

Emerging choreographies: developing new pedagogies in dance

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Abstract

New dance forums in India have evolved recently, allowing performers to identify conflict areas in performative practice. This development has arisen as a consequence of questioning techniques as exercised in classical dance pedagogy. This research looks into different tools of performance provided by Gati Dance Forum in New Delhi to engage with these techniques through different pedagogical approaches. The learning and unlearning of performance skills, constantly challenges the dancer's perception of audience-performer, body-dance and dance-space relations, vis-à-vis the individual choreography-creating process. The need to challenge the body to go beyond the taught and practised language has consequently developed a distinct performative text, which is visual, verbal and embodied. Deriving from a theoretical idea of Paul Ricoeur's, the performance text is examined at levels of structural explanation and interpretation, where the different components act as 'discrete units' to form an arranged whole and the constituent units acquire a signifying function.

Keywords: dance, pedagogy, choreography, body, text, India

The initial impetus for this research came from the author's training in a highly codified system of Indian classical dance and her previous research on pedagogy, in Odissi dance and limitations as experienced by dance students. The training process employed in classical dances is primarily based on a method of imitation of the Guru's demonstrations. The explanation of technical maneuvering of the body depends on the teacher's proficiency in technique; the core process mostly consists of imitation with a few guidelines and instructions. If not explained consciously, the techniques of weight-shift, balance, movement and division of body are imbibed through the unquestioned process of imitation. Dance based on *abhinaya*, generally understood as the art of expression or conveying the poetic content of the dance piece through codified gestures, is explained with anecdotes and stories to make the theme clearer and is seldom followed by engaging further in the ideas around/ beyond the chosen story. Understanding the body and the form comes with one's own practice—*riyaaz*, the importance of which is emphasized during the training period. "*Angasuddhi*" (purity of movement) and "*saustabha*" (purity of body line) become the defining criteria of one's technical expertise over the form (Chatterjee, 1996). This results in a constant need to develop an individual and personal point of reference to the dance form and the imbibed vocabulary, which triggers the dancers to grope for a contemporary approach and methodology towards dance making. The evolving dance forums attempt to engage with the process of inhabiting dance vocabulary by shifting perspectives.

Challenging the imbibed technique of dance: methodologies and tools

Gati Dance Forum, founded in 2007 in New Delhi, India, both conceived of and run by dance professionals, facilitates engagement with contemporary dance¹ practice at various levels this forum addresses these challenges, through regular workshops by local and visiting artists, production and dissemination of investigative work by emerging and established artists through its annual residency programs, and creating newer audiences for contemporary dance practice through its biennial contemporary dance festival.

The annual residency program that forms the core area of study for this research provides a platform where interventions are made in the prevalent dance practices. It is a mentored process over a period of nine weeks that addresses the key issue of creation of choreography. Each of the resident choreographers is driven by concerns with the process of creation along with the need to question their technique, to explore and/or to unlearn it, in relation to an emotional, subjective or a theoretical issue. The process involves workshop-based group training, one-to-one mentor-resident sessions and peer reviewed discussion meetings, amongst the residents. The residency is structured as such to familiarize the dancers with various choreographic tools, both physical and conceptual, to structure their 'idea' and to engage with it at different levels. These tools also assist them in questioning the previously employed methodology towards the choreographic process, with much emphasis on the perspective of the audience and the notion of spatiality vis-a-vis form.

The tools provided by the program can be broadly categorized into three; physical, methodological and performative, each of which are described here, to summarize in brief the program of the residency.

Physical tools

In the particular residency which is the subject of this paper, part of the training initiated participants into various physical, vocal, and theatrical tools to channel energy and help in a developing awareness of the body. Using tools from traditional Sanskrit theatre such as Koodiyattam² along with modern theatrical tools, different tasks and exercises were conducted including breathing techniques, the use of facial muscles, and the use of different senses to develop the dormant faculties, which are necessities for a theatre-performer, but are beyond the curricula of classical dance forms such as Odissi, Kathak and Bharatanatyam. Workshops in different western techniques such as 'flying low'³ and 'contact improvisation' help develop an awareness of the body's centre, a changed posture, or a changed 'line' of the body. Additionally, awareness of the body muscles, body parts, the point of origin of movement, the point of centre, the point of shift in movement, the point of tension, the point where movement ends, and channelling and projecting this energy around the body to develop a quality of space assisted in developing awareness of the surrounding space and the notion of space within the body. Being aware of space as a dense substance and projecting it likewise shifted focus from the body to charging the space around the body.

Methodological tools

One-to-one sessions with the mentors and guest faculty sessions questioned the methodology implemented in the choreographic process. Expert observations were geared to probe the residents to first identify his/her choreographic approach and process and its characteristics as determined by three parameters; approach towards the dancer; approach towards the audience; and an approach towards training, rehearsal and performance. Further, in provoking the dancers towards thinking about different choreographic ways to develop the dance work, choreographic thinking tools were developed. As Biswas (2014) remarked: 'The focus on self-awareness through movement makes the dancer find a liminal space where a moving body is aware of the choreographic needs and in tandem with its emotional needs'⁴. The dancers' experiences are then enhanced (or undermined) further to develop their abilities to recognise, convert and convey the intention of the idea and essence of the experience/text, further shaping the movement structure. To enhance perception and understanding of body representation, movement representation, mental transformation, memory-body cohesion and imagery, the workshop sessions helped develop cognitive understanding between mind and body.

Performative tools

The performative tools initiated the residents into different concepts of scene development: by conceiving obstacles (and how to overcome them) and objectives (how to express them); by considering resolution, actions and strategy; narrative and associations; and by breaking and linking key images while developing choreographic works, to shape the physical structure of the choreographic work. Ways of thinking about established relationships between dance and the body, dance and space, dance and text, performer and audience suggested means for challenging these conventional relationships.

Key shifts in the dancer's perception of body and movement

This training shifts the residents' perception of various elements of choreography and the choreographic process. The body becomes a point of entry rather than an outside impetus. The mentors continually emphasize building movements with what comes naturally first, and not to impose choreography on a moment or a character. It is the movement that leads towards the concept. Earlier, the process of movement generation was guided by a concept, which was central to the choreographic process. Now, the dancer is guided and lead by the movement, generated through various tasks executed in workshop sessions and individual studio work, to unexplored zones of the 'idea' and that becomes the 'seed' for choreographing while doing away with the 'concept'. Various factors contribute to such a genesis of movement and the changed position of the body vis-à-vis choreography. The approach towards choreography is no more oriented towards making a singular large narrative, but rather composing smaller distinct units, with different impetus, in association or dissociation with the central 'idea' of the work. Recognizing and realizing the embodied body⁵ with previously imbibed and/or discarded techniques, memories and characters, the residents engage with bodily concerns. 'I think I engage with it in a more conscious way and with an attitude of enquiry now So I am more interested in 'embodiment'. How does an embodied body move or

speak or occupy space? What does it take to be embodied and to embody?’ says Sunitha M.R., one of the resident choreographers in 2012. Here the term “embodied body” corresponds to understanding the dancer’s body, which plays a central role in perception, cognition, action and nature, as an acculturated body, which derives simultaneously from history of movement, history of culture and the experiences of a modern, post-colonial, globalized society.

Asha Ponikiewska (2013) used different elements as ‘triggers’ for her work titled ‘*Pochhawali*’⁶. These included stylized dance codes of Bharatanatyam and some random images; of foot prints, a hand and a still body. These images were mediated through the idea of repetition, the concept of time and memory as understood in Bharatanatyam dance, to become the structural base for Asha’s work, which challenged the scope of movement structure and went beyond the taught and the learnt technique of dance. Her choreographic work evolved from very emotional allusions of mind and of body. Her former training in Bharatanatyam and Chhau⁷ dance forms provided her body with a strong technique. Through this residency, she was interested in moving away from the outer form of imbibed techniques to explore instead the inner principles of these techniques. She points out that the classical teaching system lays a lot of emphasis on the form and achieving the correct body position, however, the principles of dancing and their realization or initiation into the process of choreography are not explained.



Illustration 1: Asha Ponikiewska (2013) performing ‘*Pochhawali*’.

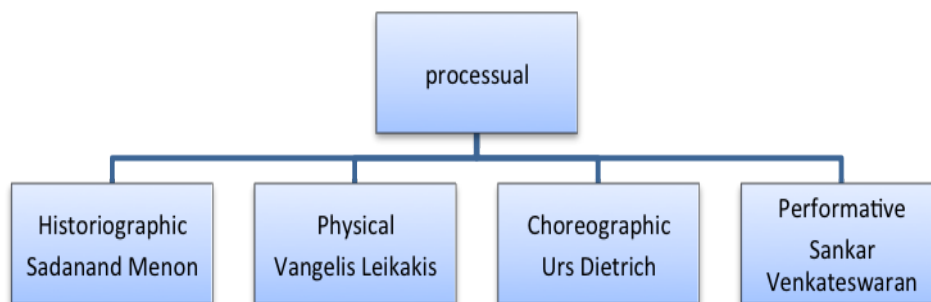
The process involved constant engagement and disengagement as an approach to the *pochha* (the mop or the dusting cloth).

The *pochha*, from an invisible object of derogation, becomes a character that plays witness to lived memories, absorbing them through the length of time, evolving as a vital visible subject, the other half of the living body, entangling with that body and dripping down shreds of memories through the circle of time. The body’s physical memory betrays a conflicting gamut of movements; Bharatanatyam stances, walks, breaking into a natural stance and interlaced with movements in contemporary dance holding the *samputa mudra*⁸, symbolizing the memory of loss. Asha’s primary task was to draw from relevant associations, engaging with those associations

and then recreating these associations through the body in presence and gradual disappearance.

From a singular text/form-based approach to multiple approaches

As opposed to the normative training processes (as discussed previously) which would provide the dancers primarily with a physical or a literary entry into the work, this training expands and familiarizes participants with different methodologies, wherein either or all could be employed in the choreographic process. Debanjali Biswas, trained in Manipuri dance⁹ and a resident at the forum in 2012, sums up the multiple approaches provided by the respective mentors of the program as:



She elaborates:

While I studied the methodologies each of the mentors took us through—I figured in my piece hierarchically, historiographic process came first, as my piece was socio-contextually based on real incidents which take place in Manipur. I wanted to break the general pattern of Manipuri dancing while delving into newer vocabularies. My choreographic processes added the next layer to the piece. Physical process comprises of pushing the limits and creating a new dance language. This was my third task. The fourth and final was to meet performative needs—how the performance or the output will be—with scenography, accoutrements and sound. With self-directedness, awareness and flexibility, the creative process of making dance stretched out over the next nine weeks.¹⁰

She was conscious of guiding the audience's eye throughout the choreographic process. The constant thrust to think about the audience through the choreographic process disturbs the normative process of identification with the dancers, causing a formerly passive, spectatorial gaze to change into a reciprocal engagement with the performer. This happens, firstly 'by unsettling the relation between spectator and participant, then by stopping him or her from viewing the piece in the kind of habitual manner usually adopted in dance performance and finally to create a heightened sensitivity towards the movement material performed' (Burt, 2007, p. 212).

Different telling of mythological stories

As opposed to a linear narration of the stories, the dancers engaged with mythic characters at different levels: by intervening and juxtaposing the 'self' with these characters; by applying different methodological tools and exploring movements

that are geared towards reflecting on them, playing with them, questioning their being, personalising them and finding new meanings, contemporaneous to current understanding of societal values.

Sanjukta Wagh's *Putana and I* and Sunitha Mysore Ramachandra's *Woo Man investigations*, both choreographies presented in 2012, engaged with mythic characters. While Sanjukta delves into personal exploration of images, ideas, emotions and feelings on encountering the mythic character, Putana¹¹, a breast-giver and a demoness, Sunitha's piece develops from the meeting of Shoorpanakha with Rama¹², where her 'ugliness' and desire for him lead to rejection and mutilation.

For Sanjukta, a Kathak dancer and teacher, the initial trigger for the piece was a reading of Ramanujam's poem *Mythologies 3*, and the extremities and the tension between the oppositions inherent in the poem. Mahashwetadevi's *Standaayini* and Joy Harjo's *She had some horses* paved the way for a deeper engagement with the characters but also with the dancer herself. It becomes a play of Putana; Krishna and the 'I', touching different zones of body, memory, history and feminist consciousness.

De-centering and displacement

The performance *Woo-Man investigations* does not follow a linear narration of the story. Rather, the dancer uses the text and develops ideas from the 'embodied body', to engage and investigate the body of Shoorpanakha. For Sunitha, the body itself becomes a trigger for movement. Here the body is projected as loaded with its own history; it is the body trained in a specific classical dance form, Bharatanatyam, which has given up that technique and forayed into modern theatre. It is also the body of a woman exploring her physical desires and the body of Shoorpanakha, which faces rejection and mutilation on openly stating and demanding the fulfillment of those desires.

Sunitha begins her performance by exploring hand gestures in isolation of the remaining body, hidden behind a table. What ensues is a play of single hand gestures symbolizing the masculine, the feminine, proposing, offering and facing rejection. Gradually other body parts are seen moving in isolation, as if fragmented and mutilated by the table. The performance progresses with the repetition of three specific hand gestures symbolizing beauty, desire and love with varying tempos, positions and movements on and around the table, with her gaze constantly focused at the audience.



Illustration 2: Sunitha M.R. (2012) working on *Woo- Man investigations*, exploring hand gestures

By defamiliarising the mythic tales, both Sunitha and Sanjukta completely overturn the conventional meanings of hand gestures and enable the audience to see things differently. Employing *asamyutahastas*¹³ as defined in the Bharatanatyam vocabulary, Sunitha plays around with commonplace meanings held by the gesture, giving it an element of uncertainty. In classical/traditional form, the style of movement or phrasing is predictable and recognizable from a certain aesthetic. Sanjukta uses *mayura hasta mudra*¹⁴, a symbol to portray Krishna, but here it emerges almost symbolically from between the legs of Putana, by which its patriarchal connotation is completely overturned.

Anusha Lall¹⁵ (2011, p. 242) describes the 'complex layers of simultaneous experience: kinetic, sensory and perceptive- and memory', gained by the body through training in an established classical dance form as *material imagination*. Lall states that

when a physical shift leads her [a dancer trained in the classical form] away from its vocabulary, and this is significant, the quality of her experience undergoes a radical transformation ... In my experience, a minute physical dislocation, almost invisible to the viewer, such as a tilt

of the head or change in the angle of the elbow in relation to the torso, can trigger a momentous fragmentation of a familiar material imagination. On the other hand, other more perceptible physical shifts can often be experienced as consistent with the original imagination of the form ... the experience of choreographing or performing work choreographed in this way becomes a journey charted towards and away from the familiar where points of arrival and departure from the familiar can become experientially loaded. Imbued with a significance of their own, they become moments of potential, surprise and adventure (p. 244).

During the process of deconstructing the imbibed technique, the dancer realizes the liminal space where the 'I' engages with the character to the affect that only the 'I' remains. It is in this zone that the dancer realizes ownership of the text and of the movement, subverting the predictable, familiar and acceptable, challenging the status quo.

From linear narrative to multiple perspectives and foci, shifting the viewpoint of the story or character to the body opens out the performative text for different interpretations, for the dancer and the audience.

Playing around with the physicality of breath; controlled, focused, deep to begin with and then tensed, pressed and volatile and on the verge of exploding, immediately turns the focus to the body itself in Nimit Gandhi's (2013) work *No strings attached* which revolves around the idea of 'what is the sense of identity, the sense of being home about the city?' The choreographic work constantly deals with this state of unrest, and a search for one's own reality of being; in search of one's own 'genius loci', making a universal identity via an individual's testimony. The constant play of tempo of the body in space reflects the individual's experience of the scale of the city-space, at moments of anonymity and identity in that dwelling space. Movements across space symbolise and resonate with the anonymity and alienation of a city dweller, exploring the mundane, the monotonous, and a constantly searching state of the inhabitant. A space envisioned in lines and of shifting dimensional perspectives for audiences becomes the city as an image of chaos and lack of order.



Illustration 3: Nimit Gandhi (2013) performing *No strings attached*.

Structure of the dance form: Seen in light of Paul Riceour's theory of text

Structurally, as observed, dance constitutes distinct smaller units of movements, which are composed and conceived independent of other units, and by using different impetus for each unit of text, movement or sound.

The arrangement of the elements together constitutes a performative narrative with each element's capacity to enter in relation with other elements and with the whole of the work. The sense of the narrative is to integrate these sub-units. Here the larger narrative of the performance piece is produced in segments, which Paul Riceour (1981, p.156) termed as 'action kernels'. It is the interconnected series of these action kernels that together constitute the structural continuity of the narrative.

Nikita Patel's (2013) work, *What are you looking at*, in collaboration with fellow dancer, Isha Naravane, was centered on the female body, with the idea of 'how do you feel when you walk down the road' as the 'seed' for her choreographic idea.

The process involved playing with male/female characters through exaggeration, deformation, hiding/concealing of female body parts, intermingling of the two bodies, dissolving the contours of the bodies, scrubbing off their boundaries, distorting the form, accentuating the dichotomies, and oscillating between the inside and the outside of the female body as a victim of 'stare', 'grobe' and 'grab'. The choreographic process built on two focal points: 'the relationship between the two bodies' and 'directing the audience's eye into the dance'. The dance is constituted by fractions of images of an inter-play between 'inside–outside' of self, of the two dancers and of the two sexes.

Merleau-Ponty (1968, p.137) has suggested that one understands another's body in relation to one's own bodily schema, further questioning our sensibilities to understand a dancer's movements and developing them for corporeal identification. Burt (2007, p. 210) says that placing awareness of one's bodily presence into a relationship with the bodies that are evoked 'acts as a dialectic, attracting but at the same time disturbing the viewer, inviting identification but at the same time inhibiting it'. In a similar manner, Nikita's choreographic work makes the (female) viewer identify with the subject, sensorially and corporeally. Also, it does not alienate the other half of the audience (male) either; but instead disturbs and unsettles him, making him aware of the heightened physical sensitivity and questioning his own 'gaze'.

It is the notion of the self, positioned with respect to space, text, mythological character, memory or a personal experience and its appropriation during the dance-making process, which assists in the meaning-making process for the dancer. Riceour (1981) suggests that the constitution of the self is contemporaneous with the constitution of the meaning of the text and this constitutes the second stage, the interpretation of the text.

To interpret is to appropriate, 'here and now,' the intended meaning of the text, as seen in contemporary performances, which is not essentially the presumed intention of the author, nor the lived experience of the choreographer, but rather what the performance text means for whoever sees the performance.

In Ricoeur's words (1981, p.162), to interpret is 'to follow the path of thought opened up by text, to place oneself en route towards the orient of the text'. The choreographic works thus produced are open-ended in their interpretation, although operate in tandem with an engagement of the self-appropriation by the dancer towards an intended meaning. Here the object is the performance text, the sign is the depth semantics disclosed by structural analysis in first stage, and interpretants is the chain of interpretations produced by the viewer and incorporated into the dynamics of the text, as the dance's meaning is constructed. The intrinsic element in its structure, as pointed out by Ricoeur, is such that the relation between the 'interpretant' and 'sign' is open and that there is always another interpretant capable of mediating the relation between the sign and the object.

Conclusion

During one of the workshop sessions of the residency, Anousha Lall, in conversation with the participants, states:

we are trying to envision the future. There are no simplifications, constructions, reductions. There are complexities, multiplicities at the same time. The only thing we are trying to do is to create an open landscape so that the diversity continues because that seems to be the richest way to do. In your preservation of a particular form seems almost to be artificial, as artificial as imposing a western ideology, the only real thing I can see is flux. There is this temptation of keeping the tradition but it seems at one point of time, false, imposed.

However, constructing the body according to a specific ideology can only be altered by engaging with the body itself as an agency and tool. Elizabeth Grosz (cited in Gilbert & Tompkins, 1996, p. 204) comments on the body as a post-colonial, subversive tool:

If the body is the specific target of [a] system of codifications, supervision and constraint, it is also because the body and its energies and capacities exert an uncontrollable, unpredictable threat to a regular, systematic mode of social organization. As well as being the site of knowledge-power, the body is thus a site of *resistance*, for it exerts a recalcitrance, and always entails the possibility of a counter-strategic reinscription, for it is capable of being self-marked, self-represented in alternative ways.

The learning/unlearning of performance skills as initiated and taught through tools and methods provided by the residency program vis-à-vis the individual choreography-creating process helps the choreographers create a performance text with a distinct structure that allows for investigation of the performative text at various levels through producing smaller units independent of each other, yet constituting a cohesive whole, with the 'seed' of the initial idea for the choreographic work at its base. The subsequent meaning can be interpreted only when these units are seen/read together in a sequence. Appropriation of the text, according to Ricoeur (1981, p.160) implies 'that the interpretation of a text culminates in the self-interpretation of a subject who thenceforth understands himself better, understands himself differently or simply understands himself'. It is in this structure, where the shifts in dynamics of

the body-dance, body-text, and body-space relations take place, which leads to an appropriation of text by the choreographer, and a subversion of normative identities and an open-ended interpretation of the text for the viewer.

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1. Contemporary dance practice in India includes both western form of contemporary as well as that which is evolved from Indian classical dance techniques.
 2. Koodiyattam is a form of Sanskrit theatre traditionally performed in the state of Kerala, India, in Hindu temples as a votive offering, and performed in the Sanskrit language.
 3. Flying Low was mainly developed by David Zombrano in 1980s working on the relationship between the dancer and the floor. Flying low's codified exercises are part of the choreographic heritage of postmodern and contemporary dance, from the end of the twentieth century. It has evolved into a codified movement technique and is a recognized training method.
 4. Debanjali Biswas, in conversation with the author.
 5. Merleau-Ponty's account of embodiment "distinguishes between the objective body, which is the body regarded as a physiological entity, and the phenomenal body, which is not just some body, some particular physiological entity, but my (or your) body as I (or you) experience it. Of course, it is possible to experience one's own body as a physiological entity. But this is not typically the case. Typically, I experience my body (tacitly) as a unified potential or capacity for doing this and that ... The distinction between the objective and phenomenal body is central to understanding the phenomenological treatment of embodiment. Embodiment is not a concept that pertains to the body grasped as a physiological entity. Rather it pertains to the phenomenal body and to the role it plays in our object-directed experiences" (in Audi, 1999).
 6. It literally means 'the mopping/cleaning lady'. Asha maintains, 'I liked the term '*pochhavalī*' because that *pochha* cloth is something so ordinary, so everyday something you just clean with, put your foot on and throw it away and don't give a damn about it, it is also something that is there, you don't think about it until it touches us'. (In an interview with the author).
 7. A martial dance form practiced in Eastern India.
 8. When the fingers are held out, palms are joined together and are bent in such a way that there is a hollow at the center of the palms, we get the *Samputa Hasta*. *Samputa* is used to denote concealment of objects. It can be used to show secrets or something that is kept safely. It can also denote something that is hidden, or to show the chest.
 9. One of the major classical dance forms of India, originating from the north-eastern state of Manipur.
 10. Interview by the author through email.
 11. Pūtānā, a female demon, is well known for her attempt to kill the infant Krishna by offering him milk from her poisoned breast; she was, however, sucked to death by the god. The legend of Putana and Krishna is narrated in many Hindu Puranic texts.
 12. Shoorpanakha was an 'asura' (demon) and sister of the ten-headed demon, Ravana in the highly revered Hindu mythological text *Ramayana*. Under the garb of the Goddess of desire, she came upon Lord Rama in the lush green forest during his exile years and wanted to surrender at his feet. Instead, she was repulsed by the married man.
 13. These gestures are done using a single hand. Hence they are called *asamyukta mudras*. The *Natyasastra* (ancient Indian treatise on music, dance and drama, ascribed to sage Bharata, written between 2nd c. B.C. to 2nd c. A.D.) mentions 28 of these *mudras*. These are extensively used in Indian classical dances, along with their respective regional *mudras*.
 14. Holding your palm straight and upright when you bring together the tips of the ring finger and the thumb, the *Mayura mudra* is formed. The word *mayura* means peacock and is often used to depict the bird, but in Indian classical dance forms it is can also be used to depict decorating the forehead, someone very famous or even putting *kohl* in one's eye.

15. Choreographer, dancer, researcher, programme manager for the residency and founder–member, director of Gati Dance Forum.

Note: All Photographs courtesy Gati Dance Forum, New Delhi, India.

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Personal Interviews (conducted by the Author)

Nikita Patel, Isha Naravane 16 October 2013

Asha Ponikiewska, 21 October 2013

Nimit Gandhi, 25 October 2013

Interviews over E-mail (conducted by the Author)

Debanjali Biswas, 26 April 2014

Sanjukta Wagh, 22 May 2014

Sunitha M.R, 7 June 2014

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Biography

Aastha Gandhi is an independent performance researcher and a performer, currently pursuing studies in Law. She is a practitioner of Guru Surendranath Jena's style of Odissi dance. She researched on Odissi dance, its historiography, practice and problems within the established *parampara*, for her M. Phil dissertation (2006–2008), Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Her subsequent research work has been published in Conference Proceedings of WDA Global Summit, "Dance Dialogues: conversations across cultures, artforms and practices" Brisbane (2009) and World Dance Alliance's Journal of Emerging Dance Scholars (2013). Her current area of research engages with city space and its evolving metaphors of performance, seen in contestation with the established laws.

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