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Dance Matters Too: Markets, Memories, Identities

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DANCE MATTERS II

Introduction

Pallabi Chakravorty and Nilanjana Gupta

The new terrain

This book builds on an earlier publication titled *Dance Matters*, edited by Pallabi Chakravorty and Nilanjana Gupta, which attempted to bring together a variety of approaches to Dance and Performance studies related to not just 'classical' forms, but traditional, popular and context-specific dance practices. Dance and Performance research has grown in complexity and nuance in the past few decades. The interdisciplinary significance of dance research as a rapidly developing field of scholarly inquiry is underscored by its link to both the humanities and the social sciences. Its simultaneous engagement with critical thinking, intellectual rigor, artistic labour and creativity makes it a dynamic platform for the integration of reflection and experience.

The dynamism inherent in Indian dance studies also represents the multipolar tensions in the field, where contradictory and complicated forces are at work in shaping the debates. The field is still nascent and critical scholarship is emergent. Keeping these complexities in mind, the book juxtaposes chapters that have a variety of orientations: chapters that stem from the subjective experience of practitioners that combine critical theory; chapters that are based on academic research methods and contemporary critical theory; and chapters that are inclined towards experiential knowledge with minimal engagement with theory. Interestingly, the shift in social theory itself in recent years, from the predominance of text and textual theories (oriented towards strictly objective approaches) to questions of body, senses, emotion/affect and visual culture, has thrown into relief a new awareness of the importance of researching dance both in terms of affect and artefact. The primary thrust of the conference *Dance Matters II* ("What Remains: Remembrances Representations and Responses

as Dance Artifacts,” held at Jadavpur University in 2013) and this book is on approaches to dance research that address these developments in the field of scholarly research. More specifically, the book demonstrates the exigencies of Indian dance research in this age of rapid socio-cultural transformation, highlighting the issues of cultural preservation, heritage and liberalization of the market.

Recent scholarship on Indian dance has analyzed it in the context of postcolonial modernity, invention of tradition, national identity, critical history, subaltern historiography, diasporic identity, gender and politics. Our previous conference titled “Dance Matters” and the anthology by the same name explored some of these key issues surrounding Indian dance and culture with an agenda for democratizing the inherent hierarchy and elitism associated with Indian dance both in theory and practice. This book builds on that earlier contribution and expands and deepens the scope of research on Indian dance by placing it at the front lines of intellectual debates on culture, identity, embodiment, aesthetics and socio-political change as India plunges deeper into the messiness of markets and modernity. The book attempts to address the multipolar debates surrounding dance, culture, heritage and change with a focus on questions of preservation and politics of categories (‘classical,’ ‘folk,’ ‘contemporary,’ etc.). From the overarching concerns of politics, economics and culture, this book shifts its emphasis to locate dance as also an expression of our innermost experiences, bodily perceptions and memory. The expansion of the dance experience in contemporary culture from corporeality to multimedia and digital technology has problematized notions of embodiment. Questions of embodiment and various experiences by dancers and choreographers today working within and outside India enrich the focus of this book. We believe that this book makes important theoretical contributions to this growing area of investigation and marks the potential of dance as a significant field of interdisciplinary study. It highlights Indian dance histories, audiences, markets and state control of the arts as competing narratives with many actors and agents of change. The chapters are accompanied by rich illustrations that support and augment the material.

From dance preservation in globalizing India to multimedia and the circulation of dance via electronic media, from embodiment and memory to corporatization and Bollywood, the research on Indian dance is multidimensional in its scope and perspective. *Dance Matters Too: Markets, Memories, Identities* charts the journey of Indian dance from hegemonic ideologies of the past to deepening democracy and competing discourses of markets and modernity.

It is significant that many of the contributors to this volume are themselves both dancers and theorists. Many of them are young scholars and are

struggling both to redefine what dance means in today's globalized world of multimedia production and to find space for dance and performance studies in an academic world which is increasingly integrated into global capitalism and its concerns. They are seriously challenging the entrenched classifications of dance forms and the ossified history of dance as a vital part of the nationalist discourse. As several of the chapters in this volume testify, these dancer-scholars combine the rationality of their intellectual training with the embodied experience of dance in their work – both creative and academic. Although the chapters in this volume all add a novel and critical edge to dance research, they do so not necessarily with the same degree of intensity or academic preparedness. There are established researchers who have contributed to this volume along with emergent scholars. Some are more focused on practice-oriented research that belongs to new fields like Dance Studies or Performance Studies, and some belong to more established fields like Art History, Religion or Anthropology. This eclectic mix of researchers (some of whom are also practitioners) makes the anthology perhaps a little uneven. But the eclectic blend of multiple voices at various stages of critical scholarship shows the texture and scope of Dance Studies in India. They underscore its ability as a growing academic field to challenge authoritative state narratives and reflect on imagination and creativity. In short, the chapters in the volume chart the immense possibilities of academic and creative interdisciplinary engagements that are possible in the field of contemporary dance research.

The exhibit and performance

Accompanying the conference were two significant events. An exhibition of dance-related artefacts was jointly curated by Madhuja Mukherjee of the Department of Film Studies at Jadavpur University; Priyadarshini Ghosh, a senior Mohiniattam and Contemporary dancer; and Vikram Iyengar, trained in Kathak and currently experimenting with ways of pushing the boundaries of what is dance. The exhibition at the National Library Gallery titled "What Remains?" asked what remains after a performance ceases to be. A poignant question foregrounding 'ephemerality,' which remains a core concern for dance or any performance, was articulated in the exhibition through the use of posters, invitation cards, photographs, costumes, masks, reviews and other material objects which are all that remain of the dance and the dancer. These artefacts were from all categories of dance, including classical, traditional and film. The nature of this ephemerality and the subsequent need to find ways to preserve dance performances/practices was discussed in the inaugural lecture by Samik Bandyopadhyay, the well-known theatre and performance critic.



Figure 1.1 Photograph of exhibition

Source: Photograph belongs to Project Performance, UGC-UPE II, Jadavpur University, Kolkata.

Two short lecture demonstrations were performed/delivered during the conference. The first was by Manipuri dancer Priti Patel, who highlighted the physicality of male dancers in the traditional hunting rituals which are now aesthetized and made visually attractive through the work of trained choreographers. Vikram Iyengar showcased a short sequence from Ranan's *Those who could not hear the Music*, a performance inspired by Beethoven's life and music, and Vikram Seth's novel *An Equal Music*. In two very different performances, the dancers showed us the inspiring variety of movements that coexists in the world of performance and the sensory pleasures of experiencing them.

Dialogues

Dance Matters II did not just carry on from the earlier discussion, but rather looked at dance in India from new perspectives. During the discussions, issues ranging from the lost history of the *tawa'ifs* to the advertisements for local cricket matches which announce that there will be dancing cheerleaders from Mumbai added to our own awareness of the multiplicity

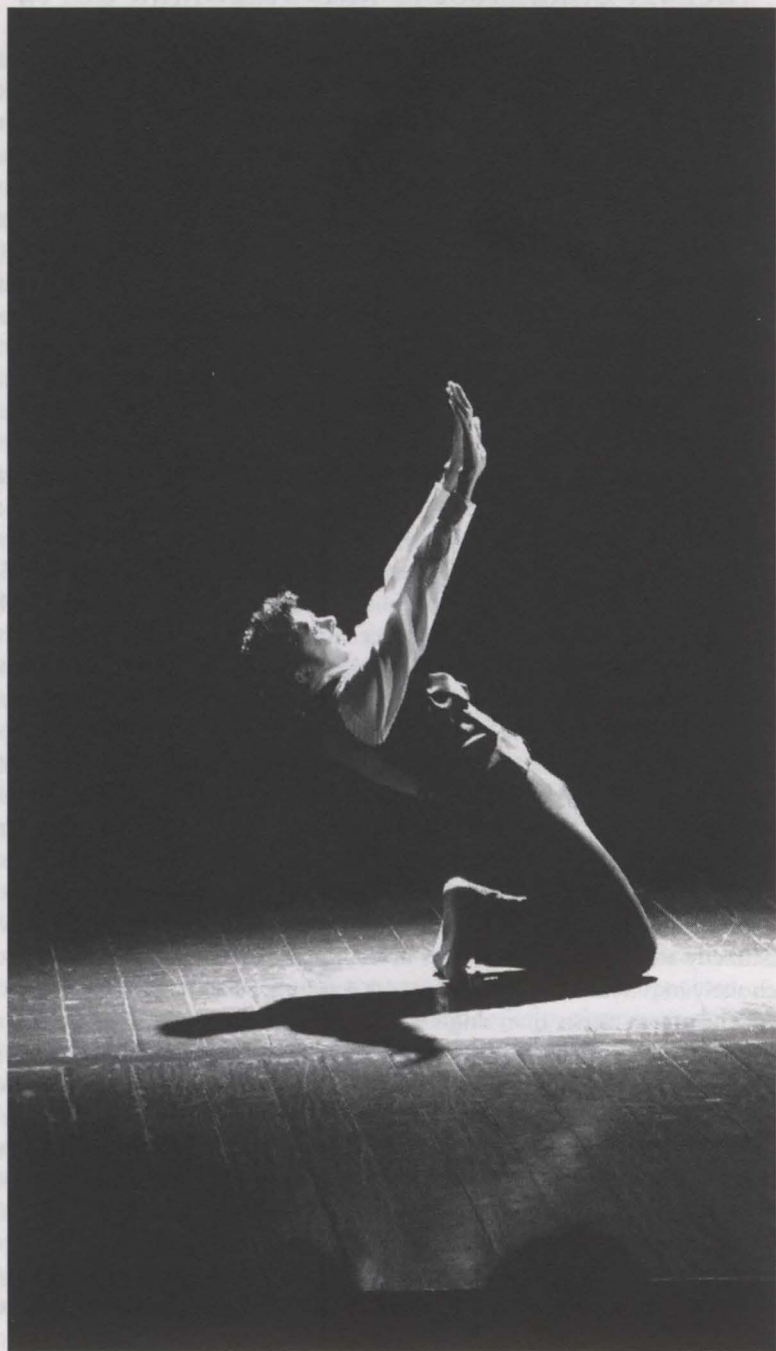


Figure 1.2 Photograph of performance

Source: Used with the permission of Vikram Iyengar.

of dance histories, experiences and performances. Nilanjana Gupta in her speech mapped the new terrain of dance in India as part of an ever-increasing visual field encompassing various social spaces. She looked at social dancing in India at weddings and parties and in school competitions, reality shows and the streets, and the multiple meanings that practitioners derive from them. This book, in this regard, creates a dialogue with similarly edited monographs that have begun to appear to create the field of Indian dance studies. This growing body of scholarship breaks from past writings on Indian dance that tended to focus primarily on dance criticism or dance as a category of art abstracted from its socio-historical and political economic contexts. Many edited volumes have presented this dynamic trajectory of Indian dance, which has brought scholars and practitioners together on various forums in India and abroad.

The book *Traversing Tradition* (2011, eds Munsu and Burrige) represents this complex mosaic of critics, commentators, scholars and artists that shape the amalgam of old, new and emergent narratives. Another recent book titled *Scripting Dance in Contemporary India* (2016, eds Anoop and Gulati) brings together essays by scholars and practitioners who are working in the various areas of Indian dance studies, in India and the diaspora, enriching and complicating the field. On the other hand, edited books with narrower focus such as *Bharatanatyam* (ed. Soneji) on the history and modern constructions of Bharatanatyam and *Moving Space* (Sarkar and Chakravorty, 2018) on the struggle of women to create their space for dance and alternative spaces that embrace women and their dance have both added depth to the foundation of a new Indian dance scholarship. There have been other edited volumes such as *Rukmini Devi Arundale* (ed. Avanthi Meduri), *Performing Ecstasy* (eds Chakravorty and Kugle) and *Voyages of the Body and Soul* (eds Katrak and Ratnam) that have directly or indirectly addressed the new ways of looking at Indian dance as an area of scholarly inquiry. Note that here we are referring only to edited or collaborative ventures rather than single-authored books. The latter, as we know, have been crucial to the development of Indian dance studies as an international field. We hope this volume will also engage with the arguments and debates put forward by these books, our earlier co-edited book *Dance Matters* (2010, Chakravorty and Gupta) and many other single-authored and edited books on Indian dance. This particular volume is inspired by this growing scholarship on Indian dance and contributes to our understanding of why dance matters, perhaps more than ever.

The chapters in the volume are organized in four parts. Part I deals with issues of conservation and the heritage of dance and dancers. Scott Kugle focuses on the little-known history of the courtesan and poet Mah

Laqa Bai Chanda from the court of Nizam of Hyderabad, and Kugle's own efforts to translate her Urdu poetry and to restore and preserve her memory and tomb. This opens up a debate on what (if any) culture needs to be preserved, and who decides what it is? Yoshiaki Takemura shows the conflict surrounding the cultural practices of Teyyam ritual, animal sacrifice and environmental protection in Kerala. He argues that due to various social and economic reasons the practice of Vayanattu Kulavan Teyyam, one of the many Teyyam rituals practiced in Kerala by the marginalized castes, has gained in popularity, which in turn has increased hunting and animal sacrifice, as they are part of the ritual aspect of Teyyam. But this now conflicts with animal protection and environmental preservation issues in the state. Nandini Sikand's chapter on an Odissi costume controversy uses the symbol of the apparel as heritage to focus on three layers of competing meanings associated with varying notions of 'Indianness.' Whether it is the appropriateness of attire, regional or national identity, authenticity or globalizing forces, the meaning of Indianness is a source of conflict. The source of the debate is the staging of Odissi dance in Odisha by Ramli Ibrahim, a Malaysian choreographer. Shruti Ghosh discusses the concept of an archive from the perspective of dance. She holds on to the question of 'authenticity' of the embodied experience and argues that the body itself is the true archive of dance, and it is only by constantly doing or performing that we can be sure of knowing something, and thus naming it. She argues that a closer look at the performative aspects of dance can redefine notions of cultural preservation, heritage, and innovation and authenticity. She uses her own experience of learning to dance Kathak to substantiate her argument. Pallabi Chakravorty looks at the changing ways knowledge of Indian dances and dancing bodies has been explored by focusing on disparate themes such as Rabindranritya and dance reality shows. The chapter offers a dynamic understanding of India's dance heritage that juxtaposes the high and low, the regional and global, the vernacular and the cosmopolitan.

Part II on patronage, markets and new modes of performances develops around dance as cultural production in a globalizing India. Veena Basavara-jaiiah focuses on the corporatization of dance and the burgeoning 'dance industry' it has produced. She argues that art and economics have always been linked, as the latter ensures the patronage of artistic sustenance. She uses her own experience as a Bharatanatyam dancer in Bengaluru to substantiate her point. Arshiya Sethi further contextualizes the process of dance production in India by analyzing the intertwined relationship between arts management, audience engagement and the dynamic of sponsorship. Her intimate knowledge of this relationship as an artist manager and scholar, critic and presenter gives us a rare insight into this world of politics, state

machineries and funding sources, such as the PPPs (public-private partnerships). Indrani Dasgupta extends the narrative of commercialization of dance to the popular form Bollywood by highlighting the contradictions and ambiguities of Bollywood dance as a contested space of an Indian identity that symbolizes a world of 'contemporary newness.'

Part III on embodiment and experience in a digitized world focuses on the changing dynamics of the dance experience and issues of embodiment. Pika Ghosh traces the continuity of *rasa* aesthetics as an emotional experience of *bhakti* or devotional love attached to Gaudiya Vaishnavism by analyzing *rasamandala* temple sculptures of Bishnupur, Bengal, to its present incarnation in Bollywood films in the song and dance sequences. Jean-Frédéric Chevallier frames the fundamental parameters of dancing as the opening up of senses. He argues that dancing is different from other art forms as it directly deals with the corporeality of the body. He further argues that this experience is true for all kinds of dancing in India, from classical and folk to tribal and Bollywood. Because these dances awaken the senses in the audience, they work as a reminder to them that they can move and be moved. Focusing on the centrality of music in Kathak dance, Ameera Nimjee explores the intimacy between the tabla player and the Kathak dancer. She analyzes how expressive gestures, movements and speech between the dancer and the percussionist create this intimate bond where the experience is about the interdependence of music and dance. From the conceptual categories of movement, senses and experience, the chapters in this part go on to issues of embodiment by scholar practitioners working in various contexts. Prarthana Purakayastha argues that a new model of inquiry called 'practice-as-research' places the body at the centre of analysis and can offer resistive strategies to representations in performance. She uses one of her own choreographies, "The Wife's Letter" (2008), as a case study to shed light on the intertextual meanings that emerge from a disembodied narrative text, lived body and the mediated body. Continuing on the theme of disembodied bodies or mediated bodies, Sandra Chatterjee and Cynthia Ling analyze two different choreographies: Revanta Sarabhai's *LDR* and their own piece *Super Ruwaxi*. They argue for the need to expand the notion of *natya* from its traditional meaning of an integration of dance, theatre and music to inter-media that defies categories and produces mongrels.

The last section focuses on Indian dance histories as they transform from ritual to regional and subnational identities. Aishika Chakraborty focuses on Rabindranath Tagore's dance style and the performances of his dance creations staged from the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. By tracing the audience reaction and critical reception of the 'Rabindrik paradigm,' she explores the changing attitude towards modern Indian dance,

including works of choreographers who later use the paradigm such as Manjusri Chaki Sircar. Sruti Bandopadhyay on Manipuri dance focuses on its local, gendered, ritual aspects and its transformation into a 'classical' form that represents the state of Manipur on the cultural map of India. She traces this journey from the *sankirtana* and *raslila* dances to their recontextualization and codification as a classical form under guru Bipin Singh. Anwesa Mahanta's chapter on Sattriya dance analyzes it as a narrative of Sattriya ritual to the new aesthetic form, Sattriya, that invigorates an Assamese (sub)national consciousness. She argues that the dance is transformed from ritual to social identity through a process of textualization. Sabina Sweta Sen-Podstawka explores Odissi dance history and performance through a multisensory paradigm using the framework of an anthropology of the senses and ethnography. In the process, she explores how the performance of Odissi finds new meaning in an ever-changing context.

Contestation and identification

The questions of cultural preservation, heritage, classification, power, censorship, invention of tradition, embodiment, experiential knowledge, the expansion of dance into an urban popular culture, Bollywoodization and corporatization of Indian dance are the multipolar and crisscrossing issues and ideas debated on the pages of *Dance Matters Too: Markets, Memories, Identities*. The multiple perspectives the authors bring to the four areas delineated in the book are not isolated but create a dialectical tension within Indian dance research itself. They also foreground the complex and diverse modes of knowledge formation within dance where practitioners and scholars often inhabit separate worlds. For instance, the very nomenclature of Indian dance as classical or folk or contemporary is both a space for contestation and identification. This space for contestations was heralded by postcolonial dance scholarship that linked classical dances to the invention of tradition. However, the codified repertoire of the styles is embodied through methods of practice and ritual that make them authentic (as the chapters by Nimjee and S. Ghosh show us). These issues of identification and contestation (that appear to be contrapuntal in nature) are further complicated by questions on preservation, addressed by P. Ghosh where the dancing body itself is the archive.

On the other hand, the reification of 'classical' as a mode of nationalism continues to be expressed in (sub)national/regional contexts of identity politics as we see in the chapters on Manipuri or Sattriya dance (Bandopadhyay, Mahanta). It is only in the case of Tagore and Bengal and later in Chaki-Sircar that we see a cosmopolitan vision of nationalism emerge through a regional identity (Chakraborty, Chakravorty). The debates

regarding the sectarian understanding of Indianness rage in many quarters (especially with the current Hindutva resurgence), as the Odissi costume controversy chapter by Sikand shows us. Most (sub)national politics are now aligned with right-wing Hindu politics in India, and Indian dance in many quarters is increasingly identified through this lens (as we have also seen in the appropriation of Yoga by right-wing Hindu groups). At the same time, the circulation of dance in various media including Bollywood films, reality shows and multimedia, as well as school competitions and weddings, creates a counter-narrative to such narratives of authenticity and right-wing politics (Dasgupta, Chatterjee and Lee). The complex relationship between the immediacy of dance performance and the politics of representation creates an inherent tension and complicates the premise of dance research (Chevallier, Purakayastha). In addition, the politics and economics of dance in the current context are further complicated by liberalization (Sethi, Basavarajaiah), and the questions of preservation and heritage emerge from the dominance of the market. It encourages us to think about how to formulate questions of heritage and preservation without reifying past categories of classifications or simply documenting dance around the cult of individual personalities. Ultimately, the experience of performance brings us back to the ephemerality of dance, which the introductory section addresses (see Kugle). Looking at the materiality of dance, we ask “what remains?,” undergirding the exhibit that accompanied the conference.

In conclusion, we acknowledge the peculiarity of dance as a field of investigation; it is like no other discipline, where the art and the artist/practitioner are fused. This, of course, is the ultimate tension, challenge and excitement of the field. This book is extraordinarily rich in the diversity of its material, the analytical approaches and the questions it raises regarding Indian dance studies. Unhinged from the past dichotomies of tradition and modernity or tradition and continuity, it charts the debates on Indian dance within in a dialectical tension between identification and contestation in a market-driven economy. This dialectic is illuminated by contributions from established and emerging scholars from multiple and interdisciplinary perspectives and gives a fresh impetus to the growing body of knowledge on Indian dance.

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