

Disciplined creativity

Aadya Kaktikar

Shiv Nadar University, India

aadya.kaktikar@snu.edu.in

Abstract

Traditional Indian dances with highly codified performance techniques are often understood as immutable within a world where fluidity and flux constantly challenge our notions of stable identities and unchanging traditions. Why is it then that in spite of the severely disciplining nature of dance training, dancers do not simply repeat what they are conditioned to do? If agency is dependent upon social structures and power matrices, why does innovation, deviation, resistance and confrontation occur changing scripts and evolving new meanings of what is danced within tradition? This paper accesses traditional Indian dance pedagogies through the kinetic sensorium, highlighting the bodily experience that the traditional dance forms provide. My own training in Odissi, challenges the notion of creativity as a product. It leads to an understanding of creativity and the role that discipline plays in its expression which is culture specific, yet may find universal applicability.

Keywords: creativity, discipline, kinaesthesia, Indian classical dance, pedagogy

Introduction

Five pairs of feet slap the ground repeatedly echoing the rhythm of the percussion, hands and torsos moving in unison. Under the strict and usually disapproving eye of the *Guru*¹, these young bodies labour to embody the nuances of an Indian classical dance style. Hour after hour, year after year, these students fastidiously repeat the same exercises, the same steps in the same sequence in pursuit of the unattainable aim of *anga shuddhi*. Literally translated, *anga shuddhi* means to purify the body. This purity is achieved by the ability of the dancer to clearly execute complex rhythmic structures and lucidly articulate subtle philosophical ideas through hand gestures and facial expressions woven within a complex grammatical structure.

It is not surprising therefore that in a world where 'fluidity and flux have become significant metaphors for the way we define our cultures and our world' (Shapiro, 2008, p. 253), where our notion of stable identities and unchanging traditions is constantly challenged, Indian classical dance forms are often understood as unchanging, continuous, immutable and rigid. These forms, with their highly codified techniques, rigorous and long training periods (at least ten to fifteen years to qualify as an amateur dancer), raise questions of universal applicability, creative space, expression of individuality and agency, and the relevance of discipline and rigor.

Why is it then, that in spite of severely restrictive and disciplining nature of dance training, no two students of a Guru dance alike, or like an identical copy of the Guru? Why is it that they do not simply repeat what they are conditioned to do? If agency is dependent upon social structures and power matrices, why does innovation, deviation, resistance and confrontation occur, changing scripts and evolving new meanings of what is danced within tradition? This paper asserts that accessing

traditional Indian dance pedagogies through the kinetic sensorium, highlighting the bodily experience of traditional dance forms, provide an understanding of creativity that moves beyond the creation of a novel product. It leads to an understanding of creativity and the role that discipline plays in its expression which is culture specific, yet may find universal applicability.

Carrie Noland (2009) in *Agency Embodiment* has asserted that agency cannot spring from an autonomous, undisciplined source. She says that 'a biological body unfolds its unpredictable (as opposed to predetermined) possibilities as they are pruned or expanded through variables that are primarily historical and social in nature' (Noland, 2009, p. 8). Based on this idea, I examine the lived reality of embodying a traditional dance form with its emphasis on discipline, rigor and length of training. This discipline is self-directed, moving inwards, aimed at leaving a mark not on the space around the body through gesture and not on the eyes that watch these bodies, but inscribing body of the dancer (Ness, 2008, p. 6). I argue that because traditional dance pedagogies emphasize a kinaesthetic experience over a visual experience for both for the dancer and the audience through the concept of the *Rasa Theory*², they incorporate endless possibilities for creativity, innovation and individual agency. Prioritising kinaesthetic knowledge also shifts the focus of dance training from being product centric to being process centric; highlighting the intrinsic value of dance made available to students over the extrinsic values. 'Failing to acknowledge the difference sets up a paradigm for knowing which emphasizes the 'observing eye' over the 'knowing body'" (Shapiro, 1999, p. 39).

It is important to remember however, that bodily experience cannot be defined in a universal way and that enculturation creates the frame through which these experiences might be seen. Indian classical dances are seen as forms that use the body to rise above the physical world and the ideal of the learning process involves a move from a physical to a psycho-physical discipline that aims at the experiential goal of creating *rasa*. Dance then becomes the most chiselled expression of a distinctive Indian world view and cannot be viewed in isolation from the significant philosophical framework upon which it is built (Vatsyayan, 1996, p. 3). If the basic premise, that the whole structure of traditional dance forms is built for increasing subtlety and abstraction within a system of identifications is forgotten, then these forms seem to be an inflexible clutter of grammar and syntax.

The body of tradition: learning from the inside out

Customarily, the arts have been taught in India through the *Guru-Shishya Parampara*³. Traditional pedagogies, encapsulated by the *Guru-Shishya Parampara*, are often considered problematic because they defy standardisation and preserve idiosyncrasy, challenging set assessment modes. This mode of learning represents that which existed before the differentiation of time into concerts and lessons, before differentiation of dance into beginners and advanced lessons and before the separation of dance from life in general (Weidman, 2008, p. 226).

In the traditional context, the body refers not only to the physical body of the dancer but also to his/her *paramparic*⁴ body, one which is formed out of bodily dispositions handed down tacitly through teaching ancestries. Training is a way in which the dancer inscribes on his/her own body the memory, the life experiences of those who

came before her/him. This inscription of the *paramparic* body of the dance places the body in the centre; as the preceptor of life (Shapiro, 1999, p. 38). Dance however, becomes a way of living but not life itself; the inscription pierces deeply enough to mark the body but not penetrate enough to alter the host body's material character (Ness, 2009, p. 4). Even as they impregnate the dancer's body with cultural meanings, traditional dance forms weave themselves around the changing age, gender, shape and size of the body, drawing meaning from everyday lives of each dancer.

At the outset, the mode of teaching dance privileges oral instruction and aural reception. A long period of training with the Guru and a close proximity between the student and the teacher ensure that the student be continuously but subtly placed in a learning environment. Collins, Brown and Newman argue that within this 'cognitive apprenticeship' (1989, p. 12) the process of formal instruction is complemented by learning through *Shravan* (listening) and *Manan* (contemplation), which leads to *Grahan* (imbibing) knowledge. The body becomes a reservoir for amassing vast amounts of experience, which the student acquires through peripheral participation in the community of the *Gurukula*⁵. This social nature of teaching entails the absorption and transmission of aesthetic and contextual knowledge through an intuitive process. As a student, learning dance has as much to do with involvement in the communal aspects and understanding the hierarchical structure of the *Gurukula* by spending time with the Guru, as it has to do with actual dancing hours. These contributions to the community are as important to one's identity as a dancer as are actual skills and techniques.

Contrary to being rigid and prohibitive, this kind of scaffolded learning leads to the 'accumulation of knowledge [which is] skill enhancing by its very existence or presence, even though, and in fact *because*, it remained beyond the grasp of the mover's direct awareness' (Ness, 2008, p. 23).

The Guru demonstrates and the student imitates with little or no verbal explanation. Any texts including notes taken by the student are mere approximations of the oral tradition. As students, we were never encouraged to take notes. 'Learn it in your bones, remember it in your muscles', my Guru would say, 'Why do you need to write?' And there is no rush; students take their time understanding the movement vocabulary. There is no syllabus to be finished, no exams to be given; just the immediacy of coming to terms with one's body and the movement. It is common to see students at different levels of learning in the same class. Even today, in a traditional dance class, making videos is discouraged. 'As long as you dance from the video, you will dance but never *learn* the piece I am trying to teach you. Use it as a memory aid, if you must. But the dance is *in* you... bring that out' my teacher would often admonish young dancers. The efficacy of this statement became evident to me while attempting to 'remember' dance pieces that I had not done for over fifteen years. As I got on the floor and the music played, my body moved, it remembered. The muscles and joints remembered the exact stress and tension required for the right posture. Even without a mirror I knew if I was doing the movement correctly or not. This kinaesthetic remembering is, as put forward by Edward Casy, a 'body memory' (1987, p.168) where inscription of the dynamic contours of movement takes place in the muscle and sinew of the dancer.

Another poignant illustration of this body memory is the *abhinaya*⁶ class. The *Natyashastra*⁷ has an extensive system of codification of emotive states and their psychological signs through which these emotions can be understood along with directions on how these can be achieved. While teaching a dancer to emote a particular piece, very often the Guru will ask him/her to bring forth a life experience which generates that emotion. For example, while depicting *Radha's*⁸ pain the young dancer will be asked to access his/her own memory of such a pain from life, learn from it and apply it to the piece being taught; 'in order to move, the subject must rely on not only the learned routines and personal or collective desires but also on her engagement, her embeddedness, what Martin Heidegger calls her "everyday-being-in the world"' (Ness, 2008, p. 16). By repeatedly accessing this body memory, the dancer ingests the movement of the emotion, fusing it with the stylization of the *Natyashastra*, making it seem like a spontaneous reaction on stage. This movement expressivity thus gets separated into self-expressions, rising unpremeditated out of life circumstances and expressive signs that seem to spring from feeling but are actually the result of a symbolic form (ibid, p. 89). This complex Indian aesthetic of *Rasa*, is illustrated in Reghunathan's (1972, p. 78) discussion of *abhinaya*:

[I]t is this aspect of universalization that keeps a *rasa* from descending into emotional outburst, even in the dancer. The moment she is swayed by the emotion which she seeks to represent, stylistically, *rasa* slips away. Her purpose is—or should be—at all times to recreate before the audience a vibrant form of the lyrical poetry. This is where, it seems to me, dance stands apart from drama; whereas an actor's aim is to step into the role he seeks to play, the dancer does not. For her forte is the ability to relate emotions of the subtlest shades, impersonally.

This stylistic necessity of the dance form where the dancer is required to have the 'ability to portray strong emotions without getting swept away by them and to maintain impeccable technique in such a portrayal comes from training, repeated practice, and continual exposure to such finesse in performance by masters in this field' (Chatterjea, 1996, p. 78). The peculiarity of the Indian dancer to be both the experiencer and the detached seer, to learn from one's own body and its sensory dynamics in order to evoke a similar psychical experience in the spectator is honed through years of rigorous discipline and practice.

Although the senses are primary and indispensable, like horses in a chariot they need to be groomed, disciplined and restrained (Vatsyayan, 2003). The authority of a traditional performer is derived from a trained body and mind where 'the will [...] has been marshalled over many years to discipline the haphazard and instinctive movements of the body and to create the control necessary to make artful moving forms' (Kern, 1975, p. 93). A blend of physical, emotional and spiritual refinement happens in the dancer's body within a regimented, codified and prescribed process.

Discipline and practice: the beauty of boundaries

'Practice, practice, practice' is the mantra for every traditional dancer. Individual *riaz* or *sadhana* (loosely translated as practice) provides a standard for individual accomplishment and conscientiousness. The student inherits two things from the Guru—a corpus of knowledge about the art form and a corpus of understandings of

how to be a dancer. Central to being a traditional dancer is 'living your dance' as my Guru would put it. This implies not just hours of repetitive practice to hone the body but also hours of meditative practice into ways of thinking. The severity of discipline renders a philosophical contour to the dance forms so that *abhinaya* is not just acting and *saadhna* is not just practice.

The virtuosic nature of classical dance forms and the complex mechanical fundamentals and technicalities like the basic stance of *chauk*⁹ or *aramandi*¹⁰, requires the body to move, constantly and for long durations, in ways beyond the normal range of human movement. The *Natyashastra*'s detailed movement descriptions fragment the physical body—the eyes, lips cheeks, hands, feet, fingers and feet positions. This fragmentation allows the dancer to access each body part separately and simultaneously in a mind-body-spirit connection making the paradoxical separation of body parts critical to the presentation of an integral Indian aesthetic.

Subverting the Cartesian mind body dualism, training requires the dancer to fuse these physical skills with the intellectual skills of *raag* (music) and *taal* (rhythm) systems. With continuing practice, this composite then gets layered over by a network of philosophical understandings which are extremely subtle and complex, and require years of careful concentration and study in order to 'understand' and 'perform'. Extent of practice determines extent of engagement with the philosophy and therefore the extent of 'understanding'. The creation of *Rasa* requires extreme precision in the alignment of the body and the mind of the dancer. Neuman says, '[practice] itself, then, turns into the ultimate lesson where the student interacts with the traditional structures on his/her own individual terms; indeed [...] (practitioners) often regard *riaz* (practice) as an art and an end in itself' (1980, p. 36). Lessons are repeated for months with even senior students taking up to six months to learn a fifteen minute composition. Practice becomes 'important as a source of ideas, an institution of continuing discipline, a route for continuing refinement' (Neuman, 1990, p. 35). Learning how to practice is an important achievement for a dance student so that it does not merely become a habit, but rather evolves into a process that requires reflexive concentration. Repetition is not merely doing the same thing over and over again, but a process by which the knowledge can be embodied. A few decades ago the practice of having mirrored dance classes in India was unheard of; even today most traditional classrooms do not have a mirror. Dancers learn to master movement not by gazing into the mirror and objectifying their bodies but by a reflexive awareness of the way their bodies move.

Practice is done alone or in the presence of a select group of people. This is to separate practice from performance. Practice is when liberties can be taken, new ideas can be tried out and experimentation in execution might take place. Practice gives space for making mistakes and silent contemplation of experience unadulterated by spectator expectations, criticism or praise and opinions. 'When I practice I don't know what I am practicing [so] I don't want others to listen to my practice' (Neuman, 1980, p. 40). 'Most of your dance happens in your mind. You have to isolate yourself to know what *you* are thinking' my teacher would say, while teaching an exceptionally difficult *abhinaya* piece. 'I can teach you the choreography, but I can't teach you to bring *Radha* alive on stage'. Through hours of repetitive

practice the dancer begins to embody the instructions of the Guru; internalising and actualising the dance within him/herself. These hours spent in individual (often lonely) *saadhana* fill in the un-teachable and un-expressible elements of dance. 'Without actualization [...] the master's knowledge has been imparted but not transmitted' (Simms, 1994, p. 8)

Vatsyayan (1968) has written extensively on the conceptual framework of the Indian laws of movement. She says '[t]he mere fact of my physicality determines certain possibilities of relationship with the space outside and the relationship with the self within' (Vatsyayan, 1968, p. 4). The amalgamation of the mind and body with the spirit, rather than their disconnection, in contrast to Cartesian western philosophy, highlights the primacy of the bodily experience and knowledge in the making of the traditional Indian dancer.

I think therefore 'I' am

Defining itself as a 'Theory of Praxis', in the opening line of the *Natyashastra*, the author says, 'I am creating a theory and text on performance, of practice and experimentation' (Vatsyayan, 1996, p. 38). Yet it is often difficult to associate creativity with seemingly repetitive actions in the traditional dance repertoire, if creative behaviour is associated with rejection of the norm. Artistic creativity in India often involves a re-interpretation of traditional ideas and is not always a complete break from the past or an original piece of art or an innovative solution to the problem. The emphasis is on the quality of the subjective experience as enriching or meaningful. This is what determines the experience of creativity rather than the judgment of the external world regarding its novelty. Creativity might then be seen as a cognitive ability to re/structure one's experience and perceptions into embodied patterns of doing. 'It is then the pre-objective, pre-linguistic perceptual/cognitive process that works creatively to configure experience' (Sklar, 2008, p. 94).

Yet it is not pre-cultural in that, rather than being a universal value, creativity is subject to a cultural interpretation. Deidre Sklar elaborates on this; '[i]n different socio-cultural circumstances, people learn to emphasize and value different sensory details of form and quality, different perceptual and expressive media, and different ways of processing somatosensory information' (2008, p. 95). Innovativeness, uniqueness and originality of products of art may hold no value for certain cultures where the artist works incessantly at what may appear to be a seemingly repetitive task (Sen & Sharma, 2011). Creativity can then be understood as ways of expanding what we already know, understand and can do—therefore it becomes an aspect of learning. In a traditional dance class, even though each student is learning a fixed movement vocabulary, because learning is primarily kinaesthetic, each student makes their own connections to the idea of the movement. Each student manifests these connections through engagement; hours of *riyaz* practice. The same *abhinaya* piece performed by different students of one teacher is never the same; neither does it remain the same when done by the same individual over a number of years. In spite of learning the same movement or choreography, each student in the class engages at a different level with the semantics of dance. Each student brings into the class his/her own individuality, which when merged with seemingly repetitive or rigid movement code of the dance style, reflects the personality of the dancer. Even while

performing the same pieces over the years, I have realized that my engagement with them has changed as I evolved as a person through my life experiences. Even as I perform the same choreography over the years, it feels different; to both me and the audience.

Evoking the body as the locator of the truth of existence—or the reality we live—brings together both reason and sensuality, intellect and perception, mind and body (Shapiro, 1999, p. 50).

If moving bodies perform in innovative ways, it is not because they manage to move without acquired gestural routines but because they gain knowledge as a result of performing them. The “practical enskillment of human subject” involves, as Tim Ingold has claimed, both the disciplining of the body and the discovery of the individual body’s singular capacities of awareness and response (Noland, 2009, p. 7).

Accessing traditional forms, through a concrete language of the body for understanding creativity, discipline, innovativeness and individuality, inscribed within cultural organizations of kinetic vitality (Sklar, 2008, p. 101) allows for the dancer’s existential life situations to become the starting point of a critical dance pedagogy. The primacy of kinaesthetic knowledge can allow traditional pedagogies to be empowering as their inherent flexibility supports a number of possibilities that may be realized differently for different individuals.

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1. Guru—loosely translated to mean teacher. The term signifies a strong pedagogical/spiritual bond with the student that extends beyond the class hours.
 2. Rasa Theory is the theory that underlines the Indian art aesthetic based on ‘relishing’ the experience of producing and viewing the art work.
 3. Guru-Shishya Parampara—the tradition of a living and learning relationship between the teacher (Guru) and the student (Shishya), signifying the emotional, intellectual and spiritual bonding between them.
 4. Paramparic—traditional, a repository of generations of knowledge, customs and dispositions.
 5. Gurukula—Guru means teacher and *kula* means family. Therefore Gurukul means a place where the student becomes a part of the extended family of the Guru in order to gain knowledge.
 6. Abhinaya—derived from the Sanskrit words *abhi*—towards and *nii*—leading, popularly used to mean the skill of emoting, actually means the art of leading the viewer towards rasa.
 7. Natyashastra—oldest surviving manual on stagecraft in the world, written in Sanskrit between 200AD and 200 BC.
 8. Radha—a popular female protagonist in traditional dance narratives.
 9. Chauk—basic stance in Odissi.
 10. Aramandi—basic stance of Bharatnatyam.

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This article has not been published, submitted, or accepted for publication elsewhere.

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Biography

A performer and teacher, Aadya Kaktikar has more than two decades of performance and teaching experience in the Odissi Dance form. Her book *Odissi Yaatra—The journey of Guru Mayadhar Raut*, captures the culturally vibrant years of the 40s, 50s and 70s in the field of Odissi dance. Illustrated with rare photographs, the book documents the people and processes involved in the classicisation of Odissi dance post India's Independence. Working at the cusp of education and performance her practice, research and teaching focuses on expanding the vocabulary of traditional Indian dance forms both in pedagogy and practice.