Configuring the "Contemporary" in Indian Dance Through the Development Discourse: The Influence of Max Mueller Bhavan's 1984 "East-West Dance Encounter"

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Abstract

The essay explores how the geocultural and geopolitical inequities formalized during the Cold War shaped the contours of the "contemporary" in Indian dance in the twentieth century. It analyzes the 1984 "East-West Dance Encounter," a conference initiated by the Max Mueller Bhavan (MMB) to foster transnational dialogue about dance innovations between Indian choreographers and their Western counterparts. The MMB, a German cultural institution in India, embodies postwar cultural diplomacy functions designated and adopted by Global North countries: (1) establishing "peaceful" and productive coalitions through cultural knowledge exchange, and (2) "developing" the cultures of the Global South. The essay focuses on the discursive commentaries from the Encounter, particularly the remarks by the MMB director, his allies, and the Indian participants. I argue that while Indian choreographers presented a multitude of perspectives on dance experimentation through local and global lenses, the MMB's representation advocated for the advancement of contemporary Indian dance in alignment with the aesthetics and ideals of Euro-American dance at the time. This, I contend, reflects the neocolonial aspirations of Western institutions to maintain ideological and cultural hegemony in the region.

Key Words

contemporary Indian dance; development ideology; cultural imperialism; institutional critique; postwar cultural diplomacy

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Introduction

While reviewing brochures from experimental dance events I attended in India over the years, I noticed that the MMB was frequently listed as a sponsor or partner institution. This sparked my curiosity about why a foreign entity would be particularly invested in experimental performance from the subcontinent and the extent of its intervention. The MMB is part of a network of embassies, consulates, and cultural institutions from the Global North that aim to cultivate long-term relationships with India through the exchange of artistic forms, as well as to support professional networking programs and "capacity building" for Indian artists and cultural workers.[1] Over the past six decades, the MMB has been described as a "hotbed of avant-garde art," and specifically in the realm of contemporary Indian dance, it has served as a significant galvanizing force ("MMB and Me"). Since the latter half of the twentieth century, the MMB has facilitated numerous conferences, workshops, festivals, and other programs that focus exclusively on new and modern dance in India. Its initiatives have introduced emerging and established figures in contemporary Indian dance, enabling them to reflect on and evolve their practices in dialogue with global developments in the performing arts, while also promoting critical discussions on this subject within academic circles.[2]

The 1984 Dance Encounter is often celebrated in dance scholarship as a watershed moment that marked the arrival of the "contemporary" in Indian dance. While I cannot dive into the complexities of such a claim here, the event was undeniably the first of its kind curated by an institutional patron

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1 These include the British Council, Alliance Française, Royal Norwegian Embassy, Pro Helvetia Swiss Arts Council, Instituto Cervantes, Japan Foundation, and the National Arts Council of Singapore.

2 For example, the 2003 book *New Directions in Indian Dance*, edited by Sunil Kothari, was largely inspired by the growing interest in contemporary Indian dance, triggered by numerous events organized by the MMB in the 1980s and 1990s. Since its publication, there has been a significant expansion in the literature on contemporary Indian dance.

in the modern history of the subcontinent. The "First All-India Dance Seminar" in 1958, organized by India's national performing arts academy, the Sangeet Natak Akademi (SNA), included presentations on creating new dance idioms in a postcolonial context. However, it was just one of many topics debated and occupied only a small part of the agenda. Additionally, the "National Ballet Festivals" organized by the SNA in the early 1970s lacked an international scope. In contrast, the 1984 Dance Encounter, featured an array of performers from India, Europe, and North America, each with distinct approaches to dance-making. In the next section, I will outline key characteristics of the MMB to provide context for the discourse on contemporary Indian dance that emerged during the Dance Encounter.

The MMB's Constitution and Approach to Arts Programming

MMB's parent organization, the first Goethe-Institut, was founded in Munich in 1951 by the Foreign Ministry of West Germany to implement its external cultural policy after World War II.[3] The Goethe-Institut, predicated on ideals of cultural diplomacy and cooperation, was created to rehabilitate Germany's international image after the fall of the Nazi regime and in the aftermath of the Holocaust. The German Federal Foreign Office subsequently established a global network of Goethe-Instituts to promote the "positive" elements of German history, society and politics.[4] In the first decade, the Goethe-Institut's foreign cultural policy primarily focused on exporting and showcasing German national culture, particularly through language instruction. The Goethe-Institut has continued to serve as the leading German cultural association abroad, even after Germany's reunification in 1989, with teaching the German language remaining one of its core functions, alongside exposing worldwide audiences to contemporary German arts.[5] As the Cold War progressed, the German Foreign Office expanded its external cultural policy beyond national cultural projection to emphasize "dialogue and partnership" ("History of the Goethe-Institut").[6] It committed to "understanding the life of the partner" by fostering long-term knowledge exchanges, resource sharing, and the enrichment of creative talents in partner countries (Hampel 61). In the late 1970s, the Goethe-Institut incorporated this expanded mission into its cultural activities. The Goethe-Institut has six main branches in India, founded in New Delhi (1957), Kolkata (1957), Chennai (1960), Bengaluru (1960), Pune (1961), and Mumbai (1969). These branches have operated to varying degrees over the decades.[7] Their establishment is linked to the history of Indo-German diplomatic relations in the twentieth century, which began with an exchange of ambassadors between the two countries in 1951.[8] During this period, the first Prime Minister

3 In 1949, the four "occupation zones" established after the Allied Powers defeated Nazi Germany were reorganized into two new countries: West Germany, a market democracy modeled after the U.S. and officially called the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), and East Germany, a Soviet-controlled communist state known as the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Until the reunification of West and East Germany in 1990, West Germany largely dominated the projection and circulation of German culture abroad.

4 The first Goethe-Institut opened abroad in Athens in 1952. Today, the Goethe-Institut operates a global network of more than 158 institutes and 10 liaison offices across 98 countries (Lanshina).

5 During the period of German division, the FRG and GDR competed in the realm of foreign cultural policy. The Herder Institute in Leipzig began its work in 1951—the same year the Goethe-Institut was founded—by offering German language classes to 11 university applicants from Nigeria. For more on this history, see ("History of the Goethe-Institut").

6 The standards of international cultural cooperation developed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) informed this shift.

7 The Goethe-Institut in New Delhi serves as the regional institute for South Asia. Additionally, there are four Goethe Centers located in Hyderabad (2004), Coimbatore (2007), Ahmedabad (2008), and Trivandrum (2008), which focus exclusively on German language training. Overall, the Goethe-Institut has the largest international presence in India (Hampel 69).

8 The first German ambassador to India was Prof. Ernst Wilhelm Meyer, who held this position from 1952 to 1957. Under his leadership, Indo-German relations reportedly flourished (Rothermund).

of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, and the first Chancellor of West Germany, Konrad Adenauer, were devising political and economic strategies to enhance their countries' status within the context of the Cold War. Cultivating a relationship with India was part of Adenauer's broader strategy to strengthen ties with the Western bloc and promote the advantages of choosing a social market democracy. Although Nehru was a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement and ideologically invested in socialism—recognizing that capitalism and colonialism were part of a singular system of exploitation and oppression—he eventually chose to strategically collaborate with West Germany due to the material aid needed to achieve his industrialization goals for India.[9] Following Nehru's visit to West Germany in July 1956, the two countries launched several scientific and academic collaborations, which informed the subsequent establishment of the MMB network across the subcontinent.[10] Naming the Goethe-Institut after the German Indologist Friedrich Max Müller signified the organization's intention to continue the long history of encounters and collaborations between the two cultures.[11]

Although the purported goal of cultural diplomacy in the postwar context was to cultivate "peaceful" and "mutually beneficial" alliances, seeking to guide the war-weary international community back toward conciliation, this aspiration masked a newly emerging reality.[12] Political theorist Gregory Paschalidis (2009) writes that with the dissolution of modern era empires between 1945 and 1989, "external cultural policy was extensively deployed for the preservation or promotion of economic and cultural ties between metropolitan and ex-colonial countries, providing an alternative, new structure of integration" (282). For former colonial powers, maintaining dominance in this new age required a different rationale. Thus, the period described by Paschalidis witnessed the rise of the development discourse, reflected in the creation of institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and various U.N. agencies.[13] The ideology of development positioned industrialized nations of the Global North, predominantly capitalist, as the ideal models for the societies of the Global South, which were increasingly portrayed as "infant" and reliant on the former for advancement. Anthropologist Arturo Escobar (1995) argues that development amounted to little more than the West's convenient "discovery" of poverty in the Global South, serving to reassert its moral and cultural superiority in supposedly post-colonial times, while concealing the fact that the deprivation experienced by communities in the Global South was a direct consequence of colonial plunder.[14] As Paschalidis points out, the rhetorical emphasis on the "development mission" attached to Western diplomatic practices in this period

9 For more details about the political-economic maneuvers of India and West Germany, read (Rothermund).

10 The establishment of the South Asia Institute at Heidelberg University in 1962, in the presence of Indian diplomat Vijayalakshmi Pandit, serves as a notable example. This occurred around the time when Germany provided economic aid to India to help build the Rourkela Steel Mill and the Indian Institute of Technology in Chennai (Rothermund 1, 5).

11 On its official website, the Goethe-Institut provides a positive description for its naming choice: " The Goethe-Instituts in India…were named after this founder of Indology in honour of the inter-cultural sympathies and understanding he had nurtured through his saintly quest for a common Indo-European brotherhood"(" The Goethe-Institut in India— About Max Mueller"). For a critical analysis of Müller's writings, particularly their role in shaping and politicizing the Aryan race theory in the nineteenth century—an ideology of racial supremacy that contributed to Nazi doctrine and influenced early interpretations of Indian history, thereby legitimizing the hegemony of upper-caste Hindus—see (Thapar).

12 The establishment of UNESCO as the leading institution for international cultural cooperation in November 1945, just a few months after the end of World War II, exemplifies this claim to restore trust in the cultural dimension of international relations.

13 For an exploration of the institutional and conceptual framework of development that emerged in the post-World War II era, see Escobar and Cooper and Packard (eds.).

14 Other theorists, such as Frank, Amin, Galtung, Parenti, and Mies and Shiva, have argued that the scarcity of material and cultural resources in the Global South is a direct consequence of colonial history, during which the countries of the Western bloc overexploited the "Third World."

was, in essence, a reconfiguration of external cultural policy to maintain economic and cultural influence over formerly colonized nations—an archetypal case of neo-colonialism.

The expansion of German cultural institutes in the Global South has followed a similar pattern through programs of development aid and cultural, scientific, and academic exchanges. Moreover, the practice of MMBs have adhered to these structuring logics, even though Germany has no direct colonial history in the subcontinent, and the Goethe-Institut network claims to operate "independently and without political ties," having signed a general agreement with the German Foreign Office in 1976 ("History of the Goethe-Institut").[15] Although the German national government primarily funds the organization and its administrative structure includes key government representatives, I believe state agents still hold the power to influence MMB programs according to their agendas, despite the organization's autonomous status and its planning committee and advisory councils for programming being predominantly composed of art and cultural experts ("President and Executive Committee" and "Boards").[16] I argue that the objective undergirding the MMB's cultural exchange and professional development programs, particularly around the time of the 1984 "East-West Dance Encounter," was to assert the civilizational hegemony of Germany (and, by extension, the West) and to prescribe the assimilation of Indian modernity in line with Western values. In other words, "development," achieved through the "benevolence" of diplomatic exchange, became a vehicle for enacting cultural imperialism.

One key way in which the MMB has exerted its influence within the arts sector across the subcontinent is by hiring locals for staff positions such as Program Coordinators, Communications Officers, and Administrators of Cultural Programs ("Staff"). Additionally, it has invited local artists and scholars to often co-design projects. However, as far as I have observed, the Directors of Cultural Programs at each MMB branch have frequently been Germans with specialized knowledge of South Asia, approved by the Executive Committee of the Goethe-Institut flagship in Munich.[17] While hiring and partnering with locals has enabled the MMB build cultural competency and maintain an intimate understanding of the context-specific needs of Indian artists, cultural workers, and the public, placing Germans in Director roles has essentially meant that a foreign entity arbitrates the agenda of support, often determining the terms.

Contemporary art, including contemporary dance, modern theatre, contemporary literature, and electronic music, has been central to the MMB's cultural programming. Farah Batool, Programs Coordinator of MMB-New Delhi, shared during a 2018 interview with me that the various branches focus on art practices that demonstrate novelty, experimentation, and independent thought. Over the years, these branches have hosted, curated, or financially supported residencies, exhibitions, concerts, film series, seminars, training courses, and festivals dedicated to the above-mentioned mediums ("Projects"). While some of these initiatives focus on creative production and reflection, others prioritize professional development. Additionally, specific programs have facilitated exchanges between practitioners from India and Germany ("bangaloREsidency"), while others have focused exclusively on Indian artists (*Five Million Incidents*).

The MMB's focus on supporting contemporary art in the Indian context aligns with how Germany has viewed the role of aesthetic production since the postwar period. As part of distancing itself from its fascist past, the (West) German state has embraced the arts as a potential site for fostering a free and

15 The rationale for this was the institution's ability to determine its global programming independently of state-sanctioned interests.

16 Although the Goethe-Institut's various branches worldwide have been able to expand their work through self-generated income and contributions from individuals, companies, and patrons outside the German government, a significant portion of its overall budget still comes from annual grants provided by the German Foreign Office and the German Press Office ("Partners and Sponsors").

17 The Executive Committee oversees and directs the organization's global activities, including its regional branches. However, the selection of heads for regional Goethe-Instituts, including those in South Asia, typically involves multiple levels of decision-making. While the Executive Committee might have the final say, the selection process often includes input from regional Goethe-Institut offices, local stakeholders, and sometimes external experts ("President and Executive Committee" and "Boards").

democratic society.[18] This is a key reason, the German state claims, for allocating a significant portion of its national budget to arts and culture compared to other countries. In my view, championing contemporary art—particularly those that embody classical liberal values of individual liberty and pursuit of new ideas—is one way Germany seeks to influence the world and bolster Western ideological hegemony, more broadly. This objective has shaped the focus of German cultural institutions abroad, including the MMB. Driven by this underlying rationale, the institution has played a crucial role in shaping the evolving artistic language in India, particularly given the indifference of Indian state-run and public institutions toward curating experimental performance.

The 1984 "East-West Dance Encounter"

Between January 22-29, 1984, the MMB hosted the "East-West Dance Encounter," initiated by its then-Director, Georg Lechner, who held key positions within the Goethe-Institut for over forty years, spending twenty of those years in India, where he served in the Mumbai, New Delhi, and Kolkata branches. The Dance Encounter was the second in a series of cultural, scientific, and academic exchanges between 1983 and 1986, organized by Lechner during a period of renewed Indo-German diplomatic relations following a phase of benign neglect.[19] He described the initiative as follows: "[A] series of East-West dialogues involving authors, composers, musicians, theatre experts, choreographers, dancers, painters, sculptors, philosophers, and scientists, who are invited to participate in an inquiry into the possibilities of creative work and thought today, drawing from Indian and Western sources" (Mehta 84). The stated aim was to cultivate exchange between artists and academics from various disciplines, exploring the potential for creative and intellectual collaboration between the two regions. This initiative was also intended to build connections among cultural workers across national borders. The purpose of this series reflects the efforts of transnational institutions like the MMB during this time to prevent the Cold War from escalating into open conflict, by creating environments conducive to improving East-West relations.

The 1984 Dance Encounter took place in Mumbai at the National Center for the Performing Arts (NCPA), one of India's leading cultural institutions, established in 1969. The NCPA has a long history of presenting traditional and experimental performances across various art forms and regions. Lechner invited NCPA founder and then-Vice Chairman, Jamshed J. Bhabha, to serve as the creative consultant for the event. As noted earlier, involving local cultural producers was part of the MMB's operational strategy in India, and including Bhabha helped Lechner legitimize the presence of a foreign institution engaging in the Indian cultural landscape. The involvement of Bhabha, an elite figure whose family was instrumental in shaping institutions of Indian postcolonial modernity, was no coincidence.[20] Along with the SNA, the co-sponsors of the Dance Encounter included

18 In 1949, the FDR recommitted itself to a liberal representative democracy and established the Basic Law, the German constitution that has endured beyond reunification to the present day. Article 5, Paragraph 3 of the German Basic Law, titled "Freedom of Expression, Arts and Sciences," stipulates that the arts, culture, and sciences should be free and autonomous in their context and expression ("Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany"). However, the case of the Goethe-Institut disinviting Palestinian poet Mohammed el-Kurd from its 2022 event reveals the hypocrisy of cultural institutions funded by the German government in their commitment to safeguarding freedom of expression for all global citizens, particularly when such expressions challenge the racist and settler-colonial structures that sustain Western capitalist hegemony.

19 The Music Encounter occurred in 1983, the Philosophy Encounter in 1985, and the Theatre Encounter in 1986 (NCPA 1993). These programs anticipated a renewal of Indo-German relations following a period of diplomatic indifference between the mid-1960s and mid-1980s, influenced by a specific set of political and economic events, such as the 1965 India-Pakistan war, the Indian Emergency (1975-77), Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's restrictive legislation aimed at making the country "self-reliant," including the Monopoly and Restrictive Trade Practice Act of 1969 and the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act of 1973, as well as India's increasingly close relationship with the Soviet Union in those years (Rothermund). The West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl visited India in 1986, and Rajiv Gandhi, who succeeded Indira Gandhi as Prime Minster of India, reciprocated in 1988 by traveling to West Germany, signaling a resurgence of interest.

diplomatic and philanthropic organizations such as the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), the Alliance Française, the British Council, and the Parsi-owned Time and Talents Club (NCPA Quarterly Journal front matter).[21]

Lechner brought together approximately thirty-seven individuals from India, (West) Germany, France, Italy, the UK, and North America to participate in the event. The group included dance choreographers, their collaborators, and performance critics.[22] The Indian dance contingent featured practitioners from the states of Gujarat and Odisha, as well as the cities of Delhi, Chennai, and Mumbai, along with a few artists from the American and British diaspora.[23] Some of these individuals were foreigners practicing Indian dance within the subcontinent. Lechner's decision to include such a varied spectrum of performers aligns with the event's aim of fostering conversations about the intercultural and international dimensions of innovation in Indian dance. While some invitees are now recognized as prominent figures in the contemporary dance movement in India, they were still growing their styles and approaches at the time of the Dance Encounter. For many, including Chandralekha, Uttara Asha Coorlawala, and Astad Deboo, the Dance Encounter played a key role in their future visibility as noteworthy figures in the field. Most artists in the Indian contingent operated within the domain of modern, reconstructed "classical" forms, either exploring new aspects of Bharatanatyam, Odissi, Manipuri, Kuchipudi, and Kathak or reviving forgotten or distorted elements within these traditions. A few practitioners were also engaging in dialogues between Indian and Western techniques. The Western dance contingent included choreographers working in the realms of Euro-American modern and postmodern dance, primarily from countries that were (West) Germany's allies during the Cold War.[24] This is why the cultural embassies of France and the UK helped sponsor the event.

"To create a forum... where the respective artistic concepts, dance styles, and work modes of India and the West [could] be analyzed in depth," a key component of the Dance Encounter included daytime sessions, during which participants offered lecture demonstrations and academic presentations (*NCPA* 7). Most days, these daytime sessions were followed by evening performances at the NCPA's Tata Theatre and Little Theatre.[25] Additionally, there were film screenings that introduced the attendees to exponents

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20 His brother, Dr. Homi J. Bhabha, is colloquially known as the "father of the Indian nuclear program," having been appointed by Nehru to establish an institution dedicated to the development of nuclear technology.

21 In the mid-1980s, state institutions such as the SNA and the ICCR (the latter established by the Indian government in 1950 to advance its foreign policy) began recognizing the value of supporting contemporary dance to showcase India's innovative and internationally-oriented character as an emerging geopolitical entity within the evolving neoliberal order. The Parsis are descended from Persian Zoroastrians who emigrated to India, primarily to Maharashtra and Gujarat, to avoid religious persecution nearly 1,300 years ago. The Parsi community, to which Bhabha belonged, is credited with playing a significant role in building modern India. They adapted swiftly to British colonial rule and became their chief collaborators. After independence, their merchant class, having accumulated capital through their partnership with the British, began to occupy key roles in trade, industry, and science, while also engaging in philanthropy.

22 The critics in attendance included Sunil Kothari, Sadanand Menon, Anne-Marie Gaston, Shirin Vajifdar, and Shanta Serbjeet Singh. Chandralekha's collaborator, visual designer Dashrath Patel, and Daksha Seth's long-time composer from Australia, Devissaro, were also present (NCPA 1-4).

23 The Indian dancers included Chandralekha, Kumudini Lakhia, Mrinalini and Mallika Sarabhai, Ileana Citaristi, Sonal Mansingh, Sharon Lowen, Leela Samson, Sucheta Bhide, Damayanti Joshi, Ram Gopal, Avanthi Muralikrishna, Yamini Krishnamurthy, Ritha Devi, Uttara Asha Coorlawala, Astad Deboo, Chitra Sundaram, Anne Marie Gaston, and Bharat Sharma (Ibid).

24 The participants part of the Western contingent included French choreographers Dominique Bagouet, Elisabeth Mauger, and Andréine Bel, as well as French composer Igor Wakhévitch; German *Tanztheater* exponents Gerhard Bohner and Susanne Linke, as well as German scholar Rolf Garske; Italian choreographer Patrizia Cerroni; Black American choreographer Carmen DeLavallade; and British dancers Stephen Long and Tushna Dallas and ethnomusicologist James Kippen (Ibid).

25 For details, see ("Evening Performances during the Encounter").

and works that had paved the way for dance innovations in India and the West.[26] The idea was to provide Encounter participants with a multi-modal exchange of information about the history and current state of dance innovations in both regions. Admission to the daytime sessions was restricted to participants and invited observers, many of whom were believed to be part of Lechner's "inner circle," but the performances were open to the public (Shankar Menon). In this essay, I trace the discourse on contemporary dance, particularly as it relates to Indian dance, that the Encounter generated, with a special focus on the daytime sessions.

While reading Lechner and Bhabha's joint introduction to the 1984 *NCPA Journal* issue on the Dance Encounter (which appears to be their remarks at the start of the event), I found it intriguing how they framed the relationship between India and the West. Introducing the Indian dance scene at the time, they observed: "…a certain openness to innovations, no doubt, an inevitable result of the constant contact with the West, is discernible among dancers of the present generation" (5). They viewed regular interaction with the West as a critical factor driving Indian dancers toward contemporary directions, a characterization that positions the West as the origin of modernity and anchors the Indian dancing body to the past. In one of the sessions during the event, Lechner similarly asserted that India "encountering" the West was necessary due to the "lack of a competitive and challenging local dance scene favoring experimentation" (*NCPA* 43).

The statements by Lechner and Bhabha appear to be influenced by the ideology of development, which is based on a re-enactment of Orientalist tropes that became globally hegemonic during the Cold War. Western Europe and North America deployed external cultural policies to establish a new structure of geopolitical integration rooted in the notion of "development." According to the development rhetoric institutionalized by these regions, postcolonial societies in the Global South, such as India, were viewed as lacking and in need of aid to prosper. Postcolonial scholars like David Ludden (1992) argue that this discourse of development drew upon colonial registers of Orientalist thought and the accompanying dichotomies of "advanced" and "primitive" societies. The development framework was an updated version of the Enlightenment-era evolutionary schema that positioned the West as "civilized" and the non-West as "backward." According to this hierarchical classification, the latter could only achieve modernity—across culture, politics, society, and economics—through the normative and material intervention of the former, which was assumed to be at the pinnacle of progress.

I argue that this thinking underpinned Lechner's views, as reflected in his two assertions: (1) that Indian dance has moved in a contemporary direction due to its exposure to the West, and (2) that Indian dancers need an encounter with the West to further "develop" in this area. Lechner applied a development logic to legitimize the necessity of foreign intervention, through both the organization he represented and the British and French cultural institutes that endorsed the event. It is also essential to understand why Bhabha may have participated in this discourse. As the head of the NCPA and a co-host of the event, Bhabha represented India's cultural interests at the institutional level.[27] Since the 1950s, Indian leaders

26 The list of screenings included *Pas de Deux* (1962), *Ballet Adagio* (1972), *Kalpana* (1948), excerpts of *Maya Darpana* (1972) and *Shakuntala*, and *Bala* (1976) (*NCPA* 38).

27 Bhabha, who was born into an aristocratic Parsi family in the early twentieth century and maintained close affiliations with British officials, experienced a privileged upbringing surrounded by a curated collection of Western art, music, and literature while also pursuing his studies in England. He epitomizes the concept of a colonized elite as articulated in the Fanonian framework. Frantz Fanon (1961) posits that colonizers strategically co-opt local elites—comprising intellectuals, lawyers, academics, religious leaders, and influential political figures—when they perceive a decline in their power. According to Fanon, these local elites are not only profoundly colonized but also driven by self-interest, leading them to willingly collaborate with colonizers in order to uphold the prevailing social order. Moreover, their experiences of colonization condition them to internalize the values espoused by the (former) colonizers, which they regard as essential to the process of "modernization."

from the upper classes and castes had actively engaged with the structures of development, seeing it as essential to becoming a "modern" nation.[28] Despite the problematic assumptions underlying development discourse, promoting it was seen as a way to maintain strategic alliances with the West, which they hoped would bring about the cultural, social, and political transformations needed to "advance" India. For Bhabha, the contemporaneity of Indian dance also seemed tied to Western-manufactured ideas of progress and internationalism.

Lechner opened the first daytime session of the Encounter (on January 23) by posing the following guiding questions:

> Does Indian dance feel the need for developing choreography to express new themes? Is it meaningful in the Indian context? Is it being done professionally or is it just an imitative process? What does it mean to be open to new cultures, or stepping out of one's culture into another? (*NCPA* 9).

Lechner wanted dancers to explore the relevance of experimentation in Indian dance and what makes it distinct. As the representative of an organization dedicated to cross-cultural exchange, it made sense that he foregrounded this subject as a springboard for discussing pathways to generating new choreography. The presentations by dancers Uttara Asha Coorlawala, Bharat Sharma, and Astad Deboo responded to this theme. During her January 24 session, Coorlawala highlighted how her work juxtaposes the relationships between movement and space fundamental to Bharatanatyam, Hatha Yoga, and the Martha Graham technique. In his session on the same day, Sharma shared that "Even though [he] began training in some Indian styles, such as Chhau and Kathakali, [he] only found [his] moorings outside the classical framework and more in the kind of free movement offered by Western-style modern dance" (Ibid 19). He also credited his readiness to pursue intensive training in American modern dance to his formative experiences with Narendra Sharma, who encouraged his students "to improvise and create freely in class" (Ibid).[29] Narendra Sharma was a disciple of early modern dancer Uday Shankar, whose open movement vocabulary combined "Indian conceptions of gesture, iconography, and theme alongside Western conceptions of time and presentation" (Popkin 3).

During his session on January 25, Astad Deboo recounted significant milestones in his dance journey that shaped his distinct movement language.[30] To illustrate how he integrates various dance encounters into his choreographies, Deboo discussed incorporating the focused attention given to facial expressions in Kathakali *abhinaya* (expressive choreography) with the minimalism and fluidity of movement drawn from Euro-American modern dance principles. Lechner appears to have selected these three dancers to demonstrate the productive effects of interweaving aesthetics and choreographic approaches developed in the West to create new Indian forms. In reading Coorlawala (2003), I discovered that Lechner had commissioned her to create *Winds of Shiva* in collaboration with French musician Igor Wakhévitch specifically for the 1984 Dance Encounter (106). He was intent on showcasing a successful example of international cooperation that birthed a new syntax for Indian dance.

The Encounter also featured artists who adapted and translated traditional Indian dance grammar and principles to demonstrate the formal possibilities of modern choreography. Lechner clarified: "We are not saying that the old traditions should be relegated. Side by side is the evolution of new experiences; this is what the whole gathering should address" (*NCPA* 10). He encouraged Indian dancers to challenge the applicability of inherited movement paradigms in relation to the changes they encountered in

28 Sangeeta Kamat (2002) analyzes the impact of development ideologies on the structure of postcolonial Indian politics, both during the era of state planning in the early twentieth century and the period of economic liberalization.

29 In the late 1970s, Sharma received a scholarship to study dance at Jacob's Pillow, followed by an Asian Cultural Council grant that enabled him to study with Hanya Holm, Alwin Nikolais, and Murray Louis.

30 Deboo traced his training in Kathak, his study of modern dance at the School of Contemporary Dance in London, his immersion in the Kathakali technique under the guidance of K.C. Panicker, and his experiences with Pina Bausch, the Wuppertal Dance Theatre in Germany, and Pilobolus, an American dance company.

contemporary society. Let's now consider what some participants shared in response to this perspective.

During the January 27 session, Chandralekha expressed her commitment to revitalizing Indian tradition at a time when, in her opinion, it had become "mummified, fossilized" (Ibid 10). She presented critiques and concepts that she believed could infuse the classical dance scene in the subcontinent with "much-needed contemporary vitality," some of which I highlight below (Chandralekha 61). Chandralekha cautioned her fellow attendees about certain developments in the Indian classical dance world that she found problematic. She denounced the field's insularity and its lack of responsiveness to the significant cultural, social, scientific, and historical changes in the modern world. She condemned the deification of dance on stage and the resistance of classical dancers to contemporary progressive values. Additionally, she criticized the co-option of classical dance by national governmental agendas, its commodification within the international dance circuit, and its commercialization in urban settings. Furthermore, Chandralekha urged her peers to reassess how Western mediation had shaped India's preoccupation with revivalism, nostalgia, purity, exclusiveness, conservation, and preservation in the dance field. She highlighted how colonial structures, institutions, and values had influenced the modern creation of India's traditional arts.

Chandralekha also introduced her parameters or references for creating new dance in the Indian context. In contrast to the MMB director's patronizing viewpoint, she asserted that change in Indian performance did not require "going West." Instead, she emphasized the necessity of drawing from the "tremendously rich and powerful" aesthetic traditions indigenous to the subcontinent: "To me, to be 'contemporary' would mean to understand and express the East in its own terms; to explore the full linkages generated by valid interdisciplinary principles common to all arts and central to the creative concept of *rasa*" (Ibid 61).[31] Chandralekha critiqued the histrionic use of *rasa*—the residual essence of an elemental human emotion like love or fear that shapes the dominant note of a dramatic piece—in the classical dances of her time. Instead, she chose to interpret it as a sensual portal that activates the "autonomy of the individual [to be integrated] with himself, with his society and with nature in an epoch of social fracture" (Ibid). Performance scholar Rustom Bharucha (1995) argues that, by applying the theory of *rasa* in this way, Chandralekha foregrounded the capacity of dance's physical language to "recharge" human beings from the everyday mechanization, alienation, and brutality of modern, industrial life (129). For her, it was this regenerative potential of dance that "constitute[d] its contemporaneity" (Chandralekha 61).

In a similar vein to Chandralekha, during the January 28 session, Kumudini Lakhia described feeling constrained by Kathak's religious underpinnings and reaching a significant crossroads in her dance journey: "I came to a stage when I wanted to divorce from Krishna" (*NCPA* 34). She explained that rather than restaging stories of Krishna—a mythic-religious figure central to the traditional Kathak repertoire—she chose to look outward toward society, focusing on issues such as the plight of contemporary, everyday women in productions like *Duvidha*.[32] She also sought to make classical dance relevant to the intellectual issues of the time. As Lakhia presented an *abhinaya* piece and her students demonstrated some of her innovations in group choreography, the dancer exclaimed, "We must have our own laws of expression," emphasizing the importance of individual prerogative in changing Kathak's vocabulary and presentation (Ibid).[33] Lakhia noted that she encouraged her students to question what they are learning, a pedagogical approach that differs

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31 Chandralekha lamented that performing artists in the subcontinent were oblivious to the avant-garde ideas about the body, stage, and presentation outlined in ancient Indian aesthetic texts like the *Abhinaya Darpana*.

32 During the Encounter, Lakhia claimed that she was criticized by the Kathak community for this shift.

33 During her session, Lakhia also recounted the evolution of the Kathak form over the twentieth century, describing the various influences that shaped the practice and demonstrating that the dance tradition allows for freedom and change (*NCPA* 35)

from the one typically emphasized in classical dance education rooted in the *guru-shishya parampara.*[34]

Other Encounter participants sought to preserve the traditional function of the classical form in their process of innovation. In contrast to Lakhia, Bharatanatyam and Odissi dancer Sonal Mansingh, during her January 25 session, advocated for the "power" of classical dance's thematic conventions.[35] She emphasized that these conventions allow dancers to choreograph an aesthetic experience for audiences, offering them something distinct from the hardships of everyday life. On the same day, Sucheta Bidhe shared her process of synthesizing Bharatanatyam with Hindustani music and rhythms to create a classical dance style for the state of Maharashtra. She explained, "I am not trying to replace anything…just trying to expand the horizons, to add new dimensions to this [dance] technique which I love so much. My main objective is to bring Bharata Natyam closer to audiences in North India" (*NCPA* 23). Bhide associates experimentation with creating a new classical form that would help consolidate a regional Maratha identity. For her, this meant "keeping intact" the formal Bharatanatyam technique and preserving the "originality" of Hindustani music and its *talas* while also identifying points of contact between the two (24-25).

Bhabha and Lechner concluded their joint statement about the Encounter with the following words: "At the focal point of this inquiry may well be aggression and experimentation on the side of modern Western dance; stagnation and authenticity on the side of Indian dance" (*NCPA* 7). This ideological division between Western and Indian dance reinforced an Orientalist taxonomy, linking the former with forceful action and innovation and the latter with stasis and passive adherence to tradition (Said 1978). As I have shown above, while some dancers representing the Indian contingent were reluctant to depart from or critically question the conventions of Indian classical dance, many performers actively demonstrated how they interacted with or reimagined tradition.[36] Participants also demonstrated self-reflexivity about the dynamic relationships they were building between Indian and Euro-American aesthetics in their work. Some, like Chandralekha, were even critical of conceding to a Western framework of modernity. Despite this, the dichotomy assumed by Lechner and Bhabha in their opening remarks continued to circulate even after the event concluded.

In a comment he made to journalist Anees Jung a few days after the Encounter in February 1984, Lechner stated that Indian dancers were not prepared to ideologically grapple with the problems of classical dance in a contemporary context or to look beyond its imagined securities. As I substantiated above, this was an inaccurate generalization of what transpired during the Encounter. Lechner told Jung that, unlike their Western counterparts, Indian dancers do not expand their repertoire, repeating the same compositions without any sense of self-ownership or impulse to choreograph something new (Jung 54). He clung to the notion that aesthetic modernity, innovation, and autonomy were the domain of Western dance, while Indian dance, in his view, remained content with being old-fashioned and conformist. During the same interview, Jung asked German choreographer Susanne Linke, one of the international participants at the Encounter, the following question: "Are they [Indian dancers] also innovative, searching, aware?" and Linke responded: "Indians do not question…the Indian way is perhaps to accept life. They do not ask or question or

34 In classical dance training rooted in the *guru-shishya parampara*, knowledge is typically transmitted in a uni-directional manner, flowing from teacher to student. This approach views students as passive recipients into whom the teacher, seen as the expert, deposits information, thereby establishing a hierarchical relationship between the two.

35 Mansingh's insistence on preserving tradition has recently manifested in her full embrace of Hindutva—a modern political ideology encompassing a cultural justification of Hindu supremacy, and which seeks to transform India, a constitutionally secular state, into an ethno-religious nation called the Hindu Rashtra.

36 Given that this essay features in an issue exploring the concept of "hierarchies," it is important to note that the discussions surrounding new directions in Indian dance did not adequately engage with the historical context of casteism that accompanied the modern institutionalization of "classical" Indian dance forms in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Even figures like Chandralekha and Lakhia, who examined aesthetic issues from a structural perspective, appeared to sidestep the casteist politics inherent in dances of contemporary India.

change things as we do. To search for new things in creative work is *not yet a need* for them" (52). Like Lechner, Linke also broadly characterized Indian dancers as uncritical and resistant to change in their choreographic practices. She even supported her assumption with an evolutionary argument (as indicated by the phrase I italicized). Lechner and Linke's statements reflect the institutionalization of Western bias in contemporary dance within the postwar performance world, which inevitably perpetuated the cultural hegemony of the West and its assumed position as the proprietor of modernity.

Similarly, dancer and researcher Fabián Barba (2019) observes that the perception of contemporary dance outside the Western context as often antiquated reflects a broader, structural, Western-centric mindset. To explore this, she draws on the work of postcolonial scholar Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000), whose analysis is also relevant to my own. Chakrabarty explains that historicism, emerging in the nineteenth century, was a key ideological framework for understanding global progress and development. It created the notion that modernity and capitalism originated in Europe and then spread outward, establishing a timeline where Europe was seen as the starting point, with other regions following suit. This historicist view positions Western development as a model for the "less developed" world, reinforcing a temporal and cultural hierarchy. Historicism thus underpinned the assumption of a cultural difference between the West and non-West, particularly in terms of institutional progress (7). This historicist understanding of global development is reflected in Linke and Lechner's comments about the Encounter, which reinforce a hierarchical structure wherein the Indian dance scene appears outdated in contrast to the Western dance scene, which is presumed to be continuously modern (Barba 2019).

Dance scholar SanSan Kwan (2017) observes the "fraught nature of temporal terms such as "contemporary" and "modern" and the ways that they are often linked with the geographical and cultural, that is, the West" (44-45). This constructed connection highlights the Eurocentric codification of world dance, in which select countries of Western Europe and North America claim exclusivity over modernity, autonomy, and democracy in aesthetic explorations (Kunst 2004). This monopoly undermines expressions of these values by "non-Western" and "not-quite-Western" artists (Vujanović 2014), perpetuating the notion that non-Western forms exhibit a "delayed physicality" that needs to "catch up" to the Western dancing body to be considered contemporary (Kunst 2004). Lechner and his aides' commentary throughout the Encounter suggests that Indian dancers could become more innovative if they embraced individualism and openness to exploration and change, which were largely seen as Western ideals.[37] Additionally, a historicist logic is employed to suggest that Indian contemporary dance could eventually attain the present contemporaneity of its foreign counterparts in the future, especially with the intervention of Western institutions like the MMB.

Conclusion

Despite the power asymmetries between "East" and "West," the 1984 Dance Encounter was certainly instrumental in fostering experimental dance in India. As the above snapshots from the event illustrate, the Indian dance contingent was able to engage with a variety of subjects alongside local and transnational peers, including choreography, dance pedagogy, and the relationship between dance and everyday life. They put forward eclectic ideas, approaches, and propositions for creating new dance. Inviting exponents who cross-pollinate Indian and international movement vocabularies was a particularly vital contribution of the MMB. It validated the intercultural as a generative site for pushing the aesthetic and national boundaries of Indian dance, highlighting the rich movement complexity that emerges from the mixing, tension,

37 This stance encapsulates a double erasure in the global history of dance modernism: contemporary dance and theater movements from the West have drawn from the conceptual foundations of Indian performance to advance their own projects, while simultaneously denying Indian performance its association with creative experimentation.

and confrontation of premises inherited from different dance traditions and lineages. Of course, it suited the neo-imperialist agenda of the MMB to showcase forms that perpetuated the narrative that interactions with the West could make Indian dance more “advanced,” “sophisticated,” and “contemporary.” However, this also ended up benefiting Indian artists. Before this event, cultural bodies of the state, including the SNA, reproduced the former’s protectionist approach to political economy and barely acknowledged dancers drawing on international aesthetics to innovate Indian dance. After the Encounter, however, the SNA shifted its stance on contemporary transnational dance, increasingly including it in its programs and grant schemes. This shift aligned with the SNA’s interest in presenting India as a nation assimilating fluidly with global modernity, especially as the 1990s approached.

Considering that professional structures for contemporary dance in India were still relatively scarce during the early 1980s, participants on the last day of the Dance Encounter agreed on the need for more platforms to deliberate on and develop their creative practices (*NCPA* 36). During this decade, the MMB continued to support innovative dance in India through similar exchanges, such as the second edition of the Dance Encounter in March 1985 and the “Dance Choreography Workshop: Possibilities for Extending Tradition” held in collaboration with the NCPA and the SNA in November of that year. Being recognized and supported by a cultural institute of international stature granted Indian choreographers who participated in MMB events a certain degree of prestige. For some, it led to the rapid growth of their careers, and they became leading figures in contemporary Indian dance both domestically and internationally. From the 1990s onwards, however, the MMB shifted away from curating events based on the dichotomy of “East” and “West.” The MMB no longer saw this framework as appropriate for structuring their endeavors and sought to design initiatives that better represented local cultural priorities (Hampel 136).[38] This shift mirrored the broader transformations in geopolitical classifications and alignments following the end of the Cold War and the emergence of a multipolar world under neoliberalism, prompting Germany to reorient its diplomatic strategies from a dictatorial to a more collaborative role. The outcomes of this shift, however, are a topic for another discussion.

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38 For instance, the MMB’s 1993 workshop, “New Directions in Indian Dance,” did not focus on intercultural exchange. Instead, it prioritized the formalization of aesthetic, pedagogical, institutional, professional, and production networks for contemporary dance in India.

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