Scripting Dance in Contemporary India

Edited by

MARATT MYTHILI ANOOP and VARUN GULATI

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LEXINGTON BOOKS
Lanham • Boulder • New York • London

Published by Lexington Books
An imprint of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706
www.rowman.com

Unit A, Whitacre Mews, 26-34 Stannary Street, London SE11 4AB

"Nautch Girl: The dancing girl in the 'European' gaze" by Dr. Ruchika Sharma, originally published in AKADEMOS, ISSN number 2231-0584, vol. – V, 2010-11 (Journal of Kamala Nehru College, University of Delhi). Reprinted by permission of Akademos.

"Building a Natya Shastra" by Anandi Leela Salinas, published by Proquest in 2011. Reprinted by permission of Anandi Leela Salinas and Proquest.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Anoop, Maratt Mythili, editor. | Gulati, Varun, editor.
Title: Scripting dance in contemporary India / edited by Maratt Mythili Anoop and Varun Gulati.
Description: Lanham, Maryland : Lexington Books, [2016] | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2015038213| ISBN 9781498505512 (cloth : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781498505529 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Dance–India–History.
1. Aesthetics.
Classification: LCC GV1693 .S53 2016 | DDC 793.3/1954–dc23 LC record available at http://lccn.loc.gov/2015038213

™ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

Printed in the United States of America

Contents

Acknowledgments

This project has been a collaborative enterprise from the start. The inspiration has been drawn from several lectures, presentations, performances, and writings of artists and scholars. We have only been instrumental in bringing together the writings in this volume.

Dance studies in India is still a niche area, and scholars, practitioners, and critics of Indian dance form a geographically dispersed community persuaded by a deep interest for dance. In the last few decades, academia in India has recognized dance as a field of research, and the number of scholars working on the various forms of Indian dance have been steadily increasing. This venture has been an attempt to bring together an eclectic range of work on Indian dance/dance in/from India by practitioners, scholars, and journalists.

We are grateful to have some of the most established names in Indian dance research on our advisory/editorial board: Pallabi Chakravorty, Swarthmore College, United States, and Uttara Asha Coorlawala, Bernard College, United States, whose advice and comments have transformed our work. We are grateful to Prof. MilindMalshe, IIT Bombay and Prof. Sangeetha Menon, NIAS, Bangalore for their support and encouragement. This volume would not have been possible without the patient and rigorous efforts of our contributors. Dr. C Rajendran, retired professor, University of Calicut, has contributed a special chapter on our invitation, despite his engagements and travels. I would also especially like to mention Justine Lemos's work, which promises to be path-breaking in research on Mohiniyattam, and we are privileged to have her work in this volume. We are also indebted to Lindsey Porambo of Lexington Books for steadily steering this volume to shore.

Introduction

Maratt Mythili Anoop and Varun Gulati

In many ways, this is an exciting time to write about dance in India. Dance is growing into a ubiquitous phenomenon; there is an increasing consciousness of dance and its benefits; a greater openness to dance across people of different age groups. Dance has always been a part of celebration in several of our regional cultures. Today, more than ever, big fat Indian weddings irrespective of tradition have dance as an integral part: wedding choreographers are called upon to train the entire family to dance on the eve of the wedding. There are hobby classes spurting up in every street offering everything from the classical staples to exotic belly dance, classes that promise to train students to win contests, housewives to lose weight, and offer the elderly "dance therapy." In urban India, festivals for classical and contemporary dance exist galore; every occurrence and issue such as women's safety, or a natural calamity becomes an occasion to organize a festival to either raise awareness or funds. Dance is also celebrated for its own sake through events such as the World Dance Day. Despite the omnipresence of dance, the heightened awareness of its nature as a high art and as a medium to communicate socially relevant messages, the critical academic study of dance in India is restricted to a few pockets. There remains a need to probe what is everywhere, yet is "out-of awareness,"[1] and this volume makes a modest attempt in that direction.

Dance is a form of symbolic behavior constitutive of culture, whose forms are coded in accordance with their functions and contexts of performance. In the words of the anthropologist Judith Lynne Hanna, "Dances are social acts that contribute to the continual emergence of culture."[2] Cultural codes and conventions are scripted into movement vocabularies and subtly articulate the dynamics of power in particular societies. This volume comprises chapters that address in overt or implicit ways this act of scripting

ideas of the exotic, the erotic, the classicism, nationhood, sacredness, entertainment, social engagement, and marginality either in the technique and articulation of dance languages or the textual and mediated representations of dance and dancers.

The word "contemporary" finds wide currency in academics and has more than a single implication. As an adjective the word can imply the contemporary as a style, or the contemporary as a period that is unfolding. As a style or form, "contemporary Indian dance," according to Kethu Katrak, involves the work of dancers "who create a hybrid form with traditional Indian dance and other movement vocabularies" and present "cutting edge themes of gender and sexuality."[3] She differentiates this group from dancers who innovate from their base in a traditional form by extending their practice to include new themes, new music, or costumes. She describes the contemporary style as one in which "Indian traditional vocabulary may echo even as it is being deliberately played with, distorted and presented in unfamiliar ways, often disrupted from its symmetry" and that makes "different demands on the audience's imagination."[4] As a noun, the meaning of the word "contemporary" establishes a relation of shared temporality between people/phenomena. Any study of the contemporary implies turning the toolkit of theory to the present, to what is in process and recognizes the relational, contemporaneous presence of the enquirer as an observer or participant.

SCHOLARSHIP ON INDIAN DANCE

Scholarship on dance in India is not a modern phenomenon. Anybody with even a perfunctory awareness of Indian dance would have heard about the *Natyasastra* (200 BC–200 AD), a text which has been accorded an originary status as far as Indian dance is concerned. There has been a body of literature on Indian dance, several, deriving from the *Natyasastra* that, including commentaries and texts of a prescriptive and descriptive nature, lasted well until the late medieval period. Since the cultural negotiations with the West induced by colonization and its aftermath, the body of literature on Indian dance has burgeoned. This has been led partly by an awakening to the value of documenting dance, for its value as a traditional and historic art which faced threats of extinction, or for the sheer novelty of emerging styles in a new nation. A great deal of scholarship has been aimed at reviving extinct forms based on textual/sculptural evidence, enquiries into ancient and medieval Sanskrit texts that describe dances in systematized and nuanced ways, studies that established the civilizational superiority of India as a nation.

Mandakranta Bose in *Speaking of Dance* (2001) offers a lucid categorization of the historiography of Indian dance, which she says evolved in three stages. The first stage involved a systematization of dance by Bharata in the

Natyasastra resulting in the creation of a "pan-Indian Sanskritic tradition"[5] which in turn gave rise to several commentaries on the text. The era ends with Abhinavagupta's *Abhinavabharati*. The next stage is marked by Sarngdeva text, *Sangitaratnakara,* which for the first time treated music and dance as independent arts. In addition, he gave authenticity to the regional styles of dance, which in Bose's view reflected the "general trend of the time towards opening the exclusive world of Sanskritic culture . . . to regional languages and cultures."[6] Despite this expansion of the tradition to incorporate various indigenous styles, the hierarchy of the Greater Sanskrit tradition in the form of *marga* and the smaller *desi* styles existed. The third stage begins with the Persian and Moghul influences on Indian dance leading to the creation of a new style, Kathak. This period lasted until the eighteenth century with the beginning of colonization and the decline in patronage of the arts in general.

The beginning of the twentieth century was marked by the renaissance of classicism in the Indian performing arts. A handful of revivalists embarked on a nationalist mission to save the traditional arts of music and dance from oblivion. They discovered in these practices tokens of a cultural heritage uninfluenced by the colonizer's culture and that would be constitutive of "Indianness." In this context, Kapila Vatsyayan (2013) notes:

> There were many who were sensitive to the rich heritage which lay around like the fragments of a broken mirror. They realized that the fragments needed to be reassembled, refurnished and rejuvenated. Rukmini Devi was drawn to dance not as a vocation or a profession, even though it was Anna Pavlova who first ignited the passion for dance in her. For her it was a nationalist urge. She reassembled and created a neoclassical style which we today call Bharatanatyam.[7]

Contemporary scholars of Indian dance have told the story of the reassembling and reconstitution of regional dances as classical arts. Such an enterprise, as Vatsyayan notes above, motivated by an acute need to define "Indianness" was the result of the contact with the West.[8] The encounter of the colonizer's culture provided a compelling situation to excavate and rediscover authentic forms of precolonial Indian knowledge.

Contemporary scholarship on Indian dance consists of a traditionalist discourse, situating the practice of Indian dance within a historical and spiritual tradition, and a critical global discourse, that adopts a wide range of theoretical paradigms such as postcolonialism, feminism, and Marxism to address particular forms of practice. In the first instance, the work of exponents of classical dance such as Padma Subramanyam and Kanak Rele are exemplars. Kalpana Ram (2010) provides an insightful summary of the nature of this scholarship:

> The writing is lit up from within by the luminous aesthetics of Indian dance traditions. But the very tightness of the embrace between dancer and discourse means there is virtually no space for the potentially unsettling questions of social theory, those that concern the wider, social, political, and historical horizons within which these traditions are shaped and reshaped.[9]

The second kind of scholarship involves the work of several dancer-scholars such as Uttara Asha Coorlawala, Pallabi Chakravorty, Avanthi Meduri, Janet O'Shea, and others, who merge a cultural studies perspective with their embodied forms of knowledge as performers and practitioners. The considerable scholarly contribution of KapilaVatsyayan and Mandakranta Bose, however, illustrate both tendencies.

OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

The present volume presents an eclectic range of scholarship that approaches Indian dance at a regional, national, or global level. The contributors belong to varied backgrounds and comprise dancers and nondancers and are persuaded by diverse schools of theory and praxis. In addressing "dance" in its myriad manifestations in India, actions as diverse as the ritualistic performances of possession and bloodletting in a remote village, technologically sophisticated and intricately scripted dance-theater productions, and the *matkas* and *jatkas*[10] to popular Bollywood numbers performed in vulgarly vivid costumes in cigarette-smoke-heavy lights of dingy beer bars in urban India, are all under the same category.

The first section, titled "Representations: Dance/Dancers in Literature," engages with textual representations and illustrations of dance and dancers and the significance of those representations in the present. C. R. Rajendran in "The Sacred and the Profane," presents a macroperspective of the dual nature of Indian dance that incorporates the spiritual and the sensual through an examination of a range of Sanskrit texts, the medieval system of *devadasis*, and extant forms of theatrical dance such as the Koodiyattam. The two tendencies are manifested in distinct ways in the different traditions of dance, and traditional forms of dance in India have to maneuver between these discourses that laud it as a spiritual practice and express suspicion on account of its ability to allure. The two tendencies also find different manifestations across history, and have existed as a tension that gives Indian dance its essential complexity.

Ruchika Sharma's study titled, "The Indian Nautch Girl in the Early Colonial Travel Writing," is based on the ways in which the European male gaze constructs the *nautch* girl as an erotic symbol in writing and the visual arts. She observes the mixed responses of the Europeans to their experiences of dances and dancers in India: *nautch* is seen as an indulgence, and the

nautch girl is seen as an overtly sexual being. The novelty of the experience and the absence of anything similar in their culture led to the misinterpretation of the *devadasi* as the public woman/prostitute/temptress. The *devadasi* represented institutionalized sensuality endorsed by a primitive religion. The art of the *devadasi* was never understood; it was construed merely as a means to allure, and she was seen only as a sexual body.

In the second section, titled "Histories in Process: Stories of Traditions and Travel," the chapters engage with the historiographies of dance forms and suggest that histories are narratives that are continually created. Mohiniyattam, a feminine dance form from Kerala, performed largely by women, and one of the forms to gain the "classical" status, is a form that has not received a lot of critical scholarly attention. Since the work of Betty True Jones in the 1960s, perhaps, Justine Lemos's ethnographic study of the dance is the second such significant work on the dance. Her work gleans much from archival research to present a grounded and evidential historical narrative. The narrative of the dance's origin that has been widely recounted suffers from several ellipses and half-truths. Justine Lemos's chapter addresses the moot point of whether the origins of the classical dance form of Mohiniyattam can be traced to the existence of devadasis in Kerala. She presents the history of the dance in the Travancore and Cochin States, examining the various laws that were passed, the references to the *devadasi* system, and the references in various literatures to Mohiniyattam. In the process, she demonstrates the complexities and intricate regional trajectories in the history of the dance that is often presented through narratives of artists and scholars that overlook and sometimes misrepresent facts of history. She notes significantly that the *devadasi* is a colonial construct, and that the regional variations of the system are too many to justify a single conception of the temple dancer.

In the chapter titled "Building A Natya Shastra,"Anandi Salinas considers oral narratives captured on film and in text of the individual practice of dancers pursuing the forms of Bharatanatyam, Andhra Natyam, and Odissi. She considers the structure of these stories and the underlying assumptions that enable a dialogue between classical Indian dancers all over the world. These assumptions that pertain to notions of tradition, authenticity, and classicality are inevitably present in the individual histories of each practitioner that involve an account of lineages to particular teachers, schools, and texts. Tradition becomes reconstituted time and again through the multiple stories of dancers who define their practice in relation to particular lineages. The concept of public memory becomes relevant in examining how classicality and authenticity are formulated by dancers in relation to the foundational text of the Natya Shastra and in relation to the dynamically constituted traditions of their practice. The *Shastra* (science) of dance becomes reconstituted lending vitality to the traditions of Indian dance through the individual narratives of practitioners.

In the chapter on Thidambu Nrittham written by the exponent of the form, Puthumana Govindan Namboothiri and Govindan P., the various aspects of the form, which has received very little international visibility, have been discussed. The intricacies of the folk ritual such as the patterns of drum beats, the legends depicted, and the costumes used are discussed. The artist also provides his personal narrative as a performer committed to popularizing the form and making it part of the mainstream of traditional Indian dance.

In the chapter "Araimandi and Arabesque: Body and Technique in Bharatanatyam and Ballet," Kelli Ling and Sushmita Arunkumar's article gives an overview of the emergence of Bharatanatyam in the United States beginning with the work of dancers like Ram Gopal and others who created dances based on the theme of India. The article also discusses the appeal that classical Indian dance performances have in contemporary times in the United States. By and large, she subscribes to the idea of a universalist aesthetics of dance that surpasses cultural differences.

In the third section, "Negotiations: Aesthetics and The Dynamics of Globalization," the chapters address the different ways in which dance is embedded in society, and the different ways in which the aesthetics of a form has to negotiate with social, economic, and political imperatives.

In the chapter titled "Changing Landscape of Dance in South India: Effect of Economic Liberalization on Dance Practices and Patronage," Veena Basavarajaiah demonstrates how dance in south India has been shaped by the changing patterns of patronage and sponsorship. Locating her study in the city of Bangalore, she presents a survey of the institutional infrastructure for dance in the city. She points out how the multiple aspects of a dance performance, such as its nomenclature, choreography, accompanying musical score, and costume have been determined by the requirements of the funding agency. Artists create "middle-brow art" for the sake of financial viability. While this accommodation of the interests of the patrons through the creation/modification of compositions has enabled dancers to be full-time performers, dancers often have to make negotiations with their identity and creativity, and the aesthetics of a dance form. While art for art's sake remains a romantic notion, the chapter raises the significant question of the agency of an artist in a milieu where art is routinely manufactured and consumed.

In my exploratory chapter titled "Dancing Narratives: Performing Mythology in Globalized Spaces," I examine classical dance performances through insights from literary pragmatics and attempt to arrive at the different verbal and nonverbal strategies used by performers in urban spaces to connect the traditional themes of Indian mythology to a global/international audience anew with each performance.

Kaustvi Sarkar presents an analysis of Mohana through a rich tapestry of theory which she sees as a difficult whole, a congruence of plural styles and a token of hybridity. In a brief overview of the history of the Maharis, Sarkar

notes that the sexuality of the Maharis did not conform to patriarchal monogamy of the colonizers, which led to the abolishing of the system. Ironically, diasporic Odissi dancers emulate the authenticity and spiritual purity of image of the temple dancer. She demonstrates the performative excess in *Mohana*, which registers resistance by challenging the puritanical norms of Odissi. This is merely one among the several ways in which the work challenges the conventional aesthetic and the work engages with themes of environmental and social justice. Sarkar illustrates how the easy unity of Odissi is deconstructed and recombined into a difficult whole that traverses stories from different cultures, myths, and ethnicities in its exploration of woman's relation to water.

Dance notation has not been widely used in Indian dance, unlike in the West, wherein several systems of notation have been used. Several teachers and composers of classical Indian dance use nonstandardized stick figures for documenting compositions. However, there has been no widely accepted system that enabled compositions to be documented on paper and re-created. With the availability of easier modes of documentation through video, what do the old-fashioned, painstaking, pen-and-paper methods have to offer? If the video captures an actual production through images which are equally fleeting as the actual performance, despite the option of infinite replays, the pen-and-paper mode enables a linear thinking through and comprehension of the movement sequence. Divya Venkatesh presents her experimental work in evolving a system of dance notation for Bharatanatyam. She translates a sequence of movement using three widely accepted systems of notation: the Benesh system, which has been used for Bharatanatyam; the Beauchamp-Feuillet originally used for Baroque dance; and Labanotation, which is used for movement in general. She evaluates the relative merits and demerits of each of the systems, before presenting her own notation system which uses abstract symbols drawn from documenting foot positions. In addition, she makes provisions for illustrating directionality, *taala*, and additional foot movements. The study also documents an array of responses of dancers to whom the system was introduced.

The final section, "Othered Voices and Bodies," brings voices which are outside the mainstream Indian dance: a community of *devadasis*.[11] The image of the *devadasi* is a continuous presence in Indian dance invoked through performance in the stock compositions. Artists belonging to urban and privileged social backgrounds performatively create and re-create the symbol of the *devadasi* through the ritual of the *rangapravesha* (debut performance of a young girl). Several studies center on the *devadasi* system, reflecting on its changing character over history. With the emergence of the modern nation-state, the system which was already in decline was legally abolished in several states. Several years after, the communities of *devadasis* survive across the country in dire poverty and deprivation. There is little of dance and

music left in their lives, as they have to eke out a survival. Melwyn Pinto, SJ, presents a report based on his field research in Bijapur, Karnataka, home to nearly 50,000 *devadasis* that led to the making of his documentary, "Women of God." The report is also testimony to the chasm between the practice of dance as an art which is largely elitist and urban-centric, and the hard-hitting, unspoken realities of several communities of performers in rural India.

The volume addresses anybody with a curiosity for dance in India and does not presume specialist knowledge on the part of the readers. As a result, several well-established narratives of Indian dances within the academic circles have been recounted. This volume in no way claims to present a comprehensive picture of Indian dance. With the exception of a few chapters, the volume offers particular perspectives on specific practices and texts, and the contributions range from the academic to the nonacademic/experiential narratives. This endeavor has enabled strengthening dialogues between established and emerging scholars and practitioners situated in globally dispersed locations and varying sociocultural contexts. The enquiries here are driven by a deep engagement with Indian dance in its myriad manifestations and take a step further in fostering a global dialogue.[12]

NOTES

1. "We step into an unclaimed territory in an attempt to expose and understand what is often out-of-awareness" (Hanna, 1998, p. xvi).
2. Hanna, 1988, p. xiii.
3. Katrak, 2011, p. 11.
4. Katrak, 2011, p. 11.
5. Bose, 2001, p. 2.
6. Bose, 2001, p. 3.
7. Vatsyayan, 2013, p. 23.
8. Consider Tapati Guha-Thakurta's (1995) description of classicism in the Indian context:

> As in the European academic art theories, here too the very notion of classicism—the idea of a distant classical past, offering itself to the present as a source of renewal and inspiration—emerged from a profound feeling of decline and loss. The yawning gap between the past and the present was sought to be bridged by indigenous initiatives in "superior" forms of art practice, and in the production of new "authentic" forms of knowledge on Indian art. (Guha-Thakurta 1995, p. 63–64)

9. Ram, 2010, p. 3.
10. Jerky and, most often, vulgar movements that require no specialized training.
11. With reference to the body of scholarship on performance practices and traditions drawing on culture studies, Kalpana Ram (2010) notes:

> The work in this field has elicited a rich understanding of the *relational* character of the way in which middle-class culture has been constructed—not as an autonomous entity, but through relationships of exclusion and marginalization for the professional dancers, the devadasis. (p. 5)

12. See the Introduction by Pallabi Chakravorty and Nilanjana Gupta in *Dance Matters: Performing India* (2010, p. xiii).

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Part I

Representations: Dance/Dancers in Literature