

2

CELEBRATING DANCE IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC  
Series Editor: Stephanie Burridge

# TRAVERSING TRADITION

Celebrating Dance in India

**Editors:** Urmimala Sarkar Munsî  
Stephanie Burridge  
With a Foreword by Ratan Thiyam



ROUTLEDGE

# ***Traversing Tradition***

## **Celebrating Dance in Asia and the Pacific**

Series Editor: **Stephanie Burridge**

*Celebrating Dance in Asia and the Pacific* is a series that presents the views of eminent scholars, journalists and commentators alongside the voices of a new generation of choreographers working from tradition to create new forms of expression in contemporary dance. It documents and celebrates these artistic journeys that work within the framework of rich and complex cultural heritages. Future titles in this Series include Taiwan, Malaysia, Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific. The Series is published by Routledge and supported by the World Dance Alliance Asia Pacific.

### **Also in this Series**

*Beyond the Apsara: Celebrating Dance in Cambodia*

(Eds) Stephanie Burridge and Fred Frumberg

ISBN 978-0-415-56445-8

***Traversing Tradition***  
**Celebrating Dance in India**

**Editors**

Urmimala Sarkar Munsî  
Stephanie Burridge

First published 2011 in India  
by Routledge  
912, Tolstoy House, 15–17 Tolstoy Marg, Connaught Place,  
New Delhi 110 001

Simultaneously published in the UK  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, OX14 4RN

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

© 2011 Urmimala Sarkar Munsri and Stephanie Burridge

*Typeset by*  
Star Compugraphics Private Limited  
D-156, Second Floor  
Sector 7, Noida 201 301

*Printed and bound in India by*  
Baba Barkha Nath Printers  
MIE-37, Bahadurgarh, Haryana 124507

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage and retrieval system without permission in writing from the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data  
A catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-415-61709-3

This book is printed on ECF environment-friendly paper manufactured from unconventional and other raw materials sourced from sustainable and identified sources.

## Contents

<i>Foreword</i> by Ratan Thiyam	xi
<i>Preface</i> by Stephanie Burridge	xv
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xix
 Introduction	 xxi
<i>Urmimala Sarkar Munsri and Stephanie Burridge</i>	
1. Dance Scholarship and its Future: The Indian Context	1
<i>Kapila Vatsyayan</i>	
2. Institutionalization of Classical Dances of India: Kalakshetra — The Principal Case Study	22
<i>Sunil Kothari</i>	
3. Questions for the Modern Dance Teacher: Child–Parent Responses to Modern Dance Education	37
<i>Ranjita Karlekar</i>	
4. Writing out Otherness: Dancing Asian-Indian	57
<i>Uttara Asha Coorlawala</i>	
5. Why I Am Committed to a Contemporary South Asian Aesthetic: Arguments about the Value of ‘Difference’ from the Perspective of Practice	83
<i>Ananya Chatterjea</i>	

6. Reading Dance, Performing Research: Meaning, Interpretation, Context, and Re-contextualization in Dance Performance and Research <i>Shrinkhla Sahai</i>	104
7. Imag(in)ing the Nation: Uday Shankar's <i>Kalpana</i> <i>Urmimala Sarkar Munsî</i>	124
8. In Dialogue with Histories: The Dancer and the Actress <i>Bishnupriya Dutt</i>	151
9. The Beauty Myth and Beyond: Looking at the Bollywood 'Item Number' <i>Priyanka Basu</i>	169
10. The Altered Space: Community Dances from Everyday to the Proscenium <i>Debanjali Biswas and Anirban Ghosh</i>	192
11. Patronage, Politics of Culture and the Dancing Body of the Other: A North-east Indian Experience <i>Lokendra Arambam</i>	212
12. Empowering through Dance Movement Therapy <i>Sohini Chakraborty</i>	222
Artists' Voices and Biographies <i>Amala Shankar, Anita Ratnam, Anusha Lall, Astad Deboo, Alarmel Valli, Bimbavati Devi, Jayachandran Palazhy, Leela Samson,</i>	235

*Madhavi Mudgal, Madhu Nataraj, Mallika Sarabhai,  
Maya Krishna Rao, Navtej Johar, Padmini Chettur,  
Santosh Nair, Syed Sallauddin Pasha, Uttara Asha  
Coorlawala, Zohra and Kiran Segal*

Critics' Voices and Biographies 301  
*Leela Venkataraman and Shanta Serbjeet Singh*

*Index* 309



From the beginning, dance was an impossible dream. So I am very grateful for the joy it has given me and for experiences of the layers of being, and abilities of the human body–mind.

— *Uttara Asha Coorlawala*

There is no shortcut to the process of healing; each step of the journey has to be well assimilated and synchronized like a moving river which travels hills and valleys on its journey from the origin.

— *Syed Sallauddin Pasha*

Inheriting an art that has now become a cultural product for global consumption in postmodern India has supreme challenges for a restless woman. My dance journey has contained more avatars than a James Cameron movie — ecstatic, foolish, gruesome, awkward, magical, embarrassing, and downright fabulous.

— *Anita Ratnam*

I have always rejected a ‘nationalist’ framework to fit my work in. For me, my work is a response to my existence in everyday life ... Yet, if we can only recognize ‘Indian dance’ in the gold and glitz of Bollywood ... then I am far away and choose to stay where I am.

— *Padmini Chettur*

It is a fear among observers that the dance scene is running thin, even as it spreads far. We live in the time of sharing and of experimentation. From this trend, new vocabulary may emerge. This will at least serve to put behind us suspicion between the past and present, between the traditional and modern, between the old and the new, between practice in the West and the East, and so on. I am convinced that depth too will return to the form, for nothing can take away from the truth of it.

— *Leela Samson*

I believe that to be a contemporary Indian dancer, one must be 'Indian contemporary' and not simply imitative of the West, and evolve the contemporary idiom out of India's rich traditions along with being open to intercultural and cross-disciplinary interactions in the globalized world today.

— *Astad Deboo*

## ***Foreword***

When a child is born in my native place Manipur, the first lesson given to the new human being by the mother is ‘Ta-ding-ding-Ta-ding-ding’ and the child gradually opens up the little fingers and starts doing gestures following the tune and everybody says, ‘Oh god! He/She is dancing!’, and laughter and joy fills the air. When the child grows up, the parents take him/her to learn dance under gurus and to learn the traditional dance for the role of Krishna or Radha and perform Raaslila in the temple.

Dance is the first expression of joy of a human being, his /her emergence and acclimatization to a new space. It also makes a journey to establish a bridge of communication with the spiritual world, portraying self, society and the philosophy of life.

The range of thoughts and expressions in and around dance are limitless, especially in a country like India. It ranges from ritualistic to folk, folk to classical and classical to experimental abstractions. Countless variety and emerging possibilities of traditional forms, newer adaptations and human creativity surround us in India. It may be systematic or non-systematic with unlimited postures and gestures involved in it and combinations of various rhythmic patterns where the highest degree of energy is involved. The exploration of technique which leads to produce aesthetics in dance has always been and remains a complicated laboratory process.

India has celebrated dance and celebrated through dance in all its communities, religions, languages, and locations. Through dance, communities have celebrated life, mourned and signified beliefs and thoughts. Dance continues to be

part of life and culture in more ways than one — as different forms travel from local to global frontiers, and continue to assume complexities of difference. Dance also continues to be a medium of communication, a tool for artistic innovation and creativity in theatre and cinema.

India has also written dance for centuries using different media. The sculptures on the temple walls — where forms and moments in dance have been frozen by expert artisans, who had not only the ability to sculpt forms on stone but also extensive experience of seeing dance and dancing bodies — are left behind for all to share in future generations. Manuals like the *Natyasastra* and many others have looked at the movements, significance and logic of the forms and created a bridge between theory and practice onwards from the 2nd century B.C. Innumerable paintings from different regions have also left behind a rich legacy of frozen moments in the moving patterns of dance.

In past years, Indian dance has provoked writings from dancers, writers and critics within India and academics all over the world. Indian practitioners have prepared manuals and autobiographies. Biographies of stalwart danseuses have been written. Dance critics in India have contributed over the years in stoking and generating a critical dialogue on dance history, practice and presentation. A special contribution has also been made by wonderful dance photographs that preserve moments in dance and transform them into precious documents.

This collection celebrates Indian dance yet again; however, it consciously chooses to address areas on which there has been comparatively less emphasis till now. Academic writings based on strong and focused research come together with the voices of practitioners sharing their own worlds of dance with the readers. Traditional practice gets equal and analytical attention along with the new languages born out of creative transitional compositions. History is discussed with equal importance as the present in the world of dance. Local, national and global issues become a part of the discourse and find place in the same publication.

As a person who has existed, since childhood, in the world of performance — moving in and out of theatre, dance and music in my own work — I strongly feel that this collection will play a very positive role and will be able to coax attention and beautiful appreciation from readers around the world.

**Ratan Thiyam**



*Ratan Thiyam was born into a family of artistes on 20 January 1948. His father, Guru Thiyam Tarunkumar, was one of the most respected gurus of Manipuri dance and his mother, Bilasini Devi, was also a renowned dancer.*

*A graduate of Dramatic Arts from the National School of Drama, New Delhi, Thiyam established the Chorus Repertory Theatre Company in Imphal, Manipur in 1976. His theatre productions embrace traditional Manipuri forms as well as other performance techniques, bringing together dance, acting, martial art, and narrative traditions from Manipur, and also design and a whole range of stagecraft. His work is choreographed to emphasize the aesthetics of theatrical elements along with physical stamina and control.*

*Winner of several national and international awards, Thiyam is presently Vice Chairman, Sangeet Natak Akademi, India.*

*Apart from being one of the most prominent Indian theatre directors both in the national and international scene, Thiyam works as a music composer, choreographer, stagelight/costume designer, architect, playwright, painter, and poet. His productions and spectacular stage designs have brought in a new era of experimentation in Indian theatre. His work as the visualizer, choreographer and presenter at festivals of India in the United Kingdom, USSR, and Germany and Festival of France in India brought his multifaceted talent to the fore.*

*Ratan Thiyam has directed more than 50 world class productions which have been performed in various national and international venues.*

## ***Preface***

Dance in the Asia-Pacific region is a diverse cultural matrix where new contemporary dance occurs alongside continuing traditions such as tribal, folk and court dances and ritual practices. A continuum that expresses all aspects of life, tradition and change, dance is also a 'meeting point' for modernity and post-modernity, history and 'post-history', the present and the future where complex aesthetic and philosophical challenges are negotiated. Artists are addressing these challenges with integrity and subtlety through developing unique performance styles that are constantly evolving. Working through an empathetic approach that is grounded in regional traditions, the choreographers from the countries of the Asia-Pacific region are at the forefront of developing a new international genre of contemporary dance with unique movement vocabularies and narratives. No dance lover, practitioner or scholar can ignore the dynamism and explosion of creative energy from this region.

The books in this series discuss the meeting points, intersections and integration of dance cultures and how choreographers, performers, associated artists, and companies of the region choose to imaginatively invent, blend, fuse, select, and morph these multiple influences. Pedagogy, training, production resources, logistic support, and, in some instances, imposed restrictions such as censorship all impinge on the artistic process — above all, the passion to create, the need to perform and the desire to be heard underpins all art. In dance, the body is a powerful means of dialogue that, through embodiment, encapsulates signs and symbols of place and belief. Rather than emulating western dance forms, there

is a palpable confidence in personal creative expressions that are valued, applauded and enjoyed — the Asia-Pacific choreographers are making evocative and enigmatic dance theatre that touches a human chord and implicitly shows the power of dance to move and inspire us. The complexity of these developments may not seem a big step to outsiders, but to those versed in the traditional forms, these small steps represent giant leaps.

How does an identity emerge from such eclecticism in the Asia-Pacific region? Dance that is thematically inspired by unique narratives and regional ‘story-telling’ traditions, history and social issues occurs alongside predominately abstract choreography constructed from a diversity of movement vocabularies from the East and the West. Choreographers are incorporating imagery that is metaphoric, symbolic and iconic to make poetic statements about their world. In this amalgam memories are embodied, constructed and deconstructed, encoded and decoded into new themes and movement vocabularies in powerful and poignant moments. For instance, across the region, one of the greatest epic stories of all time, the *Ramayana*, a tale that is reinterpreted from India to Bali, Thailand, Cambodia and beyond is explored in a myriad different ways. It is revisited and interrogated by practitioners through film, drama, dance, and the visual arts — there is much to contemplate and debate in the interpretation of the characters and the intricacies of the storyline that reveals universal aspects of human frailty such as the struggle between good and evil, weakness and power, lust and greed, the masculine and the feminine and the search for the soul.

It is timely to be inspired by the breadth and diversity of dance in the Asia-Pacific region. The *Celebrating Dance in Asia and the Pacific* series focuses on themes of evolving contemporary choreography, tradition and change, inter-cultural research and practice occurring through artist exchanges, pedagogy, revitalizing, and preserving cultural heritage — rich areas for research with implications to readers throughout the global village. An important focus



is to highlight the artists' perspective on their work and its cultural and philosophical context through the inclusion of a number of artists' essays in each volume. These insights give invaluable information about the inspiration, intention and cultural connections for the dancers and choreographers. It is also an opportunity to present their thoughts on the dichotomy between the preservation of dance in their communities and the desire to choreograph contemporary dance informed by traditional and classical forms.

There inevitably remain many tensions, dilemmas and uncertainties for both the artists and the audiences where familiar ground is constantly shifting as audiences engage with new Asian contemporary dance. Rapid changes and the shock of the new may be uncomfortable to some but exhilarating and liberating to others.

Ultimately, despite divergent views and the polarities of the traditional and the contemporary, there is a sense of respect for all that dance offers — for fellow artists and the passion they all share. Audiences in the Asia-Pacific region and across the world are witnessing continuing traditions that bridge and celebrate rich cultural heritages alongside new explorations and eureka moments for both established and developing choreographers. The words of Carl Wolz, the founder of the World Dance Alliance, epitomize the philosophy and content of this series.

*Celebrating the variety, the depth and the beauty of human difference through the art of dance.*

— Singapore, WDA conference 2001

**Stephanie Burridge**  
Series Editor

## ***Acknowledgements***

This book is published in association with the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi and the World Dance Alliance Asia Pacific.

The World Dance Alliance (WDA) serves as the primary voice for dance and dancers throughout the world, and encourages exchange of ideas and awareness of dance in all its forms. Part of the strategy of the WDA Asia Pacific is to contribute to the research and heritage of affiliated countries through the region.

Thanks are due to the School of Arts and Aesthetics, JNU for the whole-hearted support from the faculty, staff and students. Special mention must be made of Dr Bishnupriya Dutt, Professor H. S. Shivaprakash, Anomita Goswami, Bhaswati Ghosh, Vibhuti Sharma, A. P. Rajaram, Priyanka Basu, and Aditya Sarkar for their constant help and support.

Our sincere thanks to all the Indian scholars, artistes, choreographers, photographers, and critics who contributed articles and photographs and were extremely cooperative and helpful at every stage of the work.

Finally, the editors are indebted to the team at Routledge, New Delhi for their immediate interest in the *Celebrating Dance in Asia and the Pacific* series and for the meticulous editing of the volume.

## ***Introduction***

Urmimala Sarkar Munsî and Stephanie Burrîdge

This volume celebrates and documents the emergence of contemporary dance practice in India. Dance occupies the most prestigious place of all performing arts in India, yet curiously, to a large extent, it remains outside the arena of the academic discourse. The academic articles in this anthology are rooted in research on important and relevant issues in the area of Dance Studies, incorporating a multidisciplinary approach. The volume includes contributions from eminent scholars, writers and commentators and includes 21 short articles and interviews with Indian artists who share their stories. These are an invaluable resource and add personal perspectives and insights into the broad themes discussed in the chapters of the book.

Indian dance has deep roots in traditional practices. The vast vertical and horizontal spread of the different genres have their own principals of teaching, performing and theorizing. While many of the dancers choose to remain completely true to the traditions, others have been exploring new trajectories in dance diverging from the time trodden paths of tradition, often using the traditional forms as resources for exploring their creative urges. The book tries to bring together practice and research under the title *Traversing Tradition: Celebrating Dance in India* where scholars, critics and performers address the personal, local or global concerns born within and outside tradition — in the changing world. Often radical in their views, the Indian dance world today reaches far beyond the nation's

shores into a far-flung diaspora. The artists represented here continue to question perhaps an uneasy relationship that exists between the insular world of dance and an outside reality. These interviews/voices of practitioners from different dance styles and genres across the country give a glimpse into their commitment, engagement and involvement with the world of dance.

This section also includes the important voices of dance criticism, which, in absence of academic research, have taken the responsibility of writing about dance over a long period. Critics such as Leela Venkataraman and Shanta Serbjeet Singh have actually been witness to the process of continuity and change in dance — practice, making and teaching, and also the active process of creating new dance languages that are both articulate in a performative context and demand investigation by researches and critics — and their insightful comments in their articles tell of a long-term, passionate partnership with the artists as they accompany them on their journey of discovery.

The inclusion of Amala Shankar and Zohra Segal in this collection of ‘Artists’ Voices’ is significant, as it is the achievements of this generation of exceptionally strong and determined and creative women dancers that we celebrate and carry forward as a legacy. As important parts of the present dance scene and carrying on with the same love for dance and theatre with the same strength and determination, Alarmel Valli, Anita Ratnam, Kiran Segal, Leela Samson, Madhavi Mudgal, and Mallika Sarabhai share their thoughts and inspirations as dancers/choreographers/teachers. In the writing of Anusha Lall, Bimbavati Devi, Madhu Nataraj, and Padmini Chettur we find the respect for tradition and transition and the negotiation between the public and the private world, just as their seniors and mentors have done, as they all talk about their individual discoveries of self and the outside domain. Set slightly apart are the writings of Maya Krishna Rao and Uttara Asha Coorlawala. While Rao has written about her initial training in *Kathakali* and her choice of theatre as her

performance vocabulary, Coorlawala shares the long journey that dance and dance scholarship has taken her on. The book is a tribute to these strong women and all others whose voices we could not incorporate, who all continue to interrogate the body; while creatively sustaining and building upon their own forms of specialization, they seek a deeper understanding of the ‘politics of the body’ negotiating its inherent contexts, complexities and liberating potentialities.

The voices of Astad Deboo, Jayachandran Palazhy, Navtej Johar, Santosh Nair, and Syed Sallauddin Pasha complete the picture of the huge dance community, where the male dancers have made a place for themselves, taking forward the historical tradition and at the same time, working hard to create a new language and meaning of dance.

This anthology looks at the shifting paradigms of dance research — celebrating the vibrancy and the scope of the subject in its contemporary perspective, reflecting the disciplinary engagements of anthropology, ethnography, sociology, historiography, studies of dance and theatre, and cultural studies. It hopes to address an India-specific scholarship, rooting it in the larger culture zone of South Asia. As one of the very few academic books on dance studies, which is developing as a new area of research, it focuses on the specific needs of Indian dance studies, going beyond the commonly explored territory of dance as the unchallenged and often mythicised emblem of a great historical past. Important issues of dance writing/creating/teaching, global and local concerns on classical and community dances, danced history, the dancing bodies, and dance as tool for therapy are addressed in chapters written by scholars and researchers in the first section.

The first article — ‘Dance Scholarship and its Future: The Indian Context’ — is by the legendary scholar of Indian dance, Kapila Vatsyayan, and discusses the important trends of development in the area of research on dance. It provides a succinct and a rigorous surmise of the interwoven layering of meaning, representation and reporting on Indian dance.



*Bharatanatyam on Wheelchair*  
Photo courtesy of Ability Unlimited



Lai Haraoba, Manipur (2008)  
Photo courtesy of Urmimala Sarkar Munsî

Sunil Kothari's historical investigative article — 'Institutionalization of Classical Dances of India — Kalakshetra: The Principal Case Study' — talks about the institutionalization process of dance teaching in India with the pathbreaking work of Rukmini Devi Arundale. Ranjita Karlekar's article — 'Questions for the Modern Dance Teacher: Child-Parent Responses to Modern Dance Education' — deals with teaching techniques and meaning making for a modern dance teacher.

Uttara Asha Coorlawala's article — 'Writing out Otherness: Dancing Asian India' — eloquently traverses the dilemma of the researcher/performer embodying multiple contexts and identities. Ananya Chatterjea's article — 'Why I am Committed to a Contemporary South Asian Aesthetic: Arguments about the Value of "Difference" from the Perspective of Practice' — underlines with the insistence on working with movement and choreographic principles that are South Asian even as that complicates reception in the global cultural marketplace of 'contemporary' dance.

Shrinkhla Sahai's article — 'Reading Dance, Performing Research: Meaning, Interpretation, Context and Re-Contextualization in Dance Performance and Research' — addresses the issue of the language of dance, and the articulation of dance as a discursive unit through the language of dance research.

The development of contemporary dance in India is firmly underpinned by rich traditions that continue to be provocatively excavated by brave, groundbreaking artists. Urmimala Sarkar Munshi's 'Imag(in)ing the Nation: Uday Shankar's *Kalpana* initiates a rethinking of the dance film *Kalpana*, a record of Uday Shankar's dance creations, to analyse the 'modern' element of dance and choreography in the pre-independence film, problematizing the potential of the 'national' imagination embedded in the danced narrative.

Bishnupriya Dutt's article — 'In Dialogue with Histories: The Dancer and The Actress' — examines the historiography of the binary of theatre versus dance in connection to the



narrative of colonial history. 'The Beauty Myth and Beyond: Looking at the Bollywood Item Number' by Priyanka Basu touches upon the concepts of dance, movement, beauty, presentation, performativity as defined by the commercially viable influence of Bollywood on perceptions of Indian dance.

Lokendra Arambam's 'Patronage, Politics of Culture and the Dancing Body of the Other: A Northeast Indian Experience' recounts the 'unequal exchange between Indian dance learners from a superior material and intellectual environment with simplistic native bearers of the original, resulting in an alienation of its properties from its own indigenous producers'. Debanjali Biswas and Anirban Ghosh's article continues on the same line of thought to critique the process of appropriation and the politics of representation that has constantly affected the regional community performances, as they strive to survive and compete with the 'urban' standards of performance to reach the proscenium and the larger Indian and international audience.

A strong sense of community, sharing, activism, and celebration of life sustains Sohini Chakraborty's article 'Empowering Through Dance Movement Therapy', as she writes about working with children and adults in projects involving physically and intellectually disabled, abused women and neglected street children.

When we took up the project, our principal aim was to create an anthology which would bridge the gap between practice and research. The sections with scholarly articles and the contributions from practitioners and critics bring together the worlds which engage with the same performing arts in different yet essential ways. As research on Indian dance gains momentum in several universities in India and abroad, this collection of writings by scholars as well as by practitioners hopes to provide important insights to practitioners, scholars, students, and lovers of Indian dance and culture around the world.



# I

## ***Dance Scholarship and its Future: The Indian Context***

Kapila Vatsyayan

### **Dance Scholarship in India**

The first section of this article is a slightly reworked text of a presentation I made during a conference — ‘Documentation beyond Performance: Dance Scholarship Today’, Essen, 10–15 June 1988 — where my topic was ‘The Dance Scholarship Today: A Report on India’ before a distinguished international audience.

The questions with which I began my discussion were: Where should I begin in speaking about dance ‘beyond performance’ and the state of current scholarship? I asked myself if my presentation should be determined by an anthropological approach because for some, Indian dance continues to be an ‘ethnic’ category. Should I take up the question of dance not as an aspect of anthropology or study of societies but as semiotics and should therefore raise a critical question on dance as a cultural phenomenon in its aspects of symbiosis, of myth, ritual and actuality? Should I take up the question as an art historian going into all that archaeological and sculptural evidence which gives me clues about what dance may have been in the past and what attempts have been made to reconstruct it? Should I present

my story from the point of view of the contemporary dancer who is seeking sources for inspiration for presentation of his stage or theatre performance, i.e., the moment not 'beyond performance' but 'before performance'? Should I talk about the changes in the training system not only in India but the entire Asian continent? Should I talk about the vaster landscape of traditional Indian theatre forms where dance is integral to the theatrical performance? Should I go into the history of Indian music taking into account both its textual, theoretical sources as also composition and structure, where dance is as integral to music as music is to dance? Should I speak about the nature of the changes that have occurred in the socio-cultural milieu at the tribal and rural level which have brought about perceptible and imperceptible changes in all that is considered the domain of the folk and the tribal art or should I go beyond all this to an aspect of dance which is none other than the strictest discipline, synonymous with worship and part of sacred ritual and how it continues to be sustained in the Indian situation today and examine what has been done to unravel its mysteries?

Should I shift gears and talk about the problems of performance and beyond performance and the changes that are being brought about by the necessity of presentation of forms on the electronic media and that which determine the ending and re-adjustments of performances itself? Should I speak about the authenticity or otherwise of reconstructed folk dances for presentation in the urban milieu or international fora? Should I speak about changes that perhaps are inevitable in decontextualization of that which could only be nurtured and fostered in context?

From amongst this long and rather confusing list of questions, it occurred to me that perhaps it would be best to outline some trends which are common to India and in other parts of Asia, possibly Latin America, Africa and the South Pacific. In short, countries which could be grouped together in purely socio-economic terms as those where there are clusters of communities which continue to share lifestyles of pre-industrialized societies.

A final distinction also has to be made within the countries of the Third World. One broad distinction, in the context of dance and dance scholarship, would be between those who have very strong oral traditions and weak literate traditions and others where the oral and the literate have been parallel streams complementary to each other. In the second category, a further distinction would have to be made between those countries where, in the context of dance and other arts, there was a long, rich and varied tradition of theoretical and textual tradition of dance and those others where despite a rich literary tradition, there was no strong theoretical tradition relating to the larger background of aesthetics or intellectual discourse beyond performance.

Against the background sketched out above, scholarship relating to dance can be broadly divided into the following categories:

- Research, editing, collation, publication of ancient and medieval texts which enunciate a theory of aesthetics common to dance and the other arts.
- A sub-category of one above is a corpus of technical literature relating to dance, dealing with movement 'in place' and 'in space'. These texts deal with units of movements or cadences of movement. Interpreted in modern terminology, they also deal with what we would today term as effort, energy, elevations, movements away from the body, movements towards the body, and some coded indication of choreography. These texts, in the case of some countries, run into thousands and have not yet seen the light of day.
- Chronicler sources which provide evidence for recreating a social history of dance. All these sources are outside dance. They tell about dance but not dance itself.
- Scholarship relating to the analysis and interpretation of visual and pictorial representation of dance in archaeological monuments, Buddhist *stupas*, temples, rock art, bronzes, ivory, terracotta, and vases. Alongside is the

evidence available in mural and miniature paintings and a vast number of illuminated manuscripts. These sources provide source material for recreating and establishing a history of style. They are also valuable for recreating a history of costumes. Besides, in the case of mural and miniature paintings, they are indicators of social and cultural milieu.

In each of the above categories, scholarship on dance has to take into account primary and secondary material relating to the other arts, especially literature, poetry, theatre, and music on the one hand, and architecture, sculpture, painting and the crafts on the other.

While the categories are theoretical, textual-based dance scholarship is also a matter of investigating, documenting, understanding, and, most of all, experiencing and articulating the moment of dance in cultures with rich oral traditions.

The following categories deal with dance scholarship based not on theoretical sources but on oral traditions and field-work. It must be noted that theoretical dance scholarship and performance are not isolated or unrelated categories. Dance scholarship now relates to:

- The recreation of a dance style by working with a master of the oral tradition.
- Reconstruction of genealogies of dance masters. As in Africa, Indonesia, Japan, China, Sri Lanka, so also in India, a most valuable part of recent dance scholarship relates to the tracing of the genealogies of those who have been human repositories of the oral traditions.
- Dance scholarship which overlaps with the disciplines of cultural anthropology where dance is part of lifestyle.
- Dance scholarship which investigates the relationship of dance in magic, dance in shamanism, in societies and communities where dance has been used as therapy.

While we can go on enlarging these categories, let me give a brief review of only a few of these categories in the context

of India to demonstrate how theory and practice, text and performance are always interdependent and mutually enriching, how theory and scholarship have affected performance and how performance has given a rise to a search for theory.

Even a brief review of the contemporary situation in India, of the last 10 or the last 50 years, cannot be dissociated, first, from the immediate historical past of the last 150 years and, then, of the next 500 years and then of another 1,500 years or more. Whether we begin from the moment today and move backward into time or we move from the moment of the first theoretical enunciation of a theory of dance, roughly the 2nd century BC to the 2nd century AD, we are face-to-face with a staggering complexity of concurrent movements of the development in theory and practice. Two movements are discernible: one, a perennial, almost unchangeable axis and the other of continual flux, change and modification. For any researcher on dance, the first problem, then, is to clearly distinguish between what may be considered the fundamentals of an underlying theory governing the Indian arts, or, for that matter, Asian arts, and thus dance as also technical analysis of movement — micro and macro of the different parts of the body and the structure of a composition and repertoire which has been undergoing constant change.

The researcher of today can begin, as has been mentioned above, either with theory and move to performance, or can begin from performance and move to theory. Before I give an overview of what appears to have happened in India during the last few decades, let me bring in one more basic element that adds to this complexity. In any normal situation in the field of classical ballet or modern dance, one would presume that the dancer, performer, ballet master would, naturally, be familiar with the text and theoretical framework and those who are dealing with theory and text would be familiar with performance. Alas, this does not seem to be true in the Indian situation and possibly in some parts of Asia. Judging from accounts given to us in texts of the 13th, 14th and 15th centuries and even those of the 18th and 19th centuries, it appears that the strong and vigorous, mutually strengthening

and complementary streams of the oral and literate, theory and practice became exclusive, almost insulated from each other and, perhaps even ironically enough, lived in confrontation. This state of affairs is articulated by a writer of a treatise on Indian dance in the 14th century. He begins his treatise, 'I don't know for whom I write, because those who can read cannot sing or dance and those who can sing and dance don't read.' Without delving into the depths of the complexity and reasons for this, let me say that this situation continues. In fact, when there was a reawakening and re-interest in Indian dance, classical dance or the fragments which attracted Ruth St Denis or Ted Shawn, there were only vestiges of a fragmented performance tradition not supported by theory or text.

It was a person outside performance who drew attention to the theoretical and technical traditions governing dance. This was none other than the great savant A. K. Coomaraswamy. He published a small book, the translation of a 6th-century text on dance called the *Abhinaya Darpana*. It was translated as 'Mirror of Gesture'. This small book opened the eyes of both performers and others.

In the 1930s and early 1940s, the interest in texts on dance in Sanskrit and other Indian languages was greatly stimulated by the publication of this text in the USA. A search for the textual basis resulted in the publication and translation of many more texts, including the monumental treatise called the *Natyasastra*.

The period between 1935 and 1950 may today be called a period of the evolution of neoclassical dance forms in India. In each case a textual base was adopted to reconstruct a medieval or ancient form. Much has been written now about how all that is recognized the world over today as the ancient traditions of *Bharatanatyam*, *Kathakali*, *Yakshagana*, *Odissi*, *Manipuri*, and *Kathak* are, at one level, reconstructs on the basis of textual and sculptural evidence and a musical score which had a continuity in the oral tradition.

In short, performance itself was the result of delving into textual and archaeological sources to bring together diverse

elements of performance in a region to evolve a distinctive style today recognized as a classical dance. What emerged was sustained by two types of lifelines. One, that connected it with that perennial axis that we spoke about, in short the division into pure dance and mime, *nritya* and *abhinaya*, the use of the elaborate vocabulary of hand gesture, eye movements etc., and a second lifeline which was shorter, contemporary, an eclectic reconstruction on the basis of a literary composition, musical score, etc.

In the period between the 1950s and 1980s, two trends were in evidence. The reconstructed neoclassical forms had come to stay — they were accepted as antiquity. They were taught and, in the 1960s and 1970s, widely disseminated abroad. The search for a new repertoire of performance led to scholarship identifying textual sources, both of theory and technique, in each region. Great scholars like V. Raghavan, B. V. Naidu, etc. identified innumerable texts relating to dance and music in the libraries of unpublished manuscripts both in India and abroad.

From this search have emerged some very valuable texts relating to performance. These include not only texts belonging to the 2nd century BC, 2nd century AD or 4th century AD and others belonging to the 6th century AD and 10th century AD but, more importantly, texts in the regional languages of India because they are more relevant to the evolution of regional classical styles. Texts which provide the theoretical and technical basis of *Kathakali* have been looked at closely by many scholars. These include the work of Clifford Jones and Betty Jones who have worked on *Kudiyattam*. The latest are the works of Phillip B. Zarrilli on *Kathakali* and the publication, in Malayalam, of *Attakatna* and *Kramedipika* by Ammannur Madhav Chakyar.

K. S. Karanth, an eminent writer and poet, became devoted to Yakshagana. As a result of his explorations, many texts which deal with the technical aspects of Yakshagana have come to light, not to speak about the libretto and musical



score. Martha Ashton's work on Yakshagana is more detailed, giving a view of its social and cultural milieu.

Similarly, in the case of a dance form like *Manipuri*, it was believed that here is a dance form coming from a very remote area of India, possibly having no textual base and belonging to an ethnic community called the Meitei. Dance scholarship in the last three decades has brought forth a significant corpus of textual material relating not so much to the history of the dance forms but to technique. At least 10 major works on talas (the metrical cycles), which govern the complex Sankirtana dances of Manipur, have been located. They have all been published in Meitei. Although some controversies have been raised about the authenticity of one or two texts and a few scholars continue to say that these texts are spurious, the publication of a text like *Govinda Leela Vilas* in the case of *Manipuri* has revealed the existence of a structure of highly chiselled dance style from the 18th century onwards.

Despite all that has been said about the interaction between Mughal and Hindu elements in the context of *Kathak*, both for the dance theoretician as also dance historian, it was important to look at textual sources as also historical and chronicler sources. Some scholars have delved into primary material in Persian, Urdu, Bengali, Avadhi, and Vraj. This material is fascinating because it provides a clue to the nature of interaction which took place between the courts of the Hindu princes and the centre of the Mughal Empire. One amongst these deals with the captive dancers and musicians brought from Mandu to the court of Akbar along with the dancers who came from Persia and Phergana. The full history of this amalgam is still to be reconstructed.

One could elaborate further on the textual sources which have been located in Rajputana, Lucknow and Bengal in the context of the history of the dance style today called *Kathak*. *Kathak* by itself cannot be isolated from the larger history of dance forms prevalent in Vraj (Mathura area), Gujarat and even Maharashtra.

Keeping *Kathak* aside for a moment, there is work that has been done on *Odissi*. This is a very interesting case history of a neoclassical form. At one level, this ancient form is not older than 1951. At another, its history can be traced back to 2nd century BC. The present form of *Odissi* was an intellectual endeavour by dancers and dance scholars at a conference in 1951 called 'Jayantika', where a dance form was evolved, given a textual base, a technical terminology, and a repertoire. Once the performance was accepted then the search into text sources also began.

From amongst these textual sources, the most fascinating are those that do not belong to the field of dance but relate to temple architecture, sculpture and painting. Once we enter this area, dance scholarship is a matter not of just dance text but of archeological evidence and texts on architecture, sculpture and manuals relating to these arts. This discipline overlaps with the discipline of art history, the sculptural notation of dance movements on the panels of the walls of innumerable monuments of India. Here, the major work that has been done in the case of Orissa is of the late Alice Boner and in the case of south India of T. N. Ramachandran. After my work *Classical Indian Dance in the Literature and the Arts* (2007),<sup>1</sup> there have been some very good, fresh attempts to correlate contemporary dance forms with evidence of dance sculpture in specific regions. Sunil Kothari attempted this in relation to the Jain temples of Mt Abu; Shaivani Pandya has done this in relation to the temples in Gujarat in Modhera; and Padma Subramanyam, a distinguished dancer, has tried to reconstruct in her movements the dance sculpture of temples in Tamil Nadu.

Anne Marie Gaston, a Canadian student of *Bharatanatyam* and *Odissi*, has been fascinated by the Siva theme in dance, myth and iconography. She analysed the sculptural imagery of Siva by applying dance terminology to sculptural types. She also tries to reconstruct the history of *devadasis* in south India.

---

<sup>1</sup> Kapila Vatsyayan, *Classical Indian Dance in the Literature and the Arts*, New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi, 2007.

There is, then, the whole area of technical evidence relating to the dance in mural and miniature paintings. This constitutes the base for the reconstruction of a history of regional dance forms. Few scholars have tried to attempt this — an outline of this has been given in my book *Dance in Indian Painting*.<sup>2</sup>

The picture outlined above deals with the situation of dance scholarship only in relation to what are termed and identified as classical or what I have termed as neoclassical forms. It has not been possible to delineate here on the scholarship or the theoretical texts available on the more pervasive and connected traditions of Indian theatre as also music. This would constitute another area which cannot be ignored in the context of dance scholarship in India.

I have not touched on nor is it possible here to touch on what needs to be done or what has been done with regard to the technical studies of dance, that is, analysis of movement or notation, phenomenology, etc. All that can be said is that there have been no very successful attempts at notation of Indian dance. Despite my own early efforts and association with Laban, the Laban notation system has not been used for Indian dance in a convincing fashion.

Two persons have attempted a new notation system, especially in relation to hand gestures. One of them is G. Venu. He appears to have succeeded in evolving a system of notation which takes into account the physical possibilities of the hand, palm and finger movements and combines an approach of using symbols along with simple pictographs. It is fairly easy to follow and perhaps will be of use, especially where a transition has been made from individual training systems to institutional training. Another attempt was made by Kanak Rele. The system she developed is fairly close to the Benesh movement notation system and does not follow the Laban system.

Although some interesting work has appeared in the last two decades on the social history of Indian dance, the corpus

---

<sup>2</sup> Kapila Vatsyayan, *Dance in Indian Painting*, New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1982.