Indian Modern Dance, Feminism and Transnationalism

Prarthana Purkayastha

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Indian Modern Dance, Feminism and Transnationalism

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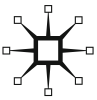

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To the memory of Ranjabati Sircar (1963–99)
and Manjusri Chaki Sircar (1934–2000)

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Series Editors' Preface

Choreography in the global context of the twenty-first century involves performance practices that are often fluid, mediated, interdisciplinary, collaborative and interactive. Choreographic projects and choreographic thinking circulate rapidly within the transnational flows of contemporary performance, prompting new aesthetics and stretching the disciplinary boundaries of established 'dance studies'. Crossing the borders of arts disciplines, histories and cultures, these 'new world choreographies' utilise dance techniques and methods to new critical ends in the body's interaction with the senses, the adoption of technology, the response to history as well as present-day conditions of political and social transformation, or in its constitution of spectator communities.

As a result, well-rehearsed approaches to understanding choreography through dance lineages, canonical structures, or as the product of individual artists give way to new modes of production and representation and an ever extending notion of what constitutes dance in performance. Choreographic practice as well as research on choreography draws on new methods of improvisation, (auto-) biography, collective creation and immersion in ways which challenge established (Western) notions of subjectivity, of the artist as creator, or which unsettle the 'objective distance' between the critic and the work. The post-national, inter-medial and interdisciplinary contexts of digital and social media, festival circuits, rapidly changing political economies, and global world politics call for further critical attention.

With an openness to these new worlds in which dance so adeptly manoeuvres, this book series aims to provide critical and historicised perspectives on the artists, concepts and cultures shaping this creative field of 'new world choreographies'. The series will provide a platform for fresh ways to understand and reflect upon what choreography means to its various audiences, and to the wider field of international dance and performance studies. Additionally, it will also provide a forum for new scholars to expand upon their ideas and to map out new knowledge paradigms that introduce this diverse

and exciting field of choreographic practice to dance, theatre and performance studies.

Rachel Fensham, University of Melbourne
Peter M. Boenisch, University of Kent
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Introduction

Indian Modern Dance is a research journey that initially grew out of two pressing concerns: the need to write Indian bodies into discussions on twentieth-century modern dance and the need to locate a genealogy of critical and political dance practice from the Indian subcontinent. During this journey, as I began to encounter traces of the past left behind in memories, writings, correspondences, photographs and films I began to realise how the dancing body complicates our understanding of Empire, Indian anti-colonial nationalism, transnationalism and 'the woman question'. Further issues began to surface as I dug out old reviews, letters, reports, published works and visual documents from different archives. How does dance, as an embodied form of resistance to political and cultural nationalism, offer a nuanced view of imperial hegemony and the recalcitrance of its subjects? What are the intricate and intimate links that exist between dancing bodies, nationalist politics, international modernism and feminism in twentieth-century Indian performance? I explore these questions in this volume through the selected dance works made during the period 1900–2000 by five Indian artists: Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), Uday Shankar (1900–77), Shanti Bardhan (1916–54), Manjusri Chaki-Sircar (1934–2000) and Ranjabati Sircar (1963–99).

This book is not a macro-historical or linear survey of all modern dance artists who have emerged from India. Ketu Katrak's *Contemporary Indian Dance* (2011) has successfully mapped the diverse practices of Indian artists in the subcontinent and globally, and so has Sunil Kothari's (2003) *New Directions in Indian Dance*, which was one of the first publications to document the cumulative voices of modern and

contemporary Indian dancers. Instead, this book's intention is two-fold: firstly, it offers an alternative genealogy of Indian modern dancers, some of whom have slipped through the net of previous dance history narratives and whose voices and bodies need to be accounted for if a picture of dance modernity unhooked from purely European or North American contexts is to be arrived at; and secondly, it examines dance as an embodied form of agency and transformation, crafted and performed by autonomous individuals living in colonial and postcolonial India.

Indian Modern Dance is part of a critical mass of scholarship on dances from and of the South Asian subcontinent that has fortunately been growing over the past few decades. These studies have generated intensive academic discussion, debate and analysis on issues surrounding the social, historical and political contexts of 'classical', 'modern' and 'contemporary' dance forms in India. For instance, Indian classical dances and their retrieval and reconstruction in the context of the nationalist cultural project of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries in India have been addressed and established by a number of scholars including Kapila Vatsyayan (1974), Amrit Srinivasan (1985), Saskia C. Kersenboom-Story (1987), Uttara Asha Coorlawala (1994), Pushpa Sundar (1995), Matthew Harp Allen (1997), Mandakranta Bose (2001), Avanthi Meduri (2005), Janet O'Shea (2007) and Pallabi Chakravorty (2008), and more recently by Priya Srinivasan (2012) and Davesh Soneji (2012).[1]

Research on modern and contemporary Indian dance, too, has been burgeoning. Apart from Katrak (2011) and Kothari (2003) mentioned earlier, other scholars and dance critics have also engaged through their work with twentieth-century modern and contemporary dance from India; among these writers are Mohan Khokar (1983), Uttara Asha Coorlawala (1994), Rustom Bharucha (1995), Kapila Vatsyayan (2003), Alessandra Lopez y Royo (2003), Ananya Chatterjea (2004a and 2004b) and Andree Grau (2007). More recently, Urmimala Sarkar Munsi (2010b), Aishika Chakraborty in her essay 'The Daring Within: Speaking Gender Through Navanritya' (2010), and Esha Niyogi De (2011) have brought to our attention, through the specific lens of gender, the significance of the legacy of modern dance-makers from the Bengal region. Yet, no single volume has until now traced the emergence of Indian modern dance-makers from the early twentieth century, their complex negotiations, collisions and collusions with

the forces of local forms of nationalism and anti-colonialism, and their position vis-à-vis the international and Euro-American experience of modernity and transnationalism. This book grew out of the interest in examining the role that dancing bodies have played in sometimes subverting and at other times co-opting the dominant tropes of national, western liberal and postcolonial thought.

In the waiting room of history

Why do so many people across the world do a double take and genuinely look surprised when I mention that I trained in modern dance in India? 'Is it Bollywood, or western dance?' they mostly ask. My frustration and anger at having to explain myself, this misfit body of mine, each time during these conversations led me to explore why modernity, specially in Indian dance, is such a misnomer for many. Social scientist and historian Dipesh Chakrabarty offers a useful explanation in his book *Provincializing Europe* (2000), where he observes that since the nineteenth century self-rule has been viewed as the highest form of government in the Euro-American world, but Indians and Africans were not considered civilised enough to rule themselves. Consigning Indians, Africans and other 'rude' nations to an imaginary waiting room of history and treating them as not-yet modern was, according to Chakrabarty, a common malady of the imperialist perception (2000: 8).

Bhikhu Parekh (2000) similarly notices a universalist view of progress within monistic traditions of thinking, which became the foundational fabric of western classical liberalism and the expansion of Empire. Tracing links between the moral monism of ancient Greek philosophy, Christian theology and the colonial project, Parekh shows how liberal thinkers such as John Locke and J.S. Mill, although endorsing the equality of human beings, believed in unequal human cultures. Mill, for instance, suggested that certain societies, including:

> […] 'dark Africa' and the 'whole East', had no right to territorial integrity. The right to one's way of life and to territorial non-intervention only belonged to those who were 'mature' enough to think and judge for themselves. Since backward societies allegedly lacked that capacity, the right was 'either a certain evil or at best a questionable good for them'. A 'parental despotism' by outsiders was

> necessary to kick-start their history, and bring them to a take-off point from where they could be relied upon to continue their progress unaided.
>
> (Parekh 2000: 45)

The 'parental despotism' of British colonialism and its attendant epistemic rupture quite obviously impacted upon the circulation and reception of cultural products of Indian origin in the twentieth century, signs of which remain even today. The view that India's dance works are not-yet-modern and that there exists a Euro-American prerogative to modernity over other cultures, especially in the dance arts, is something that this book sets out to challenge.[2]

The story of modern dance in India is rife with irony because implicated in its delayed arrival and recognition were the nation-builders and cultural policymakers themselves. Priya Srinivasan has suggested that in the early part of the twentieth century, 'the nationalist project in India served the modernist project in America': while modern dance in North America first drew within its fold and then rejected Asian practices, the Indian nationalist quest to find an 'authentic' pre-colonial past sided with orientalists and distanced itself from modernity (2012: 114). As a consequence, Indian cultural nationalism in the twentieth century ensured that Indian classical dances became widely known, recognised both within and beyond the borders of the Indian nation. The same cannot be said about modern dance of Indian origin, even though it existed alongside the revival and reconstruction of Indian classical dances in the early twentieth century, and even though the national academy of music and dance in New Delhi, the Sangeet Natak Akademi, endorses it as a category and makes available annual grants to contemporary dancers and institutions across India.[3]

Indian classical dance in the twenty-first century represents the highest form of artistic achievement in the performing arts, inspiring innumerable dance schools, concerts, documentaries and written works, both within India and in the global Indian diaspora. Indian modern dance is even today commonly viewed or regarded as the focus of isolated experiments by individual dancers who either perform 'western' dance imported from Europe or America, or mix 'western' dance with Indian dance to create a 'fusion'. Attached to terms such as 'fusion' are the associated meanings of impure and

inauthentic. Indian modern dance is therefore generally viewed as a bastardised and illegitimate form without any history or precedent, not considered representative of the highest and the best in Indian culture, since it is unable to uphold an unbroken tradition as the classical dances supposedly do.

Efforts to redress this unfortunate irony have been under way for the past few years, both through the body and through academic and critical writing. In 2001, choreographer Bharat Sharma embarked on a project titled 'Highway Performance Circuits' with ten other artists from across India. Funded by the India Foundation for the Arts (IFA) Bangalore, the project aimed to take contemporary Indian dance to a wide audience by travelling across the five southern Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Goa, the hotbed of the four Indian classical dances: Bharatanatyam, Kathakali, Mohiniattam and Kuchipudi. For nearly two months, the artists travelled in a mini-bus from coast to coast, performing in villages, towns and cities, in schools, colleges, universities, temples, churches, community halls, on makeshift stages and formal prosceniums to educate their audience about the reality of Indian contemporary dance.[4] At the level of dance writing, the scholarly works by Sarkar Munsi (2010a; 2010b) and Katrak (2011) – amongst many others – have crucially acknowledged modern and contemporary dance praxis in India. However, in order to pull Indian modern dance out of the waiting room of history, we still need to revisit the colonial past and examine the flow of narratives left behind by dancers and dance-makers, which cumulatively point towards the porosity of the colonial world and the borrowings and exchanges that lay at the very heart of this experience.

What is Indian modern dance?

How may we define Indian modern dance? What are the factors – social, political and historical – that gave birth to it? What is the relationship between national, anti-colonial and postcolonial identity formation and modern dance in India? These are some of the questions addressed in this book through the choreographed works of five artists in twentieth century India.[5] It is important to point out at the very outset that the term 'modern' is controversial and fraught with tensions when used in the context of dance in India. It is a classic

instance of the failure of language to fully communicate a highly complicated lived and embodied experience. Sarkar Munsi (2010b) has already addressed in detail the problem of using nomenclature such as 'classical', 'modern' and 'folk' in Indian dance. I only want to briefly touch on the two reasons why these classificatory labels are troublesome. Firstly, it is by now commonly acknowledged in South Asian scholarship that the classical dance forms of India are actually early twentieth-century reconstructions of indigenous movement forms.[6] In terms of location in history, therefore, the classical Indian dance (also sometimes termed by scholars such as Kapila Vatsyayan as 'neo-classical' dance) is a 'modern' construct.

Secondly, dancer-practitioners and choreographers in the field of classical dance in India have maintained and continue to assert that their dance forms, in spite of inheriting 'a centuries-old legacy', continue to have relevance in a contemporary context. By incorporating themes and ideas relevant to the present-day social milieu within its repertoire, classical dance has the ability to express and address contemporary issues of today and hence is considered 'timeless' (Venkataram 2002). Dance artists such as Rukmini Devi Arundale (1904–86), the woman behind the creation of Kalakshetra Bharatanatyam, one of India's best known classical dance forms, are heralded by scholars such as Meduri as pioneers of modernism in Indian dance, successfully negotiating at once a local and global identity for Indian dance (Meduri 1996; 2000; 2005). And finally, Janet O'Shea's account of Bharatanatyam as a genre that 'incorporates diversity and divergence', allowing for debate, dialogue and difference within its very form and, very importantly, as a dance form that 'questions the assumptions of a global stage', has significantly altered our understanding of classical dance as a fixed construct (O'Shea 2007: x–xii).

These two notions, one of temporal location and the other of contextual relevance, force us to revisit, re-address and realign our understanding of 'classicism' in the Indian dance context. Furthermore, the blurred boundaries between the fields of classical and modern dance alert us to the possibility that these are not the mutually exclusive and oppositional categories that they are often understood to be, and that the associated binaries of purity/impurity, regression/progression in the classical/modern debate in dance are highly suspect.[7] Yet, I would argue that in spite of overlaps in meaning, a fundamental differentiating factor does exist, one that points towards a divergence between

the modern classical and the modern non-classical dance genres at a formal level.

As noted by Srinivasan (2012) and other scholars, in Indian nationalist thought 'classicism' in the twentieth century generally represented a return to 'pure origins' and invoked the sense of an uncontaminated, authentic Indian past in dance. Indian cultural reformists and revivalists, in their attempt to highlight a unique and unsullied past, resorted to meticulous research of pre-colonial, ancient texts and indigenous movement forms and refashioned a twentieth-century image of Indian dance. Yet, although having immense historical value for its careful reconstruction of the past, modern classical Indian dance had no wish to reflect upon or directly address the rather different and somewhat tumultuous socio-political scenario of colonialism that gave it birth.

Modern dance in India in the twentieth century, as I would define it here and as will be demonstrated through the chapters of this book, evolved out of a combination of some or all of the following factors in the cultural life of the country: a clear rupture from the temple and court traditions of dance performance during the high noon of colonialism in the late nineteenth century and yet a continuation of the home-grown aesthetic in an altered socio-cultural milieu; a changed ideological relationship between dance and the religious domain, one in which spirituality was neither completely rejected nor overtly expressed but subsumed, negotiated and redistributed within a secular (and often feminist) vision of the role of dance; a conscious and critical engagement of dance with the political and the social domains, where the dancing body is sometimes directly engaged in social protest; and a complex relationship shared by the body with ideas around 'nation' and the concept of the 'national' which gave rise to an altogether different representation of Indian identity in dance, one that openly and consciously celebrated a dialogical relationship between India and the world beyond it.

These altered and evolving notions about the nature, place and function of the arts (including music, the visual arts, theatre and dance) in the twentieth century led to a search for new movement forms by artists, their quest shaped by the specific socio-economic and socio-political conditions of the time. Sweeping reforms to social structures implemented by colonial authorities, the violence experienced through an aggressive colonial policy of domination through

divide and rule, the socio-economic and political repercussions of two World Wars – these home and world events found their way into and impacted upon the aesthetic criteria for twentieth-century arts in India. Modern dance aesthetics, much like the aesthetics of its sibling – Indian modern art – incorporated Euro-American imports such as social realism, Expressionism and Abstract Expressionism without total repudiation of narrative; developed a non-codified movement vocabulary that was dictated by newly devised performance scripts dealing with current issues; and was characterised by an intertwining of local and international dance and movement idioms.[8] These modernist attributes may be seen to be common to all the dance-makers discussed in this book, even though the creative output of the choreographers did not take one single homogeneous form.

Unfortunately, in spite of embarking on a clearly different trajectory from the classical dances, there were no discursive frameworks present in India between the early and mid-twentieth century that could give modern dance a cogent form or status. A category of 'creative dance' was created in the 1950s by the Sangeet Natak Akademi in New Delhi, thus evading a confident acknowledgement of modernity in the realm of dance. Although Tagore, Shankar and the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) were all regarded by the national cultural authorities as being significant in the realm of theatre dance, these dance-makers remained somewhat vaguely positioned in the cultural and artistic landscape of the country. In 1984, a seminal dance conference titled 'East-West Dance Encounter', organised by the German ambassador in India, George Lechner, catapulted into the limelight the erstwhile Bharatanatyam-trained dancer and social activist Chandralekha, whose dance declared the arrival of the Indian 'contemporary' and articulately pointed out and critiqued the disjunction between reality and aesthetics in Indian classical dance.[9] I believe this disjunction to be one of the key points of departure of non-classical dance from high classicism; and yet, I completely agree with Sarkar Munsi (2010b: 211) when she suggests that although Chandralekha's arrival in the dance world marks a crucial defining moment in the history of Indian theatre dance, it also acts as a watershed that splits and disconnects the modern dance experience (1900s up until the 1970s) from the contemporary (1980s onwards). In the confident declaration of the contemporary present, something of the modern past was lost.[10]

This book salvages that modern past of Indian dance, which existed prior to the arrival of 1980s contemporary dance. Beginning with Tagore, this research puts the spotlight on early modernism in Indian dance (1920s and 1930s) and delineates its gradual conversion, through the modern protest dance texts of Shankar and Bardhan for the IPTA, into the feminist dances of the Sircars in the 1980s and 1990s. Modern dance in India, in its attempt to address real issues, had willingly allowed contamination to inform its creative output at the level of form – just as Indian contemporary dance was to do later on. The story of Indian modern dance as sketched out in this book through its five case studies is rife with acts of transgression in which bodies move beyond prescribed boundaries of nation, culture, race, class, gender and sexuality and create 'impure' but powerful and innovative cultural texts that are at once aesthetic and political.

Empire, nationalism, gender and women's movements

It is necessary to examine the socio-cultural context from which the modern dances of India emerged. Hence the focus on twentieth-century Indian nationalism, which spawned unexpected creative experiments in literature and the arts. Various acts of self-representation from the cultural domain of colonised India have received theoretical elaboration from scholars in the fields of cultural and postcolonial studies. The impetus behind the articulation of a nationalist cultural ideology in India is considered to have been rather complex. Partha Chatterjee (1993), in a his seminal study on colonial and post-colonial history, has explained the growing need for defining the 'inner domain of culture' in Indian nationalist thought during the colonial era. Putting forward his theory of the dual aspects of nationalism that emerged in India from the middle of the nineteenth century, Chatterjee has averred that:

> [….] nationalism declares the domain of the spiritual its sovereign territory and refuses to allow the colonial power to intervene in that domain.[…] The period of 'social reform' was actually made up of two distinct phases. In the earlier phase, Indian reformers looked to the colonial authorities to bring about by state action the reform of traditional institutions and customs. In the latter phase, although the need for change was not disputed, there was

> a strong resistance to allowing the colonial state to intervene in matters affecting 'national culture.'
>
> The colonial state, in other words, is kept out of the 'inner' domain of national culture; but it is not as though this so-called spiritual domain is left unchanged. In fact, here nationalism launches its most powerful, creative and historically significant project; to fashion a 'modern' national culture that is nevertheless not Western.
>
> (Chatterjee 1993: 6)

The 'outer' domain in colonial society, according to Chatterjee, was that of economy, statecraft, science and technology. The 'inner' domain was the one that bore the essential marks of cultural identity. This was the spiritual domain; it was here that attempts were first made to create a modern national culture, which was nevertheless not western, and which was founded on the assertion of difference from the colonial rulers. Thus, India was able to create its domain of sovereignty within colonial society before it began its political battle with the imperial powers. In the region of Bengal in eastern India, Chatterjee asserts that this inner domain was being created from the middle of the nineteenth century in the form of modern Bengali vernacular language, the printing press, literary and performance genres such as the novel and Bengali drama, the Bengal school of modern art, educational institutions, the family, and the position of Bengali women both within the family and in society. Nationalism in the Bengali-Indian context as in other parallel Indian contexts cannot, therefore, be regarded only as a political struggle in the material domain of the outside; it must also be understood in the light of movements that occurred in the inner domain of national culture.

Indira Chowdhury (1998) offers another incisive analysis of Bengali culture during the era of colonial resistance. Focusing on issues of identity and representation in nationalist and anti-colonialist discourse, Chowdhury highlights the stereotypical image of the frail Bengali male (as opposed to the martial and valorous Punjabi or Marathi) and analyses several icons of identity that were created around this stereotype from the late nineteenth century and, at the same time, were used as part of anti-colonial nationalist struggle. At the beginning of her work, Chowdhury alerts readers to the

self-fashioning process in anti-colonial struggle by invoking a pertinent line of enquiry:

> Any investigation into the cultural domain of the colonised must take into account crucial questions about the politics of self-representation. How are discourses of the self produced and elaborated within a colonially controlled domain? What are the ideological processes by which certain self-images are naturalised? And what are the modes of legitimation deployed by self-descriptive discourses in their attempts to liberate themselves from the colonial processes of subjectification?
>
> (Chowdhury 1998: 3)

Chowdhury not only identifies cultural icons used in nationalist rhetoric to thwart colonial repression but also reveals how the imposed universalism of such invented identities failed to take on board the reality of heterogeneous cultural identities in India. Using examples such as the Hindu Mela and the iconic use of *Bharat Mata* (Mother India) in the *Swadeshi* movement of 1905 (the 'our country' agitations), Chowdhury indicates the fallacy of Bengali bourgeois nationalism's projection of an all-encompassing identity at the cost of rendering invisible or alienating the multiple, segmented Indian identities (1998: 160–2).[11]

I take Partha Chatterjee's notion of the 'inner' domain of national culture as the starting point of my discussion of the role of dance within twentieth-century Indian nationalism. However, even as the concept of an inner domain as a site that produced self-consciously and prolifically a modern, non-Western Indian identity becomes important for this research, the warning signs set out by Chowdhury's 'virile history' simultaneously beg for the careful consideration of heterogeneous cultural identities within this domain. Not only that, the dances of the five case studies examined in this book suggest a very complicated relationship between 'inside' and 'outside' cultures. Tagore, Shankar, Bardhan and the Sircars were proudly Indian, but they willingly engaged, on their own terms and in different ways, with the outside world and allowed it to seep into their bodies and those of their dancers. Their works echo what Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal have said about the impossibility of upholding dichotomies between western 'modernity' and Indian 'tradition', or 'our (Indian) modernity' and 'their (Western) modernity' (1998: 109).

If the scopic regime of masculine empire was feminising (and by association weakening) colonised Indian bodies (and indeed this is the case with Uday Shankar's dancing body in Chapter 2), and if this in turn was producing a masculine form of Indian nationalism, where and how do Indian women's bodies feature within the gendered projects of British imperialism and virile Indian nationalism? Radha Kumar (1993) has suggested that the domestic realm, that identified with the Indian woman, was seen as a sacred space, initially beyond the reach of colonialism, but that the nationalist movement and M.K. Gandhi's freedom struggle enabled women to make the transition from the private to the public realms of society. However, in spite of the existence of women's organisations such as the Women's India Association (WIA, established in 1917), the National Council for Women in India (NCWI, established in 1925) and the All India Women's Conference (AIWC, established 1927), which were backed by the Indian National Congress, Leela Kasturi suggests that during the colonial period 'when revivalism, nationalism and communalism were overlapping responses to British rule, the progress made by women's organisations depended on two factors – the interests of the government and support from the nationalist elites, who could not always be relied upon' (2007: 331).

It was in this milieu, and in a culture where dancing was seen as a depraved art form that Rabindranath Tagore's dance-dramas were crafted and performed by young middle-class Bengali women in full public view (this is discussed in detail in Chapter 1). In Tagore's Shantiniketan in rural Bengal (Chapter 1), Uday Shankar's Almora Centre in the Himalayas (Chapter 2), Shanti Bardhan's IPTA Central Squad in the outskirts of Mumbai (Chapter 3) and the Sircars' Dancers' Guild (Chapters 4 and 5) we see the formation of Indian modern dance collectives in which colonial and gendered social relations were reconfigured, women's bodies found the space to move and protest alongside men, and proudly feminist statements regarding patriarchy and sexuality were choreographed through dancing bodies. *Indian Modern Dance* is therefore as much a tribute to the unique experience of embodied Indian feminism as it is of modernism.

The 'Bong connection'

In recent years, the neologism 'Bong' in the Bengali vernacular has been gaining currency amongst the younger generation in West

Bengal. It has two meanings: it indicates an abbreviation of 'Bengali' or is used as a dry, humorous appellation for the anglicised or foreign resident Bengali. The phrase 'Bong connection' (which even appeared as the title of a 2006 film) in common parlance also refers in a tongue-in-cheek manner to what is considered to be a typically Bengali penchant for seeking people of one's own cultural background. I have borrowed the phrase to explain and clarify certain 'Bengali' positions I have taken in this research.

The importance of regional specificity needs to be considered when we examine the ground that serves as a foundation for the work of all five dance-makers discussed in this volume – Bengal. Tagore, Shankar, Bardhan and the Sircars share a common linguistic background. They were Bengalis who hailed from different parts of India although their movements across India and the globe were quite different, as the chapters will suggest. This book is not about the Bengal region but it focuses on Bengal as a space that bred hybrid forms of culture. From the late eighteenth century onwards, Bengal proved one of the most creatively fertile grounds in India, nurturing the roots from which a modernist movement in art and sculpture, theatre, music and dance would grow in the twentieth century. The period between the late 1700s and the mid-1800s, usually referred to as the 'Bengal Renaissance' by historians, had been a highly prolific era in terms of the production of literary and artistic works, the advancement of knowledge in scientific research and a burgeoning of commerce and trade.[12] With growing numbers of English-educated Bengalis to fill administrative positions for the British colonial government, this period witnessed a remarkable confluence of imported western education and a local body of knowledge, which significantly impacted the social, cultural and economic life of Bengal.

The blurring of boundaries between native and colonial knowledge resulted in new and startling configurations in the field of culture, evident for instance in satirical visual art works produced by the Kalighat painters of Calcutta, in the confidence of the printing press and the rise of the Bengali novel as a literary genre (see Chatterjee 1993; Chowdhury 1998). This heightened creativity in literature and the arts was carried into the twentieth century during which a conscious, dialogical relationship between Indian and European art and culture was further witnessed in the realms of literature, theatre, music and the visual arts in Bengal. However, Europe continued to view Indian cultural products as 'oriental'. Ronald Inden (1990) suggests

that Indology as an orientalist discourse kept producing an essentialist identity for an 'imagined' India as an ancient and passive culture. Partha Mitter (1985) argues that early twentieth-century aestheticians such as Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy (1918, whose book inspired Uday Shankar), in spite of making extremely significant contributions to visual art studies in India, ultimately used European standards to evaluate Indian art, highlighting in vague and non-specific terms the relationship between Indian art and religion and thereby reducing art criticism to 'irrational mysticism' (Mitter 1985: 283–4). In his later project on national art in colonial India, Mitter (1995) points out how western adulation of Indian spiritualism, especially through critics opposed to European industrialism, such as E.B. Havell, Coomaraswamy and Sister Nivedita, created an anti-colonial *Swadeshi* ideology in visual art, as evidenced in the works of Abanindranath Tagore, such as his painting *Bharat Mata* (Mother India) with its depiction of a four-armed goddess in a saffron robe.

We notice then that European orientalist thought seeped invidiously into the best-intended Indian nationalist cultural projects in the early twentieth century. But was there any self-conscious attempt by Indian visual artists to construct an Indian identity during the nationalist phase that could be simultaneously national and international in character and that could defy the boundaries of nation, religion and class? The answer seems to be in the affirmative, especially if we look at Tapati Guha-Thakurta's (2005) analysis of modern Indian art. Guha-Thakurta maintains that the nation and the national remained 'a crucial mediating site' where a distinctly modern art history found space to develop; but in the progressive art movements of Calcutta, Bombay, Delhi and Madras of the 1930s, there was a divergence from the *Swadeshi* nationalist past, and internationalism became the key agenda. Artists in this movement 'discovered in forms ranging from critical realism to Fauvism and Abstract Expressionism some of the most powerful modernist aesthetic for their times' (Guha-Thakurta 2005: 105). Guha-Thakurta cites as instances Shantiniketan's artists, including Rabindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose, Ramkinkar Baij and Benode Behari Mukherji, who 'belied any set pedagogy or orthodoxy in art practice' (2005: 95). This internationalism was also embraced in dance experiments in Tagore's Shantiniketan, as Chapter 1 suggests.

In no way, however, does this book aim to project an image of Bengal as being alone at the forefront of a modern, progressive cultural

production while the rest of India remained shrouded in regressive traditionalism. Neither is there any attempt in this book to etch out a Bengali regional identity pitched in direct opposition to national identity in the realm of dance. Social historian Bidyut Chakraborty (2003) has stated that communal identity is a constructed category, because communities constantly recreate themselves and the process of self-creation never occurs in a historical vacuum. Also, the evolution of shared identities in India, as Chakraborty has explained, along with the recognition of 'Others' in the freedom struggle against the British, was never simple or stable. Hence, while this research locates five individual artists within a specific shared cultural space, it also underscores the fact that their experiences and their creative output did not adhere to the notion of a single, homogeneous, anti-national, regional Bengali identity but rather embarked on different routes and reached different destinations in terms of cultural production through a dialectical relationship between the national and the international.[13]

Most of the five individuals studied in this book were not situated specifically within the borders of Bengal. Apart from Tagore, all the other dance-makers either lived or created work outside Bengal during their lifetime. Shankar grew up in northern India, spent a considerable amount of time in England and Europe and settled in Bengal only towards the end of his career; Bardhan was born to Bengali parents outside Bengal and worked mainly in Bombay (Mumbai) in western India, and Chaki Sircar and Sircar lived and worked for many years in Africa, the United States and Britain. The impact of their work was also felt across India. Common to all of them, however, is their Bengali lineage and their use of specifically Bengali cultural experiences in their various trajectories, which will be discussed in the chapters that follow.

Finally, it should be emphasised that many past dance history projects in India have tended to focus on either individual choreographers and dance-makers or on specific genres; this book, on the other hand, in spite of following the creative journeys of five individual dance-makers from a particular region, is interested in the webs of significance and the interconnections and dialogues that existed between artists and their works in India with artistic, socio-cultural and socio-political movements abroad. This non-parochial approach is aimed at delineating a genealogy of Indian modernity in active

and meaningful conversation with the international modernity of twentieth-century dance.

Transnational modernities

Susan Leigh Foster (1995) has suggested that the dancing body is not simply a product of history; it is not only written upon but also writes and inscribes new meanings by constantly participating in and subverting the norms of culture. Through the fascinating theorisations on dance and the composite body by authors such as Ann Daly (1987), Susan Leigh Foster (1996), Ann Cooper Albright (1997) and Randy Martin (1998), we have entered an era of scholarship where we need to take into account the dancing body as a surface freighted with signs, open to interpretation and suggestion, and also as a site of political resistance. Dance that embodies politics and, indeed, bodies that reflect and write politics, are central themes of this book.

Through the dance works of its five case studies, this book suggests that the moving bodies privileged here complicate any fixed understanding of identity – Indian, European, national or international. In its study of the multiple identities and representations of modern dancing bodies in colonial and post-Independence India, this book has indeed drawn sustenance from postcolonial theory, which has overturned the stereotypical assumptions in colonial discourse about the identities of coloniser and colonised, self and other, insider and outsider. Postcolonial theories have drawn our attention to how cultures have been produced and consumed by Empire.[14] Moreover, since the collapse of Empire, theorists have observed the ways in which Europe's relations with its former colonies have changed through a freer exchange of ideas, labour and products across international boundaries. However, most discussions of transnationalism tend to view it as a post-Empire phenomenon. Pnina Werbner suggests that:

> [t]he newly-emergent scholarly discourses on transnationalism and diaspora take divergent yet intersecting paths. The focus of current theories of transnationalism is on borders and the management of flows across them: of people, goods, objects, messages. To a lesser extent it is also about the flows of ideas and practices.
>
> (Werbner 2004: 895–6)

There are two main arguments in this book regarding transnationalism: the first is that it has much earlier origins than the fall of Empire and the beginnings of globalised trade. We can notice transnational movements of ideas, bodies and even capital investment across international borders throughout the chapters of this book. The second argument is that transnationalism cannot simply be seen as a profit-making venture that favours an imperialist structure of trade. In Indian modern dance, transnationalism is a strategic movement employed by seemingly colonised and disempowered subjects to foster fruitful collaborative links with the outside world (for instance Tagore in Chapter 1 and Shankar in Chapter 2) or to use international political movements for their own advantage (Bardhan in Chapter 3).

If we turn to Shantiniketan ('the abode of peace'), the alternative educational space founded by Rabindranath Tagore in 1902 in Bolpur, West Bengal, and to which he dedicated forty years of his life, we notice how his vision of a holistic education for school and university students, founded on the principle of both national and international collaboration, created some of the most innovative cultural texts in modern India, in the visual arts, music, theatre and dance. Shantiniketan's influence on both rural reconstruction and on alternative modern arts education reached foreign shores, as evidenced in the establishment of Dartington Hall by agricultural economist and arts patron Leonard Elmhirst and his wife Dorothy in Devon in south-west England, which was directly inspired by Tagore's pedagogic methods.[15]

Kathleen O'Connell (2002), in her study of Shantiniketan, has outlined how Tagore's outlook changed from 1902 to 1920, beginning with an educational scheme to teach enlightened Hinduism for nationalist aims particularly to young Bengalis, and continuing into the post-*Swadeshi* era in which other cultures of India and abroad were assimilated in an expanded and more global outlook. In O'Connell's view, this change in direction suggests 'Rabindranath's search for an educational medium which would provide the students with an identity which was Indian yet had sufficient scope and resilience to connect with other races and cultures' (2002: 104). Clearly, this was a decisive move away from the concept of national or cultural boundaries, and Chapter 1 of this book illustrates how this mode of thought influenced the production of Shantiniketan's modern dance dramas.

An unchanging, ancient, passive identity, one that is frozen in time and cloaked in high mysticism, was what colonial discourse had carefully constructed for India and its cultural texts. In this book, what is often reiterated is that modernism in cultural production, and specifically in Indian dance, resisted such orientalist discourses and produced powerful embodied forms of knowledge. Crispin Bates has pointed out that 'the processes of globalisation may be universal – the responses are not', and that the evolution of cultural identities is not a mere imitation of global movements but a reaction to them and sometimes a complex mix of the two (Bates 2006: 6). I would suggest that colonial and postcolonial modernity in India is not just a simple case of impact and response. It is not just multiple reactions to modernity of bodies in motion, but rather multiple proposals and versions of modernity that are offered by Indian dancing bodies. These versions of transnational modernities clearly challenge the notion of borders produced by colonial orientalist discourse.

Avtar Brah (1996) has very articulately defined the notion of borders as embedded within the concept of the contemporary multi-racial, international diaspora in our present time.

> Borders: arbitrary dividing lines that are simultaneously social, cultural and psychic; territories to be patrolled against those whom they construct as outsiders, aliens, the Others; forms of demarcation where the very act of prohibition inscribes transgression; zones where fear of the Other is the fear of the self; places where claims to ownership – claims to 'mine', 'yours and 'theirs' – are staked out, contested, defended, and fought over.
>
> (Brah 1996: 198)

Brah's definition of borders as spaces characterised not merely by division but also by negotiation, dialogue, inscription and re-inscription is not only applicable in the context of twenty-first-century global diaspora; it can also be used to understand the alternative and subversive dance experiments of twentieth-century artists in India. In the cultural practice of Tagore, Shankar, Bardhan, Chaki Sircar and Sircar, we notice the early signs of rebellion against the idea of borders, at both formal and conceptual levels. But if their dance texts and their writing bodies go *beyond* borders, what are the spaces they inhabit? Homi Bhabha (1994a) has eloquently stated that the

'"beyond" is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past', but a transitional moment from which complex meanings of difference and identity arise.

> For there is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction, in the 'beyond': an exploratory restless movement caught so well in the French rendition of the words au-delà – here and there, on all sides, fort/da, hither and thither, back and forth.
>
> (Bhabha 1994: 1)

The narratives of twentieth-century Indian dancers and their dance, as it unfolds in this book, is set precisely in this space 'beyond' the concrete and rigid borders of identity and difference.

Methodology and Overview

This book is the culmination of research that has been carried out through passages and routes across multiple locations in the United Kingdom and India, covering Kolkata, Shantiniketan, New Delhi, Mumbai, Ahmedabad and Bhopal.[16] The methods employed in researching and writing this book include literature review; oral historical methods such as interviews with dancers and choreographers, academicians and writers; archival research; analysis of available visual material (still and moving pictures); and reflections on seminars, conferences and talks on Indian history, cultural theory and dance in the United Kingdom, Europe and India. In all five chapters, I have tried to privilege either the writings of the artists in question, reviews of their performances, or the memories of those who were part of the past that I have tried to reanimate. A significant portion of the body of primary source materials collected for this research, including letters, correspondence, performance reviews, scripts, interviews, biographies and memoirs are in Bengali; having a fluent knowledge of the Bengali language has enabled this book to take its current shape.

The viewing and reviewing of dance performances by artists in India and by British South Asian dance artists in the United Kingdom has also informed the theoretical underpinnings of this research. In Chapter 4, my experience of dance practice and performance as one of the Dancers' Guild's company members in Kolkata has shaped my analysis of dance texts. Overall, this research is informed by practice – my

training in the feminist dance methodology of the Sircars has fuelled the act of writing about dance – and vice versa too, my practice is on certain levels an embodiment of the modern dance genealogy as etched out in this research. This book weaves together a number of academic areas of thought and discipline and performance practices and hence offers an interdisciplinary landscape for readers to traverse. In travelling backwards in time to twentieth-century dance in India, this research draws on dance history, Indian history, cultural theory, postcolonial theory, feminist theory, literary analysis, and the experience of live and embodied performance.

Beginning in the 1900s, Chapter 1 analyses the contribution of Rabindranath Tagore and his alternative educational institution, Shantiniketan, to the formulation of eclectic dance texts, particularly focusing on three of Tagore's women-centred dance dramas. Chapter 2 follows the transnational journeys of dancer Uday Shankar, focusing particularly on his arts education experiment in Almora in northern India in the 1940s, and ending with an analysis of his film *Kalpana* (1948). Chapter 3 studies the Marxist ideology-inspired Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) movement, dance-maker Shanti Bardhan's protest dances, and his post-IPTA choreographic works. Chapter 4 focuses on post-Independence Bengali culture and the feminist New Dance of Manjusri Chaki Sircar. Chapter 5 examines the intercultural choreographic works of Ranjabati Sircar and also highlights her unique and significant position as an intermediary, one whose work in Britain in the 1990s acted as a bridge between the experience of modern dance in India and South Asian dance in the United Kingdom. The concluding chapter reflects on the movements and travels of these five dance artists and suggests how through their dance works, the Indian modern dancing body becomes feminist resistance, a transnational vector and a sign of positive impurity and mutability.

1
Rabindranath Tagore and Eclecticism in Twentieth-Century Indian Dance

Rabindranath Tagore's plays, poetry and dance dramas, written and performed for twentieth-century theatre and non-theatre spaces and for audiences in Bengal, are today commonly considered to be a cultural repository and the hallmark of a Bengali school, style or tradition of performance. A number of different descriptive labels for Tagore's dance – *Rabindra Nritya, Rabindrik Nritya* or 'Tagorean' dance – simultaneously point to the indelible presence of a clearly identifiable Bengali culture, embodied and performed through dancing bodies not only in West Bengal, India, but also in Bengali communities spread across the Indian subcontinent (including Bangladesh) as well as in the international Bengali diaspora. Tagore's vast repertoire of writing in prose, poetry and drama continues to provide material for staged and outdoor performances for a significant global population of more than 250 million people. These performances range from local community shows, for instance the *para* (neighbourhood) performances held in numerous venues during several festive occasions across the Bengal region in India, to community events and formal proscenium arch performances viewed by audiences both nationally and globally.

This chapter, however, is not concerned with documenting or analysing the traditions of Tagorean dance that are dutifully maintained across Bengali communities in India and the global diaspora or with the innovative dance and theatre performances that continue to grow out of Tagore's writings in the twenty-first century, although these undoubtedly offer fascinating modes of enquiry into the politics of performing identity. Nor is this chapter interested in celebrating

Tagore's contribution to dance in India, because such celebratory acts of writing have preceded this book (for example, Banerjee 2011). Instead this chapter, following the scholarship of postcolonial theorists such as Partha Chatterjee (1993), Ashis Nandy (2004) and more recently Esha Niyogi De (2011), examines Tagore's dance works vis-à-vis debates on twentieth-century Indian cultural and political nationalism, internationalism and transculturalism. Drawing upon archival research, oral interviews and an analysis of his letters and dance drama texts, this chapter focuses on Tagore's peculiar position as both colonised subject and wilful agent of change whose initial critiques of both British colonial and Indian anti-colonial violence in the political domain eventually led him to stage his resistance to the Empire and to Indian nationalism through other modes – alternative pedagogic methods and hybrid dance drama forms of performance. The chapter follows Tagore's movements and travels across regional, national and international borders during the colonial period to examine the intercultural exchanges and borrowings that shaped his writing for the stage and informed the eclectic dancing bodies he inspired. Instead of focusing on the well-known Euro-American adulation of Tagore amongst international modernist literary circles (Dutta and Robinson 1995; 1997), the chapter highlights the lesser-known local reception of Tagore's experiments on stage, which underscore the contradictory pulls and fissures of a gendered and divided colonial Bengal. This chapter exposes the ruptures, controversies, secrecy, careful negotiations and calculated risks that constituted Tagore's experience and journey as a modern pedagogue and artist. It critically examines the role that female bodies in his dance dramas played in reconstituting and reworking Bengali performance in the twentieth century, in turn offering an alternative yet legitimate form of dance modernity.

De-orientalising Tagore

No full-length discussion of late nineteenth- or early twentieth-century Indian, and specifically Bengali, social, cultural, religious and political history can be considered complete without taking into account the contributions of the Tagore family. Dwarkanath Tagore (1794–1846) was an entrepreneur, patron and philanthropist. His son Debendranath Tagore (1817–1905), called *maharishi* ('great sage'), was a major figure in the Brahmo Samaj, the Hindu religious

and social reform movement begun by Rammohun Roy (1772–1833) in 1825.[1] Debendranath had nine sons and six daughters. Of them, Rabindranath Tagore made his presence felt in a major way in the international literary world following the 1913 Macmillan publication of English translations of his poems and songs *Gitanjali* and *The Gardener*. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature on 13 November 1913, becoming the first ever Asian to win such an accolade. His international travels and positive reception amongst modern literary circles in Europe and America sealed his image as an oriental and mystical prophet-like figure, whose poems offered a palliative for a war-torn Europe.[2] Yet, as poet, novelist, playwright, composer, educationist, philosopher and freedom fighter, Rabindranath had remained – if sometimes uncomfortably – embedded within the national psyche of the Indian people for at least three decades prior to the international fame, recognition and reverence he received after becoming a Nobel Laureate.

Rabindranath Tagore, along with Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948), was one of the most significant voices in India's journey towards modernity and postcolonial agency. Their relationship, and the relationship that each shared with members of the Indian intelligentsia and the Indian public, was not without tensions, as highlighted in an article by Ashis Nandy (2004), which discusses the variant forms of nationalism that Gandhi and Tagore advocated. Tagore's disenchantment with nationalist ideologies can be illustrated by two instances from his life. First, he had been involved with the *Swadeshi* movement,[3] and in 1905 he became the leader of this political movement mounted against the British-led partition of Bengal. However, in less than two years he withdrew his support, disgusted by the violence, bombings and killings advocated by other party members. Secondly, Tagore refused to support Gandhi's non-cooperation movement in 1921, nor did he accept Gandhi's idea of the spinning wheel (*charkha*) and hand-made cotton as a solution to India's economic problems. He said to Gandhi during the latter's visit to Shantiniketan, in a rather tongue-in-cheek manner: 'Poems I can spin Gandhiji, songs and plays I can spin, but of your precious cotton, what a mess I would make' (Cox 1986: 38; see also Monk and Robinson 1986). These events diminished Tagore's prestige in the eyes of both firebrand nationalists and Gandhian supporters during his time, but he remained firm in his stance against both violent

and non-consensual forms of nationalism and even gave (rather prophetic) lectures on the dangers of nationalism in Japan and the USA between 1916–17, which were later compiled and published in a book simply titled *Nationalism* (Tagore 1917).

We could read this as Tagore's withdrawal from what Partha Chatterjee (1993: 6) terms the 'outer domain' of political contest with the British Empire in India and an intentional self-location in the 'inner domain' of national culture. He played an instrumental role in modernising the Bengali language, was a prolific writer of Bengali novels and short stories, created the Bengali dance drama (*nritya-natya*) genre of performance and composed patriotic songs (both India and Bangladesh's national anthems were composed by Tagore). He was also a prominent artist in the field of modern art from Bengal and started his own educational institution at his Shantiniketan ashram in 1901, which in 1918 became the Visva Bharati University. His delicate and sensitive portrayal of women's place in patriarchy in his short stories such as *Nastaneer* (*The Broken Nest,* 1901), novels such as *Ghare Baire* (*The Home and the World*, 1916) and dance dramas such as *Chitrangada* (1936) and *Chandalika* (*The Untouchable Girl,* 1938) reflect the idea of the 'new woman' (*naba nari*) that had first emerged at the time of the Bengal Renaissance, as was particularly evidenced in the literary works of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, a novelist preceeding Tagore (Kaviraj 1995). Through his literature and music, his educational institution and his art, rooted in the impulse of political self-assertion, Tagore contributed significantly to processes of both regional and national identity formation in modern India. Yet, as will be shown below, even within the inner domain of Indian national culture, Tagore carved an alternative variant space for his experimental and intercultural ideas on education and art. This differed significantly from other nationalist projects intent on safeguarding Indian culture and its products from the corrupting influences of colonialism.

A vast body of literature has been devoted to the study and analysis of Tagore's works and aspects of his life, both in Bengali and in English. Yet when it comes to critical analysis of his experiments with the performing arts, specifically dance in Shantiniketan, there is a relative paucity of articles, essays and books published in English.[4] Some dance scholars in India and abroad have previously recognised the contribution that Tagore's vision made to the revival and growth

of dance in India (Kothari 2003), but most stopped short of carefully examining how this was done. They also tended to ignore the interrelationship between Tagore's modern literary works – in this context mainly his dance dramas – and their performance, as well as the performance history of the dance productions in Shantiniketan and how they related to other experiments in dance across India at that time. This silence on Tagore's repertoire of dance works can in part be attributed to the difficulty of accessing and analysing Tagore's dance drama texts written in the Bengali language, and in part to the Indian nationalist cultural discourse, which had no place for Tagore's hybridity and eclecticism in its canon of 'pure' Indian dance tradition.

Fortunately, recent dance scholarship, primarily from female Bengali academics in India and overseas, has attempted to address this lack of attention towards a significant experience in India's performance history. Mandakranta Bose (2001; 2009) has noticed connections between Sanskrit performance traditions and texts and Tagore's experiments with the dance drama genre in Shantiniketan in the early 1900s. Aishika Chakraborty (2010), Urmimala Sarkar Munsi (Dutt and Munsi 2010) and most recently Esha Niyogi De (2011) have all been attentive to gender and female agency in their critical analysis of Tagore's dance works. These scholarly writings have made significant contributions towards de-orientalising Tagore and have argued for a reconsideration of his position and legacy as a modern artist and pedagogue. This chapter adds to the current critical mass to examine in detail the local and international flow and exchange of aesthetic and political ideas during the colonial period and the effect of these on the forms of Tagore's literary and dramatic output. To understand how revolutionary Tagore's experiments with moving bodies were, we first need to consider the socio-cultural milieu of colonial Bengal within which Tagore lived and worked as an artist and educationist.

The early dances: international and local influences (1888–1926)

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the chief forms of dance performance prevalent in Bengal were the *bai naach*, *khemta*, *raibeshe* and *brotochaari* dances and the *jatras* (Ghose 1983: 3; Roy Chowdhury 1943). The *bai naach* or the courtesan dances had the stigma of disrepute attached to them, and other forms such as the *khemta*,

which originated in the villages of rural Bengal, were considered too unsophisticated and 'folksy' for the tastes of the urban middle-class Bengali. Only women who occupied subaltern or fringe spaces – those who hailed from dubious backgrounds, such as courtesans and those who came from the periphery of urban centres such as the folk performers – danced in public. Dance was not considered to be a serious art form; it was a means of pleasurable diversion for either the bacchanalian entertainments of the aristocracy or the village audience. In late nineteenth-century Bengal, to have a female member of a respectable, educated Bengali family dance in public was therefore not only unheard of and utterly unthinkable, it would be considered immoral, blasphemous and shocking. It was in such a social and cultural atmosphere that Tagore not only introduced dance to the curriculum at his newly established educational institution in Shantiniketan in rural Bengal, first for male and then for female students from middle-class Bengali families, but also had them performing on stage to his poetry and songs, often to very bad press from local newspapers. Even though the emergence of the *naba nari* in the socio-cultural sphere since the Bengal Renaissance had led to the higher visibility of women in the public domain, the perceptual leap from the platform occupied by the public figure of the morally depraved dancing woman from a space of disgrace to one of respect demanded that the Bengali *bhadramahila* ('respectable woman') acquire an altogether new identity in Tagore's dance productions.

It is beyond the remit of a single chapter to discuss every single one of Tagore's experiments involving dance or dancing bodies. Instead of providing a detailed historical account of his staged repertoire, it is useful to focus on key moments from Tagore's career as a playwright and dance dramatist which reveal the new intercultural influences on form and thematic content that he would introduce to twentieth-century dance in India. Tagore's own involvement with the stage as an actor dated back to his youth when he would take an active part in the plays that were written and performed by him and his brothers in the Jorasanko house, the Tagores' Calcutta residence. Two instances stand out from this early period: first, Tagore had choreographed the dance of bandits in his first play *Valmiki Pratibha*, staged in Jorasanko in 1881, for which he had apparently received a lot of praise from his audience.[5] Second, a year earlier, in 1880, he had choreographed a dance to accompany a song *Ay tabey shahachari*

('Let us all dance in a round') in a play titled *Manmayi*, which was written by his artist-playwright elder brother Jyotirindranath Tagore (the play was later restaged as *Purnabasanta* in 1899, for which Tagore choreographed a dance for the same song).[6] Shantidev Ghose, first a student and then music and dance teacher at Shantiniketan from 1930 onwards, writes that perhaps Tagore's experience of English social dancing during his stay in England between 1879–80 (when he briefly studied at University College London) influenced the group dances that he choreographed for these plays (Ghose 1983: 7).[7] Tagore's colonial education in Britain may have been brief, but within a year of his return to India, he was staging plays that brought together Sanskrit and European material both in terms of scenography and choreography of bodies to music. Tagore's body remembered and retained influences from both European opera and social dances, which he consciously injected into his earliest theatre and dance experiments.

One of the earliest performances written by Tagore and performed by female bodies was staged on 29 December 1888: the *geeti-natya* (musical play) *Mayar Khela* was performed by an all-women cast in the Bethune School grounds in Calcutta, on the occasion of a crafts fair organised by a women's group called Sakhi Samiti. Although there is no record of specific choreographed dance sequences in the first staging of this play, *Mayar Khela* was performed several times over the next two decades with the inclusion of dances inspired by Japanese and Southeast Asian dance forms (the influence of Southeast Asia on Tagore is discussed later in this chapter). Other stage events worthy of mention took place in Shantiniketan in May 1911 on the occasion of Tagore's fiftieth birthday celebrations. Students and teachers staged his play *Raja* (*The King of the Dark Chamber*) in which some dancing featured along with acting and singing. Amongst the audience members was Sita Devi, daughter of Ramananda Chattopadhyay, a very well known Bengali intellectual and founder-editor of the journals *Prabashi* (1901) and *Modern Review* (1907). She visited Shantiniketan again in the autumn of the same year to see the staging of *Saradotsav* (*Autumn Festival*) and in 1914 saw the stage performance of another play titled *Achalayatan*. Sita Devi was visibly impressed on all occasions and spoke appreciatively of the performers, their acting and dancing, and especially about William Pearson's dance in *Achalayatan*. Pearson (1881–1923), a Christian missionary

in India to begin with and then teacher at Shantiniketan, acted and danced in another play, *Phalguni*, in 1916, in which Tagore himself played the part of and danced as a blind *baul* ('wandering minstrel'). As suggested by these historical records, dance in the early days of Tagore's Shantiniketan was not restricted to trained Indian bodies, but rather was viewed as an open participatory activity where bodies from both sides of the colonial divide, such as local students – and Pearson – found a space to move together.

It was his travels and movements beyond the geographic and cultural boundaries of his home in Bengal that inspired Tagore to reflect on the significance of bodily movement within pedagogy. His lecture tour to America via Japan in 1916–17 and his 1920 trip to Sylhet in East Bengal (present-day Bangladesh) and northeastern India exposed him to communities of dancers that he had never seen before (Ghose 1983). His connections with the royal court at Agartala in Tripura, a state in the foothills of the Himalayas, led him to introduce the little known Manipuri dance form into the pedagogic structure at Shantiniketan through dance teacher Buddhimantra Singh, who began to train a select group of boys (but not girls) in the art of Manipuri dancing. Shantidev Ghose mentions that the monthly newsletter *Shantiniketan* in its March 1920 edition, referred to the regular classes taught by Buddhimantra Singh as 'exercise' classes rather than 'dance' classes (1983: 10). This minor deception clearly indicates fears on the part of the publishers as to how such activities would be received by the public. That Tagore himself was fearless of disapprobation but on the contrary was rather pleased with the progress of Manipuri dance training is evident from a letter he sent to the King of Tripura in which he requested that Buddhimantra's wife be sent to Shantiniketan so that interested female students could learn Manipuri dance as well (ibid.).

Other nuggets of information from archival performance records enable us to imagine the nature of performances presented at both Shantiniketan and Calcutta during this period. On 25 February 1923, Tagore's musical play *Basanta* (*Spring*) was staged in Calcutta's Madan Theatre and performance records reveal that Tagore, along with his friend Leonard Elmhirst and a host of other students from Shantiniketan, danced to one of the songs in a spontaneous and completely improvised way (Chakraborty 1995: 180). Elmhirst was working at the time as an agricultural economist and helping Tagore

develop Sriniketan, an institution for rural reconstruction (adjacent to Shantiniketan). The performance received mixed reviews. While some local newspapers, among them *Anandabazar Patrika*, *Shishir* and *Bijoli*, praised the singing and dancing, others, such as *Sanjeevani*, were not so impressed. On 26 February 1923, *Anandabazar Patrika* carried a review of Tagore's play:

> *Basanta Utsav*, the poet's latest musical play, was performed yesterday at Madan Theatre for the first time [...] Rabindranath himself took part in the acting and all the students of Visva Bharati acted beautifully. The songs, having sprung from the experienced pen of the poet, seemed even sweeter when sung. Even dancing was not left out from the play, with Rabindranath and Abanindranath themselves taking part in the group dance. Our fellow publisher *Sanjeevani* is very cross with us for having praised the dancing. Yet what completely eludes us is that if proper music and song can be appreciated by the respectable and honourable members of the audience, why not dance? ...
>
> (Chakraborty 1995: 180; my translation)

The review clearly indicates that Tagore was courting controversy. Bengali audiences did not universally accept dancing bodies on stage at this time, even if Tagore's august presence tried to give the performance a stamp of respectability. Rather, dance, with all its associations of unfettered female sexuality, was frowned upon and belittled by certain members of the public. At the same time, Tagore's presence in the plays did win some votes for dance as the review above suggests, thereby suggesting a very gradual but noticeable change in the attitude towards dance as a performing art form. Dance at Shantiniketan and in the urban metropolis of Calcutta was bringing young women out from the inner precincts of their home onto the gendered site of the male Bengali stage, giving them an embodied visibility, an identity and the opportunity for self-representation; and cautious Bengali audiences gradually learned to view these bodies without embarrassment. By the late 1920s, dance in Shantiniketan had become part of community events in open public spaces, such as during the tree-planting ceremonies, where processions of women would move as a collective unity of bodies (Figure 1.1). Tagore may have divided public opinion on the subject of dance in an educational

Figure 1.1 *Brikhoropon* (tree planting ceremony), 1937 Shantiniketan. Courtesy of Rabindra Bhavan archives

institution, but he continued to express his interest in various modes of movement and dance forms, taking every opportunity that came his way to incorporate a wide range of movement genres into the educational system at Shantiniketan.

Writing the female dancer into history (1926–41)

It was in 1926, after Tagore's return to Shantiniketan from a trip to Dhaka and other provinces in East Bengal (present-day Bangladesh), that the first major dance drama may be said to have been consciously created for the stage. At the request of his daughter-in-law Protima Devi, Tagore began writing the script for a new play based on an earlier poem titled *Pujarini*.[8] The poem was renamed *Natir Puja* (*The Worship of the Dancing Girl*); Tagore selected the performers and trained them in acting himself, the music coach for the production was Dinendranath Tagore (grandson of Tagore's eldest brother Dwijendranath and a talented singer) and responsibility for

the choreography was given to Protima Devi and Nabakumar Singh, a Manipuri dance teacher from Agartala.

Natir Puja marks the beginning of Tagore's creation of wilful, strong and (borrowing from Ashis Nandy 2004) 'transgressive' women characters for his dance dramas, an interest that would last until his death in 1941. The central protagonist of this play is Shrimati, a court dancer (*nati*) who converts to Buddhism and renounces her profession and life as a dancer, much to the displeasure of the Hindu king to whose court she belonged. The king forbids her the practice of Buddhism and forces her to dance again. In the final scene, Shrimati dresses up in her finest costume and jewels and dances in court, but her dance is dedicated to Lord Buddha and the words of the song to which she dances are *Amay khama hey khama* – ('Lord, forgive me'). In the course of the dance Shrimati sheds her clothes and jewels and emerges in the habit of a Buddhist nun, and as she kneels in devotion for Buddha, the royal soldiers execute her for her defiance of the king's orders. The subject matter of this performance work is significant given the period in which it was staged – in the midst of raging debates in southern India between nationalists and the colonial government on banning temple dancers (Anandhi 2000).[9] *Natir Puja* perhaps reflects the idealisation of the female dancer that the nationalist revival and reconstruction of the *devadasi* was engaged in, although it takes a totally different embodied form in Tagore's work than in southern India's Bharatanatyam. Tagore's Shrimati openly rejects Hindu patriarchy, and performs her agency through her choice of an alternative spiritual engagement before she is silenced. Tagore consciously writes the figure of the public female dancing body at a time when her erasure from history was being demanded.

Natir Puja was a great success on stage when it was performed for the first time in May 1926 in Konarak House, Shantiniketan. Memorable in the production was the set design by Shantiniketan's resident artists Nandalal Bose and Surendranath Kar, which consisted of Buddhist *stupa*-like structures which were shattered by the actors playing the king's soldiers in the dramatic penultimate scene. With an apparently powerhouse performance by Gauri Bose (Nandalal Bose's daughter) who played the role of Shrimati, the dance drama's success meant that it was staged again – almost eight months later – in Calcutta at the Tagores' Jorasanko residence, with four performances over a period of

five days (Ghose 1983). This time, Tagore introduced a new character into the play, Upali the Buddhist monk, played by Tagore himself. The audience in Calcutta always wanted to see the poet on stage as a performer and Tagore had to give in to their demands time and again; the second and more important reason for the change was the old fear that audiences would disapprove of young girls dancing in public and Tagore's presence on stage was therefore a strategy to allay public criticism (Chakraborty 1995: 207).

As ever, press opinions were divided: some newspapers praised the performances, while others insinuated that Tagore was exploiting his Visva Bharati students, making them dance, sing and act and in the process lose their respectability in order to raise funds for the university (ibid.). The negative press proves, in spite of its limited viewpoints, that female dancing bodies and women such as Gauri Bose played a very significant role in making Shantiniketan visible to the public. That *Natir Puja* left an indelible mark on public memory and became a milestone in Calcutta's stage history is reinforced by the fact that the Art Film Syndicate of Bengal expressed interest in filming the play. *Natir Puja* was recorded on film by New Theatres Limited four years later during a live performance celebrating Tagore's seventieth birthday at the Old Empire Theatre in Calcutta and the print was released and shown in the Chitra Theatre between 22 March and 1 April 1932. It did not succeed as a film, probably due to the fact that it was, after all, only a recording of a live stage performance shot from one static camera position; moreover, the sound quality was poor and many felt that some of the performers did not have voices suitable for the microphone. Yet, as a performance record, the film would have been invaluable to historians; unfortunately the print was destroyed in a fire that ruined much property at New Theatre Studio on 7 August 1940 (ibid.: 220).

In both *Natir Puja* and *Nataraj*, a 1927 production featuring an all-female cast, the Manipuri dance training of Nabakumar Singh was very much evident in the dance compositions. Ghose (1983: 26) writes that while choreographing the dances, Nabakumar Singh generally used a particular aspect of the Manipuri dance technique that could express a Tagore song, namely the 'gamak' dance. The 'gamak' is a form of Manipuri dance that suggests a theme, idea or story through movement without acting out the story word by word. Singh was thus able to use the 'gamak' dance flexibly for his

choreography, bringing out the general meaning or sense of Tagore's songs rather than illustrating each line of the song through stylised hand gestures. The 'gamak', then, appears to be a key choreographic strategy in the dance works created at Shantiniketan, one that allowed for an abstract representation through dance movement of a narrative or idea present in Tagore's literature.

Singh also composed non-narrative dances for groups with Manipuri *bols* (words that accompany rhythmical structures), using the percussive beat of the *khol*, a Manipuri drum. This was a process of adapting a structured body of technique (Manipuri) that evolved from a Vaishnav context (Vaishnavism is a branch of Hinduism, hence this may be called a Hindu religious context) to meet the demands of a subject matter that was extrinsic to that movement form (Tagore's secular poetry).[10] However, either the universal ideas in Tagore's poetry/songs or the inherent flexibility of the Manipuri form enabled teacher and students alike to adopt the Manipuri movement language relatively effortlessly.

Travel and movement: re-reading Tagore's Letters from Southeast Asia

A major impetus for dance experiments at Shantiniketan during the late 1920s and 1930s came from a source outside India, from Southeast Asian dance, specifically Javanese and Balinese dance. On 12 July 1927, Tagore set sail for a tour of Southeast Asia. Historian Sugata Bose suggests how these journeys undertaken by Tagore may be called his 'Indian Ocean explorations – forays that gave expression to a form of universalism subtly different from an abstract globalism' (Bose 2006: 234). Twentieth-century movements and journeys across the Indian Ocean produced ideas of 'Asian universalism', which Bose suggests Tagore was certainly animated by. Following Bose's reading, it becomes evident how Tagore's mobility as a renowned literary figure enabled him to access the flow of ideas between regions in Asia, and how these intercultural exchanges permeated his pedagogic and artistic vision.

Between July and October 1927, Tagore travelled through various ports in Southeast Asia, sometimes staying as a royal guest in the courts of kings, and had the opportunity to witness performances by some of the finest Balinese and Javanese dancers in the region.

The letters that he wrote from Southeast Asia, describing these performances, indicate how much the dances that he saw moved and impressed him and fired his imagination. Published in 1928 in the *Visva Bharati Quarterly* journal as *Letters from Java*, these letters are a rich source of evidence in terms of how Tagore's ideas on dance evolved at the time.[11] Hailing as he did from a region in which dance was having to fight for legitimacy as a performing art form, Tagore viewed in wonder the Balinese way of celebrating almost every aspect of life through dance with unrestrained freedom. He marvelled at the way in which the Balinese dancers could express through their bodies not only emotional states but whole stories from the Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. He appreciated the imaginative and aesthetic ways in which the moving body could interpret narratives. The interrelationship between poetry and dance and the ability of dance to express poetry was perhaps something that most appealed to him. He wrote in one letter (1928):

> The events of human life, in their outward aspect, are all displayed as movement. So, when any event of outstanding importance has to be portrayed, it is but natural that its movement should be given a corresponding dignity by the addition of rhythmic grace. The dance here is just such giving of rhythmic prominence to the events of a story, keeping in the background, or leaving out altogether, the words. The Puranic legends, which, in poetry, have to make their appeal only through the ear, are here addressed to the eye. Of the words that are the vehicle of poetry, the rhythm is governed by the natural laws of music, but the meaning is artificial, depending on sound-symbols mutually adopted by men. Both are necessary for the poem. In the dance of these people, likewise, rhythm alone is not sufficient for the narration of a story, but signs are also used of which the meaning depends on a mutual understanding. Both are necessary for this kind of dance. Their tongue is silent but the whole body does the talking, by signs as well as by movements. Nothing could be more foreign to the actual field of battle than this form they give to their dance-warfare. But if some fairy land had been governed by the rule that fighting must be done rhythmically, a false step entailing defeat, then this is the kind of battle that would have been waged there. If anyone is inclined to smile at such lack of realism, he needs

> must also laugh at Shakespeare, whose heroes not only fight in metre but even die to it.
>
> (Vol. 6, No. 1, Letter no. 4)

Tagore clearly argues for a valid space for the imaginative rather than the realistic representation of a narrative within performance. The Balinese system of using stylised hand gestures along with movements of the body to convey the most dramatic of stories proved to be a fascinating treat for the poet's eyes. It seems possible that Tagore had seen Balinese Arja dance, in which gestures emphasise the words of poetry that is sung live during a performance. He was, however, not merely appreciative of the narrative aspect of the Balinese dance but also of the non-narrative pure movement units. He wrote:

> Not that all dancing here is dramatic; there is also the pure dance. That we saw last night at the palace of the Raja of Giyanyar. Two little girls, beautifully dressed and decorated with sprays of flowers in their tiaras which swung to every movement, were dancing to the music of the *gamelan*.[…] The grace of the dancing of these two little girls to this music was indeed charming. A very marvel of elegance and variety, of delicacy and naturalness, was the play of rhythm through their limbs and over their bodies. Elsewhere one sees the dancer moving the body. To see these girls, it seemed that the body itself was a spontaneously gushing fountain of dance […]
>
> (Ibid.)

The narrative as well as abstract movement components of Balinese dances made a deep impression on Tagore's mind, and would feature in his own dance drama experiments on his return to Shantiniketan. The movements of the dances of Southeast Asia were clearly deemed superior to the elements of the *bai naach* (courtesan dance) which Tagore criticised in one of his letters from Java. While discussing the costumes of two Javanese dancers, Tagore makes a distinction between the overt sexual content of the courtesan dances in India and the artistic grace and beauty of the Javanese dance:

> The heavy, cumbersome petticoats of Indian dancing girls, worn over their tight pyjamas, in the Mahomedan fashion, has always offended my taste. With their obese bodies, their massive skirts,

> their lengthy scarves and their overload of jewellery, they have always seemed to me like a shapeless mass of ornamentation. Then there is their chewing of *pan*, their badinage with their attendants, their way of making eyes, – all equally nasty, not from the moral, but from the aesthetic point of view. The dancing that we saw in Japan, and are now seeing in Java, is as remarkable for its decency as for its beauty. In the case of these two girls, their body transcended its flesh and gave expression to pure, bodiless dance, as the poem transcends its words and gives expression to the inexpressible[…]
>
> (Vol. 6, No. 2, Letter no. 6)

The phrase 'bodiless dance' is fascinating and I read it as Tagore's attempt to disengage highly sexualised movement from female bodies whilst yet keeping the female dancer visible. This erasure of the sexual 'body' from dance in Bengal's twentieth-century performance history parallels the bourgeois cleansing that accompanied the southern Indian reform and revival of the temple dance form *sadir* into Bharatanatyam. Yet it is worth noticing that Tagore's searing critique is aimed at content not form, and it is important to point out that Tagore did include Kathak, a dance form largely associated at the time with courtesans, into his performances at Shantiniketan.[12] Moreover, we must remind ourselves that Tagore crafted two of his most significant performance scripts, *Natir Puja* and *Parishadh* (later *Shyama*, 1939) around the central protagonist of a court dancer. Tagore's simultaneous admiration for 'bodiless dance' and his awareness of the situation of marginalised and banned women dancers under the colonial government in twentieth-century India makes it difficult to reach any easy conclusions about his possible bourgeois puritanism.

Tagore's experience of Balinese and Javanese performing arts remained ingrained in his memory. Such was the extent of Tagore's interest in the dances of Southeast Asia that he used his links with the royal courts to maintain contact with Taman Siswa, a Javanese educational institution, which began regularly to send dancers to Shantiniketan (Ghose 1953). Taman Siswa, a social movement initiated by a group of intellectuals in Indonesia in 1922, led to the opening of a private school in Yogyakarta. Led by Ki Hadjar Dewantara, this movement advocated an independent system of national education and played a

significant role in the rise of Indonesian nationalism (Tsuchiya 1987). Tagore's Shantiniketan and the Indonesian Taman Siswa shared a common ideology: in spite of emphasising the role of culture and the arts in national education, neither of the two institutions encouraged parochial nationalism in arts practice but stressed rather the need for inter-cultural dialogue between artists from different countries. Tagore initiated the beginning of Shantiniketan's relationship with Indonesia, thus starting a process of cultural exchange between the two countries and its educational institutions, and proved through these attempts that his vision of Indian culture differed significantly from other cultural nationalists in India during his time – he was clearly more interested in finding new dance forms that could embody the flow and movement of ideas across countries than in preserving dances as an anti-colonial exercise in cultural purification.

Revisiting the dance dramas of Tagore

Tagore's tour of Southeast Asia instilled a new vigour in him with which he set about writing more scripts for performance, eventually leading to the creation of his dance dramas at the end of the 1930s, his most prolific period in terms of writing for the stage. Not only were Javanese and Balinese influences easily discernible in the costume designs for these dance productions but the approach to narrative development through stylised gestures and abstract movement was clearly inspired by Indonesian dances. By the 1930s, Tagore's Visva Bharati University in Shantiniketan had turned into a creative laboratory for the experimental arts, which included music, dance and fine art. In the year 1934–35, for the first time in the history of Visva Bharati University, students enrolled to learn music and dance as independent rather than auxiliary subjects. The very first syllabus for music and dance was drafted in 1936, and later revised in 1941 (Ghose 1978).[13]

In dance-making, inspiration came from a wide range of sources and performance disciplines: through Shantidev Ghose, Tagore brought in Kathakali dance teacher Kelu Nair from Vallathol's Kerala Kalamandalam in southern India. The movement qualities of two diverse dance forms – Kathakali and Manipuri – were offered to dance students in training (Bose 2001; Ghosh 1953; 1978; 1983; 1999). The process of incorporation and assimilation of these various movement

styles in the dance dramas written by Tagore, and the pedagogy of dance and its practice in Visva Bharati, are discussed in detail by Bose and Ghosh. However, it needs elaborating here that the content of the dance dramas led to the evolution of a dance style that would look more towards the assimilation and synthesis of diverse movement genres than towards creating a single codified 'classical' dance vocabulary. Therefore, while writing his dance dramas, Tagore seemed to have a clear notion of what he wished to see in terms of dancers' movements, even though he was not a choreographer or dancer himself. Tagore was certainly in favour of stylised and abstract rather than mimed or illustrative movements and gestures in dance. At the same time we know, specifically from comments by his daughter-in-law Protima Devi (1949: 32–3), that the *mudras* (hand gestures) of Kathakali and Manipuri were toned down and simplified for the dance dramas, perhaps to ensure that audiences in Bengal could grasp their meaning easily. While choreographing for Tagore's productions, teachers and students had to strike a fine balance between the complexity of stylised representational movements and the simplicity of expressions of those very movements. In terms of movement content, therefore, Tagore's dance dramas were making a significant departure from existing models of Indian dancing.

Concerning thematic content, Tagore's experiment with the dance drama genre was far more revolutionary, proving that at an intellectual level these works were indeed the product of a modern mind. Examining the 1941 syllabus for dance and the items or sequences being taught then by Kathakali and Manipuri teachers at Shantiniketan (Ghosh 1978: 67–8), one finds that most of the classical dance narratives were still derived from mythological stories, mainly from the Indian epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, which often enacted predominantly Hindu-Sanskrit narratives clothed in a highly spiritual language. Tagore's own dance dramas, however, usually revolved around a female central protagonist who could not be located within a specifically Hindu world. Even when his stories were derived from Hindu and Buddhist mythology, such as his sources for the dance dramas *Chitrangada, Chandalika* and *Shyama,* discussed below, the thrust of his narrative was not on the larger-than-life high spirituality of these characters but rather on their very human, internal conflicts. Tagore's modern sensibility and his preference for addressing and reflecting the changing social, cultural and political milieu of his time

through his creative work were the main markers of his difference from the trajectory of classicism with its emphasis on spiritualism, reformulated through the so-called 'classical' dances in India at this time. This premise is elucidated here through a brief discussion of the representation of women in three of Tagore's dance dramas, written and performed in the late 1930s. In recent years, Esha Neyogi De (2011) has offered a thorough and excellent textual analysis of Tagore's dance-dramas *Chitrangada* and *Chandalika* and meticulously excavates female autonomy and agency in chosen song lyrics. My discussion is more interested in re-imagining what opportunities these performance texts gave to women's dancing bodies in 1930s Bengal. Therefore in this section, I draw on conversations with Mrinalini Sarabhai (Sarabhai 2004), a well-known Indian dancer who arrived in Shantiniketan in 1939 and performed in many of Tagore's dance productions while he was still alive. I have privileged the kinaesthetic traces of Sarabhai's dances accessed and re-imagined through her memories, since these hold valuable knowledge of a performed past that is elusive and difficult to visualise. In the following sections, I intersperse my overview of the dance drama plots with available performance records and Sarabhai's recollections to weave my own analysis of Tagore's conceptual and imaginative understanding of dance.

Chitrangada (1936)

Written as a play by Tagore in 1892, *Chitrangada* was first performed under the direction of Radhikanath Mukherjee at the Empire Theatre in Calcutta in 1928. However, it was not until the play was reworked and staged as a dance drama under the direction of Protima Devi on 11 March 1936 that it actually succeeded as a stage production (Chakraborty 1995). Tagore takes a fringe character from the Indian epic *Mahabharata* and turns her into the central protagonist of his dance-drama (Tagore 1995, 13: 147–66). The plot revolves around a fiery and brave warrior princess, Chitrangada, the only heir to the king of the matrilineal state of Manipur. On a chance meeting, Chitrangada falls in love with Arjuna, one of the Pandava brothers and the bravest of all Hindu warriors. Arjuna, however, declines her offer of love citing his oath of celibacy (*brahmacharya*) during his enforced retreat in Manipur. Chitrangada suspects that the real reason for Arjuna's refusal is her masculine and unattractive physical appearance. Hurt

and insulted, she calls upon Madana, the god of love, and asks him to transform her body into that of an ultra-feminine desirable woman.

Madana turns Chitrangada into Surupa, an exquisitely beautiful woman, and in this form, Chitrangada wins Arjuna's attention and consummates her love with him. With time, however, both Arjuna and Surupa realise that their love for each other is in truth only an illusion, a satiable carnal and self-indulgent desire that has no real depth or meaning. Arjuna in the meantime hears about the brave and heroic exploits of the warrior princess Chitrangada and wishes to meet her, unaware that he knows her already. Chitrangada as Surupa is only too willing to end her deceit and regain her true appearance and self. The play ends with Chitrangada (as herself) saying these memorable lines to Arjuna:

> *I am Chitrangada, a royal princess. Not a goddess, nor an ordinary woman. I am not someone you can put on a pedestal and worship. Nor am I someone you can ignore or leave behind. When you have me by your side in fair times and foul, when you agree to let me be your partner in hardship, only then can you truly recognise me. Today I present myself – I am Chitrangada, a royal princess.*
>
> (Tagore 1995, 13: 166; my translation)

It is of no little significance that Tagore made the central character of this dance drama a female warrior who not only dominates the narrative through the sheer strength of her personality, but also shapes the course of action through her own choices. By making Chitrangada and not Arjuna (the greatest Hindu warrior in Indian mythology) the real hero of this work, Tagore clearly shifts away from the glorification of classical male heroes such as Arjuna. On the contrary, Arjuna comes across as a weak and fallible human being who first refuses to accept Chitrangada on grounds of physical appearance and then promptly gives up his vows of celibacy for the beautiful seductress Surupa. As De (2011: 98) points out, one can clearly notice the 'intertextual politics of re-evaluating various nationalist positions on masculinity'; Tagore's subtle critique and repudiation of male sexual celibacy in the Hindu nationalism of Vivekananda and Gandhi certainly cannot be ignored here.

What is also intriguing is that in the 1930s, in spite of the presence of several male dancers at Shantiniketan, including the Kathakali

dance teacher Kelu Nair, the character of Arjuna would often be played by women dancers. Mrinalini Sarabhai recalls how often she was asked to play male roles in Tagore's productions, and one of them was Arjuna in *Chitrangada* (Sarabhai 2004). Sarabhai choreographed the dances herself while Tagore would read or sing and explain the meaning of the Bengali verses to her (Sarabhai came from a Gujarati family and knew very little Bengali). In Figure 1.2 the female dancer in pose is Nibedita who plays Arjuna. It becomes clear from these primary records that Tagore had no interest either in realistic gender portrayal, or in a male choreography embodying his vision of Arjuna. The gender-reversal in these performances is not only symptomatic of Tagore's eschewal of masculine display through movement but also of his pronounced interest in the subjective inner dilemmas of his towering female characters which could

Figure 1.2 Nibedita as Arjuna in *Chitrangada*. Date unknown. Courtesy of Rabindra Bhavan archives

Figure 1.3 Dancers Jamuna, Nibedita and Nandita in *Chitrangada*. Date unknown. Courtesy of Rabindra Bhavan archives

be expressed through the choreographic medium. In giving dancers like Sarabhai the freedom to choreograph their own dances, Tagore empowered moving female bodies in his works to write their own bodies into performance history (Figure 1.3).

Chandalika (1938)

Like *Chitrangada, Chandalika* ('*The Untouchable Girl*') started as a short play (1933) and later developed as a dance drama (Tagore 1995, 13: 169). The story is derived from *The Sanskrit Buddhist Literature of Nepal* (see Mitra 1882: 224), where in its original form, it revolves around Ananda, a monk who is Lord Buddha's favourite disciple. In the Buddhist text, a parched Ananda travelling through the city of Sravasti (in modern-day Bihar), asks an untouchable girl, Prakriti, for

water. Prakriti quenches his thirst but is struck by Ananda's beauty and falls in love with him. She asks her mother to use her magical powers to bring the monk back to her. Ananda is unable to resist the mother's powerful sorcery and finds himself at Prakriti's door. At night, full of shame and guilt, Ananda prays to Lord Buddha who hears his disciple's plea and weakens the magic of the mother. The story ends with Prakriti being purged of her obsession with Ananda and converted into a female Buddhist monk (*bhikshuni*) by the Buddha.

Tagore uses this ancient Buddhist legend for his play, but substitutes the central protagonist of the original (the monk Ananda, and by extension Lord Buddha) with the untouchable girl Prakriti. In Tagore's hands, she becomes a marginalised figure within a Hindu patriarchal societal order, constantly ostracised and discriminated against in a caste-segregated world. In Tagore's *Chandalika*, Prakriti's obsession with Ananda is not attributed to his physical attractiveness. Instead, after Ananda departs, having quenched his thirst at the hands of the untouchable girl, Tagore makes Prakriti repeatedly return to the phrase *shudhu ekti gondush jol* ('just a sprinkling of water') which has transformed her being. For Prakriti, Ananda embodies liberation, a revolution, and she desperately wants to possess the man who has offered her a way out. The magical powers of Prakriti's mother Maya, a high priestess in the *chandal* (untouchable) community, contest with Ananda's spiritual powers until he is forced against his will to come back to Prakriti. She realises in the end that the Ananda whom she now sees is only a shadow of his former self, reduced to a broken remnant of the person he once was, and she ultimately asks Maya to release him from the spell of her magic.

If *Chitrangada* consists of an underlying critique of Gandhian celibacy, then *Chandalika* offers a powerful homage to Gandhian social revolution. Through the central focus on untouchability in this dance drama, Tagore was making an extremely bold and contemporary socio-political statement. During the late 1930s, Gandhi was leading a campaign against discrimination against untouchables *(Harijans)* and the timing of the staging of Tagore's *Chandalika* could not have been more appropriate. In the context of the process of social change and development that was being formulated by Indian nationalist leaders such as Gandhi, Tagore's dance drama was not only relevant but also crucial in supporting its founding premise.

It is of little surprise, then, that *Chandalika* was seen by some of the most important luminaries in the field of Indian politics including Subhas Chandra Bose (in Calcutta, March 1938), Jawaharlal Nehru (in Shantiniketan, February 1939) and by Gandhi himself in Shantiniketan in February 1940 (Chakraborty 1995: 262–75). Sarabhai (2004) attests to this fact when she recalls performing the role of the mother, Maya, opposite Nandita Kripalini's Prakriti during Gandhi's visit (she received the role within days of arriving at Shantiniketan). Although Kripalini (Tagore's adopted grand-daughter) was older than Sarabhai, she played the role of the daughter while Sarabhai was asked to choreograph the role of the mother and input her knowledge of Bharatanatyam into the work. Tagore asked Sarabhai to perform strong movements from her Bharatanatyam vocabulary for her role (even though Bharatanatyam was not taught at Shantiniketan and Sarabhai was the only female dancer with some knowledge of the form), and Sarabhai remembers how he appreciated the power that she brought into the choreography. Clearly, *Chandalika*'s content and form demanded 1930s women's dancing bodies to be bold and empowered.

Shyama (1939)

Originally a poem titled *Parishadh* (1899), *Shyama* was given a dance drama form in 1936 and performed as *Parishadh* before being reworked and staged in 1939 (Tagore 1995, 13: 189–202). The source of the story is the same text as for *Chandalika* (Mitra 1882: 135). In the Buddhist text version, the story of Shyama and her lover Vajrasena is written to explain Buddha's renunciation of his wife Yasodhara. The plot revolves around Vajrasena, a horse-dealer on his way to a trade fair in Varanasi, who is first robbed and wounded and then mistaken by the royal guards for a thief. Vajrasena is arrested and ordered to be killed, but catches the fancy of Shyama, a courtesan, who bribes his executioners to set him free. A banker's son, Uttiya, in love with Shyama, offers himself to be killed in Vajrasena's place. On learning this, Vajrasena is filled with reproach for Shyama and eventually leaves her. In this story, the Buddha is represented by Vajrasena, and Shyama stands for his wife Yasodhara.

Tagore uses this story and adheres to its details by and large, but again he substitutes the central protagonist of the narrative

and makes his hero a woman, in this case the courtesan Shyama, instead of the Buddha, a religious or spiritual male figurehead. Once again, his focus is on a woman with a divided self, torn between her intense love for Vajrasena and her intense guilt at sacrificing the life of another to save her love. Shyama can only arrive at a true understanding of her own self and the world by journeying through experience, which involves making errors in judgement but, more importantly, active choices. In this respect, she is similar to her theatrical predecessors Chitrangada and Prakriti: she asserts her self, her individual autonomy, and is the chief architect of the actions that unfold in her life. Each of the protagonists eventually recognise their flaws and arrive at some resolution – Chitrangada secures her place as an equal partner to Arjuna, whilst Prakriti lets Ananda go. Shyama's flaw is fatal in that it involves the loss of an innocent life. In Tagore's dance drama, the young man Uttiya, Shyama's admirer, is executed in Vajrasena's place and Shyama is rebuked and finally shunned by Vajrasena for being cruel, merciless and morally repugnant. Nonetheless, Tagore directs the sympathies of his audience towards his female protagonist rather than towards the idealistic man she loves. *Shyama* offers no satisfying resolution – Shyama is left in despair, abandoned and rejected by the men who loved her.

Shyama was the last dance drama Tagore wrote before his death in 1941 (Figure 1.4 shows Tagore watching a performance in that year). Sarabhai (2004) notes how Tagore would come to rehearsals in spite of his failing health and oversee the choreography, sometimes nodding his head when he appreciated the movement material that emerged before his eyes. As his final dance script, *Shyama* underscores Tagore's commitment to writing about a reality fraught with tension, an idea that was at the foundation and shaped so many of his works, especially his later plays, poetry and novels. It may not be too far fetched to note that in creating the beautiful yet flawed character of the courtesan who is rebuked in the end, Tagore through *Shyama* perhaps reflects the traumatic narrative of those real dancing women, banished from temples and failed by patrons, who were denied legitimacy during the reformist movement in India.

Following Nandy (2004), we may argue that the women in Tagore's dance dramas (as also the heroines of his novels and short stories) may be interpreted as individuals with fractured selves. Their arrival at an understanding of who they are occurs through various forms

Figure 1.4 Live performance of *Shyama*, with Tagore watching. Courtesy of Rabindra Bhavan archives

of rebellion against sexual and social codes and, in Shyama's case, as a result of the transgression of moral codes. In choosing women who are at once strong and angst-ridden, confident yet deeply conflicted, to occupy the central space in his narratives, Tagore's preference for focusing on the human rather than the spiritual attributes of his protagonists is clearly manifest. Yet, I finish this chapter with an examination of the marginalised women characters who occupy such an integral space within his dance drama productions as ultimately being very different to the heroines of his prose works, and ask how these dance drama protagonists help procure a place for Tagore within twentieth-century modern literature and choreography.

Icons of fringeness: women in Tagore's dance dramas

What, then, were the alternatives of female representation that Tagore provided for an early twentieth-century audience? Was Tagore wholly

committed to the social position of women? Was he a feminist writer? Were subversive female characters located within his literary texts, or is it our twenty-first-century critical feminist reading of Tagore that disengages a feminist standpoint from his writings? I find a satisfying explanation in Sarkar (2002: 112–53), an essay that offers a cogent analysis of Tagore's novel *Ghare Baire* (*Home and the World,* 1915–16), exploring its relationship to nationalism and the politics of women's emancipation in the nationalist era. Here, Sarkar critiques Chatterjee (1993: 116–34) and his argument that the disappearance of women's issues from public life during the high tide of Indian nationalism was because the nationalist resolution of the 'woman question' was situated in the inner domain of sovereignty (*ghar*, home) and not played in the outer domain of political contest (*bahir*, the outside world). By citing instances of political agitation in public by women's groups such as the Bangiya Nari Samaj in the early 1920s, Sarkar (2002: 115–16) argues that the resolution of the woman question through displacement into the home was unstable and never final. In this context, Tagore's changing attitudes to nationalism and its attendant notions of ideal Indian womanhood are also discussed. Sarkar (2002) not only outlines Tagore's shift from support to repudiation of *Swadeshi* nationalism. He also delineates the author's changing views on gender, moving from stereotypical notions about women's role as nurturer and homemaker during the early 1900s to stressing the importance of her autonomous self-development (*atmasakti*) from the post-*Swadeshi* years onwards.

Sarkar (2002) further establishes that Tagore was not only acutely aware of, but also engaging with, the politics of women's rights in the post-*Swadeshi* era. He describes Tagore's short stories, such as *Streer Patra* (*The Wife's Letter*, 1914), as 'proto-feministic'. Tagore's 1936 essay *Nari* ('Woman') urged women to step out of the precincts of their homes to pursue education and cultivate their intellects. Interestingly enough, this was the period when Tagore was writing his women-centred dance dramas and populating the stage with female protagonists. To label Tagore a feminist writer using twenty-first-century definitions of feminism would perhaps be too hasty, but Sarkar (2002) and my reading of Tagore's dance texts makes it very hard not to see his proto-feminist orientation or his commitment to the social position of women.

However, in spite of the proto-feminist lens that can be applied to the female protagonists discussed above, I would argue that Tagore's

women in his dance dramas are different from those who inhabit his prose works. The heroines of Tagore's novels and short stories, such as Charulata (*Nastaneer*, or *The Broken Nest* 1901), Mrinal (*Streer Patra*, or *The Wife's Letter*) and Bimala (*Ghare Baire*, or *Home and the World,* 1915–16) are all real women to whom middle-class Bengali audiences can relate. They occupy a recognisable space as contemporary Bengali women leading seemingly conventional lives although they ultimately make unexpected and bold choices – both Charu and Bimala become emotionally (and sexually) attracted to men outside their marriage whilst Mrinal eventually rejects her husband and his home. By contrast, Tagore's women subjects in his dance dramas – warrior, untouchable, courtesan – are deliberately chosen icons of fringeness whose performing bodies disrupt conservative notions about female gender, sexuality and social position. Chitrangada, Prakriti and Shyama were not everyday characters with whom their 1930s middle-class audiences could relate; they were not situated within a bourgeois domestic world or located within any conceivable heteronormative order such as marriage. They were (and remain) beyond the remit of a containable, safe and pure Bengali social order, existing as either allusions to a mythological past or to the contemporary present, but through imagined characters. In this sense, Tagore's dance drama scripts offered material to middle-class women performing these roles that demanded new and imagined forms of embodiment.

The women who danced in Tagore's experimental dance dramas in 1930s Bengal in full public view, no longer confined to the inner precincts of their home, offered 'impure', 'inauthentic' yet powerful alternative ways of being modern Indians. These hybrid female dancing bodies, at once passive subjects of a nation under colonial domination and active agents of change, therefore simultaneously enacted and troubled Indian nationalist notions of culture and art. Thereby they produced a version of modernism that is often overlooked in Euro-American discourses on performance. They offered new techniques in theatrical presentation in that Tagore's dance drama idiom fostered new relationships between text and bodies for the twentieth-century stage. This was neither ballet with dancing bodies silently moving to an orchestra, nor opera where text and acting resided in the same body. In Tagore's dance dramas, the choral group spoke and sang the text while the dancers' bodies through

gestures and movements embodied the text. This was not illustrative dancing, but movements suggesting the meaning of words through a more abstract lexicon. Finally, Tagore's dance dramas cannot be seen as the products of some mystical eastern spirituality – there is no overriding recourse to religion, as god is absent from all of these texts, and when religious references are present (as in *Chandalika*) their authority is critiqued and challenged. Tagore's dance dramas consist of every ingredient – the formulation of new techniques, allusions to mythology through imagined characters, rejection or critique of religion – that defines a product of artistic modernism (Butler 2010).

To conclude this chapter with a series of historically recorded facts: Tagore asked the American modern dancer Ruth St Denis (1879–1968) to teach at Visva Bharati University after he saw her perform in Calcutta during her 1926 Asia tour (Shelton 1981: 198).[14] Protima Devi writes that during the 1930–31 tour of Europe, during which she accompanied Tagore and stayed with him at the Elmhirsts' Dartington Hall in Devon, she witnessed and absorbed the ballet classes of Kurt Jooss (1901–79), and admits to being influenced by what she saw during these classes and rehearsals in terms of composition and group patterning, later reflecting these influences in the dance drama productions at Shantiniketan (Devi 1949: 23). We learn from Peter Cox (1977) and Nicholas (2007) that Dartington Hall owed its very foundation and its beginnings to Tagore's experiments in both rural reconstruction and arts education. These networks amongst modern dance artists in the United States, Europe and India point towards a transnational experience of dance modernism in which Indian artists and women were not simply passive audiences but active players.

2
Uday Shankar and the Performance of Alterity in Indian Dance

In 1933, sitting in Uttarayan (one of his Shantiniketan homes), Rabindranath Tagore wrote a letter, within which he clearly expressed the need to revive dance in India without being 'burdened by the narrow conventions of provincialism' (Tagore 1933).[1] Tagore's letter suggests that he favoured moving beyond recognisable (and oppositional) understandings of embodied experience, stating that:

> [t]here are no bounds to the depth or to the expansion of any art which like dancing is the expression of life's urge. We must never shut it within the bounds of a stagnant ideal, nor define it as either Indian or oriental or occidental, for such finality only robs it of life's privilege which is freedom.

The letter was addressed to Uday Shankar, an Indian art student turned dancer whose stage performance Tagore had recently seen. Shankar's life has been meticulously documented by authors such as Khokar (1983); his meteoric rise to fame from being Anna Pavlova's little-known dance partner in Britain (in *Krishna and Rhada*, 1923) to one of Europe and America's most successful oriental dancers is a narrative well known to many dance scholars and historians. This chapter offers a revisionary account of Shankar's choreographic oeuvre. Here the narrative begins not in Europe where Shankar launched his dance career, but with a scrutiny of the Indian reception of Shankar's work during the high tide of cultural nationalism, which offers an alternative to existing Euro-American appraisals of Shankar's work and his success with western audiences. With local

critiques of Shankar's work as a starting point, the chapter examines Shankar's peculiar location as an outsider within the framework of Indian cultural nationalism and considers the founding of Shankar's Almora institute as his attempt to perform alterity. Of importance here is the complex and ambivalent relationship between Shankar, his Almora centre and the national ethos, and the ways in which personal and national memory collide and collude in Shankar's dance training in Almora. Finally, the chapter offers an analysis of Shankar's 1948 film *Kalpana* as a product of his individual memory: openly and proudly performing its impure modernity whilst firmly situating itself within the space of Indian nationalism.

Lost in translation

Uday Shankar's career as a dancer and choreographer has been extensively examined by dance historians and scholars in both South Asian and Euro-American worlds. Numerous articles, books and biographies have documented various aspects of Shankar's life, providing factual details about his performance career (Singha and Massey 1967; Banerji 1982; Khokar 1983; Mukhopadhyay 2004). While these biographies serve as an important source in their delineation of Shankar's life and his works, there have been few attempts at critical analyses and evaluation of Shankar's body of choreographic work made in India at the height of anti-colonial sentiment in the 1940s. Scant (but significant) scholarly interests in Shankar have mainly focused on him as one of the many exotic 'oriental' dancers who performed in Europe (Brenscheidt 2011).[2]

Noteworthy exceptions, however, are Joan L. Erdman (1987; 1996a), Ruth K. Abrahams (2007) and Urmimala Sarkar Munsi's (2008) work on Shankar. Elucidating the theory of the translation of performance of one culture (oriental/Indian) into another (occidental/Euro-American), Erdman argues that Shankar achieved a fine balance between the translation of Indian narratives on the one hand and interpretation of such narratives for a western audience on the other:

> The structure of the source text must be preserved and yet re-created in the second language so that the resulting work has an identifiable or comfortable shape, an architectonic design and order. The narrative sense must reflect the conventions of both

> the source culture and the culture of translation – the work must be 'from' and yet be 'at' home on a foreign stage. Thus the balance between a western performance with an Indian theme or veneer (an interpretation) and an eastern performance accessible to western audiences (a translation) must be calculated and strategically determined
>
> (Erdman 1987: 68)

According to Erdman, what Shankar presented before his audiences in the west, that is, narratives from his source culture, was channelled through a recognisably western language of dance. When Shankar danced, his body carried out a negotiating process in which a text and its presentation came from two different cultures and yet were being made to converge. At the same time, Shankar made use of his identity as an 'authentic' Indian, playing on his foreignness and his exclusivity as a dancer from the Orient. In Erdman's terms, Shankar's intelligent use of translation and interpretation gave his dance works potency and meaning in Europe and America (Figure 2.1).

Shankar's biographers state that his shows were also considered huge box-office hits in his home cities, such as Bombay and Calcutta, during his 1933 India tour. Critics adored his dance and audiences flocked to the theatres to see his productions. It was also around this time that Rabindranath Tagore saw Shankar's performance in Calcutta and praised him highly for his creative potential and his efforts to resuscitate the art of dance in India. In some parts of India therefore, particularly in the western and eastern regions, Shankar's dance communicated well with audiences. Yet, to say that Shankar's India tour in 1933 was wholly successful is a statement that needs to be carefully examined and qualified.

As Khokar's (1983) biography documents, the southern Indian reception of Shankar's work was quite different. E. Krishna Iyer, one of the pioneers of India's renaissance and revival of dance and a major voice in dance criticism in Madras (present-day Chennai), commented in the *Indian Republic*:

> With his genius for originality and superbness in presentation Uday Shankar can do a great deal, if only he can improve his faith in the best of our classical traditions and utilise them effectively.
>
> (Quoted in Khokar 1983: 79)

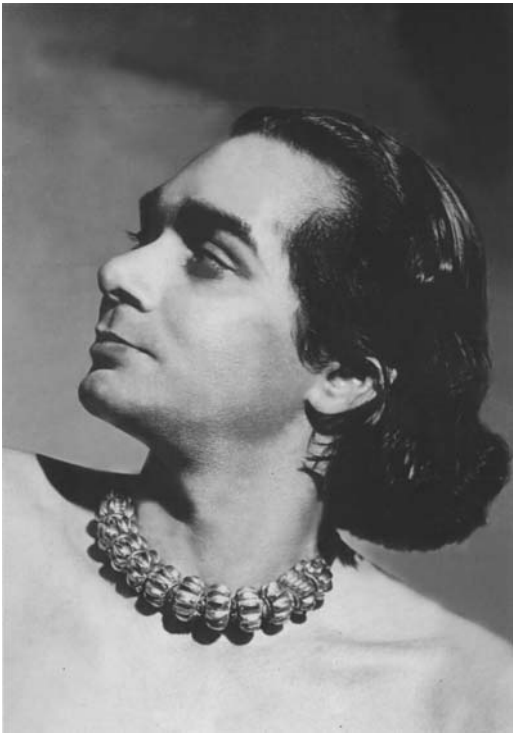

Figure 2.1 Uday Shankar (1900–77). Photo reprinted, with permission, from Sunil Kothari's collection

The *Triveni-Journal of Indian Renaissance* in its July-August issue of 1933, made the following observation on Uday Shankar's works:

> Were Uday Shankar to stay in India for a few years and put himself to systematic training under a master like Narayanswamy Iyer of Nallur and assimilate everything that the living traditions can impart, and then apply himself to the task of recovering the forgotten dances of ancient India with the aid of texts, literary and sculptural, then indeed Uday Shankar would not have striven in vain. In a matter like this, appreciation from [the] West is not everything, for the public there knows little about the genius and scope of our art forms. Uday Shankar is ambitious and complete

> success in the dances he attempts is possible only if he equips himself with a thorough knowledge of the art.
>
> (Ibid.)

Perhaps the cruellest cut of all came from a critic called G.K. Seshagri, whose article published from Madras prompted Shankar to respond defensively and make a case for his art. The issue was taken up by John Martin, the well-known American dance critic. Martin had been impressed by Shankar's 1934 American tour and decided to publish the debate that followed Seshagri's critical review, adding his own support for Shankar in an article for the *New York Times* (Martin 1934). Seshagri had written that Shankar's dance, 'considered as some kind of dance, was tolerable. But considered as Indian dance, either as Bharata Natya, or Nrittya, or Nritta, it was absolutely unconvincing except for the costumes, the décor and the music' (quoted in Martin 1934). To Seshagri's accusation that he breached 'the canons of the Indian classic dance', Shankar retorted:

> Does he expect that we should go back to 200 years or 500 years ago and blindly imitate what our forefathers were doing at that particular period? The traditions of Indian art have been changing from time to time, and it is impossible to fix upon a particular tradition prevailing at a certain time in the past and call that the only authentic Indian tradition.
>
> (Ibid.)

In Shankar's defence, Martin raised some equally pertinent questions:

> […] Is the dance to be a specialty of the scholar and the aesthete or does it belong to the general ranks? If there are those who believe that it is the former, must they in defense of their belief make it impossible for those who disagree with them to practice their own beliefs? Must we fight for every sort of tolerance except artistic tolerance, every sort of democracy except artistic democracy?
>
> (Ibid.)

Shankar's (and Martin's) response to Seshagri is emblematic for various reasons. Firstly, it clearly indicates the trajectory of experimentation and originality that Shankar took when creating his

dance works. This trajectory defied the hegemonic tendencies of the classicism project of the Indian nationalists, making Shankar's dance works appear inauthentic both in terms of vocabulary and presentation. Secondly, and consequently, it marks the wide fissure that took place between Shankar's brand of modern dance and the Madras Music Academy's brand of modern classical Indian dance in 1930s India. The critical reviews and the defensive tone in Shankar's and Martin's writings reveal the failure of Shankar's work to meet the expectations of the national cultural revival movement which was led by southern India from 1932 onwards, following the Madras Music Academy's resolution to reinstate the banned temple dances as 'Bharatanatyam', India's classical dance form. Thus, despite Shankar achieving relative success in some regions of India, he fell short of being endorsed by the key protectors of national culture whose verdict on 'authentic' dance and culture was the one that most mattered to national cultural circles and many artists during that time.[3]

On the other side of the globe, Shankar never struggled with questions of authenticity. Ruth K. Abrahams's (2007) article has provided a finely detailed history of Shankar's early career and an analysis of the reasons behind his artistic and commercial success as a dancer and choreographer in Depression-fraught America. Abrahams writes:

> While Hollywood and Broadway provided fanciful economic escapes into societies based on popularized Depression clichés where 'pennies fell from heaven' and the streets were 'paved with gold,' or where the average 'John Doe' could become a national hero, Shankar and his company provided an escape into a new exotic world infused with the Hindu spirit, where serenity triumphed over chaos and harmony reigned over dissonance. The effect was powerful and lasting. Many decades later, those who attended Shankar's concerts still vividly recalled the 'magic' of his performances, 'the godlike image' or 'larger than life' persona he projected. Adjectives like 'exquisite,' 'mesmerizing,' and 'unforgettable' repeatedly infused interview after interview with people who were there, so that there remains little doubt that Uday Shankar was unique in the history of concert dance on the American stage.
>
> (Abrahams 2007: 409)

Abrahams's examination of Shankar's artistic triumph in Europe and America, gained through his offerings of lush, larger-than-life, fantastic narratives to a financially crippled America, provides an interesting reading of the effects of performances given by a 'native' Indian.

However, despite the importance of existing research by Erdman, Abrahams and Sarkar Munsi and their appraisals of Shankar's success in Europe and America, what seems to be lacking in the existing literature is a close examination of how local and national critiques of Shankar's dance formed part of colonialist and nationalist discourses on authenticity, which clearly marginalised dancers like Shankar. In order to address this lack, it is necessary to revisit and to privilege the 1933–34 local reception of Shankar's work in southern India, an angle that opens up some pertinent issues about Indian nationalism's resistance to transcultural processes of identity construction in the dance arts. As we have seen, the nationalist identification of Bharatanatyam with 'pure' and 'authentic' Indian culture in southern India left no space for Shankar's 'impure' and 'inauthentic' dance renaissance. While Shankar's translations for Europe and America of Indian-themed dances did work, his dance performances as translations of themes of Indian origin for Indian audiences via the medium of western presentational formats were not always so successful. The following section proposes an alternative reading of Shankar's dancing body and attempts to unravel meanings perhaps lost or hidden in Shankar's translating process.

Shankar: floating artist, native outsider

Shankar's early work shows a tendency to play to the popular European imaginary of the Empire. This is evidenced in the orientalism of his early 1930s career in Europe, after leaving Anna Pavlova's company, through mythology-inspired works such as *Indra, Tandava Nrittya*, *Kalia Daman, Gandharva* and *Kartikeya* (exact dates unknown) (Figure 2.2). Following Catherine Hall's (1998) writings on Empire, this can be interpreted as Shankar 'performing Empire', a phase in which he willingly identifies, as a native of India, with Euro-American expectations of the exotic oriental dancer.[4] However, as Diana Brenscheidt (2011) has suggested, Shankar's body was often read as feminine by reviewers in Europe. Clearly, masculine Empire

Figure 2.2 Uday Shankar in and as *Kartikeya*, Madan Theatre, Calcutta 1935. Photo reprinted, with permission, from Sunil Kothari's collection

was rendering his colonised subject body effeminate. However, as discussed below, Shankar's Almora Centre and his 1948 film *Kalpana* are products of a performance of a different identity, that of alterity. Here, 'alterity' refers to Shankar's peculiar situation of being 'othered' and made effeminate in Europe and deemed an outsider even in his own home country, particularly when his works are considered not to be 'real' Indian dance by the nationalist cultural establishment. This shift from 'performing Empire' to 'performing alterity' becomes even more crucial when we view Shankar, not simply as an Indian male dancer, but as an internationally mobile artist whose movements between continents and the embodied responses they produced could not be contained or located within any easily conceivable or straitjacketed definition of nationalist culture in India.

Shankar can be positioned as an outsider within the framework of South Asian cultural nationalism: a floating figure who travelled between two worlds, the Euro-American and the Asian, without ever wholly belonging to either one. This quality of 'in-betweenness', explained by authors such as Homi Bhabha (1994a) as being peculiar to the postmodern diasporic condition, thus finds a much earlier echo in the mid-twentieth-century work of a South Asian male dance artist. Purists belonging to the Indian nationalist cultural project read this 'in-betweenness' as inauthentic. This quality alienated Shankar from South Asian audiences, giving him a place neither 'there' in the world nor 'here' in his native India. If diaspora space, as Clifford (1994) suggests, is composed of genealogies of displacement as well as genealogies of staying put, and is between localism and transnationalism, then Shankar can be seen as occupying that peculiar, nebulous space that we nowadays often associate with the diaspora, a space from which his dancing body negotiated local and translocal identities even as long ago as the 1930s. Shankar's travels and movements between the Euro-American and Asian worlds and his resulting work eluded nationalist constructions of identity, perhaps making him a harbinger of what we now call transnational hybridity.

On foreign turf, and during his early years as an emerging dance artist in Europe and America, Shankar's lack of formal training in dance was irrelevant to audiences entranced by his exoticism. When Shankar brought his successful Euro-American tour to India, there was no novelty in his familiar, coloured, masculine, native body and it was expected to conform to the normative category of the Indian classical dancing body that was being produced by nationalist and anti-colonialist discourse. Since it did not comply with these dominant networks of power by presenting 'pure' classical dance, Shankar's actively resisting dancing body ironically generated an altogether alternative cultural text within the imposed and hegemonic normative culture. Shankar's dancing body can be read as a site where multiple identities were simultaneously performed: native, foreign, insider, outsider. In particular, the zig-zagging complexity of Shankar's journey as an floating artist – beginning life in India, developing his early career in Europe and America and returning to India to claim his native roots – troubles any straightforward understanding of identity construction.

Evidently, the notion of identity and nuances in its meaning begin to play a crucial role in the performance of dance in twentieth-century India. During the anti-colonial period of the 1920s and 1930s, leading up to India's Independence from British rule in 1947, diverse forms of cultural nationalisms were at play in the different regions of India. This is exemplified in the different reception of Shankar's works in northern and southern India. Cultural nationalism in India was not one single homogeneous project of re-inventing classicism. It produced its regional variants; in Bengal, for instance, it gave rise to the modern art movement (Mitter 1995). Shankar, in spite of defensively arguing for his dance, probably sensed the problem that this perception of his works could pose for his company. He began to assert himself and his art as being consciously Indian and yet different from any of the other reformulated classical Indian models of performance. The following section looks at the founding of the Uday Shankar India Culture Centre (USICC) in Almora (in the Indian Himalayas) as Shankar's performance of an alternative Indian identity.

Almora and the performance of alterity

In order to understand the significance of Shankar's Almora experiment in India, it is necessary to begin, paradoxically enough, in 1930s Britain. Thus, this historical narrative begins from a point of suture: the distinct shift in Shankar's dance career that was the result of his momentous meeting with Leonard and Dorothy Elmhirst of Dartington Hall in Devon, England, which was to become a beneficial and fruitful collaboration (Nicholas 2007). In April 1933, Shankar's company was performing at the Arts Theatre Club in London when Margaret Barr, then Head of Dance and Drama at Dartington Hall, saw them and recommended Shankar to the Elmhirsts. Dartington's cultural policy from 1934 until World War II included the support of European artist-émigrés and the provision of a platform for international artists such as Shankar to showcase their works (ibid.). In May 1933, and inaugurating this new era of cultural exchange, Shankar along with some of his musicians performed at Dartington. This was followed by a full company performance a year later on 26 May 1934 at Dartington's Open Air Theatre.

Shankar's talent and personality had a significant impact on Dartington's students and its illustrious faculty members, including

the German modern ballet dancers Kurt Jooss (1901–79) and Sigurd Leeder (1902–81) and the Russian theatre director Michael Chekhov (1891–1955). Shankar also impressed Beatrice Straight, daughter of Dorothy Elmhirst from her previous marriage (Figure 2.3). It was largely owing to Beatrice Straight that Shankar was able to strengthen his ties with Dartington further. It was here that Shankar and his company performed at the opening of the Chekhov Theatre Studio in October 1936 and then again in 1937; it was here that Shankar's company found space in which to rehearse between tours; and it was here that Shankar got the opportunity to closely observe and share ideas about theatre and performance and its teaching methods with Chekhov. This experience was to have a strong impact on Shankar's own movement training methods as they evolved in the next decade. Finally and most importantly, it was from Dartington that Shankar secured substantial funds to set up his very own dance institute in India in 1938 – the Uday Shankar India Culture Centre in Almora (USICC).[5]

Figure 2.3 Michael Chekhov, Alice Boner, Deirdre Hurst, Beatrice Straight, Uday Shankar and company at Dartington Hall, Devon, England. Photo courtesy of Dartington Hall Trust Archive

There is a clear and significant link between the philosophy behind the foundation of institutions such as Rabindranath Tagore's Visva Bharati University at Shantiniketan in Bengal, India (where Leonard Elmhirst spent considerable time in rural reconstruction projects), Leonard and Dorothy Elmhirst's Dartington Hall and Shankar's Almora Centre in northern India, although the connections between them are only sporadically acknowledged.[6] Like Shantiniketan and Dartington Hall, Shankar's centre was an experiment in an alternative system of education that would impart knowledge of the arts and studies on both past and contemporary culture. This system of teaching was designed to encourage creativity and innovation in the performing arts context while supporting and nurturing individual talent. What needs to be asked is why Shankar believed it necessary to create and establish such an institution in India at this point? What was his intent, and where did this need or urge come from? In his letter to G.B. Pant, the premier of the United Provinces, Shankar outlined the overall aim of the Almora Centre:

> It is my plan to take a group of thirty to forty students, selected with regard to ability but without regard to caste, religion or social status, and train them first of all in dancing and music, but also in other forms of artistic expression. These students, like those who will follow them, will later be able to enrich our national life. They in turn will start centres of their own or be available as professional teachers and musicians, radio performers, etc. Although I have already received a large number of applications for admission to the proposed centre from Western students, it is my intention not to take any new students except Indians for probably five years, so that we may establish the centre on a firm Indian basis, before widening the scope of our activities. One of the features of the centre will be its all-India character. We shall have as a nucleus the members of my present organisation, which includes Bengalies, Mahrattas, Malabaries and two Muslims from the U.P., and we shall also invite, as soon as possible, special teachers and experts from different parts of India to join the teaching staff. Thus the centre, in its organisation, its emphasis and its sources of inspiration, will be truly national and non-communal in character.
>
> (Shankar Papers, File LKE India 19/A: 1932–38)

It becomes evident from this letter that in its organisation, faculty and staff composition, student body and ideological emphasis, Shankar's centre in Almora would seek to encourage 'diversity' as well as 'national unity' in the arts, two of the favourite catchwords of nationalists during India's struggle for Independence from British rule and in the post-Independence era. Shankar astutely negotiates and even panders to nationalist tropes; it is hard not to notice the repetitive use of the word 'national', as well as the ironic decision initially to exclude 'Western students' (for 'probably five years'), even though his centre relied heavily on funds and administrative help from England.

However, despite the evident nationalist insularity in the letter above, Shankar does make clear through his correspondence his own individual and alternative need for self-articulation. One can read in this act of creative entrepreneurship, an individual expression of identity that plays a complex game with the national ethos. Shankar simultaneously aligns and distances himself from nationalist notions of culture. As a returned native engaged in a complex relationship with the nation-state, Shankar shows symptoms, as Kaplan suggests, not of being an immigrant who is seen to replace one nationalist identification for another, but of an émigré who confounds 'territorial and essentialist nationalisms in favour of transnational subjectivities' (Kaplan 1996: 136).

The USICC in Almora may therefore be seen as a strong political statement made by an independent dance artist in pre-Independence India. It was meant to provide an alternative reading of Indian arts and culture, a counter-force acting alongside the hegemonic discourses on the 'classical-national' model of art forms. For Shankar, there could not exist a singular and exclusive reality of the performing arts in India dependent on the largely reconstructed classical models of performance. There were other realities too; other methods, other approaches and other pathways to the creation of dance works. His centre in Almora would present one of them. Shankar's project should not be misconstrued as a complete denial of southern India's revival of classicism. He invited well-known gurus in Bharatanatyam and Kathakali to teach at Almora, as the following section will clarify. Yet, in spite of the inclusion of training in classical dance, there was a clear distinction between Shankar's USICC-national model and the classical-national model of dance.

Memory in Shankar's dance technique

The difference between Shankar's and southern India's nationalist approach to historical recuperation, the recovery of things lost, and the reconstruction of dance in India essentially lay in their relationship with the past and in their use of memory. Nationalist scholars and cultural historians in the south of India followed a meticulous and highly analytic process of sifting through extant indigenous models of performance, channelling these through endorsed theories on dance and dramaturgy available in ancient texts on theatre and performance. Therefore, the *sadir nautch* and its revamped version 'Bharatanatyam' became the 'authentic' form of Indian dance; sanctioned, authorised and legitimised by textual theory. It complied in essence and practice with rules of performance and presentation that had existed in written form for centuries (see Srinivasan 1985; Meduri 1996; O'Shea 2007). Shankar's dance, on the contrary, would not comply with any ancient theory of either performance or its presentation. It is true that he was inspired by Ananda Coomaraswamy's *Mirror of Gesture*[7] and drew heavily upon postures and images from ancient Indian sculpture and art in his choreographies, using footwork, hand gestures and movement phrases from recognisable Indian dance forms. Yet, Shankar never attempted nor claimed to be presenting 'classical' Indian dance. He was essentially a storyteller, and he told his stories through dance in a language that was non-codified, improvisatory and open-ended.

In his early career in the 1930s, Shankar's dance drew upon impressions, a technique that allied him with impressionism in dance as evidenced in the works of early modern dancers in Europe and America such as Ruth St Denis. His later works, however, and particularly those of his Almora years, showed the development of a self-conscious 'Shankar-style', combining recognisable Indian pose and gesture with free movement. When he opened his centre in Almora, Shankar created syllabuses that focused on improvisation, originality, innovation and the use of personal or autobiographical recollection alongside historical memory in dance, music, theatre, fine art and filmmaking. This took place alongside training in Bharatanatyam, Kathakali and Manipuri. Guru Kandappa Pillai, who trained none other than Balasaraswati, the noted Bharatanatyam dancer, was invited to teach at Almora, along with Guru Shankaran

Nambudiri for Kathakali and Guru Amobi Singh for Manipuri. In music too, Shankar had on his faculty list one of India's most celebrated classical music exponents, the *sarod* maestro Ustad Alauddin Khan as a visiting teacher, alongside the talented Vishnudas Shirali who was also Shankar's company music director.

The USICC in Almora was established thanks to a generous fund of £20,000 from the Elmhirsts of Dartington, and with the advice of scientist Boshi Sen and his wife Gertrude Emerson who became the centre's executive committee members. Ninety-four acres of land called Simtola was given to Shankar by the United Provinces government; nestled in the Himalayan mountains, the area lies in the present-day Indian state of Uttaranchal. A studio that doubled up as a stage was built on Ranidhar Ridge with a view of the Himalayas, a prospectus with a programme of training for a five-year diploma course and a two-month summer course was meticulously planned, printed and distributed and the centre was ready to receive its first cohort of twenty-one students from across India and Ceylon in March 1940.[8]

Those who gravitated to Almora to train in Shankar's centre proved to be a highly eclectic mix of dance, acting and music enthusiasts, many of whom later became stalwarts in their respective fields of work. Narendra Sharma (1924–2008), the New Delhi-based modern dancer, choreographer and founder-director of Bhoomika, was fourteen when he arrived in Almora from Aligarh and had to produce a letter of consent from his uncle before gaining admission (personal interview, 13 March 2006, New Delhi). Sharma noted that in terms of dance and music technique, Shankar's centre offered a range of classes from some of the best teachers in the country, individuals who were known for their contribution to what soon became known as the Indian classical forms of performance. Yet, there were also intensive classes, such as the general class that took place early in the morning and in which students would be asked to walk and move in different ways. There was a technique class, where students would be asked to create geometrical patterns using hand and foot movements, lessons in theory (possibly Sanskrit texts on dramaturgy) taught by Mrs Shastri, and art and painting lessons given by Shankar himself. The last class of the day and one of the most important was the improvisation class, conducted by Shankar, which would have students creating and presenting their own dances. According to Narendra Sharma, Shankar's brief to his

students during improvisation class was to feel, recollect and then embody their memories in movement. Recollection became the first stage of choreography, and a combination of memory and observation of real life became the essential ingredients of new forms of abstract movement (ibid.; but see also Sharma 1978).

This observation by the late Narendra Sharma is both critical and pertinent to an understanding of Shankar's choreographic process in the 1940s. The links between Michael Chekhov's psychophysical actor training techniques, which Shankar observed at Dartington Hall, and Shankar's own emergent movement methodology of training becomes clear. Chekhov's views on the role of memory in actor training were a response to his mentor Constantin Stanislavski's (1863–1938) approach in which an actor starts with a sense memory which allows access to feelings of a more purified emotional memory (Chamberlain 2004: 59–60). Chekhov's approach differed from Stanislavski's: he critiqued the emotional memory approach, suggesting that it bound the actor too much to his or her personal history. Chekhov was more interested in adding specific qualities to an everyday physical action, which could add a layer of psychological tint and lead to what he called a 'psychophysical sensation' (ibid.). Shankar was clearly influenced by these training methods of which he had first hand experience during his Dartington visits (Figure 2.4). Shankar's own dance training methodology at Almora was less concerned with recuperating lost culture or specifically Indian movements that had been threatened by colonialism, as was the case in the reconstructed Indian classical dance techniques. His training system instead embraced international influences: he placed the dancer's individual remembering body, everyday gestures and movements nuanced by emotional states at the centre of his choreographic processes.

Recent theories of memory, such as those by Jose van Dijck, have suggested that in the current, mediatised age personal cultural memory arises out of 'the altercation of individual acts and cultural norms – a tension we can trace both in the activity of remembering and in the object of memory' (van Dijck 2007: 6). The author further explains how 'memory products invite subversion or parody, alternative or unconventional enunciations. Products of memory are first and foremost creative products, the provisional outcomes of confrontations between individual lives and the culture at large' (ibid.: 7).

Figure 2.4 Michael Chekhov with Uday Shankar and company members in the studio at Dartington Hall. Photo courtesy of Dartington Hall Trust Archive

We could apply this idea of a tension between individual and collective cultural memory to a pre-digital modern age as well. Shankar's insistence on his students' accessing memory through their bodies seems similarly to suggest how in his creative work personal memory confronted the historical memory of Indian nationalist culture. The Indian dancing body in Shankar's training system seems to have been a mediating site where seemingly dialectical concepts such as the historical and the personal, the collective and the individual, the local and the international were made to cohabit in complex ways.

Shankar's Almora Centre was in many ways similar to Rabindranath Tagore's Visva Bharati University in Shantiniketan, an alternative educational space that encouraged experimentation in the visual arts, music, drama and dance. Both institutions focused on imparting training in dance techniques from India and also emphasised a creative reconstruction of movements taken from such techniques, as discussed in Chapter 1 (for more on Tagore see Bose 2001; O'Connell 2002; Sarkar Munsi 2008). However, Shankar went one step ahead and pushed the boundaries of choreography further by introducing elements of improvisation, underlining the importance

of a conscious relationship between the gestures of everyday life and dance movements. He established a training system in which prominence was given to an in-depth knowledge of the body and its various components. Shankar emphasised the isolated movements of body parts and the symbiotic relationship of the body to space and spatial patterns. He consciously blended South Asian movement dynamics with principles of early modern dance and theatre as found in the works of Dartington-based practitioners such as Kurt Jooss and Michael Chekhov.

The Almora Centre also becomes a significant chapter in an analysis of Shankar's career as it signals the beginning of his realism-inspired choreographic works. It was here that he created *Rhythm of Life* and *Labour and Machinery*, dance works that tackled real contemporary issues in India. While *Rhythm of Life* mirrored uneasy landlord-peasant relationships and voiced the need for freedom from servility in both local and national senses, *Labour and Machinery* explored the mechanised labour of mill workers and the inhuman factory conditions in which they worked, and mirrored exploitative human relationships in an industrial set-up. This move from mythological to non-mythological storytelling through dance indicates a significant shift in Shankar's career. Shankar, through these dance works, was perhaps making the statement that it was possible to remain Indian and at the same time embrace modernism by tackling and reflecting contemporary socio-political issues.[9]

The delving into a personal past in Shankar's work during the Almora years is also perhaps indicative of his yearning to belong to the modern present. The term 'belonging', as expounded by Probyn (1996), further nuances the term 'identity'. In Probyn's words, 'belonging' sums up 'the desire for some sort of attachment, be it to other people, places, or modes of being, and the ways in which individuals and groups are caught within wanting to belong, wanting to become, a process that is fuelled by yearning rather than the positing of identity as a stable state' (Probyn, 1996: 19). The use of autobiographical memory in Uday Shankar's dance methodology in the 1940s, and particularly in his film *Kalpana*, may perhaps be read as a strategy that attempted to connect personal with historical memory. Memory in Shankar's dance therefore becomes a locus from where Shankar shifts his position of a returned misfit outsider to one who truly belonged to India, and whose work could be seen as part of his re-found native home.

Almora versus *Kalpana*

The Uday Shankar India Culture Centre was a landmark in the history of performing arts academies in India. It was the first and, during the 1940s, the only one of its kind, offering a comprehensive training programme in the performing arts, drawing from both Indian and European models of pedagogy. It held great promise as an institution, and had it continued to function efficiently, would perhaps have given a concrete shape and reality to the modernist movement in the realm of Indian dance. However, this was not to be and its failure was owed to three main reasons.

Firstly, the Almora Centre was established in a particularly turbulent period in world political history. World War II dominated events not just in Europe and America but also extended to the colonies, and the repercussions were felt in India. There was a shortage of financial capital in every business enterprise and the arts industry suffered the impact too; it was not an auspicious period for a project that depended heavily on international funding. The Almora Centre had to lose two of its administrators at its inception and had quickly become obliged to grapple with a shortage of funds, which it did somewhat unsuccessfully. Secondly, Almora did not turn out to be as idyllic a space as imagined by Shankar. He wrote in a letter to Beatrice Straight that there was no water, electricity, good communication links or medical facilities, and that five years in Almora had made him realise that it was not the ideal place for the centre (Shankar Papers, File LKE India 19/D: 1943–46). Thirdly, and to make matters worse, Shankar proved to be a rather impractical director; he had vision, courage and the ability to lead his troupe and students to artistic success but he lacked pragmatism and also perhaps (as may be seen below) sensitivity towards others when it came to decision-making in real life.

Not content with having a full-fledged centre to run, Shankar also seriously considered experimenting with the medium of cinema. He wanted to make a film, one that would document his vision of creative modern dance in India and crystallise his choreographic works. The film would become a testament to his faith that his dance could be a legitimate art form. There was one problem however. Making the film would mean aborting the training programme at Almora. The students who had invested time, energy and money into the centre had

expectations of getting a diploma at the end of their programme.[10] They demanded that their course be continued to its end. Shankar gave the students a choice; either they become a part of his film, or they leave. Much debate and argument ensued and the centre eventually had to close down owing to Shankar's adamant refusal to comply with his students' demands and his insistence on making his film. In retrospect, it seems highly unfortunate that the choice would have to be made between *Kalpana,* the only visual document of Shankar's works, and the continuing legacy of his dance training through the Almora Centre. Yet, that choice was made, the Almora Centre stopped functioning in early 1944 and the shooting of the film *Kalpana* began on the floor of Gemini Studios in Madras (Chennai) the same year.

Shankar was heavily censured by some of his colleagues and friends for this decision, for his irreverence both to his students and to his original vision of imparting education through the arts at Almora.[11] So what prompted Shankar to take such a drastic measure? And why the sudden decision to work in the medium of cinema? Could it be that Shankar already recognised the telltale signs of failure in his cherished institution? Did he choose to make a film because celluloid could highlight, market, archive or preserve his art in a way that Almora could not? Was this a decision taken to pre-empt the failure of Shankar as a struggling modern dance artist in a country that, in the 1940s, clearly had no definite space for one? These hypothetical questions suggest only possible interpretations of the reasons behind the Almora Centre's breakdown.

In the history of modern dance in India, a significant rift may be said to have taken place at this point. With the centre closing down, there was a splintering of ways between Shankar and some of his senior students. Although a new generation of dancer-choreographers emerged from this split, the end of the Almora Centre was a lamentable event and one that left unfinished Uday Shankar's goal of consciously creating new dance pedagogy in India. Perhaps the failure of Almora is also indicative of Shankar's failed identity as an institution-builder. Uday Shankar may have been an artist par excellence, but he was not a pedagogue like Tagore, whose vision of and commitment to education had provided a strong foundation for Shantiniketan, ensuring its secure future.

Shankar's abortive attempt to create an alternative arts institution also marks a moment of failure in the narrative of modern dance

in India. This crisis point, however, solidifies Shankar's identity as a subversive filmmaker and choreographer in twentieth-century dance history. As Kobena Mercer has pointed out, ' identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty' (Mercer 1990: 43). Even while Shankar's identity as a modern dance educator died a sudden and bitter death in the Almora crisis, through *Kalpana* Shankar unwittingly managed to re-cast himself as the maker of one of the most iconoclastic art-house films ever made in India.

Kalpana (1948): contexts and meanings

Uday Shankar's film *Kalpana* achieved simultaneous collaboration with and resistance to Indian nationalist contexts and frameworks of culture. Sarkar Munsi (2010a) has offered a very interesting reading of the film, highlighting the multiple agendas (nationalist, anti-colonial and progressive) that Shankar addresses in the film. In the historical re-telling and unpicking of the film's possible meanings here, the spotlight will be on Shankar's use of personal and national memory which is what eventually distinguishes him and his dance within Indian cultural production in the 1940s.[12]

The seeds of the concept for *Kalpana* were sown in the Almora Centre itself. Amala Shankar, who became Uday Shankar's dance and life partner (they married in Almora on 8 March 1942), recalls how Shankar, while discussing the film script with Guru Dutt, one of the centre's students, had asked him to write down the Bengali equivalent of the word 'imagination'. When Amala prompted the word '*kalpana*', Shankar asked Guru Dutt to write it down as the title of the film and the script gradually began to take shape from this inception point (interview with Amala Shankar 2005). To help him on this project, Shankar had on his team his wife Amala Shankar as assistant, lead character and costume designer, Vishnudas Shirali as associate producer and music director, Guru Amobi Singh to create Manipuri dances and the poet Sumitranandan Pant as lyricist. It was decided that the film would be in Hindi rather than Uday or Amala's native Bengali, possibly because that would ensure its wider acceptance in the rest of the country.

Uday Shankar was set designer, writer, producer and director. Mention must be made here particularly about Shankar's set design for *Kalpana*. A substantial fund of twelve Lakh Rupees (approximately

£15,000 in today's currency) was given by Baronet Chunubhai of Ahmedabad for this film, but the cost of each of the many sets that Shankar wanted to use for his film was estimated at three Lakh Rupees, leaving a substantial shortfall. Shankar was initially stumped but stumbled upon a plan when he saw his toddler son Ananda playing with building blocks. He built a model of his set using six-inch wide wooden blocks of various shapes, then made wooden blocks four feet wide in accordance with the model (ibid.). The sets used throughout the film were constructed from combinations of these various wooden blocks. The effect was visually stunning, theatrical and, most importantly, suited Shankar's budget.

In June 1944, Shankar wrote a letter to Amala, expressing his interest in shooting the film in Indrapuri Studios, Calcutta, but the decision to move to Gemini Studios in Madras, Tamil Nadu, was made shortly afterwards. A massive cast of dancers came from all over India: fifty male Kathakali-trained dancers from Kerala, and thirty-five female dancers from Madras, Travancore and Maharashtra.[13] From 1944–45 rehearsals for the film took place with Shankar plus 150 artistes. The shooting for the film began in 1945. Initially scheduled for eight months, filming continued until 1947. During the day, Gemini Studios was hired for another film, *Chandralekha* directed by S.S. Vasan, so that *Kalpana* could only be shot at night. All actors and dancers met for make-up and dress from 4pm–6pm; shooting for the film began at 6pm and carried on till 4am.

Kalpana took nearly three years to make owing to an acute shortage of funds and with the Indian Independence movement and World War II raging in the background. However, Uday Shankar's vision for the film was not compromised. That *Kalpana* was intended as a strong political statement made by its creator is substantiated by the message that appears on the screen just after the opening credits. Shankar's message reads thus:

> I request you all to be very alert while you watch this unusual picture – a Fantasy.
>
> Some of the events depicted here will reel off at great speed and if you miss any piece you will really be missing a vital aspect of our country's life in its Religion, Politics, Education, Society, Art and Culture, Agriculture and Industry.

> I do not deliberately aim my criticism at any particular group of people or institutions, but if it appears so, it just happens to be so, that is all.
>
> It is my duty as an Artist to be fully alive to all conditions of life and thought relating to our country and present it truthfully with all the faults and merits, through the medium of my Art.
>
> And I hope that you will be with me in our final purpose to rectify our own shortcomings and become worthy of our cultural heritage and make our motherland once again the greatest in the world.
>
> Uday Shankar

This message immediately establishes Shankar's agenda for the film: *Kalpana* was going to be an honest critique of contemporary India and its real problems revealed through his dance-art. It is not surprising therefore that the film begins outside the office of the financer and producer of a 'Thunderstruck Studio' which has as its motto the phrase 'Box Office – Our God' where Uday Shankar, playing an aged writer, is shown desperately trying to sell his story to a producer. From its very opening scene, the film seems to establish a theme of power imbalance – between producer and artist, between different classes in India's society and between the personal and the public. The theme of an artist's struggle against expectations of commercial success is further emphasised in the first scene when the film producer asks for romance and entertaining song and dance as essential ingredients of a lucrative film. In response to this demand, Shankar-as-writer points to a group of poor street children, pleads for their cause and begs for his story to be heard. The rest of the film unfolds largely in flashback mode but with frequent comments by the writer-as-narrator, as a fictionalised, semi-autobiographical re-telling of Shankar's own life story, following events in the life of a young man called Udayan who is played by Shankar himself.

Although a scene-by-scene analysis of *Kalpana* is beyond the scope of this chapter, some of the sequences in the film are especially significant in terms of understanding Shankar's peculiar position as a transnational artist within an Indian nationalist context. Significant because in these part-fictional, part-autobiographical sections Shankar is playing a complex hide and seek game with Indian cultural nationalism. For instance, a section of the film's story is set in the bustling city of Benaras, where the young Udayan travels on the advice of his

art teacher to challenge his creative imagination. This section charts Udayan's creative career and his initial experiments with dance on stage. What is noteworthy here is how Shankar replaces the European years of his real early career as a dance artist with the imaginary and fictive space of Benaras. This replacement suggests Shankar's strategic move, once again, to appeal to Indian nationalist sentiments through his work: Benaras, after all is one of the most recognisable historical temple cities in northern India. Perhaps what makes this substitution of space critical is that it points to how personal and national memory collide and collude in complex ways within the narrative of the film. In the interplay between the individual and the national, we encounter once again Shankar's conscious yearning to belong. This, as Fortier suggests, is about the desire 'of inclusion, about manufacturing cultural and historical belongings that mark out terrains of commonality, through which the social dynamics and politics of "fitting in" are delineated' (Fortier 2000: 2).

Other sections within the film's narrative that suggest a similar politics of fitting in through nationalist empathy are the images of famine where Udayan is shown grappling with poverty and hunger. This was Shankar's reaction to and portrayal of the recent man-made famine, engineered by the colonial government, which raged between 1942–46 and claimed millions of lives in the rural areas of Bengal. The film presents a series of disturbing images of the effects of famine in villages: Udayan loses his best friend Noor to starvation, and then meets a young woman, Kamini (played by Lakshmi Kanta), who is half-crazed by the calamity of death in her family. However, with time, village life improves and this is reflected in a joyous celebration through a folk-dance sequence, yet another popular nationalist motif.

A noteworthy moment in the film's narrative occurs when Udayan reluctantly follows Kamini to a party thrown by Bombay's elite. This is crucial for two reasons: firstly, the scene that follows allows Shankar to caricature the severe disparities in wealth in India's social structure (while the famine still rages in some parts of Indian villages, the wealthy drink to the deaths of millions of people). Secondly, with a wealthy mill owner showing off a model of his new factory, this scene introduces – through Udayan's vision sequence – Shankar's famous choreography in *Labour and Machinery*. The scenes from *Labour and Machinery* are startling because they reveal how Shankar

was able to create a non-codified, non-classical choreography even while he based it on the very domestic issue of exploitative industrial labour.

The opening scene of the vision sequence has a row of workers walking heavily with their spines curved while Shankar, playing a lead worker, watches them intently and then feeds coal into a gigantic machine. The scene has striking parallels with Fritz Lang's futuristic and allegorical film *Metropolis* (1927) in which the machine, embodied in the workers' dehumanised actions in the underground city and in the figure of a female robot, becomes the film's central image (Gunning 2000: 55). In *Kalpana,* as the wheel of the machine starts to turn, a clockwork movement is unleashed and this is soon translated into body movement by Shankar. Through the soot-covered and expressionless faces of the factory workers, their heavy overalls, their staccato movements and the incessant beating of drums in the background soundscape, Shankar's choreography achieves a striking depiction of mechanised labour. Of particular note is a sequence in which the workers, turned as if into automata, move their bodies disjointedly while Shankar as machine worker tries to manipulate them.

Within the choreography, the narrative moves to the workers revolting against the factory owner, being imprisoned by the police and then collectively breaking off the chains that had shackled them. The scene ends in laughter, and in the narrative of *Kalpana*, Udayan snaps out of his vision and is recalled back to the raucous behaviour of the people at the party. When analysed carefully, the section from *Labour and Machinery* seems to occur as a significant event in the film's narrative. From this moment onwards, the film follows Udayan's journey as an artist intent on making his creative vision come to life. Udayan procures funds from a generous donor at the party (an Indian businessman who replaces the real-life Elmhirsts of England) and opens his dream institute 'Kalakendra' (which replaces Almora) in the Himalayas. The next part of the film serves almost as a documentary-style re-enactment of the creative experiment that took place at the Uday Shankar India Culture Centre in Almora.

Some of the short dance sequences that feature as part of the imaginary Kalakendra's creative work are worthy of mention. These succinct choreographic works cover a range of contemporary themes and issues: the short dance snippet that has dancers moving like puppets to a patriotic song penned by the poet Sumitranandan Pant;

a brief sequence with dancers in spectacles and graduation gowns that daringly makes a jibe at existing education systems; the sequence in which the image of Bharat Mata (the nation as mother) appears to be distraught with regionalism and bewails the lack of unity amongst her people. These are images steeped in national consciousness and deeply political in tone. The reference to conventional education and degrees was both topical and personal to Shankar, given his recent (failed) educational experiment at Almora, while the iconic figure of Bharat Mata, a central trope in Indian nationalist art and literature, underscored the film's (and Shankar's) nationalist sentiments.[14]

The last half-hour of the film is centred on the increasing tension between Shankar (Udayan) and two women (Kamini and Uma) who symbolise the tug-of-war of his loyalties. This occurs simultaneously as a Spring Festival (*Vasantotsava*) in Kalakendra is planned to generate funds for the centre and to raise money for Udayan's next creative venture, which is (not surprisingly) a film project. Performers and audiences, the rich and the poor are shown to flock to this festival from all parts of India and the programme is launched with the announcement: 'Today India is on the brink of Independence. Politicians should help preserve art and work with artists shoulder to shoulder.' From the start of the festival to its abrupt end, Shankar showcases – along with his own choreographies – several dance forms from different parts of India, including Manipuri, folk and tribal dances, as if attempting to situate his work within the nation's cultural repertoire. The flashback ends suddenly when Shankar-as-writer is interrupted by the producer refusing to invest in his story as it has no romance. Shankar-as-writer with his unfinished story is left voicing his angst about the darkness that engulfs the nation. He questions how long his dream of a culturally rich nation will remain a dream. Couched in the nationalist rhetoric of Shankar's desperate final plea in these closing lines may be read a modern dancer's demand for recognition. *Kalpana* the film becomes a substitute for Almora – a narrative with an abrupt end.

Indian dance modernity and its misfits

Kalpana was released in Bombay (present day Mumbai) and across India on 13 February 1948, just six months after India's Independence. The launch of the film in such a period in India's political calendar

is significant: it may be interpreted symbolically as an event through which both the nation and the artist perhaps attempt to make a clean break from their earlier 'oriental' identities and declare their unquestioned independent identity. Through *Kalpana*, Shankar, the citizen of an independent modern India, shows himself through the medium of his art as being acutely aware, conscious, involved, active and critical within the Indian contemporary way of life.

Kalpana was critically acclaimed but considered a box office failure. It received glowing reviews from some quarters: the *Sunday News of India* carried a review of the film on 22 February 1948 under the caption '"Kalpana" Worthy of Place Among Film Classics' and claimed that in the contemporary Indian film industry 'there is nothing comparable with "Kalpana", nothing even mentionable within a dozen breaths of it: it stands alone, bearing the marks of genius, artistic vision and creative faculty'; the review also mentioned that the film was 'too subtle to be popular in the way it should be' (Shankar Papers. DHTA, LKE India 196/A: 1947–49). Another article, in *FilmIndia*, highlighted Shankar's film as a 'devastating satire' challenging the 'commercial cinemagnates', stating that *Kalpana* 'is a landmark in the history of Indian films […] It breaks completely with all the traditions of Indian cinema, discards all existing formulae, breaks new and virgin ground.' However, with the budget of the film climbing from the original estimate of Rupees 12 Lakhs to Rupees 22 Lakhs, its commercial fate was not what Shankar had either envisaged or expected. Added to this was the harsher criticism it received in southern India.[15]

The 1940s and 1950s are generally regarded as the Golden Age of Indian cinema, but film historians state that even though independent film production meant greater flexibility in filmmaking, producers generally resorted to formulaic ingredients like song and dance and employed big stars in order to avoid financial failure (Dwyer and Patel 2002). The 1940s also saw the release of a series of patriotic films such as *Dr Kotnis Ki Amar Kahani* (*The Immortal Story of Dr Kotnis*, directed by V. Shantaram 1946), *Shaheed* (*Martyr*, directed by Ramesh Saigal 1948), *Shabnam* (directed by B. Mitra 1949), and *Samadhi* (*Monument of Remembrance,* directed by Ramesh Saigal 1950). These were apparently hastily produced but drove home to their audiences the nationalist sentiment that ruled the day (Dwyer and Patel 2002: 140). However, there were also commercial films which inhabited the

spaces of popular imagination. *Kalpana*'s release coincided with the arrival of the spectacular in Indian cinema, and the most striking and relevant example is *Chandralekha,* directed by S.S. Vasan and released in the same year as *Kalpana*. The irony is that these two films, created in the same studio in Chennai at the very same time, could not have met with more disparate fates.

Chandralekha was a bilingual (Tamil and Hindi) period film that employed magnificent sets and costumes and exuded a 'Hollywood-style orientalism', and which became the yardstick against which all mass entertainment spectacular cinema after Independence was measured (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1999: 310). It was an all-India box office hit and its spectacular climax scene, the dance on the drums, is considered by some to be one of the most extravagant scenes in the history of world cinema (Thoraval 2000: 102–3). They were very different types of film: *Chandralekha* is considered to be escapist entertainment at its best, a song and dance extravaganza which tried to draw attention away from the harsh realities of war and Partition[16] (Dwyer and Patel 2002: 145). *Kalpana* attempted the very opposite, drawing attention to the social problems that plagued India at the time. *Kalpana* perhaps failed commercially in part because its social message was too sombre and dark and because it strayed far beyond the accepted formula of popular films. It may have been unable to win over its audience in southern India because its music and dance belonged neither to mainstream film dances, nor to the orthodox classical arts parameter. The film was a misfit, with no precedent and nothing else to compare it to, and it paid the price for this at the box office.

Uday Shankar's *Kalpana* presents any historian looking at early twentieth-century dance in India with an important key which opens a door to an alternative movement in dance performance. This emerged in the nationalist era alongside the Indian 'classical' forms. Through *Kalpana*, Shankar attempted to identify himself as an Indian *amongst* Indians and *to* Indians. What is constantly reiterated through the film's images, scenes, dance sequences and lyrics is that Shankar as dance-artist is from India, lives and makes work in India and is acutely aware and alive to its strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, there is absolutely no doubt about his identity, and analogically, no doubt about his dance as being truly Indian: this is the political statement and defensive gesture made by Shankar as dancer, storyteller

and film director through his film. Yet, Shankar's choreographies did not truly belong to a local or national Indian camp. It can still be argued that through *Kalpana* Shankar only managed to prove even more clearly his transnational modernity – although he tried very hard to reference nationalist frameworks.

It appears that through *Kalpana* Shankar also wished to perpetuate the legacy of his own dance. This attempt to archive his own past as well as the contemporary present is successful to an extent. Shankar is able to document his own life experiences creatively, thus making the film a visual record of his own life and art, which would remain for posterity. One needs to be careful, however, in eulogising this personal attempt at preserving one's own individual history as well as the national present. Shankar's archive is not a record of his spontaneous memory; he uses, rather, selective and constructed memory. The contents of his archive, the film *Kalpana,* suggests both creativity and compromise. The film indicates, in more ways than one, that Shankar performs his personal memories as a strategy to achieve belonging in the world outside.

Kalpana may be seen as a product of Shankar's individual memory, which transcends Euro-American othering and proudly embraces alterity whilst simultaneously situating itself within the space of Indian nationalism. Through *Kalpana,* Shankar remakes, reconstructs, and recasts himself as a protection from the challenges and conflict of nationalism. He does so largely through the medium of his personal memories. Shankar's memories empower him as a remembering subject and inscribe validity and authenticity in his experiences. The Indian nationalist cultural project in the 1940s was making Shankar and his art redundant. He had to re-invent himself, his career, his identity. This crisis of redundancy leads to the most modern of his dance works – *Kalpana*. The film's vein of modernism is defined by this expression of individual crisis and conflict. *Kalpana* is a dance film that displays a complex interlacing of the global with the local, transcending purist nationalist concerns in favour of a hybrid dialogue with international modernity. It remains an invaluable record of the processes of alternative cultural identity formations played out through the medium of dance in twentieth-century India.

3
Shanti Bardhan and Dance as Protest

By 1944, Uday Shankar's Almora Centre had closed down, triggering a splintering of ways amongst Shankar and his dance associates. However, some of Shankar's company members and students continued to work as independent dance-makers and one of this new generation of choreographers was Shanti Bardhan (1916–54). Bardhan's contribution to modern dance in India through the 'dance ballets' that he created in the 1940s and 1950s is only sporadically acknowledged in books and articles (Bardhan 1992; Vatsyayan 2003). His active involvement with the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) is unacknowledged in the lively scholarship that exists on IPTA's contribution to modern Indian drama (Bharucha 1983, 1993, 1998; Bhattacharya 1983; Bhatia 2004; Dalmia 2006). IPTA's dance drama productions have featured rarely, if ever at all, in these studies and have also escaped the attention of scholars writing on Indian dance in the past five decades. This silence is due in part to Bardhan's untimely death at the age of thirty-eight, to the lack of available resources and documentation of his choreographic oeuvre and partly perhaps to the discomfort that many left-oriented Indian scholars may have felt in writing about a dancer who switched political allegiances during his brief but eventful career. Recent years have witnessed a renaissance in scholarship on IPTA primarily through the lens of gender, with scholars such as Dutt and Munsi (2010) and Singh (2011) privileging the narratives of IPTA's women performers, many of whom danced in Bardhan's choreographic works. Yet, the silence persists on the form and content of these dance dramas that were scripted out of the revolutionary dancing bodies of men and

women who embodied transformation in India's journey towards political autonomy.

This chapter recuperates the highly political past of Indian modern dance by focusing on Bardhan's choreographic output for IPTA, the Indian National Theatre (INT) and his independent company the Little Ballet Troupe (LBT) during the 1940s and 1950s. It begins by following Bardhan's movements across the Indian subcontinent as a performer whose choreographic journeys eventually led him to Uday Shankar's company and the Almora Centre. The chapter then maps the rising tide of anti-colonialism, which carried Bardhan into the nationwide cultural movement known as IPTA and organised by the Communist Party of India. Through primary research material in the form of in-person interviews, newspaper reviews from the period and existing scholarship on the IPTA movement, the chapter revisits the protest dances that were performed by a collective of men and women whose travelling and moving bodies traversed vast geographical and linguistic territories in the newly emerging Indian nation-state. IPTA and Bardhan's choreographic output are analysed in the context of a growing Indian cultural nationalism through an examination of the colliding and congruent agendas pertaining to race, class and gender. Bardhan's post-IPTA career and his final choreographic productions are also examined through a critical discussion of collusive, complicitous and resistive forms of embodiment. The chapter observes IPTA's work alongside the Euro-American phenomenon of leftist dance and examines whether Marxism enables a feminist politics to emerge through IPTA's work. Finally, the chapter returns to the problem of appropriation and ethical exchange introduced by scholars such as Bharucha (1983; 1993) and asks whether IPTA and Bardhan's reconstitution of 'folk' dancing bodies offers an ethical and ultimately legitimate picture of dance modernity.

Dancing the revolution

Born on 8 June 1916 in the Comilla region of eastern Bengal (which lies in present-day Bangladesh), Bardhan showed signs of rebellion from a very early age by expressing his interest in dance, an art form not considered worthy of attention or respect by either his father Brojendra Chandra Bardhan (a legal advocate) or Comilla's society at large. However, his determination to learn dance brought him

to a dance teacher (name unknown) who for several years taught Bardhan the art of the little-known Tippera dance techniques.[1] Shanti Bardhan then went on to train in Manipuri dance under Guru Amobi Singh in Imphal (Manipur) for two years. On his return to Comilla, Bardhan spent a further six months honing his newly acquired dance skills and creating dance compositions of his own before moving to Calcutta in 1938. In the next two years, through impresario Haren Ghosh who noticed Bardhan's talent in his performance at the First International Science Congress held in Calcutta in 1938, Bardhan first toured north India with a newly formed troupe comprising artists from Calcutta, then went on a second tour of India with his Guru Amobi Singh and other Manipuri dancers. It was on Haren Ghosh's recommendation that in 1940 Uday Shankar invited to his Almora Centre Guru Amobi Singh as a resident teacher and Shanti Bardhan as a troupe member.[2]

Shanti Bardhan remained with Shankar's performing troupe in Almora until the centre closed down in 1944. Following the advice of the poet Sumitranandan Pant, who had been a part of the Almora Centre's activities, Bardhan went to Bombay and met P.C. Joshi, General Secretary of the Communist Party of India at the time. It was for the Communist Party's cultural programme that Bardhan created his first major choreographic work, *Bhookha Hai Bengal* (*Hungry Bengal*, 1944), based on and in aid of the victims of the devastating man-made famine that raged in Bengal between 1942 and 1946 (see below for more details). *Bhookha Hai Bengal* proved to be a major event in the cultural and political life of India, moving and stirring audiences and raising considerable sums for famine relief. Spurred on by the potency and reach of Bardhan's dance work, the Communist Party of India created a Central Cultural Squad in Bombay, which became part of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) and had Bardhan as its director. Thus began Bardhan's association with one of the most politically outspoken and culturally active nationalist outfits of India during the 1940s. To understand the historical and political framework within which Bardhan's work was situated, it is crucial to briefly revisit the Indian anti-colonial era, which framed the philosophy, constitution and ideology of the Indian People's Theatre Association.

By the beginning of the 1930s, the Indian nationalist movement, with its various strands of violent and non-violent forms of agitation,

was gaining momentum. Chief among these was Gandhi's Civil Disobedience Movement in 1930, which ushered in a wave of anti-imperial non-violent protest from various sections of the masses across India. However, in spite of the message of unification of all Indian people against the colonial rulers, Gandhi's Congress Party was not entirely successful in coalescing into one unified whole the diverse political parties and philosophies that had emerged in India since the *Swadeshi* nationalist movement of 1905. One of the Congress Party's most vociferous opponents was the Communist Party of India (CPI), which formed in 1920 at the Tashkent Military School in Russia and was soon affiliated to Lenin's Communist International (Comintern). Early Communism arrived in India from Soviet Russia and took up the cause of anti-British imperialism. After the nationwide commotion surrounding the Meerut Conspiracy Case of 1929, in which the CPI was accused and suppressed by the colonial government for attempting to replace the British Raj with a communist regime, the Communist Party of India became a well-known political outfit towards which many Indian students and radical thinkers gravitated. In eastern India, for instance, revolutionary terrorists from Bengal facing detention in the prisons of the Andaman Islands emerged as Marxist converts (Datta Gupta 2006).

By the early 1940s, political differences between the Congress party and the CPI were openly declared. In 1936, attempts had been made to create a United National Front so as to bring the socialists of Congress and the communists together in an anti-imperialist pact against the British colonial government but this was not to last for long. With the outbreak of World War II, this brief union was completely shattered. After the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union by Adolf Hitler in 1941, the CPI's support for the Soviet Union was, in effect, extended to the Allied Forces of Britain and America; the anti-imperial stand turned instead into the CPI's anti-fascist 'People's War', resulting in differences with the Congress's anti-British line of thought. The splitting of the Anti-Imperialist United National Front and the subsequent confusion caused by fractured political ideologies was, however, countered and saved by the Communist Party's continued commitment to the cause of 'the people'. The founding of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) on 25 May 1943 was one of the attempts made by the CPI to unite the fragmented left-wing across India through an organised nationwide cultural movement (Datta Gupta 2006; Chatterjee 2004).

Underlying the desire to create a mass movement that would address the contemporary concerns of the common people of India were severe social problems, the greatest of which was the famine in Bengal (1942–46). The colonial government's large-scale export of food grains to feed British troops in Europe and Japan led to an intense scarcity of food in the rural areas of Bengal and millions of peasants and labourers died of starvation. The famine gave rise in turn to mass migration, which saw thousands of hungry villagers from rural areas flocking to big cities such as Calcutta. In October 1943 alone, 3363 corpses had to be disposed of in Calcutta (Sen 1981). Such widespread devastation and man-made calamity shocked and enraged intellectuals and artists both within and outside Bengal, who felt that the hour had come to protest against the injustice meted out by the government to its colonised subjects. The rage and the protest began to be enacted through the medium of theatre, music, poetry and dance; political agitation began to take cultural form. In the words of theatre historian and critic Samik Bandyopadhyay:

> The activities of the IPTA represent the first coherent socialised initiative in the theatre as opposed to the earlier commercialism or private patronage. The IPTA started as an affiliate of the Anti-Fascist Writers and Artists Association, organised in 1942 as a broadly based left-wing front. Group singing at public gatherings had been the first activity of the IPTA; its involvement in theatre grew out of a humanistic reaction to the sufferings caused by the man-made famine in Bengal in 1943–44 and resulted in the first major IPTA production, *Navanna (The New Harvest)*, written by Bijan Bhattacharya, who co-directed it with Shombhu Mitra in 1944.
>
> (Bandyopadhyay 1971: 239)

The IPTA in Bengal, along with the Friends of the Soviet Union (established in 1941) and the Anti-Fascist Writers and Artists Association (established in 1942), began to operate in earnest from 46 Dharmatala Street in Calcutta, reflecting on the one hand the domestic conflict between Indian nationalism and British imperialism, and on the other hand the international tensions between the Soviet Union and Nazi fascism. The IPTA' s agenda was to rediscover and revive indigenous performing art forms, associating them with contemporary socio-political events and making them accessible for the masses in both

urban and rural contexts. To understand the philosophy that lay at the core of the IPTA, we may look at a part of the message from its founder members published in the organisation's Bulletin no. 1 in July 1943:

> [T]he Indian People's Theatre Association has been formed to co-ordinate and strengthen all the progressive tendencies that have so far manifested themselves in the nature of drama, songs and dances. It is not a movement which is imposed from above but one which has its roots deep down in the cultural awakening of the masses of India; nor is it a movement which discards our rich cultural heritage, but one which seeks to revive the lost in that heritage by re-interpreting, adopting and integrating it with the most significant facts of our people's lives and aspirations in the present epoch. It is a movement which seeks to make of our arts the expression and the organiser of our people's struggle for freedom, economic justice and a democratic culture. It stands for the defence of culture against Imperialism and Fascism and for enlightening the masses about the causes and solution of the problems facing them. It tries to quicken their awareness of unity and their passion for creating a better and just world order.
>
> (Pradhan 1979: 149–50)

It becomes evident that IPTA attempted to address real and immediate issues such as social justice, individual and national freedom and basic human rights through embodied forms of artistic expression. There was a clear departure from the bourgeois elitist model of performance that ruled conventional colonial theatres in Bengal at that time, and a conscious alignment with indigenous folk models of theatre, music and dance. IPTA's aim was not to serve the appetites and proclivities of an urban elite theatre audience by being a 'movement imposed from above' but rather to encourage and support art forms originating from the grass roots level. In theatre historian Minoti Chatterjee's words, the IPTA 'opened up several new possibilities, more specifically for the performing arts, rediscovering several folk forms and traditions driven to oblivion under the valorisation of colonial cultural norms and the consequent denigration of indigenous aesthetic values' (2004: 219).

This return to folk idioms during the upsurge of cultural nationalism in south Asia has remarkable similarities with arts practice

in Russia during the pre- and post-Bolshevik revolutionary era. In Russia, revolutionary theatre's roots were entrenched in the plays and pastimes of peasant life and folk culture. The Russian fairgrounds of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries became a fertile breeding ground for pre-revolutionary popular drama in which clowns, acrobats, the *raek* peepshow men and puppet showmen provided a combination of topical commentary and entertainment, and frequently ridiculed figures of authority. In the post-revolutionary period in Russia, two cultural movements endeavoured to take art to the people – the Proletkult (the Proletarian Cultural and Educational Organisation, established in 1917), which was characterised by the spirit of collectivism and enabled the working classes to practise art forms; and the Soviet Agitprop movement of the 1920s Russian intelligentsia which used folk theatre and art forms for 'agitation and propaganda' of the socialist cause (Leach 1994). The success of socialist realism in Russian art and literature was undoubtedly an inspiration for the IPTA; its blend of folk art and politics in India reflected similar if not identical interests.

A brief look at the aims and objectives of the IPTA adopted at the All India IPTA Conference held in Bombay in September 1943, enables us to return to the notion of 'authenticity' although with a clearly different agenda:

> (i) To foster the development of the theatre, music, dancing and other fine arts and literature in India, as an authentic expression of the social realities of our epoch and the inspirer of our people's efforts for the achievement of peace, democracy, and cultural progress;
> (ii) To provide healthy and educative entertainments to the people in India, through all available forms of art;
> (iii) To organise schools, lectures, libraries, and exhibitions, and to print and publish magazines, pamphlets and books and other literature for the purpose of training artists and imparting education to the public on all matters pertaining to Indian culture.
>
> (Pradhan 1979: 253)

IPTA seemed clearly uninterested in authenticity in terms of aesthetic or formal qualities of performance; instead they privileged capturing 'an authentic expression of social realities'. This marks

them as following a parallel trajectory to the Indian classical dance establishment which had denied Uday Shankar legitimacy as an 'authentic' Indian dancer (see Chapter 2). As the cultural wing of the Communist Party of India, IPTA's objective was essentially two-fold: to give potency to local indigenous art forms, and through the medium of these art forms to mirror contemporary realities, promote an awareness of human rights, spread patriotic fervour and foster a spirit of unity. To achieve this, it set up 'squads' in eight different Indian states – Bengal, Bihar, the United Provinces, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Karnataka – and at a structural level comprised of an All-India Committee and eight state-level Provincial Committees.

The IPTA managed to draw a range of talents from the fields of theatre, dance, music, literature, film and art from across the length and breadth of these eight Indian states. Some of those involved in the organisation's work later went on to become luminaries in their respective areas of arts practice: among these were filmmakers K.A. Abbas, Balraj Sahni, Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen; playwrights and directors Habib Tanvir, Shambhu Mitra and Utpal Dutt; poets Sumitranandan Pant, Kaifi Azmi and Harindranath Chattopadhyay; musicians Salil Chowdhury and Ravi Shankar; artists including Chittaprasad; and dancers including Shanti Bardhan, Narendra Sharma and Prabhat Ganguli. Through films, poetry, music, art, theatre and dance, the IPTA movement began to rouse and provoke the masses across India into resistive thought and action. Its key players were not only urban educated intellectuals but also folk artists and peasants. With its slogan, 'People's Theatre Stars the People', IPTA roped in performers and artists from villages, many of whom were agricultural labourers and peasants, and in their cultural programmes consistently featured folk songs and dances from different states, which adopted contemporary socio-political themes as their content.

Revisiting early IPTA performances

The highlights of the First Congress of the CPI's cultural programme held in Bombay between 23 May and 1 June 1943 included the Andhra Cultural Squad's repertoire. Led by their leader Comrade Nagabhushanam, this squad presented collective dances such as *Bhajans* and the *Kolata*, along with indigenous ballad forms such as *Burrakatha*.[3]

Several dances featured items such as *Medicine Man*, the *Sanyasi* and the *Madiga,* which were each performed with current political references: the medicine man, instead of suggesting the usual herbs and roots to treat ailments, in his dance 'offers pills to exterminate the Nazis and powders to choke the imperialists'; the *Sanyasi* (religious mendicant) danced his pilgrimage wherein he witnessed the defeat of the Nazis and the Japanese; and the *Madiga* (an untouchable village-crier) announced through his song and dance the first Congress of the CPI. Even the lullabies of the Andhra women performers featured lyrics that assured their babies that their fathers and brothers would prevent the Japanese from treading their soil (Pradhan 1979: 194–9).

The revival of folk idioms in IPTA's dance-drama productions shared some elements with the model of folk-inspired ballets in Soviet Russia during the 1930s. Known as *drambalets* (translated into English as drama-ballets), these productions, which were staged during Stalin's reign of terror, were monitored and controlled by the Soviet state and tackled contemporary themes on socialist realism such as race relations and war, which invariably glorified Soviet society. Works such as *The Flames of Paris* (1932, set during the French Revolution) and Pushkin's *The Fountain of Bakhchisarai* (1934) were performed for the masses and not for elite audiences (Andre 1998). Reynolds and McCormick (2003: 254–6) suggest that in 1930s Soviet Russia, the function of dance was to serve the state, leading to a canonisation of folk dance as the true expression of the people. We can notice a similar valorisation of the folk in IPTA, but the essential difference between the two is that while dance in Stalin's Soviet Union was virtually state-owned and regulated, IPTA operated from outside the control of colonial state machinery and worked assiduously towards critiquing the colonial authorities. Anthony Shay's (2002) suggestion that Soviet Russia and Eastern Europe's state sponsored folk dance ensembles propagated the nationalist message of unity-in-diversity to some degree echoes IPTA's activities. However, the work of IPTA in the 1940s can be seen as a precursor to what in the post-Independence era of the 1950s became the Indian state-sponsored folk dance ensembles.

The IPTA Bengal Squad's performers collaboratively created one of the major milestone productions of the 1940s, with the staging of playwright Bijan Bhattacharya's *Nabanna* in October 1944. Set against the background of the Bengal famine, the play followed turbulent events in the life of a peasant, Pradhan Samaddar, and his

family as they faced the food crisis.[4] The Bengal famine provided a major thrust to creative work amongst activist-artists at this time, and in 1944, the General Secretary of the IPTA in Bombay, P.C. Joshi, took the decision that a dance production would be created, pulling in IPTA activist-artists from different states, who would then perform this production across India to raise money for famine victims. It was at this time that Shanti Bardhan was asked to join the IPTA as its choreographer.

The dancers who became a part of IPTA-Bombay in its 1944 production of *Bhookha Hai Bengal* (referred to as *Voice of Bengal* as well as *Hungry Bengal*) were brought together from nine different Indian states: Shanta Gandhi, Dina Sanghvi (later Pathak) and Guniyal Jhaveri from Gujarat; Rekha Jain from Uttar Pradesh; Prem Dhawan from Punjab; Appuni Kartha and Gangadharan from Kerala; Leela Sundarayya from Maharashtra; Reddy from Andhra Pradesh; Nagesh from Karnataka; Dashrathlal from Bihar; and Bhupati Nandy, Satyajiban Bhattacharya, Panu Pal, Benoy Roy, Reba Roy (later Roy Chowdhury), Ruby Dutta and Priti Sarkar from Bengal (see Figure 3.1). The majority of the dancers were untrained amateur performers (after all, dance academies imparting formal training in dance arts sprang up in India only in the post-Independence era). Some came from rather unconventional backgrounds: Dashrathlal, for instance, was a tram conductor in Calcutta before he joined the IPTA. Yet, each was defined by a fiery commitment to the IPTA's cause as well as a willingness to embody resistance to colonial subjection. The trained performers of the troupe all hailed from Uday Shankar's Almora Centre: they were Sachin Shankar, Prabhat Ganguli, Narendra Sharma, Annadiprasad, Pinaki, Ghanshyam and Sushil Dasgupta. The responsibility for direction and choreography was conferred upon Shanti Bardhan and Abani Dasgupta was responsible for musical arrangements. The production also had a drama element, since theatre and dance were integrated in all IPTA productions and the actors in this part of the production were Shambhu Mitra, Kalyani Kumaramangalam, Nemichand Jain, Usha Dutt and Jaya Roy.

It is possible to piece together some of the moments from *Bhookha Hai Bengal* through the recollections of IPTA performers and members. Reba Roy Chowdhury (1925–2007) came to Bombay from Bengal in 1944 and became part of IPTA's productions.[5] She has left

Figure 3.1 IPTA Central Squad Manipuri Dance (1945): Reba Roy, Rekha Jain, Dina Gandhi, Ruby Dutta, Appunni Kartha, Nagesh, Prem Dhawan. Photo courtesy of IPTA–Mumbai archives

behind an invaluable autobiography in Bengali (Roy Chowdhury 1999), which suggests that Bardhan choreographed a powerful dance piece on landlords torturing peasants during famine. Moreover, Homi Sethna who later became an executive committee member of IPTA-Bombay recollects how he along with other audience members was thoroughly moved by the *Dance of Death* when he saw it performed in an open-air ground behind Charni Road station in Bombay in 1944. As one of the dance items choreographed for *Bhookha Hai Bengal*, this item had a dancer as a skeleton, 'painted with white fluorescent paint on a black tight-fitting costume which was not visible to the audience. It was accompanied by the shrill and piercing singing of Priti Sarkar "*Bhookha Hai Bengal- Bh[oo]kha Hai Bengal Bapu, Bhookha Hai Bengal*"' (Bardhan 1992: 107).[6] *Bhookha Hai Bengal* was performed in numerous towns and cities across Gujarat and Maharashtra and Shanti Bardhan's choreography created such

a stir that, at the end of 1944, the CPI's Secretary P.C. Joshi decided to create a Central Squad of the IPTA with Bardhan as its director.[7]

From its address in the Communist Party headquarters at the Red Flag Hall on Khetwadi Main Road, the Central Squad moved to a bungalow named Khusru Lodge in Andheri East, a suburb in Bombay, where work began in earnest for IPTA's other forthcoming productions. Reba Roy Chowdhury's autobiography (1999) gives a detailed account of the spartan living conditions of this group of performing artists, in what became a sort of commune in which the performers shared bare essentials, rationed food and maintained a strict working discipline. Taking the routine followed in Uday Shankar's Almora Centre a step further, Bardhan's group of performers started the day at 7am; dancers as well as musicians went through rigorous movement exercises, rehearsed for long hours, stitched and painted their own costumes and also carried out household chores like cooking, cleaning, washing and so on. Rehearsals began for the Central Squad's next production *Spirit of India* and Reba Roy Chowdhury recalls how during this time the image of the 'Call of the Drum', which later became the IPTA logo, materialised on the rehearsal floor

Figure 3.2 IPTA Central Squad performers. Photo courtesy of IPTA–Mumbai archives

before her very eyes: as Bardhan moved with sustained grace, power and rhythm, IPTA's artist Chittaprasad busily sketched the dancer playing on the drum (Roy Chowdhury 1999: 17). The 'Call of the Drum' became the introductory opening dance sequence to *Spirit of India*, which was a 45-minute dance drama weaving together nine dance items that explored the narrative of the struggle of the common man against the feudal landlord system (Figure 3.2).

Spirit of India was first performed in 1945 at the Cowasji Jehangir Hall in Bombay and subsequently in several major theatres in Calcutta including the Globe, the New Empire, the Elite Cinema, the Minerva, the Kalika and the EBR Manson Institute (currently known as the Netaji Subhas Institute). Although nothing substantial can be gathered about this production's performance from available records, except for its central theme and the fact that the production was a considerable success wherever it was performed, Reba Roy Chowdhury's account does provides some information regarding the narrative thread as well as the component parts of this choreographic work. She writes:

> *Spirit of India*'s theme was around the arrival of the British, internal war, black-marketeering, famine, riots and communal divide, and it would end in a people's revolution. The performance would start with the song 'Sare Jahan Se Accha'. Then there would be the 'Call of the Drum'. Shanti-da would emerge from behind a gigantic drum, performing powerful movements, and as soon as he would strike the drum, a group of boys and girls dressed as Rajput warriors and brandishing swords would enter the stage as revolutionaries.
>
> (1999: 17–18; my translation)

Sare Jahan Se Accha Hindusthan Hamara ('Of all the world, our India is the best'), an intensely patriotic song penned by the poet Iqbal (and one of the most popular songs with Indian nationalists) along with dancers dressed as Rajput warriors, legendary for their valour and heroic strength, boldly spelt revolution. The appeal of this production to the popular imagination of a nation in the making through a material layering of the real (Bardhan's solo body) and the historical (Rajput warriors) becomes clear.

The IPTA Central Squad's success with *Spirit of India* encouraged Bardhan to start work on his next choreographic venture titled *India*

Immortal (1946). This new work, according to Appuni Kartha, who was both the squad cook and performer, had as its central theme 'India's golden age coming to an ignominious end at the hands of British imperialism' (Bardhan 1992: 66). The production included the addition of an important artist-collaborator. Ravindra (Ravi) Shankar, Uday Shankar's youngest brother, musically trained in playing the *sitar*, joined the IPTA's Central Squad in early 1946 and it was under his music direction that *India Immortal*'s musical score materialised. In terms of production quality, *India Immortal* was an improvement on the previous *Spirit of India,* which had been put together rather hastily and according to some critics looked quite unpolished. According to one review by critic S. Sastri who saw the performance of the *India Immortal* production at the Elite Theatre, Calcutta in 1946:

> Not since Uday Shankar's 'Labour and Machinery' and 'The Rhythm of Life' have I seen such a successful attempt to present a vast canvas of events lucidly expressed through the medium of dance. Here are a series of colourful and spectacular interpretative dances linked together so beautifully that we feel the entire cavalcade of history passing before our eyes – all the way from the Vedic Age, down through the Medieval times, the coming of the Muslims to synthesis of Hindu and Muslim culture, the inroads of imperialism and the resultant confusion and impasse. Compared to their earlier shows I found the IPTA's 'India Immortal' better visualized, more polished and matured.
>
> (Sastri 1946)

Through *India Immortal*, Bardhan attempted to compress into a 45-minute dance production, key events from India's ancient, medieval and modern history. According to Gul Bardhan, Shanti Bardhan and his team of performers studied for months the history of India so as to comprehend the subject matter of their production and communicate it effectively through their dance. To give this broad spectrum of linked historical events a physical form, Bardhan 'studied the mood and movement of history' (1992: 22), which meant departing from the idea of 'pure' movement forms and allowing instead for new combinations of movements to emerge. In the words of the

noted Indian author Mulk Raj Anand, this interest in the fluidity of history and dance forms met with criticism:

> The critics, of whom there are too many in our country, did not easily accept the challenge of an art-form which was destined, perhaps, to extend itself beyond the classical confines. But the combinations and the inspirations which had fused the primitive statement of the peasant with the conscious truth about our slavery and which charged the liberating forces, imaginatively, cast a spell on everyone who came face to face with this new dynamic creation.
>
> (Quoted in Bardhan 1992: 37)

India Immortal, along with a few choreographed sequences for K.A. Abbas's 1946 film *Dharti Ke Lal* (*Children of the Earth*) were the last works Bardhan made for IPTA. Revisiting the IPTA phase of Bardhan's career offers us the opportunity to notice a political and aesthetic movement that ran parallel to the nationalist reconstruction of Indian classical dance. Several innovative and modern strategies can be identified in the processes of dance-making in IPTA: collectives of men and women who resisted colonial theatre forms and instead embraced communities of egalitarian artistic activities; bodily responses that merged a concern for the traumatic experience of colonisation with an interest in international communist philosophy; choreography that emerged out of an intermingling of old and new movement forms from across regional and linguistic borders. The agency, mobility and autonomy of IPTA's dancing bodies offer us an undeniable view of twentieth-century Indian dance as a modern, embodied form of protest and socio-political revolution.

The nation and its bodies: collisions and collusion

In 1946, ideological differences led to Bardhan's dissociation from IPTA's Central Squad. Various suggestions have been put forward as to what caused the breakdown in the relationship: some, like Homi Sethna (in Bardhan 1992), suggest that Bardhan and filmmakers Prithviraj Kapoor and K.A. Abbas refused to allow Party diktats to govern their creative work. Playwright Bijan Bhattacharya emphasises

the difference between artistic work and propaganda, stating that in spite of the IPTA's direct political affiliations: 'We did not propagate the Party line. The country and its common people were our subjects. Our job was to prepare the soil; it was the job of the political people to sow the seeds. We were preparing and enlightening the people from a broad humanistic point of view' (quoted in Bandyopadhyay 1971: 239). Yet, according to Samik Bandyopadhyay, although IPTA had its own self-sufficient organisation and did not require the CPI's assistance in its day-to-day functioning, it gradually became involved in party politics, which led to organisational and functional complications (ibid.).

Reba Roy Chowdhury (1999) adds nuance to the argument when she avers in her autobiography that with the arrival of Ravi Shankar, Central Squad productions began to lean very heavily towards classicism and even the dance items began to neglect the folk orientation of presentation. This contrasted with the IPTA's objectives and forced the CPI leaders to isolate Bardhan and Shankar. It may be argued that the hastily put-together amateurish productions of the IPTA perhaps frustrated artists such as Ravi Shankar who had been used to the immaculate professional approach of his brother Uday Shankar's productions. Theatre historian Rustom Bharucha finds in Ravi Shankar's IPTA role not the 'voice of the people' but the 'voice of the Artist – that particular luminary among cultural workers who, perhaps for the first time in the history of his *parampara* (tradition), was compelled to assert a messianic role for himself' (1998: 45). Bharucha asserts the self-consciousness of the modern artist such as Shankar as the primary cause behind the IPTA split in Bengal and Maharashtra.

Whether the rift was the result of arguments about propaganda versus art or collective versus individual creativity, Bardhan, Ravi Shankar, Narendra Sharma and Sachin Shankar left the Central Squad in 1946 and, given their records as artists of merit, were immediately given support by the rival Congress socialist's Indian National Theatre (INT). At the behest of Congress Party member Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay who was president of the INT in Bombay, Shanti Bardhan agreed to present a production for the delegates of the forthcoming First Asian Relations Conference to be held in New Delhi. The conference was designed to unite Asian countries, inviting thirty-two delegations from across Asia, and was seen as a continuation of India's freedom struggle. On 9 March 1947, five months

before India's independence from British rule, Bardhan's *Discovery of India*, based on Jawaharlal Nehru's book of the same name, was performed at the conference's inaugural show. Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964), then heading the interim government in India, had written the book while in prison for his involvement in Gandhi's anti-imperialist Quit India movement between August 1942 and June 1945. Written between April and September 1944, the book could be read less as a factual re-telling of historical events but than an exercise in patriotism; in Benjamin Zachariah's words,

> [t]he text was a strange conglomeration of diverse styles and genres. It was in part a narrative, in part reflections on his own life and his 'discovery of India' as one who had approached India, with his British educational background, almost as an alien himself; in part an attempt to think through some of the problems of constructing a coherent national identity.
>
> (2004: 119)

Bardhan's production, a creative re-telling through dance of Nehru's sketches from Indian history, attempted to squeeze the entire historical experience of a nation into 90 minutes. The production divided critics and audiences.[8] The critic D.C. Shah complained in the *Sunday Standard* of the production's overemphasis on colonial British rule in India, writing that 'the producers, in their zeal to exploit the Nationalist sentiment, have concentrated more on the shorter and more familiar period of British rule, which affords a greater scope for "playing to the gallery"' (Shah 1947). The *Morning Herald* of Bombay ran a rather scathing article written by its editor and titled it 'A Dramatised Fraud on India', lashing out at the propagandist nature of the production:

> That this multi-purposed piece of propaganda should have been made the subject of a ballet portends evil days for Indian Art. That Art critics should wax garrulous over this bit of tricoloured impertinence and go out of the artistic way to praise it as a 'Must-Be-Seen' ballet argues a disconcerting lack of balance in the field of Art criticism. We have not the slightest desire to cover the ground where an Art Critic alone is allowed to tread. In this series of articles, we mean to analyse the ballet in its real non-artistic aspect as

> an inevitable part of the Congress propaganda machinery, because it is nothing else.
>
> (Anon. 1947)

On top of the accusation of being propagandist, film historian Vinayak Purohit suggested that the book and dance production proclaimed 'the internal unity of the nation so as to camouflage the real activity of partitioning, dividing and vivisecting the country', and that Bardhan's choreography was 'a series of pretty and sweet episodes, electrically strung together, a panoramic tourist delight, a potpourri of styles and a melange of extravagant gestures' (quoted in Bardhan 1992: 104). *The Discovery of India* played to packed houses and was considered a stage success (Bardhan, 1992: 85–90), but critical reviews from the period suggest that the political agenda overshadowed the artistic merit of the choreographic work.

At the end of a one-year contract, Bardhan and Ravi Shankar left the Indian National Theatre and along with two other Shankar brothers Debendra and Rajendra, formed an independent company called the India Renaissance Artists. This move away from the INT may be interpreted as a sign of Bardhan's refusal to ally himself further with any political party where his creativity would be used as a mouthpiece for the propaganda of the party's political ideologies, and where he would have constantly to compromise his own vision to meet dominant party diktats. The India Renaissance Artists organisation was, however, short-lived; in spite of a year of performance and touring in India, during which they largely revised and re-presented *Discovery of India*, the company began to grapple with differences between its members, which led to a bitter legal imbroglio.[9] Broken in spirit and shouldering huge financial losses, Bardhan withdrew from the company of the Shankar brothers and left for Calcutta to take refuge with his eldest brother Manmatha Bardhan. Here he was diagnosed with tuberculosis and was sent to Kasauli sanatorium in Himachal Pradesh for treatment. In 1951, after a year and a half at the sanatorium, Shanti Bardhan returned to Bombay, recovered yet still bearing the scars of severe ill-health: he was without a lung and five of his ribs, overweight and almost a cripple. In spite of his physical handicap, his former troupe member Gul coaxed Bardhan back into choreographing for the stage. In the next three years, battling financial insecurity and failing health, Shanti Bardhan created

two major productions of innovative modern dance choreography, the *Ramayana* (1952) and *Panchatantra* (1954) which premiered after Bardhan's death.

With steady support from some of his former troupe members from his IPTA days – Appuni Kartha, Dashrathlal, Abani Dasgupta and Gul – Shanti Bardhan gradually went back to creating work for the stage and screen. The newly gathered unit of dancers and musicians moved to a fishermen's village in Trombay in the outskirts of Bombay. In a place called Ram Mandir (it was actually an old temple site), with a meagre amount of cash, some utensils and a small gas burner, and along with a young boy called Gyan, a girl called Devaki and two dogs, Shanti and Gul Bardhan occupied a small room with an attached large hall. Here the Bardhans established the Little Ballet Troupe (LBT) in January 1952. Bardhan started with small dance items such as *Roomal* (*Handkerchief*) and *Brij Lila*; these and other short choreographies were performed by LBT members along with Uday Shankar's former dance partner Simkie, as part of the Indian Independence Day eve celebrations held at the Taj-Bombay in August 1952. Apparently, whatever performance fee she received for her performance, Simkie donated to Bardhan's Little Ballet Troupe (Bardhan, in-person interview, 2006).

For his next production, Bardhan chose the popular ancient Indian epic the *Ramayana* as the narrative for his dance. However, instead of presenting it in the usual dance drama format, Bardhan drew inspiration from the puppet shows that he had seen during his childhood days in Comilla and the Rajasthani puppet theatre model of folk performance. In place of puppeteers manipulating small string puppets, Bardhan had his dancers play the role of puppets, making them move and dance as puppets do. Parallels may be found in the experiments of the Russian choreographer Mikhail Fokine whose *Petrouchka* (1911) for the Ballet Russes was a twentieth-century symbolist adaptation of the popular Russian folk-puppet character Petrushka (Garafola and Baer 1999). Interestingly enough, Petrushka had also been appropriated by the Agitprop movement in 1920s Russia, during which puppet groups such as the Red Petrushka collective carried out educational and propaganda work for the Soviet state (Kelly 1990). It is hard to imagine that Bardhan was unaware of these experiments in the Soviet Union, not least because the puppet masks for *Ramayana* were made out of the cardboard boxes in which magazines from Soviet Russia

arrived at Bardhan's residence (Bardhan, in-person interview, 2006). By introducing the use of large puppet masks and costumes for his dancers, Bardhan discarded *abhinaya* (facial expression) and *mudra* (hand gestures) prevalent in classical Indian dancing. Instead his focus was on the spatial relations between dancers, group choreography, formations and patterns of movement. Dance historian Kapila Vatsyayan has said about Bardhan's *Ramayana*:

> He chose for this ballet one single movement and limited himself to it. Through this limitation, he projected the story of the *Ramayana* and gave it a unique character. The work was refreshing as it was new. This approach was a departure from anything that had been done earlier and it was a new vocabulary of modern dance.
>
> (Vatsyayan 2003: 26)

Ramayana received excellent reviews from newspapers in Bombay and heralded the return of Shanti Bardhan to the world of innovative dance choreography. Its several scenes, played out through the song and dance narratives in folk genre, also included the imaginative reconstruction of staccato movements that would fit the context of a puppet play. The final scene of the production, which plays out the battle of Rama and Ravana, is perhaps the most impressive, with a dramatic musical score and choreography rich in movement patterns and group formations.

For his next production, Bardhan revisited the *Panchatantra* beast fables (believed to have been written in the third century BCE by the sage Vishnu Sharma) so as to give a classic story a modern treatment and context. Bardhan chose the second chapter from this collection of allegorical tales, the *Winning of Friends*. Through its narrative, he wanted to explore the concept of unity amidst the fragmentation of a post-Partition independent India. While choreographing for this production Bardhan sought inspiration, not from various prevalent dance languages and idioms, but rather from a direct observation of the movements of birds and animals. To quote Vatsyayan again:

> In his second composition, 'Panchatantra', Shanti Bardhan again created a distinct form; he did not base himself on any classical technique and did not borrow from different sources in order to create a new ballet. He created a distinctly new style. The arm

> movement, as also the treatment of the spine and knees, were a real contribution to modern dance. In this ballet, or at least the first half, there was no relationship between word and mime. Nor was there any relationship of a given metrical cycle and footwork. Shanti Bardhan had gone a step further than his master [Uday Shankar] by moving away altogether from the word-gesture relationship, by discarding the statuesque, and by ignoring the *tukda* or *toda* principle. (Vatsyayan 2003: 27)[10]

Bardhan's *Panchatantra* began to take shape after the Little Ballet Troupe moved from Trombay's Ram Mandir to Khusroo Lodge in Andheri, which had been their residence during the IPTA Central Squad days. Here they created a 50-foot stage under a banyan tree in the garden and rehearsed and performed their dance and laboured on the production day and night. According to Gul Bardhan, rehearsals would sometimes go on till 2am and Shanti Bardhan would not rest until he had seen his dancers move exactly like pigeons in perfect coordination (Gul Bardhan, in-person interview, 2006) (Figure 3.3).

Figure 3.3 *Panchatantra*. Photo courtesy of IPTA–Mumbai archives

Although work continued in spite of the LBT's financial woes, Shanti Bardhan's health was fast failing him. By the end of 1954 and during the making of *Panchatantra*, Bardhan was both physically and financially crippled. He would give directions for choreography from his chair, or even lying down, and his monetary situation became so alarming that his film actor-director friend Balraj Sahni came to his rescue. Under the title 'Brave Fighter for Art, Shanti Bardhan Needs Friends' Support', Sahni published a message in *Screen* (Sahni 1954). The plea for help, however, came too late. A day after the message was published, Shanti Bardhan died at the age of only thirty-eight.

Bardhan's post-IPTA choreographic phase concludes the shift from protest dance to propagandist dance and then finally to symbolic socialist dance. The return to mythology and fable in his final two choreographies clearly indicates a commitment to the notion of social cohesion and unity without returning to any formal concerns of dance classicism. Bardhan's defection from IPTA and his U-turn to INT suggests a collusion with mainstream nationalism, whereas his retreat from political affiliation is indicative of his passive resistance to it. However, reflecting on his journey as a choreographer, can we place Bardhan's work within discussions of dance modernism? How exactly can the protest dances of IPTA and Bardhan's post-IPTA productions argue for dance modernism within an Indian context? I would like to explore these questions in two ways. Firstly, I would like to revisit the leftist dance phenomenon in the UK and the USA and examine its overlaps with the emerging dance modernism in the 1930s. A comparative analysis with left-wing dances in India will allow us to notice parallels between the two experiences and enable us to construe whether just one (Euro-American leftist dance) can stake a claim within narratives of modernity or if the other (Indian leftist dance) can too. Secondly, I would like to explore whether local forms of Marxism (and its embodied products) in India offered its players access to modernity, particularly in terms of a re-envisioning and re-structuring of gender relations.

Leftist protest and modern dance: Britain, the USA and India

This chapter has drawn comparisons between socialist arts experiments such as *drambalets* and agitprop performances in Soviet Russia

and protest dances in India, suggesting that IPTA's dance drama productions may have been local in form but were certainly influenced by international political and aesthetic movements. Socialism and communism addressed issues of race and class discrimination through dance innovation as it spread across the world, a fact reinforced by the activities of the Workers Dance League and the leftist dance network in the United States from the 1930s to the period of the Cold War, where black and white bodies were united in using modern dance as a weapon for social transformation and performed the realities of the socially and racially suppressed. The African American choreographer Pearl Primus's (1919–94) choreographic works *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* (1944) and *Strange Fruit* (1945) are two instances of hard-hitting and dramatic modern dance works that became a part of the leftist cultural front. Both Ellen Graff (1997) and Susan Manning (2004) remind us that leftist dance activities paralleled the growth of American modern dance, and yet the histories of these two dance movements were often seen as divergent, particularly during the rise and lasting impact of the McCarthy era. Race relations and political affiliation have been important factors in denying several dancing bodies a legitimate place within narratives on American dance modernity. Some recent scholarship, such as that by Graff and Manning, has argued for this historical neglect to be addressed.

Stacey Prickett (2010) has suggested that a similar erasure of leftist dancers from the dance canon occurred in Britain. In the 1930s, the dance works of Margaret Barr, Teda de Moor and Katie Eisenstadt were inspired by communist ideology. The British community of left-wing dancers was diverse: 'some dancers advocated for professional standards, other groups were comprised of amateur workers, while pageant dances reinforced a larger ideological message, drawing together amateurs and professionals on a grand scale' (Prickett 2010: 71–2). Margaret Barr's Dance Drama Group, established in Dartington in 1931, performed pieces such as *Colliery* and *Mothers* in 1933, addressing the realities of workers in mines and men at war. Prickett describes Barr as having developed a 'highly theatrical and socially conscious aesthetic' in her dance, while at the same time setting up links between artists and the local community within which they worked (2010: 72).

As we have seen in Chapter 2, it was Margaret Barr who brought Uday Shankar to Dartington Hall in the 1930s (Nicholas 2007) and it

was from Dartington that Shankar acquired funds to start his Almora Centre in the Indian Himalayas, where Shanti Bardhan worked. Prickett (2010) reminds us that Barr trained with Martha Graham's sister Geordie in Santa Barbara and also at the Graham School in New York. These intertwined narratives of dancers and choreographers working across the globe offer a fascinating view of the fluidity of modern dance's movements and journeys across international borders. It is evident that leftist ideology inspired the Euro-American dramatic dance aesthetic of the choreographies of the 1930s and 1940s; it is equally evident that for a considerable time this strand of dance remained at the margins of the more established and celebrated abstract, high art modernism of Martha Graham and, later, Merce Cunningham. Graff, Manning and Prickett clearly suggest that race and class played a considerable role in this marginalisation, and more recent British and North American dance scholarship on modernism has strongly argued for the inclusion of the leftist dance experience. If we turn our focus to India and examine some of the photographs from the 1940s IPTA dances included in this chapter, at first glance our attention may be drawn to the seemingly 'folk' dance bodies captured on camera; we may easily surmise that these are indigenous men and women dancing in their 'traditional' costumes. Yet, if we move beyond the costumes – the saris and dhotis which mark these women and men's bodies as 'ethnic' – if we transcend these surface descriptors and inscriptions of culture, these ultimately racially constructed notions of primitivism and orientalism and if we remind ourselves of the stories of these dancers' revolution, both political and aesthetic, then we can finally begin to allow the reality of a different modernism to emerge. In India, Shanti Bardhan's choreographic works for the IPTA were entwined in international dialogues on twentieth-century modernity; as such, they belong to the global phenomenon of political modern dance. IPTA may have had complex links with nationalist strategies but it was also internationalist in make-up, both in terms of its ideological commitment to socialism and in its artistic and aesthetic commitment to the experience of modern innovation.

Embodying Marxist and feminist politics

Did IPTA and Shanti Bardhan's protest dances offer an egalitarian space in which both female and male members could perform their

autonomous identities? Did the practice of dance and social relations within these activist collectives offer new formulations of agency, particularly for women? Western feminist critiques of Marxism constantly remind us of its inability to address gender, and particularly the woman question. In 'Marxists and the Woman Question', Sheila Rowbotham asserts that 'although Marx was formally committed to the legal emancipation of women and to the right to work, his intellectual passion was not directed toward relations between men and women, but toward class. When it came to the business of changing society it seemed women's interests were assumed to be safely included with those of men' (1992: 141). Rowbotham's assertion is generally echoed by feminist scholarship from Europe and America, which has noticed Marxism's failure to resolve gender inequality. Furthermore, there is a tendency amongst feminist scholars to assume that the body played either a marginal role or remained absent within liberal and Marxist feminism. In *Feminism, Theory and the Politics of Difference*, Chris Weedon writes:

> The emphasis on the body, procreation and sexuality helped to make radical feminist theory and politics one of the most powerful forces shaping contemporary feminism. Whereas liberal feminism tended to ignore women's bodies, focusing its attention on equal rights for women as abstract individuals, and Marxist feminism privileged class and the transformation of the capitalist mode of production, the impact of radical feminist thought and politics expanded these agendas for the wider women's movement and focused feminist attention firmly on issues connected with the body.
>
> (1999: 29)

Whilst Weedon's argument is certainly valid in terms of a feminist engagement with women's sexuality, I would argue that 'the body' appears much earlier in feminism than Weedon suggests – that is, prior to the emergence of radical feminist politics. Women's bodies in North American and British leftist dances and in the IPTA moved beyond the confines of gendered domesticity and became an embodied site of social transformation. In the moment of dancing, the corporeal manifestations of Marxist ideology through the labouring bodies of dancers present a slightly different picture of Marxism's success, however limited, in achieving gender equality. If we turn to the

autobiographical accounts left behind by IPTA's women performers such as Reba Roy Chowdhury (1999), Dina Pathak (1995) and Gul Bardhan (1992), we realise that in India the IPTA made possible a unified community of equals, a space within Indian nationalism where gender and class categories were clearly subverted and new formulations of social relations were imagined and practised. These autobiographical narratives may not speak of women occupying positions of power: after all, none of the theatre or dance drama directors or leaders within IPTA were women. However, these women's writings do provide a glimpse into a society of equals, one in which colonised bodies of women and men moved and worked together in choreographed protests that rejected individual artistic genius in favour of choric dissent.

In the book *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Mohanty et al. 1991), Chandra Talpade Mohanty offers a useful explanation of the various forms that feminist struggles can take. She writes:

> Feminist struggles are waged on at least two simultaneous, interconnected levels: an ideological, discursive level which addresses questions of representation (womanhood/femininity), and a material, experiential, daily-life level which focuses on the micropolitics of work, home, family, sexuality, etc. Colonial relations of rule form the backdrop of feminist critiques at both levels, and it is the notion of the *practice* of ruling which may allow for an understanding of the contradictory sex, race, class, and caste positioning of third world women in relation to the state, and thus may suggest a way of formulating historically the location of third world women's feminist struggles.
>
> (Mohanty 1991: 21)

Following Mohanty's explanation of various modes of feminist resistance (although resisting the label 'third world' as it once again sets up hierarchical categories), it becomes important then to be attentive to the context-specific experiences of women in order to ascertain whether a feminist politics may manifest itself. Looking back to the 1940s, it is evident that within the historical and social context of colonial rule in India, the IPTA movement certainly afforded its women the possibility of a feminist struggle at both discursive and

material levels, even though the aim of that struggle was not gender equality but something equally fundamental – civil liberty. As Sarkar Munsi has suggested, the IPTA movement 'placed itself in the position of a facilitator for the process of lessening the divide between genders' (Dutt and Munsi 2010: 230); this certainly cannot be seen as an insignificant contribution to women and performance (Figure 3.4).

We can also remind ourselves here of what postcolonial theorist Partha Chatterjee puts forward as the notion of the twin domains of Indian nationalism: the 'outer domain' of political contest and the 'inner domain' of national culture (see the Introduction). According to Chatterjee, the woman question had largely been resolved by the end of the nineteenth century in the inner domain of national culture. On the other hand, Geraldine Forbes in her book *Women in Modern India* (1996) highlights women's active participation in the 'outer' political life of India even during colonial rule. She carefully excavates the material culture of Indian women that remained

Figure 3.4 Central Squad's women performers: Ruby Dutta, Shanta Gandhi, Dina Gandhi, Reba Roy and Gul Bardhan. Photo courtesy of IPTA–Mumbai archives

largely buried under patriarchal and colonial structures of power during the nation building processes following India's Independence in 1947. Following the postcolonial historical writings of Chatterjee and Forbes, I propose that women in India also occupied a third domain, that of a corporeal and embodied resistance which negotiated the contradictory pulls and fissures of both the inner domain of domesticity and the outer domain of political revolution. This third domain comprised of revolutionary bodies engaged in choreographies of protest against both Indian national and British colonial discourses. The Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) certainly enables us to notice how Marxist ideology-driven cultural organisations in India performed a nascent feminism on makeshift stages and that the dancing bodies of its women and men certainly re-imagined gendered theatre practices and social relations.

The invisible folk

This chapter cannot be concluded without some consideration of the debates around the ethics of appropriating the 'folk', for which IPTA has been criticised. This has been the proverbial elephant in the room throughout the discussion above, a problem that has remained unacknowledged, and an unresolved dilemma that undercuts any bold assertions about the merits of the IPTA movement. Following Rustom Bharucha's (1998: 42) astute argument that the IPTA used the 'folk' without problematising the ethical or aesthetic dimensions of such adaptations, I ask if the happy or hungry 'folk' do gain access to modernism through the narrative etched out in this chapter. We must remind ourselves that what we encounter in this chapter, through women's writings, newspaper reviews, memories and recollections of dancers are the voices of those who belonged to the educated middle-class in India. Important as these are in reconstructing the past, they do not provide any glimpse into the lives and movements of the people whose traditions they 'rescued' or adapted in their dances. Whilst the voices and bodies of IPTA's performers have left behind traces that we can hear and see, the villagers and peasants who provided the impulse to this cultural movement and gave movement material for innumerable performances remain unheard and invisible. They are, to borrow Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's words, 'the silent, silenced centre' (1988: 78). I am, of course, here indebted to Spivak's seminal

work 'Can the Subaltern Speak' for alerting me to the fact that 'certain varieties of the Indian elite are at best native informants for first-world intellectuals interested in the voice of the Other' (1988: 79).

However, this ethical dilemma will remain unresolved within this act of writing. As a researcher interested in the politics of cultural exchange, it is my responsibility to be critical of the power differentials that unconsciously existed within the very fabric of a people-facing organisation such as IPTA. My regret is that this attempt to claim a valid space for local forms of dance modernism ultimately fails to capture the experience of a very large constituency of people – the so-called 'folk'. Or perhaps there is a silver lining after all. If we follow the primary research of Lata Singh (2011), we constantly hear of the women performers of IPTA whose proximity to farmers and workers in villages and whose travels across vast geographical distances to perform in remote countryside locations offered them a lived experience that significantly altered and transformed their view of middle-class conservatism. Sima Das, an IPTA activist who danced with Reba Roy Chowdhury and whose family emigrated to Calcutta after the Partition, recalls how the spirit of the people who supported the IPTA movement made the police raids on rehearsals and the physical beatings of artist-activists seem superfluous (Das 2013).[11] Based on personal interviews with Gul Bardhan and Sima Das, I can surmise that it was the strong work ethic of the so-called 'folk', the physicality of women from agricultural and labouring classes, and the support of hundreds and thousands of villagers and workers that energised the IPTA women activists, who largely came from educated but often very gendered family set-ups. The common critique of IPTA is that the urban intelligentsia unethically used or appropriated the folk. Whilst that may be true, the fact that it was subaltern women who ultimately enabled and empowered colonised, gendered middle-class women in India, who emboldened their bodies and taught them how to move unselfconsciously in open public spaces cannot be overlooked. Perhaps this nod to the legacy of the invisible subaltern fittingly concludes this chapter of Indian dance modernism?

4
Manjusri Chaki Sircar and Feminist New Dance

If IPTA prepared the ground for women's agency to be staged in the newly imagined nation-state that was India, then Manjusri Chaki Sircar (1934–2000) openly waged her resistance to patriarchal nationalism and aesthetic Eurocentrism through her fiercely political feminist choreography. Chaki Sircar's was a significant voice in the choric dissension of Indian feminist choreographers against what they believed to be the representation of women as meek, submissive and dolled-up bodies on the Indian classical dance stage. Some other vociferous dance-makers, such as Chandralekha (1928–2006) and Mallika Sarabhai, have been the subjects of a number of in-depth scholarly studies; Bharucha (1995) and Chatterjea (2004a) have offered excellent analyses of Chandralekha's resistive choreographies; while Chatterjea (2004b) and Grau (2007) have each focused their attention on the activism of Mallika Sarabhai's dance. Curiously, apart from Kothari (2003) important narratives on modern and contemporary dance from India, including that of Ketu Katrak (2011), have left out Chaki Sircar's choreographic works.[1] This chapter considers possible reasons for this neglect and discusses how Chaki Sircar's dance repertoire might offer performance scholars an invaluable source of knowledge on embodied feminism of South Asian origin.

Chaki Sircar's family were among the millions displaced in the mass migration that followed the Partition of India during its year of independence in 1947. The chapter traces Chaki Sircar's movements across the Bengal divide and examines the ways in which this forced migration informed her politics as well as her early experiences of dance during the 1950s. It moves on to a consideration of Chaki Sircar's

international journeys and lived experiences in Africa and North America, noticing how her body consciously negotiated and processed various cultural forms of embodiment and specifically the shifting polarities of US modernism and postmodernism in the 1960s and 1970s. The chapter then travels back with Chaki Sircar to 1980s India, a period that witnessed the upsurge of women's rights movements on the one hand and the rise of right wing anti-feminist politics on the other. Against this backdrop, Chaki Sircar's *Navanritya* or New Dance became a significant form of representational practice that challenged and critiqued patriarchal frameworks governing the production of dance for the Indian stage. Acknowledging the scholarship of Aishika Chakraborty (2010) and Esha Niyogi De (2011), the chapter concludes with a further analysis of Chaki Sircar's dismantling of patriarchy in her seminal dance work *Tomari Matir Kanya* (*Daughter of the Earth*, 1985). It also notes her interest in collective agency in *Aranya Amrita* (1989) and her reworking of mythology through environmental concerns in *Krauncha Katha* (1993). In her feminist ideology driven rebuttal of institutionalised dance praxis, Chaki Sircar produced local critiques of nationalism in and through the dancing body. Ultimately, this chapter discusses the ways in which Chaki Sircar's new dance, shaped by a simultaneous eschewal and espousal of Indian cultural legacy, offers a complex picture of negotiation, one in which dialectical relationships between culture and the bodies that are situated within it are seen to produce new versions of modernity.

From displacement to cosmopolitanism: dance in post-partition Calcutta

Manjusri Chaki Sircar was born on 28 August 1934 in Baharampur in the Murshidabad district of Bengal to Nanigopal and Charubala Chaki, but her childhood was mostly spent in Pabna (now a district in Bangladesh) where she was brought up along with her brothers and sisters in an atmosphere of much poetry reading, music and dance; as she writes in her autobiography *Nritya Rashe Chitta Mamo* (2000), she could not remember a time when she did not dance. Manjusri's father Nanigopal Chaki was an educated, cultured and liberal-minded government official and the Chakis' fifteen-roomed joint-family residence in Pabna would, on almost every full-moon night, be the venue for an open-air performance where people would

gather to recite Bengali poetry or sing songs.[2] Manjusri followed in the footsteps of her older sister Sandhya and began to dance for these gatherings from an early age. During this period, she also witnessed the dance performances of such eminent Bengali dance artists as Uday Shankar and Sadhana Bose (Chaki Sircar 2000: 1–2).[3]

In her autobiography, Manjusri Chaki Sircar writes that she showed signs of rebellion from a very early age, going against expected norms of social behaviour from young Bengali women by being self-willed and boisterous: she demonstrated her awareness of gender discrimination by running away from home on one occasion when asked by her family to help in the kitchen rather than in the garden with her brothers (ibid.: 7). However, family life in Pabna came to an end with the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, forcing the Chakis to move to Calcutta.[4] Along with her family members and millions of other Bengalis, Manjusri experienced the inevitable sense of loss and displacement associated with migration and witnessed the after effects of Partition violence and riots on the streets of Calcutta. These disturbing images of communal conflict in urban India became deeply ingrained in her memory. The memories of Partition – of dead bodies piled on the streets of Calcutta – would resurface many years later in her choreographic work *Yugasandhi* (1996).

The mass migration around the Partition and Independence of India in 1947 made an indelible mark on Bengali consciousness and significantly shaped and altered the socio-cultural life of Bengal. Not only did the incidence of migration from East Bengal to West Bengal's urban centres such as Calcutta change the physical features of the city through the construction of immigrant settlements or 'colonies', it also wrought transformations in the social, political and cultural make-up of Bengali life and introduced through the figure of the immigrant in the city a new, modern post-Independence Bengali identity. In this context, Gargi Chakravarty's (2005) study of post-Partition refugee women in Bengal is pertinent since it reveals through the real-life stories of some refugee women, the significant developments and changes that occurred in Bengali society and culture in postcolonial India. Particularly interesting is Chakravarty's analysis of the role of refugee women in the domain of public culture, where she comments:

> Crossing the border was not a simple stepping into West Bengal from East Bengal. The new migrants were faced suddenly with

> situations alien to their culture. Their natural surroundings, social traditions, day-to-day rituals, living norms, and dialects were different from those of West Bengal, the people of which part were commonly known as *ghatis*. The complex dynamics of displacement and spatial loss, the psychological and sociological dimensions of the experiences of people venturing into [a] world of both problems and possibilities required all kinds of adjustments that eventually altered their gendered existence within the family. It contributed to the end of *andarmahal*, the segregation of women from the outside world. The refugee women's emergence in the public domain, their pursuit of education, their search for employment, and their participation in the activities of colony life changed the social milieu of West Bengal.
>
> (Chakravarty 2005: 79–80)

Not only were post-Partition refugee women from East Bengal grappling with their new and alien environment in West Bengal, they were simultaneously engaged in negotiating a new identity for themselves, one that brought them out from the inner precincts of their homes into the public sphere. Chakravarty notices how many refugee women joined various theatre groups, *jatras* (folk theatre) and the film industry in Calcutta, both in order to meet their economic needs and to nurture their cultural identity through music, theatre and film.

Although the Chakis were economically self-sufficient, never had to suffer homelessness or poverty and did not share the same experience as refugees from East Bengal living in urban settlements, two statements made by Manjusri Chaki Sircar in her autobiography suggest that she had something in common with other refugee women in Calcutta. First, she mentions that it was mainly her family environment and her dance that made her forget the pain associated with displacement; and second, she states that had she stayed on and grown up in Pabna, she would have had to stop dancing once she passed adolescence and would never have been able to take up dance professionally (Sircar 2000: 8). Post-Partition Calcutta therefore gave to Chaki Sircar, as it did to many other women from East Bengal, the opportunity of an education and active participation in public culture. Dance became a coping mechanism during a period of spatial dislocation as also the means through which the image of the newly arrived Bengali woman could be articulated.

Alongside furthering her school and college education, Chaki Sircar began her training in dance in Calcutta by going to classes in Kathak, Manipuri, Bharatanatyam and Kathakali with various gurus (by the early 1950s these had been reconstructed and reinstated as India's 'classical' dance forms). During this period, she was also fascinated and deeply inspired by Uday Shankar's film *Kalpana,* which she saw in Calcutta just before her matriculation examinations in 1948, and even got the opportunity to rehearse with Annadiprasad, one of Uday Shankar's students from Almora. In 1951 Chaki Sircar joined Presidency College in Calcutta, an educational institution with an established name and a long history of academic excellence, to begin her undergraduate studies in Bengali literature. It was her years in Presidency and her deepening familiarity with the literature of Bengal, especially Rabindranath Tagore's literary works, which revealed to Chaki Sircar how serious her commitment to dance would become for the rest of her life (Chaki Sircar 2000: 7).

The cosmopolitanism of 1950s Calcutta manifested itself through an experimental and international verve in artistic output. British colonialism had departed but had left behind an Indian city whose significant English educated bourgeois population remained in dialogue with global art movements. Two events may be highlighted that marked out this era's penchant for avant-garde innovation. On 27 October 1952, in a remote field one hundred miles outside Calcutta, Satyajit Ray (1921–92) along with his assistant Subrata Mitra began filming *Pather Panchali* (Robinson 1989: 78). Ray's first film heralded the beginning of an astoundingly creative filmmaking career, ranking him alongside the Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa and the Italian art house director Vittorio De Sica as amongst the most respected of all international filmmakers. The wave of neo-realism that surged through world cinema, and especially Italian cinema, had managed to reach the shores of Bengal. The second significant event was the theatre group Bahurupi's staging of Rabindranath Tagore's play *Rakta Karabi* (*Red Oleander*) in 1954.[5] Under the direction of Shombhu Mitra, former actor-director at IPTA, Tagore's play underwent a radical transformation with Khaled Chowdhury's set design and Tapas Sen's light design (Banerjee 1999: 172–80). While Ray went against the popular melodramatic mode of storytelling in 1950s Bengali films, Shombhu Mitra and his wife Tripti Mitra startled audiences with their anti-melodramatic style of acting and their

path-breaking experimentations with theatre presentation, which included the use of symbolic and abstract sets.

The mood of 1950s Calcutta also inspired Ritwik Ghatak (1925–76), a filmmaker whose evocative portrayal of the immigrant experience in cinema marks him out as one of Bengal's finest art film directors. Ghatak was born in Dhaka, the capital of present-day Bangladesh, but migrated to Calcutta during the Partition of 1947, and joined the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) for which he wrote, directed and acted in plays such as *Jwala* (*Flame*, 1951) and *Dalil* (*Document*, 1952). He also acted in Nemai Ghosh's 1950 *Chinnamul* (*The Uprooted*), a film produced by the Bengal IPTA. Ghatak's first feature film *Nagarik* (*The Citizen*) was released in Calcutta in 1952; through this and *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (*The Cloud-Capped Star*, 1960), *Komal Gandhar* (1961) and *Subarnarekha* (1962) he repeatedly presented through the language of realistic art cinema, the experience of the uprooted and dislocated Bengali immigrant (see Ghatak 2000).

The international influence and exposure that inspired and stimulated Bengali filmmakers such as Ray and Ghatak in the 1950s also had a parallel in the realm of dance, particularly in its effect on Chaki Sircar's career trajectory. Calcutta was not only host to an International Film Festival in 1952, but also, in 1955, to America's groundbreaking Martha Graham Dance Company.[6] Just as the young Satyajit Ray had devoured Kurosawa's *Rashomon* on all three consecutive screenings at the film festival (Ray 1976: 180), Chaki Sircar sat awe-struck in the audience at the New Empire Theatre, Calcutta, on two consecutive evenings during Martha Graham's dance performance. Chaki Sircar had bought the cheapest tickets to see the show, but took home with her a priceless experience. As she recalls in her autobiography, she felt as if she had witnessed poetry in movement in the language of Graham's dance; Graham's choreography of *Cave of the Heart* (1946) brought to her mind images from T.S. Eliot's poetry (Sircar 2000: 20). Graham's choric choreography would remain an inspiration for Chaki Sircar in composing her group dances in later years.

During her Presidency College and University of Calcutta years, Chaki Sircar forged collaborative links with the maverick singer Debabrata Biswas, whose anti-establishment rendition of Rabindranath Tagore's songs singled him out as a rebel. Biswas, also known as George-*da*, had been an active member of the Indian People's Theatre

Association (IPTA) Bengal; he was impatient with the way in which Tagore's songs were sung and danced to in Shantiniketan (Chaki Sircar 2000: 14–15). With Manjusri Chaki Sircar, he set about arranging Tagore's songs in an entirely novel manner, introducing varied rhythms and *bols* (spoken rhythms) into the very text of the song, to which Manjusri would perform movements derived from but not limited to her classical dance training. In Tagore's songs, poetry and dance dramas, Chaki Sircar found a new direction quite unlike the one offered to her by Indian classical dances. In the interpretation of Tagore's text her body felt unrestrained by the strictures of dance tradition; to her the female protagonists in Tagore's dance dramas were strong, self-determined and emancipated as opposed to the *nayika* (heroine) of the classical dances. Moreover, here lay the opportunity for her to use her training in classical dance innovatively rather than her having to rely on the 'Rabindrik' or Tagore style of dance that had become conventional practice at Shantiniketan after Tagore's time (Chaki Sircar 1995). The reinterpretation of Tagore's poetry and dance dramas was to remain a life-long interest.

The duo of Biswas and Chaki Sircar gave to the dance performance world in Calcutta what Ray and Shombhu Mitra gave to the film and theatre worlds – new and fresh perspectives on and radical methods of exploring available literary material. Through solo choreographies on the Tagore songs *Nrityera Taley Taley*, *Jetey Jetey Ekela Pathey*, *Kotha Je Udhao*, *Jharnar Baridhara*, *Neel Digantey* and *Ohey Shundara Mari Mari*,[7] Chaki Sircar and Biswas explored the myriad of possible interrelationships between text, music and movement rather than relying on what Biswas referred to as the '*bhava nritya*' (mood or sentimental dance) of Shantiniketan, which by the 1950s had come to signify to practitioners like Chaki Sircar and Biswas a dance style that was defined by a rather over-literal illustrative relationship between music and dance or dance and poetry (Chaki Sircar 2000: 14–15).The complex cadence of the words and rhythmical structures in Tagore's poetry and songs were imaginatively interpreted by Chaki Sircar in her choreographies. For Biswas and Chaki Sircar, poetry and words constituted movement and therefore did not require constant literal representation through the moving body. This translation of Tagore's literature through choreography enabled multiple meanings to emerge through an embodiment of text, a feature that would become the mainstay of Chaki Sircar's dance work.

Chaki Sircar, American modernism and postmodernism

The legacy of Bengali cosmopolitanism that Chaki Sircar embodied was further energised by the international journeys across continents that she embarked on during her lifetime. After her marriage in 1958 to Parbati Kumar Sircar, a professor of geography, Manjusri Chaki Sircar travelled with her husband first to New Delhi, and then to Nigeria and New York between 1961–80, during which time she gave birth to her daughter Ranjabati in Nigeria (1963) and pursued a degree in anthropology (she received a PhD from Columbia University, New York, in 1980). Her doctoral thesis, which was later published as a book (Chaki Sircar 1984) was a product of her interest in embodied agency specifically in women living in 'traditional' Indian villages. During her years abroad she also led creative and classical dance workshops wherever she lived.

Since one of the central concerns of this book is to observe the development of twentieth-century dance both within India and beyond its borders, and to explore the often unseen overlaps between various cultural forms, it is crucial that we look closely at Chaki Sircar's exposure to American modernism and postmodernism during her years in the United States (1966–80) in order to ascertain how her body and mind and her dance crossed spatial and conceptual territories in order to arrive at a distinctly Indian modern dance vocabulary. Aishika Chakraborty (2006; 2010) discusses the links between Martha Graham, American dance modernism and Chaki Sircar's *Navanritya*, but these interconnections need to be further explored. The compass of this present work will only permit a brief overview of the features of American modern and postmodern dance works that resonate with (and also diverge from) Chaki Sircar's work. Martha Graham (1894–1991) whose dance movements touched the pulse of a young Bengali woman seated in the darkened hall of the New Empire Theatre in Calcutta in 1955, offers a good starting point. Graham's name and her work epitomise American modern dance. From her early work with the Denishawn Company of Ruth St Denis and Ted Shawn in 1916, Graham gradually moved away from the oriental and the exotic flavour of movement that became a hallmark of St Denis and Shawn's early modern choreographies and carved a niche for herself as an independent concert dance artist in New York

from 1926 onwards. Her focus in her choreographic works was 'to move from the past to the present, to find contemporary subject matter for dance' (McDonagh 1974: 58).

Launching her solo career between the wars, Graham's choreographies, situated as they were in a period of unrest, uncertainty and anxiety, dramatised conflict and gave birth to a dance form that was characterised by its spasmodic movements, sharp angularity and the contraction and release of energy. Graham believed that movement was an external manifestation of an inner emotional state; her interpretations of Greek mythologies through choreography (for example, her portrayal of Medea in *Cave of the Heart*, 1946, and Jocasta in *Night Journey*, 1947) were reflections of her deep interest in Freudian and Jungian psychoanalysis and in the subconscious, in the inner landscape of the mind. The relationship between dance and literature was further evidenced in her work *Deaths and Entrances* (1943), based on the life of the Brontë sisters, and the choreography of which was inspired by James Joyce and Virginia Woolf's stream of consciousness literary technique. Through her collaborations with the American-Japanese sculptor Isamu Noguchi and composer Louis Horst, Graham conveyed her dance narratives in an abstract and symbolic mode, without relying on the linear narrative approach. Her radical approach to choreography marked her out as a rebel and made her dance distinctly different from and in direct opposition to the genre of classical ballet. As Helen Thomas has observed:

> Where ballet strove to defy gravity, Graham celebrated it. The ground, as Graham came to view it, is not dead matter, rather it symbolises life, and from it energy is derived. She used the ground as a definite direction, and the dancers would thrust into it on the down-beat, and rebound from it. Where ballet contrived to conceal energy, Graham revealed it. In the process of experimenting with her own body and teaching her findings to her dancers and other students, Graham evolved her own system of training.
> (Thomas 1995: 96)

The *New York Times* dance critic and writer John Martin (1965) has famously observed that modern dance is a point of view, not a system, and that the principle underlying it is that an emotional experience can express itself directly through movement, so that the

dance becomes the self-portrait of the artist. Yet, by the late 1950s, Graham's dance had developed into a *system* of training, a codified movement vocabulary in response to which her own students Paul Taylor and Merce Cunningham developed their individual dance trajectories. Graham's links with Expressionism, the twentieth-century art movement made famous by artists such as Emil Nolde and Wassily Kandinsky, and a conceptual connection that she shared with the German dancer Mary Wigman's *Ausdruckstanz* (expression dance) had resulted in the creation of iconic imagery and dramatic narratives, against which the early postmodernism of Cunningham took shape (Jowitt 1983). After Cunningham, in the works of dancers such as Trisha Brown and Yvonne Rainer and collectives such as the Judson Dance Theatre, expressivity continued to remain taboo; as Deborah Jowitt states, the performer in these postmodern dance works was seen as a neutral doer and the 'aesthetic of dailiness' was celebrated (ibid.: 175).

By the time Manjusri Chaki Sircar arrived in New York in 1966, the prevalent mood in the domain of American art and culture was that of avant-garde postmodernism. Reacting against the institutionalisation of modernism in the arts and literature, postmodernism in America, according to Huyssen (1986), was engaged in critiquing the high modernism of the earlier two decades and its hostility towards popular or mass culture. New York, given the appellation of the 'World's Dance Capital', was the place where some of the most iconoclastic experiments in choreography were taking place. Living with her husband and daughter in New Paltz, Chaki Sircar nonetheless made frequent trips to New York City, where she would witness a range of dance performances given by artists ranging from the Indian *devadasi* dancer Balasaraswati to Mikhail Baryshnikov (Chaki Sircar 2000: 42). Chaki Sircar even participated in workshops given by the choreographers Merce Cunningham and Alwin Nikolais, wearing leotards under her sari to these dance classes (ibid.: 32).

New York introduced Chaki Sircar to the immensely brave and hardworking community of American modern and postmodern dance artists; her autobiography states that witnessing Jose Limon's *The Winged* (1966) in New York City and Cunningham's *RainForest* (1968) in the New Paltz gymnasium remained as some of the most memorable experiences of watching dance in America (ibid.: 45). Interestingly enough, Chaki Sircar's stay in New York coincided

with the transition in American postmodern dance from neutrality to meaning and emotion in dance. By the late 1970s, as Sally Banes (1987) has pointed out in her seminal work on postmodern dance, French theories of structuralism and post-structuralism had impacted upon the performing arts and brought focus back once again to meaning, and American choreographers such as Mark Morris and Twyla Tharp began to emphasise the need for dance to express the human subject.

Although Chaki Sircar has averred that she never borrowed any movements from the modern and postmodern American dance vocabularies to create her dance (Chaki Sircar 2000: 50), there seems to be a strong parallel between Graham's ideology and approach to choreography and Chaki Sircar's search for a new movement language. Both Graham and Chaki Sircar challenged the classical dance vocabulary of their respective cultures; both celebrated the power of the female body through choreography, presenting women protagonists as active and subversive agents in their dance narratives; and both used the principle of gravity in their earth-bound, grounded steps and used the floor as a fertile source for movement. Most importantly, Manjusri's use of group formations and the Greek chorus technique in her reinterpretation of Tagore's dance dramas (see below) seems to have been inspired by the use of the chorus in Graham's dance works such as *The Heretic* (1929). This use of choric bodies as well as body clusters in the context of the Indian/Bengali dance drama narratives was one of the most innovative features of Chaki Sircar's works for the stage. Graham's modern dance vocabulary thus served as a strong point of reference for Chaki Sircar.

By the early 1980s, a period that marked the beginning of Chaki Sircar's group choreographies, the term 'New Dance' began to replace 'postmodern' in Euro-American dance. The interest in subjective experience had made a comeback in the Euro-American dance world.[8] In Britain, Stephanie Jordan (1992) describes New Dance as a movement begun by a number of dance groups such as the X6 collective, who functioned independently of the larger contemporary companies. Their dances were defined by a rejection of institutionalised dance techniques and a focus on personal subject matter, were often polemical in nature and articulated gender issues through dance (Jordan 1992: 58–87). In India, Chaki Sircar's work followed very

similar concerns; the female agency of Martha Graham's modernism, the emphasis on subjectivity of late postmodernism and the significance of the aesthetics of everyday life in postmodern choreography contributed to the construction of a favoured model for Chaki Sircar. The Indian 'new dance', the Sircars' *Navanritya*, *selectively* translated the aesthetics of Euro-American modern and postmodern movement *on its own terms*. The emphasis here serves to demonstrate that in spite of the return to a subject-centred choreography, postmodern and post-structural Euro-American dance rejected the narrative mode of storytelling. Herein lay the difference in Chaki Sircar's approach: she refused to repudiate narrative in her version of Indian modern dance, for which she was censured by other Indian choreographers at the 1985 East-West Dance Encounter in Bombay.[9] Chaki Sircar responded to her detractors by refusing to bow down to what she termed 'cultural colonialism' – the diktats of Europe and North America regarding what can or cannot comprise modern or postmodern dance (Chaki Sircar 2000: 78–9).

We can see then something of the complexity of the web of interrelationships between modern dance in India and in the Euro-American worlds and perhaps begin to appreciate the flow of ideas and movement exchanges that occurred across international borders. However, this is sensitive ground: the tendency in much twentieth-century Euro-American dance scholarship has been to attribute progressive change to theatre-dance work created in the Euro-American worlds only, whilst sidelining cultural productions of non-western origin in native/ethnic/traditional terms. Not only that, any progressive change to the content or format of non-western dance has been seen as the result of western influence. This is an oft-repeated concern found in the works of scholars such as Ananya Chatterjea (2004) who has also alerted us to the act of 'double erasure': modern and postmodern dance in the West that imbibes influences from 'other' cultures but creates itself as an antithesis to these cultures (2004: 2). Instead of casually brushing over cultural encounters and borrowings, we need to recognise that in colonial and postcolonial worlds cross-cultural experimentation in the dance arts occurred across the board, with choreographers from either side of the globe looking beyond their immediate cultural location for different themes, forms and modes of presentation to inform their artistic practice. For instance, De Mille (1956: 250) suggests that Graham used the Kundalini energy of the

Indian yogic system in devising her dance technique.[10] I urge readers to resist reading Chaki Sircar's internationalism as a simple case of the impact of colonialism and the response of the colonised – to refrain from hastily assuming that Chaki Sircar's embodied modernism was a product of western intervention. As Antoinette Burton (1999: 2) reminds us, the 'porousness of colonialism' forces us to reconsider the purposeful negotiations in the works of both colonised and colonial agents.

Ironically, in spite of being the site of some of the boldest art experiments in the postmodern era, North America failed Chaki Sircar in one vital aspect: it refused to acknowledge the modern Indian identity of her dance. Chaki Sircar's agent in New York informed her that she could only get booked for shows if she performed Indian classical dance work (Wade 2001: 190). Chaki Sircar did compromise to begin with; she presented a mix of classical dances and her own compositions in her shows. However, for a woman who would only a few years later make a statement such as '[m]y dance choreography is a rebellion against the patriarchal Brahmanistic classical dance tradition of India' (1994), it was perhaps deeply frustrating to play up to the exotic image of the Indian classical dancer when all she desired was to break away from the parameters of classicism. Modernity and postmodernity in dance as a supposed prerogative of the west had endorsed a homogeneous look and Chaki Sircar's sari-clad body – neither purely classical Indian nor purely modern/postmodern – was a misfit.

In 1980, Chaki Sircar returned to India to work on a research project in the Birbhum district of West Bengal.[11] During this time, and displaying a striking parallel with collectives such as Judson Church in New York and X6 in London, Chaki Sircar established the Collective Dance Theatre in the home of her painter friend Shanu Lahiri in Calcutta, working with trained and untrained performers to create new dance compositions *Rudra-Madhur, Sabala* and *Nrityakatha Mirabai*. In between her research fieldwork, Chaki Sircar would work with a group of young dance enthusiasts including Jhuma Basak, daughter of an old friend and dance colleague Mira Bramhachari, and two young men (Laloo and Sputnik) from the department of English at Jadavpur University who had no prior dance training but an interest in theatre.[12] The choreographies were crafted around powerful and subversive women and experimented with the enmeshing of voice, theatre and poetry with movement. Spurred

on by the success and enthusiastic reception of her choreographic work and firmly believing that Calcutta could give her the freedom of her own bodily utterance, Chaki Sircar moved permanently to India from the United States in 1983–84 along with her family and founded the Dancers' Guild on 15 August 1983 in her new residence in Salt Lake City, a suburban township in north-eastern Calcutta, along with her daughter Ranjabati Sircar. This marked the beginning of *Navanritya* as one of Bengal and India's prominent new dance languages; it ushered in nearly two fruitful decades of trail-blazing choreography by the Sircars.

The female subject in new dance

As a returned native, Chaki Sircar belonged in a no-man's land: located between the 'traditional' Indian and the 'modern/postmodern' American, she and her impure dance were neither here nor there. Chaki Sircar's return to Calcutta in 1980 and the setting up of the Dancers' Guild in 1983 is emblematic of her refusal to compromise any further with her firm belief in the need for a new Indian contemporary language of dance, a language that could utter the specificity and reality of the new nation. But what impelled Chaki Sircar to react against Indian classical dance the way she did? What was broken and could not be fixed? Why this burning need to create a 'new' language of dance? And furthermore, could Chaki Sircar not have situated her work within the modern dance trajectories of Tagore, Shankar or the IPTA? The answers to these questions are to be found in Chaki Sircar's own highly articulate and critical comments on the nature and form of dance in India and Bengal during her lifetime, and it is these that are privileged in this section. To address the question of her reaction to classical dance first: it seems that what bothered Chaki Sircar most was the image of the female that Indian classical dance highlighted. Firmly believing that the classical dances of India such as Bharatanatyam engaged in the objectification of the submissive woman dancer, highlighting her sensuality for the male gaze, Chaki Sircar questioned the representation of women in classical dance:

> [O]ne may question the honesty of the dancer in the contemporary milieu. The typical classical dancer performs in the garb of the *devadasi,* the exploited 'bride of God', in expensive, bejewelled costumes, portraying stories and ethos of Hindu Brahmanic

> patriarchy. Most of the dances rely on the *nayika bhava*, the heroine, and bear the stamp of *devadasi* origins in being blatantly created for the pleasure of high-caste, high-class men. Stories of Shiva and Parvati, Krishna and the *gopis*, are depicted in explicit detail, so that a most demeaning eroticism that sees women as objects for the use of those in power, that creates commodities out of human beings, can be disguised by a misleading and confusing religious aura. How relevant are these things to contemporary situations, how retrogressive – these questions must be asked by the responsible artist.
>
> (Chaki Sircar 1988: 98)

For Chaki Sircar, the classical dance heroine (*nayika*) as well as classical dance narratives constituted an onslaught on her feminist sensibilities by objectivising the female dancer's body for a male viewership. It is worth noting here that since the 1990s, Laura Mulvey's seminal 'male gaze' theory (1975) has been considered problematic by dance historians such as Ann Daly (1992), who has stated that it privileges vision over all other senses and does not account for linguistic and psychic processes in producing meaning in a dance work. Chaki Sircar's feminist views represent a particular perception of the female body in Indian classical dance; other feminist scholars differ on the subject. In recent times British Asian performer-choreographer and dance scholar Vena Ramphal has used a phenomenological framework to understand the dancer's subjectivity within the classical form of Bharatanatyam. In her analysis of gender in the *Natyashastra*, Ramphal suggests:

> The concept of the embodied person suspended between subject and object is pertinent to the *Natyashastra*'s discourse. The emphasis is on subjectivity as experience, not the ability to fascinate the gaze of the viewer. Undoubtedly, the *nayika*'s body is made a specular object, but it is just that – an objectivising effect. Her subjectivity lies in her own experience of her *sattva, bhava,* and so on. She moves between the spaces of the experiencing subject and the viewed object.
>
> (Ramphal 2004: 175)

Ramphal here posits that the *Natyashastra*'s insistence on embodied subjectivity and the body's experience of reality (*sattva*) and becoming

(*bhava*) enable the female dancer to become 'the complete subject of aesthetics', something that is denied to the male (2004: 174–5). These views of the experience of gender in Bharatanatyam are ones that feminists such as Chaki Sircar (and the Indian choreographer Chandralekha) did not share. For Chaki Sircar, what Ramphal describes as the 'objectivising effect' far overtook the subjective experience of the dancer; for her, the presence of the male Brahman and his patriarchal ideology as both maker and consumer of the *devadasi* was an inescapable fact, and something that continued to remain in essence in the modern Bharatanatyam form. In her search for cultural texts that privileged women, Chaki Sircar's focus turned instead to the heroines of Tagore's modern literature; far more satisfying representations of women in Tagore's dance dramas presented to her the possibilities of a truly feminist expression through dance. Chaki Sircar's admiration for Tagore's female protagonists is clearly voiced in one of her articles (1988: 98), where she says:

> [I]t is amazing to think of the woman characters created by Tagore not only in his stories and novels but in his dance-dramas: Prakriti, Maya, Chitrangada fall entirely outside the classical milieu. Poems like 'Sabala', 'Jhulan', and 'Duhshamay' can hardly be conceptualized within a given classical framework – their scope supersedes the limits of the Brahmanic ideology inherent in classical dance. Without denying the need to cultivate tradition, it is time to ask: How long can we be limited by it?

If Tagore's heroines provided an alternative, proto-feminist construction of Indian womanhood, the easy and most natural solution for a feminist choreographer such as Chaki Sircar would have been to turn to his Shantiniketan and its *Rabindranritya* or *Rabindrik* dance. Yet, with this dance form too she had reservations. After the death of Tagore, Chaki Sircar felt that Shantiniketan ossified the poet's ideas and refused to treat his dance dramas as living forms capable of transformation. Pointing out the changed context of her contemporary milieu and thus the fallacy of adhering to Tagore's 1930s dance dramas as they had been originally conceived and performed, Chaki Sircar averred:

> We lack the charismatic and guiding presence of the poet, the audience of his time, and the respectful awe with which the first

> Bengali women to take to stage dance were regarded. It is difficult to say how far it is possible to stage Tagore's dance-dramas in their original form with the aid of, merely, memories, guesses, and nostalgic romance. Our society has certainly changed a great deal. The Second World War, Independence, Partition, and other major events have followed one another at a relentless pace, forcing human values into continuous re-assessment. The pressure of the age in which we live has made itself felt in the spheres of literature, fine arts, theatre and film; one wonders if it is a very positive thing to ask any artist to confine him/herself to the experimentation of five decades ago.
>
> (1988: 94)

Chaki Sircar rejected the inflexibility of Shantiniketan's dance practice in favour of a more open-minded approach to the choreography of Tagore's literary material. There was, of course, Uday Shankar's modern dance that she could embrace upon her return to Calcutta; but Chaki Sircar felt that Shankar's dance evolved out of the celebration of his masculinity, and was centred upon himself, on the male body. Chakraborty (2006: 11) quotes one of Chaki Sircar's class lectures in which she asks why, of all Tagore's writings, Shankar chose *Samanya Kshati*, in which the proud queen is humbled and the king emerges both powerful and magnanimous? Liverpool-based dancer Bisakha Sarker, who performed with Chaki Sircar in the 1960s and also trained in Uday Shankar's dance school, remembers Chaki Sircar visiting a dance class at the Shankar school and asking Sarker later: 'why were you girls smiling all the time while dancing?' (personal interview, 2012). Chaki Sircar was clearly uninspired by the place and insignificance of women in Shankar's choreographies. Finally, after Shankar, the only other noteworthy experiments with modern dance that had emerged in Bengal through the Indian People's Theatre Association movement had by the 1980s reached a dead end; the social and political causes (anti-fascism, colonial violence and civil liberty) for which IPTA's theatre and dance activists had fought in the 1940s no longer inspired a response and the urgent zeal with which their bodies danced had faded.

Chaki Sircar's return to India in the mid-1980s thrust her into the midst of fierce polemical debates within the arts and media sector on the subject of Indian femininity. On the one hand, the growing

collective of Indian feminist scholars, which voiced articulate critiques of patriarchal thought governing cultural production, offered a ripe critical field for dance praxis.[13] On the other hand, scholars such as Rajan (1993) raised suspicions around the arrival of the 'new' Indian woman in the media (for instance, in television adverts for detergents), suggesting that the new was only a repackaging of the old patriarchal belief system that valorised women as homemakers. Rajan reveals how commercial advertising and national television (Doordarshan) in India, instead of encouraging a truly autonomous space for modern Indian women and promoting an organised women's movement, actually ended up conflating the ideological categories of 'tradition' and 'modernity' in its representations of the new Indian woman. Feminist scholar Jasodhara Bagchi has also pointed out that 'Indian womanhood is transfixed on the essentialist notion of "purity" that was used in a particular historical juncture to define Indianness' (Bagchi 1995: 2).

Yet, the possibility of a truly feminist mode of self-representation is not completely denied by Rajan. In the selection of cultural texts that she cites as being representative of 'real' rather than 'imagined' women, including the Bengali theatre actress Shaoli Mitra's one-woman play *Nathabati-Anathabat*, Rajan notes the following features or concerns:

> A feminist consciousness that is historically 'modern' informs the subjectivity of the women represented in these texts; and/or an actual or incipient female solidarity (the condition of collectivisation) is set in motion; thematically, issues of tradition and modernity are engaged with strenuously; and formal innovativeness marks their textual modes.
>
> (Rajan 1993: 139)

If the features singled out above by Rajan are taken as pointers indicating contemporary cultural texts that have successfully registered the voices of women in India, then I would include Chaki Sircar's (and later on her daughter Ranjabati Sircar's) choreographic works as significant bodily texts that consciously engaged in a dialogue with and confronted the hegemonic representation of women in the Indian proscenium space. In choreography as cultural text of the kind produced by the Sircars, the dancing body, and particularly the

female dancing body, becomes the space that allows for the conflict of gender and sexuality to be played out. Chaki Sircar's body became a site of resistance, of ideological critique and of the subversion of cultural norms. The new bodies she began to usher on stage displaced the myth of passive womanhood, and not only embodied a feminist cultural politics by intervening and shifting cultural representations but also signalled a transformative politics of the body.

Chaki Sircar's quest was to find a new dance language that would be contemporary in form, and would have current issues as its subject matter. Her new dance would populate the stage with women who were bold, self-assertive, subversive and Indian. These would be women as both products and makers of their culture; they would challenge stereotypical images of women on the dance stage and enact their rebellion through movement; female bodies that would not only critique but also construct alternative versions of womanhood in and through performance. With the establishment of the Dancers' Guild in 1983, Manjusri Chaki Sircar set about creating new full-length group choreographic works in which trained women dancers from various disciplines of Indian classical and semi-classical dance, with proud and erect spines, would leap, jump, kick or roll out their feminist worldview. The following section examines some of the bodily significations and key features of Chaki Sircar's choreography by focusing on three selected dance works from the 1980s and 1990s.

Embodying feminism

In the context of this present study, it is crucial to analyse Chaki Sircar's choreography of Tagore's dance drama *Chandalika,* which she renamed *Tomari Matir Kanya* (*Daughter of the Earth*, 1985). This work reveals the ways in which the original text becomes the site in which Chaki Sircar positioned her feminist questioning and exploration of the status of both women and dance in India. Trevor Wade (2001), Aishika Chakraborty (2006; 2010) and Esha Neyogi De (2011) have each provided excellent analyses of this dance drama and highlighted its chief features; my study of Chaki Sircar's *Tomari Matir Kanya* is slightly different in that it is informed by the fact of my having performed and embodied Chaki Sircar's choreography, first as one of the *chandal kanya* (untouchable women) and later, after the demise

of Ranjabati Sircar in 1999, in the title role of Prakriti. My analysis of *Tomari Matir Kanya* will therefore involve a re-enactment, through words, of the experience of physically performing Tagore's text (the play/dance drama) through the medium of Chaki Sircar's text (the choreography). In rethinking Tagore's and Chaki Sircar's texts from the point of view of a practitioner, this study will endeavour to bring the materiality and knowledge of the dancing body in direct communion and dialogue with discursive feminist and cultural theory.

This trajectory owes allegiance to those authors who have, in the past, addressed methodological and epistemological concerns of the dancing body from within the academy through discourses on dance history, feminist and cultural theory. For example, Jane C. Desmond's claim that there exists a 'fictive separation of mental and physical production in academia', and that a redressing of this imbalance is much needed (1998: 155); and Randy Martin's endorsement of the use of interdisciplinary cultural theories in understanding dance production (1998: 22). The eminence of movement – fluid, unstable, unfixed, ephemeral – in discursive analyses may seem incongruous. Yet, as choreographer and feminist scholar Carol Brown (1994) has pointed out, it is precisely its fleeting presence that has made dance a privileged site for the exploration of fractured and fragmentary identities since the advent of post-structuralism.

The analysis below of Chaki Sircar's choreography – and that of her daughter's work in the next chapter – is in line with feminist analysis and criticism, which is understood to be never disinterested, makes space for the subjectivity of the writer, and positions female dancers as autonomous subjects rather than contingent objects (Brown 1994: 209). The eventual thrust of the effort of reworking theory through praxis, and vice-versa, is two-pronged: to reveal the political nature of Chaki Sircar's feminist re-reading and reworking of Tagore's literature through the corporeality of the dancing body, and to show how Chaki Sircar's choreography, at the twin levels of representation and embodiment, empowered the female dancing body, which can be read as a crucial aspect of performing *Navanritya*. The analysis of Chaki Sircar's *Tomari Matir Kanya* will run along two interlinked threads: a delineation of Chaki Sircar's feminist approach to Tagore's texts and an exploration of my subjective experience in the performance of Chaki Sircar's choreography.

Dismantling patriarchy in *Tomari Matir Kanya* (*Daughter of the Earth*, 1985)

One of the notable features of Chaki Sircar's feminist approach to Tagore's dance drama *Chandalika* is revealed in her careful analytic research into and selection of textual passages that endorse the agency of the two female protagonists, Prakriti and her mother Maya. While creating the choreographic script for *Tomari Matir Kanya*, Chaki Sircar did not adhere to the dance drama text alone, as is usually the practice followed in Bengal for Tagore's dance drama productions; she also turned to the prose play version, which was written in 1933, and only later revised by Tagore as a dance drama in 1938.[14] To Chaki Sircar, the original play presented the characters of the mother and daughter as far more powerful and self-reliant than in the dance-drama, in which the mother 'is often subject to religious fears and insecurities, modelled more on the Bengali middle-class mother than on the Tantric Bhairavi of outcaste society' (Chaki Sircar 1988: 99). The play also afforded to Chaki Sircar the possibility of the ample use of theatre within the dance performance. As Aishika Chakraborty explains in her analysis of *Tomari Matir Kanya*:

> Manjusri consciously infused an element of theatre in the dance-drama by interpositions of dialogues from the original text. The interjections and conversations between the mother (Maya) and the daughter (Prakriti) transcend the narrow space of the 'private' to acquire the power of a social/political statement to challenge the patriarchal order. The emphasis [of *Tomari Matir Kanya*] was on three aspects: 1) It endorsed woman's agency as a force of social change, 2) it recognised their collective power and 3) it focused on the relative independence of lower caste women in ritual ceremonies that fall outside the Brahmanic paradigm.
>
> (2006: 9)

More recently, Esha Niyogi De (2011) has provided an excellent reading of this choreographic work and suggests that in *Tomari Matir Kanya,* Chaki Sircar:

> powerfully rebuts the imperialist filiative order, as entwined in modern Indian caste prejudices. For she reimagines the family as

> a woman-centred site in which to practice and through which to universalize egalitarian relationships.
>
> (De 2011: 158)

De also avers that the mutually supportive mother-daughter relationship central to *Tomari Matir Kanya* not only critiques patriarchal Hindu notions of the family, which see the daughter as burden, but is also at odds with certain western feminist views (such as those of Julia Kristeva) which suggest that motherly bonds are inevitably 'compromised by consecrated representations of femininity' (De 2011: 158).

It is Chaki Sircar's inventiveness as an interpreter of Tagore's text that makes a study of her dance production *Tomari Matir Kanya* so fascinating. A trained feminist anthropologist with in-depth research experience in rural Manipur and Bengal, Chaki Sircar selectively highlights through her edited script the collective strength of female bodies in forming a support system for women. In her work, Prakriti and Maya no longer remain imaginary *chandals* (untouchables) from a fictional world. They are presented as real beings, bearing the double societal burden of being women and untouchables; and they subvert their place by ferociously questioning both the *varna* or caste-system and women's place in society. Male presence in Chaki Sircar's choreography is marginal: Ananda, the Buddhist monk never appears in the flesh on stage. His presence is only hinted at through a beam of light from the stage wings, or through a silhouette of his body on a raised dais located upstage.[15]

My body vividly remembers the labouring, repetitive movements of the *chandal* women in the opening sequence of *Tomari Matir Kanya*. Engaged in hard physical work, these women performers, located in three different spaces on the stage, form the focus of the viewer's attention; for long minutes, all the audience sees when a soft light fades in are their incessant movements, symbolic of an endless cycle of work and hardship for this body of ostracised, outcast untouchable women of the *chandal* community. The movements are not a stylised mimicry of physical work, nor is there any attempt at making the repetitive score graceful or gratuitously aesthetic – everyday gestures and actions combine with deep lunges, thrusts and stamps on the floor. Chaki Sircar repeatedly urged us to *feel* the exertion, the physical pain of the body performing hard manual labour as real women labourers do. My body remembers the moments of contact when the

surfaces of dancers' bodies touched or connected in various moments in the choreography – the *chandal* women leaning against each other in a collective huddle; Prakriti's deep back arch which is held in suspension by the mother Maya (Figure 4.1); the mass of serpentine bodies that move tightly yet sensuously together as a collective in the ritual choreography of *Maya Nritya*; in each of these examples and many more, the performing body feels physically supported and empowered at the same time in a manner unprecedented in Indian dance (physical proximity between bodies and weight sharing is rare in Indian classical dances such as Bharatanatyam, Kathak or Odissi). And then of course, there is the iconoclastic moment of Prakriti's sexual awakening, which occurs in the slow travelling through a tunnel of women's bodies – a powerful visual and choreographic metaphor for women's sexuality and reproductive fertility (Figure 4.2). My body

Figure 4.1 Manjusri Chaki Sircar and Ranjabati Sircar in *Tomari Matir Kanya*. Photo by Avinash Pasricha

Figure 4.2 Ranjabati Sircar as Prakriti in *Tomari Matir Kanya*. Photo by Avinash Pasricha

still remembers the sensation of moving through the narrow, dark lattice of arms and curved spines towards the single beam of light shone on Prakriti – it brings to mind an unconscious and conscious bodily memory of journeying through the birth canal, a profound and intensely life-affirming moment.

In *Tomari Matir Kanya,* conversations between Maya and Prakriti are interrupted several times by the entry of a choral group of women dancers who embody the mother-daughter dialogue and add another layer of meaning to their conversation. For instance, in one scene Prakriti rebelliously confronts her mother with the lines: 'I, a *Chandali?* It is a lie, it is a lie, it is a great lie. The dark monsoon clouds, if you call them *chandal*, will they lose their caste, will their water be then considered impure?' (My translation). At the beginning of her lines, a group of *chandal* women enter the stage – their stamping feet and jagged movements signify their protest, mirroring the rebellious words of Prakriti through their bodies. The chorus leaves the stage after circling the mother and daughter soon afterwards, but through their sudden and powerful entry, Chaki Sircar highlights that it is not only Prakriti but the entire collective body of *chandal* women who question and interrogate their social segregation. Quite

like the role of the chorus in Martha Graham's choreography, Chaki Sircar's choric bodies of dancers perform the function of reflecting or externally manifesting through movement the inner conflict, dilemma or struggle of the principal protagonists.

The women in Chaki Sircar's choreography often perform movements with raised legs (to the front or to the side), high kicks and wide side stretches with an open pelvis; in terms of spatial relations, Chaki Sircar's most revolutionary (and controversial) move was to make her dancers roll on the floor, as in one of the *Maya Nritya* sections.[16] In embodying Chaki Sircar's choreography, which weaves in movement material not only from the precision-demanding Bharatanatyam, Manipuri and Odissi dance forms but also from the male movement forms of Kathakali and the martial art forms Chhau and Kalaripayattu, the female dancer experiences a feeling of autonomy and freedom. In claiming movements from the androcentric worlds of Chhau, Kalaripayattu and Kathakali and giving them to female bodies, Chaki Sircar's choreography deliberately reversed and confused the gendered and sexed definitions of dance patriarchy on the Bengali-Indian stage.

Chaki Sircar's presentation of female bodies in *Tomari Matir Kanya* was a rebuttal of the classic image of the bejewelled dancing woman on the Indian stage. Feminist scholars Kumkum Sangari and Suresh Vaid have pointed out in their seminal project of 'recasting women' that womanhood and femaleness is constructed, constantly made and redistributed; 'it is part of an asserted or desired, not an actual cultural continuity' (1986: 17). Representation, according to these critics, is always political, and serves some interest or purpose. Chaki Sircar's *Tomari Matir Kanya* similarly involved recasting women, not as beatified objects but as physically and intellectually strong subjects. In spinal posture, relation to space, facial expression and body movement, Chaki Sircar and her female dancers offered a new and empowered image of femininity.

Collective agency in *Aranya Amrita* (*The Immortal Forest*, 1989)

Chaki Sircar's non-Tagore choreographic works continued her penchant for bringing together the aesthetic and the political, and include such titles as her 1989 dance drama *Aranya Amrita* (Figure 4.3). The work was inspired by the Chipko Movement, a major ecological statement

Figure 4.3 Arunima Ghosh, Rabishankar Ray and Sadhana Hazra in *Aranya Amrita*. Photo by Avinash Pasricha

in contemporary India, and dealt with the issue of environmental destruction. 'Chipko', literally meaning 'cling to' in Hindi, was a movement begun in the mid-1970s, initiated largely by rural women against government forestry policies to prevent deforestation in northern India. Kumar (1999: 342–69) offers an excellent study of Chipko and other feminist movements in India, explaining how by the 1980s it had swept through large parts of the Indian subcontinent. A non-violent form of protest against the destruction of woodland and forests, the Chipko movement was a striking instance of subaltern agency.

Chaki Sircar's *Aranya Amrita* reflected Chipko's concerns but performatively re-enacted the Bishnoi legend: a community of nearly four hundred villagers in rural Rajasthan who were massacred in the eighteenth century by the king's woodcutters as they tried to protect their trees from being felled.[17] Chaki Sircar's central protagonist Amrita leads her community to non-violent and self-sacrificial rebellion, and her choreography captures the horrors of mass murder through unison sections where collectives of women strike the

ground, protest through urgent and loud footwork, gush forward, fall, arch backwards and spasm inwards. The spasmodic movements, contractions and deep spinal arches perform an angularity, a pulling open and closing of the body and violent twists of the torso that is reminiscent of Martha Graham's dance language in *Lamentation* (1930) or *Cave of the Heart*, and yet looks unapologetically Indian. Chaki Sircar's choreography offers a heady concoction of movement forms from diverse sources that are rearranged on women's bodies to produce a new bodily utterance. The labour involved in performing *Aranya Amrita,* made manifest through the profuse sweating, sharp breaths and loud grunts of the collective bodies in the massacre scene, is real rather than crafted. Chaki Sircar's vision of a powerful and visceral subaltern community is conveyed through her choreography of violence and the non-violent resistance it inspired.

Feminist ecology in *Krauncha Katha* (*Ballad of the Cranes*, 1993)

As in Tagore, Shankar and Bardhan's works, there is an interest in mythology in Chaki Sircar's choreography and her dance-making involved a reconstruction of myth through a feminist lens. In her short choreographic work *Krauncha Katha* (1993), Chaki Sircar used a tale from the Hindu *Puranas*, that of Ratnakar, a merciless robber, and his transformation into the sage Valmiki who then writes the epic *Ramayana*. In the original story, Valmiki's first verse utterance in Sanskrit is triggered by rage and grief at the killing of a pair of cranes. In Chaki Sircar's hands, the story undergoes a metamorphosis; giving the Puranic legend a contemporary context, she once again picks up an ecological issue and puts the central focus of the choreography on a pair of cranes in a bird sanctuary. Their blissful existence in the lap of nature is brought to an end when the male crane is shot dead. The female crane dies of grief as other cranes collectively lament over their limp, lifeless bodies.

It may sound like a simple and straightforward narrative but Chaki Sircar's pronounced interest in violence on bodies and the environment, and in the power of the collective consciousness is evident in this choreographic work which largely follows a non-linear method of storytelling. A Peruvian folk soundtrack, suggestive of a populous sanctuary teeming with bird life, opens the first scene in which the stage floor is littered with bodies. The dancers on the floor, some

lying on their backs and some on their stomachs, unleash a cacophony of sound and movement as feet and hands begin to patter on and slap the ground. The collective sounds of the bodies' contact with the floor move into body percussion and vocal work in the later sections as dancers in group formations move across the stage space en masse. Movements from Chhau suggest elevation; positions from Odissi offer earth-bound, grounded bodies. Balance, bodily and symbolic, is a crucial feature of this work (Figure 4.4). The group lament, forming a semi-circular holding space for the dead pair of cranes, involves dancers connected and leaning on each other. The mutuality of weight giving and sharing in this linked arc of bodies expunges the possibility of any virtuosic display of movement. If *Tomari Matir Kanya* and even *Aranya Amrita* offer opportunities for star roles, *Krauncha Katha*'s choreography is almost entirely carried by its ensemble of dancers.

Even though in choreographies such as *Krauncha Katha* and *Aranya Amrita* there are some roles for male performers (for example, the male crane in *Krauncha Katha* or the male tree in *Aranya Amrita*),

Figure 4.4 Shyamasree Purkayastha and Sukalyan Bhattacharya in *Krauncha Katha*. Photo by Avinash Pasricha

the dominant space in Chaki Sircar's choreographic works is usually occupied by women. In all three pieces of work, the choreographic vision promotes solidarity amongst women, and enables female bodies to claim space, physically and politically. I have mentioned earlier that Chaki Sircar's dance form *Navanritya* gives a feeling of empowerment to the female dancer. This notion is further reinforced by Jhuma Basak, a principal dancer from the Dancer's Guild who played the title role of Amrita for many years and who said of Chaki Sircar's choreography during an interview: 'I realised that her dance was not just dance. It was liberation' (Basak 2005).

Dance and postcolonial feminism

Through her dance and her dancers, through her subject matter and her choreography, Chaki Sircar endorsed the emancipated position of the modern Bengali woman living in a postcolonial world. Her experiments with the dancing body initiated a new wave in the realm of modern dance performance in Bengal; Chaki Sircar's dance art is simultaneously a part of and posed against the trajectory of modernism in dance from the Bengal region. Her choreographic journey resulted in the creation of a new modern Indian dance language called *Navanritya*, which was initially intended primarily as a training methodology for contemporary dancers. Both Manjusri Chaki Sircar and her daughter Ranjabati felt that their new dance form, born out of what they described as a 'chemical synthesis' of different Indian classical, semi-classical, folk and martial movements and yoga, needed to be systematised in order for it to be received coherently by its performers.

In the next chapter, I discuss the components and structure of *Navanritya*, its very definition and how it gradually became a codified movement vocabulary. In the context of this present chapter, however, it is necessary to recap why Chaki Sircar's work becomes crucial in Indian modern dance. First, it inscribes a circular genealogical process that begins and ends with Tagore's ideas on the art of dance and its place in Bengal's, and in a broader and extended sense, India's social and cultural fabric. Second, Chaki Sircar's work underscores both the continuities and ruptures that took place in this genealogy of linked socio-cultural events. Third, Chaki Sircar's works for the stage should be seen as a reallocation of some works from the repository of Tagore's

literature through a feminist methodology. And finally, Chaki Sircar's subversive choreographies offer crucial examples of the politics of postcolonial feminism in late twentieth-century India which gave birth to a movement language that rejected parochial identities and embraced instead the emergence of a range of interlocking narratives of embodied modernities. Her choreographic works, created from the margins to begin with, force us to read against the grain of the nationalist rhetoric that inhered in the reformulated classical dances of India and claimed their nationwide, univocal representation. In the domain of twentieth-century Indian modern culture, particularly that of the Bengal region, her work remains an important example of female agency and her choreographies still hold their place as some of the most intelligent, sensitive, subversive, political and thought-provoking artistic productions of the late twentieth century.

5
Ranjabati Sircar and the Politics of Identity in Indian Dance

If Manjusri Chaki Sircar, situated in post-Independence Bengal as an artist-academic, introduced her version of a feminist enquiry into the representation of women on the Indian dance stage, then her daughter Ranjabati Sircar (1963–99) went a step further and confronted the Indian classical dance establishment head on with her radical rebuttal of not only the form but the pedagogical methods of Indian classical dance. Also, as co-director of the Dancers' Guild, Ranjabati Sircar's input into the Guild's choreographic works and the formulation of the new dance methodology of *Navanritya* was instrumental. The paucity of studies on Sircar's works, therefore, certainly needs to be recompensed. With a few important exceptions – Alessandra Lopez y Royo's article (2003), which initiated a much-needed scholarly analysis of Sircar's work, a brief account of Sircar's choreographies in Gayatri Chattopadhyay's book in Bengali (2001: 157–8), and Aishika Chakraborty's excellent (2008) edition of the dancer's writings – there is remarkably little written critical analysis of Sircar's dance repertoire. Sircar's choreographic works deserve extensive analysis along with a much-needed review of her career trajectory, which traversed several continents and cultural spaces during her brief lifetime. The contours and lines of Sircar's fluid body moved beyond the territorial essentialisms of embodied cultures and consciously sought out intercultural dialogues through the dancing body. Donning the multiple roles of performer, choreographer and teacher in the Indian sub-continent as well as several cosmopolitan spaces in Europe, such as Britain where she worked with dancers from the South Asian diaspora, Ranjabati Sircar created choreographic works that expanded the definition of

Navanritya and of Indian dance across a wide spectrum of cultural contexts. The polyvocality of Sircar's dance works, therefore, becomes both the concluding segment of this book and the springboard from which necessary questions about the transnational identity of Indian dance are instigated.

This chapter begins with a retracing of Ranjabati Sircar's steps across diverse geo-cultural regions, noting the influences that informed her body and mind on these transcontinental journeys. It then offers an overview of the core principles of the *Navanritya* methodology, which Sircar helped her mother create as a new dance training system for performers, upon her return to India. The chapter then privileges excerpts from Sircar's writings on dance, gender and training and observes the continued thread of feminism in Indian dance that either links her to, or separates her from, her predecessors discussed in this book. It next proceeds towards a discussion of some of the overriding political and aesthetic concerns of Sircar as a choreographer and feminist thinker in three of her solo works: *Fable for La Gran Sabana* (1991), *Gangavataran* (1992) and *Cassandra* (1996). Finally, the chapter examines Sircar's choreographic forays into the multicultural Britain of the 1990s, observing the integration policies of the freshly arrived New Labour government in parallel with Sircar's choreographic works such as *Oblique* (1997), which dealt with the thorny issue of race. Through this, the chapter explores questions of identity construction through the dancing body and analyses how Sircar becomes a vital connection bridging Indian and British experiences of embodied subjectivity in twentieth-century dance.

Multiple homes, multiple bodies

Ranjabati Sircar was the only child of Manjusri Chaki and Parbati Kumar Sircar, born on 29 March 1963 in Nsukka, Nigeria to her Indian parents who had moved to West Africa in 1961. Here, for five years, her father headed the geography department at the University of Nigeria whilst her mother learnt and taught dance. Nigeria was home to Sircar's first rendezvous with dance, carried in a sling on her mother's back to lessons and performances. In 1966, the family moved to North America, where Parbati Sircar joined SUNY New Paltz in upstate New York as professor of geography. The fourteen years that the Sircar family spent in North America would leave a

profound imprint on the dual identity of both Ranjabati Sircar's persona and work.

In her introduction to a collection of Ranjabati Sircar's writings, Aishika Chakraborty (2008) offers an in-depth and moving account of Sircar's life in New Paltz, lived as it was in surroundings of immense natural beauty encircled by the Catskill mountains, but constantly walking a tight-rope between her Bengali heritage and the North American cultural space where she grew up. As Chakraborty notes, '[w]hen the world outside was bursting with Rock and Jazz, the drawing room of the Sircars was filled with Indian music, particularly the songs of Tagore, sung by Debabrata Biswas…' (2008: 8). Like many other children growing up in diaspora cultures across the world, Sircar experienced tensions between her home and the world outside: at home, she was encouraged to speak only Bengali and in the world outside, she mingled with white, liberal, middle-class Americans. At home, she was asked to learn Indian dance by her mother, which she often fretted against and in the world outside, she was in the midst of the Ginsbergian 'Flower Power' counter-culture that gripped America in the 1960s.

Ranjabati's mother Manjusri Chaki Sircar enthusiastically participated in American life, completing a doctoral degree in anthropology from Columbia University, New York, and absorbing the avant-garde dance culture during her stay in the United States. The Sircars' home was therefore never an insular space that desperately crystallised its 'original' or 'authentic' Indian cultural identity. However, in some ways, the Sircars' experience as a diaspora family constantly straddling two cultures perhaps attests to what Pnina Werbner in her essay 'Complex Diasporas' (2010) calls being both ethnic-parochial and cosmopolitan. Ranjabati Sircar was certainly a product of this complex dialectical tension. Also, unlike other permanently settled diaspora families, the Sircars chose to return to India in 1980. This back and forth movement between India and the outside world is not insignificant in the context of the evolution of Sircar's unique identity as a dance artist. Werbner suggests a very interesting term in her discussion of transnationalism:

> [a] key point distinguishing transnationalism from the old literature on international migration is that *that* literature tended to assume a one-way migration to the West, and in particular the United States. The new scholarly debates on migrant transnationalism

> recognise the importance of a reverse process of return, circulatory international migration and hence also the permanent condition of being a 'transmigrant', that is, a migrant who moves back and forth between the West and the Rest.
>
> (2004: 896)

The Sircars' reverse process of return and their circulatory ambulations in the 1980s certainly thwarts any straightforward or simplistic understanding of either migrant or national identity construction. Ranjabati Sircar's 'transmigrant' condition would infect her thinking, ideology and her bodily discourse throughout her life. Following her father's early retirement and the family's return to India in 1980, Sircar completed her high school education at the Kodaikanal International School in southern India, and then studied English literature at both undergraduate and postgraduate degree levels at Jadavpur University, Calcutta, topping her class consistently. By this time, she had begun to perform with her mother in a string of performances presented by the Collective Dance Theatre, which Chaki Sircar had established in Calcutta (see Chapter 4). Ranjabati Sircar simultaneously continued her dance training, learning the classical dances Bharatanatyam from the Kalakshetra-trained Guru Khagendranath Burman and Kathakali from Guru Govindan Kutty; she also worked alongside her mother to create choreographic works for the stage. In 1983, mother and daughter established the Dancers' Guild in their home in Calcutta, and Ranjabati began her career as co-director of the company. For the next sixteen years, she would help her mother devise a new dance training process (*Navanritya*), co-direct and perform in Dancers' Guild productions, create her own solo works, and teach, perform and choreograph both nationally and in international residencies across the globe, including North and South America, the United Kingdom and elsewhere in western Europe (see Chakraborty 2008: 16). The following section provides an overview of the methodology of new dance training that constituted *Navanritya*, and examines the assemblage of multiple cultural reference points that together mapped out the *Navanritya* body.

Navanritya: a new dance methodology

During the 1980s, Sircar began what she then called 'creative dance' classes for children and young adults at the Dancers' Guild, then at

her home in the leafy suburban township of Salt Lake City, Calcutta. My own parents' home happened to be in the same neighbourhood, a five-minute walk away from the Sircars' residence. My mother, trained in Manipuri during her youth in the north-eastern state of Assam, had a passion for dance but had to choose marriage and family over a career as a performer in the early 1960s. She was keen that my older sister and I experience and engage with dance as an art form. Thus, my sister and I were among Ranjabati Sircar's earliest students and joined her creative dance classes in 1985–86. Every Sunday morning, we would spend a couple of solid hours moving with Sircar, or 'Ranja-di', as we called her.[1]

My body vividly remembers the movements that Sircar sometimes taught us and sometimes facilitated out of our individual bodies. Sircar would teach us the Indian classical dance form Bharatanatyam, carefully going through the footwork, hand gestures and body positions central to the form, but it was her creative dance sessions that struck a chord with the young bodies and minds that she trained. Sircar used imagery-laden language and visualisation while teaching, transforming the studio into a magical forest or a wild river, and would ask us to embody the pulse and movements of the elements, or birds and beasts. The individual freedom and autonomy that she brought out of students as young as six or seven, her ability to tease out stories through play from the improvised body movements of her young dancers was exemplary and nothing like a regimented dance technique class. The emphasis of her classes was always on new movement vocabularies for the body to find and explore. By the time my sister (Shyamasree Purkayastha) had joined the Dancers' Guild as a performing dance artist and I had moved into Sircar's advanced class, the pedagogic vision was openly inclusive of Indian and Euro-American systems of dance training. Looking back, I can clearly see traces of Sircar's international dance journeys enter the Guild's studio space and our bodies. Her warm-up and cool-down exercises would include deep stretches of the spine that referenced both yoga and a Trisha Brown company class. When I attended a six-week residency at the American Dance Festival in 2003,[2] taking part in contact improvisation classes and in Trisha Brown's repertoire class (taught by Abigail Yager), I fully grasped how eclectic and intercultural Sircar's own teaching methods and movement content were.

As we saw in Chapter 4, the Dancers' Guild's early productions, such as *Tomari Matir Kanya* (1985) and *Chitrangada* (1987), involved a feminist reinterpretation of Tagore's Bengali literary texts in the creation of altogether new movement material for dancers. Sircar and her mother soon realised that the movement material generated by their choreographic experiments needed a coherent structure and a cogent language in order for their company members and students to receive it with clarity. The mother-daughter duo had so far been weaving together movements gleaned from a number of different sources to create new movement: the Indian classical forms, primarily the Kalakshetra style of Bharatanatyam, and Manipuri; postures and movements inspired by temple sculptures and paintings; martial arts such as Chhau; and body positions from yoga. The first step was to christen their new dance '*Navanritya*': in spirit, it would not be too different from the wave of contemporary dance experiments responding to feminist politics that took the name of 'New Dance' in Britain during the 1970s and 1980s (Jordan 1992). In Britain, New Dance was, amongst other things, very firmly aligned with the women's movement; as Jordan states, it opened up 'a new range of representations for women in dance' (1992: 87). The Sircars' *Navanritya,* with its feminist anti-establishment foundations, became an Indian enunciation of the global experience of feminism in dance.

The second step was to give the process of assimilation of diverse movement genres and body postures a definition. The term chosen for this was 'chemical synthesis': derived from the Bengali *rashayonik shangmishron*, the phrase was borrowed from Protima Devi's book *Nritya* (1949), which describes the early experiments with dance movement that took place in Shantiniketan during Tagore's time.[3] Taking direct inspiration from Tagore's experiment of synthesising different genres of dance and yet departing from what they believed to be an illustrative style of dancing that had become the norm in Shantiniketan's dance praxis, Sircar and her mother gave their assimilative process a formal structure. *Navanritya* was described by the Sircars not so much as a 'technique' but as a working *methodology*, an approach to dance that would be fluid, open and constantly inclusive of new movement material.

The *Navanritya* methodology was divided into an eight-part structure of movement groups, depending on the body's relation to space. An overview of these eight groups of body movements suggests the

citationality of the *Navanritya* body: (i) *Bhoomisparsha* (touching the earth), the first group consisting of floor rolls, postures from temple sculptures and yoga positions; (ii) *Madhyabhangi* (mid-level postures) derived and reconstructed from Bharatanatyam, Kathakali, Odissi and Manipuri; (iii) *Sthanaka* (upright static positions), bringing together the basic standing body positions of Bharatanatyam, Kathakali, Odissi; (iv) *Tribhanga* (the isolated three-part bending of the body), consisting of a group of formulated movements originating from Odissi and Chhau; (v) *Ullamphana* (jumps), a category comprising leaps and jumps from Bharatanatyam, Kathakali, the *karanas* in Chidambaram temple sculptures, Chhau and the Manipuri martial art/dance form Thangk-ta; (vi) *Chalan O Gati Matra* (movements traversing space), including walking and running, many of them from Bharatanatyam, the *karanas* and Chhau; (vii) *Urdhagati* (movements of elevation), comprising above hip-level lifting and stretching of legs mostly inspired from Chhau movements; and (viii) *Bhangisamasthi* (movement clusters), which included both group formations in the form of body clusters and movement phrases.[4]

The structuring of body movements into eight groups and the process of adding, incorporating and devising the movements that came to form a part of each of these groups followed the creation of the Sircars' early choreographic works; as Jhuma Basak (personal interview, 2005) has suggested, *Navanritya* was formalised as both a methodology and a training process only after the creation of *Tomari Matir Kanya* and *Chitrangada*.[5] The earliest choreographic works of the Sircars, therefore, served as the foundation from which *Navanritya* movements and the movement groups were categorised and structured. Thus, process was a key ingredient in the formulation of the *Navanritya* methodology; not only that, it was one of the most significant defining features of the Sircars' new dance.

In this process of compilation and assimilation of body movements, two interconnected strands played a crucial role: a liberating ideology and formal innovation. The liberating ideology strand shaped the central concern of the Sircars' new dance methodology: to find strategies that would free the female body from pre-codified structures of physicality in Indian dance, which had been largely shaped by socio-cultural conditioning. Manjusri Chaki Sircar and Ranjabati Sircar's approaches to physical movement were defined by their position in post-Independence Bengal as erudite, mobile

women with strong feminist leanings. Hence, at a corporeal level the new movement vocabulary bore the stamp of their intellectual make-up and their personalities: bold, assertive, uninhibited bodies that unabashedly exhibited an erect spine, open torso, and a flexible pelvis became the blueprint on which the Guild's dancers' bodies were moulded.

The formal innovation strand in the methodological process was shaped in turn by the ideological: movements were sourced not only from various classical dance forms, but also from yoga and martial arts, which demanded greater flexibility and freedom of the moving body. The diverse body postures and movements were synthesised to create new relationships between body and space for the proscenium. Two instances from the first group of movements, *Bhoomisparsha* (touching the earth), stand as examples. In this group, the very first movement phrase is one in which the dancer is seated on the floor in the *Bhadrasana* posture from yoga – erect spine, open pelvis, both knees turned outward, the soles of the feet pressed flat against each other and pulled close to the pelvis. A Bharatanatyam *Natyarambhe* first position of the hands – arms stretched on either side, shoulder level, with elbows slightly turned up – matches this open seated position of the body on the floor. From this open-knee posture, the movement flows forward as the outstretched arms circle from the centre, resembling a breaststroke motion from swimming. The lower body matches the upper body as it sends both feet forward, presses the floor with the outside of the feet and slides the body forward along the ground using core abdominal strength, the sit bones and pelvis.

The second example of a movement phrase from the same group is what the Sircars termed the 'Flying Apsara', derived from a sculpture of a female body in the Ellora caves: the dancer's body here is reclined on the floor, front facing, hinged on one hip and a propped elbow, feet outstretched, pelvis open and held rather than pushed back, and one arm parallel to the outstretched feet. In Indian mythology, an *apsara* is a celestial woman knowledgeable in the art of dancing, and is part of the coterie of women in the court of Indra, the god of thunder and warfare. Although the image of the *apsara* is charged with erotic and seductive valence in popular art and film, in *Navanritya* the body of the *apsara* offers the possibility of unsubmissive female sexuality. In both these cited examples of movement phrases, there is an openness of the female body and a celebration

of the body's relationship with the floor hitherto unseen in Indian classical dance. The female body claiming space – physically, symbolically and politically – becomes of utmost significance and is indeed the founding principle of *Navanritya*. There is also a very clear embodying of history at work. I return to the term 'citationality', which I introduced earlier, to suggest that the multiple citations or the arranging and organising of bodies in recognisable ways that occurs within *Navanritya* interpenetrates origin with destruction. In a process where the past is appropriated and transformed, the citationality of the *Navanritya* methodology, like Derrida's notion of the signature, exemplifies a highly original intention (Royle 2003).

There are several other examples of body movements that one may cite from the *Navanritya* methodology and that subvert the stereotypical image of glamorised female bodies on the Indian stage and instead highlight the freedom and power of such bodies. The movements, for instance, in the seventh group, *Urdhagati*, which are largely inspired by the Mayurbhanj Chhau martial dance form, demand not only the ability to balance through the strength of the lower limbs but also the ability of the moving body to lift, stretch and push itself using the legs, pelvis and the torso. The appropriation of movements and body postures from androcentric dance/martial art forms such as Chhau by female bodies not only blurs the distinctions between gendered movements but also offers a broad range of possibilities for the female torso to be opened, for the female spine to explore various spaces and levels and for the pelvis (as a body part symbolic of sexuality) to be released. It is a powerful twist to Mary Daly's notion of androgyny in *Pure Lust* (1984), in that here it is women who subsume or consume men, rather than vice versa.[6]

In the following section, I revisit Ranjabati Sircar's writings on and issues with Indian dance as she saw and experienced it, in order to understand the relationship between Sircar's own brand of feminism and her own intellectual and physical understanding of the female body in dance.

'The body is trained to think, the mind is trained to move'[7]

Ranjabati Sircar twinned her career in dance with the life of a prolific writer; her body and pen inscribing furiously and incisively on the

pages of India's performance and cultural history. She has left behind a significant array of written material that includes performance reviews, scholarly articles on dance and training, travel writings and critical reflections on gender. Many of these were published in important journals and volumes during her lifetime and most of her seminal pieces of written work, as well as previously unpublished and rarely accessed material, have been reprinted in a collection edited by historian Aishika Chakraborty (2008). Chakraborty's book offers a fascinating glimpse into the life of an erudite dancer who was as comfortable and eloquent in her critical appraisal of performances by, for instance, the Merce Cunningham company, Pina Bausch's Tanztheater Wuppertal and the British theatre company Cheek by Jowl as she was when writing about Rabindranath Tagore's dance dramas or Uday Shankar's film *Kalpana*. This section focuses on Sircar's lucid writing and her thoughts as captured in Chakraborty's collection as well as in two of her original published writings (Sircar 1993 and 1995) and in interviews published in Britain (see Burt 1992a; Longley 1997a). This enables us to clearly position her within the modern dance genealogy that the book has attempted to sketch.

Like her mother, Ranjabati Sircar reserved an enormous amount of admiration and respect for Tagore's artistic oeuvre, although not for the institution of Tagore-purism that he had unwittingly left behind. Speaking of the legacy of experimentation that Tagore had gifted to dancers like herself, she wrote:

> The various frameworks of form and content (and any number of other considerations) within which artistes operate may be diverse. But the basic sensibility that underlies all these attempts are undoubtedly the same, and the same too as those that underlay Tagore's own attempts: faith in the body as artistic vehicle, and faith in the individual as artist, beyond hidebound strictures of tradition. Indeed, concepts of eco-political consciousness, feminism, non-religious spirituality, and the clear, demystified eye with which the contemporary dancer approaches physical forms, were all aspects of Tagore's explorations, fifty years ago.
>
> (In Chakraborty 2008: 79)

Sircar's reliance on Tagore's modernity was not absolute, and she embraced her own individuality, just as she felt Tagore did in his

lifetime, when working with his texts. When she played the character of Prakriti in the Dancers' Guild production of *Tomari Matir Kanya*, based on Tagore's dance drama *Chandalika* (see Chapter 4), she brought her training and skills in textual analysis to inform her own specific understanding and subjective take on Tagore's writing:

> My background in literature helped me to go through the texts of both dance-drama and play over and over again to find imagery and metaphors that could help me to construct Prakriti as a flesh and blood character. Repeatedly, I found images of contrast: aridity/abundance; heat/coolness; the sun/the well; fire/water; earth/sky; mother/monk; attachment/renunciation.
>
> (In Chakraborty 2008: 80)

It was Sircar's ability to discern multiple layers of meaning implicit in a text through a careful attentiveness to language that also enabled her to read the dancing body as a semiotic field. Like her mother, Sircar displayed a pronounced suspicion of the patriarchal underpinnings of Indian classical dance and instead emphasised the need for new modes of movement that would be able to deal effectively with socio-cultural change and contemporary subject matter. Although placing herself in a lineage of Indian dance modernity, Sircar advocated the presence and growth of a distinct contemporary dance language in India. At the very beginning of her article on this subject, Sircar situated herself in what she termed 'the moment of definition' (Sircar 1995: 255). Contemporary dance in India, according to her, needed to be theorised, its history documented and its links with politics and culture in India clearly analysed. Sircar succinctly addressed some of these concerns when she set out to discuss classical and contemporary Indian dance from a feminist position, using a deconstruction model of analysis. Defining contemporary dance as 'a genre of genrelessness' distinguished by its 'multi-layered, multifaceted existence, and the absence of given closures' (ibid.: 257), Sircar went on to analyse the differences in body language that the contemporary and classical genres demanded of the female body. Beginning with the ways in which the female body is held in the original models of classical dance, Sircar wrote:

> [I]f we begin with the earliest models of Bharatanatyam which we find in temple sculpture – taking those of Chidambaram as a

> central focus – we take certain facts to be generally applicable in the semiotic of the bodies represented, in spite of regional and temporal variations. The spine is straight, pelvis and shoulders open, abdomen relaxed, joints flexible, head, hands and feet supple. The bodies bespeak naturalness and precision, a sense of strength which is flowing, power which is at ease. There is never evidence of strain; although tension may be there, it is a muscular/skeletal pattern in the control of the dancer.
>
> (Ibid.: 257–8)

From her description of the openness, confidence and ease in the body positions of dancing women depicted in temple sculptures, Sircar moved to an analysis of photographs of *devadasis* taken by colonials at the turn of the century (source not cited), where she described the dancers' bodies with the shoulders turned inwards and the pelvis decentred as being 'defensively self-conscious', revealing the 'instability and uncertainty' of a new socio-cultural situation (ibid.: 258).[8] Sircar then turned her attention to a critique of the female body in the modern reconstructed Bharatanatyam of Kalakshetra, which in her opinion, appropriated the tradition of the *devadasis* while simultaneously denouncing their history, and reduced the sensual celebration of the female body to mere sexuality. She suggested that:

> […] the geometry of the Kalakshetra technique is meticulous, but at the cost of separation of upper and lower body. This is evident in the pulled-up abdominal muscles and the backward sway of the pelvis – as if negating the openness of the *mandala* position. Linear clarity recalls the sculptural blueprint, but the two-dimensional, staccato quality characteristic of Kalakshetra calls for extraordinary muscular tension, denying the body's fluidity.
>
> (Ibid.: 258)

Sircar's analysis echoes Amrit Srinivasan's (1985) and Matthew Harp Allen's (1997) argument that the twentieth-century revival and reform of Bharatanatyam saved not the dancer but the dance, by marginalising the *devadasis* and cleansing the *sadir* dance art form of those elements that the bourgeois revivalists found morally offensive.[9] In her reading and embodying of Bharatanatyam, Sircar noticed a puritanical negation of the frank celebration of physicality noticeable

in the earliest extant sculptural images of female bodies. In terms of body positions ('the backward sway of the pelvis'), Sircar perhaps felt that the female body in the revived classical dance selfconsciously and embarrassedly negotiated the open-legged, knees-facing-outward stance of the *mandala* (first position) in Bharatanatyam.

One of her other objections to the classical dance form was the gender imbalance implicit in its pedagogical system. In an article titled 'Contemporary Indian Dance: Question of Training' (1993), which was published in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, Sircar openly challenged and questioned the mode of teaching classical dance, where knowledge invariably flowed from male teacher (*guru*) to female disciple (*shishya*). This, to Sircar, reflected a patriarchal situation in which the authoritative knowledge system is viewed as 'masculine-penetrative' and the body as 'feminine-receptive'. Firmly believing that such a system stifled creativity, Sircar advocated an individualistic approach to the exploration and interpretation of form: one through which the dancer would explore her/his physical capacity 'while respecting the body's integrity' (Sircar 1995: 260). It was her belief in individual artistic self-development and an empowering external and internal training process that would go 'beyond linearity, logic and linguistic tyranny' (ibid.) that shaped Sircar's trajectory of experimentation with the body and subject matter.

Ranjabati Sircar's writings exhibit tell-tale signs of a postmodern feminist stance in the way in which she discusses the body within training regimes in dance. Her approach to dance analysis clearly favours deconstruction as she shows a keen interest in structures underlying systems of bodily training. Her writings also appear to be anti-essentialist, resisting binaries between the mind and the body, the past and the present of dance, and instead finding fluid connections between moving and thinking, between being and becoming. Hélène Cixous suggests that the feminine space of writing is 'the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of social and cultural standards' (Cixous 1981: 249). Although Sircar's writings on dance do not wander or stray from the realm of structured and organised language as Cixous has argued for, they do serve as a launch pad for a much-needed critique of gendered training systems in India and suggest a movement towards a transformation of the female body-mind relationship within patriarchal systems of performance. If one of the

concerns of current performance scholarship – and certainly it is true of this volume – is to notice where movement resides, then we can undoubtedly see acts of writing such as Sircar's as being constitutive of movement.

The following section focuses on the ways in which, through her solo works, Sircar used the dancing body as a site for the re-examination and re-performance of various significant feminist concerns, such as female sexuality, desire and reproduction.

Decolonising the female body: the solo works of Ranjabati Sircar

Ranjabati Sircar's solo choreographies inherited the anti-patriarchal content of Manjusri Chaki Sircar's feminism, but departed from her mother's work in terms of their open celebration of viscerality, female desire and sexuality. As Sircar's career as a choreographer and performer developed, her dance works increasingly reflected her preference for representing women as subjects of theatre who could expose both their vulnerabilities and their tremendous, untameable power. The analysis below looks to just three of Sircar's solos, all of which are suggestive of a wilful process of decolonising the female body through a feminist re-enactment and reclamation of fable, mythology and classical literature.[10]

Fable for La Gran Sabana (1991) and the filial order

This choreographic work was a product of Sircar's journey to South America in 1991, during which she participated in the First International Creators' Encounter in Venezuela. In *Fable for La Gran Sabana*, the geology of the Venezuelan Amazon, home to some of the earth's most ancient layers of rock formations, becomes the backdrop against which Sircar radically re-imagines filial bonds and the patriarchal order. She enacts the different stages of a woman's life – love, consummation, childbearing, motherhood – using an untamed physical vocabulary to present her subject matter. Within the narrative of *Fable,* the female protagonist exhibits her agency and autonomy not only in choosing the lover with whom she fulfils her sexual union, but also the space in which she constructs her own family. She travels alone, as her pregnant body grows larger and heavier, until she finds the most beautiful and unspoilt place on

earth, La Gran Sabana, where she ultimately gives birth to a daughter. The mother-daughter bond is deep, unhindered and unconstrained by the presence of the father or any other male authority figure. But this alternative utopian female order is brutally demolished by the entry of a male king who lusts after the woman's beautiful daughter and disrupts the pristine innocence of the chosen world; the king's attempt at rape, presented by Sircar in a subtle rather than sensational manner, is thwarted by a miraculous death in which the daughter's material body disintegrates into air. The mother's grief for the loss of her child gestates for nine months, at the end of which she sees her daughter's body materialised as hills and valleys, her presence palpable in every nook and corner of the natural world.

Fable's narrative strand enabled Sircar's performing body to create a world on stage in which images of female desire, sexuality, reproduction and labour were offered through both a real and a symbolic language of the dancing body. Although the natural world lies at the heart of the piece, Sircar does not seem to offer either a problematised or essentialised alliance between woman and nature of the kind that feminist thinkers such as Luce Irigaray (1985) or Monique Wittig

Figure 5.1 Ranjabati Sircar in *Fable for La Gran Sabana*. Photo by Avinash Pasricha

(1992) have been suspicious of and ultimately rejected. Instead, her vision seems to suggest what Stacy Alaimo (2000) has called the transformation of nature into undomesticated ground, a space where women can be 'untamed, unruly and unregenerate' (Alaimo 2000: 16). Sircar's choreography captured the weight of a pregnant female body, the harrowing pain of labour, the nurturance of the maternal body and the agonising lament of a bereaved mother through a combination of everyday and stylised movements that spilled out beyond the confines of any recognisable Indian dance language (Figure 5.1). In its construction of an alternative filial order, *Fable*'s feminist revision of family and female reproduction can certainly be seen as an embodied political statement.

Gangavataran (1992) and patriarchal order

Gangavataran (the descent of the river Ganga) explored a well-known Hindu mythological story in which Sircar's solo dancing body explored the various physical and psychological traits of four different characters – Bhagirath, a noble king; Shiva, a powerful male god in the Hindu trinity; Parvati, goddess and Shiva's partner; and Ganga, the female personification of the mighty river revered by Hindus. The mythology of Ganga's descent relates how Bhagirath inherits a kingdom of disorder to rule and in order to bring peace to his country, journeys to the Himalayan Mountains to ask for the celestial river Ganga to flow down to earth. Bhagirath's disciplined *tapasya* (meditation) wins him the blessing of Brahma, the father of heaven (and Ganga), who agrees to let Ganga flow on earth. However, Ganga's power and force of descent is destructive and can only be harnessed by the mighty Shiva, who agrees to ensnare Ganga in the matted locks of his hair.

From one angle, the ideological implications of such a narrative, such a male authoritative mythological world order, might seem an odd choice for a choreography by Sircar. If both Manjusri Chaki Sircar and Ranjabati Sircar had in the past critiqued and been dissatisfied with Uday Shankar's choice of Tagore's text *Shamanya Khyati* (*A Small Damage*), in which a proud queen is ultimately humbled, why then did the humbling of a powerful female river by the male gods offer a satisfying narrative for Sircar's choreography? However, from another angle it can be argued that it is precisely in the way in which Sircar's female body re-performed and re-enacted the mythology that one begins to unravel her feminist critique of this worldview. On a

surface level, *Gangavataran* could be read simply as a narrative of crisis and resolution – it moved from chaos to harmony, and structurally the choreography, through the narrator Bhagirath's eyes, offered an easy journey of hope and reconciliation for the audience to participate in. On another, deeper level, Sircar's dance questioned male control and domination and the deep distrust and fear that patriarchy has for the power of the feminine to potentially destroy the male order. Like many radical feminist works, *Gangavataran* urges its audience to the critical view that the only possibility that has been afforded to us for a truly ordered world is through a patriarchal control of the surge of feminine power, and the only way that this control over the feminine can be achieved is by manipulation and force. Sircar's body unleashed a fury on stage as she performed Ganga's roaring descent on earth, sweeping aside and devastating everything in its way; similarly, she performed Shiva's seduction of Ganga and the deceit with which he invites her into his arms and then entraps and binds her in his hair, with a subtle irony and an unmistakable sense of pathos.

In *Gangavataran*, Sircar displayed a sense of absolute ease with the new movement language of her dancing body while yet demonstrating that she was in full command and control of it (Figure 5.2). She

Figure 5.2 Ranjabati Sircar in *Gangavataran*. Photo by Avinash Pasricha

dexterously played the male characters of Bhagirath and Shiva or the personified river Ganga (female), deploying a movement vocabulary that seamlessly flowed between the male and female body positions, hand gestures and footwork from the diverse Indian dance genres of Bharatanatyam, Kathakali, Chhau and Odissi. Her body, in reverting to a mythological past – while never abandoning a contemporary critical feminist lens – produced a dance language that could easily travel between learnt and discovered movement.

Cassandra (1996) and the dangerous feminine

Sircar's empathy for powerful yet victimised and marginalised women characters from history and mythology was clearly revealed in *Cassandra*. In this choreographic work, not only did Sircar focus on the trauma of the well-known female character from Greek mythology, she also drew parallels with other misunderstood and maltreated women of history and folklore: Joan of Arc from France and Khana from Bengal. The narratives of Cassandra and Joan of Arc will be familiar to most western readers, but it might be useful to reflect on why Khana's story appealed to Sircar. According to Bengali legend, Khana was a woman widely respected and admired by all for her intelligence and especially for her knowledge of astronomy and agriculture. It is believed that she was the daughter-in-law of a renowned astronomer Varahamihira (Singh 2009: 581). Khana attracted the envious attention of wise men in King Bikramaditya's court for her increasing popularity and they conspired to have her tongue cut out. Before she was silenced, Khana is believed to have recited her knowledge through verses that live as proverbs in rural Bengal to the present day, known as *Khanar Bachan* or 'Khana's Sayings'.[11]

Common to all these women – Cassandra, Joan of Arc and Khana – were the gift of foresight and their innate power of prophesy. The forces of authority/patriarchy had silenced all three women: branded as witches or as insane, their voices were suppressed in the cacophony of macho state politics or warfare. In Sircar's choreography, the proscenium becomes the site in which the female body revisits these women and gives them voice, if only for a few significant moments. In highlighting the injustice meted out to these intelligent and articulate women, Sircar's subversive choreography underscores gender imbalance and discrimination in histories across two different cultures, the

Figure 5.3 Ranjabati Sircar in *Cassandra*. Photo by Avinash Pasricha

western and the eastern, and also highlights the significance of the figure of the dangerous feminine that constantly poses a threat to masculine systems of knowledge and therefore is continually disempowered (Figure 5.3).

Sircar's *Cassandra* was based on her reading of *Conditions of a Narrative: Cassandra* (1984), written by the East German writer Christa Wolf (1929–2011). Of the inspiration for her work, Sircar wrote:

> Wolf's work forms the textual and conceptual groundwork for the character of Cassandra. On an Aristotelian level, Cassandra is an archetypal tragic heroine, bound by the dictates of an impersonal destiny. On the political level, however, her story is the story of all those who are disempowered by the processes of history. It is also the ultimate myth of the 'female voice' that expresses itself through magic, ritual, poetry, story, and inspirational or devotional

> performance; the voice that speaks again and again, accusing, protesting, cutting through layers of ego structure to declare the truth of reality; the voice that has spoken throughout history and continues to speak today, in the face of insidious oppression and brutal suppression.
>
> (In Chakraborty 2008: 174)

Female voices, overlapping and layered one over the other, sometimes speaking and sometimes whispering in Steve Gorn's sound score formed part of the memorable atmosphere of *Cassandra*, according to Shyamasree Purkayastha, Sircar's student and audience member (in person interview, 2012). The stage was stark, with some minimalist props (bamboo canes and a net), and the piece was overall dark and hard-hitting – there were no attempts at embellishment, no desire to please (ibid.). Perhaps Sircar's most definitive contribution to Indian performance was the introduction of larger than life yet very human images of women: she deliberately chose female protagonists from literature, mythology or folklore – female archetypal figures, as she suggests in the paragraph above – whose bodies could not be contained within the putative boundaries of feminine representation in the Indian dance space. Whether it was the woman in labour from the birth scene in *Fable* or the dangerous, knowledgeable yet misunderstood seer in *Cassandra*, Sircar skilfully presented her female body as the active maker, rather than the passive receiver of meaning.

Dance historian Uttara Asha Coorlawala notices several citations in Sircar's work from Martha Graham's repertory and also sees the presentation of heroic archetypal female roles as being common to their choreographic works (e-mail communication). *Navanritya*'s link with Graham is well established (see Chapter 4); both Manjusri Chaki Sircar and Ranjabati Sircar spoke highly of Graham's works to their students and indeed, were inspired by the Graham technique whilst creating the pedagogical framework for *Navanritya* (Figure 5.4). Moreover, Coorlawala has also suggested that while in New Paltz, Ranjabati trained in Graham technique under Mar Benham, a trained dancer-practitioner from Graham's school, at the State University of New York (ibid.). Echoes of Graham's larger than life and dramatic Greek female protagonists such as Medea and Clytemnestra may therefore be found in Sircar's own choreographic works, emphasising the dominant

Figure 5.4 Ranjabati Sircar in *Cassandra*. Photo by Avinash Pasricha

image of the female body as both an active and a corrosive presence in proscenium space.

A bridge between two worlds

This final section follows Ranjabati Sircar's movements across the colonial cultural schism between Asia and Europe to focus on her dance experiments beyond India's shores and in the land of its former colonisers, in the rapidly transforming cultural space of Britain of the 1990s. Sircar's choreographic works are read here as interventions that were inscribed into a significant chapter in Britain's political history – the meteoric rise and arrival of the New Labour government. It is useful to sketch, therefore, the British socio-cultural scene within which Sircar's choreographies were conceived and performed.

Along with the entry of Tony Blair and his newly envisioned Labour Party came a flurry of ideas about multiculturalism, which in turn triggered fruitful and yet heated debates on assimilation and integration. Tariq Modood (2005), amongst many other scholars, offers – through the lens of British experience – a useful distinction between assimilation (a one-way relationship),integration (a two-way

process of social interaction) and multiculturalism. Multicultural accommodation, Modood states,

> works simultaneously on two levels: creating new forms of belonging to citizenship and country, and helping sustain origins and diaspora. The result – without which multiculturalism would not be a form of integration – is the formation of 'hyphenated' identities […] These hyphenated identities are in this understanding a legitimate basis for political mobilisation and lobbying, not attacked as divisive or disloyal.
>
> (Modood 2005: 3)

The acknowledgement of these 'hyphenated' identities and of the existence of fluid and overlapping cultural territories was a significant shift in perspectives on British national identity in the 1990s. Race, ethnicity and community became key terms which shaped government policies and significantly impacted on government funding for the arts. The British cultural commentator Naseem Khan, writing about arts in New Labour Britain has said that:

> [i]n the 1990s, the concept of multiculturalism, in which people were confined behind their racial identities and divisions were institutionalised, began to lose ground. The walls between cultures were being decisively dismantled. Artists were claiming a freedom to stay with their ethnic identity, to abandon it, to parody, evolve, deconstruct and reconstruct it – as they chose.
>
> (2006: 22)

It was in such a milieu of celebration, critique, debate, deconstruction and experimentation in British South Asian arts that Ranjabati Sircar started taking on choreography projects in Britain. In 1992, she was invited to become the first artistic director of the National South Asian Youth Dance Company, YUVA and was commissioned to create a full-length choreographic work with a cast comprised entirely of British Asian dancers. *Thirsting River* (1992) was the result of an intensive training process during which Sircar worked closely with a group of seven dancers who, like her, embodied dual or hyphenated identities. The work responded to questions surrounding cultural memory, belonging, and a restless search for cohesiveness amidst

the experience of plurality. In an interview with Ramsay Burt, Sircar talked about the piece at length:

> It's called 'Thirsting River' because I am working with a group of young South Asians, who for me are like plants that are uprooted from a certain soil and have put down roots again, and put out seeds which are now sending down roots. But the roots that they are now sending down have the memory of the old roots in them. Remembering is like an ache sometimes […] The river is full of water, but it is still looking for water. We have it all in there, but we are still looking for it.
>
> (Burt 1992a: 9)

Sircar's attentiveness and sensitivity to the dual cultural heritage of her dancers, and her interest in addressing issues of multiple identities that sometimes cohered and ossified and at other times fragmented or became fluid is evident from some of the titles of the sections of the choreography (Rock, Fissures, Source), which point towards notions of stability, fracture and mutability. Although no video documentation of this production was found, Ramsay Burt's review enables us to visualise the work to some extent:

> Rock starts dramatically in semi-darkness with the dancers stamping firmly in a swiftly moving ring, developing into strong, bold, symmetrical movements taken from Indian martial arts as well as classical Indian styles.
>
> Fissures consists of four short parts which rely on striking costumes and lighting effects to suggest things falling apart. It includes a lovely section with three pairs of gossiping women, each miming her tale, one after the other to a distinctly different *tabla* rhythm.
>
> Then, in Source, a line of dancers, dressed in blue, crawl through a cave mouth formed by two statuesque, standing figures, and then they all flow together as water. At one moment, half the dancers are standing in a circle moving slowly while in the middle the rest are moving swiftly on the floor to a different rhythm. […]
>
> Sircar's choreography makes the dancers – six women and one man, all young British, South Asians – look strong and intelligent.
>
> (Burt 1992b: 16)

The review suggests that Sircar's choreography was able to empower the British Asian dancers she was working with, her dance giving them a sense of place and a space to be who they were. Her interest in working within the British arts scene after her work with YUVA (for which she received the Time Out/Dance Umbrella award) clearly grew stronger. She noticed the problematic alliance between South Asian dance and community dance in Britain (Datta 2008 [1997]) and believed that further possibilities in training for young South Asians would have to be in place for them to be recognised within the professional dance sector.[12] In a faxed typescript of *Cassandra* to her collaborators Tim Jones and Adrian Lee (dated 10 November 1994), Sircar wrote:

> Britain is poised for radical changes and developments in the field of South Asian arts. My own background of growing up as a second-generation Indian immigrant in the US has helped me to relate to young British South Asians. A collaboration such as *Cassandra* would, I hope, strengthen their belief and confidence in the evolution of a new cultural identity that is open ended and fluid.
>
> (In Chakraborty 2008: 175)

When Sircar brought *Cassandra* to Britain, she performed it alongside another choreographic venture, a piece titled *Oblique* (1997), which was commissioned by the Birmingham-based dance organisation Sampad, headed by Piali Ray. Premiered in the very year that the New Labour government came to power in Britain, the main questions framing the choreography, relating to race and gender, could not have been timelier. Sircar's solos (*Fable*, *Gangavataran* and *Cassandra*) either followed or were based on narrative structures; her British choreographies, on the other hand, were devised pieces of work, responding to the individuals (her dancers and composers) with whom she engaged. In an interview about *Oblique* with Martin Longley in the *Birmingham Post*, Sircar said:

> There is no storyline whatsoever. It's not that there aren't any stories. There's a lot of story, without any story! That's why it's called *Oblique*. The issues aren't dealt with in a narrative or didactic way; its open to interpretation, to a certain extent. We will be giving

> clues in the sense that the seven sections of the piece have titles. Naturally, we do want the audience to have very open minds.
>
> (Longley 1997a)

Sircar's approach to the choreography of *Oblique* was deliberately open-ended. She was given a cast of five performers who hailed from completely different cultural and training backgrounds: Australian Liz Lea was trained in Bharatanatyam and Kalaripayattu; British performer Rachel Heap was a ballet dancer; Isira Makuloluwe was a Sri Lankan male dancer trained in Kalaripayattu as well as ballet and contemporary dance; British Asian Simmy Gupta was a Kathak trained dancer; and Anne Dufour was a juggling artist. According to Liz Lea, Sircar was given six weeks to create a work for this eclectic mix of performers (personal communication, 2014). Although an immensely challenging process, Sircar managed to give the five dancers a common language through *Navanritya*, which although never imposed, became the thread that connected them and a pathway to making choreography. Lea remembers that *Navanritya* was an excellent teaching tool, where process and subject matter were bound up, and bodies in training were empowered irrespective of their skin colour. It was her belief that Sampad was both courageous and forward thinking in involving an Indian choreographer to create quality intercultural work in Britain (ibid.).

Oblique's sound score was composed by saxophonist Iain Ballamy who, like Sircar, avoided easy solutions such as merely fusing Indian and jazz sounds. The sounds of Indian instruments and the saxophone were mediated through digitised compositions. In his review of the piece, Martin Longley wrote:

> The music avoids Indo-jazz fusing, turning to sequenced computer drums and a sharp funk snap. When the dancers wrap blindfolds around their heads, we could be watching a Prince video [...] One of the best segments features fast *tabla* beats and soprano sax with more overtly Indian stances, Sircar successfully combining elements rarely seen together.
>
> (Longley 1997b)

Oblique was produced at a time when British multiculturalism as a young product of the New Labour government had only just

begun to interrogate or look afresh at established notions of 'culture', 'community' and 'heritage'. Its intercultural cast of performers butted against walls between minority and mainstream and the embodied forms these take (Kathak, Bharatanatyam, ballet, contemporary). In so doing, Sircar's choreography and her ensemble cast presented a world on stage in which older accepted versions of 'British', 'European', 'Indian' or 'South Asian' as exclusive categories of experience were being openly interrogated. It is worth noting here that some of the concerns regarding cultural boundaries that Sircar and her dancers explored in *Oblique* were also being echoed by other British Asian artists, who were asking similarly important questions about received notions of Indian dance in the United Kingdom. Shobana Jeyasingh, who established her dance company in Britain in 1988 and who by 1997 had already created seminal works such as *Configurations* (1988) and *Making of Maps* (1992), also voiced her critique of cultural stereotyping. In the same year that *Oblique* premiered, Jeyasingh wrote:

> Definitions that have served in Europe about what 'Indian-ness' is, are not very helpful to people like myself in Britain. At first these definitions did not affect me, but as I started to work here I saw that these attitudes do affect your working conditions. Funding structures are orientated around them as is the whole language that is used to tell the public what the piece is about. This in turn influences the audience's perceptions. For me this is such an important issue to talk about and contend with.
>
> (1997a: 11)

Jeyasingh's words remind us of the difficult territory of the multicultural dance scene in Britain, 'the total inaccuracy of the home ground that was prescribed' to her (1997b: 32), a terrain that many artists, including those from the Indian subcontinent such as Sircar, have had to negotiate and challenge. The identity politics of 1990s New Labour Britain should not only be seen as a force that impacted on or shaped Sircar's work. On the contrary, it could be argued that her choreography offers through the dancing body a very significant strategy for dealing with ideas of race and cultural difference at a significant juncture in Britain's national history.

An unfinished ending

Sircar's last, unfinished work, *She Said…*(performed by the Dancers' Guild in 2001, after Sircar's death) returned once again to an exclusively female domain, this time to the private world of women: through eight solos performed by eight different dancers (choreographed by the individual artists) and a series of group choreographies by Sircar, the viewer of *She Said…* entered the everyday world of women, where hopes, fears, desires and insecurities, and sometimes disturbing irrationalities, were presented in an unembarrassed and unbridled manner.[13] Set in the present day, using contemporary Bengali songs by the Calcutta band Chakravyuha, which were interspersed with deeply personal phrases spoken by the dancers in Bengali and English, *She Said…* became a journey inward, into the very heart of women's lives, in which handbags and umbrellas, ankle bells and bed sheets became an extension of their selves and even acquired new meanings as they turned into tropes of domination or resistance.

Through *She Said…* Sircar celebrated solidarity amongst women but at the same time courageously focused on the unseen and often-repressed stories of women on the verge of a nervous breakdown or insanity, as the eighth solo by dancer Arunima Ghosh showed.[14] Tragically, before *She Said…*was completed, Sircar herself succumbed to her own insecurities or anxieties, which she kept close to herself and away from most people around her in her final days. She committed suicide in 1999, just a few days after her return to India from Europe, and following performances of her solo *Gangavataran* in Mumbai during the Durga Puja festival in October.[15] As Chakraborty has suggested, death was a repetitive motif in Sircar's work, and her dance works grew increasingly dark as the years went by: '[i]n the journey from *Tomari Matir Kanya* to *Cassandra*, something was lost' (2008: 28). The exact reasons for Sircar's suicide were never known and for many of her colleagues and students, including myself, her hasty exit offered no possibility for closure. Sircar's death dealt a severe blow to dancers not just in India but also across the world; she left unfinished and unresolved a genealogy of dance modernity in India that asked important questions about women's place and the visibility of their bodies in culture, both within and beyond Indian contexts. To some, her death symbolised a resignation from a patriarchal normative order, to others it was an act of defiance. As a

dancer whose life's work revolved around an embodied interrogation of women's position in the world, Sircar's death certainly left many other questions unanswered.

Yet, in her brief and eventful career as a performer and choreographer, Ranjabati Sircar created through dance and for the proscenium a space for women to become active subjects and give voice to their stories. As a choreographer who pushed the prescribed limits of gender and sexuality through her dance works and created a contemporary self and identity for Indian women on the theatre stage, Ranjabati Sircar's dance and choreography unhesitatingly offered the dancing body as a strategy for feminist resistance. The traces of her movements occupy a crucial position in the performance space of contemporary India. Like a few other vociferous choreographers such as Chandralekha, and her mother Manjusri, Sircar's feminist questioning of gender inequality through her dance actively engaged with the politics of female self-representation in the cultural life of a postcolonial India and with the politics of cultural identity formation in turn-of-the-millennium Britain, her body in the process becoming a bridge between two worlds.

6
Conclusions

Indian Modern Dance has mapped out the space occupied by certain dancers and dance-makers from India with a focus on the specific ways in which the dancing bodies they ushered into the public realm imbibed, reflected, commented on and critiqued the colonial and postcolonial worlds they inhabited. Each of the individuals discussed forces us to rethink the commonly held view, especially in the Euro-American worlds, that 'authentic' or 'pure' Indian dance art can only be that which is founded either on some ancient Indian dramaturgical treatise such as the *Natyashastra* or the *Abhinaya Darpana*, or on some indigenous oral folk tradition untouched by the Empire and the modern world. Kumkum Sangari (1989) suggested more than two decades ago that complicit in the propagation of this idea of a 'true Indian tradition' of a performing arts untainted by modernity was the Indian state machinery itself, engaged since India's Independence in 1947 in promoting a uniquely Indian cultural heritage comprising of 'timeless' museum art forms that somehow survived the horror and pestilence of colonialism. Similarly, Rustom Bharucha (1993; 1998) and Urmimala Sarkar Munsi (2010) have also alerted us to the collusive role of the Indian nation-state in reifying the binaries of traditional heritage and modern innovation.[1]

Whilst accepting the urgent historical necessity and value of identity-building nationalist projects such as the reconstruction of Indian classical dances (for we must not erroneously disregard the importance of the Rukmini Devi Arundales and the Balasaraswatis in history), I have chosen to privilege the narratives of dance-makers who resisted the nationalist return-to-origins initiative as a viable

option for performance-making for their contemporary milieu or its subjects. The dances of Rabindranath Tagore, Uday Shankar, Shanti Bardhan, Manjusri Chaki Sircar and Ranjabati Sircar show us that running parallel to the defensive gestures by the guardians of the Indian nation-state were movements that openly acknowledged and celebrated the intercourse between different cultures, which in turn gave birth to new choreographic practices that were proudly political in nature. Cumulatively, the physical and imaginative journeys undertaken by these five artists map out three main areas of cultural intervention through Indian modern dance, which I reflect on in this concluding segment: the body as feminist resistance, the body as transnational vector and finally, the body as sign.

The body as feminist resistance

All five artists and their dance works discussed in this book offer important material on the role of gender in Indian modern dance performance and introduce the opportunity for a feminist politics to be initiated or celebrated through the dancing body. In Chapter 1, we noticed that Tagore's 'proto-feminism' (to borrow Sumit Sarkar's phrase, 2002) led to the creation of dance dramas that revolved around female subjects, bringing women out of the domestic domain on to the performing stage and in the process revolutionising the gendered spaces of inside (home) and outside (theatre). In Chapter 2, Shankar's dancing body revealed that the colonial Empire was a highly gendered and masculine discourse, which feminised his colonised body and his dance. Chapter 3 saw Bardhan's Marxist Central Squad in IPTA provide a space for women to live, work and dance alongside their male comrades as equals and to collectively protest through their moving bodies. In Chapter 4, we witnessed how Manjusri Chaki Sircar's *Navanritya* or New Dance openly launched a feminist critique of female objectification in Indian classical dance and ushered in an era of women-centred choreographies. And finally, in Chapter 4 Ranjabati Sircar's body butted against patriarchal dance pedagogy, initiating through her feminist dance praxis (by thinking, writing and doing) an interrogation of women's place within a phallogocentric world. The body in Indian modern dance was clearly a resistive tool and often represented a form of feminist resistance.

To a certain degree, all five artists engaged in a process of reinterpreting mythology through their dance works. Tagore reworks Buddhist and Hindu legends in favour of women's subjectivity in his dance dramas. Shankar extracts larger-than-life gods from Hindu mythology – such as Indra and Shiva – to perform masculinity (although his real nasal voice in the film *Kalpana* troubles this mythic masculinity). Bardhan's *Ramayana* uses the popular Hindu epic to reflect on social cohesion in post-Independence India, his human puppets confounding distinctions between male and female bodies on stage. The Sircars constantly return to myths and legends in their choreographic works (mostly Indian but as seen in Chapter 5, also Greek and South American) in order to reconfigure patriarchy. Mythology offers to all of these dance-makers not just a simple opportunity to celebrate or valorise the past but the possibility of decolonising, resisting and critiquing power structures in their own time.

Is feminism in the Indian modern dances of these five artists, with its numerous references to gods, goddesses and the supernatural world, believable as a product of modernity? It is useful to note here that several South Asian feminist scholars, including Jayawardena (1986) and Mohanty (1991), have stated that, depending on the region, history and culture of South Asia, non-western feminism is a response, not only to gender inequality but to inequalities in caste, class and race, which are often informed by religious beliefs. In a study of Indian modern dance and its relation to feminism, what Homi Bhabha terms as 'subaltern secularism' provides a much more nuanced understanding of the artistic practices covered in this book. Bhabha (1994b) states that women from different religious communities in South Asia can coexist whilst having the space and right to choose and interpret their traditions in their own way as autonomous subjects. Although none of the five artists in this book occupied subaltern positions – they were privileged members of Indian society who had a voice – and although none of them identified strictly with any religious community, or endorsed religious beliefs through their dance works, they did choose their sources and interpret their heritage (which included Hindu and Buddhist religious texts) autonomously. Above all, the modern dance methodologies offered by Tagore, Shankar, Bardhan and the Sircars may be seen as movement systems that offered alternatives to social relations bound by patriarchy. Through their dances, systems of power, dominance, hierarchy

and competition were carefully revisited and scrutinised in order to propose a more ethical way of living, being and moving.

The body as transnational vector

Post-Empire, the movements embedded in twentieth and twenty-first-century migration from erstwhile colonies into the worlds of the colonisers and their repercussions on the social, political, cultural and economic fabric of Euro-American spaces have been closely examined by cultural and postcolonial theorists. These have repeatedly underscored the importance of the migration of 'third world' labour as a phenomenon and its impact on those 'first world' societies that had for so long maintained a false sense of racial and cultural superiority associated with Empire and colonial rule. The postcolonial scholarship of the 1990s on diaspora and migration demonstrated a heightened interest in discourses on cultural identity and difference. Iain Chambers spoke about how migrancy 'disrupts and interrogates the overarching themes of modernity' (1994: 24). Stuart Hall pointed out two different ways of thinking about cultural identity in a postcolonial world: as a shared history or ancestry that binds people together, or as 'the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past' (Hall 1993: 394). Paul Gilroy's work also provided an insightful analysis of the cultural experience of migration, suggesting how it embraces new possibilities for identities, assuming neither 'effortless sameness' nor 'absolute differentiation' (Gilroy 1996: 22).

Although Chambers, Hall and Gilroy have offered excellent observations on the ways in which new cultural identities were formed in the global North after the collapse of Empire, their work (and the work of several other writers in diaspora studies) have the unwitting tendency to render invisible the experimental, risk-taking, boundary-defying work that occurred in the native homeland during colonisation, and which this book has strongly argued as more than worthy of consideration. Rather than thinking through notions of cultural identity and difference, Sara Ahmed offers views on postcoloniality that are extremely pertinent in thinking about the past and how it informs our present:

> When post-colonialism is assumed to be referential – we are in a post-colonial time or place – then it does become deeply

> conservative: it assumes that 'we' have overcome the legacies of colonialism, and that this overcoming is what binds 'us' together. For me post-colonialism is about rethinking *how* colonialism operated in different times in ways that permeate all aspects of social life, in the colonised and colonising nations. It is hence about the complexity of the relationship between the past and present, between the histories of European colonisation and contemporary forms of globalisation. That complexity cannot be reduced by either a notion that the present has broken from the past (a narrative that assumes that decolonisation meant the end of colonialism) or that the present is simply continuous with the past (a narrative that assumes colonialism is a trans-historical phenomenon that is not affected by local contexts or other forms of social change). To this extent, post-coloniality allows us to investigate how colonial encounters are both determining, and yet not fully determining, of social and material existence.
>
> (Ahmed 2000: 11).

Ahmed's words are very useful when I turn to look back at the modern past of Indian dance from my position as an academic raised in independent India and currently residing in its ex-coloniser's space (Britain). Ahmed's concept of 'stranger fetishism' (2000: 6) is particularly significant and can be related to the ways in which Indian dancing bodies were fetishised by the colonial gaze within historical narratives of the past for their strangeness and hence rendered incapable of entering into conversations on modernity as equal partners of Europe or North America.[2] As mentioned in the Introduction, such fetishism still exists as part of the world's colonial legacy of thought, evident in many people's surprise at the notion of training in contemporary dance in India. Ahmed's prioritising of moments of encounter over studies of identity also marks a different trajectory to the postcolonial scholarship of the writers mentioned above. In particular, her proposal that 'the surprising nature of encounters can be understood in relation to the structural possibility that *we may not be able to read the bodies of others*' (2000: 8). Certainly within the structure of twentieth-century colonial encounters in the Indian subcontinent, Europe and North America, many 'native' dancing bodies were read as not-modern when in fact they were busily engaged in dialogues with modernity.

For twenty-first-century audiences, it is important to recognise that the cultural attributes specific to migration that 1990s postcolonial scholarship has ascribed to those displaced (hybridity, for instance is one of the key concepts to have emerged from these discourses) are also echoed in the interrogative gestures of those travelling out and back to the homeland in the colonial world. A critique of the nation/national and the centre, the process of becoming rather than recovering and a questioning of the sterile notion of an unchanging tradition are attributes that all five modern dance-makers discussed in this book share. Negotiation of a received tradition or unfixing cultural identities are not peculiar to the diasporic experience but are prominent in the accounts of native Indian dance-makers such as Tagore, Shankar, Bardhan, Chaki Sircar and Ranjabati Sircar and their transcontinental journeys. And the challenging of prescribed parameters of cultural practice has been as much part of the less told story of modernity in the homeland as it has been of migrant modernities in the global North in a post-Empire landscape.

This leads to two main notions with regard to the transnational identities of the dances and dancers discussed in this book. The first notion to consider is that transnationalism and its products are not peculiar to the era of globalisation that followed the collapse of Empire, the growth of diasporas and the beginnings of multinational trading across national borders. Transnational flows of bodies, ideas and movements are not new, post-Second World War phenomena, but preceded our contemporary age in the modern era. In the context of Indian modern dance the formation of non-parochial imagined communities – the dance collectives in Tagore's Shantiniketan in rural Bengal, Shankar's Almora Centre in the Indian Himalayas, Bardhan's IPTA Central Squad in Bombay's suburbs and the Sircars' Dancers' Guild on the outskirts of Calcutta – are compelling social formations which imagined and constructed new identities for both colonial and postcolonial subjects. These artistic collectives were formed through the forging of international links between institutions or ideologies: for instance, Shankar's Almora Centre and the Elmhirsts' Dartington Hall, or Bardhan's IPTA squad and international Marxist Communism. There was also international capital investment in these collectives (Tagore raised funds for his university in the USA, the Elmhirsts funded Almora and Shankar's film *Kalpana*), although this was not for the purposes of profit.

Second, the Indian modern dancers and dance-makers discussed in this book cannot be seen as passive receivers of Euro-American cosmopolitanism. They were not sudden 'modern' converts within some sort of a colonial mission of transformation. Neither did these individuals become modernised as a result of coming into contact with the Empire. In their book *Bodies in Contact: Rethinking Colonial Encounters in World History* (2005), Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton suggest that European colonialists were 'latecomers' to the cosmopolitanism of the Indian Ocean and it was only with militarisation that power relations shifted in the region (Ballantyne and Burton 2005: 10). Retracing the transcontinental journeys of Tagore, Shankar and the Sircars, and Bardhan's travels across the Indian subcontinent, allows the realisation that these individuals were not mute or static colonised subjects to whom events, or culture, happened. They actively shaped and changed their life experiences (and the lives of those who moved with them) by their constant negotiations with established codes of cultural practices. Their bodies were transnational vectors that moved across geographical, cultural, linguistic and regional borders, and as a result produced embodied experiences in dance that defied any logical or straightforward assumptions about cultural authenticity. National and international travel and movements offered distance – physical and critical – from the insularities and provincialisms that sometimes defined their 'home': the world they saw, experienced and absorbed organically seeped beyond the transcribed limits and boundaries of that into which they had been born. Despite their pride in their home, it could not contain their movements and therefore often could neither place nor understand them, as several of the performance reviews in the chapters suggest.

The body as sign

If we follow Ahmed's proposition that it is the unreadability of bodies that accounts for difference, that sets up a barrier between 'us' and 'them', then we realise how crucial the role of the body is as a semiotic field within colonial and postcolonial relations of being. Ahmed suggests that 'when we face others, we seek to recognise who they are, by reading the signs on their body, or by reading their body *as* a sign' (2000: 8). In some ways, this echoes feminist theorist

Elizabeth Grosz's notion of 'volatile bodies' that are culturally inscribed and hence open to being read in a particular way (1994). Grosz suggests that:

> [w]hat is sometimes loosely called body language is a not inappropriate description of the ways in which culturally specific grids of power, regulation, and force condition and provide techniques for the formation of particular bodies.
>
> (1994: 142)

For Grosz, bodies of a determinate type are produced by historical, social and cultural necessity, but they 'are not inert; they function interactively and productively. They act and react. They generate what is new, surprising, unpredictable' (ibid.: xi).[3]

The dancing bodies proposed by Tagore, Shankar, Bardhan, Chaki Sircar and Ranjabati Sircar similarly acted and reacted against historical and cultural necessity and in the process generated movement material that was unpredictably modern. In Tagore's eclectic dance dramas, Shankar's experimental film, Bardhan's protest dances, Chaki Sircar's New Dance choreographies and Ranjabati Sircar's feminist intercultural dance works, it is bodies in movement that constantly upset or unsettle previously held ideas of purity and impurity, dominant and subjugated, 'ours' and 'theirs'. In these dances, the deployment of the body in motion performs and constructs new forms and meanings that do not conform to socio-cultural norms established by either Indian nationalist or Euro-American imperialist and orientalist schools of thought. Identities related to nation, race, region, class, gender and sexuality are played out, questioned, subverted, shifted or rejected by each of these five dance-makers, and it is the lived dancing body, the moving corporeal matter, that offers new strategies for engaging with dominant structures of power.

By examining the alternative cultural movements initiated by dance-makers in India, and through each of the five case studies discussed in this book, we can notice how the active construction of dancing bodies that push against, defy and go beyond prescribed borders of nation, race, class and gender provide unexpected ways of merging the aesthetic and the political and make it possible for innovative cultural texts to take shape. I have woven through my discussion of each of their careers, the thread of cosmopolitanism and

internationalism, which permeates and informs every experiment in movement and pedagogy mentioned in this book. The study of each of the five dance-makers in this book underscores the fact that being sensitive to culturally specific meanings of bodies in performance is of utmost significance in dance scholarship today, especially if we are to avoid Euro-American readings of what descriptive and normative categories of dance (classical, modern, postmodern, contemporary) are, or who these categories should include or exclude.[4]

Bodily gestures, movements, actions and costumes; those essential constitutive elements of a dance performance are culturally specific signs, invested with and representing different/varied meanings depending on who the viewer or spectator is. For us to truly understand the 'strange' modernity of the individuals mentioned in the book (or those significant numbers left out), and as we browse through grainy snapshots of Indian dancers of the past, we need to look beyond the saris, the dhotis, the gestures and movements and the brown skin – the surface markers that often callously scream 'ethnic' – and look for the signs and traces of revolution and transformation that these dancing bodies have left behind. Only then can we truly re-encounter the taboo-breaking stances of Tagore's women dancers, the fluid boundaries of the bodies of Shankar and his dancers, the pride as well as the protest in the movements of IPTA's dancers and the defiance in the dances of the Sircars.

Mobile legacies

In the final pages of this volume, it is perhaps useful to critically reflect on the artistic legacy that the five dance-makers have left behind. What is the inheritance that these experimental twentieth-century artists have passed on to the following generations? And what are the specific contributions to modernity as a whole that these bodies may be said to have made? If we turn first to Tagore's experiments with the dancing body, we notice that his legacy includes at once one of the biggest ironies and the most interesting cases of embodied cultural memory in dance history. The irony is that many of Tagore's followers (for example, teachers and students of his dance and music within Bengal and beyond) uphold his legacy of experimental performance by reproducing it as an unchanging heritage form. Watching his dance dramas can be similar to watching a

costume play or Shakespeare presented as period drama. (The parallels do not end there, as a sculpture of Tagore now resides in the garden of Shakespeare's Stratford-upon-Avon home in England).

However, one can perhaps best experience the liveness of Tagore's legacy by visiting the annual Spring Festival (*Basantotsava*) in Shantiniketan, West Bengal. Here, much more than the staged performances, it is the procession of students moving and singing as a collective body, and gathering under the trees to perform improvised dances to his songs (with audience members often joining in) that upholds the spirit of community that Tagore instilled in his institution (and also inspired in Dartington). Tagore's modern dance legacy is not simply found in the dance drama texts he has left behind for anyone to perform, nor in the countless amateur and professional performances that stage his repertoire across the world, nor in the International Festival at Dartington Hall that he continues to inspire – it may be found in the communities of dancers that constantly form around his work.

Uday Shankar's experiments with a modern dance vocabulary have been retained in the pedagogic vision of his wife Amala Shankar (Uday Shankar India Culture Centre), his daughter Mamata Shankar (Mamata Shankar Dance Company) and his daughter-in-law Tanusree Shankar (Tanusree Shankar Dance Company) in Bengal. His best-known students and associates from his Almora years are the filmmaker Guru Dutt (1925–64), the veteran actress Zohra Sehgal (b. 1912) and the founder director of Bhoomika Dance Narendra Sharma (1924–2008). Shankar's former dance students and company members such as Shanti Bose have also continued to perform his movement methods to students and performers in Bengal. Perhaps the most enduring legacy that Shankar has left behind is his film *Kalpana*, which was recently restored by the American film director Martin Scorsese's World Cinema Foundation and screened at the Cannes International Film Festival in 2012. *Kalpana*'s return to the world stage signals the exciting possibility of new conversations on Indian modern dance.

Shanti Bardhan's Little Ballet Troupe continued to perform his repertoire of work nationally, along with newly commissioned dance works from their home in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, in central India. In 2006, when I visited the company, it was led by Gul Bardhan, Shanti Bardhan's partner, as Prabhat Ganguli the company's previous

artistic director, battled with age and illness. Gul Bardhan passed away in 2010, but the company continues to function and perform its repertoire of work. The revolutionary protest dance works of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), for which Shanti Bardhan worked, are scarcely remembered by many in embodied form (except perhaps by women like Sima Das who sang for IPTA in Calcutta in the 1950s and remembers seeing some of its performances; personal interview, 2013). IPTA's legacy continues mainly in its theatre work in many parts of India (IPTA-Mumbai for instance continues to be active) but it leaves little trace of a living repertoire of dance work.

Finally, Manjusri Chaki Sircar and Ranjabati Sircar's New Dance form *Navanritya* continues to be taught by senior members of their company, the Dancers' Guild, in Kolkata. The company also performs Chaki Sircar and Ranjabati Sircar's repertoire of work regularly at national and international festivals, and produces new choreographies. The Sircars' legacy lives on not only in their hometown but in the bodily memory of practitioners dotted across the world (such as Ranjabati's associate, the Australian dancer Liz Lea) and also in the work of several academics such as Aishika Chakraborty (2008; 2010), Esha Niyogi De (2011) and Trevor Montague Wade (2001).

The Indian modern dance legacy, as shaped by the five dance-makers discussed here, offers an uneven story of transmission. The Sircars' *Navanritya* is perhaps the most carefully conceived in terms of how it is structured as a taught form. It parallels the pedagogic clarity of Indian classical dance forms such as Bharatanatyam and Kathak, or Martha Graham's technique. Tagore, Shankar and Bardhan's dances do not follow a rule book, or a set pedagogic structure – there is no documented or set way of performing the original repertoire – although a discernible 'house style' emerges if one encounters or embodies their dances today.

The modernist experiment with dance as both art form and transformative tool in India was not an exclusively Bengali privilege. Other experiments in movement forms that are simultaneously aesthetic and political have been carried out in other regions of India, and Indian choreographers and artists are continually attempting alternative modes of performing cultural texts across India today. Bharat Sharma, son of Narendra Sharma, is a dance writer, researcher and contemporary dance choreographer who currently leads his father's company Bhoomika in New Delhi. Mallika Sarabhai (daughter of

Mrinalini Sarabhai, who studied at Shantiniketan) is a political activist and choreographer who uses dance as a tool for social transformation through her company, Darpana Academy of Performing Arts in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. New Delhi-based Aditi Mangaldas, a dancer trained in the Kathak dance form, constantly pushes the boundaries of her practice; her choreographic work of the late 1980s such as *Letters to a Child Never Born* offers a distinctly feminist questioning of the maternal drive (personal interview, 2012) and Mangaldas continues to be one of the most prolific and vociferous dance-makers working within Indian dance. Artists such as Maya Rao and Navtej Singh Johar also offer powerful critiques of issues surrounding gender and sexuality through their embodied interventions.

Like the dance artists of this book, there are many significant practitioners of Indian dance today who experiment with, interrogate and butt against received movement knowledge through a critical process of enquiry.[5] My hope is that the modern past of Indian dance, where similar processes of interrogation and enquiry were evident, will not be forgotten or erased in the palimpsest of dance modernity. We have seen in this volume how Indian modern dance was defined by movements beyond national or cultural borders and yet as an aesthetic product it did not (or could not) travel globally alongside its Euro-American counterparts since it was deemed inauthentic, impure or not-yet-modern. The movements and journeys traced in this volume demand that impure and transnational Indian dance also be seen as legitimate forms of modernity, opening routes to other modern dance experiences that have taken shape in different parts of twentieth-century India, and instigating critical enquiry and analyses of those questioning, dissenting and resistive bodies in performance that have left behind traces of their dance.

Notes

Introduction

1. I would like to sketch a very basic outline of the reconstruction projects here to provide some context for readers. Two major events became the axes of Indian cultural nationalism in southern India: the Anti-Nautch Campaign of the late nineteenth century in Bombay and South India, unleashed by Hindu reformists on the temple dancers due to their association with prostitution and child marriage, and the revival efforts of Madras High Court advocate E.V. Krishna Iyer who famously donned a *devadasi* costume and gave a public *sadir* dance recital in 1926 to resurrect the dance from near extinction. By 1936, the revivalists had won the battle, and fortunately succeeded in bringing the *sadir* back to life, but in a newly reconstructed form called 'Bharatanatyam'. In this reconstruction project, the chief contributors apart from Iyer were the women pioneers Rukmini Devi Arundale and Balasaraswati. See Meduri (2005) and O'Shea (2007). In the southern Indian state of Kerala, as part of the cultural nationalist movement of the 1930s, the Malayalam poet Vallathol played a significant role in reviving the Kathakali dance-drama tradition from 1924 onwards, and founded the Kerala Kala Mandalam in 1937 in Cheruthurthi to provide a space for masters and disciples to work together on both pre-existing as well as newly devised scripts for performance. See Vatsyayan (1974: 33–48) and Zarilli (1999). Travelling north, we encounter another revival project in the form of Kathak, an Indian classical dance genre that most pointedly marks a hybrid space for itself. A combination of Muslim Mughal court dancing (primarily in the cities of Delhi, Agra and Lucknow) and the religious Vaishnav Bhakti (Hindu) aesthetic of Rajasthan, Kathak's evolution as a distinctive genre of narrative performance from the sixteenth to the early eighteenth century was marred during the height of colonial rule by its association with prostitution. Like the *devadasis* in southern India, the *tawaifs* of the north became known to British travellers as the 'nautch girls', associated with easy virtue and moral depravity rather than artistic skill, and it was only during the late 1930s that Kathak reversed its downward fall to stake its claim as a serious performing art form. See Vatsyayan (1974: 84–95), Khokar (1984) and Chakravorty (2008). Odissi, originating from the eastern regional state of Orissa, even though linked by scholars to a cultural period pre-dating the composition of Natyasastra in the 2nd century BC, was only canonised as a classical dance form in the 1950s, after Indian independence. The tradition of ritual dancing in the temples by *maharis*, the eastern Indian equivalent of southern *devadasis*, had brought similar

charges of ignominy from the social reformists. See Marglin (1985) and Lopez y Royo (2007). Mohiniattam, a dance form performed by women from Kerala, and Kuchipudi, performed by both male and female performers from Andhra Pradesh, were established as classical dance forms in the early 1950s (Khokar, 1984). Finally, Manipuri, perhaps the only dance form that escaped the charge of moral depravity owing to its birthplace, the Manipur valley in the northeastern part of India, where the clamour of colonial cultural policy did not easily invade the lives of the dancers, was deemed a classical dance form in the 1950s (Vatsyayan, 1974: 68–83). See also Chaki Sircar (1984).

2. I should point out and acknowledge here the similar challenges that have been advanced by scholars such as Ananya Chatterjea, who has emphatically declared a space for the 'local post-modern' in her book *Butting Out* (2004a), which examines the choreographic works of the African American dancer Jawole Willa Jo Zollar and Indian dancer Chandralekha.
3. The Sangeet Natak Akademi was set up in 1953 in New Delhi as a central government initiative and has recognised modern dance as one of the Indian performing art genres worthy of support since the 1980s. It regularly provides funding to support individual Indian classical and modern dancers and companies. However, we should note that it took nearly thirty years for the state to recognise the modernity of its dance forms.
4. Bharat Sharma is a dancer, choreographer and writer, and also founder of the Bhoorang dance company in Bangalore. He is currently artistic director of the dance company established by his late father, Narendra Sharma, Bhoomika Creative Arts Centre in New Delhi. I was one of the participants in his pilot dance education project, along with two members of the Dancers' Guild, Kolkata, Samudra Dance Company from Thiruvananthapuram and Bhoorang (led by Bharat Sharma and Tripura Kashyap).
5. I should clarify here that the terms 'dance-maker' and 'choreographer' have been used interchangeably in this book. However, I am aware that the term 'choreographer' only arrived in India in the 1980s, particularly through the works of Chandralekha and the subsequent generation of dancers, and it is perhaps problematic to apply it to those Indian dance artists, classical or modern, in the early twentieth century who would not have described themselves in that way. However, O'Shea's definition of choreography (2007: 11) as an act which involves 'explicit decision-making about performance, training and presentation', whether it is in classical, modern or contemporary dance, is what I have in mind when using the terms 'choreography' and 'choreographer' in my discussion of dance works and dance-makers here in this book.
6. See for instance, amongst many others, Kapila Vatsyayan (1974), Amrit Srinavasan (1985), Pushpa Sundar (1995), Avanthi Meduri (1996; 2000).
7. Cultural historian Kapila Vatsyayan has also emphasised the fact that not only are classical and contemporary Indian dance not mutually exclusive but experimentation occurs across the board. See Vatsyayan's article

'Modern Dance: The Contribution of Uday Shankar and His Associates' in Kothari (2003: 20–30).

8. Social realism, a distinct style of representation emerging particularly from the socialist context of Soviet Russia in the 1930s, rejected the idealism of nineteenth-century Romantic art and literature and instead attempted to mirror the often disturbing reality of the common person, especially the plight of the proletariat. This is evidenced in both Shankar's *Kalpana* (1948, see Chapter 2) and Bardhan's IPTA works (see Chapter 3). Abstract Expressionism in American art, following close on the heels of twentieth-century art movements such as Expressionism and Cubism in Europe, often dealt with the abstract representation and visualisation of the unconscious or the inner emotional states of human beings. The influence of Euro-American artistic movements on the Bengal school of art in the twentieth century has been discussed by art historians such as Partha Mitter and Tapati Guha-Thakurta, and is discussed in this chapter.
9. Chandralekha has famously said: 'Besides several negative features in the prevailing dance situation like spectacular mindlessness, archaic social values, faked religiosity, idealization leading to mortification of the form, numbing sentimentality, literalism, verbalism, dependence on sahitya, on word, mystification and dollification, perpetuation of anti-women values, cynicism within the solo dance situation and its senseless competitiveness, there are also more serious questions: why have classical Indian dances become so insular and unresponsive to the dramatic social, historical, scientific, human changes that have occurred in the world around us …?' (2003: 54). Details on the life and choreographic oeuvre of Chandralekha are available in her biography by Rustom Bharucha (1995) and in Ananya Chatterjea (2004a).
10. Chapter 4 of this book refers to the debate between two choreographers, Chandralekha and Manjusri Chaki Sircar, at the 'East-West Dance Encounter' in 1985, suggesting that feminist notions of agency through the dancing body took very different forms in India. I am fully aware that by including choreographers such as the Sircars in a book titled *Indian Modern Dance*, I once again run the risk of splitting up Indian modern dance from contemporary dance in the readers' eyes, which should not be the case. My intention here is not to suggest that Chandralekha inaugurated contemporary (or postmodern dance) in India whilst choreographers like the Sircars operated within an older modern dance genre. The Sircars defined themselves as contemporary dance-makers in their lifetimes. I should alert readers to the fact that 'modern' and 'contemporary' are terms often used interchangeably in Indian dance contexts, and that choreographers such as the Sircars can stake a claim to either label, since they placed themselves very clearly vis-à-vis earlier modern dance narratives, whilst operating within a contemporary dance-making landscape.
11. The *Swadeshi* nationalist movement, according to Chowdhury and many other historians, had failed to draw Muslims into the political agitation with its Hindu-dominated rhetoric.

12. See Sukanta Chaudhuri (2004); Subrata Dasgupta (2007); and David Kopf (1969).
13. In taking this position, I echo the line of thought taken by historians Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal who have emphasised the importance of being critical of the homogenising and hegemonising tendencies of centralised colonial and postcolonial nation-states, without sliding into mindless anti-statism. See Bose and Jalal (1998).
14. One of the most important texts in the field of postcolonial studies, and indeed the touchstone of subsequent critiques of orientalist discourse, is Edward Said's *Orientalism*, in which the author in no uncertain terms talks about imperialism's 'monstrous chain of command', which managed and even produced the 'Orient' (1995: 45).
15. Leonard Knight Elmhirst (1893–1974) helped Tagore start Sriniketan, an institution for rural reconstruction (adjacent to Shantiniketan) in 1921 and later founded the Dartington Hall Trust in Devon, UK, along with his wife Dorothy Straight Elmhirst. For a detailed study of Dartington Hall and its history, particularly its performing arts profile, see Larraine Nicholas (2007).
16. I would like to provide a brief note here on the use of both variants – 'Kolkata' and 'Calcutta' – in this book. The city of Calcutta was renamed as 'Kolkata', following its Bengali vernacular pronunciation, in the year 2001. Where I refer to the city from 2001to the present day in this book, I use the current name and spelling for the city, that is, 'Kolkata'. When referring to a period before 2001, for example, in the discussion of the city's cultural climate in the 1950s in Chapter 4, I have deliberately used the old spelling of 'Calcutta' to maintain historical accuracy. The same applies to my use of the old spellings of Bombay (Mumbai) and Madras (Chennai).

1 Rabindranath Tagore and Eclecticism in Twentieth-Century Indian Dance

1. For a detailed introduction to the Tagore family background, see Dutta and Robinson (1995: 17–34). For English translations of selected Tagore poems and short stories, see Radice (1994a; 1994b).
2. It is well known that the poet Wilfred Owen (1893–1918), who died in the front lines of the First World War, had the following lines from Tagore's poem in his pocketbook: 'When I go from hence, let this be my parting word, that what I have seen is unsurpassable.'
3. S*wadesh* means 'our country' in Sanskrit/Bengali.
4. Mention must be made here of crucial books, articles and essays written in the Bengali language by Shantidev Ghose (1953; 1978; 1983; 1999), Protima Devi (1949), Gayatri Chattopadhyay (2001) and Rudraprasad Chakraborty (1995); a few articles in English by Manjusri Chaki Sircar (1988; 1995) and Rina Singha and Reginald Massey (1967); and Krishna Dutta's essay 'Tagore's Dance Dramas' (1986). Also, Sudipta Kaviraj (2006)

has provided a brief but insightful analysis of Tagore's dance dramas, *Sapmocan* and *Shyama,* and the play *Rakta Karabi* in his discussion of emotional modernity.

5. This is substantiated in Kalidas Nag's 1943 article 'Nrityakala O Rabindranath'.
6. There is some confusion about Tagore's involvement in this play since Tagore states that he had never acted in the play. See Rudraprasad Chakraborty (1995).
7. For a detailed and rather humorous account of Tagore's dance experience in England, see 'Letters from Europe', translated by William Radice (Dutta and Robinson 1991: 43).
8. Protima Devi, Tagore's daughter-in-law and wife of Rathindranath Tagore, played an active role in the development of theatre and dance productions in Shantiniketan during Tagore's time. Her book *Nritya* (1949) is an invaluable primary research source, which discusses Tagore's ideas on dance.
9. As stated in Anandhi (2000), a resolution was passed unanimously in the Madras legislature in 1927 to abolish the *devadasi* system. During the same period, conservative members of the Madras Congress such as S. Satyamurthy were organising meetings with *devadasis* to oppose the abolition.
10. Manipuri dance also has a very important pre-Hindu ritualistic component, as indicated by the ritual performances of the Meitei and Meibei dancers. See Sircar (1984).
11. More recently, the Visva Bharati Publications department has published English translations of the *Letters from Java*, edited by Supriya Roy (2010). I have, however, used the earlier 1928 translations gathered during my fieldwork in Shantiniketan, located at Rabindra Bhavan Archives.
12. Kathak dancer Asha Ojha played the male title role of Uttiya in Tagore's production *Parishadh* (1938), which was renamed and re-staged as *Shyama* in 1939 (Ghose 1983).
13. The following syllabus drafts from 1936 (Ghose, 1978: 57–9) and 1941 (ibid: 67–8) offer a clear idea of the pedagogic thrust in the subject area of dance at Visva Bharati University. The differences between the two versions are interesting to note: the 1936 syllabus is not constructed around the gender of the student, whereas the 1941 revision clearly is. Moreover, the 1941 syllabus clearly suggests that the training comprised of teaching pieces from dance repertoires ranging from mythological narratives (*Suvadra-Arjun*, *Putanam*, *Shri Krishna Dance* and so on) to pure dance sequences (*Kalasams*, *Toream*, *Chali* and so on), therefore providing to the students a wide choice of movement vocabulary and a range of material that could be used, when necessary, in an entirely different context – Tagore's poetry/dance dramas.

1936 SYLLABUS AND COURSE

The Sangit Bhavan aims at providing instruction in all the three branches of Indian Music i.e. *Gita* (vocal music), *Vadya* (instrumental music) and *Nritya* (dancing). […]

3. Indian Dancing
The course is for four years.

1st year: Elementary classes in Manipuri dancing
Elementary classes in South Indian dancing
2nd year: Manipuri 'Tala' dances
South Indian 'Tala' dances
Training in 'Bole' and symbolic 'Mudra'
3rd year: South Indian Kathakali and Ceylonese dance
Rendering of Bengali songs to dances
Study of poses from old paintings and frescoes
4th year: Mimicry and Expression. Composition
Dramatic Interpretation

1941 KATHA-KALI DANCE SYLLABUS

For Boys

1st Year: Ten Exercises and seven steps. (1) Toream (2) Purapar (3) Kalasams – 6.
2nd Year: Fifteen exercises and twelve steps. Dance. (1) Peacock dance (2) Hunter's dance (3) Harvest dance.
Kalasams – 15; Asta Kalasams – and 200 mudras.
3rd Year: Dance. (1) Tandav (2) Ekalabya (3) Kamadeva (4) Suvadra-Arjun (5) Flower Dance.
4th Year: Dramatic Plots
700 mudras and all the exercises. Student's own composition.

KATHA-KALI DANCE SYLLABUS

For Girls

1st Year: Ten exercises and seven steps. Three dances (1) Flower dance (2) Nrityanjali (3) Toream.
2nd Year: Fifteen exercises and twelve steps. Three dances (1) Purapar (2) Hunter's dance (3) Harvest dance. About 200 mudras.
3rd Year: More exercises and steps. Dances (1) Peacock dance (2) Kalasams-15 (3) Asta Kalasams in Jhaptal (4) Vastra-haran. Three hundred mudras with steps. Expressions with eyes and few dramatic plots.
4th Year: (1) Kalasams - 15 (2) Putanam (3) Suvadra-Arjun (4) Sati-Shiva (5) Vasanta dance.
Three of the main expressions – (1) Sringara (2) Vira (3) Karuna (4) Adbhut (5) Hasya (6) Bhayanak (7) Bibhatsa (8) Rudra and (9) Santo. All the 700 mudras. Regular practice of exercises will be compulsory.

MANIPURI DANCE SYLLABUS

1st Year:	Dances of 1st Chali, 2nd Chali, 3rd Chali, 4th Chali. Dance of Lalita in Dadra and Trital. Dance of Bishakha in Dadra and Trital.
2nd Year:	Dance of Lalita in three different Bols and Chautal. Dance of Bishakha in three different Bols of Chotto-Dashkushi and four different Bols of Chautal.
3rd Year:	Shree Krishna Dance in Dadra and Trital. Shree Radha Dance in Dadra and Trital. Bhangi dance in Lopha, Dadra and Jat.
4th Year:	Khurambapareng in Lopha, Dadra and Jat. Shree Krishna Dance in Chautal, Chotto Dashkushi, Shree Radha Dance in Chautal, Chotto Dashkushi. Dance of eight Sakhis in Panchamsawari and Teora.

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14. St Denis apparently declined the offer, but in 1930 she performed to Tagore's poem in a charity fundraiser for Visva Bharati University in New York City.

2 Uday Shankar and the Performance of Alterity in Indian Dance

1. From the Rabindra Bhavan Archives, Shantiniketan. The letter has the Bengali calendar date 29 *Ashar*, 1340.
2. Of the acknowledgements of Shankar's contribution to modern dance, see Kapila Vatsyayan's 'Modern Dance: The Contribution of Uday Shankar and His Associates' (2003: 30–1). French dance scholar Anne Decoret's book examines the phenomenon of exotic dance in France in the late nineteenth and early half of the twentieth century, and includes a study of Shankar's works along with (what were then considered as) exotic dances like Flamenco, Tango and dances from Indonesia and Africa. See Decoret-Ahiha (2004: 198–203). Brenscheidt (2011) offers a very interesting and analytical study of Shankar's reception in Europe in his early career (1930s).
3. As Erdman (1996a) has pointed out, Shankar was perceived as an oriental dancer in India during his first tour, and since to Indians 'oriental dance' was understood as dance from Europe composed to oriental themes (such as the dances of American choreographers Ruth St Denis and Ted Shawn) Shankar was not considered to be an authentic Indian dancer.
4. Catherine Hall (1998) provides a fine critique of cultural memories of Empire in her essay 'Turning a Blind Eye: Memories of Empire'. Hall questions what happens after the dissolution of Empire and the shift of the global map, and explains how imperial identity and Empire continue to pervade contemporary culture. I use the terms 'performing Empire' and 'performing otherness' in this chapter to read Shankar's complex performance of multiple identities.
5. Correspondence between Shankar and the Elmhirsts, the details of trust deeds and paperwork relating to the administration and finance of the Uday

Shankar India Culture Centre (USICC) are maintained in The Dartington Trust Archives Files (DHTA) LKE India 19/A-D, LKE India 196/A: 1947–1949, LKE India 196/B: 1950–69, LKE India/E 'USIC Centre News'. Details on this period of Shankar's life are also found in Amala Shankar's reminiscences in Bisakha Ray's (1991) 'Shankarnama', a series of articles published in 26 parts in the Bengali magazine *Sananda*; also see Khokar (1983).

6. The common ground shared by Shantiniketan and Dartington has been briefly addressed in the past by writers such as Cox (1977), former principal of Dartington College of Arts and by Dutta and Robinson (1991). Nicholas (2007) also addresses the relationship between Dartington and Shantiniketan. Almora's other international links with arts institutions have been further noted by Joan Erdman (1996b), who has provided a very detailed account of Shankar's student Zohra Sehgal's training in Mary Wigman's school in Dresden and its influence on Uday Shankar's curriculum at USICC in *Stages: The Art and Adventures of Zohra Segal*.
7. See Khokar (1983: 42). *Mirror of Gesture* was art historian Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy's English translation of *Abhinaya Darpana*, which made Shankar realise that Shiva Nataraja was not only a pose, rather 'the centre of hundreds of movements that moved from one to another and finished with that pose' (Shankar quoted in Khokar 1983: 42). Coomaraswamy's translation, titled *The Mirror of Gesture, Being the Abhinaya Darpana of Nandikesvara*, was first published in 1918.
8. Dartington Trust Archives: DHTA, File LKE India 19/B: 1940–42.
9. It must be added here that one of Almora's great successes was the staging of Shankar's *Ramleela*, which drew a spectator count of over 6,000. It was based on the *Ramayana*, hence a mythology-inspired work, but here too he introduced a startling innovative approach rarely seen in Indian dance performance by using a giant white screen and choreographing Javanese shadow-play inspired segments for the dance.
10. By the end of the 1940s, educational institutions such as Tagore's Shantiniketan in West Bengal and Rukmini Devi Arundale's Kalakshetra in Tamil Nadu were awarding diplomas to dance, music and art students.
11. Scientist Boshi Sen and his wife Gertrude Emerson's letters to the Elmhirsts complaining of Shankar's inconsistent plans are evidence of his unpopularity with the Almora Centre board of advisers. Courtesy: Dartington Hall Trust Archives, file LKE India 196/A-1947-49.
12. Using *Kalpana* as a primary source material for historical analysis in this research project proved to be problematic. *Kalpana* was at the centre of a prolonged court battle, as Shankar gave the rights of the film not to his family, but to his last partner in the final years of his life. The difficulty, therefore, lay in accessing an uncut, original version of the film. The following analysis of the film is based on a copy of the original viewed at the Sangeet Natak Akademi library in New Delhi in 2005. A recent digitally restored version of the film (the restoration project was undertaken by Martin Scorsese's World Cinema Foundation in 2012) is available at the National Film Archives of India.

13. There is a disparity in these numbers between Amala Shankar's account in Bishakha Ray's article 'Shankarnama' for the Bengali magazine *Sananda*, 27 June (1991: 78–9) and Khokar's figures (1983: 115).
14. See Gupta (2006). See also the discussion of Abanindranath Tagore's painting of Bharat Mata in Mitter (1995).
15. Dartington Trust Archive, Shankar Papers: DHTA, LKR India 196/A: 1947–49; 'Uday Shankar's Challenge to Film Industry', in *FilmIndia*, March 1948.
16. The Partition of India occurred at the same time as India gained Independence from British rule in 1947. The Muslim majority region of western India called Punjab became the newly created nation state of Pakistan. The Muslim majority region of eastern India called Bengal also became part of Pakistan, and was called East Pakistan. In 1971, following a war of independence against Pakistan, East Pakistan became the new nation-state of Bangladesh.

3 Shanti Bardhan and Dance as Protest

1. Tippera dance originates from the Tippera Hills, which form a part of the present-day northeast Indian state of Tripura. There are several dance forms practiced by the tribes of this regions; for instance the *Goria* dance, the *Hojagiri* by the Reang clan and the *Bihu* of the Chakmas. It is not exactly clear from records which of these dance forms Bardhan trained in.
2. Much of this biographical information is gleaned from an in-person interview with Gul Bardhan in Bhopal-Madhya Pradesh, India, 21 February 2006. Biographical information on Bardhan can also be found in articles published in Bardhan (1992); see, for instance, Mohan Khokar's article on Shanti Bardhan, first published in the *Illustrated Weekly* on 21 September 1969 (Bardhan 1992: 181–5).
3. *Bhajans*: Andhra Pradesh folk dance usually with devotional content; *Kolata*: folk dance with sticks practised both in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. *Burrakatha*: popular narrative entertainment in Andhra Pradesh blending theatre, music and dance and accompanied by the *burra*, a tambura worn by the storyteller.
4. As theatre historian Samik Bandyopadhyay suggests, the first staging of *Nabanna* resulted in a run of thirty-five performances at theatres and public gatherings in Bengal, 'often to audiences of seven thousand or more' (1971: 239).
5. Her brother Benoy Roy was an IPTA activist and singer.
6. A direct translation of the phrase is 'Bengal is hungry – Bengali is hungry, father, Bengal is hungry.' The word 'bapu' translates as 'father' but here it is a reference to Gandhi who was popularly called Bapu or 'father of the nation' by many Indians.
7. It is purported that during one of its performances in Bombay, attended by stalwarts from the film industry, the actor-director Prithviraj Kapoor was so moved by the production that he got up on stage, announced 'I must do something for hungry Bengal' and with his cap in hand, begged for donations from the gathered audience. On that single night,

Kapoor and his colleagues raised Indian Rupees 20,000 (approximately £250 in today's currency, a considerable sum in 1940s India) for famine victims in Bengal (Roy Chowdhury 1999: 13–14).
8. Original newspaper reviews have been sourced from the Bardhans' Little Ballet Troupe archives in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh.
9. This was mentioned by Gul Bardhan in the interview cited above at note 2, although the details of the legal battle are unclear.
10. The *tukda* and the *toda* are technical terms from the Jaipur school of the north Indian classical Kathak dance form, indicating precise relationships between the footwork and rhythmic patterns.
11. Das's book *Dyash Theke Deshe* (*From East to West Bengal*, 2010) recounts her family's migration from East Bengal to West Bengal before the Partition years, and her involvement with the IPTA in Calcutta as a singer (although she also watched dance rehearsals, and once performed with the dancer Panu Pal in Bardhan's *Dance of Death*).

4 Manjusri Chaki Sircar and Feminist New Dance

1. Apart from Kothari, published articles such as those by Indian scholars Venkataraman and Pattabhi Raman (1994) have also been attentive to Chaki Sircar's contribution to dance. Historians from Bengal such as Gayatri Chattopadhyay (2001) and Aishika Chakraborty (2006; 2010) have offered useful overviews of Chaki Sircar's work, while Trevor Montague Wade in her (2001) dissertation locates Chaki Sircar's choreography within a specifically Hindu context. Also, Alessandra Lopez y Royo in her (2003) article on Ranjabati Sircar offers a very interesting analysis of her final choreographic work, which I shall return to in Chapter 5. Esha Niyogi De (2011) perhaps offers the most rigorous and in-depth analysis of Chaki Sircar's feminism; her work is referenced below in this chapter.
2. Poetry reading, music and dance at informal gatherings on full-moon or *purnima* nights were a regular feature of Chaki Sircar's life in Calcutta in the 1980s. Known as *Purnima Sammelan* (full-moon gatherings), these evenings would include readings and performances by Chaki Sircar's students, friends and colleagues.
3. Sadhana Bose (1914–73) was a dancer and actress who performed for the Bengali stage and cinema. Her modern theatre dance compositions include *Birth of Freedom*, *Bhookh* and *Ajanta* (dates unknown). Historian Gayatri Chattopadhyay (2002: 345; 2001: 88–93) situates Bose's works between Uday Shankar and IPTA.
4. See Chapter 2, note 16 above. Following the India-Pakistan partition in 1947 the Muslim majority East Bengal became a part of Pakistan, and came to be known as East Pakistan. Between March and December 1971, the liberation war, '*Mukti Juddho*' in Bengali, broke out in East Pakistan, leading to its independence from Pakistan and the creation of the autonomous nation-state of Bangladesh.
5. One of Tagore's most allegorical and political (pro-socialist) plays, *Rakta Karabi*, was written in 1926 but never performed during the poet's lifetime,

apparently due to the unavailability of a suitable female performer to play the part of the central protagonist Nandini. For an English translation of this play, see *Red Oleanders* in Lal (2001) *Rabindranath Tagore: Three Plays*.

6. Martha Graham's company toured South Asia, South East Asia and the Middle East under the International Exchange Programme in 1955–56, which is described as a phase of heightened American cultural diplomacy in the Cold War period. See Prevots (1998).
7. Trans. *Nrityera Taley Taley* (*Through the Rhythm of Dance*), *Jetey Jetey Ekela Pathey* (*On my Solitary Journey*), *Kotha Je Udhao* (*Where has my Mind Vanished*), *Jharnar Baridhara* (*Torrents of Rain*), *Neel Digantey* (*In the Blue Horizon*), *Ohey Shundara Mari Mari* (*O Beautiful One*). Although there are no contemporary recordings of these choreographies, Chaki Sircar later choreographed several of these songs for Dancers' Guild members, many of which are available on video at Dancers' Guild, Kolkata.
8. Ramsay Burt (2004) makes a similar claim, stating that contemporary dance in Britain may be seen more as a continuation of the modern rather than the postmodern aesthetic. Sally Banes (1987) also discusses the different phases of postmodern choreography and maintains that 'analytic' postmodern American dance of the 1970s displayed modernist preoccupations and was linked to modernist visual art through the use of minimalist sculpture. Banes describes 1980s 'new dance' as belonging to the 'rebirth of content' phase of postmodern dance.
9. According to Chaki Sircar's autobiography, she was severely criticised for her use of narrative and her reworking of Tagore's dance drama by a number of her contemporaries at the East-West Dance Encounter: Chandralekha, also a feminist choreographer, Kathak, a choreographer, Kumudini Lakhia and George Lechner of the Max Mueller Goethe Institute.
10. Priya Srinivasan (2003) has argued that Graham borrowed from Asian practices such as yoga to develop her technique, but did not always acknowledge her sources. According to Srinivasan, Graham discarded Ruth St Denis's overt mimicry of the Orient in favour of a more subtle, concealed appropriation, which became 'the new face of Orientalism couched in the rhetoric of modernity' (Srinivasan 2003: 121).
11. Her research findings were published in the 1988 book (co-written with P. Rohner) *Women and Children in a Bengali Village*.
12. I am indebted to Jhuma Basak, one of the Dancers' Guild's lead performers and teachers in the 1980s, for sharing her memories and providing information on these early experiments. Unfortunately, the full names of the male performers are not known to Basak (interviewed on 24 April 2005 in Kolkata, India).
13. For an overview of the women's movement in India, see Radha Kumar's excellent essay 'From Chipko to Sati: The Contemporary Indian Women's Movement' (1999).
14. See Tagore (1945) *Rabindra Racanavali*, Vol. 23, pp.135–53 for the prose play and Vol. 25, 161–84 for the dance drama.

15. De (2011) has critiqued the insertion of the saffron-robed ascetic in the production's national television recording. De's reading is that in so doing 'Doordarshan television's multiculturalism capitalises on unifying the spectator's gaze with the misogynist Hindu nationalist's fetish for the saffron-clothed male' (162); however, it must be noted here that both Manjusri and Ranjabati were against this insertion, and described the choreographic change (and the superimposition of the monk's image on Ranjabati's palms in the mirror scene) as a 'gimmick' with which both were frustrated.
16. Some commentators – among them C.V. Chandrashekhar – criticised Chaki Sircar for making her women dancers roll on the floor and raise their legs in a manner that is nowhere to be found in Indian classical dance presentation. See Kothari (1994).
17. Bishnoi, a compound word meaning twenty-nine (*bish* = twenty, *noi* = nine), is a living community in rural north-west India who live by twenty-nine rules, many of which relate to the protection of trees and animals.

5 Ranjabati Sircar and the Politics of Identity in Indian Dance

1. 'Di' is short for 'didi', which in the Indian Bengali/Hindi language means 'older sister'.
2. The residency was supported by the Ford Foundation in New Delhi, India. In some ways I attempted to trace and make sense of Sircar's own journey to the American Dance Festival in 1990.
3. See Devi (1949: 34). Chaki Sircar talks about this inspiration, and her allegiance to Tagore in formulating *Navanritya* in rigorous detail in her (1988) article 'Tagore's Dance-Drama in Contemporary Dance Idiom'.
4. Wade (2001: 219–20) has also described the eight groups of movements; my description of certain terms is slightly different from hers.
5. Jhuma Basak was one of the first dancers to work with the Sircars as a Dancer's Guild member and principal performer. She suggests that the Sircars' concern with structuring and codifying movements after the first few years of experimentation perhaps was an attempt to legitimise the *Navanritya* body vis-à-vis the classical dance body.
6. In *Pure Lust*, Daly is suspicious of androgyny as a liberation strategy, citing the example of the 1982 film *Tootsie* in which Dustin Hoffman declares at the end that he is Dorothy, the woman he had been posing as. Daly reads this as a message of 'cannibalistic androgynous maleness. Little Dustin, whom Julie had loved and rejected because she believed he was a woman, incorporates the best of womanhood – like Dionysius and Jesus before him' (1984: 203). While Daly's reading is fascinating, I am proposing that a reversal of this process of subsuming/consuming is perhaps possible, as can be noticed in the Sircars' androgynous dance training.
7. Sircar (in Chakraborty 2008: 49).

8. Even though it is unclear which photographs are being referred to here, Doris M. Srinivasan substantiates Sircar's point in an essay titled 'Royalty's Courtesans and God's Mortal Wives: Keepers of Culture in Pre Colonial India'. Here, Srinivasan states that photographs of *devadasis* taken around 1856 'represent them garbed as erotic curiosities with trapped, vacuous stares facing a heartless lens. These photographs capture the cultivated courtesan in the process of becoming objectified. Not only do the new rulers of India reduce her to the category of prostitute, but local reformers also work to ostracise her and boycott her artistic appearances' (2006: 176).
9. Amrit Srinivasan's (1985) and Matthew Harp Allen's (1997) research was seminal in terms of drawing the reader's attention to the Indian nationalist revival and reform movement which cleansed and reconstructed the classical dance Bharatanatyam. Their views have been countered in recent years by Avanthi Meduri, who states that the disempowerment of the *devadasis* occurred not because of 'Sankritization' (that is, on a dependence on Sanskrit textual sources) in the revival project but due to a split between *tala* (percussive) and *bhava* (expressive) components in Bharatanatyam dance form (see Avanthi Meduri 2005).
10. For a comprehensive list of Sircar's works, see Chakraborty (2008).
11. Biplab Dasgupta (2005: 104) has suggested that '[a]gricultural practices and crop calendars, written down in the form of a collection of poems, such as Khanar Bachan, suggested not only cropping practices, but also advised what to do if, due to climactic or other changes, the crop calendar needed to be revised. Khanar Bachan was handed down from one generation to the next. Khana, the author of these poems, was a woman, and these poems were in use by word of mouth. They reflected a rich and deep understanding of rural ecology, soil and weather conditions, and its impact on different fruits, vegetables and crops.' The relationship between woman and nature/natural cycle can once again be noticed here, but Khana's wisdom was not simply limited to an essentialised female intuitive knowledge of the natural world, but was the outcome of analytical study of climate patterns through the lenses of mathematics and astronomy.
12. For a detailed mapping of South Asian dance in Britain, its community and professional practice, see Grau et al. (2001) SADiB report, funded by the Leverhulme Trust.
13. See Lopez y Royo (2003) for a fuller analysis of this choreographic work.
14. I was among the eight soloists in this production, along with Jonaki Sarkar, Aishika Chakraborty, Arunima Ghosh, Sadhana Hazra, Sanghamitra Sengupta, Sohini Das and Koel Pal. Video documentation of the work is available at the Dancers' Guild.
15. Sircar performed her solo before the Dancers' Guild's production *Kon Nutaneri Dak* in the same evening shows. I was a performing member of the company then, and was amongst the many dancers of the Guild who waited for her to return to Calcutta from Mumbai – which she never did.

6 Conclusions

1. Bharucha has said that in the 'institutionalised sectors of cultural practice […], there was a vacuous retrieval of the past through an "invention of tradition", whereby a "back to the roots" anti-modern/anti-realist/anti-western policy was crudely, yet tenaciously propagated by the state and its accomplices. These proponents of an authentic "Indianness" were, for the most part, neither native visionaries nor ideologues, but cultural bureaucrats who exemplified the "intellectual laziness" that marks the defunct state of the national bourgeoisie' (1993: 33–4). Moreover, Sarkar Munsi has suggested that for dancers in pre- and post-Independence India, 'it was safe to be either a folk artiste or a classical dancer and remain within the well-defined structure of patronage. In the effort to categorise the dances into two safe slots, the bureaucracy ignored, either by design or by sheer lack of recognising power and knowledge, the new stream of dance that was happening, as early as the beginning of the twentieth century which was outside the definition of either of the two recognised categories' (2010b: 216).
2. See for instance Priya Srinivasan (2012: 23) who reads the inception of modern dance in North America as a 'collective endeavour' by white American women and the unrecognised labour of Asian dancers who inspired St Denis.
3. Although remarkable for her ability to notice how power operates on bodies in visible and invisible ways, there was little acknowledgement in Grosz's work of how the body as a lived entity and experience is capable of producing its own terms of engagement with structures of power, and therefore of creating new structures or languages. It is interesting, and indeed satisfying, to notice that Grosz's more recent work accepts her previous failure 'to adequately address how living matter, corporeality, allows itself cultural location, gives itself up to cultural inscription, provides a "surface" for cultural writing – that is, how the biological induces the cultural rather than inhibits it, how biological complexity impels the complications and variability of culture itself' (2004: 4).
4. One should particularly look at the work of Ananya Chatterjea, especially her (2004) book *Butting Out: Reading Resistive Choreographies Through Works by Jawole Willa Jo Zollar and Chandralekha*. Here, Chatterjea repeatedly alerts her readers to 'the tyranny of the West, its aesthetic imperative' (p. xiii) on cultural production and emphasises 'context and cultural specificity in analysis and interpretation of choreography' (p. xiv).
5. See Ketu Katrak (2011) for an overview of many of these dancers' works.

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