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Dance Matters: Performing India

Pallabi Chakravorty

Swarthmore College, pchakra1@swarthmore.edu

N. Gupta

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Introduction

PALLABI CHAKRAVORTY AND NILANJANA GUPTA

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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