Languid Bodies, Grounded Stances

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Languid Bodies, Grounded Stances: The Curving Pathway of Neoclassical Odissi Dance
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The Curving Pathway of Neoclassical Odissi Dance

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For Armaan and Manav,
who have taught me the magic of stillness,
the joy of movement,
and everything in between.

And I dance
a dance
of optimism and doubt,
of airy thrills tending centered desire.
All steps new or partly new,
dragging as they will
movements habitual,
arcs of body normalized with years
of expectations, conventions, pledges, loves.

And I dance
these winged arcs as countermoves,
crosscuts gaining then falling somewhat back
on what was,
on inactions and actions, dances claiming
they must be.
While more and more this new choreography
takes hold
and lifts
these confiding steps of my creation.

And we dance
this dance together and alone,
when we risk the change that creates and destroys.
When we erase our sacred *mudras* immediately
after completing the prayer,
when even the new gestures thrill us
we check or erase out of guilt,
since it may not yet align with what
our feared audience expects.
Because we fear our own good treasures,
and because it contrasts
with the symbols we know
so well,
we dance imperfectly.

But we dance.

When we hear the din of our aloneness,
is this the watermark of a beloved dancer's last move?
I grieve the deleted passage,
like the late passage of your bodily
grace and precision—your attention and careful presence,
Elysium incarnate—
a second after your arms
and thighs have cut past that portion of air
like the swish of the iguana's tail
in the jewels of sunlight
from a moment ago.

And yet I dance
in joy
because I see and sense and know you,
your raga,
trailing now through all my stars,
and mirroring
the tracks in my soul.

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Introduction

Towards a Global Community

To speak about bodies is first and foremost to explore the ways in which bodies move.

—Erin Manning, *The Politics of Touch*

How and when the Indian considered the body as an essential prerequisite for transcending the body constitutes a total history of Indian thought.

—Kapila Vatsayan, *Traditional Indian Theatre*

Towards the end of my anthropological fieldwork for this project, I interviewed respected author and dance critic Leela Venkataraman to ask about the future of odissi dance.[1] As we sat in the lobby of the India International Centre in New Delhi, surrounded by leafy Lodhi Gardens, she said:

> More and more people will learn odissi, there is no question. I have a feeling that people who dance outside [India] will know very little of either the Odia language or the Odia poetry. They are going to associate the dance form with just the movements and nothing else. I think it's only the technique that is going to become more and more popular. The form and the content, I think they are going to split.[2]

Here I was in the middle of conducting my research, excited by new directions traversed by odissi dancers worldwide, when her remarks squelched my enthusiasm. Was it because I didn't believe form and content could be so easily divorced from one another, and because oftentimes form *is* content? Or did my discomfort

proceed from the part of her comment that privileged the geographical context of Odisha over others, thus cutting against the core of my study of a global community? Or was it for more personal reasons because I was one of "them"—dancers who now live and perform outside India? Obviously, there were several perspectives to unpack in her comments. First, Venkataraman makes a clear distinction between the form and the content of odissi dance, where "form" refers to technique. Second, she is of the view that odissi dancers, especially those outside India, will think of odissi just as the frame without the essence, that they will learn and perform the technique and/or form without an understanding of the content and without awareness of the context from which it emerges. For her, the latter is exhibited by the language or poetry of Odisha, dimensions she believes are integral to the dance form. And her remarks, while not explicit, seem to perpetuate a well-worn argument that dancers outside India are not as authentic as their homegrown counterparts—a narrative I heard often during my fieldwork and chafed against as a global practitioner of the form. While I did not agree with her, I was also unable to shrug off her comments. I too had seen several odissi performances in the US choreographed to Bollywood or Western music. These performances ranged from highly creative productions to less polished versions. The ones that were less effective were not so because they were performed outside India or to non-Odia music, but because the dancers appeared less experienced. I had also seen odissi dancers in Odisha, replete with regional context, performing with sloppy technique that did little justice to the rigor and grace of the form. I knew that the simple binary of form versus content set up by Venkataraman did not tell a complete story.

Yet, I could not ignore her comments. Venkataraman's assertions are extremely relevant in light of the commodification of "world dance." Her concerns alert us to the dangers of dance performed outside its "original" context and how certain aspects of non-Western forms have been cherry-picked and appropriated in the West as "world dance" (Savigliano 2009), and indigenous and regional specificities have been reduced to dance notation but mostly have been erased by regularization of movement (Foster 2009). In writing this manuscript, and unpacking Venkataraman's comments, it is increasingly clear that these knotty questions are tethered to equally knotty answers. This book is an attempt to untangle some of these questions and answers, and their corresponding points of attachment. For example, the above-mentioned concern of the split between form and content may actually reflect an anxiety over a lack of authenticity seeping into odissi dance. This book not only engages with the question I posed to the critic about odissi's future but proceeds with an understanding that odissi's future is deeply tied to odissi's past. I also ask other related questions, such as what notion of "tradition(s)" guides these movement practices, and how are they being recreated in a global context? How do odissi dancers engage with an embodied practice that has its roots in a ritual form and is now performed

nationally and transnationally? How does the performance of odissi, originally a regional dance form from Odisha called *Odra Magadha* (first or second century BCE)[3] reify, or perhaps challenge notions of national identity and complicate discourses of diversity in India and abroad? How does choreographic innovation take place within a dance form that is celebrated for its antiquity? Further, how do these dancers deal with Indian dance being a "religious/spiritual" form of expression, and a marker of "essential" Indian identity, in a neoliberal context? Finally, what embodiment of the form will enable the evolution of the art as opposed to its atrophy? Many of these questions are not limited to odissi dance but pertain to other Indian classical dance forms as well, and they continue to be debated in academic writing.

Taking all these questions into account, this book focuses on odissi dance that is deeply anchored in *both* form and content, and in work that breaks new ground. These are works that may or may not use Odia poetry yet capture the poetry and geometry of the form; works that may or may not have been created within the regional boundaries of Odisha yet build on its richness of language, complexity, nuance, and rigor. In this book, I argue that the form and content of odissi, along with its context, have *always* been in dynamic engagement with one another, and the story of odissi and the dancers in this ethnography provides varying refractions of this engagement. Although the regional context may shift, these dancers create new contexts. And whether dancers perform Krishna-Radha stories and enact mythological demons, or use the form to focus on transnational feminist issues, odissi is grounded by the geometry and the undulations of the dancing body that carries its own context and creates it anew.

Odissi: The Form

What is the form of odissi? How does it feel to dance odissi? Odissi is made up of two basic positions, *chowka* (square) and *tribhanga* (three bends). *Chowka* is a symmetrical, solid stance, rooted to the ground in a deep knee bend formation. The weight is equally distributed on two feet, with heels (placed half a foot-length apart) pointed towards each other and toes pointed out to the sides. The arms, held out to the sides at shoulder height, are bent at ninety degrees at the elbow to form a square, with fingers together and pointing forward. The back is straight, head and eyes forward, pelvis dropped towards the ground, and abdominal muscles engaged. After a few minutes of being stationary in this position, the thighs start to cramp, the arms tire, and the lower back aches as sweat begins to form along the spine. In the first basic exercise of lifting and placing one foot then the other, the act of transferring the weight from foot to foot brings sweet but momentary relief. All told, the practice and training of odissi is extremely strenuous and taxes the body. I discuss the *sadhana* (practice) in more detail in Chapter 2.

Tribhanga involves the three bends of the neck, torso, and knee and is, unlike *chowka*, an asymmetrical stance. The majority of weight is on one leg while the other leg is free to move. The weighted leg must be stolid and provide balance for the rest of the dancing body. The *tribhanga* position is often described as creating a gentle "S" shape with the body. In both *chowka* and *tribhanga*, the torso undulates from left to right, but not in a straight line. The torso traces a small and gentle arc upwards over the belly button to the right and back while the hips remain stationary. Generally, the gaze follows the hands, and if the hands are in a static position they follow the arc of the torso.

The odissi dancer moves continually and fluidly between these two basic stances of *chowka* and *tribhanga*, adding a multitude of permutations, which involve feet, hands, eyes, torso, arms, jumps, turns, and leg movements. The dancing of odissi contains an inherent paradox: the bent legs provide a strong base; at the same time, this groundedness is essential for the freedom and graceful fluidity of the upper body. Performed skillfully, the dancer moves languidly while the hard work of the legs goes unseen. The practice of the dance accentuates the hips with the uneven weight shifts in *tribhanga* and the arcing undulation of the torso. Visiting Odisha, it is possible to see how such movement originated in a coastal and tropical state where the humidity envelops one for most of the year and movement is often slow and deliberate. Moreover, the temple sculptures that odissi lays claim to celebrate the generous curve of the hips and the roundedness of the breast.

The codification of many Indian classical dance forms, including odissi, as I discuss in detail later, involved a removal of the eroticism of the dance in response to critical colonial writings. Despite this erasure, the form of odissi with its languid, circular movements is inherently sensual; even the *chaali* (walk) on and off stage is rounded, with the torso making a figure eight, and is rarely executed traveling in a straight line. The circularity of odissi's form and directionality is accomplished by using pivots, arcs, and spirals in the body. If a dancer is to walk starting on her right, she will lift her right leg, place the right heel down near the left toes, and pivot from left to right rotating her body on the heel. As her right toes arc open to the right, her torso traces an arc up and over from left to right, and spirals so that the left shoulder comes forward. Jagannath, the temple deity for whom this dance was originally performed, gives us many clues for odissi's stances and movements. *Chowka* is similar to his square stance as depicted in clay. The emphasis on roundedness in odissi can be traced to the all-seeing eyes of Jagannath, circles of black, surrounded by white and outlined in red believed to symbolize infinity. *Tribhanga* is most commonly associated with the stance of Krishna, weighted to one side, languidly playing his flute.

Bodies, Bells, and Borders

Featured prominently in Michael Jackson's 1991 "Black or White" video is a female odissi dancer.[4] Performing at a busy traffic intersection, Yamuna Sangarasivam performs with Michael Jackson to the lyrics:

They print my message
In the Saturday Sun
I had to tell them
I ain't second to none

And I told about equality
An' it's true
Either you're wrong
Or you're right

But, if you're thinkin'
about my baby
It don't matter if you're
black or white.

The odissi dancer performing is one of many "world performers" in the video, showcased between American Indians dancing outdoors amidst gunfire and horses, and Russian performers moving in front of the Kremlin beneath swirling

Figure 0.1. Still from Michael Jackson's 1991 "Black or White" video.

snowflakes. The twenty-two seconds of the odissi sequence feature Sangarasivam with Jackson on a traffic island as cars zip by, in front and behind them.

This particular segment culminates in a perfectly timed spin for both and a look of mutual exchange. Sangarasivam holds up a *darpan* or mirror, a classic odissi pose often associated with Radha as she dresses for her secret tryst with Krishna. The song became the best-selling single of 1991, and shortly after Jackson's death in 2010 the video was recirculated on the odissi yahoo group. This was not the only odissi cameo in global pop music; in 1998, several years after the initial release of "Black or White," Madonna performed alongside the California-based Patnaik sisters at the MTV awards. Trained in odissi, Laboni (20), Shibani (17), and Shalini (16) choreographed and performed odissi in its traditional idiom, alongside the famous pop star. Moving to a more literary instantiation, the young Kashmiri village girl, Boonyi, featured in celebrated novelist Salman Rushdie's 2005 novel *Shalimar the Clown*, at the behest of the visiting US ambassador, is to take odissi classes with a legendary guru as a way to inculcate in her the training and sensuality associated with the dance form (Hejmadi 2010). While these appearances in music videos of well-known pop stars and in the work of world-renowned novelists legitimize odissi in some ways, they also place the dance form on a buffet table of multiculturalism to perpetuate an image of an unchanging and traditional, yet highly visual and sensual dance form. These cameo appearances of odissi dance are helpful to contextualize the dance within a global economy; but as tempting as it might be to conduct an analysis of these glimpses, they are not the focus of this study. Instead I am interested in odissi dancers who are at the forefront of the story, who are choreographing work, and changing the form to push it in new directions, and to give the reader a glimpse beyond the *darpan* or mirror that is held up for us.

A March 2005 issue of *India Today* (International Edition), a magazine that claims a global readership in excess of fifteen million, has on its cover three Indian dancers. These dancers are from Ananya Dance Theatre, a Minneapolis-based dance company working on an odissi-derived production. They are, however, a departure from the odissi dancers who typically represent this dance form, and who often adorn posters advertising Indian tourism. The 2006 "Incredible !ndia" tourism advertising campaign uses odissi dancers in several images, especially dancers with winsome expressions, sculpted poses, colorful silk costumes, and elaborate silver jewelry. By contrast, the dancers on the cover of the *India Today* magazine are dressed in cotton saris wrapped over black leotards, their disheveled hair untied to the waist, red *sindhoor* powder smeared across their hands and foreheads, and their expressions bold and fierce. The cover story, entitled "Para Troupers," seems to comment on this departure, suggesting an odissi avant-garde, of dancers trouping across borders.

The article goes on to explain how these dancers are reworking "classical" Indian dance forms (such as odissi) for a global audience. While the image on

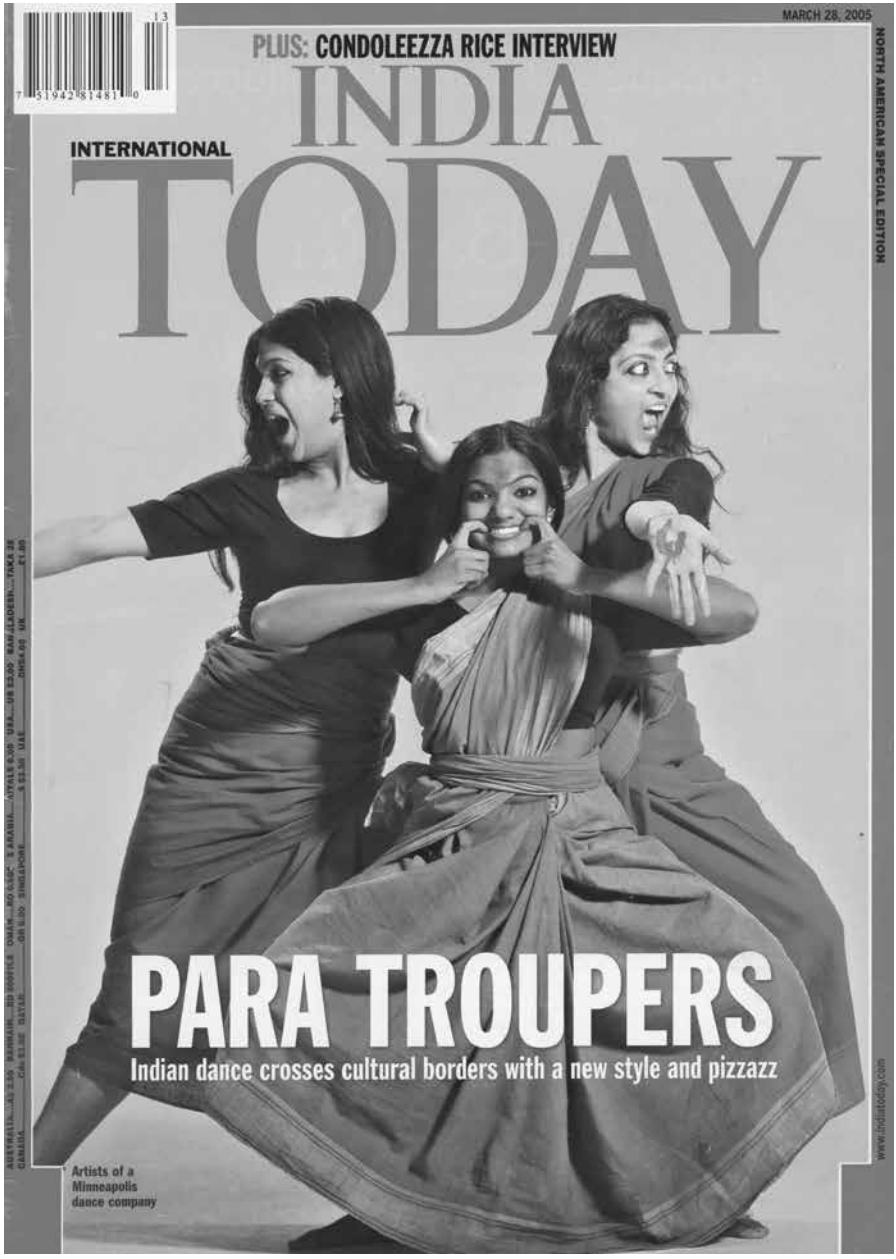

Figure 0.2. March 2005 cover of India Today magazine (International Edition).

the magazine cover and the accompanying article address new forms of Indian classical dance, the coverage remains a sensationalized depiction by mainstream media. By contrast, the ethnographic and theoretical study in the present work builds on the history of odissi dance and its transformation from a ritual in a sacralized space to a transnational performance in the public sphere.

Odissi's story is one of postcolonial India, a tale of the struggle around tradition, gender, class, caste, regionalism, nationalism, and globalism. As one of eight Indian "classical" dance forms, odissi's compelling narrative takes place at the intersection of colonial discourse, nationalist historiographies, and regional identities. Although archaeological evidence traces it to the second century BCE, odissi was officially codified in 1958 by a group of odissi dancers and scholars who came together to reconstruct the dance,[5] a fact elided in most narratives that invoke a seamless trajectory back to antiquity.

In 1991, with the beginning of neoliberal reform and a consolidation of a middle class economy and identity in India, odissi emerged on the national and global stage in a way that is different to its prior heyday. India's increased interaction with global capital over the last few decades has been viewed by some as a threat to national identity (Oza 2006: 2). With the desire to preserve a "national" heritage in mind, dancers sometimes rely on an essentialized notion of "Hindu culture" to forward the form of odissi; others challenge nationalist discourse through politically inspired expressions and performances. These varied claims to "Indianness" by a wide array of odissi dancers are often politically deployed and can embody a range of meanings, from alienation from the homeland to a conflation of "Hindu" culture with right-wing Hindutva ideologies. As the debate about India as the next "superpower" continues,[6] sites of performance have become increasingly crucial locations of study, especially as the interplay between globalization and nationalism occupies cultural sites with often competing agendas. Consequently, this study of odissi dance is not only an expression of a "local culture" or "tradition," but one that conceptualizes the dance form as a politicized genre—a dance that renders itself amenable to different ideological usages and contestations. Based on ethnographic material and historical analysis within this socio-economic landscape I show that for many of these dancers the "performing body" is not only a site of aesthetic expression, but also one that manifests myriad positionalities of gender, class, and region as it traverses multiple borders and subjective notions of belonging.

Framing the Dance

Painting in broad strokes, Dipesh Chakrabarty describes an epistemological split present in the "fault line central to modern European social thought." On the one hand, there exists a hermeneutic tradition, best represented by Heidegger, that produces "affective histories"; on the other hand, there is the analytic tradition of Marx that tries to "demystify ideology" (Chakrabarty 2000: 18). Using

these two schools of thought in his discussion of South Asian political modernity, Chakrabarty attempts to bring both intellectual traditions into the same conversation. Like him, I try to find a balance between these two trajectories of social thought and bring them into dialogue with one another. Within the hermeneutic tradition, I study the "affective" history of odissi by paying attention to the diversity of local identities of gender, geography, and class of these practicing odissi dancers to ask questions such as: how does this community of dancers create and imbue meaning into their daily lives? What does odissi, and the practice of it, mean to them, and how is it enacted? What are the specificities and contradictions in this practice and performance? This study is also placed within a Marxist analytic tradition of looking at how the ideologies of nationalism and neoliberalism govern the ways in which these dancers are able to dance. For example, how do neoliberal economies in India affect the professional and artistic choices these dancers make? How has odissi's presence on a global stage changed its practice and performance? By placing this study between these two approaches and keeping a balance between these two different frameworks of social thought, I am able to look at the dancer as both a participant in a global economic framework and one who creates a particular place of belonging for herself. To that end, I approach this study as a dancer on stage looking out, and use two distinct Sanskrit terms that describe different facets of seeing: *drishti* and *darsan*. These terms function as both conceptual and bodily anchors in my work as a dancer and scholar.

I use the term *drishti* to describe my study of the affective histories of odissi as described above. *Drishti* loosely translates as a "focused gaze" or a gaze of intentionality, an awareness of the body in space. The act of *drishti* is not merely looking; it is the physical act of seeing. For dancers, *drishti* is paramount—the dancer's direct gaze signals an intentionality of movement. In odissi, the dancer's *drishti* most often follows her hand movements, but can also be the gaze of the character she is performing. If she dances as Radha, as she hears enchanting flute music she gazes in the direction of Krishna with her own *drishti*. Thus she also directs the audience's gaze to see Krishna's mythic presence through her *drishti*. The yoga and meditation practitioner also uses her *drishti* to pick a fixed point in space to develop concentration or keep balance. We tend to think of seeing as a cognitive function, "as a disembodied, beam like 'gaze'" (Csordas 1994: 138). But we can also conceptualize visual attention as a "turning towards"; the phenomenological idea of "paying attention *with* one's body" rather than simply looking is helpful in deepening our understanding of *drishti*. This project, too, is not simply about gazing or looking but looking as an intentional, bodily act, a looking by which we pay attention with our bodies.

In the practice of dance training, *drishti* can also be understood as developing a keen sense of body awareness. The dancer becomes aware of how her body "feels" in performing movement as well as how it feels moving in space,

a skill that is crucial for a performer. Using mirrors during dance practice can be helpful in self-correcting and perfecting movement, but it can also prevent a performer from fully developing a sensorial awareness of their body. It can become a crutch that is not available during performance, when *drishti* is essential. In a parallel fashion, I use *drishti* in my research and writing; as a way to keep our conceptual gaze clear and intent, yet soft to allow for multiple ways of seeing, and to keep focused on the dance and the body of the dancer, focused on "turning towards" the intimate detail. The "mirror" in my research is akin to narratives of odissi dance that see odissi in a singular dimension. These "mirror" narratives, while helpful in my research and the formation of my argument, are incomplete without the sensorial awareness of the dancer in space.

Similarly, *darsan* is intimately connected to the practice and cultural context of odissi, and is a term I use to describe the analytical categories used in this study. *Darsan* means "sight"— beholding in a spiritual context, an intentional viewing of a deity, such as in a temple, as well as the broader notion of visual perception of the divine. In Hinduism, the clay deity represents the divine and its eyes are typically the last feature to be fashioned. Moreover, religious practice in India is not complete with "just" prayer; *seeing* the deity is also central (Eck 1998). The viewing of the divine by the devotee is a relational form of seeing: if I am able to see the divine, then it follows that I am seen. The term *darsan* then describes a religious experience central to Hindu worship and is often expressed colloquially, as in, "I went to the temple and had a good *darsan* today."

Odissi originated as dance performed in Jagannath Temple and for the deity of Jagannath. Even though odissi has transformed itself into a dance that is performed on a global stage and in transnational contexts, its bodily training and repertoire are still performed with the deity of Jagannath placed in the space or with an awareness of his presence. Most of odissi's various schools of dance (*gurukuls* and *gharanas*) perform with Jagannath present on stage,[7] and this presence of the divine is then embodied within the dancer, who switches between performing the role of devotee and the deity. Even though the audience may not be privy to her *darsan*, her awareness of Jagannath is ever present.

This study then is fashioned as two different ways of seeing: *drishti* to focus on the immediate, the dancing body, and the form's "affective histories"; and *darsan*, a way of seeing that which is not always perceptible, a viewing of structural forces at work around odissi and analysis of their ramifications for the form and its practitioners. Like the dancer on stage who sees inside and outside her body, I attempt to do both in this study—to use my *drishti* and *darsan* as a practitioner/scholar looking inside the experience of being an odissi practitioner and at the affective communities of odissi practice, and looking outside at the larger societal context that frames the practices of odissi. Doniger in *The Hindus: An Alternative History* describes dualism[8] as "the Indian way of thinking":

> It is, I think no accident that India is the land that developed the technique of interweaving two colors of silk threads so that the fabric is what they call peacock's neck, blue if you hold it one way, green another (or sometimes pink, or yellow or purple), and, if you hold it right, both at once. (Doniger 2009: 11)

Although I argue that the term "dualism" as used by Doniger suggests two fixed entities, in my analysis of odissi I attempt to describe a dynamic process, a dialogue between moving parts, a *jugalbandhi*. *Jugalbandhi* roughly translates as "entwined twins," and is a term used mostly in Indian classical music to describe a performance of two musicians of equal status in which they engage in a dynamic but structured improvisation. It is a performance of sympathetic exchange, each musician exhibiting their unique characteristics but always maintaining a balance. And like any other duet it is one in which each participant shifts and changes their position constantly. Sometimes one performer comes into focus, and the other recedes momentarily; but then they trade and eventually join together in a ringing climax. Similarly, my hope is that this book allows for such a dual framing of the specificities and contradictions of the daily lives of odissi dancers, as well as the larger framework within which they operate. This dialogic and dialectical *jugalbandhi* between a global odissi community and the immediate and local realities of each dancer cannot be overstated.

Alternative Narratives

My study offers a five-part alternative to standard national and historical narratives of odissi. First, I interrogate odissi as a neoclassical dance, rather than as a "traditional" and unchanging form. By neoclassical, I mean a dance form that engages with the "classical" (however problematic that term may be) in new and unseen ways. The term "classical" is not an indigenous one. It is a Western category that has been widely adopted by practitioners of Indian dance.[9] Some dancers have adopted the term neoclassical (Lopez y Royo 2003b)[10] but it is not in wide usage because of the prevailing myth that all Indian classical dance traces its lineage seamlessly to that iconic Hindu treatise, the *Natya Shastra*.[11] Even though discourses of "tradition" and "antiquity" are continuously employed in the commoditization of odissi, each dancer's engagement with tradition is a dynamic one and contributes to the broad variance of the dance as it is performed and practiced today. In this book I look at contemporary sites of choreographic innovation, sites that depart from the traditional *margam* (repertoire) and that dance scholars often ignore because such artistic practices are viewed as breaking allegiances with classical culture. Instead, I argue that such departures are integral to the story of odissi, an interrupted history, and that these departures have enacted and continue to enact the practice of a new odissi tradition. To be clear, these sites of choreographic innovation are not entirely new but the inclusion of