

New Directions in Indian Dance

An overview 1980-2006

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During the colonial period of British rule (1957-1947), Indigenous Classical Indian Dance forms and other arts were looked down upon for various reasons. Temple dancing was associated with the class of *devadasis*, servants of God, who were considered women of ill fame, prostitutes. In the late 1920s, Indian dance made a mark on the national and international fronts through the efforts of pioneers like Uday Shankar (Khokar, 1983, pp 101-105). Indians discovered their heritage and various dance traditions. Besides the temples where dance was a part of the ritual procedures, dance did exist in the royal courts, where dancers performed for their patrons. As a reaction to the British rule, the intelligentsia sought a visible national identity and, subsequently, revived the Indigenous arts. Dance became part of the national agenda.

With the increasing awareness about Indian dance traditions in the thirties, some of the pioneers, visionaries like the poet Tagore (1861-1941) in Bengal, poet Vallathol (1878-1957) in Kerala, theosophist Rukmini Devi (1904-1986) in Madras (Chennai, Eastern South India), Madame Menaka (1899-1947), a musician/dancer in Khandala (a hill station near Mumbai in Western India) and Uday Shankar (1900-1977) in Almora in the Himalayas founded institutions for training in dance. Thus dance became institutionalised. These pioneers were the modernists of their time who knew that new approaches to the arts would bring national pride amongst Indians. By the time India became independent on 15th August 1947, the classical Indian dances were firmly established. Uday Shankar's style was unique, creative, and came to be known as modern. He is considered by many to be the father of Indian Modern Dance.

However, the classical Indian dances were now being pursued by the educated middle class, the majority of whom were young women. The entry of women like Rukmini Devi from the upper Brahmin class changed the scenario (Kothari, 2007, pp. 166-167). The stigma attached to dance was not completely removed, but the change in attitude was noticeable. In 1954, the

establishment of three academies by the government under their cultural policy for literature, plastic arts and dance, drama and music gave a fillip to the development of literature, and the plastic and the performing arts.

In the 1960s, 70s, and 80s the popularity of classical dance forms reached its peak. The first All India Dance Seminar and Festival in New Delhi in 1958 brought to the fore two additional dance forms, Odissi and Kuchipudi. And more recently in 2000, the Sattriya dance form of Assam has received recognition as the eighth classical dance form. Thus India boasts a plural vocabulary of dance with Bharatanatyam, Kathakali, Mohini Attam, Manipuri, Kathak, Kuchipudi, Odissi and Sattriya as the eight official classical dance forms.

What is common to all these classical dances is that their roots are in religion. Mythological and devotional stories form their content. The expressive aspect tends to revolve around a *nayika*, the heroine, who pines for union with the *nayaka*, the hero. The heroine symbolises the soul of the devotee, and the hero, the Lord, the super-soul with whom the soul wishes to unite. The spirit of *Bhakti* movement, the cult of devotion, permeates these dance forms. The hold of tradition has been so strong that the practitioners continue to perform the dances taught to them by their traditional teachers. Under the guru, Shishya Parampara, the teacher and the guardian of the order, no questions were allowed to be asked. One had to master the art following the guru, the teacher.

With an unprecedented growth in the number of dancers, the continued adherence to mythological and religious themes and the repetition of the same content of a heroine pining eternally for hero, the classical dance forms began to be criticised as museum pieces. Besides the assembly-line production of dancers, rampant commercialisation also affected standards and quality. There was also a shift in the class origins of dancers. Instead of coming from hereditary¹ classes, the dancers came from the newly educated middle class. This shift played an important role in dancers re-thinking and seeking new directions in Indian dance. Dancers with imagination and an ability to reflect upon present day issues, including two world wars, have deviated from the traditional *margam*² (Alarippu to Tillana repertoire of Bharatanatyam) and from the *nayaka-nayika*³ themes. It was inevitable with the rapid shift in the background of the performers that there would be also a shift in the content of the dance. Dancers sensitive to the gap between their own lives and what they performed on stage started questioning the relevance of the *nayaka-nayika* theme.

The East-West Dance Encounter organised by Georg Lechner, the director of Max Mueller Bhavan in Mumbai in January 1984, is a watershed moment in the history of Indian dance (*NCPA Quarterly*, 1984). Many dancers, who had seemed to be working in isolation, seeking new directions, were in fact in touch with other developments. The outcome of this conference was very rewarding. Contemporary dancers in the forefront of change included Mrinalini Sarabhai, Kumudini Lakhia, Chandralekha, Yamini Krishnamurty, Bharat Sharma, Uttara Asha Coorlawala, Astad Deboo and others. Among the critics

and scholars who also fostered new approaches were Dr Narayan Menon, Shanta Serbjeet Singh, Sadanand Menon and Sunil Kothari. From the West came German artists Susanne Linke and Gerhard Bohner, from France Dominique Bagouet, from England Stephen Long, from Canada Ann Marie Gaston, and from the USA, Carmen de Lavallade. Two dancers, American Sharon Lowen and Italian Ileana Citaristi settled in India, as did others like musician Igor Wakhevitch from France. It must be mentioned that as a follow up to this encounter, two further conferences were held in 1993, one in Toronto, Canada in February and the other in New Delhi in September.

Trained in Bharatanatyam under the traditional guru, Conjeevaram Elappa Pillai in Madras (Chennai) Chandralekha gave up dancing for twelve years⁴ before returning to dance to explore the Bharatanatyam form (Bharucha, 1995, pp. 29-30, & Chatterjee, 2004). Chandralekha raised several questions:

- Why have classical Indian dances become insular and unresponsive to the dramatic social, historical, scientific, human changes that have occurred in the world during the past thirty years?
- What makes them resistant to contemporary progressive values?
- Why have attempts not been encouraged to explore the power and strength of the forms and their links with the martial arts?

Working with and making a departure from the exclusive classicism of Bharatanatyam, Chandralekha started thinking and experimenting in her choreographic work; how to explore, expand, and universalise the form. She tried to comprehend its inherent energy content. She began to see it in relation to other allied physical disciplines in India like yoga, ancient martial arts, and allied life activity. Her concern was about how to interpret the purity of the Bharatanatyam line, its principles of balance and flexion, its body-geometry in terms of squares, circles, triangles, coils and curves. She wanted to visualise this body-geometry in terms of space and inner/outer correspondences. She wanted to slash across the dead weight of the past suffocating dance in the name of tradition in order to pare dance of its feudal and religious acculturations, sticking like unhealthy patinas to the form, as also from the increasing pressure on it of the demands of the commercial market (Chandralekha, 2003).⁵

For Chandralekha it was important to understand dance as a language in its own right, self-sufficient and with vocabulary of its own, so as to free it from the tedious god/goddess narratives and staged religiosity. Also to give it a secular space of its own as well as to demystify its former content, which reinforces nostalgia and revivalism.

Her aim was instead to recover and celebrate the nature of abstract forms of space and time in dance and to initiate and consolidate the conjunctions between traditional forms and contemporary concerns. Any work with dance involved engaging with the body and its primitive accumulations, its social complexes and its cultural stratifications. For Chandralekha, the 'content' of the body was vast and complex. There were no limited or fragmented

concepts of the body in indigenous cultures where the body is seen as a unity, with respect to itself as well as to the society and the cosmos.

Chandralekha observed that in this cosmology, the arts and sciences too, are interdependent and richly cross-referenced. Dance, music, architecture, sculpture, yoga, medicine, martial arts, linguistics, and grammar are not isolated and mutually exclusive. This is the larger meaning of tradition, which we do not need to break (Chandralekha, 2003, p. 58). Chandralekha saw tradition not as a museum piece or fossil form, which precludes ideation, commentary, questioning, and critique. She believed that the task of the artist is to modernise the tradition through the creative process.

A firm believer in the need for resuscitating traditional forms with contemporary energy, she worked towards exploring the structures and internal strength of Bharatanatyam, martial forms like Kalaripayattu and therapeutic forms like yoga to comprehend and interpret the body in a modern sense. She postulated a new, non-sublimated content of the dance. Her body of choreographic works ranging from *Angika* (Traditions of Dance and Body language of India, 1985), *Lilavati* (1989), *Prana* (Breath, 1990), *Sri* (Traditions of Woman and Empowerment), *Yantra* (DanceDiagrams, 1994), *Mahakal* (Invoking Time, 1995) to *Sharira* (Fire/Desire, 2001) reveals what new directions Indian dance has taken (Menon, 2005).



From *SRI*, choreographed by Chandralekha

Photo: Kalanidhi Foundation, Toronto, Canada

Her senior Mrinalini Sarabhai, trained in Bharatanatyam, Kathakali and Indonesian dances, had also studied at Tagore's Shantiniketan University during 1938-40 (Sarabhai, 2004, pp. 55-56). Appreciating the inherited cultural legacy, she made bold experiments using the technique of Kathakali for telling the story of man – *Manushya* (1949, revived many times till 1987) – without the cumbersome costumes of Kathakali. Using Bharatanatyam technique, she told stories of dowry deaths and suicide, substituting silence in

place of music. She handled abstract concepts of Rigveda scripture, created dance works on ecology, pollution and extended both the vocabulary of dance and its themes, which showed contemporary awareness of social issues. Through her institution Darpana, established in 1948, she continues to present traditional dance forms and train new generations in Indian dance.

Kumudini Lakhia, a contemporary of Chandralekha and trained in Kathak by traditional gurus, faced a dilemma when she started training the young generation in 1960 through her school Kadamb, using the Kathak technique for choreographic works (Shah, 2005, pp. 137-138). She started exploring different combinations and permutations within the given structure of the Kathak technique. Within the classical framework of Kathak, she discovered new movements, using space, different levels and one single movement passing from one dancer to another, the latter giving an impression of a single movement in an extended form, breaking patterns of movement into fragments, each performed by a different dancer. She liberated Kathak from its feudalistic court content and made audiences see Kathak in a new light. She dealt with social issues in work like *Samvedan* (1993): How do individuals live with others in society? How does an individual relate to other people? How do past moments in an individual's life affect the individual in the present? Besides these experiments, she was fortunate to have a music composer, Atul Desai, who specially composed music for her choreographic works that went hand in hand with her approach. Costumes and lighting played important roles in her work. In costumes she used simple costumes with a discerning eye for colours, avoiding gaudy colours. Lighting was no more flat front lighting, but well designed and imaginative highlighting the movements. Rather than the customary solo dances Kumudini's group choreographic works broke new grounds. Lakhia (2003, pp. 67-68) states that:

In all other art forms like music, painting, architecture, sculpture, etc. the artists were thinking progressively and their mindset was attuned with contemporary aesthetic needs of society, some were futuristic in their approach also, but in dance, at least in Kathak form, nothing was happening. I have thought about it and worked towards changes creating relevant contemporary dance works in Kathak.

Today her students like Daksha Sheth and Aditi Mangaldas, have extended their work through their basic training under Kumudini in remarkable ways. Daksha Sheth extended her vocabulary with training in the Mayurbhanj Chhau dance form of Orissa, which has its origins in martial arts. She also studied Kalaripayattu, a martial art form of Kerala, and malkhamb, a physical tradition based on the use of rope. Devissaro, her musician husband from Australia, helped her in her choreographic works providing original music. A radical dancer, Sheth displayed an evolving dance vocabulary in each of her choreographic works like *Yajna*, *Serpagati* and *Search for my Tongue*, which successfully coalesces the eclecticism of her work. Her male dancers from Kerala, Madhu Gopinath and others, formed in 1997 Samudra, a separate group, which created excellent works using classical dance forms and martial arts, inspired by their association and work with Sheth.

In the Manipuri dance form from North East region, the tradition has been very strong as dance is a part of daily life with rituals on many occasions like child birth, marriage, death and the various religious festivals held round the year (ibid, p. 70). The pre-Vaishnavite tradition of Lai Haraoba, the merry making of the gods and a vibrant tradition of Thang-ta, a martial art wielding sword and spear and practiced by both men and women, offer a dancer a staggering variety of movements to draw upon. No-where in India is dance and music so interwoven with rituals and religious practice. One rarely comes across any Manipuri who does not know dance and music.



From *Sharira*, choreographed by Chandralekha with artist, Tishani.

Photo: Sadanand Menon, Chennai, India

Indeed it has been a great challenge for Manipuri dancers to tamper with the tradition. However, Manipuri choreographers like R.K. Singhjit Singh, Chao Tombi and the young non-Manipuri choreographer from Kolkata, Priti Patel, have extended the boundaries of Manipuri dance with contemporary sensibilities and themes. In *Nupi Lan – Women's Struggle* (2000) choreographer Charu Sija, wife of R.K. Singhjit Singh, has dealt with the female power that surfaces to save the families from starvation and exploitation. They fight against the menace of drug smuggling to which the young fall victim. Priti Patel in *Malem, (Prithvi-Earth, 1998)* interprets the myth of Earth as mother and shows how it is used as commodity and destroyed. In another mythological story, *Nahal Nog* (2003), she interprets the jealous

brother's attempt to destroy the earth, which is challenged by the goddess of lightning, a metaphor for female force. In *Agni (Fire)* (2005), Priti Patel explores abstract concepts with an acrobatic dance tradition. Choreographer Chao Tombi deals with a vanishing species of Sangai deer in a ballet titled *Kaibul Lamjao* (1986). These works are a far cry from the traditional all night dance-dramas like *Rasalilas*, the dances of Lord Krishna. No longer do young dancers shy away from deviating from the tradition. They boldly attempt to bring in elements of martial arts, which quicken the pace and invest the form with a pulsating, throbbing, vital element and have succeeded in extending the boundaries of Manipuri dance.

In West Bengal, Rabindranath Tagore's (1841-1941) dance-dramas are choreographed in a dance genre known as Rabindrik dance. Poet Tagore had seen Manipuri dances in (1920) and introduced them in his educational curriculum. His intervention has been remarkable. A creative era often finds its expression in the milieu of social progress. Questioning of traditional mores like caste discrimination, social hierarchy and polarity of sex roles found expression in the thematic content of Tagore's dance lyrics. By changing the attitude of male-female relationships and conventional role models, the mode of presentation in his dance-dramas, with equal participation of the male and female on the stage, created a visual confirmation of the new era in Indian society. Two major dancers/choreographers, the late Manjusri Chaki Sircar and her daughter Ranjabati with their movement of Navanritya, new dance, showed how the thematic content of Tagore's dance-dramas, songs and poetry called for innovation in the technique of dancing in a form capable of expressing modern concerns (Kothari, 1995, pp. 245-247). Dissatisfied both by the style of Uday Shankar and what was 'Rabindrik', Sircar from 1980 onwards drew upon various classical and folk dance traditions, with the base reference point remaining the classical principles of movement, line, energy and emotion. In keeping with the spirit of dialogue and discourse intrinsic to the contemporary arena, openness had been the guiding principle for them.

'An important aspect of the Navanritya methodology was the development of social awareness and political consciousness. Deconstruction of the classical and traditional dance ideologies reveals an oppression of women, class and/or caste exploitation and patriarchal Brahminical discrimination. Neo-colonialism and neo-imperialism pressure the dance economy to remain in a self-contained bubble of nostalgia to maintain the appeal of the exotic and pseudo-erotic, thinly disguised by a veil of religiosity' (Sircar, 2003, p. 92). In their choreographic works like *Tomari Matir Kanya* (1982), *Chitrangada* (1988) and other works Manjusri and Ranjabati Sircar broke fresh grounds. It is a sad fact that the deaths of both mother and daughter have impoverished the Indian dance movement, which was receiving great support in West Bengal. Their organisation, Dancers' Guild in Kolkata, and their few dancers carry on their work devotedly.

Two dancers, Uttara Asha Coorlawala, trained in the Martha Graham and other Western modern dance techniques, and Astad Deboo, trained in a variety of dance techniques from the West have charted their own paths. Their contemporary Indian dance is of significance. Their work is neither

imitative of the West nor a refashioning of the tradition by discarding context and retaining technique. Theirs is an individual statement, without being either parochial or global, in a vague sense. Their art has captured the predicament of the modern human as he or she faces the future. Uttara Asha Coorlawala's thesis *Classical and Contemporary Indian Dance*, submitted to New York University, 1994, is a major attempt in critical analysis and evaluation of contemporary works of Indian choreographers (Coorlawala, 1994, pp. 98-110). Coorlawala has developed a dual cultural sensitivity, enhanced by her involvement with Bharatanatyam and yoga. In modern dance, abstraction, universalised experience and kinetic representations are valued, but in the classical Indian narrative forms, it is specificity, clarity, and multiplicity of details in narration that is valued. The difficulty involved in honouring a culture-specific tradition of expression while still providing access paths to international audiences is indeed a challenge. Coorlawala says that despite years of involvement with modern dance and its history, rife with its myths of self-origination and individualism, she still speculates whether it is the abundance of historic representations of dance visible all over India that inflects her way of moving. Despite the futility of seeking assurances of primacy, she returns to this question often, urged on by an unmistakable sense of bodily authenticity (Kothari, 2003, p. 116).

Astad Deboo's career is fascinating. Trained in Kathak during childhood, he moved to Mumbai from Jamshedpur and was exposed to Murray Louis performances in the mid-sixties (ibid, p. 118). Since then he has never looked back and has danced all these years seeking movements which he discovered in the West and also from the study of Kathakali. A bold experimenter, he has travelled round the world. He found the representation of classical Indian dance was over concerned with flow and grace. He felt that through fractured movements, tremblings and falls he could express emotional and spiritual themes ignored by other dance forms. He achieved these visceral responses through the repetition of explicitly and violently disjunctive movements. Eclectic in his choice of music, he has boldly experimented with various dance forms and also with Thang-ta martial artists of Manipur, combining such techniques with his own individual dance movements developed over the years. He has enjoyed site specific performances, dancing on the Great Wall of China and on the ramparts of a fort in Gujarat, utilising various levels of the stage. He prefers to unshackle himself from the narrow walls of domesticity. His collaboration with the Hindustani classical musicians Gundecha Brothers is memorable. Since 1999, his work with deaf children has drawn attention internationally. He has tried to make his audiences aware of the human physical apparatus and how much dance can do to make the body more mobile, flexible, expressive, even sensitive among the hearing impaired in India, China, Mexico and USA.

Thus, we notice that with the shift in the class of dancers there has been a re-thinking about Indian dance and also a consequent shift in the thematic content presented through dance. In terms of the form and the technique also one notices that there has been, as Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan (2003, pp. 30-31) observes:

One notices on the contemporary Indian dance scene an impressive development of utilising the movement vocabulary of the vast storehouse of genres and forms. The Chhau forms have been generously utilised, so also the movements of Kalari and Thang-ta and others, especially from Kerala. At the level of technique, lower limb and specially leg extensions, elevations, and floor movements are far more in evidence than in the era of Uday Shankar and his contemporaries. Another consequence has been the exploration of geometrical space at floor level and choreographic patterns. The two, along with other impulses, have amounted to some productions achieving a high level of abstraction comparable to trends in the visual arts. The classification of *nritta*, pure dance and *abhinaya*, expressional dance is no longer relevant, nor sometimes the sequential storyline.

Today Indian dances have crossed national borders, and exponents in the Indian Diaspora have been also extending their dance horizons wherever they are (ibid, p. 146). For Indian dancers the challenges are of not transplanting, borrowing, imitating, or becoming a shadow culture of some other culture. It has to be an inward journey into one's own self – a journey constantly relating and refining the reality of the in-between area, to enable tradition to flow freely in our contemporary life (ibid, p. 58).

Notes

¹ By 'hereditary' I am referring to performers who belonged to a class whose profession it was to perform dance to earn their livelihood.

² *margam* is a term which applies to a suit of Bharatanatyam dance form with numbers like Alarippu, jatiswaram, sabdam, varnam, padam, javali, tillana and slokam.

³ *nayaka-nayika* refers to the roles played by the dancer as a hero and heroine, in a traditional dance form. It also refers to a devotee who is in love with the God and expresses it through dance. A devotee may be a man and/or woman.

⁴ Chandralekha stopped dancing for over a decade because she did not wish to repeat ad nasium the same themes of a *nayika* in separation from her *nayaka* and did not reflect any contemporary issue.

⁵ For details of Chandralekha's approach, see her article: 'Reflections on new directions in Indian dance' in *New Directions In Indian Dance*, edited by the author.

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Biographical statement

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