) to a desire to consume. Bollywood choreographers have created some of the most stunning images of dance through new digital technology, costumes, sets, and dance techniques. Bollywood song and dance sequences have pushed commodification of images to new aesthetic heights. I will focus on the film *Dhoom 2* to further explore this new symbolic field in constructing a new Indian global modernity. Remix as a conceptual node connects actual dance practice to its representation in Bollywood films.

Remix as cultural practice ultimately represents a particular desire to consume. A desire represented through hyper-visualization of commodity images, also called “commodity aesthetics” (Haug 1986). Bollywood dance, I argue, is a potent desire for producing this particular kind of desire. Bollywood dance enables the dancer and the viewer alike to produce themselves as individual consumers disconnected from their social class, family, or community. I have discussed elsewhere how the recent film *Devdas* creates a pleasure of seduction through a visual overload of commodity aesthetics. In this new consumerist phase of Indian modernity I show how erotic desire that was part of the *bhava/rasa* aesthetics of Indian music and dance is transformed into desire for commodity in the song and dance sequences (Chakravorty 2008). In *Dhoom 2*, we find a further crystallization of commodity images through the creation of yet another kind of “aesthetics of distinction.” In *Dhoom 2*, this aesthetic is that of the global, cosmopolitan Indian who has no citizenship, nor any familial ties. The commodity images inspired by the film are akin to “aspirational images” that create the impulse to consume or buy a product. This concept can also extend to valuing a certain lifestyle or geographical area. Maffarella explains:

The statement that objects or images may be “aspirational” implies that an orientation toward such objects or images indicates a desire for personal transformation, in line with a widely diffused and thus generally recognized index of advancement. Aspirational qualities appear, on the face of it, to

be inherent properties. Thus marketing theorist Davis Aaker writes: "The brand [Nike] is very aspirational in the sense that wearing Nike represents what the users aspire to be like rather than their current self-image" (Aaker 1995: 514–50). Aspirational qualities are, moreover, associated not only with particular brands but also with whole quasi-geographical imaginaries. (2003:102)

This form of aspirational desire of a new generation of Indians, I argue, is writ large on the canvas of *Dhoom 2*. This high-tech thriller is a sequel to the mega hit *Dhoom*. *Dhoom 2* is an extraordinary visual extravaganza even by Bollywood standards. This cop and thief film starred Hrithik Roshan, Aishwarya Rai, Abhishek Bachchan, and Bipasha Basu. The story spans several continents from Africa to India to South America. Hrithik Roshan is an international thief who plans to steal a priceless artifact in Bombay. Aishwarya Rai is a wanna be master thief who falls for Hrithik. This is the basic story line, with cop Abhishek Bachchan always being outwitted by the thief Hrithik. Both Hrithik and Aishwarya exude the cosmopolitan aura of western fashion models with their perfect bodies, stylish accessories, tanned looks and golden hair highlights. Hrithik sports Pepe jeans, drives Suzuki bikes, and is the quintessential American hero, whereas Ash, as she is popularly known, wears leather boots, micro mini skirts, and bikini tops, reminding us of MTV queen Britney Spears.

The song and dance sequence "Dil Lagaa Na Dil Jala Se Dil Jal Jaayegaa" opens with a Samba festival in Brazil. After a few stunning Capoeira moves, the audience is confronted with the dazzling moves, sculpted body, youthful exuberance of Hrithik. Displaying his narcissistic musculature, Hrithik glides, grinds, jumps, and sways. Aishwarya in a white mini skirt and a bikini top exhibits her slender body and bare legs more fearlessly than her male counterpart. The digital effects in the sequence are spliced with elaborate costumes of the carnival creating a colorful montage. The shots keep moving from one image to another creating a dizzying array of images. It creates a techno-Indo-American aesthetic that is neither bound by geographical boundaries nor by any ethnic identity. Note that the lyrics of the song itself are in Hinglish (a mixture of English and Hindi). With its bold images (leather, metal, acrobatic bodies) and international brand endorsement such as Suzuki bikes and Pepe jeans, *Dhoom 2* delivers the promise of liberation from geographical boundaries and bounded aesthetics by creating "aspirational commodity aesthetics" of social distinction. A distinction created through the value of looking

Euro-American, maintaining a Euro-American lifestyle by driving Suzukis, and sporting Pepe jeans and micro minis. *Dhoom 2* signifies a new Indian membership in the transnational and transcendental world of commodity images that is both global and Indian.

Conclusion

The essay focuses on Bollywood dance to explore the concept of “remix” as a particular kind of dance practice that is impacting on contemporary Indian culture. I have argued that Bollywood dance and the dancing body is a potent lens to analyze the changing perceptions that shape cultural identity and subjectivity. Embodiment as a conceptual node, which incorporates aesthetics, needs to be juxtaposed with post-colonial and postmodern cultural theory to analyze deep perceptual changes in identity construction. I have used the concepts of habitus and practice as they relate to embodiment and experience of *rasa* and remix to analyze contemporary dance aesthetics. I have elaborated remix as a dance/cultural practice that ultimately represents a desire to consume. I have used ethnographic fieldwork in Bombay dance halls and film studios to show how dance practice in Bombay dance halls connects to narratives of desire and social distinction represented in films such as *Dhoom 2*.



Notes

*Part of this article appeared in the *Journal of Visual Anthropology* 22, 2009.

1. Wikipedia describes “remix” as a hybridizing process combining fragments of various works. Although associated with music, it can be applied to visual or video arts, and even things further afield.

References

- Aaker, David, 1995. *Building Strong Brands*. New York: Free Press.
- Appadurai, Arjun. 1997. *Modernity at Large*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Bender, Shawn. 2005. “Of Roots and Race: Discourses of Body and Place in Japanese Taliko Drumming.” *Social Science Japan Journal* 8 (2): 197–212.
- Booth, Gregory, 2000. “Religion, Gossip, Narrative Conventions and the Construction of Meaning in Hindi Film Songs.” *Popular Music* 19: 125–46.

- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. R. Nice. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press.
- Chakravarty, Sumita. 1993. *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema, 1947–87*. Austin: University of Austin Press.
- Chakravorty, Pallabi. 1998. "Dance Hegemony and Nation: The Construction of Classical Indian Dance." *South Asia* 21: 107–20.
- . 2004. "Dance, Pleasure and Indian Women as Multisensorial Subjects." *Visual Anthropology*, March, 17 (1): 1–17.
- . 2008. *Bells of Change: Kathak Dance, Women and Modernity in India*. Kolkata: Seagull.
- Fraleigh, Sandra H. 1996. *Dance and the Lived Body*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Harvey, David, 1989. *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Cambridge: Blackwell.
- Haug, W. F. 1986. *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics: Appearance, Sexuality, and Advertising in Capitalist Society*. Translated by Robert Bock. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Jameson, Frederic. 1991. *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- . 1998. "Globalization as Philosophical Issue." In Frederic Jameson and Masao Miyoshi, eds, *The Cultures of Globalization*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Kesavan, Mukul. 1994. "Urdu, Awadh and the Tawaif: The Islamicate Roots of Hindi Cinema." In Zoya Hasan, ed., *Forging Identities: Gender, Communication and the State*, p. 253. New Delhi: Kali for Women.
- Mazzarella, William. 2003. *Shoveling Smoke: Advertising and Globalization in Contemporary India*. Durham, Duke University Press.
- Meduri, Avanthi. 1996. "Nation, Woman, Representation: The Sutured History of the Devadasi and Her Dance." Unpublished Ph.D. diss., New York University.
- Mishra, Vijay. 2002. *Bollywood Cinema.: Temples of Desire*. New York: Routledge.
- Nandy, Ashis, ed. 1998. *The Secret Politics of Our Desires*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Prasad, Madhav. 1998. *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction*. New Delhi, Oxford University Press.
- Shrestova, Sangita. 2003. "Strictly Bollywood? Story, Camera, and Movement in Hindi Film Dance." M.A. thesis, Princeton University.
- Vasudevan, Ravi, ed. 2000. *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Vatsyayan, Kapila. 1968. *Classical Indian Dance in Literature and the Arts*. New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi.
- Wolputte, Steven Van. 2004. "Hang on to Your Self: Of Bodies, Embodiment, and Selves." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33: 251–69.

IV

The Gendered Dancing Body

The Daring Within: Speaking Gender through Navanritya

AISHIKA CHAKRABORTY

Introduction

Can the female body furnish a discursive site for a radical cultural politics? Is it possible to use dance, a celebratory art of the female body, to contest the dominant constructions of femininity? How can a female dancer find ways to speak her mind in a non-verbal medium? This essay seeks to answer many such questions as it raises a few more in delving into the idea and idiom of a *new dance* called Navanritya. Taking the dancer's body as an object of discourse, Navanritya spells out a new body politics, stressing its social, historical, and ideological constructions.

In India, discourses on both dance and the dancer have inhabited a politically volatile terrain. Much of this discourse, I have argued, turned on the twin axes of gender and sexuality. It was assumed, not questioned, that a female dancer was a sight and an object of male vision who communicated purely through her physicality. This essay scrutinizes the patriarchal eye behind the formulation of roles, icons, and the dancing stereotypes as scripted in the colonial-classical tradition. Underpinning the dynamic interplay between caste, class, gender, and dance, my essay maps out the itinerary of the *new dance* from the colonial to postcolonial Bengal, blurring concurrently the binary between the "classical" and the "contemporary."¹

The essay also looks at the life story of the dancer-choreographer, Manjusri Chaki-Sircar, who epitomized the movement of the *new dance*. Disrupting and subverting existing regimes of representation, she challenged culturally constituted bodily identities, which were real

as well as socially inscribed and discursively produced. Transgressing the “classical body,” the political economy of her dance emphasized the materiality and actual lived experiences of the female body.² While representations of the female body in classical dance followed an archetype sculpted by the male gaze, Manjusri’s choreography construed it through multiple constructions and deconstructions.³

The journey of “modern”/“contemporary” dance in early twentieth-century India witnessed momentous shifts initiating certain stylistic breakthroughs.⁴ Bengal, which can hardly boast of possessing any classical dance tradition, takes pride in having inaugurated the modern dance movement in India. My essay looks at three major cut-off points with sequential overlaps and focuses on the alternative fourth—Navanritya, which runs parallel and opposite to the *brahminic*, patriarchal culture. Following the eclectic dance technique of Rabindranath Tagore, stepping beyond the imaginative experiments of Uday Shankar and moving further away from the Indian People’s Theater Association’s explorations of subaltern culture, Navanritya signaled a paradigm shift in Indian dance. It grew out of yet differed fundamentally from its proximate developments. As the foremost feminist intervention, it exuded a non-patriarchal expression through dance. Returning the female “body” to her “self,” it spoke a woman’s language.

Though the inception of modernism in Indian dance traced its origin to the cultural revivalism of the 1930s, contemporary dance as we see it today is a more recent phenomenon. Unlike its classical counterpart, the contemporary was considered an upstart, born out of irreverence. The journey that began at the crossroads of a renaissance and revivalism gained momentum and a wider social acceptability during the 1980s–90s. This period was marked by an iconoclastic defiance against the classical tradition. In India, as in the west, most of the iconoclasts who broke new ground were women. Key dancers like Dr Manjusri Chaki-Sircar, Mrinalini Sarabhai, Chandralekha, Kumudini Lakhia, Maya Krishna Rao, Daksha Seth, and Ranjabati Sircar dominated the postcolonial and post-classical dance repertoire, each with their distinct styles of choreography. They visibly overturned the classical ideology and addressed gender and sexual politics through a dynamic representation of the female body.

In Navanritya, Manjusri raised fundamental questions about tradition, spectatorship, and gender that encoded women’s bodies as subordinate and passive. Continuing the legacy of kinesthetic semiotics, her daughter, Ranjabati, further explored the complex linkages between

race, nationality, class, and sexuality. Her repertoire, with new signs of hybrid and postcolonial identity, reflected the tensions of a diasporic dancer, signaling another paradigm shift within Navanritya. Negotiating with cultural borders, social identities, and their embodied realities, she worked within a liminal or in-between “third space” (Paul 1998). Their shared inventory, ranging from pure narrative to non-literal and non-linear, mapped the migration of body movements across boundaries, outside the hegemonic classical paradigm.

Navanritya: History and Ideology

My first encounter with Navanritya started at the age of seventeen when I went to a new dance school—Dancers’ Guild. I had acquired training in Indian classical dance, but I was yet to grapple with the new vocabulary of dance. I was told that I had to learn a new body dynamic, unlearning some of the old. But my first class left me dumbfounded. I could barely dance. The artistic director kept on repeating one basic instruction, “Keep your spine straight.” Reverberating the Grahamian doctrine, “Your spine is the line connecting heaven and earth,” Manjusri underscored the centrality of the backbone. Each turn, each leap, each fall was guided by one single command—“Straighten your spine.” Whether we stood, or sat, or rolled on the floor, we had to keep our spines straight! Indeed, we were tired of the director’s obsession with the spine. Later I realized how conscious she was of the woman’s spine. Women often seek to hide their bodies and are made to forget that they have such a thing called a “spine.” Patriarchy grooms, conditions, and demands the feminine vertebra to be stooped. Manjusri’s task was to remind us all the time to hold aloft that delicate spine. While creating *new dance* she consciously constructed a *new woman*. Navanritya taught me not only new ways of dancing, but also new ways of thinking about my body and myself—as a woman. Our lessons in Navanritya were thus lessons of life. Reaching out to a new discipline, this dance helps us to stand straight and stretch forward.

What was “new” in Navanritya? Newness has myriad definitions. It can mean changed, revived, modified, based upon, or altered. Navanritya is all these, and it is more than that. Navanritya is not a “style,” nor does it aim to build up a *gharana*, according to its inventors.⁵ It is a “psycho-physical” exercise, exploring the kinesthetic, tactile, and philosophical possibilities of body language.

Ranjabati once defined Navanritya as a compound of two Sanskrit words put together in an original way. The two words—“*nava*” and

“nritya”—with separate meanings on their own, together make a new word, with a new meaning beyond the original ones. “Navanritya,” she explained, is a “reincarnation” and a “re-embodiment” of dance (Chakraborty 2008: 13). Since the 1930s, Indian dance forms have been termed as classical, semi-classical, folk, and tribal, and experimentations with these forms have received myriad names like Oriental, neo-classical, modern, and innovative. The work of sorting out labels is not over yet and perhaps never will be, since the terms have crossed over, interchanged, or remained side by side. Far from being a rearrangement of traditional patterns within a style, described Ranjabati, Navanritya grew out of “cross-stylization” of different dance patterns. It retained a flavor of classicism while refusing to be subject to it.

Beyond these long-winded connotations, Manjusri offered an unorthodox definition of her dance. She considered the word “contemporary” to be a weak reed. Today’s “contemporary” (*samakalin*) would be tomorrow’s “outdated” (*gatakalin*), she said. Navanritya should be of all times, hence eternal (*sarvakalin*). This dance would mirror our times, not in snapshots but in all its rich changes, flux, and fluidity. Manjusri believed that Navanritya, like every modern dance, is a point of view, an attitude toward the contemporary world.⁶ As the world keeps changing, it will change. It will have to be demolished and re-choreographed. Unless this happens, modern dance is not modern—it is dead.⁷

The engagement with modernity in Indian dance has never been free from contradictions. Often identified with the “western,” Indian modern dance was frequently posited in contradistinction to the traditional and classical.⁸ Navanritya with its roots in Indian tradition develops through its continuous subversion. Integrating the imprints of cross-culturalism, it articulates a resoundingly Indian dance language against Eurocentric notions of modern dance.

Its first run started back in the 1950s in the city of Kolkata (then Calcutta). In a sense, Navanritya is of Kolkata, mirroring the spirit of the urban metropolis with its colonial past and postcolonial influences. Kolkata’s art has reached from the local to the global, from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first; Navanritya is part of that Kolkata—that trajectory. The city of *bhadraloks* was once considered a pace setter for the nation’s intelligentsia. But how different was the cultural profile of Kolkata from the rest of India? Was the colonial city conducive to the emergence of a new dance? There has never been any real dance tradition in Bengal as there has been in south and north

India. While the cultural contours of other parts of India were starkly shaped by classicism, Kolkata, unregimented by traditional influences, seemed ready for experimentation.

But, with all its creative feats, dance, unlike theater and cinema, was not related to the urban, intellectual “culture.” The response of the Kolkata audience was not one of forthright appreciation to modern dance. Tagore’s experiments invited flak from critics. Uday Shankar and Shanti Vardhan moved far from the city to set up their dance centers elsewhere. Especially between the mid-1960s and 1970s, modern dance seemed to have reached an impasse. Out of the passions and frustrations of a fickle urban landscape emerged the *new dance* (Chaki-Sircar 1972).

Ideologically Navanritya rejects the content of dance as determined by Hindu, brahminic, patriarchal tradition. Manjusri asserted, “My dance is a protest against that *classical* conviction which deprecates, denigrates, and decries women” (Chaki-Sircar personal communication). In the classical repertoire, “From Kalidasa to Jaydev, the stress has been on the male romance” (Sen 1994: 16). Within this framed tradition, women tended to get frozen in irrelevant stereotypes—as *abhisarika*, *darpanasundari*, and several other enticing bodily images. The dance that perennially traps women within the image of a “*nayika*” (heroine) portrays her body, almost without exception, for erotic purposes. Thus Dassiattam, later rechristened Bharatnatyam, developed through the *devadasi* system that was exploitative of women. The *darbari* dance like Kathak evoked court patronage through “*salam*” catering sensual indulgence to a male audience with an obsessive illustration of the Krishna theme. Odissi and Bharatnatyam emphasized the strengths of the female body—the heavy pelvis, the flexible torso, supple neck and limbs, complimented by a thematic focus on man–woman relations. Women, the bodies that danced, were displaced from actual social contexts and commodified as objects of desire.⁹ Ranjabati asked whether a language of dance that evolved out of various levels of exploitation and power politics could explore a modern ethos.

But is it so easy even today to come out of the normative roles that continue to please, both visually and socially? Sita, running after the golden deer, still dominates the stage. Love-stricken Radha, falling for polygamous Krishna, is still the undisputed heroine. While cultural politics in India encouraged these images to be flaunted on stage, Navanritya refused to follow the syntax circumscribed by the classical.

"Dance today can not be creatively reinvented," Manjusri affirmed, "unless it is ripped up from its classical patriarchal moorings" (Chaki-Sircar 2000: 12–14). However classical *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* may be, Shakuntala cannot claim a place in Navanritya.

Does the desire to glorify tradition as ancient and timeless stem from the Orientalist agenda? Does it reflect the insecurity of a colonized people? Ranjabati argued that the relationship between the traditional training system and the body under training "is strictly patriarchal: the system is authority, the body is object." The classical exercise, rooted in the guru–shishya parampara, sanctified by tradition, accentuates "the gender dichotomy, without regard to the sexes involved." "The disciple is female, the guru male; the body feminine-receptive, the system masculine-penetrative" (Sircar 1993: 2068).

The discourse of embodying difference is, indeed, a legacy of Manjusri's personal history. She was born in August 1934 in the most volatile decade of the last century. It witnessed the Sarda Act, which restrained child marriage in India, altering the fate of millions of Hindu women. During the 1930s, Gandhian nationalism opened up new spaces for women in public politics. Around the same time, middle-class women came out on the public stage as dancers. Manjusri, the eighth child of her parents, was the most stubborn, keen to break the rules of domesticity. Born in Murshidabad, she spent her childhood in Pabna (now in Bangladesh). Her family had to relocate to Kolkata during the partition. As a girl of fourteen she experienced riots and hunger. The upheavals of the Second World War, nationalism, and communal holocaust left indelible marks on her childhood memories.

This migration simultaneously enabled Manjusri to explore contemporary culture in Kolkata in her own way. It was a time when far-reaching experimentations were taking place in various art forms—music, film, theater, sculpture, paintings—all swayed by gusts of innovative modernity. A restless and demanding generation hailed changes in every art form and set them on the move.

The language of dance, however, refused to deviate from tradition. In postcolonial East Asia, an element of the "western modern" visibly altered tradition. In communist China, Mao censored erotic sentiments, thus reshaping the Peking Opera. Kabuki was reformed eliminating excess stylization. As a remarkable exception Indian dance retreated to an unquestioning classicism.

Tagore and the New Dance

In Bengal the experiments that started in the late 1920s with Rabindranath Tagore were brief but significant. Dance was the last frontier of art he approached, rather a late child but nonetheless maturely conceived. Tagore, the most representative voice of the Bengal Renaissance, fashioned his own genre of dance drama, a unique blend of dance, theater, and songs (Ketaki Kushari Dyson in Introduction to Tagore 1992: 24). He not only counterbalanced the hegemonic classicism of south India, but also modernized the Oriental tradition of performing arts.¹⁰

The Tagorean dance tradition, reflecting the modernism of Renaissance Bengal, provided the first watershed in modern dance. Tagore's foremost contribution was to provide the context for the emergence of "respectable" middle-class women in the world of performing arts, the stamping ground of "unrespectable" public women. In nineteenth-century Bengal, dance was considered a degenerate pursuit of rich *zamindars* and Bengali *baboo*s who patronized *khemtas* and *nautches* to entertain British officers. With his new dancers, Tagore asked for a new rank of educated audience, consisting of both men and women. Indeed, in his day he served the valuable purpose of making dance accessible to middle-class Bengali women. To see girls on stage moving their bodies, however tentatively, was something of a revolution and an addition to the nationalist upsurge. In spite of inviting censure from contemporary society, Tagore facilitated a responsiveness to dance as a legitimate social activity (Chaki-Sircar 2003). He kept deliberate aloofness from the professional Bengali stage, as his works evolved along their own lines. Indeed, Tagore had never written for the public; rather, he created a public for his works (Guha-Thakurta 1961).

Contemporary women learning dance in Shantiniketan recalled their stage performances as a unique cultural experience (Sen 1977, 2000; Chakraborty 2004). The social environment, however, impeded the development of a powerful body language. Under the influence of Victorian morality and *Brahmo* puritanism, Tagorean dance style remained more aesthetic than self-assertive. Manipuri, the most gentle and "non-threatening" of classical styles, was preferred for women dancers. His own presence on stage as the *sutradhar* (narrator) tacitly sanctified the performances with social endorsement (Chaki-Sircar n.d.). The costumes for the female dancers, designed by Pratima Devi



Figure 13.1: Women dancers performing *Shyama*, as Tagore watches.
(Photograph courtesy Rabindra Bhavan, Viswabharati, Santiniketan)

and Nandalal Bose, had many sashes for the upper torso, with scarves hanging from both shoulders, safeguarding reticence of the body.

Tagore's experiments were, in fact, in line with the nationalist construction of the new woman, bred within the middle-class homes. The "new woman" was allowed to acquire cultural refinements without jeopardizing her sexual modesty. The "new patriarchy" under the nationalist ideology adopted selected elements of "tradition" as marks of cultural identity, but this was a deliberately "classicized" tradition—reformed and reconstructed.¹¹ The middle-class sexual morality prescribed decorum, civility, and modesty as the cornerstones of acceptable behavioral paradigm for the respectable *bhadramahila* (Bannerji 2001). As morally judgmental terms these qualities also operated in a wider cultural economy to validate their location within both the "private" and "public" spheres.

The question is—how "modern" was Tagore's vision of dance? In his early compositions of *Balmiki Pratibha*, *Falguni* and *Arup Ratan*, spontaneous movements were woven into an operatic structure, where dance came as mere embellishment to the songs (Sircar 1986;

Chaki-Sircar n.d.). Later, however, he was forced to find a vocabulary to shore up the metaphoric and dramatic imagery of his songs and dance dramas. Hence began his ceaseless search for new forms, new ways of approaching the body. In search of new languages, Shantidev Ghosh was sent to Kerala and accompanied Tagore to Java and Bali (Ghosh 1952). Tagore was equally fascinated by the masculine vim and vigor of *Mayurbhanja Chau* and *Raibeshey* (Ghosh 1983). Twice he brought south Indian teachers to introduce a southern dance style to Shantiniketan (Devi 1949). In 1927, Srimati Tagore went to Europe to learn modern dance. She was asked by Tagore to choreograph his poem *Jhoolan* with her newly acquired expressionist style, pioneered by Mary Wigman (Ghosh 1983). Pratima Devi, Tagore's daughter-in-law, influenced by classical ballet, choreographed a group dance based on collective synchronization. A whole new repertoire was about to go forward, through self-absorption and imaginative expansion, drawing from folk to classical, from Indian to western (Ghosh 1994).

Tagore's contribution to the modernization of dance cannot be compared with the revival of classical dance. He moved towards an artistic future where form and content would match each other through innovative exchanges. Although he took part in the cultural revivalist movement along with Vallathol and Rukmini Devi, Tagore was never fulfilled with these forms, however pure they might be. He expressed his weariness with the repetitive nature of specialized styles. His imageries of dance were visually represented through his paintings—abstract yet allusive.

However, after his death, the popular version of Tagorean dance belied his vision of modernity. Ranjabati explained that apart from a few exceptions, two blind alleys characterized the line in Bengal. One alternative was to join in the stereotyped dancing that passed as Rabindrik. Such dance was exemplified in its literalness—a gesture to illustrate every word. The other road rejected Tagore at the outset as pre-modern and passé. Both approaches (or non-approaches), said Ranjabati, sought to discount his contributions in modern dance (Sircar 1986).

Where does then, Navanritya stand? For Manjusri, the legacy of Tagore was one obvious springboard for creations. Simultaneously, she had to brave the Rabindrik style defended by Shantiniketan. Her early experimental dash with Tagorean eclecticism met with disapproval. In 1954, Manjusri was cautioned by Nandita Kripalni, the granddaughter of Tagore and the chairperson of Sangeet Natak Akademi,

not to innovate further upon his dance. “After the death of *dadamashai* (grandfather),” Kripalni said, “it was an end in itself” (Chaki-Sircar 2000). Manjusri differed. Between the classical/stereotypical and the untutored/amateur she was forced to discover her “own” dance.

Uday Shankar and Beyond

If Rabindranath was the first to conceptualize Indian modern dance, Uday Shankar was the first to apply it. Under his charismatic influence Indian dance burst onto the world scene. His spectacular Oriental dance captivated the western audience. The renaissance of classical dance was not really at odds with his modern experiments. With Shankar’s modern deployment of the tradition, with his dramatization of Kathakali, came the fame of Indian classical dance. Hardly a traditionalist himself, Uday Shankar popularized his tradition and prepared the western audience for classical forms derived from temple dancing.

In one significant move, however, Uday Shankar broke away and reversed the classical pattern of dance where music comes first and dance is adapted to it. In his formula, movement had to be evolved first with any kind of articulation of the body (Vatsyayan 2003). “It is sheer injustice to dance as an art form,” Manjusri wrote in a similar vein, “if it has to play a subordinate role to music, be it that of Tchaikovsky, Tagore or Thyagaraja” (Chaki-Sircar 2003: 37).

But there were also points of departure. With all her regard for Shankar as a versatile artist, Manjusri was able to sculpt a distinct style not influenced by him. She was rather critical about his celebration of masculinity. His dance was centered upon himself and therefore on the male body (Sen 1994: 16). The roles he made famous were *Indra*, *Rudra*, *Kartikeya*, and, of course, *Krishna*. Though integrated into the modern form, the women dancers’ characterizations nonetheless followed the *Puranic* and mythical roles. “Why,” Manjusri would ask, “of all Tagore’s poems, did he choose *Samanya Kshati* in which the proud queen is humbled and the king emerged both powerful and magnanimous?” (Chaki-Sircar, personal communication).

The IPTA Intervention

The Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA) or the Gana Natya Sangha was founded in Bengal during the Quit India Movement of

1942. Primarily a cultural expression of the Communist Party of India, IPTA stood against imperialism and fascism. Under the influence of the Communist Party of Soviet Union (CPSU), it revived folk art, adapted the bourgeois (classical) art, and created a mass-art for the proletariat.

The caption goes, People's Theatre "stars the people." The IPTA favored "art for life." It portrayed contemporary realism forming new relationships between art, artists, and audience. Shanti Vardhan, Narendra Sharma, and Sachin Shankar, breaking away from Uday Shankar's Almora Centre, led the dance squad of IPTA. Their repertoire included *Call of the Drum*, *Amar Bharat*, *Ramleela*, and a wide range of folk dances of India. The devastating famine of Bengal in 1942 inspired the cultural squad to produce "Voice of Bengal." Reba Roy, a leading dancer, described in detail the diet, the drill, and the discipline of dancers of the cultural squad during the early 1940s (Ray Choudhury 1999).

Around the 1960s, IPTA faced disintegration at the national level, though the local units continued to function. With the untimely departure of Shanti Vardhan, the IPTA dance movement received a setback, losing its appeal and attraction. Notwithstanding their commitment to the party ideology, the choreographers failed to capture public imagination.

At the same time, the modern dance movement in Bengal reached a stalemate. The constant ferment that once characterized the contemporary kaleidoscope was visibly missing. Bengal, the capital of contemporary dance, increasingly took a back seat in the dance graph of India.

Navanritya: Her Body, Her Dance

It was in this context that Navanritya emerged with its alternative idiom. Questioning "the ability of ancient tools to express modern concerns," it set off a new breakthrough in Indian modern dance (Sircar 2003: 92). Dance now became a social as well as a political statement. Under a new genre, modern dance took another leap forward (Chakraborty 2006).

The most important influence that fashioned the style and technique of Navanritya was the book called *Nritya* (Dance). Written by Pratima Devi, *Nritya* reflected a great deal of Tagore's own thinking about dance. The focus was on a "chemical synthesis" of diverse dance

traditions without their “associated contexts.” In the 1930s, Pratima Devi wrote that the form appropriate for a modern Indian dance was still shrouded in obscurity: “It was like groping in the dark with a mixture of mime, musical expression and body movements. The mixture did allow scope for emoting but it was not completely fulfilling” (Devi 1949: 20–21).

A question remains: How capable was this form for expressing a fuller range of emotions, evolving into a modern dance? Tagore himself provided the clue. He composed his songs through a creative amalgam of diverse traditions—Indian classical and folk, mingling *tappa*, *dhamar*, *baul* with western music. Thus, argued Pratima Devi, modern dance had to be constructed from wide-ranging movements. The dance could be *based* upon classical techniques yet might not be fully loyal to it. It should symbolize something more—a newness—a unique distinctive style (Devi 1949: 34). Navanritya seeks to embody this Tagorean vision of modern dance.

Was it then a patchwork? Was it a mere pastiche of sundry movements? Manjusri emphasized that methodologically Navanritya adhered to the stylization of a variety of dances but went on to tear them off their original contexts, blending them with other body dynamics. The hybridity of Navanritya, placed in the conjunction of cultures, had within it a counter-hegemonic agency.¹² Through its “chemical synthesis” a Bharatnatyam *adavu* could become, in a flash, a *topka* of Chhau, and the strong lines and high kicks of the martial arts could blend with the lyrical curves of Manipuri and Odissi. By continuous breaking and stretching, said Ranjabati, a new centering of the body was discovered, not dictated by any one style.

This hybridity owes its origin to the transmigration of Manjusri, who covered vast distances geographically and intellectually. After her marriage she left for Africa in 1961. While experiencing the uninhibited physicality of tribal-traditional African dance, she started her first school in Nigeria to teach “Indian” dance to African students. Carrying her newborn daughter, Ranjabati, along on her back, Manjusri entered into a new process of learning and experimentation.

In 1966, Manjusri left Africa to live in New Paltz, America, where modern dance movements were making waves. The period was marked by a cultural politics in America that emphasized multiculturalism. This was the time, when Indians and Indianness had become a part of the cultural landscape of America. Performance of the Indian classical, bearing the stamp of class experience of the educated middle class, was now preferred in an attempt

to reify the immigrant culture. To recreate one's own culture left behind represented the "burden" of representing the "pure" version of immigrant culture to alien interlocutors, of "getting it right" and of teaching its true ingredients to the next generation. This reification was indeed symptomatic of immigrant identification.¹³

For Manjusri, such reification was, however, not without question. If the general diasporic pattern followed an uncritical veneration of classical tradition, Manjusri's dance was situated within a discourse of resistance. Though frequently compelled by her sponsors to present the "pure classical," Manjusri initiated an open intercession between the Indian classical and the western contemporary. Carrying on her old fascination with Martha Graham, she started taking lessons in modern dance wearing leotards under her *saree* (Chaki-Sircar 2000: 32).

Under the influence of post-modernism, Manjusri's dance expunged racial memories of colonialism. Scrutinizing the colonial male gaze she revealed how concepts of nation were linked to class, caste, and gender, and how all these could meet in bodily representation. A contemporary dance critic in America (*New York Times*) found the overpowering aura of her dance something "beyond a theater dance" while another hailed (*Dance Magazine*) her as the "Indian Isadora" (reproduced in Chaki-Sircar, Repertoire).

Indeed, Manjusri was imbued with the kinetic spirit of the founding mothers of modern dance. Duncan danced out her generation's rebellion against the Puritanism of the Victorian era. Transgressive of traditional gender ideology, socially her works found parallels in the radical freeing of the body by the feminist dress reform movement. The rebellion culminated in Graham's dramatization of the conflict between Puritanism and sexual oppression. The 1930s, dominated by Graham and Humphrey, were remembered as the "long woollens" period. No pretty costumes, just a black jersey. No pink slippers, just barefoot. Dance was no longer a spectacular display of the legs but a reflection of the inner self. Turning away from fairy tales and romantic legends, dancers took up the social and psychological problems that beset their own time. Black dancers, rejecting the "Lilly White" ballet, started dancing in black boots. By the early 1970s, social and political protests found their way into a dramatically oriented dance theater. Unrestricted by a limited vocabulary, modern dance now discovered a range of possibilities in human movement.

Her worldwide travels enabled Manjusri to broaden the horizon of her dance. Her encounters with modern, non-literal, postmodern and

post-classical techniques finally ended in setting up her own dance institute, Dancers' Guild, in August 1983. The Guild, a creative laboratory, became the only center in India to develop a contemporary training methodology. Marked by the absence of closures and openness of dialogue, the dance was ever accommodative of body dynamics.¹⁴ Eight groups of movements were codified, ranging from *bhumisparsha* to *urdhagati* and *ullamphan*—from the earth to the air. The movements sought to transcend the duality of *tandava* and *lasya* (the masculine and the feminine) regardless of the sexual identity of the dancer.

In her first production of *Meerabai Nrityakatha*, Manjusri represented Meera as a social deviant, who challenged patriarchal dogma. In *Rudramadhur*, a collage of Tagore's songs, she went beyond the trite Rabindrik style. Her signature pieces, however, dwelt on Tagore's dance dramas, where she found her true icons. It was Tagore, she believed, who broke the tradition of so-called "Hindu" dance and enlarged it beyond Shiva-Krishna mythological themes (Chaki-Sircar 1972: 193). Tagore's *new women* appeared in the pages of his novels, short stories, and poems, in the strains of his songs and against all oppositions, straight onto the open stage. In his dance dramas, he borrowed powerful imagery of women from epics and the ancient past, recasting them in a new mold. His three great dance dramas, *Shyama*, *Chitrangada*, and *Chandalika*, tore apart the images of *ashtanayikas* of classical theory (Chaki-Sircar unpublished).

Chitrangada of the *Mahabharata* is transformed into a self-realized warrior queen who changes forever the definition of a wife—neither goddess nor ordinary woman. In Manjusri's interpretation, Chitrangada, who takes up the task of winning Arjuna through external charm, treats it almost like a challenge to battle. Her second self is intoxicated by the discovery of sensuality through a new body, and yet soon she begins to feel like a prisoner trapped inside her own beauty.

Manjusri reinterpreted *Tasher Desh* (Kingdom of Cards) as a social satire, a mockery of the Hindu caste system. It was an absurdly absolutist state, where women were incarcerated, and patriarchal tyranny was upheld through several policing agencies. When an outlandish prince landed with a call for change, the cards were reshuffled and took off their masks to bring down the rule of Cards.

The most forceful characterization of women appeared in Tagore's *Chandalika* (the untouchable woman), a derivation from the *Jataka* story, *Shardulakarnavadan*. Manjusri's *Tomari Matir Kanya* drew

both from the dance-drama and the play *Chandalika*. Inspired by Gandhi's *Harijan* movement, *Chandalika* challenged the *brahminic* caste hierarchy, which marginalized women, especially low-caste women, by deploying tradition and religion. *Tomari Matir Kanya* endorses women's agency in social change, recognizes their collective power and the relative independence of low-caste women in ritual ceremonies falling outside the brahminic paradigm. The interposition of dialogues between the mother (Maya) and the daughter (Prakriti) often transcends the narrow space of the "private" to acquire the power of a social/political statement subverting the patriarchal ethos.

The dance-drama does not conceive Prakriti as an isolated woman. Her marginality as an outcaste is indemnified by the use of clusters. She is teamed up with a chorus symbolizing the solidarity of her community. In the stage placement the high-caste "others" appear as intruders into the domain of the outcastes. Prakriti's confrontation with patriarchal order is expressed through self-assertive body movements—kicks, jumps, and lifts, drawn from martial arts like Kalaripayattu, Chhau, and Thankta, which were conventionally prohibited to women.

All three of these dance dramas juxtaposed the verbal with the visual, culminating into an image of a dance-theater. In a path-breaking innovation, Manjusri drew from the Greek chorus, using it for the first time in Tagorean dance drama.

Navigating through a wider emotional plain, Ranjabati's individual repertoire experienced a variety of tactile and verbal stimuli. *Gangavataran*, *Fable for La Gran Sabana*, *Cassandra*, and *Oblique/She Said* deconstructed classical mythologies, experimented with magic realism and questioned the objectification of women. Her works, with an explicit feminist overtone, represented the cultural straddling of a dancer who had "several places of origin," "many homes," and "homes in between" (Lopez y Royo 2005).

Ranjabati went along to theorize Navanritya prioritizing cerebrality over the corporeal. Articulating the dynamics of a *thinking body* and a *moving mind*, she interrogated the body/brain dualism. She wrote that in classical dance, the dancer "embodies the 'burden' of tradition" re-invented under colonialism. Navanritya conforms the changing semiotics of the Indian body and "allows the body to be its own vehicle," rather than that of the form explored. In Navanritya, Ranjabati asserted, "The body is trained to think, the mind is trained to move."



Figure 13.2: *She said . . .* — Ranjabati's last choreography with Dancers' Guild.
(Photograph courtesy Dancers' Guild, Kolkata)

The relationship between body and training, hence, no longer remains patriarchal. Through such training, she said, “We are freed from the overwhelming ‘burden’ of inherited tradition,” not through its rejection but through its reclamation on our own terms, a tradition that has been colonized by our own selves (Sircar 1995).

Postscript

Almost all through her career Manjusri attracted criticism from both traditionalists and modernists. The Bengali press found fault with her “radical” experimentations with Tagore. The form of Navanritya remains anathema to Tagore aficionados. Some questioned the immodest footwork of her women dancers. The breakthrough was unfamiliar and, thus, violent. It bewildered the audience, accustomed to the pseudo-classical Rabindrik dance.

Later in her life, Manjusri was criticized by her contemporaries for innovating on the narrative dance tradition, a tradition belonging to the 1930s. Modern dancers from western India were impatient with her less than frank depiction of female sexuality. The narrative content was incompatible with modern dance, said the modernists.

But Manjusri persisted. She was convinced of the possibility of a synthesis—modern eclectic dance forms with narrative content.

It took time to win recognition. In the end, Manjusri reached her audience. The *new dance* of the *new woman* released her dancers from the traditional trappings of Radha or Sita, enabling them to act beyond the extraneous nayika, beyond the tinsel and flesh. Manjusri led them to aspire to the daring within as she said, “The dancing foot, the sound of tinkling bells, the songs that are sung and the varying steps . . . find out these within yourselves and then . . . your fetters fall away” (Chaki-Sircar 2000: 35).



Notes

1. The discovery of the “classical” tradition of dance in India was imbricated in a heightening preoccupation with class, nationality, and sexuality. Re-invented partly as a cultural project of the Hindu *brahminic* elite in its encounter with colonialism, it was hitched to an agenda of nationalism. In the caste-ridden world of Indian dance, the “classical,” identified as the *brahmin*, emerged as a marker of Hindu culture and identity. It was also in line with the western romanticization of the Orient. The discourses further roped in a reified image of Hindu womanhood with her “classical body,” pivotal to the contesting ideologies of nationalism and colonialism.
2. The tensions of bodily representations in dance and the feminist politics of the body were eloquently sketched by Janet Wolff in her study of dance in western culture (1997).
3. Elizabeth Dempster, exploring the “gaze theory” between classical and modern dance, argued that in the classical dance the spectator is invited to gaze upon a distanced, ideal world, where the female dancer is traced as a sylph and cipher, a necessary absence. In contrast, “the body” in postmodern dance is fleeting and flickering. This shifting quality of the body, she argued, makes the latter more liberating (1988).
4. I am not going to protract the unending tug of war in theorizing the “modern” and the “contemporary.” In the Indian context the two have distinct ideological overlapping and have been used interchangeably. I prefer to posit Navanritya within the “contemporary” genre of dance, which made its mark from the 1980s, tracing its origin in the “modern” dance movement of the 1930s.
5. Gharana can be defined as a particular style of an art form that came down to us through training by successive generations. This guru–shishya parampara, sanctified by unassailable tradition, was essentially patriarchal in nature.

6. In 1933, John Martin of *The New York Times* stated that modern dance is “a point of view” (Cohen 1977: 4).
7. Seeing dance as a commentary on contemporary life, Anna Sokolow once defined that art should be related to now, to our time. The artist must be primarily conditioned by the time around her (Cohen 1977: 33).
8. For this reason, the first generation of Indian modern dancers expressed discomfort with the tagging of the term “modern” to their dance and declined to label themselves as modern dancers.
9. Observing such limitations, Rabindranath Tagore once wrote to Uday Shankar, “In an unfortunate country where life’s vigour had waned, dancing vitiates into a catering for a diseased mind that has lost its normal appetites” (Khokar 1983: 75).
10. The reviews of the British press indicated the immense popularity of Tagore’s works in the west, which succeeded in bridging the gulf between Oriental mysticism and Occidental reasoning (Kundu 1990).
11. The nationalist construct of the *new woman* was explored by many historians in the context of nineteenth-century Bengal (Banerjee 1989; Chatterjee 1989, 1993).
12. The concept of hybridity occupies a central place in the postcolonial discourse. As a superior cultural intelligence owing to in-betweenness, hybridity is also an antidote to essentialism. Challenging the colonizer’s singular universal framework, it opens up a “third space” and interweaves elements of both the colonizer and the colonized (Paul 1998).
13. This issue has been discussed in the context of immigrant cultural lives in Australia by Kalpana Ram (2005).
14. Ranjabati Sircar furnished a thorough analysis of Navanritya methodology in her article, “Navanritya—A Contemporary Methodology, History, Theory, Practice” (2003).

References

- Banerjee, Sumanta. 1989. “Marginalization of Women’s Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal.” In Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, eds, *Recasting Women, Essays in Colonial History*, pp. 127–79. New Delhi: Kali for Women.
- Bannerji, Himani. 2001. *Inventing Subjects, Studies in Hegemony, Patriarchy and Colonialism*. New Delhi: Tulika.
- Chaki-Sircar, Manjusri. 1972. “Community of Dancers in Calcutta.” In Surajit Sinha, ed., *Cultural Profile of Calcutta*, pp. 190–98. Kolkata: The Indian Anthropological Society.
- . 1994. “Body Language.” Interview by Sandhya Sen. July 31. *Amritabazar Patrika*, Interface.
- . 2000. *Nrityarase Chittamama*. Kolkata: Miranda.

- Chaki-Sircar, Manjusri. [1995] 2003. "Tagore and Modernization of Dance." First published in *Rasa: The Indian Performing Arts in the Last Twenty-five Years*, reprint in Sunil Kothari, ed., *New Directions in Indian Dance*, pp. 33–34. Mumbai: Marg Publications.
- . Unpublished writings.
- . Repertoire, Shree, New Paltz, USA.
- Chakraborty, Aishika. 2006. "Navanritya: Her Body, Her Dance." *Sephis E Magazine* 2 (2): 7–11.
- . 2008. *Ranjabati: A Dancer and Her World*. Kolkata: Thema.
- Chakraborty, Rama. 2004. *Pathe Chale Jetey Jetey*. Kolkata: Ananda.
- Chatterjee, Partha. 1989. "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question." In Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, eds, *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, pp. 233–53. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989.
- . 1993. *The Nation and its Fragments*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Cohen, Selma Jeanne, ed. 1977. *The Modern Dance, Seven Statements of Belief*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.
- Dempster, Elizabeth. 1988. "Women Writing the Body: Let's Watch a Little How She Dances." In Susan Sheridan, ed., *Grafts: Feminist Cultural Criticism*, pp. 35–54. London: Verso.
- Devi, Pratima. [1949] 1965. *Nritya*. Kolkata: Viswabharati.
- Ghosh, Shantidev. 1952. Reprint 1994. *Java O Balir Nrityageet*. Kolkata: Viswabharati.
- . 1983. *Gurudev Rabindranath O Adhunik Bharatiya Nritya*. Kolkata: Ananda.
- . 1994. *Jibaner Dhrubatara*. Kolkata: Ananda.
- Guha-Thakurta, P. First ed. 1961, reprint 2006. "Rabindranath the Dramatist." In Pulinbihari Sen and Kshitish Roy, eds, *Rabindranath Tagore: A Tribute*, p. 53. New Delhi: Hope Indian Publications.
- Khokar, Mohan. 1983. *His Dance, His Life: A Portrait of Uday Shankar*. New Delhi: Himalayan Books.
- Kundu, Kalyan. 1990. *Rabindranath Tagore and the British Press (1921–1941)*, eds. Sakti Bhattacharya and Kalyan Sircar. London: The Tagore Center (U.K.).
- Lopez y Royo, Alessandra. 2005. "Dance in the British Asian Diaspora: Redefining Classicism." Available at <http://pkp.ubc.ca/pocol/viewarticle.php?id=138>.
- Paul, Meredith. 1998. "Hybridity in the third Space: Rethinking Bi-cultural Politics in Aotearoa/New Zealand." Available at <http://ianz.waikato.ac.nz/PAPERS/Paul/hydrity.pdf>.
- Ram, Kalpana. 2005. "Phantom Limbs: South Indian Dance and Immigrant Reifications of the Female Body." *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 26 (1–2): 121–37.

- Ray Choudhury, Reba. 1999. *Jeebaner Tane, Shilper Tane*. Kolkata: Thema.
- Sen, Amita. 1977. *Shantiniketane Ashramkanya*. Kolkata: Tagore Research Institute.
- Sen, Sandhya. 1994. Interview with Manjsuri Chaki-Sircar, "Body Language," *Amritabazar Patrika*, July 31, Kolkata.
- . 2000. *Sirisha, Bakula, Amer Mukul*. Kolkata: Nabapatra Prakashan.
- Sircar, Ranjabati. 1986. "Tagore and Dance." *Point Counter Point*: May 10: 54–55.
- . 1993. "Contemporary Indian Dance: Question of Training." *Economic and Political Weekly*, September 25: 2068.
- . 1995. "Contemporary Indian Dance." In Vol. 1 of Bimal Mukherjee and Sunil Kothari, eds, *Rasa: The Indian Performing Arts in the Last Twenty-five Years*, pp. 256–60. Kolkata: Anamika Kala Sangam.
- . 2003. "Navanritya—A Contemporary Methodology, History, Theory, Practice." In Sunil Kothari, ed., *New Directions in Indian Dance*, pp. 82–92. Mumbai: Marg Publications.
- Tagore, Rabindranath. 1992. *I Won't Let You Go, Selected Poems*. Trans. Ketaki Kushari Dyson. New Delhi: UBSPD.
- Vatsyayan, Kapila. 2003. "Modern Dance: The Contribution of Uday Shankar and His Associates." In Sunil Kothari, ed., *New Directions in Indian Dance*, pp. 21–22. Mumbai: Marg Publications.
- Wolff, Janet. [1997] 2003. "Reinstating Corporality: Feminism and Body Politics." In Jane C. Desmond, ed., *Meaning in Motion, New Cultural Studies of Dance*, pp. 81–97. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Re-Exporting “Tradition”: The Transcultural Practice of Kathak in Kolkata and the Creation of a New Female Body

MONICA DALIDOWICZ

The prologue to the lesson began with new students repeating the line, “Kathak is philosophical, historical, mathematical and spiritual.” In the words of our teacher, he was “injecting culture” back into the practice of kathak in India. (Field notes 2004)

There is now a growing literature on the reification of tradition by Indian diasporic communities, but there is far less written on the return flow of diasporic practices back to India. With the increasing transnational flows of people, ideas, and images between India and the diaspora, versions of Indian tradition developed abroad are returning home. Tradition is reconstructed, and boundaries are more clearly defined as recontextualized practices are adapted to diasporic environments, to both western and South Asian expectations of traditional practice. But what is happening when de-territorialized interpretations of culture are re-exported back to India? In this essay, I consider what transpires within local Indian bodies when such diasporic teachings on Kathak dance return to India. I focus on the return of American-based Pandit Chitresh Das, an eminent Kathak exponent, to Kolkata during 2004–5, as he began “injecting culture” back into the field of Kathak in India. Das’s work with students abroad generated a practice that emphasized conservation, tradition, and heritage, a platform that stood in sharp contrast to a field of Kathak in Kolkata intent on modernizing. His teachings on tradition are articulated in conjunction with a discourse on female empowerment

that challenges the patriarchal model of femininity in India. He offers students a compelling method on how to use “traditional” dance to redefine femininity, the role of women and the role of dance in Kolkata. In this essay, I examine the experiential and embodied nature of training within a transcultural yet assertively “traditional” lineage of Kathak in Kolkata.

Problematizing Global Flows: Locating the Transcultural

The flow of performers and teachers across national boundaries, whether permanently or temporarily, facilitates a continuous artistic interchange between Kathak practitioners in diverse sites. The field of Kathak today, an inherently transnational one, is defined by artists situated throughout the world, including dancers of varied ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds in places as culturally varied as North America, Europe, Asia, and Australia. Increasing global interactions through media and migration create a de-territorialized continuous space within which dancers come to situate and understand themselves. Previous theorizations of the transcultural have privileged the imagination as a constitutive feature of modern subjectivity within a new global order, prioritizing the role of images, symbols, and shared narratives in any understanding of global flows (Appadurai 1996: 3). Yet transcultural practices must always be grounded within materialized bodies engaged in materialized sites of practice. Nowhere is this more dramatically exemplified than in the bodily practice of dance. Imagination is not something that is separate from our embodied experience: “Imagining is the activity of a being who nevertheless dwells in an actual world. However much he may be wrapped up with his own thoughts, the thinker is situated in a time and place and therefore in a relational context” (Ingold 2000: 418). My focus on skill acquisition allows me to demonstrate something that has been missing from debates on globalization: the fact that transcultural flows have to be mediated in embodied ways and by bodies that are shaped by particular practices within localized contexts. Second, a sustained period of being trained and retrained, as in the study of a style of Kathak, is itself a live site for the creation of new kinds of embodiments, particularly the experience of a new feminine self.

Incorporating Diasporic Experience: Teaching Tradition

Pandit Chitresh Das, a prominent Kathak exponent and the current head of the dance lineage that I discuss in this essay, was born in Kolkata in the 1940s and immigrated to California in the early 1970s. He now lives, teaches, and performs Kathak in San Francisco, where he is artistic director of the Chhandam dance company and school, putatively the largest Indian classical dance school in North America.¹ In 2002, Das officially reestablished and inaugurated the Kolkata branch, Nritya Bharati, the school where I studied during fieldwork.² Although he has been based in California for over thirty years, he continues to travel back to India to teach and perform, predominantly in his native town of Kolkata. The distinctive adaptations and stylizations within Das's practice today result from the style's transnational development, particularly the past few decades that this Kolkata native has remained in America, a period during which he has consolidated his adherence to tradition.

The transplantation of Das's lineage of Kathak to the west, to a different cultural environment, clarified the boundaries of the practice as it came to stand as a symbol of Indian culture against a multiethnic western background. The dynamism of a multicultural California, the changing demographics of his classes, the needs of such a diverse group of students, as well as audiences' shifting expectations have impacted Das and his version of Kathak in endless ways. During Das's early years in California, he stressed speed and power in footwork, a tendency in his own dancing that became more significant through his positioning in America (Morelli 2007: 52).³ Das's ongoing participation in a western dance world included an incorporation of western ideals, aesthetic preferences, and beliefs about art, performance, the body, and gender. Das integrated ideas about athleticism, strength and endurance, as well as an aesthetic value system that endorses a spectacularization of the style and a privileging of certain types of alignment, synchronicity, and clean movement. His particular emphasis of ideals such as high levels of fitness, holistic living, supporting health and well-being of the individual, and self-assured femininity can be partially understood in relation to Das's new American home. Yet, as I will discuss, the intercultural developments in Das's style continue to draw on ideas inherent in Indian history and philosophy.⁴

While it was predominantly non-Indian students that filled his classes in early years, a period that facilitated numerous shifts in pedagogy and style to accommodate students whose knowledge and bodily understandings emanated from the cultural context of America in the 1970s, more recently, classes have seen a huge increase in the participation of South Asian students. An “increased emphasis on *khubsurati* and *nazakat* (softness and delicacy) coincided with and was influenced by the addition of South Asian and South Asian American students, who joined his classes in increasing numbers beginning in the later 1980s. Pandit Das’s new students possessed greater familiarity with characters from Hindu mythology, with culturally specific body language and therefore with depicting these characters through dance” (Morelli 2007: 105). The particular motivations and expectations of South Asian families in traditional dance practice have also motivated a more clearly articulated ideology on tradition, culture, and the preservation of heritage. Traditional practices like Kathak come to stand as symbolic representations of Indian culture in diasporic settings, and teachers like Das are given the responsibility of transmitting Indian culture, its ideals and values, to new generations of Indo-Americans through training in Kathak. Not surprisingly, Das’s own pedagogy has come to stress the importance of tradition and culture through physical training in dance, as will be discussed.⁵

Das created a new variant of Kathak embodying the kinesthetic repertoire of two different cultural worlds: his style of Kathak embodies two different sets of aesthetic values, cultural ideals, and beliefs. In this essay, I emphasize how this intersection of Indian and western values, implicit in Das’s discourse on tradition, is finding a new audience as this particular style is taught and performed in Kolkata. Although classical Indian dance is often treated as an emblem of Indian culture, analysis of training with this practice shows that there is much more going on at the lived experiential and embodied level.⁶ In the rest of the essay, I discuss what is occurring in the body as dancers in Kolkata train in a definitively intercultural style. Within this essay, I focus largely on the local Indian dancers in Kolkata who participated in training, but I also note the presence of myself and other Indo-American students who took his classes and accompanied Das to workshops, performances, and an array of other activities in Kolkata. Although his American students will frequently move with him between sites, here I focus on the trans-locality of Das and his teachings as they were presented and practised in Kolkata.

The Field of Kathak in Kolkata

In the present field of Kathak, even dancers who do not travel out from their center of learning will gain experience of this larger transnational domain. Their understanding and experience of Kathak is calibrated with what is going on in multiple sites of practice within and outside of India; exposure to the transnationality of Kathak has become implicit in interactions within local fields of practice. Such is true in the case of the group of local Kolkata dancers who train under Das. His emphasis on tradition, initially emergent in a western context, was further amplified upon return trips to India. During 2004–5, Das confronted a field of dance in Kolkata that was intent on modernizing, an experience that endorsed a stronger assertion of tradition on his part. First, I outline the wider field of Kathak in Kolkata, highlighting the predilection toward modernization in dance that is occurring before considering Das's return to Kolkata.

The wider field of dance in India exhibits a long-standing interest in intercultural choreographies, fusion works, and a shift toward modern styles of Indian dance. By the 1930s, Rukmini Devi was presenting a stylized version of Bharatnatyam (O'Shea 2007), Madame Menaka was pioneering the reconstruction of classical Kathak (Chakravorty 2000) and Uday Shankar was already presenting his own interpretation of "Indian modern dance" to local Indian audiences (Erdman 1987).⁷ Indian artists have since continued to explore the fusion of different aesthetic practices and the creation of non-traditional styles of Indian dance, as can be seen in the works of Kumudini Lakhia, Aditi Mangaldas, and Akram Khan. At the professional level, creation and innovation is a growing expectation, and artists are continually seeking new ways to use their art form, develop their own styles, and present contemporary issues. The emphasis on innovation in the professional world is echoed in the amateur practice of Kathak. During my fieldwork in Kolkata in 2004–5, I observed a prolific trend toward what was known as "modern Kathak." Modern Kathak had supplanted the traditional style on the proscenium stage; the traditional solo was replaced with elaborate group choreographies, innovative fusion pieces that combine Kathak with such other dance forms as flamenco, jazz, and even ballet, and endless others manifestations of Kathak that incorporate socially relevant themes far outside the traditional repertoire. In the teaching of the form, shifts toward art academies, commercial dance studios, and university settings were replacing the traditional

guru–shishya parampara, a practice that is no longer economically viable in contemporary India.⁸ The hazy distinctions between what is modern and traditional continue to be a constant source of tension for artists and scholars who debate the parameters of a dynamic tradition and the acceptable limits of innovation within it. Yet innovation remains an integral part of how artists define themselves and their changing role in Indian society.

Shifts in pedagogical models and performance styles in Kolkata remain an important way for female practitioners to redefine themselves in the public sphere and in relation to marriage. Classical dance in India has historically been submerged in a heavily male-dominated sphere: males headed stylistic lineages, male gurus controlled the transmission of knowledge, male patrons provided financial support to artists and thus maintained control over performances, and fathers (male heads of the family) controlled their daughters' participation in the realm of dance.⁹ Today, female practitioners are taking up serious study of Kathak, dancing professionally, teaching, and finding new ways such as the creation of "modern Kathak" to challenge the patriarchal model. The recognition that dance training has operated as cultural capital in the negotiation of marriages (Chakravorty 2000) has been countered by the female pursuit of higher education and entrance into the professional world of dance. Dancers lay claims to non-traditional gender roles, contesting the dominant patriarchal ideology that situates the woman in the home as a mother and wife. Yet female dancers in Kolkata remain concerned with their familial obligations and are often pressured to give up dance and make a transition to their new role as a wife and mother. In the rest of the essay, I consider how Pandit Chitresh Das articulates adherence to tradition (and innovation within tradition, as opposed to an outright path to modern Kathak) in order to achieve a similar end: the genuine experience of a new feminine self that stood out against the patriarchal feminine ideal in India.

A Transcultural Lineage: Re-exporting Tradition to India

Understandings of Indian heritage and the necessity of preserving culture have come to the forefront of Das's pedagogical and performance style, shaped by his experiences with the west and more recently with

his experiences of returning to India. The boundaries of tradition became more clearly demarcated through Das's experiences in India, as he witnessed a field of Kathak moving away from what he believed to be the essence of the form: such things as *taal* (rhythmic cycle) and *upaj* (improvisation), elements of Kathak that can only be experienced fully with live music, a characteristic not evident in many versions of modern Kathak. His commitment to this project of asserting tradition while allowing creativity within its boundaries culminated in Das's organization of a Kathak symposium, "Kathak at the Crossroads: Innovation within Tradition," held in San Francisco in 2007. This historic event welcomed some of the most eminent figures in Kathak. As an assertion of his loyalty to traditional Kathak, all performers were required to perform with live musicians, ensuring that the "essence" of the form remained intact.

When Das traveled to India, the version of traditional Kathak that he developed in the west was presented to local Kolkata dancers as representative of their own culture and tradition. Das's encounter with an Indian dance community seemingly intent on imitating certain traits of the west provoked him to encourage Indian students to look to their own culture, specifically the version that he had been developing overseas. Local Indian students were instructed by this westernized Indian guru to be proud of their culture. Students, reminded of the greatness of Indian civilization, were urged to delve deeply into their own culture for ideas and wisdom rather than looking to the west for their measure of greatness. In his recent teachings, Kathak dance has come to stand as a symbolic representation of the richness of Indian culture, as has been expressed in Das's dictum, "Kathak is historical, mathematical, spiritual, and philosophical," a phrase his students were often asked to repeat. His didactic emphasis on preserving tradition was coupled with a strong adherence to traditional cultural etiquette, both tacit and explicit, as well as the development of a systematic pedagogy and training model that prioritized intensive physical training in traditional techniques. In the rest of this essay, I will discuss how such transcultural developments, embodiments of both Indian and western values, were returning to India, looking closely at what transpires as such diasporic lessons are being embodied and experienced by local practitioners.

Training in a Transcultural Style

Learning Pure Dance (Nritya): Emphasis on Strength, Speed, and Endurance

My main thrust is to kindle the energy within each student that will propel them beyond their normal levels of endurance. Over time this process develops strength and stamina—the necessary ingredients to sustain between one to two hours of continuous dancing. I guide this process through the playing of tabla (drums), while reciting the bols (language of the dance and drums) and simultaneously singing lehara/nagma (a repetitive melodic phrase). This continuous dancing, drumming, reciting and singing generates a combined energy of force which radiates an exhilarating feeling and a high state of mind. (Das n.d.: 13)

Perhaps one of the most prominent features of training in Das's style and one of the most unforgettable to students new to his systematic pedagogy is the emphasis on developing endurance and strength through repetitive training of isolated techniques, such as the rhythmic complexities of *tatkar* footwork or the swift successive *chakkars* or turns.¹⁰ The approach to our training emphasized intensive physical practice, relentless physical exertion and mental pressure, long periods of repetition, and sustaining of high speeds, all designed to push students past their own limits. Within his style, techniques were executed with great strength and stamina, distinguishing Das's form from many other local styles in Kolkata that featured a soft grace and beauty (Chakravorty 2000: 141). We were often told that as soon as people hear we study with Chitresh Das, they would immediately look at our feet, for our teacher and his style is characterized by the strength and speed of its footwork. The fundamental technical components of Kathak were given primacy in his teachings and were rehearsed ad nauseam. In practice, dancers would frequently move through varying speeds of footwork, repeating endless cycles at the highest speeds. A drenched *shalwar kamiz* (Indian tunic and trousers), saturated by perspiration, was usually indication that one was working hard enough. The skills, as well as the speed and strength necessary to perform them, are not entirely outside the genre of Kathak, but their exaggeration can be understood through this lineage's distinctive transcultural past.

Das incorporated ideas of overall fitness, athleticism, and strength into Kathak. He stressed aerobic training, strength-building exercises, and stretching designed for flexibility and injury prevention.¹¹ Relatively

unconventional approaches in class promoted the development of overall fitness. In workshops, Das would have students perform fairly unorthodox exercises for Kathak training, such as jumping up and down or running laps, developing the cardiovascular system, and encouraging the idea of being fit and ready.

Students were also instructed to stretch throughout class, an exercise that I observed in no other class in Kolkata. Dancers were occasionally made to strap weights on their wrists as they practiced, building strength in the upper body and mental resilience. A new, strengthened body was crafted in this process, capable of executing the techniques of Kathak with a refined ability and mastery.

Western aesthetic preferences of the body, evident in western dance practice, emerged in classrooms in Kolkata in other ways. Students were instructed to pay attention to posture and alignment, not only in dance movements but also in everyday postures such as sitting cross-legged on the ground. The typical quotidian cross-legged seated position of Indian students often resulted in a slightly rounded back or a habitual slouch. Das frequently requested that his students sit up with a straight spine to counter this habitual posture and alignment. Although Das noted that this kind of instruction on posture had not traditionally been given in Kathak, he saw the benefit of it and incorporated it into his method. Contrary to western dance forms, which stress proper alignment, Kathak does not customarily train the dancer on how to hold the torso and largely lacks instruction on posture and alignment.¹² The emphasis on erectness in this variety of Kathak is consistent with ideas of good posture in the west and reflects the embodiment of varying cultural aesthetic ideals, shaping a new transnational body, one that does not compromise the genre. Das's changes to posture and training were not seen as inconsistent with preserving the integrity of Kathak. Although Das rigorously promoted tradition within Kathak, there was recognition that innovation does and should occur within certain limits; the vehicle of communicating tradition could be altered without altering the cultural and artistic product.

The high physical demands placed on students elicited an array of responses ranging from fear to excitement to exhaustion. Tales of frightened young dancers attempting to make it through one of Das's rigorous classes, a few never to return, circulated amongst local dancers. I observed plenty of young dancers exchange furtive, nervous glances while awaiting the arrival of a teacher whose reputation for strictness and physically demanding training preceded him. Local Indian bodies immersed in a context where being physically fit was

not idealized or promoted in the same way as in the guru's adopted home in the US were not accustomed to such tests of stamina. For most dancers, if not all, their training in other styles of Kathak did not require submitting to such a physically demanding training regimen. Fatigue would often overcome the most capable of dancers, as was the intent of this training style. It was in these moments of exhaustion that dancers were pushed even further to places of discomfort and into uncharted physical and mental space. Dancers emphatically exclaimed to me that it was a case of "do or die," referencing how compelled they felt to muster every ounce of effort when in front of our teacher. The physical, mental, and emotional challenges of this training regime, reminiscent of boot camp, often took students to their breaking point. It was not uncommon to see students in tears throughout training. A mental resilience and ability to withstand and cope with pressure was simultaneously cultivated in training. Das exclaimed on more than one occasion, "No pain, no gain!" Suffering and pain were implicit to fidelity and a prerequisite for achievement and success. The physically stressful nature of this style validated the significance of his style of Kathak; what students were learning was understood to be more important than other forms of Kathak precisely because the price was so high.

Kathak Yoga

While physical strengthening was prioritized in this training, it was always coupled with strong emphasis on musicality; rhythmic precision and knowledge of taal were imperative in training. Maintaining focus on taal during times of physical duress required an immense amount of concentration. In moments of fatigue, focus often wanes, and dancers can easily lose track of their place in the rhythmic cycle. Das's most recent innovation in training techniques, "Kathak yoga," most succinctly encompasses this confluence of physical exertion and mental focus that characterizes his pedagogy. The most basic form of Kathak yoga, often taught in workshops I observed, was the practice of *kramalaya tatkar*, a repetitive practice of basic Kathak footwork at increasing speeds while reciting the *theke* of the time cycle over the top.¹³ The dancers must remain confident in their footwork, not allowing the changing rhythms to affect the recitation of the steady beat of the theke; the concurrent performance of multiple skills requires a strong internal focus and attentiveness. More advanced dancers will perform more complex rhythmic patterns and entire compositions while reciting the steady theke. Das himself exemplifies the complexity

of the practice of Kathak yoga by simultaneously playing *tabla*, performing rapid rhythmically complex footwork and reciting theka. This technique, initially intended for individual practice (although it has been demonstrated in public and recently been presented on the stage) is designed to cultivate the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual capacities of the dancer by wholly engaging the body and mind. It is a training method for personal practice rather than performance, intended to bring long-lasting positive effects on the mind and body of practitioners, emulating the practice of yoga in its western incarnation. The centering of mind and body required creates a place devoid of any other thoughts, a state of complete focus and balance.¹⁴ Integral to the message was the idea that the practice goes far beyond simple performance and the perfection of skills; rather, *kathak* can provide a path toward inner solace.

Learning Expression: Teachings on Abhinaya in the Everyday

Abhinaya, or expression, is an equally important element of Kathak dance. Kathak, an art form that emphasizes storytelling, utilizes the expression of the body in narration. Abhinaya draws heavily on intricate use of the face and hands to dramatize stories. Familiarity with mythological stories and their characters is a prerequisite to traditional narration, and a Kathak dancer must be particularly adept at portraying multiple characters, both male and female. Students should infuse their own sentiment into the portrayal of the character, making knowledge of the epics and the Indian deities crucial to an accurate portrayal of the character.

It is in this portrayal of characters and the evocation of sentiment that cross-cultural lessons on abhinaya emerge in relation to the lived world of Kolkata. The way locals expressed abhinaya, for example, portraying the role of Radha and her eternal love for Krishna, looked much different than a portrayal by non-locals. The diverse cultural demographics of the classroom in Kolkata, comprised of local Indian, Indo-American, and foreign students such as myself, obviated the cultural and local specificity of abhinaya in Kathak. Das, as head of a transcultural lineage, confronts the cultural specificity of emotion, such as the ways of portraying love and devotion, in his varied groups of students. Das's reflexivity to the cultural specificity of the way emotions are organized and expressed in the body is another dimension of his experiences of living and teaching in the US, where he was first confronted with westernized bodies and modes of

expression. The differential patterns of abhinaya are underscored in Kolkata, an environment where the idealized patterns of movement and expression still exist.

In this cross-cultural setting, it became evident that a distinctly Indian mode of expression, one that has typified the form, was desired. Das advised foreign students that it is possible, although very difficult, to acquire the locally Indian mode of expressing abhinaya. Our instruction was to observe the actions and reactions of people in Kolkata, and from this we would learn something about the portrayal of abhinaya. The quotidian world of Kolkata, a stark contrast from Das's base of San Francisco, provides the backdrop for this lesson. At the time of research, most women in the public sphere still wore *sarees* or *shalwar kamiz*, occupied gender-segregated spaces on local transit, and were rarely seen out alone after dark. A range of culturally specific patterns of movement are still visible within this materialized world; for example, an emphatic use of hand gesture and facial expression, a habitual cross-legged seated position, smaller gait, and a slower dynamic of locomotion.¹⁵ Observing moving bodies and expressions of both femininity and masculinity in Kolkata was important to mastering these traits in the dance sphere. Everyday normative body postures, movement patterns, gestures, and expressions are replicated in Kathak, as students strive to embody characters, often replicating idealized versions of masculinity and femininity. On one occasion we were instructed to observe and emulate the way that the mother of one of the dancers elegantly sat in her sari, cross-legged with a soft suppleness as her shoulders rounded and her hands lay gently on her lap. Through attention to such local Indian ways of moving and expressing, one could begin to understand the idealized patterns of femininity and the cultural mode of expression required in Kathak. For the local dancer, abhinaya draws on their own embodied repertoire, highlighting and creatively assigning new value to traditional patterns embedded in the everyday world of Kolkata. In this way, the incorporation of transcultural techniques and sensibilities actually induces an affinity for and embellishment of local patterns.

Assertion of Traditional Etiquette

The traditional mode of learning in ancient India, from Vedic times, for all disciples was the *gurushisya parampara* (the tradition of the guru and his disciple) whereby the disciples came at an early age to study with the guru and live with him as a part of the household to live in the house of the

guru. . . Each student became an integral part of the guru's family and it was believed that such proximity was essential for imparting true and total education. (Ananya 1996: 69)

Das's teachings on Kathak, tradition, and Indian culture were most apparent and available through participation in his reconstructed lived version of this historic pedagogical model, the guru–shishya parampara. A modernized guru–shishya system, constructed from his diasporic location in the US, became even more multi-dimensional when Das returned to Kolkata. In America, students devoutly adhere to the prescribed modes of respect and fulfill certain obligations to their teacher, but within the confines of daily life in America, they are restricted from complete immersion and residency with Das. It is in Kolkata that his version of the guru–shishya system can be most fully experienced, as senior students, both local and foreign, come to live with him during his stay, spending as much time as possible with him outside of the classroom. While in India, this usually meant students were near him twenty-four hours a day, ideally awake before him and up with him until after he retired for the evening. In this section, I highlight several of the ways that a heightened sense of traditional practice, however modernized, was replicated and performed in Kolkata by dancers studying under this "modern-guru-in-training."¹⁶ Prolonged living within this set of norms, especially when it is not confined to the classroom, is creating for students a genuine set of emotional commitments and a very strong example of the way in which tradition can be simultaneously an object of discourse and a lived created reality for participants.

Students' participation in this modernized guru–shishya system required an embodied understanding of the reciprocal obligations between teacher and student. Students receive a breadth of knowledge from their guru in exchange for their loyalty. There was a strong sense of the enduring obligation students felt toward Das and he toward them. In exchange for this total education and imparting of wisdom of an art and lifestyle designed to bring them success and fulfillment in life, students gave their service and devotion. Students were eager to fulfill the duty of being a student, whether that meant service by completing menial tasks, deference shown in both public and private domains, or continued respect of the guru's wishes. In our training, this occasionally translated into service to our teacher, whether that consisted of bringing him tea, cooking dinner, or running an errand.

In order to solidify a closer relation to the teacher, students were willing to bear such responsibilities as it signified their ascending position in the hierarchy. Willingness to serve the teacher can help to secure a place near to him. Since only those closest to him will have the privilege of doing certain things, enacting favors is not seen as a burden but rather as an honor. In turn, those students who served him were privileged to receive more of his attention.

Beyond such superficial tasks were a deep devotion and respect that was cultivated in the students and evident in their attention to his needs. After one of Das's performances, we were all standing around in the changing room waiting. He eventually told a few of us to sit down. We resisted; he urged us again saying, "I want you to sit, sometimes I mean it, and sometimes I do not. You will learn to tell what I mean, and eventually, you will just know without my saying." He proceeded to tell a story of a guru and his *shishya*. The *shishya* knew exactly what the guru wanted and could anticipate the next move; he was able to do what the guru wanted without the guru having to ask. The *shishya* would bring a glass of water at the moment that the guru felt thirsty, although he had not requested it. This tale epitomized the idealized connection one has with their guru. Sensitivity to the needs of the teacher ideally derived from being near him at all times. The anticipation and quick reaction of the student to the teacher also exemplifies *tayari*, or readiness in the everyday.¹⁷

Following tradition, students remain open vessels for the teachings from the guru, thereby surrendering themselves to their teacher. Within the traditional *parampara*, students must wait patiently, ready to capture lessons from the teacher whenever he should chose to impart them to his students. In this way, learning becomes the responsibility of the student; only the most committed students will be privileged to the entirety of their guru's teachings. The uncertainty and variability of the form, delivery, and timing of such lessons require that the student maintain an acute awareness, scrutinizing hours of conversation and lecture in order to capture the wisdom immanent in her daily interactions with the guru. Das would occasionally test the students on their attentiveness—on their ability to recognize and absorb his teachings—questioning us as to what important lesson had arisen in the past few minutes. By testing our listening, he demonstrated how closely we must follow and how easily we can miss valuable lessons.¹⁸

Learning can occur at every moment of every day, necessitating a state of constant vigilance on behalf of the student. Ideally, a student

absorbs such lessons and cultural conventions without clarification, an indication of her own conscientious observation. Students' attunement to the prescribed cultural etiquette is cultivated through a non-discursive conditioning of behavior rather than explicit instruction. Rather than learning specific skills, a corporeal attentiveness was generated that developed one's awareness and sensitivity to the conventions of the field of practice. Transgression of cultural etiquette was the one occasion that brought the implicit organizational rules of the field into the immediate present, providing a cause for discursive elaboration on the appropriate behavior. In the classroom, violation of *ghungru* (dancer's bells) etiquette elicited a harsh reaction from Das, who would take every opportunity to give a lesson on the care of *ghungru*. For the unfortunate student who incited the lecture through a breach of etiquette—treating *ghungru* carelessly, bringing shoes nearby, or talking while putting them on—her mistake served as an example of what not to do. Through constant exposure, trial and error, and a reflexive mediation, the body adopts these patterns of movement, culturally specific gestures, and predilections to action. It is only through this enduring proximity to their teacher that students are able to fully comprehend and experience the multi-dimensional nature of the dance, which I have only briefly touched upon here.

While most schools and teachers in Kolkata followed some code for class conduct, the strict adherence to this particular version of tradition within this lineage was highly apparent. The reverential nature with which students trained in this style, approached the dance space, their *ghungru*, and the teacher was noticeably amplified. The presence of foreign and Indo-American students who were devoutly committed to upholding this tradition was contrasted to local students and used to incite them to work harder. Students were encouraged to look toward their own cultural practices and traditions with the same respect rather than looking to the west. Our teacher recounted stories of non-Indian students' superior knowledge and respect of Indian culture as a tactic: confronting local students with the fact that non-Indian students could know more than they did about their own culture provoked them to work harder. Our teacher used western affinity for traditional Indian culture and the examples of American students who followed traditional Indian ways with great reverence and devotion to cultivate a renewed interest in Indian students for their own cultural practices. This embodied transcultural discourse on tradition, implicit in the actions of practitioners, in the way they enter a room, tie their

ghungru and interact with one another, exemplifies how tradition is not merely objectified but is being lived in the present moment, created in the movements of each and every practitioner.

Using Tradition to Break with Tradition: The Creation of the Strong Empowered Female Body in “Traditional” Kathak

The acquisition of bodily skills in Das’s distinctively transcultural style created the opportunity for a new experience of the body for dancers in Kolkata. As dancers acquire new skills, they are able to sense, perceive, and experience a greater potential to act. A genuine experience of increased agency occurred as students discovered new physical capacities such as faster footwork, quicker turns, growing endurance, keen perception of taal, or heightened awareness of social interaction. Das discursively pre-framed this increased capacity to act as female agency. He endorsed autonomy and strength through Kathak training by creating what he referred to as “strong, empowered women.”¹⁹ An ideology of female empowerment carries great efficacy for dancers practically engaged in this training regime, as it makes kinesthetic sense in the body. Enduring the kinds of physical, emotional, and mental challenges that I have discussed gave dancers a real experience of strength. For local dancers not accustomed to the over-extension of one’s body in this way, surviving such training was a source of pride. Local students endorsed the creation of a powerful female by repeatedly telling me that this training was not for weak women.

Das presented students with an alternative that opposed the patriarchal feminine ideal of the subservient woman in India. He articulated a new ideal of a contemporary Indian woman as assertive and powerful and presented a life-long path of Kathak that challenged the idea of dance as a mode of female refinement for marriage. He challenged the conventional patterns of female loss of autonomy and subordination of independence by teaching strength and perseverance in both dance and the everyday. In a creative move, Das uses his own version of traditional Kathak to counter the traditional ideals of femininity and women’s role in Indian society, encouraging students to break with the traditional patriarchal model. Das’s model draws partially on western ideology of self-assured femininity; he made direct comparisons between the assertive independence of his American students to local Kolkata students. However, this new kind of Indian woman was still

grounded in Indian philosophical thought. It was not a completely foreign notion, and therefore it was not a complete break with Indian tradition but a rearticulation of ideas embedded in ancient India. Integral to Das's teaching was the idea of *Shiva/Shakti* embodied in the image of *Ardhanariswara*, "literally meaning 'half female, half male' symbolically representing the union of both feminine and masculine energies as a balanced force in nature" (Das n.d.: 82). Das's teachings frequently echoed selective components of Hindu philosophy and religion; his articulation of the strong empowered woman reflects ideas of feminine power embodied in *shakti*.

Experiencing Tradition

The return of this clearly delineated tradition stood out against other local versions of modern Kathak in Kolkata and resulted in students' heightened sensitivity to the role of culture, tradition, and preservation of heritage through Kathak. Despite its obvious transcultural roots—the presence of this self-identified "Bengali-Rajput-Californian" guru, his American students, the endless tales of America and comparisons between local and American dancers—his students in Kolkata remained loyal to this version of tradition.²⁰ Whilst many locally based Kolkata dancers may never leave their hometowns, experiences of the west, and the larger transcultural dimension, pervade every level of their training and bodily experience of Kathak. Yet, the apparent transcultural influence and dynamism in Das's teachings did not negate the authenticity of the style for Das or for local dancers. The integration of new ideals of fitness, health, and self-assured femininity did not compromise the integrity of the form as they were rearticulated around traditional Indian ideas that included the guru–shishya parampara, yoga, shakti, elements of the dance itself such as upaj, taal, and the fundamental techniques of the form. The commitment to upholding this tradition was taken up by his local Kolkata dancers. The senior dancers in Kolkata were compelled to fulfill their duty as members of this lineage by sustaining the traditional practice as they had been taught. In his absence, I observed local students practice together, tell stories of their guru's last visit, and remind each other of his teachings. They provided staunch lectures to younger students on the care of ghungru, pushed one another to do yet another round of tatkar, and reminded me that this training was not for the faint of heart. His senior students in Kolkata took up his teachings with great

pride, and from it they gained strength that facilitated their continued pursuit in the study of Kathak and, with it, an experience of a new empowered feminine self.



Notes

1. His school, Chhandam was founded in 1980 and now has branches in California, Boston, Toronto, the Metro D.C. Area, Denver, Tokyo in Japan, and Kolkata and Coimbatore in India.
2. The Nritya Bharati school of Indian music and dance was founded in 1942 in Kolkata by the parents of Chitresh Das, Srimati Nilima Das and Nrityacharya Prohlad Das.
3. Developing technical prowess was one of the ways that Das was able to compete in the western dance world (Morelli 2007).
4. Numerous scholars have detailed the historical development of a binary schema that opposes India and the west, spirituality and materialism, and that has provided the grounding for the ideas we see in Das's style (Chatterjee 1993; Inden 1990). An oppositional understanding of India as ancient, spiritual, and timeless has certainly played into his constructions of traditional Indian dance.
5. Many Indians have found their identity and sense of cultural distinctiveness reinforced by the experience of living abroad: "many important historical figures such as Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Ananda Coomaraswamy all discovered India through leaving it" (Tarlo 1996: 299).
6. Kalpana Ram's work on Indian dance has also highlighted the need for a "better less reified understanding of authenticity and culture itself" (2000: 362); she has elsewhere focused specifically on lived immigrant experiences of Indian dance (2005).
7. Numerous others have documented the history of intercultural choreographies between east and west and changes in choreographic and presentational convention (Coorlawala 1992; Kothari 1988; O'Shea 1998, 2007).
8. The economic improbability of teachers taking students into their homes, providing room and board, and the impracticality of a long-term apprenticeship with the guru when degrees from reputable universities may be given precedence, all contribute to the system's decline.
9. Kathak in contemporary Kolkata is practiced by mainly middle- and upper-class females and continues to play an important role in the process of female socialization in India. A quasi-normative aspect of childhood socialization, dance has become an extra-curricular activity to

which many young girls of upper and middle classes have access, taking up study by their own desire or that of their parents. Training in dance teaches a type of refinement that emulates the traditional feminine ideal. A finishing school of sorts, the study of dance shaped an idealized elite woman who embodied elegance, subservience, and a dignified manner.

10. Tatkar is a simple repeating pattern, with eight steps. Each *bol* corresponds to one step, as follows: *Ta Thei Thei Tat A Thei Thei Tat*, Right-Left-Right-Left—Left-Right-Left-Right.
11. Das's promotion of fitness in Kathak reflects its development in the west but still fits into the body culture in Kolkata that is itself in a state of flux. With the emergence of a burgeoning middle class, gyms and fitness centers are becoming a feature of middle-class lifestyle. Although his emphasis on fitness is not foreign in contemporary India, he is distinctive in bringing a few very specific forms of fitness into Kathak.
12. A local Indian dancer trained in western styles of dance spoke to me of the difficulty he had teaching Kathak dancers to maintain an erect posture and engage their torso when teaching western dance techniques.
13. Theka is the basic *bol* pattern or drum strokes which identifies a particular *tal*. The theka of *tin tal* is recited as *Dha Dhin Dhin Dha, Dha Dhin Dhin Dha, Na Tin Tin Ta, Tete Dhin Dhin Dha* (Das n.d: 88).
14. Attached to this training technique was an emphasis on well-being, holistic living, and spiritual philosophy that must be understood through this style's transnational development. The practice of Kathak yoga has been extensively elaborated in Sarah Morelli's dissertation on Das (2007).
15. I have discussed elsewhere the relation between the material and movement world of Kolkata and its relation to dance (Dalidowicz 2006; see also Ness 1992).
16. Das often referred to himself by this term, an indication of the ongoing negotiation that was implicit in his role as a guru in contemporary society.
17. *Tayari*, or readiness is a primary element in the performance of the dance itself, particularly in improvisation. The need for *tayari* in dance was replicated and supported by the need for it in everyday interactions.
18. The virtue of patience is also paramount in a model where students must await the lessons from the teacher.
19. These were the words I heard him most frequently use during my fieldwork, but as Morelli notes, he also used the phrase "a superior race of women" (2007).
20. Das often referred to himself by this term, which identified his native home of West Bengal, the Rajput roots of his own guru, Pandit Ram Narayan Misra, and his new home in California.

References

- Ananya. 1996. "Training in Indian Classical Dance: A Case Study." *Asian Theatre Journal* 13 (1): 68–91.
- Appadurai, Arjun. 1996. *Modernity at Large*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Chakravorty, Pallabi. 2000. "Choreographing Modernity: Kathak Dance, Public Culture and Women's Identity in India." Ph.D. diss., Temple University.
- Chatterjee, Partha. 1993. *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Coorlawala, Uttara Asha. 1992. "Denis and India's Dance Renaissance." *Sangeet Natak* 104: 3–22.
- Dalidowicz, Monica. 2006. "Embodying Transculturalism: Learning Kathak in Kolkata." M.A. thesis, University of Regina.
- Das, Chitresh. n.d. *Kathak Handbook*. Chhandam School of Kathak dance.
- Erdman, Joan L. 1987. "Performance as Translation." *The Drama Review* 31 (1): 64–88.
- Inden, Ronald. 1990. *Imagining India*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Inc.
- Ingold, Tim. 2000. *The Perception of the Environment*. Routledge: London.
- Kothari, Sunil. 1988. "East-West Dance Encounters." *Sangeet Natak* 89–90: 30–46.
- Morelli, Sarah. 2007. "From Calcutta to California: Negotiations of Movement and Meaning in Kathak Dance." Ph.D. diss., Harvard University.
- Ness, Sally Ann. 1992. *Body, Movement and Culture*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- O'Shea, Janet. 1998. "Traditional Indian Dance and the Making of Interpretive Communities." *Asian Theatre Journal* 15 (1): 43–63.
- . 2007. *At Home in the World: Bharata Natyam on the Global Stage*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press.
- Ram, Kalpana. 2000. "Listening to the Call of Dance: Re-thinking Authenticity." *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 11 (3): 358–64.
- . 2005. "Phantom Limbs: South Indian Dance and Immigrant Reifications of the Female Body." *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 26 (1–2): 121–37.
- Tarlo, Emma. 1996. *Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

The Lords of Dance: Changing Fortunes

VIKRAM IYENGAR

This essay is on the changing perceptions of the male dancer—specifically the male classical dancer—in India. Classical dance and dancers have, in the last century or so, faced a huge variety of circumstances. The issues I have attempted to address in this essay take into account notions of masculinity, virility, and sexuality, relating them to the place and conception of the male dancer in society.

In his book on Kathak, Sunil Kothari (1989) says of the well-known Kathak dancer, late Gopi Kishan:

His movements are broad, virile and vigorous. There is a lot of bravado, bravura and showmanship.

I would like to begin with V. Shantaram's landmark film, *Jhanak Jhanak Payal Baje* of 1955—the film which catapulted Kathak dancer Gopi Kishan onto the national consciousness. Now, one may (quite understandably, if one views his dance pieces in the film—both his solos and duets with the dancer-actress Sandhya) have huge reservations about his renditions of Kathak—I certainly do—but that is besides the point. What we are looking at is a sense of *sanction*. The minute you can conceive of making a film about a male classical dancer—a commercially successful film, no less—there is obviously an audience ready to receive such a film. Would a film centering around a similar character even be thought of today? There have been films about male choreographers—take Shah Rukh Khan in *Dil To Pagal Hai* (1997). But he has nothing to do with classical dance by any stretch of imagination, and anyway it is the women in the film who do most of the dancing. Of course, Pandit Birju Maharaj continues to choreograph for film, but he choreographs for Madhuri Dixit in a period film like *Devdas* (2002),

not for a hunky Hrithik Roshan in some film shot in New Zealand or Singapore. And before Madhuri Dixit, there was Rekha in *Umrao Jaan* (1981), Meena Kumari in *Pakeezah* (1972) and Waheeda Rahman in *Guide* (1965). So what we see, therefore, is a certain “feminization” of classical dance in terms of understanding, reception and, undeniably, association. In this day and age, there is nothing that shapes or responds to social mindsets as obviously as commercial cinema.

‘Feminization’ can have many connotations and processes. To start with, let’s look at the gender graph for classical dancers from the early 1900s till today. Historically, across most classical dance styles (with the exception of possibly Mohiniattam) most dance maestros were men. The family trees of the two main gharanas of Kathak—Lucknow and Jaipur—comprise predominantly men. Women, when mentioned, happen to be wives, sisters, daughters, or mothers of male dancers—rarely dancers themselves. A woman dancing was not a socially sanctioned activity at the time. The rare exceptions in the family trees include Jaikumari, daughter of Shri Jailal, and Sitara Devi. The latter is the daughter of Sukhdev Maharaj of Benares, who defied the conventions of the time by training both his daughters along with his sons in Kathak.

Sukhdev Maharaj was also the grandfather and Guru of Gopi Kishan, but why was it a defiance of the conventions of that time to train his two daughters? It was not that there were no female dancers: it was that society automatically classed them with a certain category of women doing a certain category of dance for a certain category of audience.

The dancing woman was a courtesan, a tawaif, an entertainer. One of the central themes of *Jhanak Jhanak Payal Baje* is how a woman who has been used to what she herself terms as ‘bazaari naach’ is initiated into the hallowed and respected world of classical dance. The scenario of *Umrao Jaan* is set against the world of courtesans and their paramours in and around Lucknow, but much the same thing in terms of attitude was happening with Bharatnatyam in the south with Devdasis becoming synonymous with prostitutes. The British Raj with its inability to accept the erotic elements of Indian performing arts did precipitate this decline across India, but the idea of women dancers as seductresses has always existed in the Indian psyche. Take Valmiki and Menoka: her divine dance distracted him from his meditation. In fact, this parallel is drawn in the film *Jhanak Jhanak Payal Baje* when

the Guru—being male—accuses the heroine of using her expertise in dance (ironically something that she has learned from the Guru) to distract his son from his single-minded pursuit of dance. There is an essential dichotomy here. Dance when practised by men was considered a ‘sadhana’, a calling, a path to spiritual salvation. When a woman performed the same dance, she was immediately accused of using it as a device to attract the helpless male of the species—accused even by the person who taught both her and her male counterpart the same dance! It must be true that women have a much greater degree of self-control since I have never heard of a woman—human or divine—being distracted by or salivating after a man who happens to dance in front of her.

Be that as it may, there was a gradual marginalization of classical dance in the social psyche because of these associations. From being at the center of religious and social life, it was condemned as “a debased and licentious remnant of our barbaric past,” as Mahesh Dattani (1994) says in his introduction to his play, *Dance Like a Man*. The male gurus were put in an awkward situation: the patronage from courts and temples was a thing of the past, few people wanted to learn the dance, so their expertise as teachers was redundant. While some gurus turned to other professions, others had to turn to passing on some semblance of their skills to the one market that could actually pay—the clan of ‘entertainers’.

The noted dance scholar, Dr Kapila Vatsyayan was a disciple of the great Achchan Maharaj, father of Pandit Birju Maharaj, the current doyen of the Lucknow Gharana of Kathak. One of her childhood experiences of training is worth quoting at length here (Vatsyayan 1998):

The exercise went on relentlessly and rigorously. There were no performances to be given, no shows in the offing. Alongside was the spectacle not too often but often enough of some professional woman walking into the classes and Achchan Maharaj feverishly teaching her a variety of compositions. It was but natural to compare. Why was I being drilled in this manner while these others who came in were being given goodies so easily? Why, why, why?

Kapila Vatsyayan stopped going to her classes after a slight misunderstanding with her guru. The seeming unfairness of the situation still haunted her. Achchan Maharaj came looking for her.

The master spoke: "What is all this nonsense? Does she know that all I am teaching those professional women will go down the dirty Jamuna with each of their demonstrations; what I am teaching Kapila will either go with her to the pyre or will be given to my son Birju through her."

Such may have been the desperation of the male guru in those times. But note that Achchan Maharaj never says that Kapila will become a dancer herself: she serves merely as a carrier of tradition. After all, Kapila Vatsyayan was from a respectable class of society!

It was only with the renewed interest in classical dance during the independence movement that several women—such as Rukmini Devi Arundale and Madame Menoka—all from respectable families, began to learn these dance forms. At this time, forms of cultural expression assumed the importance of nationalistic symbols of pride. It was a brave step to take given the hostility of society towards dance, and the attempts by these women to give the forms their due respect proved a difficult path to tread. That is another story. What is important here is that it was women who did it, and this escalated the 'feminization' of classical dance. Ironically, dance now became almost exclusively a woman's area.

An extract from Dattani's *Dance Like A Man* (1994: 166) sees a confrontation between Amritlal, the outwardly liberal, progressive nationalist and his daughter-in-law, Ratna, a Bharatnatyam dancer who has married his son because he too is a Bharatnatyam dancer—much to his father's discomfort.

AMRITLAL: A woman in a man's world may be considered being progressive. But a man in a woman's world is—pathetic.

RATNA: Maybe we aren't "progressive" enough.

AMRITLAL: That isn't being progressive, that is—sick.

The question is, why is it "sick"? Earlier in the play, Amritlal's son Jairaj, now an ageing Bharatnatyam dancer recounts his father's response to his wanting to be a dancer:

The craft of a prostitute to show off her wares—what business did a man have learning such a craft? Of what use could it be to him? No use. So no man would want to learn such a craft. Hence anyone who learnt such a craft could not be a man. How could I argue against such logic? (Dattani 1994: 137)

And again:

- AMRITLAL: I have no objections to your efforts in reviving the art, but I definitely do object to the people you are associating with.
- JAIRAJ: What do you mean?
- AMRITLAL: Your guru. What kind of a family is he from?
- JAIRAJ: His mother was not a devadasi, if that's what you want to know.
- AMRITLAL: Why does he wear his hair so long?
- JAIRAJ: Why do you ask?
- AMRITLAL: I have never seen a man with long hair.
- JAIRAJ: All sadhus have long hair.
- AMRITLAL: I don't mean them. I meant normal men.
- JAIRAJ: What are you trying to say?
- AMRITLAL: All I'm saying is that normal men don't keep their hair so long.
- JAIRAJ: Are you saying that he is not—(*Realising the implication*)—are you saying—?
- AMRITLAL: I've also noticed the way he walks.
- JAIRAJ: This is disgusting! You are insane! (Dattani 1994: 152–53)

This brings me to another reading of 'feminization' as connected with classical dance, which is, the 'feminization' (if one can call it that) of the male dancer himself. The male dancer—classical dancer—has been represented as effeminate to say the least in innumerable commercial films. Unfortunately, this very picture painted by Amritlal can also be seen in so-called parallel cinema such as in Aparna Sen's *Yugant* (1995). This has obviously contributed to the reading of what a male dancer looks like and what a male dancer is. And this is an idea which even the dancers themselves fall prey to. During my final years of school, I once worked on a dance piece for the title sequence of a forgettable children's programme on television. The equally forgettable choreographer who happened to be a man asked me why I did not grow my hair. I replied evasively but perfectly truthfully that long hair was not allowed in my school—a missionary boy's school. I will never forget the choreographer's response, which struck me as ridiculously absurd even then. He said: "Tell your school authorities that you are a dancer and therefore must have long hair." Does the secret of dance talent and skill lie in the length of one's tresses? Then how have audiences ever been mesmerized by the bald-pated Guru Kelucharan Mahapatra?

In his introduction to *Dance Like a Man*, Dattani mentions several male Bharatnatyam dancers he knows who don't talk about their passion to their friends for fear of ridicule. Astad Deboo, too, recalls being "nagged" by his school friends. I have been extremely privileged to have a largely supportive family, friends, and school circle which—looking back now—must have cushioned me from similar experiences. There are two incidents that I would like to narrate, though, about boys learning dance.

The first was related to me by a friend's mother. As a child this friend of mine used to learn Bharatnatyam and showed quite a flair for it. This incident must have happened when he was about five years old. He was leaving class one day when a female student's mother came up and asked his mother what the child's name was. His mother gave his obviously masculine name, to which she was treated to an unexpected and uncertain response—"Oh, he's a boy!"

There is an assumption buried in this remark, an assumption about what girls are expected to do and what boys are expected to do. I have often been asked during my school days—invariably by boys of my age: "So, what sports do you play?" Now this is not to say that because one dances, one should not play sports, but shouldn't the first question really be "Do you play sports?" For me the answer is no, for my sister the answer is a resounding yes. So what are we assuming about who?

This particular situation was also explored in a ballet I saw as a child. Presented by the Mamata Shankar Ballet Troupe, it was called *Ajker Ekalavya*, and followed the life of a young boy who is drawn to dance. The opening scene of this presentation remains fresh in my mind. A group of boys are playing some sort of sport and this boy is sitting apart from them. Soon, engrossed in his own thoughts, he begins to dance, exploring movements in different ways. When the other boys notice this, they all have a jolly good laugh at this poor chap's expense. The aspiring dancer becomes the butt of jokes, and is forced to look elsewhere to continue his interest.

The second real-life episode I want to share concerns an acquaintance of mine who was in another boy's school in Kolkata. When I was about eight, a performance by children had been prepared for Independence Day featuring dance forms from across India. Both he and I were involved. I had a Kathak solo piece, and he was greatly inspired by watching it. Soon after I learned that he, too, had joined Kathak classes in a well-known dance academy in the city. A few years later—when we would have been about twelve or thirteen—I heard that he

had stopped dancing. The reason: boys in his class were teasing him. Now, I don't know whether he would have grown up to be a fantastic dancer, but an opportunity was closed to him that day, an opportunity which he had been genuinely interested in at the time.

So the question is, does this peer attitude mean that it is not okay for young boys to dance? Or does it merely mean that there are very specific kinds of dance that boys may do? Perhaps the ideal is now Hrithik Roshan's dance numbers in films like *Kaho Naa . . . Pyaar Hai* (2000).

I'd like to clear something immediately. Personally, I think Hrithik Roshan is a fabulous dancer. I may not always like the moves he is given to do, but that is another matter entirely. There is no denying that of all the male film stars now, no one can hold a candle to him when it comes to dancing.

Over the last couple of years, I have been called in to various inter-school fests to judge their dance events. A few observations from these experiences. First, the events all have very nebulous categories, and regardless of any rules put in place about the kinds of dance the event is looking for, everything ultimately dissolves into the fog of 'fusion' dance. In fact, many schools actually specify that this is the category they are looking for, though they never go to the trouble to define what the term actually means. This makes things easier for participating schools, since they do not have to worry about being able to deliver a particular form of dance. Now while this should ideally be very liberating and, indeed, encourage experimentation and creativity of the most exciting kind, the offerings all draw from one source: the Bollywood of today with its focus on what I would call 'Fitness Dance'.

Both girls and boys present extremely energetic, supple, and precise movements set to a soundtrack of the latest dance numbers both from Hindi films and elsewhere. Rhythm and percussive beat is everything; thematic content—even when asked for—is thrown out of the window and choreography involves primarily the aspect of coordination. While the agility and ability of some of the dancers is amazing, there are only so many moves to choose from. For a judge, therefore, it soon becomes a series of scarcely differentiable drill demonstrations.

As I have said, both sexes present pieces like this. But what happens when elements of folk, classical, or hazy and undefined forms of Indian or even 'eastern' dance are demanded by the rules of the event? I have seen various renditions by girls' school groups: Lavni,

Garba, some ambiguous concept of Rajasthani dance or Goan fishing village dance, apologies for Kathak, Bharatnatyam, and Odissi, pieces apparently following the Shantiniketan tradition of what has come to be known as Rabindra Nritya, idyllic folk dances of Bengal of greatly questionable authenticity, and the ubiquitous and wafty style of what Bengal proudly refers to as Srijanshil Nritya—"Creative" Dance. When it comes to boys' groups, however, I have never seen anything other than Bhangra, and very occasionally Dandia Raas. In fact, there have been times where boys' school groups have either opted not to participate in a dance event that asks for the inclusion of any element of Indian dance, or gone pigheadedly ahead with their packaged acrobatic routine regardless of the rules of the event. It does seem that there is little in the vast matrix of Indian dance that young boys can or will or will be allowed to do.

At the center of this situation is the question of masculinity, of virility and therefore, necessarily, of sexuality. "Do you know where a man's happiness lies?" Amritlal asks his daughter-in-law in *Dance Like a Man*. "In being a man" (Dattani 1994: 164). How can one be a "man" in dance? How can one be a "man" *and* dance? Is a man's dance only allowed the explosive energy and even aggression of Bhangra, or can a man's dance also be the Pung Cholum of Manipur with restrained energy, exceptional skill, controlled acrobatics, and the most delicate grace? In all the fests I have judged, I have never seen an attempt by a boys' school to present something like the Pung Cholum. It is, like the Bhangra, a dance traditionally reserved for men only. Of course, it is more than possible (in fact, probable) that neither the students nor the teachers know of the existence of this dance. That is hugely unfortunate in itself, but I very much fear that a dance even approximating Pung Cholum would not be attempted because, in addition to the intense physical control and capacity, it also demands a subtle grace, delicacy, and quietude—all aspects of "feminine" dance.

There is a trend in several newer Kolkata schools to offer performing arts as extra- or co-curricular activities. While schools across the board offer drama and music to an extent, to the best of my knowledge it is largely girls' schools that offer any input of Indian dance as an option, just as (at least when I was in school) it was largely boys' schools that offered the more "masculine" sports such as football, cricket, and rugby. The verdict is clear: boys are not supposed to be interested in Indian dance any more than girls are supposed to be interested in those team sports.

When I performed at a co-educational school in Kerala last year a large group of girls came to meet my co-dancer and myself after the performance. That was only to be expected. What was far more heartening, though, was the small group of boys who loitered sheepishly into the green room, obviously impressed. And the principal said, "Perhaps now, after having seen you dance, some of these boys will also take it up." Now I'm not interested in being a role model for anyone, but if my performance manages to ignite an appreciation and a change of perception of a male classical dancer, I consider it a validation of who I am, who we are as male dancers in India today. And by creating a space for the male dancer in society today, we simultaneously expand and open up ideas and attitudes of and toward masculinity, virility, sensuality, and sexuality.

One of the greatest compliments I have received as a performer was after my production of Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala* (1993)—a production bringing together young actors and classical dancers. Because of the involvement of these young actors, we had a large contingent of college goers in the audience. The vast majority of this section of spectators had never had any interaction with any classical performance before—dance or otherwise. I played the character of Naga and had a few solo and duet pieces to dance—pieces which were choreographed completely in Kathak. I did not at all look like a traditional Kathak performer dressed as I was in rexin trousers and frockcoat, but the dance was Kathak nevertheless performed to very Indian classical-based music. One of the comments that filtered back to me in the days after the show through our young co-actors: some of their male college friends had apparently said that, for me, they were quite ready to turn gay. I respond to the spirit of that reaction rather than to the letter of it, by saying a wholehearted "Thank You!"

For there can be no greater fulfilment for a performer than the knowledge that he or she has succeeded in attracting the audience, in drawing them into the performance in some often intangible way, in making them desire the performing body almost as a voyeur. What is it that makes the male dancer most problematic? Certainly not the dancer himself, but the audience attitudes toward him. And certainly, it is men who are most uncomfortable watching or dealing with dancing male bodies on stage, not women. And if we are able to meet that awkwardness head on and turn it to our advantage, the male dancer will find a space for himself in the world of Indian performing arts and society at large.



References

- Dattani, Mahesh. 1994. *Final Solutions and Other Plays*. New Delhi: Rupa Distributors.
- Karnad, Girish. 1993. *Naga-Mandala: Play with a Cobra*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Kothari, Sunil. 1989. *Kathak: Indian Classical Dance Art*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications.
- Vatsyayan, Kapila. 1998. Program brochure for *Samskritiki Shreyaskar*, Kolkata's production of "Nritya Sandhya Anant Yatra."

Filmography

- Dance Like a Man*. 2003. Produced by National Film Development Corporation of India. Directed by Pamela Rooks.
- Devdas*. 2002. Produced by Bharat Shah. Directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali.
- Dil to Pagal Hai*. 1997. Produced by Yash Raj Films. Directed by Yash Chopra.
- Guide*. 1965. Produced by Navketan International Films. Directed by Vijay Anand.
- Jhanak Jhanak Payal Baje*. 1955. Produced by Rajkamal Kala Mandir. Directed by V. Shantaram.
- Kaho Naa . . . Pyaar Hai*. 2000. Produced by Film Kraft. Directed by Rakesh Roshan.
- Pakeezah*. 1972. Produced by Kamal Pictures Pvt. Ltd. Directed by Kamal Amrohi.
- Umrao Jaan*. 1981. Produced by Integrated Films. Directed by Muzaffar Ali.
- Yugant*. 1995. Produced by National Film Development Corporation of India. Directed by Aparna Sen.

V
Alternative Histories

The Politics of Memory: The Rise of the Anti-Hero in Kathakali

MUNDOLI NARAYANAN

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it “the way it really was” (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.

—Walter Benjamin,
“Theses on the Philosophy of History,” *Illuminations*

An intriguing feature of Kathakali, the traditional dance-drama of Kerala in south India, is the presence in its repertoire of a number of plays that have anti-heroic, haughty characters as protagonists. The ascent of anti-heroic characters in what was—and largely still is—essentially a heroic form started towards the end of the eighteenth century with *Ravanolbhavam* (The Origins of Ravana), a play that presented the majestic arrogance and determined rise to power of Ravana, the anti-hero of the epic *Ramayana*.¹ When *Ravanolbhavam* was first performed at the Tripunithura Royal Palace, the seat of the Kings of Cochin in the year 1780, it initiated a radical inversion in the hitherto established culture of Kathakali.² Kathakali's roots lay in a performance form that originated in the mid-seventeenth century under the influences of the pan-Indian *Bhakti* movement as Ramanattam, a devotional dance-drama that centered on the figure of Rama and enacted episodes from the *Ramayana*.³ The form then matured into Kathakali with the Kottayam plays, which drew upon the *Mahabharata* and presented the victories of the noble Pandavas in a heroic mode.⁴ Thus the rise of the haughty, anti-heroic character of Ravana to the level of the protagonist was a veritable reversal not only of the performance priorities of Kathakali but also of its fundamental ethical patterns. When *Ravanolbhavam* was closely followed by

Balivijayam (The Victory of Bali) and *Ravanavijayam* (The Victory of Ravana), both of which had Ravana as the protagonist, and Ravana's role in the Ramanattam play *Toranayudham* (The Battle of the Tower Pillars) was reformulated as Azhaku Ravana (Ravana, the Handsome), the figure of Ravana grew to be an undeniably central presence on the Kathakali stage.⁵ The dominant ethos of Kathakali thus shifted from a valiant heroism (*dhirodatta*) to a valiant haughtiness (*dhira udhata*), from a celebration of devotion and nobility to a celebration of arrogant power and defiance.⁶ The anti-hero had usurped the role of the hero, and Ramanattam (the dance of Rama) had in effect turned into Ravanattam (the dance of Ravana).

What was the social logic of this inversion, the political relevance of this radical rewriting of a tradition? These questions take us to a crucial stage in the history of not just Kathakali but the culture of Kerala itself. For, in the latter half of the eighteenth century, at a critical juncture when threats from both within and without the country had combined to raise the all too real specter of political subjugation and colonization, a number of discourses surfaced in the fields of arts, culture, politics, and life practices that bore insistent echoes of brute power and severe defiance. In a sense, what was being articulated through these "Ravanite" discourses were the hope and distant possibility for a radical reconfiguration of Kerala's ethical, cultural, and political values, and through them the very identity of the Malayali.⁷

It may not be possible to trace these Ravanite expressions in conventional historical texts that are bogged down in facts, figures, events, and the linear principles of a historical chronology, for the spheres of social experience and mental processes have been largely alien to these "factual" accounts of the past. On the other hand, a society's perceptions, hopes, and anxieties about its own time are best expressed in the legends and popular stories that circulate in an oral fashion at any given time. In a sense, legends are a society's soliloquies; they are self-directed articulations of its identity, its character, and its desires. Lacking specific authors or stable texts, these public discourses express the wider, changing substance of a society's mind. They are in effect signposts to how a society experiences its own reality. Even their hyperboles and exaggerations are relevant: more than a "true" representation of how things really were, they express the popular conception of how things ought to have been.

Sakthan Tampuran: Narratives of Power

In the second half of the eighteenth century, a number of legends and popular narratives circulated in Kerala, replete with recurrent images of brute power, the ruthless use of force, and a fierce defiance toward many things till then considered sacrosanct. Probably, the most prominent among them were the stories of Rama Varma, the ruler of Cochin from 1770 to 1805,⁸ popularly known as *Sakthan Tampuran*, the “strong king.” These tales gave an entirely new dimension to kingly power and the administration of law and justice. For the most part, they were also tales of unmitigated audacity, utter willfulness, and in many instances downright brutality. One such tale is as follows:

Once, when Sakthan Tampuran was at Thrissur, he saw that the famous Vatakkunnatha temple was surrounded by a dense forest of teaks, making it very inconvenient and unsafe for people to move around in the area.⁹ So, he decided to clear the forest and make wide pavements all around the temple. On the day the work on clearing the forest began, with His Majesty personally present, the *velichapadu* of the famed Paramekkavu temple nearby arrived in a dance of passion, carrying his sword and jingling his armlet.¹⁰ Speaking for Bhagavati, he addressed His Majesty angrily, “This is my father Siva’s matted hair. This cannot be cut in this manner.” His Majesty replied, “I have decided to clear this forest and make this area clean and tidy. It would be better if you stop saying unnecessary things and just go away. When Tippu Sultan came, entered the temple, dug up the figure of Siva and tossed it out, where were you and your father?”¹¹ Hearing this, the oracle’s fury mounted, and his dance became more frenetic. “Son, do you think you can trifle with me? I shall show you the consequences,” he said and started hacking at Sakthan Tampuran’s head with his sword as oracles are wont to do. Since his sword was not very sharp, it did not cut his head much. Then Sakthan Tampuran said to him, “What can you ever do to me? If your sword is not sharp enough, I have one that is quite sharp. It will be better to use that.” With these words, Sakthan Tampuran drew his own sword and, placing it on the oracle’s head, proceeded to hammer it down with the armlet. As the sword was quite sharp, the oracle’s body was instantly cut in half. After that His Majesty made sure that the forest was cleared away and broad pavements were laid all around the temple. As a result, the people were able to move around the temple conveniently and with no fear. (Sankunni 1982: 250)¹²

On close reading, one can see that there are two seemingly contradictory conceptual strands yoked together in this tale. On the one hand is the

idea of public service and welfare. The image of an excellent, welfare-oriented ruler committed to envisioning and executing policies that are beneficial to the people at large emerges clearly in the story, as it does in his biographer's description:

The division of the country into two parts, then into further administrative provinces and to different occupational units, the survey of the land and the systematic collection of taxes were all started during the time of Sakthan Tampuran. The establishment of a permanent *Nair* army, the formation of an *Ezhava* army and the commencement of public works were all done by him. . . . The making of roads, the planting of trees by the roadside, the building of bridges and the digging of ponds were all done under his direct supervision. Public meal houses, wayside inns and drinking water pavilions were established wherever necessary.¹³ (Ramamenon 1940: 6–7)

Many other conventional historical texts also credit Sakthan Tampuran with having imparted a clear direction to the administrative machinery which made the dispensation of law and order more efficient, strengthened the facilities and support for agriculture and trade, increased government revenue, carried out developmental public work schemes, and clearly defined the responsibilities of government officials. These activities aimed at the overall progress of Cochin and were based on a welfare-oriented concept of the nation characterized by many historians as “modern” (Menon 1914: 346–47; Menon 1967: 412–13). In short, the account of the incident at the Vatakkunnathan temple only replicates in a popular narrative context the historical consensus on Sakthan Tampuran's contributions to the making of a modern Cochin.

However, there is also another Sakthan Tampuran who stands out in high relief in the story, a Sakthan Tampuran who rarely gets represented in conventional accounts of history. Entirely in keeping with the adjective *sakthan*, the strong, it is the image of a sovereign who appears with all the trappings of brute power and utter ruthlessness. This dictator mercilessly suppresses anything and anyone who stands opposed to his wishes, raises a challenge to his schemes, or proves to be an obstacle in the path that he has chosen for his country. He is the protagonist in a number of other popular tales as well. Excellent examples include stories about the killing of Devarasa Kini, the insolent Gauda Saraswatha trader who delayed the supply of sugar for the ceremonial feast following the death of his aunt; the plunder of the Tirumala Devaswom temple and the business establishments of the

Gauda Saraswatha community in order to rein in their “arrogance”; the gouging out of the eyes of Kunjitti Menon, a corrupt government official; the immolation of the Ezhava army chief Tandan for the crime of molesting a poor Nair woman; the seizure of the wealth and possessions of Avanapparambu Nambudiri, a wealthy Brahmin given to pompous exhibitions of affluence; the drowning of thieves, robbers, and many other types of criminals in the Cochin backwaters; the capture and control of the powers of the temple establishments; and the systematic suppression of the Panickers, the Kaimals, the Karthas, and other landlords who refused to submit to his wishes.¹⁴ In all these tales, what surfaces is the vivid image of a “king who kills,” one who is seldom reluctant in employing any measure, however harsh it may be, to secure his own sovereign power and the social system at which he aims. In a sense, there is a deep contradiction between this figure of a dictator who resorted to a system of justice that reminds one of medieval modes of punishment and the figure of the modern monarch deeply interested in his country’s progress and the welfare of his people.

A possible explanation of this contradiction interprets Sakthan Tampuran’s deeds as a concerted endeavor to establish an absolutist system in which he embodied the state as the monarch, was restricted neither by written law nor by custom, and had no limitations on his authority and sovereignty. Seen in this light, the curbing and bringing to heel of alternative power centers within the state such as the temple establishments and the landlords, the suppression of wealthy Brahmins and other nobles who posed a challenge to the throne, the obliteration of privileges based on caste hierarchy and the values of religious orthodoxy, the containment of communities that defied the authority of the king by virtue of the backing they received from external forces, the creation of an administrative and military class/group that was totally loyal to the monarch, and the establishment of the idea that the king is the ultimate personification of law and justice were all elements of a larger political scheme to establish a system of royal absolutism.¹⁵ In the words of his biographer,

In order to establish the principle of “one country, one king,” he bowed to those who had to be bowed to, quarreled with those who had to be quarreled with, abused those who had to be abused, squeezed those who had to be squeezed, and destroyed those who had to be destroyed. (Ramamenon 1940: 8)

Compelling as this may sound, this interpretation gives no adequate explanation for the severity of some of the measures employed by Sakthan Tampuran. Nor does it provide any insight into the political contexts in which such a severe mode of absolutism came to be accepted by the people at large and even celebrated in popular narratives as an ideal worth embracing. Once again, popular narratives give us more clues about these contexts than historical accounts. One of them is as follows:

For the convenience of travel, Sakthan Tampuran made wide roads in different parts of the country and arranged for trees of shade to be planted on either side of the roads. Alongside the road from the eastern entrance of the Tripunithura temple to the East Fort gate too, pipal trees were planted and orders were issued that no one should pluck even a leaf from those trees. At that time, the prince, the king's younger brother and the successor to the throne, owned a few goats and, in order to feed them, the prince's friend and companion Cheruparambathu Kunjikrishna Menon plucked a few leaves from the pipal trees. As soon as the news reached him, Sakthan Tampuran had Kunjikrishna Menon brought before him, and grabbing him by his hair was about to cut off his head with his sword. At that point, the prince rushed in and hugging the king at the waist pleaded, "You may kill Kunjikrishnan after you have killed me." Then, Sakthan Tampuran told the prince, "It is in your time that this country is going to be subjugated and lose its sovereignty," and threw his sword to the ground. Turning to Kunjikrishna Menon, he shouted, "Go! Don't you come before me ever again," and let him off unharmed. (Sankunni 1982: 244)

It is manifestly evident here that even while the establishment of Cochin as a modern nation was the primary objective of Sakthan Tampuran, many of his deeds were prompted by a deep anxiety that the country may be "subjugated and lose its sovereignty." That severe measures and aggressive power were required as precautions to avoid such a danger is repeatedly implied in many of the stories about him. We see glimpses of this anxiety and the efforts to overcome it in stories such as those about his attempts to expose the weaknesses of his brothers and his efforts to transform them into strong individuals with the power of command, the banishment of his chief minister Paliath Achan for his intrigues and his collusion with Travancore, and his repeated endeavors to resist all forms of external interventions in the affairs of the state (Sankunni 1982: 239–65). In all of them, internal consolidation is seen as the answer to the anxiety of external threat.

The Threat of Colonization

What then was the source of this anxiety? In one sense, the threat of subjugation was not new to Cochin. From the fourteenth century on, from time to time, Cochin had been subject to repeated invasions from outside and the resultant loss of sovereignty. Moreover, the challenges raised by the landlords who functioned as local power centers and the conflicts among them, the tugs of war between various claimants to the throne, Brahmin dominance, and the power of the temple establishments that functioned more or less as states within a state, had made Cochin even weaker. In words that may seem rather harsh, a historian describes this situation thus:

From the fourteenth century on, the history of Cochin has been one of subservience, first to Vijayanagara kings, then to the *Samutiri* (the ruler of Calicut), after that to the Portuguese and the Dutch, then to Travancore, and finally to the British. In this royal family's internal feuds and their slavery to external powers, one can see that they encouraged forces that endangered the very freedom of India. It is doubtful whether there has been any other region where the wanton wilfulness of the priesthood and of feudal barons has held such sway.¹⁶ (Gopalakrishnan 2000: 395)

While this was indeed the general state of affairs, there was a crucial difference with Sakthan Tampuran's time in power (1770–1805). Turning the colonization efforts of the Portuguese and the Dutch into a mere tame prelude, the real drama of complete colonization was about to be staged under the auspices of the British East India Company.¹⁷ This menace, which had by then grown into one that could consume not just Cochin but the whole of India, had already made its presence felt in Kerala. With the fall of Tippu Sultan in 1792, apart from the isolated resistance of Pazhassi Raja, the ruler of the northern principality of Kottayam, Malabar had come under the full control of the British, Travancore had been reduced to a fully subservient state, and British forays into Cochin were increasing day by day.¹⁸

This was a new experience in every sense. That this aggression was radically different from the earlier instances of power struggles and territorial invasions among the local rulers was not merely because this was a case of dominance by a foreign power. Till then, despite recurrent changes in rulers and borders, the life of the common people had continued relatively unchanged because a generally accepted set

of ethical values, traditional notions about kingly duties and public welfare, conventions of law and justice, and principles of societal customs and practices were all generally shared and followed by successive rulers and ruling groups. This became possible primarily because, barring minor differences, they all belonged to one broad cultural stream. However, the arrival of the British dealt a severe blow to the continuation of this long-standing system. What was evident in the actions of the British East India Company at the time was a kind of unrestrained desire for profit probably unseen in India till then and an intense urge for power and supremacy. In the effort to satisfy these, they demonstrated a willingness to employ any means at their disposal, no matter how base or unfair. Along with a total contempt for the local people, their customs, and their conventions, the swift progress of the British, gained by employing skillful negotiation, rank deceit, or military strength as required, threw the hitherto accepted systems of ethical values and societal conventions into a deep crisis.

It is to this background wherein the fearsome specter of total colonization was looming large that one should consider Sakthan Tampuran's deeds and the popular narratives about them. In one sense, they contain the significant awareness that the times were changing, that traditional ethics and the time-honored social conventions of the land were no longer adequate to meet the difficult demands of the new situation. They forcefully articulate the need for a change in the basic values that determine societal practice and for the construction of a radically new world view. In the measures that Sakthan Tampuran is credited with in the popular narratives, we can discern a total rejection of traditional ethical priorities and the hitherto customarily accepted ideas of kingly duty. What we find is an attempt to formulate a new ethic, a new language of government that subordinates all other values by establishing mores to the overarching claims of power, creating a new political discourse based upon the idea of absolute authority—or "strength" as the language of the times identified it. Whether it be the hierarchies of the caste system, the perceived greatness of Brahminism, the values of religion, traditional notions about royal responsibilities, or humanitarian ideals of kindness and mercy, none of these were valuable by themselves in this new political order in the making. They had relevance only insofar as they assisted in establishing the authority of the king, who in effect embodied the state. In other words, power was the ultimate value in this authoritarian system, and any other value had significance only to the extent that it supported and legitimized power.

Naturally, questions could arise about the veracity of the popular tales that attribute uncommon strength and power to Sakthan Tampuran and the validity of viewing his actions as an oppositional response to colonization when in reality he entered into a truce with the East India Company and avoided a direct conflict with them altogether. As indicated earlier, these questions arise from a conception of history that is based on narrow factuality. The real issue is not what Sakthan Tampuran actually did or did not do. Substantially more important is what society was trying to say through its narratives of what he was supposed to have done. In other words, what concerns us here primarily is not the factuality of these tales but their signification. In all these stories, Sakthan Tampuran is a multifaceted image: an image that implies the rejection of an obsolete socio-ethical system in the face of the gathering threat of colonization, the nascent hopes for a new and vigorous political order, and the rise of certain non-traditional ideas about power and authority. The profusion and popularity of these stories have to be seen not only as evidence of how they managed to capture the imaginations of the people of the time but also as initial indications of an extensive transformation in their social and political attitudes. What was being articulated through them was a “structure of feeling” (Williams 1983: 7–12) that at that point of time was still relatively vague and yet to acquire a clear sense of direction, but which, if it had been allowed to develop fully, would have evolved into a different kind of nationalism and a new conception of the state. In short, they were the oral endeavors of a culture to discover a new path for itself and a new identity for its people.

The Entrance of Ravana

In terms of a culture’s attempt to discover a new sociopolitical ethic and a new world view in response to the imminent threat of colonization, a text that needs to be read parallel to the popular legends about Sakthan Tampuran is *Ravanolbhavam*, the first Kathakali play that had an anti-heroic figure as the protagonist. Written by Kallekulangara Raghava Pisharody while he was at Tripunithura during the reign of Sakthan Tampuran, *Ravanolbhavam* was first performed in 1780 at the Tripunithura Royal Palace under the auspices of Veera Kerala Varma, a Kathakali enthusiast and then the third in the line of succession to the throne of Cochin (Menon 1957: 50). Drawing its plot from the *Uttarakanda* (the final canto) of the *Ramayana*, *Ravanolbhavam* deals

with the origins and rise to power of Ravana. It presents an extensive array of events, starting with the defeat by the *devas* of the first *rakshasa* empire led by Mali, Sumali, and Malyavan and culminating in the establishment of the second *rakshasa* empire by Ravana, who through proud valor and strength acquires the power to be victorious over all the three worlds from Lord Brahma.¹⁹ On first appearance, it may not be entirely amiss to assume that a major inspiration for the composition of *Ravanolbhavam* at that particular juncture was the popular perception of a Ravana-type disposition in Sakthan Tampuran. Indeed, there are remarkable similarities between the Sakthan Tampuran of the popular legends and the Ravana of the myths, in both character and situation. Strength, harshness, and haughtiness were as much companions to Sakthan Tampuran as they were to Ravana. The destruction of enemies by any means, the strengthening of the country and the expansion of kingly authority were prominent aims for both. Ineffective successors and weak brothers were also constant worries to both of them.

At the same time, more than these superficial similarities of personality, it can also be seen that the Sakthan Tampuran of the legends and the Ravana of *Ravanolbhavam* were different formal expressions of a "structure of feeling" that arose in the social consciousness of the time. If Sakthan Tampuran's legends represented the hope for a certain kind of inversion in the political culture of the time, *Ravanolbhavam* effectively achieved a comparable kind of inversion in the culture of Kathakali. The usurpation of the hero's position by the anti-hero is not a departure whose implications are to be traced solely within the sphere of characters. On the other hand, it is a move that totally transforms the fundamental systems and structures of an art form. The ethical priorities, the aesthetic configuration, the ideological underpinnings, the established world view, and the general concepts of reality that had till then been accepted and expressed in Kathakali were all subjected to a comprehensive inversion and reformulation by the accession of Ravana to the position of the hero. Though the performance form that gave rise to Kathakali arose under the influences of the Bhakti movement with all its attendant humanist ideals, as the form evolved through the Ramanattam plays and the Kottayam plays, what developed was a performative system with manifest ideological undercurrents of Brahmin ascendancy and the hierarchies of the caste system. The crucial elements that governed this system were a costume and make-up typology which worked according to character categorizations such as *uttama* (noble), *madhyama* (medium), and *adhama* (base), or

satvika (ascetic), *rajasa* (haughty), and *tamasa* (evil), a clear vertical hierarchy among the characters on the basis of their birth and clan, and a marked preference for a Vedic/Brahminic ideological world view received from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.²⁰ Along with this, a concept of the noble hero and notions of right and wrong that borrowed heavily from the ethical structures of the *puranas* completed the ideological composition of the form.²¹ However, when the position of the hero that had been occupied by characters such as Rama, Dharmaputra, Arjuna, and Bhima came to be taken over by Ravana, this effected a radical reformulation of the internal, latent form while maintaining intact its apparent external form.²² Through its passionate celebration of haughtiness to the accompaniment of a pulsating orchestra of drums and rhythms, *Ravanolbhavam* not only rejected the established concept of a noble hero but initiated within the visual form of Kathakali a value system that had at its heart an abiding idea of strength and power. Puranic notions of good and evil, or right and wrong, never enter into the scope of this Ravanite dispensation. For this haughty hero who saw even the gods as his minions, there was only one “right”—the strength to challenge anything—and only one “wrong”: weakness. Much as in the case of the popular legends about Sakthan Tampuran, if one were to read this new direction in Kathakali in the context of the realities of the time, its political implications are quite evident: the need to reject the values and systems accepted and followed till then in order to confront the challenges of a time of transformation and the necessity of instituting a new system of societal practice based on the idea of unlimited power.

The Politics of Memory

It was not accidental that the image of Ravana cropped up in the visual culture of Kerala at that crucial point of time when the threat of impending colonization was most acute. It was as “a memory (that) flashed up at a moment of danger” (Benjamin 1970: 36) that the figure of Ravana appeared then, evoking the slumbering remembrance of an earlier era of Vedic/Brahminic colonization and the courageous but tragic resistance undertaken by Dravidian/south Indian tribes against it.²³ The similarities/parallels between the Vedic expansion and British colonization in their geographical directions, the clash of cultures they spawned, and the discourses of superiority/inferiority that they initiated were all promptings for the arousal of this latent communal memory. In one sense, it was a return to the Dravidian roots of Kerala

culture and, in essence, the first step toward a culture's rediscovery of itself through a pilgrimage to its own sources of strength.

Here, one needs to reflect on the politics of memory. Most often, memory is a refuge and a weapon for the oppressed. In that respect, memory is also the enemy of history because what is erased in history emerges in memory. While the victors write history, the vanquished store memories. The experience of the vanquished, denied a space in the history of the victors, is transmitted from person to person, from generation to generation and hoarded as the shared internal memory of an oppressed society. This communal memory that gets accumulated through the centuries has none of history's pretensions of impartiality, its aura of objectivity, or its claims of completeness. It is necessarily partial, subjective, and incomplete. Its truthfulness is, in the fullest sense of the term, relative. This unpretentiousness and partiality is at the same time its strength. For, more than recognizing the past "the way it really was," this memory resides in the societal consciousness as the potent fuel for an act of resistance that is to come.

The memory of Ravana as it appears in *Ravanolbhavam* shares the same partiality and relativity. Ravana is presented in the play not as the sly womanizer who abducted Sita, nor as the pathetic captive hanging helpless at the end of Bali's tail, nor as the evil sinner brought down by the righteous Rama's fatal arrow.²⁴ On the other hand, he appears as the *gananayaka* or king of the rakshasas, who is able to command even the gods with his resolute will and is about to become the lord of the three worlds. His valor knows no bounds, and he hesitates little in chopping off and sacrificing all his ten heads as he stands in meditation in the middle of the five flames (*panchagni*) in order to achieve his aim of being the unchallenged master of the universe.²⁵ It is highly significant here that unlike the regular culture of kathakali plays, the title and the story of the play involve not the "killing" (*vadham*) but the "origins" (*ulbhava*) and rise of Ravana.²⁶ This Ravana, who proudly declares "*ekanennalum porum*" (Alone, I am enough!) to conquer the whole world, is an image of forceful power and unbridled self-confidence—an image that could have sufficed to awaken the energy and strength of an entire people and lead them to resistance.

Tapassattam—A Theater of Memory

Memory is employed in *Ravanolbhavam* not only at the larger level of textual/cultural signification but also as a specific strategy, a technique, of performance. The scene *tapassattam*, "the performance of

penance," which through its immense performative popularity has become the most important scene in *Ravanolbhavam* and customarily the only one presented these days, is in itself a "theater of memory."²⁷ As a consummate portrayal of Ravana's majestic arrogance and his intense penance to acquire divine blessings from Lord Brahma, the crucial feature of tapassattam is that the events are presented as if they have already occurred, in the form of Ravana's recollections of his immediate past.

Showing clear traces of the device of *nirvahana* in Koodiyattam, where a detailed exposition of the pre-history of the character is conducted, this recollection of the past progresses through a series of questions and answers and depends on a distinctive technique known as *pakarnnattam*, "transferred acting," where the actor playing Ravana assumes the roles of all the other characters who figure in his remembrance.²⁸ Starting with the question, "I am most happy. What is the reason?" Ravana proceeds to go step by step into his past and enacts the entire sequence of events that led to his acquiring divine boons from Brahma. The narrative that unfolds is as follows: while the young Ravana is living at the hermitage of his father Sage Visravas in the forest of Madhu along with his mother Kaikasi and his two brothers, Vaisravana, another son of the sage and the lord of all riches, arrives in the *pushpaka vimana*, his aerial chariot, to pay respects to his father. On seeing his prominence and prosperity, Kaikasi becomes jealous and is saddened by the sorry plight of her own son, Ravana, who at that time was asleep in his mother's lap. Awakened by her tears falling on his face and realizing the reason for her sorrow, Ravana sets off with his brothers to perform intense meditation of Lord Brahma and achieve the powers needed to be victorious over the world. Standing immobile on one leg, surrounded by four burning pyres and the scorching sun above him, Ravana conducts severe meditation for several years. When Lord Brahma fails to appear despite this, Ravana, who has ten heads, proceeds to chop off his heads one by one and sacrifice them in the flames. Finally, when all but one head is gone and Lord Brahma has still not appeared before him, Ravana resolves to chop off his remaining head and sacrifice that too. This is nothing less than a challenge to the gods themselves, threatening them with the ill fame of causing his death despite his severe penance. However, when he raises his sword to strike, Lord Brahma appears and restrains him. Brimming with pride, Ravana then demands and acquires all the powers he needs, not as a humble suppliant but as one who arrogantly enjoins the gods to do his beckoning.

This highly structured scene progresses through a series of steadily intensifying patterns of percussive rhythms that denote each succeeding stage in Ravana's unfolding memory and the developmental movement of his emotions from valor to determination and then on to pride and arrogance. It was choreographed and introduced by Kaplingat Nambuthiri, a major innovator in the performance systems of Kathakali in the late eighteenth century, shortly after the play's initial staging in 1780.²⁹ That Kaplingat Nambuthiri was responsible for the introduction of this scene is of considerable historical significance. Not only were his many innovations in costume, make-up, acting modes, and improvisational segments crucial in the haughty, *katti*-type characters assuming central importance in Kathakali, but his life as one of the early modernizers of Kathakali was also another example of the inversion and rejection of established values that characterized the culture of the day. In his overwhelming passion for Kathakali, Kaplingat, though a Brahmin, is credited with having taken up Kathakali music, drumming, and the management of Kathakali troupes and training grounds, all vocations then considered strictly non-Brahminical. Stories abound of his total disregard and defiance toward many strictures and rules connected with the caste system and with other established social practices and traditional customs in his single-minded devotion to the cause of Kathakali (Sankunni 1982: 552–53). In short, there seems to be a historical inevitability in this confluence of persons and characters that in one way or another appear to personify a trenchant rejection of prevalent modes and mores.

To return to tapassattam, though Kaplingat drew upon the familiar technique of nirvahana, the exposition of character in Koodiyattam, the introduction of the device in Kathakali for Ravana's extended remembrance of his past in *Ravanolbhavam* produced a very different set of possibilities and connotations. First, though Koodiyattam is a multi-actor drama (*anekaharya*), it was in connection with the importance that accrued to a single-actor performance (*ekaharya*) that the nirvahana developed in Koodiyattam. This came about primarily due to the unique nature of the performance and audience spaces of the *kuttampalams*, the temple theaters where Koodiyattam is customarily performed, the distinctive "ways of seeing" that evolved in these spaces, and certain specific performative modes that developed as a result. The performance culture of Kathakali, however, was markedly different. As a multi-actor dance drama (*nrtiya*) in which the presence

and interaction of more than one character on the stage was a general rule, the introduction of such an extended segment of single-actor performance as the tapassattam marked a rupture in the continuance of established practice and the initiation of a new system. As far as the storyline of *Ravanolbhavam* is concerned, this single-actor segment, which gives the most consummate visual rendering to Ravana's arrogant confidence that "he alone is enough," is also a supreme performative expression of his accession to the rank of the hero. In performance, the stage is indeed the world; in thus presenting a single-handed conquest of the stage, tapassattam effectively evokes the impression of a conquest of the whole world. Thus, through the medium of the theater, and to the accompaniment of a frenzied percussion ensemble, Ravana emerges as the unopposed conqueror of the world.

At the same time, in a performance form in which events appear in a narrative time frame that is essentially of the present—in the order of their occurrence and governed by the notion that they are in the process of occurring—this performance of a memory of the past was a novel concept. Though indebted to the nirvahana, tapassattam has one crucial difference. In Koodiyattam, the nirvahana is presented before the actual play as a performative narration of previous events and episodes that are not part of the plot or the play text but are connected to the main characters. However, in tapassattam, a part of the story that is a segment in the actual play text and that has been presented in previous scenes is being presented again in the middle of the play in the form of a memory. While the episodes connected with Ravana and his brothers acquiring boons from Brahma are presented in the immediately preceding three scenes in the form of cholliyattam, the enactment of the play text, in tapassattam, the same episodes are presented by Ravana as ilakiyattam, the actor's improvisational performance. Though, in one sense, this may appear as a repetition of events, the fact is that it is not a mere repetition, and the performative focus is on the differences and contrasts between the two presentations.

First, there is immense difference between the *kutti Ravana* (boy-Ravana) of the previous scenes and the mature, mighty Ravana of the tapassattam. This is not merely a difference that accrues from the fact that the former is a minor role (*kuttitharam*) usually played by a younger, lesser actor and the latter a major role (*adyavasanam*) always played by a senior, accomplished actor. It is also a difference in the nature of the two characters. If in the previous scenes, Ravana appears

as a young boy, the darling son of Kaikasi, the entrance of Ravana in tapassattam is as *dasamukha*, the ten-headed one, who has been made mighty and strong by the boons from Brahma and who reigns supreme over all the three worlds. The narrative *sloka* that precedes the scene amply illustrates this difference:³⁰

Mighty and strong with boons obtained from Brahma, the Lord of the world, Dasamukha boldly brought under his rule, with the colossal power of his arms, All the three worlds, Indra, the Lord of Heaven, and other celestial guardians. Then, he spoke thus to his eminent brothers, who also had received boons. (Nair 2000, vol. 2: 345)

This difference informs all aspects of performance. The might, strength, and courage suggested in the *sloka* determine the basic sentiment and tone of the entire scene. Starting with a *tiranokku* (curtain gaze) that moves from courage to arrogance, progressing through each stage of an intensely harsh meditation in which heads are chopped off and sacrificed one by one, and culminating in the attainment of boons from Brahma with the utmost vigor and valor, this scene presents the figure of an unchallenged, haughty hero. Thus, with the help of steadily intensifying patterns of percussive rhythms on the *chenda* and the *maddalam* that keep pace with the steadily mounting force and speed of the actor's movements, tapassattam becomes a complete audiovisual portrayal of power. One is left to wonder whether it is possible to even contemplate a stronger protagonist.

Along with affirming Ravana's status as a hero, tapassattam also achieves a rereading/rewriting of history with Ravana in the position of the subject. When the same series of events that was presented in cholliyattam, the enactment of the play text, is again presented in the form of a memory in ilakiyattam, the actor's improvisational performance, what it reveals is a history "written" from Ravana's point of view. When Ravana takes on the roles of Kaikasi, Brahma, and himself in the past, what is enacted is a different history without any hint of defeat or humility and with recurrent echoes of valor and arrogance. Thus, through an autobiographical performance narrative, the effort here is to recapture a history that belongs to the victors and to rewrite it from a radically different perspective. At the same time, as Walter Benjamin reminds us, "History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now" (1970: 37). In other words, any historical discourse is as much about the living present as it is about the dead past. The language, views, interests, and anxieties of the present always shape the writing

of any history. Without this contemporaneity, this “presentness,” there is neither the past nor history. In its attempt to provide a new interpretation, a different version to history, *tapassattam* unites in its very performative context two different kinds of the present. One is the narrative present of Ravana, reigning in power and glory after his attainment of divine boons; the other is the specific historical present in which the play was written and first performed. In this coming together of two presents, one of the stage and the other of the world offstage, one performative and the other real, we can see the enactment of a sense of history that appears at moments of revolutionary action and the evocation of an earlier time that is “blasted out of the continuum of history” (Benjamin 1970: 36). As Benjamin observes:

. . . no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. (1970: 36)

When the imminent threat of total colonization and, in response to it, the need for a political culture based on strength and power arose, an earlier mythical present that formed a constellation with this historical present was ushered onto the stage. Here, Ravana becomes a veritable model. Implying the need for an idiom of strength and audacity in the identity of a people and the possibility of initiating a different approach to contemporary realities, Ravana’s enactment of his own story, his “writing” of his own history, captures and articulates the hopes of an age through the language of the stage. Thereby, he becomes the symbol of a society’s desire to become the acting subjects of a new history that they author through their own deeds.

From Resistance to Rejection

The possibilities of power and resistance, envisaged through the legends of Sakthan Tampuran and *Ravanolbhavam*, unfortunately had very few sequels or follow-ups in the cultural or political arenas of Kerala. The fact is that the possibilities for change were never really translated from the realm of hope to that of practical political action. Ruling families and groups that couldn’t see beyond their limited private interests and the absence of a leadership with a clear political will actually hastened the process of colonization. Apart from the isolated

struggles of Pazhassi Raja in the north of Kerala and Velu Thampi Dalava in the south, no serious or organized challenges to British supremacy arose during the time.³¹ Thus, by 1800, Kerala came to be fully under the British yoke. With that, the small window of possibility that had opened in the imaginations of the people was slammed shut, and the hopes for the creation of a new political dispensation and a new social identity disappeared altogether.

Needless to say, there were distinct echoes of this development on the Kathakali stage. Many plays that helped in furthering the importance of haughty, katti-type characters were authored, performed, and came to acquire popularity. Yet, apart from the partial exceptions of *Balivijayam* and *Narakasuravadham*, no plays appeared on the Kathakali stage that fully continued the culture of strength and power that characterizes *Ravanolbhavam*. With complete colonization having become an undeniable reality, the possibility of a dispensation based on absolute power had become as untenable on the stage as in the social and political fields. At the same time, a return to the old, traditional ethic was also not possible. Thus, “caught between two worlds, one dead and the other powerless to be born,” Kathakali to a great extent turned its face away from the realities of life and society and limited its scope to the formal processes of stage and performance. With this disjunction between the world and the stage, between reality and performance, the anti-hero’s usurpation of the role of the hero lost its initial, radical sociopolitical implications and became a mere theatrical device. It is in this context that the excessive presence of eroticism, of the performative emotion of *sambhoga sringara*, in most post-*Ravanolbhavam* plays with haughty, katti-type characters as protagonists becomes noteworthy.³² This phenomenon developed primarily through the works of the Travancore kings Karthika Tirunal and Aswathi Tirunal, and poets under their patronage such as Putiyikkal Tampan, Irayimman Tampi, and Karindran, who made it a rule in their plays that katti-type characters should make their initial entrance in an opening scene that features an extended erotic segment acted to the accompaniment of the *raga Pati*.³³ In this move from arrogance to eroticism, and from a display of strength to a display of ardor, there was a drastic reduction in the range and scope of Kathakali. With this, the Kathakali stage shrunk from the social to a theatrical “personal” and from the public realm to a very narrow private realm that had its existence only on the stage. In one sense, what occurred through this was a comprehensive depoliticization of the Kathakali stage. Faced with brutally oppressive power structures of colonialism that could

not be tamed, let alone defeated, Kathakali shrank back from all social connotations and withdrew into a small onstage world of amorous passion characterized by elaborate and conventional descriptions of the surroundings and of the heroine's physical attributes. At the same time, these highly technical and virtuosic displays of passion developed as formal theatrical actions far removed from the realities of love and sexuality in the audience's life. To put it differently, they were mere performance constructions: technical assemblies of gestures, facial expressions, stances, and movements that had relevance only on and for the stage. They signified little outside of the stage. The visual and performative images they created with the assistance of music and percussion were self-signifying in the fullest sense of the term. Through them a world of performance was created that turned the process of semiosis on itself, that signified nothing but itself.

Another major feature of the plays that came after *Ravanolbhavam* and were centered around haughty, katti-type characters was that their plots invariably culminated in the death of the protagonists. It is indeed possible to speculate whether this change of narrative focus from the origins and rise of a haughty character to the fall and demise of such characters constituted a return to the earlier traditional ethic of good and bad, virtue and vice, and the victory of the former over the latter. The possibility is further strengthened by the fact that a number of plays were written around this time that had Vaishnavite devotional themes.³⁴ However, the pattern of internal development of the katti-type plays alerts us to an entirely different process. They open with *padinja padams*, slow rhythmic sequences of an erotic nature, in which the lead character exudes all the airs of heroic majesty. However, as I have explained elsewhere, eroticism here is only a prelude to death:

The vital feature of these extended and conventional depictions of erotic love is that they are invariably never consummated, fulfillment is continually postponed, and their course disrupted by the entry of violence, till finally, in a macabre twist, desire turns into its virtual opposite, death. What started as subjective mobility ends in utter stasis. (Narayanan 2001: 34)

In this curious admixture of desire and death, where the initial affirmation of a desiring subject gives way to the assertion of non-existence and nullity, there lurks an extreme kind of nihilism. In denying the protagonist the ability to determine himself even in the most limited sense, these plays reject the possibility of a humane universe and the very subjectivity of man. Thus, like the crest and ebb of a wave, the ascent and descent of a musical note, the evolution from Ravana,

the conqueror of the world, to Kichaka, who ends up as a nondescript, lifeless ball, constitutes the performance text for the demise of the Malayali's hopes for a political dispensation of defiant strength and his surrender to the yoke of colonialism.³⁵



Notes

1. Written by Kallekulangara Raghava Pisharody, *Ravanolbhavam* draws upon the *Uttara Kanda*, the final canto of the *Ramayana*. It deals with the origins and rise to power of Ravana, the anti-hero of the epic *Ramayana*, and was the first Kathakali play to have a haughty, anti-heroic character as the protagonist.
2. In the eighteenth century, the region currently known as Kerala in the southwest of India was comprised of three major principalities: Travancore in the south, Cochin at the center, and Calicut (Malabar) in the north, along with a few other smaller principalities that accepted the general suzerainty of the first three. All the principalities were under the hereditary rule of princely families specific to each principality.
3. The Bhakti movement refers to a string of religious movements that convulsed the whole of India during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These religious movements centered on the figures of Krishna and Rama and emphasized devotion to God as the sole means of salvation. Collectively known as the Bhakti movement, they left a very profound impact on the life and culture of Indians in the subsequent centuries and gave rise to a number of literary and theatrical forms and genres.

Ramanattam comprised a cycle of seven plays written in the mid-seventeenth century by Kottarakkara Tampuran, the ruler of a principality in southern Kerala, which drew upon the *Ramayana* and presented various episodes in the life of Rama.

4. The four plays of Kottayam Thampuram, the ruler of a northern principality of Kerala, collectively known as the *Kottayam* plays, were written in the late seventeenth century and are based on different episodes of the *Mahabharata*. They form the very kernel of the Kathakali repertoire and have been primarily instrumental in establishing most of the central structures of training and performance of Kathakali. The plays are *Bakavadham* (The Killing of Baka), *Kirmiravadham* (The Killing of Kirmira), *Kalyanasaugandhikam* (The Auspicious Flower), and *Nivathakavacha Kalakeyavadham* (The Killing of the Nivathakavachas and Kalakeya).

In the *Mahabharata*, the Pandavas consisted of five brothers—Yudhishtira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva—who were sons of Pandu and cousins of the Kauravas.

5. Authored by Kalloor Neelakantan Nambudiripad, *Balivijayam* was the second major play with Ravana as the protagonist. In terms of its plot, it may be considered a continuation of *Ravanolbhavam*, since it deals with events after Ravana's attainment of boons from Brahma and his victory over the three worlds. The major episodes of the play are Ravana's victory over Indra and his defeat at Bali's hands.

Written by Kilimanoor Raja Raja Varma, also known as Karindran, *Ravanavijayam* draws upon chapters thirteen to sixteen of the *Uttarakanda* of the *Ramayana*. It presents Ravana embarking on his campaign of victory over the three worlds, his defeat of Kubera, the juggling of Mount Kailasa, Ravana's receipt of the divine sword *Chandrasahsa* from Lord Siva, and the rape of Rambha.

Azhaku Ravana (Ravana, the Handsome) is the name given to Ravana's initial appearance in the play *Toranayudham*. While residing in his palace with his consort Mandodari, Ravana is overcome by his desire for Sita, Rama's consort, whom he had abducted to Lanka. He sets out to the trees of the Garden of Asoka, where Sita resides, lighted by torches and accompanied by the celebratory sounds and stances of his retinue. Once there, he attempts to persuade Sita to accept him through clever words and valuable gifts. This segment and the performance systems associated with it were a contribution of Kaplingat Nambuthiri, a major modernizer of Kathakali in the late eighteenth century. Generally, the characters and their corresponding costumes and make-up in Kathakali fall into several distinct categories: *paccha* (green) and *pazhukka* (golden yellow) for noble heroes and kings; *katti* (knife), with a round ball attached to the tip of the nose, for high-born, haughty types; *chuvanna thadi* (red beard) for extremely evil or excessively angry characters; *vella thadi* (white beard) for monkeys; *kari* (black) for sub-human beings; and *minukku* (shining) for women, Brahmins, and ascetics. The historical significance of the *azhaku Ravana* segment is that it introduced a newfound importance to haughty, *katti*-type characters, as opposed to the prominence of the noble *paccha*-type in previous plays, and opened the way for new plays that had anti-heroic characters as their protagonists.

6. In the Hindu *puranas*, *nayakas* (heroes) are classified as belonging to four types: *dhirodatta* (valiant-noble), *dhira uddhata* (valiant-haughty), *dhiralalita* (valiant-simple), and *dhirasantha* (valiant-calm). This classification has influenced the theatrical practice and analysis of most traditional Indian theater forms, especially the Sanskrit theater.
7. Malayalam being the language spoken by most people in Kerala, the residents of Kerala are known in local parlance as "Malayalis."
8. Rama Varma was de facto ruler from 1770 to 1789 and ruler from 1789 to 1805.
9. Thrissur is a town in central Kerala famous for its *puram* (festival), which involves elaborate processions of caparisoned elephants and extensive

percussion ensembles. Sakthan Tampuran is regarded as the “architect” of modern Thrissur and the initiator of the puram.

The Vatakkunnathan temple, dedicated to Shiva, is one of the largest and oldest temples in Kerala. Considered to be more than a thousand years old, the sprawling grounds around it are the main venue of the Thrissur puram.

10. The *velichapadu* is the Goddess’s anointed oracle, who in a state of passion is believed to speak for the goddess and whose words are revered as sacred.

The Paramekkavu temple refers to a temple to Bhagavati, the female deity in the Hindu faith, situated close to the Vatakkunnathan temple.

11. A major event in the history of Kerala in the late eighteenth century was the repeated invasions by Haider Ali and his son Tippu Sultan, the rulers of neighboring Mysore. Tippu Sultan’s army took control of the whole of northern Kerala and reached up to Alwaye in central Kerala in 1790. During these incursions, a number of Hindu temples were looted and destroyed, and many Hindus were forcibly converted to Islam. At Trichur, Tippu Sultan’s army is said to have camped on the grounds surrounding the Vatakkunnathan temple and inflicted extensive damage to the temple.
12. All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are by the author.
13. The Ezhava and Nair armies referred to here were military units organized on caste lines, Nairs and Ezhavas being two caste communities of Kerala.
14. The Gauda Saraswathas were a community of Brahmins who migrated to the south-west of India from the north over a period of several centuries. They arrived in Kerala during the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries AD from the south Karnataka region of Konkan and are thus also known as the Konkani. Their major occupation being trade and commerce, they entered into an alliance with the Dutch, who had a base in Fort Cochin. Dutch protection and their wealth made them largely immune to the powers of the Cochin rulers till the time of Sakthan Tampuran.

The Tirumala Devaswom temple at Cochin, established in 1599 AD, is the biggest socio-religious institution of the Gauda Saraswatha community and is one of the great temples of Kerala.

The Nambudiri Brahmins were the highest in the caste system; due to their high social and ritual status they were held in respect by society at large. Apart from playing a major role in the affairs of government as advisors to the rulers, they were effectively the leaders of society and dominated every aspect of social, economic, cultural, and political life in Kerala from the twelfth to the nineteenth centuries (Gopalakrishnan 2000: 413–14 and 428–34). It is in this context that Sakthan Tampuran’s actions against powerful and wealthy Nambudiris acquire significance.

Between the third and the seventh century AD, there was a large-scale influx of Brahmins into Kerala from areas that are now present-day Andhra through Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, resulting in the establishment of thirty-two Brahmin settlements in the fertile tracts of northern and central Kerala, best suited for paddy cultivation. From the eighth to the twelfth centuries these settlements proliferated into sub-settlements and were consolidated as temple-centered agrarian villages headed by Brahmins. The status of the temple as a landed institution and as a repository of gold and other valuables enabled the temple establishments to wield a great deal of social control, so much so that over the centuries they developed into semi-autonomous power centers over which the rulers of the different principalities had little control. For more on the temple establishments, see Veluthat (1978), Gurukkal (1994), and Gopalakrishnan (2000).

For all these stories, see Sankunni (1982: 239–65).

15. Several Kerala historians have attempted to approach Sakthan Tampuran's rule in terms of its parallels with the political philosophy and practice of western instances of absolute monarchy. For two major examples, see Padmanabha Menon (1914: 354) and Pillai (1967: 263).
16. The Vijayanagara kingdom was a south Indian kingdom based in the Deccan plateau, with its capital at the erstwhile city of Vijayanagara near present-day Hampi in east Karnataka. Established in 1336, it brought most of southern India under its control by 1374 and continued to exert its dominance over the region till the end of the fifteenth century (Thapar 1966: 323–28).
17. After their first arrival on the Malabar Coast in 1498 under the leadership of Vasco da Gama, the Portuguese directed their efforts primarily toward trade in spices and Christian proselytizing. Though they succeeded in acquiring territory, establishing a number of forts on the western coast of India, and getting involved in political intrigues with the local rulers, territorial acquisition and political maneuvers were ultimately in the service of furthering their trade and religious interests, or as Hermann Gundert observes, to "spread the fame of Portugal and the greatness of the Gospel" (1964: 51). As for the Dutch, it was pepper that drew them to Kerala in the middle of the seventeenth century. With the capture of Portuguese strongholds at Cochin during 1661–63, the Dutch became the masters of the coastline. Like the Portuguese they avoided territorial conquests and, throughout their career in Kerala, which lasted till the closing years of the eighteenth century, the Dutch involvement in local politics was minimal. The conflicts that they had with the Samutiri of Kozhikode in 1718 and Marthanda Varma of Travancore in 1739–41 were exceptions and not the general characteristic of Dutch policy in Kerala (Gupta 1966: 17–47).

18. Pazhassi Raja (1760?–1805) was the king of Kottayam in the late eighteenth century. Following an unpopular revenue policy by the East India Company, he stopped the collection of all revenues in Kottayam and organized revolts against the British in Malabar. In the revolt of 1793–97, Pazhassi Raja scored a decisive victory over the British, who suffered a critical loss of men and material. A truce was called for as a matter of political expediency. The second revolt took place from 1800 to 1805, at which time the Raja had the assistance of peasants and the tribal people of Wayanad. The revolt turned into a guerrilla battle waged in the jungles of Wayanad. On November 30, 1805, the Raja was shot dead by the British (Sreedhara Menon 1967: 378).

In 1764, Travancore permitted the establishment of a British East India Company post at Vizhinjam in return for military help, and in 1795 a treaty of “permanent” alliance was signed. Travancore had to resort to the help of British forces to quell an uprising by certain sections of the military in protest against the reduction of their allowances, the outcome of which was the signing of a new treaty in 1806. According to this treaty, the East India Company had the right to intervene in Travancore’s internal matters of state, and it was henceforth to be regarded as a subservient state under the protection of the Company (Gopalakrishnan 2000: 346–48).

19. According to Hindu mythology, the devas are celestial beings or semi-gods, and the rakshasas, their opponents, are a group of power-seeking deities, sometimes referred to as demons.
20. These are conventional categorizations found in a number of Indian performance and poetic forms that can be traced to the *Natyasastra* (The Science of Acting), the ancient Indian treatise on dramaturgy attributed to Bharatamuni.
21. *Purana*, or that which belongs to ancient or olden times, is the name of an ancient Indian genre (or a group of related genres) of Hindu literature. The general themes of the *puranas* are history, tradition, philosophy, and religion, and they are usually in the form of stories related by one person to another.
22. While Rama was the hero of the seven Ramanattam plays composed by Kottarakkara Tampuran, Dharmaputra, Arjuna, and Bhima, the Pandava brothers of *Mahabharata* were the heroes of the four plays written by Kottayam Tampuran.
23. This is not to partake of quasi-Orientalist notions of the *Ramayana* as a story that describes the Aryan invasion of the non-Aryan south and the consequent conflict between Aryan and Dravidian cultures. This interpretation originated from the work of a nineteenth-century Indologist, Christian Lassen, in whose *Indisches Alterthumskunde* (Leipzig, 1847–62), the Aryan is represented by the orderly and advanced society of Ayodhya and the Dravidian by the uncouth wildness of the

rakshasa. This dichotomy had more to do with contemporary European ideological preoccupations with “the Aryan” than with local, indigenous identifications. However, a close reading of the political subtexts of various Rama stories, such as the Buddhist *Jataka* tales, the *Valmiki Ramayana*, *Paumacariyam*, the Jain version of the Rama story, and so on, clearly demonstrates that the idea of exile and the establishment of outposts were symbolic renderings of the extension of the boundaries of the monarchical state, the defeat and subjugation of the “republics” of central and southern India, the establishment of monarchy in their stead, and the spread of Vedic Brahminism from the north to the south. Of primary importance here is the representation of Ayodhya as an agrarian, caste-based society with clearly demarcated boundaries and a monarchical system based on primogeniture, while Lanka is represented as a pre-agrarian, casteless society with no clear boundaries and an oligarchic system of chieftainship. The suggestion by linguists that Ravana, more than a personal name, is a Sanskritized form of a Dravidian word *ireivan/irauvan* meaning god, sovereign, or lord, and the reference to more than one Ravana in Puranic sources, lend credence to the idea that the Ravana of the *Ramayana* stories is a symbolic condensation of many different Dravidian chieftains who might have resisted the onslaughts of Vedic expansion. For more details, see Thapar (2000: 647–79, 1055–78).

24. In *Balivijayam*, by Kallloor Neelakantan Nambudiripad, Ravana challenges Bali, the powerful monkey king of Kishkindha, on the instigation of Sage Narada, and accepts defeat when he ends up captured in Bali’s long tail.
25. *Panchagni* is a rite of purification in which five external fires—four fires that are lit around the meditating person and the fifth that of the sun—are endured. The five external fires are symbolic of the five “internal fires” raging within: *kama* (passion), *krodha* (anger), *lobha* (greed), *moha* (attachment), and *matsara* (jealousy).
26. Most Kathakali plays before *Ravanolbhavam*, especially those of Kottayam Thampuran, being stories of the victory of right over wrong and virtue over evil, depicted the killing of haughty katti and *thadi* characters by the noble *paccha* characters. This culture of “killing” (*vadham*) was a part of the very ethical and aesthetic structures of Kathakali as it stood before the appearance of *Ravanolbhavam*.
27. A contemporary performance convention of Kathakali is that only scenes that have significant performance potential and audience appeal are customarily presented, and scenes that merely take the narrative forward are usually left out. This natural process of editing has come about over the last two to three centuries and has had to do with the development of a particular kind of aesthetic in the appreciation of Kathakali, wherein the claims of performance have become more important than the demands of the narrative. The progress of the narrative is of little importance; practically everyone knows the story and, in fact, it is even considered

imperative that one knows the story to enjoy the performance fully. Therefore, the dynamics of performance, the audiovisual experience of performance, acquires primary importance. This has meant that only scenes with performance significance remain, while the other scenes have gradually faded from the stage.

28. Nirvahana is a form of exposition of character in Kutiyattam, where the major characters who appear in the first scene of a play narrate their previous histories through extended mono-act performance segments of gestural acting. Proceeding through a question-answer structure, the events of the pre-history are enacted by the actor, who takes the part of all the characters who figure in this performative narration.
29. The story is that Veera Kerala Varma asked Kaplingat Nambuthiri to contribute something of his own to the performance of the play and that in one afternoon he choreographed and systematized the entire segment of tapassattam and got it performed that very evening by Ittiri Panikker (Menon 1957: 50).
30. A Sanskrit verse form in four lines with set metrical patterns.
31. See footnote 19 for Pazhassi Raja. For Velu Thampi Dalava see Gopalakrishnan (2000: 348).
32. *Sringara*, the aspect of love, has by convention a number of different emotional strands such as *sambhoga sringara* (love union), *vipralambha sringara* (separation in love), *vatsalya sringara* (tender caring), and *bhakti sringara* (devotional love).
33. Karthika Thirunal Rama Varma (1724–98), the author of seven Kathakali plays, is famous primarily for the plays *Rajasuyam* and *Narakasura-vadham*, both of which had haughty characters as protagonists.
Aswathi Thirunal Rama Varma (1756–94) was the author of *Rukminiswayamvaram*, *Puthanamoksham*, *Ambarishcharitam*, and *Poundrakavadham*.
Puthiyikkal Thampuran (1725–90) was the author of *Karthaviryavijayam* and *Ramanukaranam*.
Irayimman Thampi (1783–1856) was the author of *Kichakavadham*, *Uttaraswayamvaram*, and *Dakshayagam*.
Raja Rajavarma Koyi Thampuram, who wrote under the pseudonym Karindran, was the author of *Ravanavijayam*.
34. The most important of these are *Santhanagopalam*, *Rugmangatacharitam*, and *Kuchelavrittam*, all of which had devotional themes and Krishna as a major character.
35. In *Kichakavadham*, the haughty character Kichaka is finally crushed to death by Bhima and turned into a lifeless ball of flesh.

References

- Benjamin, Walter. 1970. *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn. London: Vintage Press.
- Gopalakrishnan, P. K. 2000. *Keralathinte Samskarika Charitram* [The Cultural History of Kerala; Malayalam]. Thiruvananthapuram: State Institute of Languages.
- Gundert, Herman. 1964. *Keralappalama* [History of Malabar from A.D. 1498–1531; Malayalam], first published in 1868. Kottayam: Vidyarthi Mithram.
- Gupta, A. Das. 1966. *Malabar in Asian Trade 1740–1800*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gurukkal, Rajan. 1994. "The Formation of Caste Society in Kerala: Historical Antecedents." In K. L. Sharma, ed., *Caste and Class in India*, pp. 396–406. Jaipur: Rawat Publications.
- Kaimal, Aymanam Krishna. 1986. *Kathakali Vijnanakosam* [Kathakali Encyclopedia; Malayalam]. Kottayam: Current Books.
- Lassen, Christian. 1847–62. *Indisches Alterthumskunde*. Leipzig: LA Kittler.
- Menon, K. P. Padmanabha. 1914. *Kochi Rajyacharitam* [The History of Cochin; Malayalam]. Ernakulam: Cochin Government Press.
- Menon, K. P. S. 1957. *Kathakali Rangam* [The Kathakali Stage; Malayalam]. Kozhikode: Mathrubhumi Books.
- Menon, Sreedhara A. 1967. *A Survey of Kerala History*. Kottayam: National Book Stall.
- Nair, Kalamandalam Padmanabhan. 2000. *Cholliyattam* [Manual for acting *kathakali* plays; Malayalam]. Vols. 1 & 2. Vallathol Nagar: Kerala Kalamandalam.
- Narayanan, Mundoli. 2001. "The Impact of the Public Sphere: Shifting Patterns of Form in *Kathakali* (Indian Classical Theatre)." *Haritham. Journal of the School of Letters*, Mahatma Gandhi University 12: 27–39.
- Pillai, Elamkulam P. N. Kunjan. 1967. *Studies in Kerala History*. Trivandrum: The Author.
- Ramamenon, Puthiezhatu. 1940. *Sakthan Tampuran* [Malayalam]. Ernakulam: Vishwanatha Press.
- Sankunni, Kottarathil. 1982. *Aitihyamala* [The Garland of Legends; Malayalam]. Kottayam: Current Books.
- Thapar, Romila. 1966. *A History of India*. Vol. 1. London: Penguin Books.
- . 2000. *Cultural Pasts*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Veluthat, Kesavan. 1978. *Brahmin Settlements in Kerala: Historical Studies*. Calicut: Sandhya Publishers.
- Williams, Raymond. 1983. *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*. Hammondsworth: Penguin Books.

Guru Surendranath Jena: Subverting the Reconstituted *Odissi* Canon

ALESSANDRA LOPEZ Y ROYO

Desperately Seeking to be Ancient . . .

Odissi was canonized in India as “classical dance” in the late 1950s.¹ This makes it barely half a century old. It is now taught and performed in Orissa, in major Indian cities outside Orissa, and globally in South Asian diasporic contexts. The history of Odissi and its classicization is complex, involving a convergence of different performative traditions—the ritualistic singing and dancing of the *mahari* temple dancers of the Jagannath temple in Puri, the acrobatic dancing of the *gotipuas* or street boy-performers, the martial arts of the *akhada* or the gymnasia of Puri, and the *naca* or the local dance theater of the Orissan villages—in a balancing act of religious ritualism and secular practice.²

Odissi was born in the theaters of Cuttack in the 1940s; it bore no special name and was devised as entertainment within plays (Pani 2000; Citaristi 2001). The 1940s were clearly marked, nation-wide, by the revival of Bharatnatyam, and by the larger significance of this act of re-cuperation in cultural and political terms. Odissi was fashioned by its twentieth-century male gurus as a paradigmatic, quintessentially female form in the “classical” mode, loosely inspired by the Hindu ritualistic dance practices of the maharis. A performance aesthetic was evolved for it, modeled on the aesthetics of Bharatnatyam. The latter was being constructed as the genre that most perfectly embodied Indian dance classicism and thus became instrumental for

its institutionalization. Odissi and other dance forms followed suit (Chatterjea 2004: 147).

Odissi was systematized with classificatory borrowings from ancient texts on dramaturgy—the pan-Indian *shastras* written in Sanskrit, such as *Abhinaya Darpana*, but also regional texts from Orissa, such as the *Abhinaya Chandrika*, whose date will continue to remain controversial, though routinely pushed back in time in different accounts as a guarantor of antiquity. Throughout, Odissi classicism has been used in contrasting ways to essentialize femininity and as a marker of Oriya and Indian identity both in India and, in more complex ways, in the South Asian diaspora. Thus Odissi is a participant and interlocutor in local, supralocal, and global dance discourses of the “classical.”

Most current historical narratives of Odissi seek to establish neat continuities and skillfully avoid ruptures, differences, and ambiguities. Their main objective is to establish the antiquity of Odissi in an effort to give a lineage to the dance of today. The Rani Gumpha caves of the pre-Christian era and their reliefs of dancing scenes; the *alasa kanyas*, indolent maidens, of the Rajarani temple in Bhubaneswar; the voluptuous Konarak stone dancers of the Sun temple; and the Jagannath temple in Puri all mark significant moments in this reimagined ancient history. The sacred maharis and their erotic rituals performed for the god enshrined in the temple, Lord Jagannath, are central to such narratives, even though the maharis’ actual input into Odissi dance remains hard to quantify.³ The gotipuas, young boy street dancers who mimicked the sacred rituals of the maharis, dressing up like them and performing acrobatics, also play a role in this narrative and are often pitched against the maharis, as some kind of usurpers of their dance.⁴

It is the gurus—the majority of whom were former gotipua dancers but also performers of *yatra* and other forms of street theater—who are the protagonists of this dramatic tale of restoration. The gurus realized that the “sacred art” of the maharis might disappear forever unless they acted fast and together, so the story goes. Never mind about the maharis themselves—out of the temple, poverty had corrupted them, and they were seen as no better than prostitutes. But their art was sublime. Thus the gurus began to work on the dance in earnest, teaching girls from respectable families, some of whom, such as the late Sanjukta Panigrahi (acknowledged by all as one of the greatest Odissi exponents of our time) went on to become dancers of international repute. Working together, the gurus refined and redefined

their craft, found a name for it—Odissi (that is, “from Orissa”)—and turned it into one of the classical genres of Indian dance, fighting off some initial resistance from the Bharatnatyam reformers who would rather see Odissi as an offshoot of Bharatnatyam.⁵ This whole endeavor was inscribed in the artistic revival and reconstruction of post-independence India and its rhetoric, where each region’s creative arts were being rediscovered and brought to attention, nationally and internationally.

The gurus could not have done it without the scholars’ support. The scholars unearthed manuscripts (and occasionally attributed to them greater antiquity than warranted), found references to the Odissi technique in old Sanskrit manuals with a resulting Sanskritization of the dance (and attempted “brahmanization,” though never as successful as that of the southern Bharatnatyam), and helped to connect temple sculptures with dance movements—in sum, following the agenda of rewriting a suitable history of Odissi, once more to make it respectably ancient.⁶ In the official history of the dance, Odissi and ritual are intertwined and almost interchangeable: Odissi is seen first and foremost as a banned temple ritual, and this is central to its mystique, which contributes to the way Odissi has been marketed on the urban and international performance circuit.

Yet the real history of Odissi is more interesting and exciting than its myth of origin. As mentioned earlier, the dance was actually born in the theaters of the city of Cuttack in Orissa in the mid-1940s. Until then there had been no Odissi, and it would take at least another fifteen years before the name Odissi began to acquire some currency, finally validated at the end of the 1950s. What happened is that a number of musicians, former street dancers, and actors, began working together. These were people who had been exposed to dance from outside Orissa—such as the dance of pioneer modern dancer Uday Shankar at Almora and the resurgent Bharatnatyam and Kathakali of the south, relocated to major urban centers such as Kolkata—and were receptive to the major changes that were sweeping across the country. Dance numbers were added for entertainment to the plays performed in the Cuttack theaters in an attempt to attract larger audiences. Among the people involved in the Cuttack theater movement and who later formed the Jayantika group for reforming dance, led by Kalicharan Pattnaik, were Pankaj Charan Das, Kelucharan Mahapatra and his wife Laxmipriya, Durlav Chandra Singh, Hariharan Rout, and a number of others (Chatterjea 2004: 151). It was in the Cuttack theaters that what

later became important compositions of Odissi were actually created: among them was the *Dasavatar* (The Ten Incarnations of Vishnu), performance of which has now become *de rigueur* in most Odissi dance recitals, choreographed and re-choreographed by a number of dance masters (Citaristi 2001: 71–73).

The gurus went on to develop individual “styles” of Odissi, and the one which came to be identified as quintessentially Odissi was evolved by Guru Kelucharan Mahapatra. All the “styles” are a modern creation, a way for the gurus to differentiate each other’s work, but still in keeping with a set of rules which they established more or less collectively as they went along. Sometimes it is difficult to draw boundaries between the styles: some performers are happy to cross them, and thus they have a repertoire of dances created by different gurus that are stylistically different. This occurs despite the efforts made by the Odissi dance establishment in Orissa to maintain distinctions, to create an Odissi dance canon, and, more generally, to “police” the form, making sure that the rules of a newly established classicism are not transgressed, constantly invoking purity and authenticity to silence any dissenting voice.

Going Against the Odissi Canon

But even though some diversity of style is recognized and admissible, there are also forms of Odissi that are regarded as “transgressive” of the reconstituted canon by the extremely conservative Odissi dance establishment. One such form is the Odissi fashioned by Guru Surendranath Jena, a form that does not attempt to conform to the canon yet remains as classical as any of the others, rejecting, among other things, the reconstituted set repertoire. The canonized set repertoire of an Odissi performance is made up of dances of offering; *nrtta*, non-representational pieces built around complex cross-rhythms; *abhinaya*, representational pieces choreographed on the verses of the *Gita Govinda*, an erotic devotional poem in Sanskrit about the divine lovemaking of Radha and Krishna; Oriya devotional poems; and a final piece called *mokshya* (liberation), a *nrtta* which in its cadences attempts to convey the movement to soul liberation and serenity. This set repertoire sequence is not adhered to by Guru Surendranath Jena.

Guru Surendranath Jena received official acknowledgment from the Indian government for his contribution to Odissi only as late as January 2007, a few months before his demise in October of the

same year. It has taken time for his work to find some acceptance and recognition, and to this day many people continue to regard his Odissi as “inferior” in relation to the Odissi classical canon reformulated by Guru Kelucharan Mahapatra and other gurus, that is, Guru Deba Prasad Das and Guru Pankaj Charan Das. I remember clearly how my interest in Guru Surendranath’s work was greeted with a horrified look by one of the First Ladies of the form in Orissa, followed by the melodramatic statement “That man should be jailed for what he has done to Odissi!” as he had broken all the “age old” rules of this “tradition” of dance. And in Delhi, a well-meaning dancer thought I needed better guidance in my research, as I had obviously not understood that there was only one Odissi, Guru Kelucharan’s: “You are wasting time, these forms are not classical, I will put you in touch with the real exponents of Odissi,” she declared. In saying this, they were both taking sides in the context of the rivalries internal to the Odissi dance world and were doing this through invoking tradition, presenting it to me as immutable and perennial.

What was Guru Surendranath Jena’s trajectory? Initially one of the younger members of the Jayantika, Guru Surendranath (Surababu) moved to Delhi in the 1960s and began to teach at Triveni Kala Sangam, a reputed institute for the arts in the capital. He evolved his own Odissi, recreating it from his interpretation of the dance sculptures of the Konarak temple, which provided him with a dance vocabulary in stone and which he imaginatively exploited to fashion his new dance.

Surababu recounts that the creative stimulus came to him after he traveled to Konarak in the 1970s with one of his foreign students, the anthropologist Frédérique Apfell Marglin, who was then engaged in research about the maharis of Puri—this research was later published in 1985 under the title *Wives of the God-king*, a book that has remained unsurpassed as one of the most influential studies of the ritualistic practices of the maharis. It struck him that the poses of the Konarak *nata mandapa*, dance hall, could be turned into dance movements. Until then he had taught the standard Jayantika Odissi, but on his return to Delhi he composed *Konarak Kanti* (The Beauty of Konarak), a dance piece inspired by the dance narratives of the temple. He then began to reformulate Odissi in keeping with his newer insights.

It is remarkable that Surababu did not attempt to disguise his creativity by claiming he was engaged in recovering the lost dance of a golden ancient past—a tack taken by other gurus and dancers. He went ahead with his exploration, somewhat protected by his association

with Triveni and his continuous engagement with teaching—now continued by his daughters Pratibha, Rekha, and Rama Jena, and also by his son Nirmal Jena, currently living in Sydney, Australia.

All the odissi gurus claim to have been inspired and guided by Orissan temple sculpture in their remaking of Odissi. So, in what way is Guru Surendranath Jena's Odissi different? The divergence from other Odissi styles (or schools) is significant. The main difference arises from the way he converted the sculpted poses into codified movement units and vocabulary.

Typically, in all Odissi styles, the iconic poses of the Orissan temple sculptures are linked together through the footwork and gestural language devised by the Jayantika group for the dance, whereby the poses become "highlights" of a dance sequence. In Guru Surendranath's style, the poses themselves are dynamically stretched and energized, deriving a complex movement unit from the manipulation of the initial static pose. He achieves this by reimagining the "missing portions" of the movements frozen in the sculptures of the Konarak nata mandapa. In his Odissi, the basic movement vocabulary is provided by twenty-four dance movement units, all originating from the Konarak temple.

These units can be further divided into sub-units involving movements of the upper part of the body and movements of the lower part of the body. This process of segmentation and re-assemblage can be more easily visualized if one imagines a horizontal axis along the circumference of the waist cutting the body into a top and a bottom half, intersecting with a vertical axis that coincides with the straight spine and divides the body into a left and a right half. This imaginary partitioning of the body provides a three-dimensional geometric structure and a planar grid for the projection and extension of each sculpture and its movement.

Guru Surendranath has named his movement units borrowing the nomenclature from the *śilpa sastras* (treatises dealing with sculpture and architecture) rather than the dance/drama treatises. The well-known scholar of Indian arts, Kapila Vatsyayan, who was for many years one of Guru Surendranath Jena's students and among the first to appreciate his iconographic insights and the plasticity of his movements, intimated, in conversations we had during my 2004 field research, that his work can be understood in terms of *karana* units.⁷ Each unit devised by Guru Surendranath is a *karana*, but not in the sense of being a reconstruction of any one of the 108 *karanas* listed in the *Natyasastra* and seen in the reliefs of the south Indian Chidambaram temple, among others. The *karanas* of Guru

Surendranath are conceptual, in keeping with the definition of *karana* given in the *sastras*, but materially new.⁸

The conceptualization of dance units based on the Konarak sculptures is not the only distinctive feature of Guru Surendranath Jena's Odissi. Because of the iconicity he visualized for the dance, his basic *tribhangi* and *chauka*, the two main stances of Odissi, involve deeper bends than seen in other Odissi styles. The *chauka* in particular is performed through a slow lowering movement from middle to low level, down to a squatting position and rising again to mid-level. This is done while retaining the equidistant sideways position of the bent legs, in order to form a square—a *chauka*—and involving simultaneous side shifts of the torso. His *tribhangi* is again based on a clear shift of the torso from the central vertical axis, in a way other styles of Odissi would regard as exaggerated; moreover, there are variant *tribhangis* which use a different foot position. Another important feature is the raising and lowering of the body while dancing, creating an undulating effect through a continuous change of level; in other forms of Odissi this would be regarded as inadmissible.

There are also other differences, which have turned Surababu's Odissi into a "transgressive" dance form and which are perceived as somewhat threatening.

Unlike other Odissi gurus, Surendranath Jena does not believe in choreographing dance-dramas, which require groups of dancers and a kind of acting which in his view lacks dramatic power and subtlety. Instead, he favors the solo performance, which can have a strong narrative and dramatic content without deploying the histrionics of dance-drama.⁹ Worse still, in the view of his many critics, Guru Surendranath has choreographed dance pieces in which the *abhinaya* explores in full force the *raudra* and *bhibatsa* sentiments (fury and disgust) rather than just suggesting them. This is seen as a serious blow to the notion of Odissi as quintessentially feminine, beautiful and sensuous, and it has been dismissed not as merely "non-classical," but as positively "anti-classical" and a subversion of the very notion of Odissi classicism. When I raised this with Guru Surendranath he reminded me of the tantric *Chausat Yogini* temple at Hirapur (the temple of the sixty-four *yoginis*) which has inspired him as much as Konarak. Hirapur's iconographic renditions of the different moods and aspects of the tantric *yoginis* include imagery of horror and fear. One suspects that the concern of Surababu's critics may be deeper: tantrism is itself a transgressive religious movement, and in Orissa

it has strong links with older indigenous witchcraft practices.¹⁰ This is definitely a “no-go” area, countering a more sanitized version of religion that the Oriya Hindu middle classes strive to project.

Mahari Rituals and Stage Performance

Classicized and refashioned to reflect a re-imagined temple ritual—though clearly not equivalent with it—with the dancer taking on the persona of a temple dancer, in the contemporary imaginary the Odissi/mahari equation still holds strong, at all levels, playing down the input from other sources. Yet, for Guru Surendranath Jena the link between Odissi and the maharis of the Puri temple or between Odissi and the gotipuas is a non-issue. His Odissi does not attempt to posit itself as a reconstituted ritual, it branches out in a different direction: it is a solo performance with a strong theatrical quality, as exemplified by the *Shakti Rupa Yogini* (The *Shakti* form of the *yoginis*), a piece which he choreographed—composed would be a better word as he also created the music for it—in homage to the yoginis of the Hirapur temple.

As I have pointed out elsewhere, the history of Odissi is inscribed in the broader project of modernization and classicization (in Euro-American terms) of Indian dance on the whole (Lopez y Royo 2003). The dance has been shaped by the different dance discourses in the subcontinent and their entanglement with political power. For example, when “appropriation” was raised as an issue in the late 1970s and 1980s in the context of Bharatnatyam—appropriation of the dance which rightfully belonged to the *devadasis* of the south at the hands of middle-class Brahmin women such as Rukmini Devi Arundale, the founder of the Kalakshetra school (Allen 1997)—the history of Odissi also began to be written in terms of appropriation, with dispossessed maharis looming large in the picture. Maharis were indeed dispossessed but not exactly of their dance, as there was, in practice, very little left of it. But maharis have become symbols of Odissi and Odissi has been re-fashioned in their image, re-imagined as a mahari ritual—and this remains true regardless of all claims arising from time to time that the Odissi one sees today is entirely based on the gotipua imitation of the dance of the mahari and is thus “inauthentic.”¹¹

I have dealt with the maharis at length elsewhere (Lopez y Royo 2007b) and will not repeat that discussion here. But I would like to pick up the thread and add to it, as fairly recently Marglin has lent her authoritative opinion on the controversial issue of Odissi and its

relationship with mahari dancing. In her pathbreaking 1985 work she does not engage with the recent history of the refashioning of Odissi, whereas in this recent article she oddly endeavors, on one hand, to mark a distinction, and on the other, to establish a neat continuity. She begins by giving a brief account of the origin of Odissi dance. Glossing over the events which took place in Cuttack during the 1940s, she reiterates that Odissi grew out of the dance of both gotipuas and maharis and maintains that among the first gurus appointed by the State Academy for Dance and Music in Bhubaneswar in the 1950s–1960s were a number of gurus who had taught both maharis and gotipuas, among whom was her guru Surendranath Jena—the latter was however a student in the 1950s, and in 1961 he moved to Delhi together with Mayadhar Rout to teach Odissi. The dance of the gotipuas and that of the maharis did not differ much in form, she claims, only in purpose, which in the case of the maharis was exclusively ritualistic. The resultant Odissi did not deviate from the old practices:

the musical form, the hand gestures and body movements [of odissi] remained pretty much the same. What changed was the repertoire and the details of the choreography. The dance of the devadasis was segmented into much shorter items to suit the attention span of the theater audiences. (Marglin 2003: 4)

But would such changes not be already fairly substantial?

That some old Puri gurus, such as the late Mohan Mahapatra, as Marglin sustains, taught both maharis and gotipuas was also reported by Dharendra Patnaik in his first book on Odissi (Patnaik 1971: 61), and this makes the connection between the so-called mahari style with that of the gotipuas perhaps more fluid than usually warranted, with some possible overlaps. Nevertheless, their dancing style could not be quite the same, if only because the bodies of the dancers differed and also, to a great extent, their training—gotipuas were young boys schooled in acrobatics, whereas even from the scant descriptions given of mahari ritual dancing in the Oriya texts, for example, the *Madala Panji*, it seems most unlikely they would perform the acrobatic feats for which gotipuas were known and admired. Also, the difference in purpose noted by Marglin would be reflected outwardly in the way the movements were articulated by the dancing body.

Marglin goes on to consider in great detail the rituals performed by maharis at the Puri temple, at the time of the midday food offering and in the evening, when the deities are about to go to sleep. But she only

tells us that the mahari faced south during the midday ritual, which was performed in the dance hall, and that she danced to the sound of a *pakhawaj* drum between food offerings placed on her right and left (Marglin 2003: 5–6), watched by a large crowd of devotees. The dancing as such is not discussed but the liturgical significance of the midday and evening rituals are, by contrast, dwelled upon at some length. In the late 1970s Marglin was initiated as disciple by K. C. Rajaguru, one of the elderly Brahmin priests of the Puri king known as *purohitas*, the “overseers” of all the *sevas* (services) at the Jagannath temple. K. C. Rajaguru taught Marglin about the esoteric content of the mahari dance rituals (the women themselves would not apparently divulge this secret teaching to anyone): the midday and evening dance are a *maithuna*, a form of sexual intercourse. As she performs the rituals, the mahari turns into a goddess (*calanti devi*), and stimulated by her own movements she sheds on the ground her sexual fluids and sexual essence (or *sakti ucchista*). This sexual union with the god is her *seva* which ensures the well-being of the kingdom (Marglin 2003: 4–9; see also Marglin 1985).

After bemoaning the disappearance of this *seva* and, consequently, the disappearance of a “feminine presence” in the performance of the rituals of the Puri temple, an event which would signal a “serious patriarchal turn” and the severing of an “uninterrupted link” with “Goddess-centred religions” across Asia and Europe, Marglin ends by wishing for Odissi to be the vehicle for the ritual efficacy of the lost *seva*, to be thus passed on to contemporary audiences:

The dance as an artistic performance still preserves the power of that ancient form but the efficacy of its enactment is now entirely at the whim of each witness to the performance. Let us hope that the transformative power of the temple dance is evoked in some among the audience who can open themselves to receiving the blessings of the goddess. (Marglin 2003: 8)

Odissi is a secular dance whose sources are most varied. There is no ritual value or efficacy in its performance; therefore this latest intervention by Marglin is puzzling. Temple songs, street dancing, sculptural poses inspired by the rich imagery of Orissan temples, folk songs, and tunes: they all went into today's Odissi, as well as aesthetic developments derived from other Indian classical dances.¹² It is thus refreshing to see that Guru Surendranath Jena extricated himself from the endless discussion on mahari ritual dancing and chose to

channel his energy into exploring creatively the potential of Odissi as a form. This is not to say that he did not cross the line that in modern India separates the sacred from the secular, a legacy of colonial rule, taken over with some unease by the Indian nation-state. He did so, for example, in the piece *Shakti Rupa Yogini*, which sings praise to the goddess and her powerful manifestations and which through the choreography reactivates the defunct practices of the ancient tantric cults. However, he looked forward rather than backwards: refashioning Odissi after re-imagined ritual practices and claiming to have inherited them did not interest him, while using Odissi as a vehicle for his personal devotion did. When performed onstage his dances do not mimic ritual, yet, depending on the performer's rendition, they can attain that very transformative power which Marglin invokes.

Situating Odissi between the global and the local

Unlike Bharatnatyam, which has arguably been sanitized through its complete and absolute classicization, and in so doing gradually been removed from the local but also opened the way to its relocation(s) in a global context (O'Shea 2001), in Odissi the interaction of a local and supralocal identity is played out on uneven ground through different power networks.

It is constantly reiterated in Orissa and by Oriyas that to dance Odissi well one has to be Oriya. The understanding of Odissi classicism that ensues is marked by the unease and insecurity generated by a situation in which the local is aggressively confronted by the supralocal and the global. Thus, on the one hand people cling to reassuring notions of Oriya-ness, coinciding with an Oriya high-caste and middle-class socio-cultural elitism of which Odissi dance is seen as an expression. On the other hand, any reference to local, non-elite culture projected in the dance is seen as a dangerous threat to its classical status, determinedly won through a re-alignment with and imitation of a hegemonic form. In this context, this hegemonic (and global) form is an ahistorical, reconstituted Bharatnatyam, synecdochic of Indian culture as a whole.

There are nowadays influential non-Indian practitioners of Odissi, some of whom have settled in India, and non-Oriya dancers and performers of Indian and non-Indian origin who locate themselves in the South Asian diaspora, each one with a different vision for Odissi.

A growing number of Odissi performers outside Orissa, under the stimulus of an engagement with broader theoretical issues and post-structural modes of analysis, have begun to question the established odissi classical canon, creating work which counters a re-invented and normative classicism and breaks from its straight jacketing effect. In some cases this takes the form of explicit critique of an apolitical Odissi, foregrounding the dancer's body as the site of power struggles.¹³

The transnational relocation of Odissi is ambivalently posited as a much-coveted goal as well as a challenge to the distinctive regionalism of the dance, which is in danger of being eroded and obliterated by a neo-colonial globalism. This tension between global, supralocal, and local is embedded in the very articulation of the process of classicization, inscribed in the power play of social constructs of nature, culture, and tradition; of ethnicity; of femininity and masculinity; and as such is reflected and embodied by the dancers themselves.

The controversy over Odissi music, felt by a number of Odissi dancers outside Orissa to be still “insufficiently classical” is but another expression of this tension.¹⁴ Yet it would be too simplistic to see this as a tension between an increasingly sophisticated urban classical Odissi practiced outside Orissa by non-Oriyas, and a less sophisticated but equally classical, more village-rooted Odissi practised by Oriyas in Orissa. Here, the transgressive form of Odissi created by Guru Surendranath Jena outside Orissa in the very urban setting of the Indian capital, New Delhi, and practiced by non-Oriyas and Oriyas alike seems to challenge such a polarization and demands that we review (and further nuance) our contemporary understanding of Odissi classicism, its ongoing contestation as well as its significance to the different groups and communities involved.



Notes

*This is an edited print version of the chapter “Odissi, Temple Rituals and Temple Sculpture” in my online book *ReConstructing and RePresenting Dance: Exploring the Dance/Archaeology Conjunction* published by ChiasmeSoftbooks, Stanford University. Available at <http://humanitieslab.stanford.edu/ArchaeologyDanceConjunction/693>. Some portions of this essay have appeared, in an abridged form, as an article entitled “The Hot Chariot of the Sun God” in *Pulse* 2005, spring: 23–25. I have also directed a documentary film on DVD about the Odissi of Guru Surendranath Jena and

its relationship to the sites of Konarak and Hirapur. The DVD is produced and distributed by the AHRC Research Centre for Cross-cultural Music and Dance Performance, SOAS, as part of their SOASIS series. Those interested in Guru Jena's style of Odissi may also download video-clips, including excerpts of interviews with him, at the website which complements the DVD project, *Performing Konarak, Performing Hirapur*, <http://humanitieslab.stanford.edu/51/Home>.

1. Sometimes written as orissi depending on the spelling given to the transliteration of the original Oriya.
2. I follow the practice of writing the name of the Indian classical dance genres in lower case.

I must also add, the literature on classicization is growing. Pamela Moro, among others, has examined the process of classicization and its link with nation and nation-building policies in South and South East Asia (Moro 2004). I have also written about classicization of Indian dance in my 2003 essay about Ranjabati Sircar's work (Lopez y Royo 2003).

3. The dance of the maharis, interpreted in a tantric way, was symbolic of sexual intercourse: "the association between dance and sex is very strong . . . the dance ritual is also known to stand for the last 'm' in the five 'm' offerings of the tantric *sakta* ritual. This last 'm' is *maithuna*: sexual intercourse" (Marglin 1985: 95).
4. The custom of young men dancing dressed like women seems to have been introduced by the Vaishnavites in the sixteenth century, worshipping Krishna in a *sakhi bhava* fashion—as a female friend of Radha's (*sakhi*). The gotipuas were also linked with the *akhadas* where they practiced combat, and on festival days in Puri they danced the Radha Krishna story dressed like maharis (Kothari 1968: 32).
5. It took much effort and imagination to establish Odissi as a classical dance throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Initially, it was viewed by purists as a hybridized Bharatnatyam, and Rukmini Devi, the Bharatnatyam reformer, founder of the famous Kalakshetra school in present-day Chennai was reported to have frowned on the "vulgarity" of the Odissi repertoire when she first saw it (Citaristi 2001: 119).
6. The case of the *Abhinaya Chandrika*, a manuscript discovered by D. N. Patnaik is notorious. Patnaik fixed its date to the twelfth century (Patnaik 1958: 10), later dating it seventeenth century in a new edition of the same work. More recently Das has given the date of the *Chandrika* as 1750 (Das 2001: x).
7. My research on Guru Surendranath Jena took place during 2004 and again in 2005, with a British Academy grant. In the course of my second research trip I recorded Guru Surendranath Jena's signature pieces on film with the assistance of Rajyashree Ramamurthy, who did most of the camera work, and later edited the film together with Sarah Bilby.

8. See my discussion of karanas in my online book, [chapter 2](#) and [4](#) (Lopez y Royo 2007a).
9. Even in teaching Guru Surendranath Jena follows a parallel norm: he would never teach in groups, only on a one-on-one basis. His daughter Pratibha continues this practice.
10. Tantrism was a Hindu and also Buddhist religious sectarian movement which celebrated the superiority of female spiritual energy; one of the ways of worship was through sexual intercourse, which allowed for a realization of divinity (Flood 2005).
11. See Ratna Roy's comments on the silencing of the maharis: "the principal gurus of Orissi dance have revived and recreated the gotipua (male) tradition of Orissi dance and brought it to international acclaim as 'the' style of Orissi classical dance. A powerful and beautiful women's dance tradition, the mahari style of Orissi dance was crushed in the 20th century" (Roy, n.d., available at <http://www.olywa.net/ratna-david/ratna.htm>).
12. Some Odissi gurus trained in kathakali (and also Bharatnatyam), for example, Mayadhar Rout was at the famous Kalakshetra school in Madras (Chennai) and Surendranath Jena went to Kolkata to study Kathakali, before beginning his training in Odissi in Cuttack.
13. Minneapolis-based Odissi dancer and scholar Ananya Chatterjea, who trained under Sanjukta Panigrahi, should be mentioned here for her emotionally powerful work, coming out of her interrogation of Odissi classicism.
14. Unlike Hindustani or Carnatic music, Odissi music does not have a concert tradition and is not supported by an equivalent systematic classification and its specific theoretical knowledge of ragas, talas and their nuances, on the part of its musicians. This is perceived as a lack of classicism, and it has prompted a number of non-Oriya dancers to rely more explicitly on Hindustani musical accompaniment to classicize the music and the dance further, thereby subtly modifying the Odissi form.

References

- Allen, Matthew. 1997. "Rewriting the Script for South Indian Dance. The Drama Review," *Journal of Performance Studies* 41 (3): 63–100.
- Chatterjea, Ananya. 2004. "Contestations: Constructing a Historical Narrative for Odissi." In Alexandra Carter, ed., *Rethinking Dance History*, pp. 143–56. London: Routledge.
- Citaristi, Ileana. 2001. *The Making of a Guru: Kelucharan Mahapatra his Life and Times*. New Delhi: Manohar.
- Das, Maya. 2001. *Abhinaya Candrika and Odissi Dance*. Delhi: Eastern Books Linkers.

- Flood, Gavin. 2005. *The Tantric Body: The Secret Tradition of Hindu Religion*. London: I. B. Tauris.
- Kothari, Sunil. 1968. "Gotipua dancers." *Sangeet Natak* 8: 32–34.
- Lopez y Royo, Alessandra. 2003. "Classicism, Post-classicism and Ranjabati Sircar's Work: Re-defining the Terms of Indian Contemporary Dance Discourses." *South Asia Research* 23 (1): 153–69.
- . 2007a. *ReConstructing and RePresenting Dance: Exploring the Dance/archaeology Conjunction*. Stanford: SoftBooks Chiasme. Available at <http://humanitieslab.stanford.edu/ArchaeologyDanceConjunction/Home>.
- . 2007b. "The Reinvention of Odissi Classical Dance as a Temple Ritual." In Evangelos Kyriakidis, ed., *The Archaeology of Ritual*. Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute, UCLA.
- Marglin, Frédérique Apfell. 1985. *Wives of the God-king: The Rituals of the Devadasis of Puri*. Delhi, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- . 2003. "The Goddess Dances: The Midday Ritual in Jagannatha Temple in Puri, Orissa." In 2nd International Odissi Festival Souvenir Washington DC, 28–31 August 2003.
- Moro, Pamela. 2004. "Constructions of Nations and the Comparative Classicization of Music: Comparative Perspective from Southeast and South Asia." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 35 (2): 187ff.
- O'Shea, Janet. 2001. "At Home in the World: Bharata Natyam's Transnational Traditions." Ph.D. diss., UC Riverside.
- Pani, Jivan. 2000. "Odissi." In S. Serbjeet Singh, ed., *Indian Dance: The Ultimate Metaphor*, pp. 147–62. New Delhi: Ravi Kumar Publisher, Bookwise (India) PVT Ltd.
- Patnaik, Direndra. 1971. *Odissi Dance*. Bhubaneshwar: Orissa Sangeet Natak Akademi (1st edn 1958).

Courtesans and Choreographers: The (Re)Placement of Women in the History of *Kathak* Dance*

MARGARET WALKER

In the move from feudal empire to British colony to independent nation in less than 300 years, India's traditions have needed to constantly adapt to changing politics, patronage, and philosophies. The trajectory of change through the first half of the twentieth century combined re-invention with rediscovery, as multiple facets of Indian culture met each other in the heady environment surrounding the struggle for and achievement of independence in 1947. During the years leading up to independence, a flowering of interest in music and dance led to a period described as a "Renaissance" or the "Neo-Classical" period of Indian music and dance. These terms, which suggest a reclaiming of ancient or lost traditions after a period of decline, underline the crucial role that the reclamation of the performing arts as the rich and worthy cultural inheritance of an independent people played in the raising of national consciousness and pride during the struggle against the colonial Raj.

Yet, scholars also analyze the mid-twentieth century as a period of modernity when the newly independent India broke with the colonial past and re-invented itself as an autonomous nation-state. Most histories of music and dance written in the twentieth century combine this modernist sense of rupture with the nationalist need for an ancient Hindu past, offering telescoped pasts that leap from Vedic to modern times in a few giant steps (Devi 1972; Banerji 1982; Narayan 1998; Sinha 2000; Walker 2004 among many others). Although by and large understandable in the context of the fight for freedom, one trend in twentieth-century scholarship has been an unquestioning acceptance of unilinear, evolutionary histories of music and dance that, in their

eagerness to connect with Vedic antiquity, omit any analysis of the immediate past and marginalize many of the major players. In the history of the north Indian dance form of Kathak, it is the contribution of women that is most often passed over or neglected. In the development of Kathak, the tangle of traditionalism and modernism resulted in a number of shifts and ruptures. The first break with the past was the disenfranchisement of the hereditary women who were prominent holders of the dance tradition from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This allowed a connection to a more ancient past to be emphasized through empowering hereditary male performers called Kathaks as hegemonous “owners” of the dance. Furthermore, in a final ironic twist, the high-class non-hereditary women who had replaced the hereditary women on the stage (see later) and who had played important roles in shaping twentieth-century Kathak were in their turn passed over in the continued validation of the male-dominated “tradition” that they had in many ways helped to invent.

The Kathak they helped to shape is today a virtuosic and specialized genre practiced largely by highly trained professionals. Although occasionally performed in small venues for a select audience of connoisseurs, Kathak is most often danced on a stage in a recital or concert hall, and it reached a certain level of international status and recognition during the second half of the twentieth century. The dance itself combines polyrhythmic items, footwork sequences, and exciting spins with slower, meditative sections that use graceful hand and wrist movements, elegant body postures, and subtle swaying motions. Complex rhythmic “pieces” closely related to drum repertoire contrast with segments depicting short scenes or telling longer stories, and both abstract and mimetic sections combine precomposed and improvised material. The variety of dance items and movement patterns within today’s Kathak are witness to its syncreticism—this is not an art form that can be traced to a single origin but a recent and ongoing fusion of a number of north Indian performance traditions. Promotional material about Kathak commonly alludes to its blend of Hindu and Muslim traditions but unhesitatingly attributes the dance’s origins to the Hindu hereditary male performers called Kathaks. These men are still considered authorities on Kathak’s authentic style and continue in many ways to dominate the dance world. Although one cannot deny the involvement of these male musicians and dancers in north Indian dance, their largely unchallenged hegemony through the twentieth century belies the influence of women, hereditary and non-hereditary, on the development of Kathak dance.

An exploration of women's contributions to the development of Kathak is timely in a number of ways. Current research in the history of Hindustani music in the decades leading up to independence by such scholars as Bakhle (2005) and Kippen (2006) has begun a process of deconstructing revised histories, revealing a period of Sanskritization and classicization in which many performing arts that had been performed and disseminated for centuries by hereditary Muslim specialists were documented, published, and promoted as the inheritance of a devotional Hindu past worthy of a pan-Indian independent future.¹ Furthermore, one of the most contentious issues surrounding Indian music and dance during the period of cultural reclamation was the historical connection of performing arts to hereditary female performers associated with the sex trade. As patronizing and eventually learning music and dance gradually became acceptable to the middle classes, the arts needed to be purged of this association. This sort of gentrification, however, is not uncommon. Recent work in dance history and historiography in a variety of cultures has uncovered similar stories—sanitized pasts, classicized traditions, and contradictory oral and written histories—which point again to webs of interacting influences rather than the straight-line progressions so often found in “official” versions of history (Buckland 2006). The first step in reclaiming a past for women in north Indian dance, therefore, is an examination of the dance of hereditary female performers of recent centuries.

Hereditary Women

As mentioned earlier, the association of the performing arts with “public” women, dancing girls, and red light districts was a barrier to their reclamation and acceptance by the middle classes. History itself needed to be cleansed of this link, and the promotion of music and dance as Hindu, pious, and preserved through male lines was adopted in large part to accomplish this. Hereditary female performers, however, were not one homogeneous group, and the most refined among them were urbane, literate, and highly trained in the performance of poetry, vocal music, and dance. These women, whom we now tend to call courtesans or *tavayafs*, were for more than a century among the primary culture bearers of north Indian vocal music and dance. Associated with the decadent and effete courts of Muslim aristocrats, connected with brothels and an illegal underclass, and often Muslim

themselves, the tawayafs found themselves pushed to the margins of musical society by the reforms of the early twentieth century.

There is now substantial research on the history of women in Hindustani music. Since the 1980s, scholars have begun to give credit to the contributions of the female performers of the past (Manuel 1989; Post 1989), and recent work has also included their living descendents, giving voice to a long-marginalized section of north Indian society (Maciszewski 2001a and 2001b). The role of hereditary women performers in the preservation and dissemination of tradition, not to mention their contribution to artistic excellence, has finally been recognized, and advocacy projects encouraging and promoting the musical arts of today's female hereditary singers are ongoing (Maciszewski 2004). Yet, the connections between courtesan performance practice and today's north Indian dance (now identified as Kathak) have received less attention (one of the few scholars to examine this connection in any depth is Chakravorty 2007).²

The artistic practice of tawayafs during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was a synthesis of poetry, music, gestures, and dance. To historians' best knowledge, the seated tawayaf, accompanied by male musicians playing *tabla* (pair of tuned hand drums) and *sarangi* (upright bowed fiddle), would sing songs called *thumri* or *ghazal* with evocative and ambiguous lyrics, repeating and elaborating certain phrases while illustrating the poetic text with mimetic gestures. After the melody and lyrics had been sufficiently explored, the tawayaf would rise to dance. The rhythm of the *tabla* would change from the often slower rhythmic cycle of the song to a quick pace and insert syncopated patterns called *laggi*. The dance would expand on the theme of the song text but incorporate movements of the whole body, including characteristic postures and stylized walks. Although courtesan performance included music, poetry, song, and dance, the current separation of these genres has resulted in most scholars' investigating only one or perhaps two parts at a time. Excellent publications on *thumri* (Manuel 1989; Du Perron 2007), *ghazal* (Qureshi 1989), *sarangi* (Bor 1986/87 Qureshi 1997) and *tabla* (Kippen 1988 and 2006), while providing much needed musical and linguistic analysis and insight into the historical context of tawayaf performance, most often relegate discussion of dance and gestures into a few short paragraphs.

The dance of nineteenth-century women, however, has been documented in considerable detail both in the travel writings of the colonizing Europeans and in a number of Urdu sources connected with the Nawabi court in Lucknow. Nowhere in any of these sources

is the dance of the hereditary women (or “Nautch girls” as the British termed them) called Kathak, but ubiquitous in the twentieth-century literature is a curious accusation that the dancing girls adopted a pre-existing devotional dance called Kathak and corrupted it.³ Although this belief raises a host of external issues, the greatest historical weakness is the assumption that the women could not have a performance tradition of their own that predated their contact with the hereditary male Kathaks, who are said to have migrated to the courts. An examination of contemporary documentation, however, not only supports the assertion that the female dancers of the period performed material that differed from the dance of the male Kathaks but also offers strong evidence that parts of this female dance contributed significantly to the twentieth-century stage dance called Kathak.

There is a wealth of largely unstudied information about nineteenth-century north Indian dance in a number of treatises that date from after 1860. A nostalgic need to record a disappearing culture arose after the annexation of the princely state of Awadh and the dismantling of its capital at Lucknow by the British after the failed First War of Independence in 1857.⁴ There was an outpouring of documentation not only by former courtiers, but also by Wajid Ali Shah, the deposed Nawab of Awadh himself. *Madun-ul Musiqi* (1869) by Mohammad Karam Imam, *Sarmaya-i Ishrat* (1884) by Sadat Ali Khan, and *Bani* (1877?) by Wajid Ali Shah, all contain information about dancers and musicians, rhythm and melody, and dance items.⁵ To these three nineteenth-century documents, the early twentieth-century collection of articles by Abdul Halim Sharar entitled *Guzishta Lucknow* can also be added. Comparing these sources with the descriptions of “nautch” performances in the colonial travel writings provides a reasonably accurate picture of the dance styles of the time.

There are indications in both *Sarmaya-i Ishrat* and *Guzishta Lucknow* that men and women did not necessarily perform the same repertoire or in the same manner. According to Sharar, the dance of women functioned “to portray amorous dalliance with elegance and grace . . . and to display feelings of love” whereas the men danced “to show sprightliness and vigour in their movements in accordance with the rhythm” (Sharar 1975: 141–42). This is supported very strongly in *Sarmaya-i Ishrat*, wherein specific dance items are associated with male dancers called either Bhands or Kathaks. The manuscript includes the *bols*, or oral notation, for some of the rhythmic dance genres now performed in Kathak dance. One of these, the *parmelu*,

is singled out as having higher status than the other rhythmic dances and “performed by famous Kathaks, that is to say dancers” (Khan 1884: 153). The dances in *Sarmaya-i Ishrat* are alternately called *nritt* (a Sanskrit term for non-representational dance), *raq* (Arabic for dance), or *gat* (a further term meaning dance and used in all three treatises). In the detailed list of twenty gats, three are assigned to male dancers: the plate gat, the plate and bowl gat, and the *mardani* gat. The *mardani* gat is particularly interesting and seems a direct correspondent to the footwork patterns of today: “This is a male *gat*, that is the style and kind belonging to the *Bhands*. In this *gat* . . . the arms are folded in the front. . . . The *bols* are played out by the feet and so the *ghungurus* are set to the *pakhawaj*. However, this is the job of *Kathaks*” (Khan 1884: 173). In *Madun-ul Musiqi*, only one of the twenty-one *gats* listed is for male dancers: the “Krishna gat,” which is a dazzling spin on the knees performed in the devotional folk theater *Ras Lila*, “is practiced among the *Kathaks*, [and] often not danced at the beginning of a *mehfil* [or salon concert]” (Imam 1869: 204–5).

But what of the graceful and elegant dances which displayed the feelings of love and were performed by the women? One finds them in the majority of the gats in both *Sarmaya-i Ishrat* and *Madun-ul Musiqi*, and also in Wajid Ali Shah’s book, *Bani*. To perform these dances, which seem clearly designed for the “amorous dalliances” of *tavayaf* performance, the dancer is to “dive into the ocean of love and tempo” (Imam 1869: 205), and go around the entire gathering, locking eyes with the audience members so that everyone present is “wounded with the arrow of her eyelashes” (Khan 1884: 169–70). In Imam’s work, one finds gats entitled “beauty” “coquettish,” “beloved,” and “amorous glance,” and in Shah’s book there are “pleading,” “loving,” “flirting,” and “winking” gats. All three sources include gats which instruct the dancer to gesture with her veil, skirt, or end of her sari, and *Sarmaya-i Ishrat* in particular contains very specific directions about how the dancer should use her eyes. Both Khan and Imam also include directions for subtle body movements: dancers are to keep “all body parts both internal and external” (Imam 1869: 204), moving “fluidly and pleasingly” (Khan 1884: 161). These descriptions of graceful yet alluring dances involving elegant postures and gestures with veils are corroborated in the colonial material. In the “nautch” parties observed by the British Sahibs and Memsahibs, female dancers sang and danced by moving with gliding or “shuffling” steps, making slow pirouettes, and pulling their “shawls” on and off their heads and faces (for more information and complete citations see Dyson 1978: 336–56).

Setting the wounding eyelashes and Victorian prudery aside, it is not difficult to connect much of this choreographic description to repertoire in today's Kathak dance. The graceful swaying found in *thaat*, the introductory section of a Kathak performance, seems similar to the fluid coordination of body parts detailed in the treatises, and the gliding walk, graceful turns, and manipulation of the veil in the travel writings seems easily to evoke the items still called by the name *ghungat ki gat*. Furthermore, when one begins to examine the detailed instructions for the gats themselves and compare today's Kathak postures with the small sketches included in both *Bani* and *Sarmaya-i Ishrat*, undeniable links between Kathak and courtesan dance emerge. The first gat in *Sarmaya-i Ishrat* is the "Heir's gat" (*Janasheen ki Gat*), which is taught to beginners (Figure 18.1). The text instructs the dancer thus:

The right hand is positioned above the head, with an open palm's distance between the head and the hand. The right elbow should be at the earlobe level. The left arm should be straight like an arrow, the chest should be raised. . . . Fingers and wrists of both hands should keep swinging softly and flexibly, and the palms closed like fists should keep opening on tat and ta. (Khan 1884: 165)

With some slight modifications—one does not make fists nor keep the left arm so straight—this stance is ubiquitous in today's Kathak. It remains the first posture learned in the string of charming cameos called *gat nikas*, but is most characteristic, together with the rhythmic swaying included in the manuscript, in *thaat*.⁶ It also has a place in the rhythmic compositions, where it is struck at the end of a piece. This position, so characteristically Kathak yet so prominent in courtesan dance, has gathered mythological explanations to explain its presence: one story connects the posture with a dancing demon who had stolen Shiva's magic bracelet (Zutshi 1937; Gopal and Dadachanji 1951), and a later one explains that the stance represents Krishna with his peacock feather crown (Vatsyayan 1974; Natavar 1997). Neither the instructions in *Sarmaya-i Ishrat*, nor those in *Madun-ul Musiqi*, however, associate the *Janasheen* position with a Hindu deity, even though both manuscripts contain discussions of the dances of Shiva, Parvati, and Krishna.⁷

The other gats in *Sarmaya-i Ishrat*, *Madun-ul Musiqi*, and *Bani* most closely connected with today's Kathak, in particular with *gat nikas*, are the many which include gestures with the *ghungat* or veil (Figure 18.2). The colonial writers also made much of the dancers'



Figure 18.1: *Janasheen ki Gat* (Heir's Gat) *Sarmaya-i Ishrat*: 165.
(Used with permission from the British Library)



Figure 18.2: *Gat Chehre ki* (Face Gat) *Sarmaya-i Ishrat*: 168.
(Used with permission from the British Library)

covering and uncovering their heads and faces with “shawls,” “mantles,” and “screens of gauze” (Dyson 1978), and most dancers in both indigenous and colonial iconography hold veils or large dupattas as they dance. In Kathak today, loose veils would be a hazard when performing the virtuosic rhythmic material and spins, but most costumes for women include a dupatta, often made of gold tissue or gauzy silk, pinned modestly across the body or over the head (see [Figure 18.3](#)). Yet, although the securely fastened fabric generally precludes its use in expressive dancing, Kathak dancers still perform the gestures of the *ghungat gats* using an intriguingly codified vocabulary of pantomimed movements.

The graceful tavaayaf, with her repertoire of swaying postures and veil gestures, evocative songs and flirtatious eye contact, is no longer a feature of the north Indian performing arts. Her most characteristic song genre, the thumri, is bereft of its expressive movements and now sung at the end of classical vocal recitals as a “light dessert.” Yet, thumri is also now a dance genre, and although the dancers do not sing, their movement vocabulary is replete with gestures from the salon of the tavaayaf. Thaat, the graceful *salaami* and *aamad* (entry) compositions inserted into its elegant stream, and gat nikas also seem irrefutably descended from the dances of hereditary women. Even more deeply absorbed is the body language and use of the eyes; the subtle swaying of the body called *kasak-masak* and the arresting glance that usually marks the end of a piece are subtle but insistent witnesses to nineteenth-century women’s dance in today’s Kathak.

Displaced and Replaced

The hereditary female dancers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries did not disappear, nor did their repertoire vanish. Yet, social and political forces during the hundred years between the beginning and end of the Raj conspired to marginalize them to the extent that they were almost written out of history. When the Raj was formed in 1858 after the First War of Independence, one of its primary concerns was the creation of new laws and initiatives so that another opportunity for rebellion would never emerge. The city of Lucknow had been one of the epicenters and the site of some of the most horrifying stories of British suffering. The resulting demolitions, increase in police, health inspections, and seizure of property had devastating effects on the independent and refined world of the tavaayafs. Deprived of aristocratic



Figure 18.3: *Kathak* Dancer Sudeshna Maulik in costume with a veil.
(Used with permission)

patronage and encouraged by the Cantonment Act of 1864 to relocate near the army regiments, former courtesan-songstresses found themselves equated with the common prostitutes who served the army (Oldenburg 1984; Rao 1996).

Unfortunately, the rising Indian middle class had little more taste or appreciation for the refined world of the *tavayaf* than the British occupiers. The colonial officials had learned quickly that it was easiest to administrate the multicultural, multilingual Indian population through a layer of indigenous bureaucrats. Education was considered the key, and young Indian men from respectable families were thus exported to Britain for tuition. In a delightfully ironic turn of events, the Indians absorbed European philosophies of equality and liberty along with cricket and English grammar. Reacquainted on their return with the racism and brutality of British rule, they formed the core of the Independence Movement, including the Congress Party, Muslim League, and various “quit India” campaigns. While the educated activists pondered the fact of their country’s occupation and searched for potential weaknesses that allowed it, Victorian morality replaced Enlightenment philosophy, and social reforms began to focus on “fallen women” as a salient symptom of a culture in decline. The resultant “anti-Nautch” movement was as successful in the disenfranchisement of hereditary female performers as the British efforts in 1857, and the lobby, which began at a public meeting in Madras in 1893, set out to convince leaders and socialites to cease their patronage of “public” women who danced. The final result, the Devadasi Abolition Bill, was one of the first acts of the new Indian Parliament. The beginnings of both British imperial and independent Indian rule were thus marked by laws controlling women (Forbes 1996; Rao 1996; Sundar 1995 among others).

The “rescue” of music and eventually dance from their association with decadent courts, loose behavior, and the sex trade, and their reclamation as national cultural treasures was largely the work of a few reformers in the early decades of the twentieth century. Rabindranath Tagore, Vishnu Narayan Bhatkhande, and Vishnu Digambar Paluskar all played important parts in the collection, documentation, and dissemination of Indian music to the middle-class audiences and amateurs who had previously disowned it. Modernization and classicization were central to their reforms, and although their work was certainly a reaction against years of colonial disrespect and lack of patronage, it managed on the other hand to support the writings

of colonial scholars like Sir William Jones (1882 [1784]) who claimed that the music of India was above all ancient and Hindu. The foundation of music colleges permitted any Indian to learn music previously disseminated through families of hereditary performers, and the organization of music festivals allowed large audiences to hear music previously only available at select gatherings of connoisseurs. This simultaneously democratized the performing arts and detached them from their immediate roots, disenfranchising and marginalizing many of the predominantly Muslim hereditary artists (for more information see especially Bakhle 2005, but also Kippen 2006 and Du Perron 2007). The marginalization of hereditary performers had a different impact on men and women. Although many histories still emphasize ancient Sanskrit roots over the role played by Muslim hereditary musicians, they cannot completely ignore their presence, and male hereditary artists remain among the leading performers and teachers today. It was easy, on the other hand, to ignore, indeed to erase, the presence of hereditary women. Tainted by colonial laws, muzzled by the anti-Nautch, and made redundant by a series of shifts in patronage, the *tavayafs*, lead artists and culture bearers of previous centuries, disappeared off the stage and became no more than an embarrassing footnote in the history of Indian music and dance. Yet, these same shifts in patronage, the creation of education institutions, and the gentrification of performing arts made it possible for a different group of women to enter the performing arts. Middle- and upper-class women from non-hereditary musical backgrounds, began, tentatively, to enter the public sphere as the hereditary women became less visible and quickly came to dominate the world of female vocal music and eventually dance.⁸ The role of non-hereditary women in the development of twentieth-century north Indian dance would be fundamental.

Dance in north India had been performed traditionally by both men and women, and aspects of both male and female hereditary dance can be found in today's Kathak. Yet, as music and dance were peeled apart in the social upheaval surrounding the anti-Nautch movement, the most talented of the hereditary women largely ceased dancing and became singers. This left the repertoire of both male and female dance in the hands of the hereditary men, the caste called Kathak, who had performed with the *tavayafs* as their accompanists and teachers. Interestingly, when cultural reformers became interested in dance, it was largely women who were instrumental in its reclamation.

The individual non-hereditary young women who became the first “ladies” of Kathak often experienced social difficulties and familial opposition to their careers. Nevertheless, the twin facts that the hereditary men (the Kathaks) were Hindu and that the hereditary women (the tavyayafs) seemed permanently removed from the dance facilitated the adoption of Kathak as a “classical” dance into the newly modernized and nationalized performing arts.

Non-Hereditary Women

The women dancers of the nineteenth century have, by and large, no discernible individual identities. Although Imam provided names of female performers in *Madun-ul Musiqi*, there are no matrilineal family trees through which one can trace their descendents nor are there oral histories that include their names. The first few generations of women dancers of the twentieth century, on the other hand, are a documented group of individuals, many of whom are still actively involved in the performing arts. Yet, although their names and faces are well-known and some books on Kathak dance include their biographies (Kothari 1989), many of their contributions are not recognized or have been absorbed into the legends and legacies of the hereditary male dancers. In this parallel disenfranchisement, both the authority of tradition and the genius of creativity are attributed to the male Kathaks, with the cultural dispossession of the tavyayafs sometimes blamed solely on the non-hereditary women.

The young women who entered the world of performing arts as Kathak dancers in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s usually faced immense disapproval from both family members and society at large. The opposition to the nautch had been built on a social division between the “professional” or “public” women who sang and danced and the respectable married women who stayed at home, and it went far beyond imported colonial prudery. Many of the social reforms of the previous century, however, had focused on women’s issues, with Indian reformers as actively involved as British agencies (Forbes 1996; Minault 1998 among others), and many of the women who entered the world of performing arts before and after independence came from families who were not entirely opposed to emancipation. A complete history of the contributions and legacy of each significant female figure in the recent history of Kathak is beyond the scope of this essay and will have to wait for a future opportunity. My focus here on the activities of a

few women associated with the capital city of Delhi, therefore, is made with the recognition that many stories and important dancers with careers outside the capital are being omitted.

Although Leila Sokhey (known as Madam Menaka) is generally credited with bringing Kathak onto the world stage during the 1930s (Joshi 1989; Kothari 1989: 151–52), it was Nirmula Joshi, an educated connoisseur of music and dance, who officially brought the dance to Delhi. Although Nirmula Joshi did learn music and dance from hereditary performers, it was her administrative initiatives that helped bring Kathak dance into the public arena. In 1937, she founded the Hindustani School of Music and Dance in Delhi and invited top male hereditary musicians and dancers to teach there. Chief among the dancers was the hereditary Kathak, Achchan Maharaj. This first school eventually closed down, but subsequent institutions founded after independence—the Bharatiya Kala Kendra, the Kathak Kendra, and the Sangit Natak Akademi, still central arts organizations today—all benefited from Joshi's energies and organizational skills. Central to her contribution was her importation of culture bearers to Delhi from other contexts of defunct or declining patronage. The gathering of many of the top musicians and dancers of the time at the Bharatiya Kala Kendra in the 1950s, combined with the nationalist agenda of cultural reclamation, made Delhi a fertile and creative center of artistic re-creation (Khokar 1998, 2004; Vidyarthi 1999).

The ongoing efforts of cultural reclamation made it necessary for the new institutions to continue distancing performing arts from the sensuous world of the *tavayaf* and the disdained colonial *nautch*. Although the hereditary male Kathaks who taught at the Bharatiya Kala Kendra had themselves taught courtesans in Lucknow, hereditary female dancers and singers were, with very few exceptions, not welcome.⁹ Instead, the new Indian government offered scholarships to encourage young middle- or upper-class women from non-musical families to study the classical dance now called Kathak.¹⁰ As the first young women cleared a path, the trickle became a torrent, and by the 1960s, the Kathak classes of hereditary gurus Shambhu Maharaj and Sundar Prasad were brimming. A list of the names of these women provides a substantial “who’s who” of Kathak dance for their generation (Khokar 1998).

The first non-hereditary student of Kathak guru Shambhu Maharaj was Maya Rao, who had traveled north from her home in Bangalore searching for substantial training in Kathak. She had a background

in music, Kathak, and the Oriental dance of Uday Shankar and had already in her early 1920s taught dance and begun to choreograph at the school she founded in Bangalore. Arriving in Delhi at the age of 25 on full scholarship, she devoted herself to her new studies yet also gradually influenced the dance's presentation, introducing many of the organizational features now considered traditional performance practice. Maya Rao had an interest in historical research, and many of her choreographic creations, all accomplished with the approval of both Shambhu Maharaj and Nirmula Joshi, sought to connect the movement vocabulary of Kathak with the poetry and prayers of the past. During this period, Maya Rao introduced Sanskrit devotional items such as *vandana* or *sloka* into the Kathak repertoire, and created the first choreography of the *Saraswati vandana*. Faced with the intuitive and somewhat fragmented teaching method of her guru, she suggested that the repertoire be organized into "families" of similar genres and forms and designed a progressive curriculum through which they could be transmitted. The informal and fluid performance style of Kathak at the time also disturbed her, and she instituted the order of performance connected to the gradual increase of tempo found in vocal and instrumental music. Rather than allowing the dancer to present items in any order, Rao created the now accepted format beginning with the newly introduced *vandana* and progressing through slower items like *thaat* and *aamad* to the exciting finale of fast *tukras*, *gat nikas*, and footwork (Maya Rao, personal communication; Khokar 2004).

Maya Rao was initially Shambhu Maharaj's sole student, but subsequent years brought other non-hereditary young women to his class in the Bharatiya Kala Kendra. One of these was Kumudini Lakhia, who ultimately emerged as one of India's foremost dance choreographers. Kumudini Lakhia arrived in Delhi with substantial dance experience; she had, like Maya Rao, studied Kathak with other teachers, but she had also spent a number of years dancing professionally and touring with Ram Gopal's Indian dance company. Coming to Delhi in 1958 for further study, Kumudini Lakhia brought an approach to staging, choreography, and dance itself that she had learned through the polished productions of Ram Gopal. As a senior student at the Bharatiya Kala Kendra, she studied and performed solo Kathak and took leading roles in the two "Kathak ballets" the school produced in the late 1950s, but nonetheless grew increasingly dissatisfied with the emphasis placed on technical prowess and Hindu mythology. Her solution was modernist to the core: strip the dance form down to its choreographic essentials

and recombine the elemental cells of the movement vocabulary into productions with minimal sets, trim costumes, and contemporary or abstract themes. From her first independent productions in the early 1970s, Lakhia's work was strikingly original, and she has been the recipient of both praise and criticism for it. Although, like Rao, she has seen many of her innovations presented on stage and credited to others, she also believes that she had a positive influence on the hereditary Kathaks with whom she worked. In particular, her close professional association with Birju Maharaj, nephew of Shambhu Maharaj and the current leader of the hereditary Kathaks from Lucknow, undoubtedly shaped both his willingness to experiment and his later success in creating large-scale choreographies (Kumudini Lakhia, personal communication; Lakhia 1995; Shah 2005).

The contributions of Maya Rao and Kumudini Lakhia have met with both public acclaim and recognition, tempered with the criticism that frequently greets innovators and with the often disrespectful appropriation of their ideas. They remain simultaneously recognized and marginalized and both feel strongly that much of their strength and artistic freedom was possible because they eventually left Delhi—Rao to resettle in Bangalore where she directs the Natya Institute of Kathak and Choreography, and Lakhia to found Kadamb, her institution and dance company in Ahmedabad. It is Reba Vidyarthi, their fellow non-hereditary colleague, who remained in Delhi to teach, train, and mentor four decades of future Kathak stars and teachers. No less important, her role in the development of today's Kathak seems almost forgotten.

Reba Vidyarthi had studied Kathak as a young girl with Achchan Maharaj at Nirmula Joshi's School of Hindustani Music and Dance in the 1930s. She struggled against the disapproval of her conservative grandfather, who opposed her involvement in professional dance, and began to teach. She entered the Bharatiya Kala Kendra in 1960 as a scholarship student, but the organizers, impressed with her background, assigned her to teach the beginner class formerly taught by Maya Rao. She shifted quickly from student to teacher and designed a five-year diploma course through which all entering students needed to pass, creating exercises and repertoire which trained the young dancers' hands, minds, and bodies as surely as any western ballet curriculum. To this day, students studying with a Lucknow style graduate of the Delhi Kathak Kendra will most likely begin with Vidyarthi's exercises, although there is little chance they will know this. Her influence can also be seen in films of the star-studded Kathak

Kendra Production Unit from the 1980s—hereditary male and non-hereditary female dancers alike who had begun in her foundation class perform with a disciplined finesse and elegance that are a product of her training. Her legacy, however, is the most difficult to trace, as it rests not in films, programs, or choreographies, but in the bodies of her former students. If her students' biographies omit her name in the interest of linking themselves to the more prominent hereditary males, her contribution is effectively erased (Reba Vidyarthi, personal communication).¹¹

Not all of Reba Vidyarthi's students have dismissed her influence in their lives, however, and many of Maya Rao and Kumudini Lakhia's students proudly include their teachers' names in their biographies. Yet, an unequivocal recognition of the central role these ladies and the many others who have followed them as teachers, dancers, and choreographers have played in the creation of Kathak still eludes them. Ownership and stylistic authority still rest officially with the male Kathaks, and one can observe a type of cultural magnetic field which causes the efforts and creations of others to be credited to them. Yet the answer is clearly not to disenfranchise the Kathaks in turn; they are and were, by and large, excellent teachers and creative artists who, having grown up in musical families, present an internalized form of artistic knowledge inimitable by those who have trained outside their homes. The contributions of these men to the Kathak of today are undeniable, but the contributions of women, both hereditary and non-hereditary need to be equally recognized.

My research into the history of north India's "classical" dance form, Kathak, has uncovered a past that is a tangled web of multiple origins, castes and classes, musicians and dancers that combined to form the dance we know today in the early decades of the twentieth century (Walker 2004). The story is as syncretic and multifaceted as the dance itself, and calls the widely accepted unilinear story of an ancient temple dance into question. This essay has sought to redress one of the imbalances by exploring the role of women in Kathak's history and by addressing some reasons why women, both the hereditary *tavayafs* of the nineteenth century and the more elite women who replaced them, have more often than not become footnotes in the history of Kathak dance. Embracing a history of Kathak that is multilinear and firmly situated in contemporary events rather than ancient story-telling may finally aid us in placing women in the history of the dance we call Kathak.



Notes

*This essay is based on several past presentations on women's roles in Kathak dance (Walker 2005a, 2005b, 2006a, and 2006b). Research was done both through examination of historical documentation and ethnography. Funding for fieldwork trips to India in 2003 and 2006 was generously provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada in Doctoral and Post-Doctoral Fellowships.

1. The origin of this vision of an ancient Hindu music, largely unrelated to the realities of contemporary performance practice, is usually attributed to (or blamed on) the eighteenth-century Orientalist scholar William Jones. Writing in 1784, Jones set a tone for more than two centuries of scholarship that has consistently attempted to trace Indian music back to Vedic origins, concentrating on Sanskrit sources of 500 hundred or more years ago while ignoring more recent documentation in Persian and Urdu (Jones 1882 [1784]).
2. It is important to observe that the word "Kathak" in reference to a discreet dance tradition, whether as "Kathak dance" (*kathak nritya*) or as "the dance of the Kathaks" (*kathak ka nritya*) does not predate the 1930s in written documents. While this does not mean that the term "Kathak dance" was not used before then, it is anachronistic to apply it to the dances of previous centuries, as the people of those times did not seem to refer to any particular dance specifically as "Kathak."
3. "Nautch" is an Anglicization of the Hindi/Urdu word *nach*, meaning dance. As the colonial observers were unable to distinguish between sophisticated performances of the courtesans and the more lascivious renditions by prostitutes, the term conflated all Indian dance into the immoral activity of "public women."
4. Also called the "Sepoy Mutiny," the First War of Independence took the form of a military uprising against the growing control of the British East India Company. A shift of political and military control from the Company to the British crown following the suppression of the struggle marked the beginning of Imperial rule and the "Raj."
5. I am grateful to Asma Siddiqi for her work in Urdu translation.
6. Khan equates the terms *gat* and *thaat* on page 160 (1884), and Kathak dance guru Reba Vidyarthi called this posture "the first *thaat*" (personal communication 2003).
7. There are four *gats* in *Sarmaya-i Ishrat* (the "Crown" and "Flute" *gats*) which are clearly connected to the dance of Krishna. There is no reason the author would not have included similar information about the *Janasheen ki gat* if it were relevant.

8. One can actually “hear” this shift on early recordings when female singers at the end of their performances announce themselves as “amateur,” that is, not professional and therefore not tavyaf (Du Perron 2007: 61).
9. Undoubtedly, part of the initial motivation for founding the new dance institutions in Delhi was to remove the male artists from the contexts where they still worked with hereditary women.
10. This is, of course, a reference to hereditary occupation, not an indication of inherited talent.
11. It is regrettable, but worth noting, that Ashish Khokar’s book celebrating the history and personalities of the Bharatiya Kala Kendra (1998) somehow omits her.

References

- Allen, Matthew Harp. 1997. “Rewriting the Script for South Indian Dance.” *The Drama Review, Journal of Performance Studies* 41 (3): 63–100.
- Bakhle, Janaki. 2005. *Two Men and Music: Nationalism in the Making of an Indian Classical Tradition*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Banerji, Projesh. 1982. *Kathak Dance Through Ages*. New Delhi: Cosmo Publications.
- Bor, Joep. 1986/87. “The Voice of the Sarangi: An Illustrated History of Bowing in India” *National Centre for the Performing Arts Quarterly Journal* 15 (3–4), 16 (1): 1–183.
- Buckland, Theresa Jill, ed. 2006. *Dancing from Past to Present: Nation, Culture, Identities*. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Chakravorty, Pallabi. 2007. *Bells of Change: Kathak Dance, Women, and Modernity in India*. Kolkata: Seagull Books.
- Devi, Ragini. 1972. *Dance Dialects of India*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Du Perron, Lalita. 2007. *Hindi Poetry in a Musical Genre: Thumri Lyrics*. London: Routledge.
- Dyson, Keteki Kushari. 1978. *A Various Universe: A Study of the Journals and Memoirs of British Men and Women in the Indian Subcontinent, 1765–1856*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Forbes, Geraldine. 1996. “Women in Modern India.” In *The New Cambridge History of India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gopal, Ram and Seroz Dadachanji. 1951. *Indian Dancing*. London: Phoenix House Ltd.
- Imam, Mohammad Karam. 1869. *Madun-ul Musiqi*. British Library. Urdu 143.
- Jones, William. 1882 [1784]. “On the Musical Modes of the Hindoos.” In Sourindro Mohan Tagore, ed., *Hindu Music from Various Authors*, pp. 125–64. 2nd ed. Kolkata: I. C. Bose and Company.
- Joshi, Damayanti. 1989. *Madame Menaka*. New Delhi: Sangit Natak Akademi.

- Khan, Sadat Ali. 1884. *Sarmaya-i Ishrat*. British Library, lithograph. 14119.f.27
- Khokar, Ashish. 1998. *Shriram Bharatiya Kala Kendra: A History*. Sumitra Charat Ram Reminiscences. [New Delhi]: Lustre Press.
- . 2004. *Guru Maya Rao: Pioneers of Indian Dance*. Bangalore: Ekah-Bios.
- Khokar, Mohan. 1984. *Tradition of Indian Classical Dance*. 1979. Rev. Ed. New Delhi: Clarion Books.
- Kippen, James. 1988. *The Tabla of Lucknow: A Cultural Analysis of a Musical Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 2006. *Gurudev's Drumming Legacy: Music, Theory and Nationalism in the Mrdang aur Tabla Vadanpaddhati of Gurudev Patwardhan*. SOAS Musicology Series. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Kothari, Sunil. 1989. *Kathak: Indian Classical Dance Art*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications.
- Lakhia, Kumudini. 1995. "Innovative Choreography in Kathak." In Bimal Mukherjee and Sunil Kothari, eds, *Rasa: The Indian Performing Arts in the Last Twenty-five Years*, vol. 1 Music and Dance. Kolkata: Anamika Kala Sangam.
- Maciszewski, Amelia. 2001a. "Stories About Selves: Selected North Indian Women's Musical (Auto)biographies." *The World of Music* 43 (1): 139–72.
- . 2001b. "Multiple Voices, Multiple Selves: Song Style and North Indian Women's Identity." *Asian Music* 32: 1–40.
- . 2004. *Guriya, Gossip, and Globalization*. Videocassette.
- Manuel, Peter. 1989. *Thumri in Historic and Stylistic Perspectives*. Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass.
- Minault, Gail. 1998. "Women, Legal Reform and Muslim Identity in South Asia." In M. Hasan, ed., *Islam, Communities and the Nation. Muslim Identities in South Asia and Beyond*, pp. 139–58. Delhi: Manohar Publishers.
- Narayan, Shovana. 1998. *Rhythmic Echoes and Reflections: Kathak*. New Delhi: Roli Books Pvt Ltd.
- Natavar, Mekhala. 1997. "New Dances, New Dancers, New Audiences: Shifting Rhythms in the Evolution of India's Kathak Dance." Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison.
- Oldenburg, Veena Talwar. 1984. *The Making of Colonial Lucknow, 1856–1877*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Post, Jennifer. 1989. "Professional Women in Indian Music: The Death of the Courtesan Tradition." In Ellen Koskoff, ed., *Women and Music in Cross Cultural Perspective*, pp. 97–109. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Qureshi, Regula. 1989. "The Urdu Ghazal in Performance." In Christopher Shackle, ed., *Urdu and Muslim South Asia: Studies in Honour of Ralph Russell*, pp. 175–89. London: Soas.
- . 1997. "The Indian Sarangi: Sound of Affect, Site of Conquest." *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 29: 3–38.

- Rao, Vidya. 1996. "Thumri and Thumri Singers: Changes in Style and Life-Style." In Indu Banga Jaidev, ed., *Cultural Reorientation in Modern India*, pp. 278–315. Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study.
- Shah, Reena. 2005. *Movement in Stills: The Dance and Life of Kumudini Lakhia*. Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd.
- Shah, Wajid Ali. 1987 [1877?]. *Bani*. Translated into Hindi by Roshan Taqi and Krishna Mohan Saxena. Lucknow: Sangit Natak Akademi.
- Sharar, Abdul Halim. 1975 [1913–20]. *Lucknow: The Last Phases of an Oriental Culture*, trans. and eds. E. S. Harcourt and Fakhir Hussain. London: Paul Elek.
- Sinha, Manjari. 2000. "Kathak." In Shanta Serbjeet Singh, ed., *Indian Dance: The Ultimate Metaphor*, pp. 59–83. New Delhi: Bookwise (India) Pvt. Ltd.
- Sundar, Pushpa. 1995. *Patrons and Philistines: Arts and the State in British India, 1773–1847*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Vatsyayan, Kapila. 1974. *Indian Classical Dance*. New Delhi: Publications Division.
- Vidyarthi, Govind. 1999. Recorded by Shri S. L. Manchanda and Smt. Usha Prasad. Nehru Memorial Museum and Library. Oral History Project.
- Walker, Margaret E. 2004. "Kathak Dance: A Critical History." Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto.
- . 2005a. "Courtesans and Choreographers: Women in North Indian Kathak Dance." Paper presented at York University Graduate Colloquium, Toronto Canada, October 27.
- . 2005b. "From Mehfil to Moscow: Women's Contributions to Kathak Dance Choreography." Paper presented to the Society for Ethnomusicology Conference, Atlanta Georgia, November 19.
- . 2006a. "Placing Women in Kathak History." Paper presented at the Natya Institute for Kathak and Choreography, Bangalore India, January 24.
- . 2006b. "Gazing Through the Ghunghat: Courtesan Dance in Urdu Manuscripts." Paper presented at the Kathak at the Crossroads International Festival and Symposium, San Francisco California, September 29.
- Zutshi, Janak Kumari. 1937. "The Kathak School of Dancing." *The Hindustan Times*, Monday, March 15, 1937: 7.

About the Contributors

Payal Ahuja was born and brought up in Mumbai. Payal's initial foray into the world of dance was at the tender age of three. Thereafter she pursued advance training in Bharatnatyam in one of India's premiere dance institutions, Nalanda Dance Research Center, Mumbai. Having completed the five-year degree program at Nalanda she received the Sri Nageshwar Rao scholarship for standing first in the Bachelor of Fine Arts program from Mumbai University. A recipient of the Roehampton Postgraduate scholarship, Payal is currently doing her M.A. in South Asian Dance Studies at Roehampton University London, convened by internationally acclaimed performer-scholar Dr Avanthi Meduri.

Sruti Bandopadhyay is one of the foremost Manipuri dance artists of India. Performer, scholar, and choreographer, Sruti has obtained a Ph.D. in Dance and is presently working as reader in dance at the Department of Dance, Rabindra Bharati University. She was a Visiting Lecturer Fulbright Fellow at the Department of World Arts and Culture, UCLA in Fall 2007. Her experiments in Indian dance with her group, Sruti Performing Troupe, have gained wide acclaim.

Samar Kumar Biswas completed his M.Sc. in Anthropology (Social-Cultural Specialization) from the University of Calcutta. He is presently a lecturer in the Department of Anthropology, North Bengal University, Darjeeling, India; he has been teaching for more than six years. His areas of interest include issues related to environment, ethnographic studies, tribal society, rural society, peasant society, studies on Dalits, women's studies, health, and a number of other contemporary issues related to the socio-cultural aspects of different ethnic groups. His published works include several articles in national and international journals, and he has attended a number of national and international seminars and symposiums.

Somenath Bhattacharjee completed his M.Sc. in Anthropology (Social Cultural Specialization) from North Bengal University, Darjeeling, India. Presently he is a junior research fellow at the same

department. His areas of interest focus on socio-economic studies among occupational groups, rural societies, and the folk culture of tribal people in North Bengal. His published works include articles in several national and international journals.

Mandakranta Bose, professor emerita at the University of British Columbia, and till her retirement director of the University's Centre for South Asia and India Research, studied Sanskrit at Sanskrit College, Kolkata and in Oxford University, and comparative literature in the University of British Columbia. She has made the Sanskrit tradition of dance and theater arts the subject of her lifelong study, publishing major studies in the field, including *Classical Indian Dancing: A Glossary*, *Speaking of Dance: The Indian Critique*, and *Nartananirnaya*, a critical edition of a sixteenth-century Sanskrit text on music and dance. Her book, *Movement and Mimesis: The Idea of Dance in the Sanskritic Tradition* is a significant contribution to the scholarly understanding of classical Indian dance and drama.

Aishika Chakraborty is a student of Dr Manjusri Chaki-Sircar and Ranjabati Sircar. Aishika has authored and presented several articles on the history, ideology, and methodology of Navanritya, underwriting the interplay between gender and dance. She is currently engaged in writing monographs on the works of Manjusri and Ranjabati. Aishika holds a Ph.D. in "Widowhood in Colonial Bengal" from the University of Calcutta and she teaches History in Brahmananda Keshab Chandra College, Kolkata.

Sohini Chakraborty is an Ashoka Fellow, sociologist, and dance activist. She is founder and director of Kolkata Sanved and Network Chair of Status and Welfare of World Dance Alliance-West Bengal Chapter. Sohini uses dance and movement as an alternative tool for therapy, communication, self-expression, facilitating the rehabilitation of marginalized populations to the mainstream.

Pallabi Chakravorty teaches Kathak dance and academic courses related to the anthropology of performance in the Department of Music and Dance at Swarthmore College. Founder and artistic director of the ensemble Courtyard Dancers, she is an anthropologist, dancer, choreographer, and cultural worker. Pallabi's inter-disciplinary research has been published widely. She is the author of *Bells of*

Change: Kathak Dance, Women, and Modernity in India. Her co-edited monograph titled *Performing Ecstasy: The Poetics and Politics of Religion in South Asia* is forthcoming from Manohar Publications.

Uttara Asha Coorlawala teaches dance at Long Island University-C.W. Post and at Barnard College, NYC. She has served as CORD guest editor and has written for journals and anthologies. As a dancer-choreographer, Coorlawala pioneered intercultural innovation in Indian contemporary dance, performing in tours across the USA, eastern and western Europe, and Japan.

Monica Dalidowicz is a doctoral candidate in anthropology at Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia. Her research focuses on training in Kathak dance and the transmission of bodily knowledge between India and its diaspora.

Shreeparna Ghosal submitted her Ph.D. under Professor Malabika Sarkar, Department of English, Jadavpur University, on William Blake's Poetry and Paintings. She has learned Bharatnatyam for twenty years under Guru Smt. Thankamani Kutty of Kalamandalam Kolkata and has also taught there for eight years. Currently she has her own institution of Creative Bharatnatyam called Nrtyaadhar. She is a core committee member and coordinator of "Dhitang" Dance and the Child Movement, West Bengal Chapter, and is a working committee member of World Dance Alliance, West Bengal Chapter.

Pika Ghosh teaches South Asian art and architecture at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and her research focuses on material culture in eastern India from the seventeenth century to the present. Her book *Temple to Love: Architecture and Devotion in Seventeenth-Century Bengal* identifies the emergence of a new architectural formation in the religious and political environment of the seventeenth century. She is interested in ethnographic approaches and how current practices such as ritual and oral lore can help inform us about the pre-modern period.

Nilanjana Gupta is director, School of Media Communication & Culture, and professor of English at Jadavpur University. She is interested in contemporary cultural practices.

Vikram Iyengar is a Kathak dancer, choreographer, director, and performing arts researcher in Kolkata. An Indian Government Scholarship and Fellowship awardee with an M.A. in Performing Arts from the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, his production work spans classical dance, choreographic presentations, and dance-theater. He has taught at B.A. and M.A. levels at Wales, presented papers at seminars in the UK, Hong Kong, Singapore, and India and contributes articles to various publications regularly. He is founder and artistic director of the Kolkata-based performance company Ranan.

Mundoli Narayanan is on leave from his tenured position at the University of Calicut, India, and is currently a professor of Literature at Miyazaki International College, Japan. He has been documenting Kathakali and Kutiyattam in association with the UNESCO and with VEDIKA, Thrissur, a non-profitable trust for the preservation of the traditional performing arts of Kerala. He co-directed VEDIKA's *Kathakali: Kottayam Plays, International DVD Edition*, a set of eight DVDs. His articles have appeared in *TDR*, *Comparative Culture* and a number of Indian journals.

Kalpana Ram is the head of the anthropology department at Macquarie University, Sydney. She is the author of *Mukkuvar Women: Gender, Hegemony and Capitalist Transformation in a South Indian Fishing Community*, co-editor of *Maternities and Modernities: Colonial and Postcolonial Experiences in Asia and the Pacific*; *Borders of Being: Citizenship, Sexuality and Reproduction in Asia and the Pacific*; and *Migrating Feminisms Special Issue of Women's Studies International Forum*. Her research interests in Indian dance, diaspora, postcolonialism, and gender will be her next major research project.

Alessandra Lopez y Royo is reader in visual culture at Roehampton University, London where she lectures on the art history and dance studies programs of the School of Arts. She has written extensively on the visual and performing arts of Asia, especially India and Indonesia. She is currently engaged in research on the relationship between photography and dance and has recently completed an online book, published by the Metamedia Collaborative at Stanford University, entitled *ReConstructing and RePresenting Dance: Exploring the Dance/Archaeology Conjunction* (2007). (<http://humanitieslab.stanford.edu/117/Home>).

Urmimala Sarkar Munshi is a visiting fellow teaching Dance Studies at the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. She has done her Ph.D. in Social Anthropology on the socio-cultural context of tribal and folk dance from Calcutta University. She is currently involved in a major research/documentation project on professional and semi-professional women performers in India. She is a choreographer/performer trained and attached to the Uday Shankar India Culture Centre, Kolkata and is currently the Co-Chair of the Research and Documentation network of the World Dance Alliance-Asia Pacific.

Margaret Walker completed her Ph.D. in ethnomusicology at the University of Toronto under the guidance of tabla scholar James Kippen. She has studied Kathak dance with various teachers in Canada and India since 1997. Her research focuses on the history of Kathak and includes work with rural folk musicians, historical ethnography of hereditary performers, and ongoing analysis of courtesan dance in nineteenth-century documents. She is currently assistant professor of Musicology/Ethnomusicology at Queen's University in Kingston, Canada.

Index

- Abhijnana Shakuntalam* 190
Abhinavabharati 123
Abhinavagupta 123–28
Abhinaya Chandrika 265
Abhinaya Darpana 31, 109, 110, 265
abhinaya (performing narratives)
 123, 215, 216, 267, 270
adavu system 58
Ajker Ekalavya (ballet) 230
Amar Bharat 195
Ammam, Mylapur Gauri 30
Angik, 131, 132, 144, 145
animism 18
anukirtana 128, 129
Aparna Sen's *Yugant* 229
Appadurai, Arjun 112, 113
arangetrams 92
arati (worship) 93
Ardhanariswara 221
Arundale, Rukmini Devi 22, 23, 28,
 30, 58, 111, 271
Arup Ratan 192
Asmakam—The quest 112
attam 8; as bodily technique 10–16;
 performance and nationalism
 19–23
avesam 20
Azhaku Ravana 238
- bakung* (drums) 45
Balasaraswati 30, 31, 20
Balinese dances 77
Balivijayam (play) 238, 254
ballet dance 111
Balmiki Pratibha 192
Bani, by Wajid Ali Shah 283, 284, 285
Barman, B. K. Roy 43
baroyat (plate-like instrument) 50
basili dance 51
bhadramahila 192
Bhagavata Purana 156, 157
Bhagavati Pattu 33
bhakti (devotional worship) 13, 14,
 29, 94, 128, 143, 157
Bhakti movement 237, 246
bhakti rasa 143
bhakti-sringar 121
Bhangra 232
Bharatiya Kala Kendra 293, 294, 295
Bharatnatyam 6, 16, 30, 57, 58, 96,
 121, 143; art form of 108; and
 ballet dance 111; in Bombay films
 172; choreography 131; 2006
 conference in Chicago/Toronto
 129; cultural narrative of xviii;
 dance classes in Britain 91, 101;
 development of 29, 189; history of
 108, 109; influence of ethnicity on
 95; institutionalization of 31;
 pedagogical approaches to 109;
 performance at Hindu religious
 festivals and temples 89;
 relationship with *sadir attam* 4;
 relationship with temples 92;
 Rukmini Devi's re-choreographing
 of 22; stylized version of 209;
 use in dance movement therapy
 process 65
bhava-rasa system xviii, 169, 171
bodily techniques 10–16
Bollywood films: dancers and
 choreographers in 174; dancing
 girls of 174; influence on folk
 dances 89, 100–102; mixing of
 film dance to narratives of nation
 171–73

Bollywood Star (television program)
101

Bombay cinema 172

Borade, Ajai 176

Borainai dance 49

Bose, Mandakranta 109

boumshi (bamboo flute) 50

boushi (adze-like instrument) 50

Brahmanism 18

Brakel-Papenhuyzen, Clara 77

Call of the Drum 195

Cassandra 199

Chaitanya 150–54, 160, 161; as
incarnation of Krishna 162;
yugavatar 164

Chaitanya Charitamrita, by

Krishnadas Kaviraj 161

Chaki-Sircar, Manjusri 185, 197

chakra (energy centers) 129

Chandalika, by Rabindranath Tagore
198, 199

Chandralekha 131–32

Chhau dance 35, 199

chingbakak 51

Chitrangada, by Rabindranath
Tagore 198

clapping dance *see* Garba dance

classical dance of India *see* Indian
classical dance

colom areibi 140

Colom dances, of Manipur 140, 145

“commodity aesthetics” 178

community dance, of Laiharaoba 143

congregational songs 46

Coorlawala, Uttara Asha 31

cultural identity, concept of 95–98

Cutalai Matan 9, 10

dance, *see also* Indian classical dance:
activism 55; activity in Britain
90; art-ritual-practice of xiv;
choreography 4; classical formats
of 57; concept of ethnicity in 94–
95; concerts 84; as devotional

practices of Gaudiya Vaishnava
community 150; eroticism and
loss of masculinity 81; as ethnic
and cultural identity marker
93–94; as expression of human
behavior xiv; in form of minor
practice 7–10; gender-neutral
conceptions and practices 78; and
gender of performer 76; inception
of modernism in 186; indigenous
styles by urban practitioners 26;
influence of Bollywood films
89, 100–102; in Kampuchea 79;
lasya style 142, 198; lineages of
concepts of 121; modes of 76;
of nineteenth-century women
282; postcolonial scholarship xx;
practices of Gujaratis and Tamils
90; “remix” 170, 178, 180;
‘Sanskritization’ of indigenous
forms xvii, 31, 32; scholarship
in India 3, 5; status as profession
81; Tagore’s contribution to
modernization of 193; *tandava*
style 142, 198; in Thailand 79;
training in transcultural style:
assertion of traditional etiquette
216–20; Kathak yoga 214–15;
learning of expression 215–16;
learning of pure dance (nritya)
212–14; west–east intercultural
paradigm 111; writing 4; as
yoga 130

dance-dramas 28, 78, 198, 199

dance halls 173, 174

Dance Like a Man (play) 227, 228,
230, 232

Dance Matters xiv, 112

Dance Movement Therapy (DMT)
62; situation and need for 63–64
dance offerings, in South Indian
temples 83

Dancers’ Guild 187

dance studios 173, 209

- dance therapy, for restoring confidence among women [xvii](#)
- dancing girls: of Bollywood films [174](#); and hereditary women [281–88](#)
- ‘Dancing in Cambodia,’ by Amitav Ghosh [xiv](#)
- dandia [93](#), [232](#)
- Dandia Raas [232](#)
- darbari* dance [189](#)
- dasavatara* [145](#), [162](#)
- Dasiyattam [30](#), [58](#)
- Das, Nityananda [158](#)
- Das, Pandit Chitresh [xix](#), [207](#), [210](#), [212](#)
- Dassiattam [189](#)
- demon deities [19](#)
- “demon worship” [13](#)
- devadasis [4](#), [30](#), [58](#), [79](#), [271](#); development of Dassiattam [189](#); temple dance [92](#)
- Devdas* (film) [178](#), [226](#)
- Devi, Pratima [195–96](#)
- Devi, Ragini [34](#)
- dhansi* [51](#)
- dharma [14](#)
- dhemsa* (temple) [45](#), [46](#)
- Dhire* (song) [46](#)
- Dhoom 2* (film): and aesthetics of aspiration [178–80](#); song and dance sequences [170](#), [171](#)
- Dil To Pagal Hai* (film) [225](#)
- DMT *see* Dance Movement Therapy (DMT)
- “Dravidian” culture [19](#)
- Eliot, T. S. [58](#), [73](#)
- ethnicity, concept of [94–95](#)
- ethnography, practice of [7](#)
- Euro-American dance [110](#)
- Fable for La Gran Sabana* [199](#)
- Falguni* [192](#)
- Fame Academy* (television program) [101](#)
- ‘feminization,’ of classical dance [226](#), [229](#)
- film dances [171–72](#)
- ‘Fitness Dance’ [231](#)
- folk art [44](#), [195](#)
- folk culture: among tribes of North Bengal: Meches [47–50](#); Rabhas [50–52](#); Totos [45–47](#); defined [43](#)
- folk dances [7](#), [195](#); in Bombay films [172](#); Garba [89](#); history of appropriation of [31–34](#); Raas [89](#)
- folklore, of tribals [43–44](#)
- folk theaters [33](#), [284](#)
- Gadan bathor* [49](#)
- Gana Natya Sangha *see* Indian People’s Theatre Association (I.P.T.A.)
- Gangavataran* [199](#)
- Garba dance [89](#), [93](#), [232](#)
- Gaudiya Vaishnavism [xviii](#)
- gharana* [187](#), [226](#), [227](#)
- ghungat gats* [288](#)
- ghungat ki gat* [285](#)
- Girish Karnad’s *Nagamandala* [233](#)
- Gita Govinda* [32](#), [145](#), [267](#)
- Goethe’s *Werther* [85](#)
- Gopal, Ram [28](#)
- group dances [28](#), [193](#)
- Guide* (film) [226](#)
- guru shishya parampara* [56](#), [57](#), [109](#), [170](#), [190](#), [210](#), [217](#), [221](#)
- Guzishta Lucknow*, by Abdul Halim Sharar [283](#)
- Hagra madai puja* [49](#)
- Handar Buru* pseudo-war dance [51](#)
- handa* (type of sword) [50](#)
- Hangai Sani* dance [51](#)
- Hanna, Judith [37](#)
- hereditary female performers [281–88](#); displacement and replacement of [288–92](#)
- Hindi films, cultural importance of [169](#)

Hindu community dance 90

Hindu science 18

Icakki Amman 8, 13, 14, 15, 17

ideal spectator *see* *rasika* (ideal spectator)

Indian classical dance 57, 73; in Bombay films 172; development of 83; 'feminization' of 226; globalization of 84; inception of modernism in 186; "Neo-Classical" period of 279; social issues related to 82; transcultural lineage of 210–11; women's art and 74

Indian culture: Bollywood's role in shaping 169; and its components 41–42

Indian dance aesthetics xviii

Indian dance traditions 3, 6; stigmatization of women as dancers 82

Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) 194–95

indigenous dance styles: movement patterns of 27; restructuring process for 27–31; by urban practitioners 26

"item numbers" 172, 173, 174, 176

Iyer, A. K. 17, 19

janatavam 129

Jataka story 198, 261

Javanese dancing 77

Jena, Guru Surendranath 267, 273

Jena, Surnedranath xix

Jeyasingh, Shobana 96

Jhanak Jhanak Payal Baje (film) 173, 225, 226

Jhoolan 193

Jhumur 35

Joshi, Nirmula 293

Journey to the West, by Jatinda Verma 95

Kaho Naa Pyaar Hai (film) 231

kalari 32

Kalaripayattu 131

kalbansi 51

kalthurang 51

Kama Sutra 120

Kapoor, Geeta 175

karma, doctrines of 18

Kathakali xix, 32, 34, 121, 194; dance of hereditary women 283; dances which influenced 33; entrance of Ravana 245–47; features of 237; politics of memory 247–48; resistance to rejection 253–56; during threat of colonization 243–45

Kathak dance xix, 119, 143, 206, 280; in Bombay films 172; creation of strong empowered female body in 220–21; fundamental technical components of 212; history of xx; in Kolkata 209–10, 221; modern 210, 211; teaching tradition 207–8; training in transcultural style: assertion of traditional etiquette 216–20; Kathak yoga 214–15; learning of expression 215–16; learning pure dance (*nritya*) 212–14; women's contributions to development of 281

Kathak: Indian Classical Dance Art, by Sunil Kothari xv

Kathak Kendra 293, 295

Katrak, Ketu 91, 95

Kerala Kala Mandalam 33

kham (drum) 49

kirickki 12

kirtana songs 143, 157

kirukiru 12

Kolkata Sanved: awards 68; dance movement therapy 68; intervention approach 64–67; program development 62; situation and need 63–64

- Konarak Kanti* 268
Koodiyattam 125, 126, 128, 130
kramalaya tatkar 214
Krishna Gana Sabha 126
Krishna Nartan 144, 145
Krishnattam 32, 33
Kudiyattam 33
Kumarasambhavam, by Rukmini Devi 4
kuravanji 4
kuri (prophecy) 9, 10
Kutrala Kuravanji, by Rukmini Devi 4
kutti Ravana 251

laicing jagoi 141
lairen mathek 141
Lalit Kala Akademi 29
lasya 142, 145, 198
leti gehuas 46
London Tamil dance scene 90

Madun-ul Musiqi, by Mohammad Karam Imam 283, 284, 285, 292
magic 18
Mahabharata 34, 110, 198, 237, 247
Maharaj, Birju 119, 224, 227, 295
Mairbar Changi dance 51
mallavi 92
Manipuri dance 140–46; characteristics of 142–43; *Rasalila* 144
Manipur State Kala Academy 145
mantravadi 21
martial arts 128, 145, 199
martial dances 33
Mayurbhanja Chau 193
Meches, folk culture of 47–50
Meerabai Nrityakatha 198
modern-guru-in-training 217
moorti 119
Mosanai dance 49
multiculturalism, in Indian Society 42–43
Murukan 17
Mutti-yettu 33

Nachni dance 35–37
nadaswaram 10, 11
Nagamandala, by Girish Karnad 233
nagar samkirtan 150
nagaswaram 92
Nakchung Reni dance 51
Nalanda Nrtyakala Mahavidyalaya 108
Nandikesvara's Abhinayadarpanam 109
Narakasuravadham (play) 254
nartaki (female dancer) 74
nattuvannars 59
Natyasastra 31, 58, 59, 76, 109, 110, 120, 121, 122, 269
Nautanki, in Bombay films 172
“nautch girls” 28, 283, *see also* women temple dancers; status in society 81
Navanritya xix, 185, 186; body and dance 195–200; history and ideology of 187–90; Tagore and 191–94
nayika 23, 125, 189, 201
“neo-Saivite” revivalism 19
Nilakamaladalauyama 145
non-hereditary women 280, 292–96
Nritya, by Pratima Devi 195

Oblique/She Said 199
Odissi dance 143, 189; global and local 274–75; history of 264; Mahari rituals and stage performance 271–74
O'Shea's book 6

Pakeezah (film) 226
Pakhangba 141
Pampin Tullal 33
Paramahamsa, Swami Muktananda 118
Patanjali's Yoga Sutras 125
performer–audience relationship 119
Pillai, Meenakshi Sundaram 30

- Pop Idol* (television program) 101
 possession cults, intellectual
 representations of 19
 “Practice as Research” 111
Prem Vilas, by Nityananda Das 158
puja 92
 Pung Cholum dance, of Manipur 232
Puranas 34, 247
Purush 126
pushpanjali (offering of flowers) 92
- Raas dance 89, 93
 Rabhas, folk culture of 50–52
 Rabindra Nritya 232
 Radha Shyam Temple 152, 160, 161,
 162
Raibeshey 193
 Rajagopalan, Kritika 131
rajasa 122, 247
 Ramanattam 33, 237, 238, 246
Ramayana 110, 237, 247; by Tulsidas
 129
 Ram, Kalpana 91
Ramleela 195
Rasalila 144, 160, 284; in Bombay
 films 172; costume of 144; terra
 cotta depictions of 155
Rasa-mandala 154
 rasa theory 117–18, 120–23, 128
rasika (ideal spectator) 118, 119–20
rasiks 35
 rationalism, politics of 16–19
Ravanavijayam 238
Ravanolbhavam 237, 245, 246, 249,
 250, 255
 religious nationalism 16–19
 “remix” dances 170, 178, 180
Rg Veda 18, 19
 ritual worship 14, 109
Rongjali 49
 Roy, Sanjoy 96
Rudramadhur 198
 Rushdie, Salman 96
- Sadir 31, 58, 92
sadir attam 4, 8, 22
 Sadir Nritya 29
 Sahitya Akademi 29
Sakthan Tampuran 239–42
Samarparnam 92
Samkirtana 141
Sampurnata (fulfillment) 62
 Samson, Leela 4
sangati dena 131
 Sangeet Natak Akademi 28
 Sangitaratnakara 77, 120
 Sangit Natak Akademi 293
sankirtana xviii
 Sanskritization in dance, concept of
 xvii, 31, 32
 Sarabhai, Mallika xvi
Sarabhendra Kuravanji 4
Sarmaya-i Ishrat, by Sadat Ali Khan
 283, 284
 Sarukkai, Malavika 128
 Sattriya dance 35
sattva 119, 122
satvika bhava 122
 School of Media Communication
 and Culture xvi
 Shahani, Roshan Jagatrai 130
Shakti Rupa Yogini 271, 274
 Shankar, Uday 28, 58, 143, 145,
 186, 189; contribution to Indian
 modern dance 194
Sharira-Fire/Desire 132
shilpa sastras 269
shiphung (bamboo flute) 49
Shiva Purana 34
Shyama, by Rabindranath Tagore 198
 Shyamananda, Dukhi 158–60
 Shyam Ray Temple 154, 155, 156
 Singh, Ojha Amubi 143, 145
 Singh, Ojha Bipin 145
Siva Sutras 133
 Sokhey, Leila 293

solo dances 28, 29, 122, 123, 145
 sorcery 18
South Asian Aesthetics Unwrapped 100
 South Asian Dance Studies program 108, 112
 South Asian dance styles 97, 110
 spirit cults 18
 Srijanshil Nritya 232
sringara 22, 122, 178, 254
sringara rasa 178
sthula sharira 129
sthyayibhava 121, 122, 123
Strictly Dance Fever (television program) 101
sukshma sharira 129
sum (heavy wooden instrument) 50
tabla 130, 131
 Tagore, Rabindranath 28, 77, 82, 143, 186, 189; contribution to modernization of dance 193; and new dance 191–94
talam 92
talappu 9, 16
tamasa 122, 247
 Tamil literary nationalism 16
tandava 142, 145, 198
tapassattam 248–53
Tasher Desh 198
Tashi Tawa (song) 46
 tavayafs 5, 281, 282, 284, 288, 290, 291, 292, 296
tavil drum 10
 terukkuttu 8, 12, 13, 20
 Teyyam 33
 Thang Ta (martial art) 145
 Tirayattam 33

Tomari Matir Kanya, by Manjusri 198–99
Toranayudham 238
 totemism 18
 Totos, folk culture of 45–47
Tulsidas's Ramayana 129
 Tylor, E. B. 41

Umrao Jaan (film) 226
uncal patttu (swing song) 9
Upanishads 18, 19
 urban dance choreographers xvii

 Vaishnava songs 160
 Vallathol, Mahakavi 82
 Vardhan, Shanti 189
 Vatsyayan, Kapila 29, 34, 130, 227, 228, 269
vepa ellai 9, 10
veriatam 17
 vertigo-inducing movements, in Tamil ritual performances 12
villu pattu (bow song) 9, 11, 13, 20
viputhi (sacred ash) 9
Vishnudharmottara 120
 “Voice of Bengal” 195
vyabhichara bhava 122

 warrior battle dances 77
Wives of the God-king (book) 268
 women temple dancers 28
 World Dance Alliance 61

 yoga 130, 221; Kathak 214–15
Yoga Sutras, by Patanjali 125
yognis xx
Yugant, by Aparna Sen 229
yugavatar 164