

Editorial: South Asian Dance Intersections

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Three issues under the belt with this edition! With this edition we can put behind us the fear of the number 3. This is also probably our longest edition this far, making full use of the online status to include film, photos and videos. We bring you in this edition a dance film from Manipur that captures the current travails of the land, a photo essay in which artists of two countries are involved and a recording of an almost forgotten style, maybe the better word would be dialect, of Kathak. Our theme in this edition was ‘hierarchies’ and while not all, but many of the articles shine the torch on hierarchies in dance that manifest themselves in both obvious and subtle ways. It is hoped that this edition will help us dismantle hierarchies, especially those that cause harm to dance and dancers and help them to be more mindful and sensitive about this pervasive issue. With South Asia carrying forth a plexus of social, historical, gendered hierarchies, dance in this geography carries hierarchy reaching cult proportions, sometimes along misogynist lines and often creating unhealthy and unsafe ecosystems. In the last four years for instance, sexual harassment in the arts has been called out several times, but has not been heard. In the lineup of nine, a mix of essays and media submissions, we have none on this aspect. But that is not unusual as this is still a taboo subject. What the journal carries in this edition, via incisive articles, reflective works, visual essays, interviews and films, highlights so many lesser realized aspects of hierarchies. I see this edition generating new and more advanced discourse around the issue. It will also be the first edition that will have a “live” launch, in New Delhi, the capital of India. The recording of the event will be available online for those to see who could not participate in person but wished to have been a part of it.

Most dancers who have trained in the classical dances of South Asia, itself a hierarchical category, find themselves embroiled in multiple hierarchical structures operating at many levels, chief among which is the almost autocratic guru-shishya parampara, the pattern of learning over several

years with a single teacher who enjoys unquestioned authority and an almost divine position. Scholar, dancer and dance educator, Aadya Kaktikar found herself in a similar dichotomy, especially since she wanted to offer a more emancipatory pedagogy. Living with this dichotomy compelled Kaktikar to offer a different way of looking at the linear training and find the spaces for individual agency, which she has laid out in this essay “The Hierarchy of Parampara: Rethinking Relationship to Legacy in Dance”. Drawing on her own relationship with her Guru, on whom she has written a book in 2011, “Odissi Yaatra: The Journey of Guru Mayadhar Raut”, she expanded on the idea of tradition and nuanced its hold on a dancer. The essay proposes a framework that takes cognizance of individual agency and its political manifestation to repurpose Parampara or tradition. Referring to how dancers in their attempts at protecting their material shackle themselves to idealizing the past, as if it were an ideal past. This crafted nostalgia once played effectively into the idea of post-colonial nationalism, but the recent debates around caste in the world of classical Carnatic music has punched a gaping hole into the argument of the bygone golden age and its accompanying positions of unchallenged structures.

Kaktikar cogently argues in the essay that the hierarchies of traditional methods of training are definitely a valuable inheritance, but examines it minutely to then suggest ways of going past the shackling, and surviving the chokehold of tradition. Her methodology is via a triptych of three frames, of play, mimesis and osmosis. Play refers to the individual directed (re)engagement, (re)negotiation and rethinking of taught material where the rules of lineage do not apply. The second frame of mimesis is an imbricated process of simultaneous imitation and interpretation, the result of identification with an idea to the extent of trying to own it. The third and final frame she brings to the fore is the of osmosis which refers to the way in which the received canon gets refracted through the lived experience of the recipient, allowing individual

agency to play an important role and make for movement that happens simultaneously on two axes, allowing for movement that is both forwards and sideways.

Arushi Singh's reflections in her essay "Configuring the "Contemporary" in Indian Dance Through the Development Discourse: The Influence of Max Mueller Bhawan's 1984 "East – West Dance Encounter", foregrounds the role played by the Max Mueller Bhawan, a German cultural Institution in India, at a key moment of India's dance history. The MMB as it is popularly called embodies postwar cultural diplomacy that works towards developing the cultures of the global south by "productive" and "peaceful" cultural coalitions. Its mark, on shaping the contours of contemporary dance in India is seminal. In India, the twentieth century is important for the many deviations and self-expressions, since it witnessed, classical dance being created as a category, that seemed to align well with the nationalist movement. This process was accompanied by many disruptions and usurpations, and saw a radical shift among practitioners and prevailing practices of dance. From the early part of the twentieth century, a form of creative but distinctly Indian dance emerged due to the efforts of Uday Shankar and Ram Gopal. However, since the East-West Encounter of 1984, organized by the MMB, which served as a watershed moment, a "contemporary" dance emerged in India that patently carried the ideals, aesthetics and influence of the west.

Interestingly, the MMB, is a German institution named after Orientalist Max Mueller, who while supporting the theory of Aryan supremacy, had never visited India. MMB has had a defining impact on contemporary dance in India, largely because the then Director of the institution, Georg Lechner, pursued the end he sought, in a systematic manner. He seemed to dismiss the "inter-cultural sympathies" of the institution's naming, and a form of cultural imperialism can be read into the endeavor. Interestingly, Lechner persisted the very next year in reinforcing what had started in 1984, resulting in the Sangeet Natak Akademi, the national academy of the performing arts of India, an autonomous body (questionable to say the least), under the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, initiating the Nava Nritya

Utsav and seminar in Delhi in 1985. This served as a catalyst for the recognition and resulted in evoking some support for contemporary dance in India. Singh meticulously unravels the role of MMB, specifically, its persuasive Director in cultivating this development.

Gitanjali Kolanad opens her essay "Finding the Truth in Fiction" by shining the torch on a casualty of the segues made by dance, in the twentieth century. This is the devadasi or professional female dancer, often dedicated to a temple. Kolanad opens her essay with a quote by John Berger that "art makes inequality seem noble and hierarchies seem thrilling" (Ways of Seeing, 29), but then goes on to argue that if art can white wash hierarchies, it can also create inversions and versions that present other possibilities for organizing the world. From the seventeenth century padam repertoire of the prolific Telugu poet Kshetrappa, to films in which devadasis played the lead roles where the story was often about the devadasi community, to the novel "Web of Deceit", Kolanad traces how art is used to invert the hierarchies. The padams become fodder for her argument since the interpretative agency given to the dancer allows her to project herself in any way, out of the multiple options available in the erotic/ devotional poetry, often framing herself in a position of superiority that was quite contrary to the reality of their lives and station. In early Tamil films, it was often the devadasis who reinvented themselves as actresses, even playing the role of the devadasi. In the process, they gain in social and financial equity. It mattered little of the films used the word devadasi as a slur, for the fact of the matter was that the artistic world of the films allowed succor and improved opportunities to the devadasi, who was already beleaguered by social stigma. In the novel "Web of Deceit" written by Muvalur Ramamirtham, herself a devadasi, we find a detailed picture of the ills of the system. But, using the art of writing, the author directs the narrative to the protagonist who becomes an activist in the reform movement, finding her voice, agency and the courage to break free from an oppressive system—made possible through fictional affordances.

Some years ago, in a conversation with Manipuri contemporary dancer Surjit Nongmeikapam, I was fascinated by his comment that "Every time I dance,

I make a political statement”. What else can you say about long neglected Manipur. As a land on the margins, a frontier province of India, it has not had an easy existence. The combination of a near continuous history in recent times of insurgency, violence and the imposition of the Armed forces Special Powers Act and the twin Disturbed Area Act, have cast a political cloud on this gem state of India. But over the last thirty months Manipur has seen an unprecedentedly disruptive political crisis. Out of the dark times emerged the dance film “Hypnagogia”. Hypnagogia refers to the transitional state of consciousness that occurs while falling asleep, and it is characterized by a range of sensory experiences. Capturing the liminal state between sleep and wakefulness, in these turbulent times, the film maker uses griminess and grittiness to express the haphazard agonies of his people and their land. The [film](#) is accompanied by a moving note by the performing artist R.K. Bitesh and film-maker Tushar Nongthombam.

From the body political and the body diplomatic, Preethi Athreya’s essay “Form, Identity, Dissent – Reclaiming the Critical Space” takes us to her interest in the human body per se, the functional body instead of the performative body. Drawing from her “Jumping Project” where she explores the many insights in the simple, non-decorative act of jumping, as a counterpoint to the movements of the decorative dance body. Referencing body based political counters in jal satyagrahas or the stripped bodies of Manipur’s women protestors, Athreya, argues that “our bodies are being stolen from us”. She comes to this conclusion based on the realization that even when born in dance labs that are supposedly free from predetermined ends and untethered to restrictions, the body gets co-opted, loses its autonomy, as the body, and is compelled by the process to become a performative body. Athreya’s body centric argument reminds me of one of the most important writings on the body in our times- Brahma Prakash’s “Bodies on a Barricade: Life, Art and Resistance in Contemporary India.” In this book Prakash talks about how the state controls the body and why. “The figure of the poet and artist is an ideal of freedom...barricading them is special because the purpose is not to capture their bodies but to detain words and imagination”

(Prakash, 2023; 122).

The compelling photo essay “Imkaan”, a word which in Persian means possibilities, is actually a coming together of two artistes- Indian dancer, photographer Sumedha Bhattacharya and Iranian underground artist Hadiyeh Azma, who is currently in Norway, for a collaborative exploration of visual story telling of a censorship regime. Supremacies, hierarchies and hegemonic world views is at the root of censorship, which leads to shaming, embarrassment and repression. This photo essay captures how the body gets subjected to cultural codes and social protocols. But even a socialized, controlled and contained body carries its political body within it. It resists—compulsively, despite being once contained, without concern for time passed, as is evident in Iran today, where an embodied resistance plays out via the hair revolution.

In a simpler manner but marking a revolutionary moment nevertheless is Ramli Ibrahim’s reflective work titled “Weaving Odissi Feminine: A Malaysian Perspective” that captures the subtle shift from male produced Odissi dance to female produced Odissi dance, in Malaysia. Linking it with the demographic dynamics emanating from India, the land of Odissi’s origins, he argues that the men were always privileged as Gurus while the women were the dancers, till a subtle shift was witnessed in India in the eighties, about a decade after Malaysians were introduced to Odissi. However, for Malaysians to enjoy and participate in dance where women became makers of dance, another three decades had to pass. This happened as a direct result of Ramli Ibrahim’s dance school, Sutra’s mindful invitation to women creators, breaking the male shibboleth of gurudom. The essay has resonances that can be developed by future scholarship around issues of the changed nature, intent and dynamics of pedagogy and the creative content introduced by this gender shift.

Lionel Popkin’s reflective writing “Reorienting the Orient: A Case Study” is based on a durational performance installation running for eight hours in which he examines his own archive of thirty years of art making, located within the history of representation of South Asian performers on

western stages, thereby augmenting the discourse around dance in diasporic settings, especially in the United States. This essay was first developed as part of a conference that accompanied the exhibit “Border crossings: Exile and American Modern Dance, 1900-1955” which was initially mounted at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts in the Fall of 2023 and then remounted in January 2024 at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Consequently, the writing has a mosaic-like quality to it.

Early in the piece Popkin asks the question of how his project enters the transnational hierarchies of form and social expectations that have historically characterized South Asian dance in diasporic settings. In answering it Popkin, who has strong Indian links, including stints in training, takes us through a series of works and writings on Ruth St. Denis, Ted Shawn, Uday Shankar, La Meri and Ram Gopal. He focuses in particular on the mystique and life of Ram Gopal, about whom coincidentally in 2024 was published Ann David’s definitive book- “Ram Gopal: Interweaving Histories of Indian Dance”. But, Popkin challenges the Orientalizing gaze imposed on South Asian artists in American Modern Dance, that largely as a result of America’s fascination for these, “the reconstructionist classicists of Indian dance”, as he calls them, which he believes has perpetuated a hierarchy of form. This form that they are exemplars of, limits the expressive capability of performance with respect to what it can do, while navigating the complexities of diasporic life. Given the fact that debates around hierarchies of caste and class have only recently begun rumbling in India, Popkin’s questions are very significant.

I would like to conclude this editorial with reference to the one interview we have. Titled “Crossing Barriers: Dance Unwound- A Conversation with Sushant Gaurav”, it is a detailed conversation between veteran theatre critic Ajay Joshi and a young Kathak dancer, Sushant Gaurav, who is being noticed globally for dancing a rare version of the well-known dance style of Kathak, which is very different from the routine craft associated with it. A large part of Gaurav’s presentation is marked by performance in a very slow tempo, that is not seen today, although records testify that it once existed. Gaurav describes

his lineage as the Lahore- Lucknow gharana. This would befuddle many for while we are aware of the court patronized Lucknow style, a stalwart of which was Acchan Maharaj, who was known to dance at different tempos starting from the very slow tempo (called the ‘purana andaaz’- the old way), almost nothing is known about the Lahore Lucknow style. This story is one of migration, post-colonial country formations, borders, poor diplomatic relations and the obsession to get past all this, via travel and technology, driven by the desire to learn a specific kind of dance. It seems that Gaurav, by following old ways is fast gaining new audiences. An [excerpt](#) of Sushant Gaurav’s dance is linked to the interview, for readers to see for themselves.

Finally, before ending, I would like to put on record that the mentoring program offered by SADI is growing in popularity, as this year, two young scholars have opted for it and we hope to include their writings in the next edition. The call for papers for the next edition, SADI 4.0 is called Pedagogies of Crossing where a sharpening focus is introduced into interrogating theoretical and practical predilections associated with pedagogy.

Wishing you all the best for 2025,

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Works Cited

- Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. Penguin Books, 1972.
- Prakash, Brahma. *Body on the Barricades: Life, Art, and Resistance in Contemporary India*. LeftWord Books, 2003.