Form, Identity, Dissent – Reclaiming the Critical Space

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The origins of ***Conditions of Carriage: The Jumping Project*** go back to my obsession with the functional body in contrast to the performative body. As a dancer and creator in the Indian context, I have gone from one work to the next, trying to find a technique of the body that challenges the way dance is perceived and valued. Navigating through the various positions held on dance over time, I find myself struck by how complex it has become to locate ourselves through our bodies as social and political human beings.

Around the beginning of the year 2015, I began asking a series of questions regarding the dancing body. My search was to find a way to allow the autonomy of the body to come alive. I wanted to create an environment that values the immediacy of action over artistic interpretation. I began making a series of experiments that involved acts of jumping, running, walking and standing. I wanted to see how these actions could retain their rudimentary form and yet propose a complexity of time and space relationships.

I chose to explore the physicality of jumping for many reasons. Foremost among them is that jumping allows only the truth of the body to come to the surface. The effort demands a presence where there is no room for artifice.

Jumping is also a physicality that is common to other bodily disciplines such as sport , where the decorative element is stripped off to reveal pure mechanics of the body. But unlike an Olympian, the jumping here is not competitive. It is composed to draw attention to the immediacy of action, rather than a symbolic or iconic reference through that act. Yet, this functionality has a form of its own – there is a way of rolling the ball of the foot, a way in which the pelvis is held, the relation of the upper body, arms and head, and the timing and source of each step, turn, and shift. These choices surely propose a formal aesthetic, but it is one that stems from needing to be functional and effective.

I began to work with a group of ten people from backgrounds as diverse as boxing, theatre, parkour, law, art therapy, psychology, fitness, classical dance, contemporary dance, and cine dance. This choice of people was not premeditated on the basis of their backgrounds or their virtuosity. Rather, looking at the cohort of twenty-five people, young and old who have trained for this work over the last two years, I can fairly say that these are people for whom this minute scrutiny of the body has been of interest. In trying to find a language of the body that connects one with the other, the process of work took on a diversity of its own.

The decision to jump was also a natural outcome of working out of SPACES, in Chennai, home of the late choreographer, Chandralekha. I had been drawn to the open square pit - an installation of the late Dashrath Patel. Located in front of the Mandala work space and theatre, this pit of about twenty by twenty feet has an arresting quality with an endless upward energy. It was an invitation to plunge in and spring out. Our jumping began to activate the vertical axis that was already present. Patterns of jumping and running collided with the angularity of the space, often pouring out of the pit and sliding back in. The visually dominant square invited a challenge to displace the idea of borders and limitations. Of seeing and being seen.

Choosing to have the work visible from all four sides without a fixed viewing perspective, the body is hyper visible. Instead of being put on a pedestal, the performer is in a pit with nowhere to hide and with no advantageous position from where to express himself or herself. There is only the cavity of the pit and the edge to navigate. The viewer is free to move around and choose several perspectives to watch the work.

The act of jumping in this work is forced to be bereft of any purpose other than the integrity of the action. The work is meticulously designed to propose a grand nothingness. The discrete mechanical movements require precision and

focus while the more fluid ones demand endurance and strength. It allows you to see the effort and fragility of the body in meeting the requirements and sometimes also failing. The closeness of the viewing from all sides of a square space leaves nothing to hide. The more you look for meaning, the less it appears. What is palpable is the sheer physicality of the experience.

In the words of my colleague, Yashaswini who is a film-maker, "The body is invoked as a machine... put to use ... made to work... the effort is akin to humanising a ball socket, or circuits or the insides of a scanner. While the ten human beings move like a machine they almost, simultaneously cannot be a machine. The anatomies reveal - fatigue, sweat and salt covering the air - fit and unfit, efficient and inefficient, young, old, all engaged in simply carrying out the function of jumping and moving that is at hand." This grand nothingness that is at the centre of the endeavour becomes a counter spectacle. The spectacle here refers to Guy Debord's definition of the spectacle as the inverted image of society in which relations between commodities have supplanted relations between people, where a mindless identification with images supplants genuine response and relation (Guy Debord, 1967, The Society of the Spectacle). If the body is to counter this idea of the spectacle, what can it counter and how?

The body has always been used to challenge positions of power through resistance movements – in the form of a weapon at times, as well as the object of violation. We see this in hunger strikes, physical barricades, women's protests in Manipur,[1] Jal Satyagrahas[2] and so on. Also, there are theories about how a 'sleeping' body that is essentially an unproductive body is also a form of resistance where sleep challenges the foundations of a productive society. The anti-work campaigns[3] in various countries have spoken about this and interrogated this concept. The hunger strikes and violations subject the body to a form of self-brutalisation, equal in terms of a burnt-earth strategy. What is put to use is the 'functioning' body, except in the cases of extreme starvation like Irom Sharmila's[4] which has become an iconic image of resistance. It does not expose the 'functional' capacity of the body. In Irom's case too, it is a negation of the functionality. In the Jumping Project, I am focussing closely on specific functional areas of the human body within a performative space. Here there is certainly a reference to the body in a similar sense to the anti-work movements' view of the sleeping body. The difference is in how the body is occupied. What is common is the idea that pre-occupation resists occupation.

Within dance, the idea of a counter culture in resistance to the external 'gaze' is not new. One of the pioneers of this kind of resistive expression was Chandralekha. She reacted to the way 'Indianness' was being interpreted and sold in the post-nationalist period and therefore employed a range of techniques to make the body visible in another manner, the most famous of them being the hyper-slowness of movement, where the nuts and bolts of the mechanics of moving are revealed and given a place of pride. She challenged the viewers' need to be constantly entertained and remain passive receivers. Instead, she presented technique in a way that revealed the fragility of the human body and its endeavour as a way of replacing the idea of a perfect dancer or dancerliness.

The time we live in now is not marked by the particular reaction to nationalism that was present in the early decades of independent India. Nor is it gripped by regional political identity assertions in the way it was in the years to follow. All these have taken a new form today. Until a decade ago the dominant discourse in contemporary dance in India was the emergence of new forms and their departures from tradition. Notions of 'discovering our tradition' or the later debates on 'tradition and modernity' have all become irrelevant in today's contemporary dance context. The last ten years has seen a parallel strand of dance-makers, who arrive with none of this baggage.[5]

What seems to be the greatest challenge to the creators of today is the growing capitalist economy and its co-option of the arts, specifically the contemporary arts which have stood for their autonomy and critical self-reflection. It would not be amiss to say that contemporary dance seems to be emerging more and more from a culture of 'dance labs', 'camps', 'workshops' , 'competitions' and 'master classes' where, in effect, the context for creation is pre-decided. The subversive body that Chandralekha proposed is under threat of

extinction with the onslaught from a generation's own surge for finding its practice and an endorsement of it.

One sees it in the instances within the country where business houses and individual financial entrepreneurs have entered the scene and taken over the curation of contemporary expression, ostensibly in a partnership with the arts, but in effect, a co-option of it. Especially within dance, models of 'successful' contemporary expression are imported, bringing in both aesthetic and marketing values and systems. Therefore, while it affects the pool of potential creators, it also exposes the reasons behind such funding – at whose service is the funding? Francois Lecour, who works in theatre administration in France, reports that concepts like residencies are offered at no cost and no stake from the givers – they are a way of circumventing the necessity of directly funding the creators for the work they do.

In other instances, there have been attempts to institutionalise the practice of contemporary dance within the country by practitioners themselves. These set-ups provide the illusion of an alternate space for young aspiring contemporary individuals for they provide the 'space' which the rest of the cultural practice neglects. Unable to find it within the realms of existing practice, serious seekers of the contemporary are drawn to these new institutional models that seem to offer skills and opportunities. Many a time, the skills are imported from other systems and sometimes they are indigenous adaptations of earlier imported systems. New embodied indigenous systems are rare, if at all visible.

As for the opportunities, they exist only so long as the economic power imbalance exists between the east and the west. The opportunities also exist only inside the institutional frame, leaving individual or autonomous enterprise impossible to achieve. Effectively, what these scenarios offer is a 'tool-kit' that allows one to function as a technician dancer. Yet, to use technique as a key to propose a new paradigm requires another kind of rigour. It is only this rigour that can give rise to a stance, an approach, a world-view to be endorsed, a wager. It opens up the discourse around dance practice by asking some basic questions - Who are we, where are we, and where do we want to go?

The resistant body is once again relevant today for entirely different reasons than before. As We live in a hyper-sensitive political climate and a hyper capitalist society that is under no threat from the practitioners of art so long as the project of art does not function as a critical and emancipatory agency. How can we resist being consumed, how can we re-invite the body's autonomy? We have to resist, in our times, the mediation of powers, from within the country and from outside, in defining our contemporaneity or our Indianness; we have to keep our agency. It may be the only way to guard the critical energies released through creation from being co-opted by its opponents.

I quote Ram Bapat from his article 'The Internal Agony of True Pleasure-Seekers':

We have to act from the body today, because our bodies are being stolen from us. Capitalism allows the portrayal of the body, in the performing arts, etc, but never allows us to have a functioning real body. Because that body is subversive. That body is beyond their capacity to control. They want bodies as safety valves, and they want bodies as automatons.

With our dead bodies, we carry dead democracies.

WORKS CITED

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ENDNOTES

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1 On 15 July 2004, 12 Manipur women disrobed in front of the Assam Rifles HQ in Imphal to protest against the killing of Manorama Thangjam who was also allegedly raped. On 15 July 2004, these 12 imas had disrobed in front of the historic Kangla Fort in the heart of Imphal — then the headquarters of the Assam Rifles — carrying banners with messages painted in red. “Indian Army Rape Us”, read one. “Indian Army Take Our Flesh”, said another. The women were protesting against the brutal killing of Manorama Thangjam, a 32-year-old woman who had been picked up by Assam Rifles personnel in suspicious circumstances four days prior. ‘17 years since their naked protest against Army, ‘Mothers of Manipur’ say fight not over yet, artice by Simrin Sirur, The Print Magazine, issue July 22, 2021.

2 The Jal Satyagraha protest in the Khandwa district of Madhya Pradesh, India, was a protest in 2015 by residents of Gogalgaon village, and neighboring hamlets, that involves them remaining immersed in the waters of the Narmada River, as the government has not yet rehabilitated them as promised. It was a part of Narmada Bachao Andolan.

3 Ruth Noack in her article ‘Outrage: subversive sleep’ argues that sleeping is a political act against the workings of a capitalist society. She states, ‘Less an act than a way of being, the sleeper, by sleeping when and where it is not condoned, challenges everyone else, who is doing/working/functioning/functionalised. Contrary to the tree falling in the forest, the sleeper in the workplace or in public space affects and thus ever so slightly transforms those around them.’ The Architectural Review, issue April 9, 2020. In addition to this, historical accounts of various resistance movements, such as the abolitionist movement or the civil rights movement, often describe instances where sleep was used as a form of passive resistance. For example, during the Montgomery Bus Boycott, African Americans refused to use segregated public transportation, often opting to walk or sleep in their homes rather than submit to discriminatory practices.

4 Irom Sharmila is an Indian civil rights activist, political activist, and poet from the Indian state of Manipur, which is located on the north-eastern side of India. In November 2000, she began a hunger strike for abolishing the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958, which has received criticism from several sections for concerns about human rights violations in the regions of its enforcement. After 16 years, she ended her fast in 2016, after being nasally force-fed for over 500 weeks in custody.

5 In the choreographic works of Padmini Chettur, we see a clear language of abstraction that traces the idea of form through the handling of line, tension, effort and stillness that resists any complacent joining of dots with traditional forms or mythology. In the works of Mandeep Raikhy, we see a language of the body emerging from responses to lived experience of gender and identity. Deepak Kurki Shivaswamy embraces a fluid hybrid body that meets and moulds itself within the urban landscape of a changing India. Meghna Bharadwaj chooses the idiom of yarning, weaving as a methodological score/ interpretation of form and movement logic. Avantika Bhal draws out a language of the body from signing for the hearing impaired. Aseng Borang presents a body in conflict asserting its individuality and freedom by playing with the idea of the gaze rather than with martial forms and indigenous symbols.