DANCING WITH TRADITION:
A GLOBAL COMMUNITY OF ODISSI DANCERS

by

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Abstract
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This dissertation is a multi-sited, ethnographic study conducted from 2005 to 2009 in six cities: Alexandria, VA, Bhubaneswar, Khajuraho, Kolkata, New Delhi, and New York, in two countries, India and the United States, and is centered on the narratives of Odissi dancers, dance gurus, performers, scholars, writers, presenters and institutional officials who have contributed to this changing dance form. By exploring the connections between an embodied practice that has formed at the intersection of colonial discourse, nationalist historiography and regional identity, I explore three fundamental questions: First, what notion of "tradition(s)" guides these practices, and how are they being recreated in a global context? Second, how do Odissi dancers engage with an embodied practice that has its roots in a ritual form, and is now performed nationally and transnationally? Finally, how has Odissi emerged as a cultural product within the context of a global market, since the institution of neoliberal policies in India in the early 90s?

By studying this dance as a globalized phenomenon and practice, rather than a solely regional or historical one, I show Odissi to be a highly-produced, fluid and mobile medium that crosses boundaries, and is continuously reinvented. My argument is two-fold: first, there is a thriving global community of Odissi dancers who practice, teach and perform this dance form all over the world, yet this global community is one marked by broad variance and heterogeneity. Second, the practice of Odissi has changed over years to accommodate new contexts and audiences, and it continues to do so. This change is

evident from its history, and is built into the cultural understanding and practice of Odissi as a form of expression, guided by traditions that are characterized more by fluidity, than fixity. The ethnographic findings and historical analysis presented in this study show that for many of these dancers the "performing body" is not only a site of aesthetic expression, but one that manifests myriad positionalities of gender, class and region, as it traverses multiple borders and subjective notions of belonging.

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enthusiasm to fuel us both. His fearlessness and gummy smile helped me get through the hardest moments of being away from the familiar. Armaan remains the most disarming research associate I have ever had. Manav, who was born during the writing of this project and whose infancy was sometimes measured in chapters written. His lengthy "comments" adorn most of my field notes, and many early drafts of this dissertation. On days I would leave to go write, and look back guilt-ridden, Armaan in his 3-year old wisdom sensing my hesitation would push me towards the door and say, "Go to school, Mama." On other days the boys were a little less forgiving, and I know this project has cost us many precious moments of togetherness.

I dedicate this dissertation to the three men in my life, Barry, Armaan and Manav who give me and my work meaning.

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Figure 1: Cover Story from "India Today" Magazine (2005)

A March 2005 issue of ***India Today*** (International Edition), a magazine which claims a global readership in excess of 15 million has on its cover three Indian dancers (see figure 1). These dancers are from a Minneapolis-based dance company working on

an Odissi-derived production. They are, however, a departure from Odissi dancers who typically represent this dance form, and often adorn posters advertising Indian tourism. For instance, the 2006 "Incredible India" tourism advertising campaign has Odissi dancers on several posters, dancers with their winsome expressions, sculpted poses, colorful silk costumes, and elaborate silver jewelry.

Figure 2: Image on a website promoting tourism in Orissa

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 *sindhur* smeared across their hands and foreheads, and their expressions ranging from bold to fierce. The cover story of the magazine explains how these dancers are reworking "classical" Indian dance forms (such as Odissi) for a global audience. This image on the magazine cover tells a different story of a ritual dance form, with its beginnings at a temple in Orissa, a state in the east of India.

My dissertation, "*Dancing with Tradition: A Global Community of Odissi Dancers*" is an attempt to understand how the classical dance form of Odissi is being

reworked, as indicated in the example above. I do so by exploring the history of Odissi dance as a ritual practice in the temples of Orissa, to the continuum of Odissi dance seen and performed on a global stage today. These varied performances can range from a soloist performing the complete Odissi *margam* (repertoire) with a full suite of live musicians led by her guru, to an international group of dancers protesting water privatization using the Odissi idiom. My research is based on over 24 months of ethnographic fieldwork in six cities and two countries, and is centered on the narratives of Odissi dancers, dance gurus, performers, scholars, writers, presenters and institutional officials who have contributed to this evolving dance form.

Odissi is one of eight Indian "classical" dance forms and archaeological evidence traces it to the 2nd century BCE. This ethnography of dance however offers an alternative to standard archaeological and historical narratives by moving away from geographically-bounded perspectives of cultural production that cite a seamless link to antiquity. By exploring the connections between an embodied practice that has formed at the intersection of colonial discourse, nationalist historiography and regional identity, I explore three fundamental questions: First, what notion of "tradition(s)" guides these practices, and how are they being recreated in a global context? Second, how do Odissi dancers engage with an embodied practice that has its roots in a ritual form, and is now performed nationally and transnationally? Finally, I examine how Odissi has emerged as a cultural product within the context of a global market, especially since the institution of neoliberal policies in India in the early 90s. The findings presented in this study, based on ethnographic material and historical analysis show that for many of these dancers the "performing body" is not only a site of aesthetic expression, but one that manifests

myriad positionalities of gender, class and region, as it traverses multiple borders and subjective notions of belonging.

Although Bhubaneswar, the capital of Orissa, remains a center for learning Odissi, it is only through performing in major cities like Delhi, Bombay, and Kolkata that dancers are recognized and validated. International tours abroad serve as further encouragement for many of these dancers, providing patronage, grants and awards. For many dancers located in India, the freedom to collaborate with other dance forms stretches the definitions of "national". By contrast, some dancers located in diasporic contexts such as Minneapolis, Washington D.C, Manchester and New York adhere more strictly to the "rules" of Odissi. This is because Odissi is seen by their audiences to represent "Indianness" even if this is not the intention of the dancer, making the "national" a frame of reference in these transnational contexts (Karaca 2010). The complex relationship between the dancers and their audience is another basic theme that I explore in this dissertation. How have geo-culturally specific and prescribed notions of audience-spectator relationship, as delineated in the ancient theory of *Rasa*[1], changed over time to accommodate new audiences and new contexts?

By studying this practice as a globalized phenomenon and practice, rather than a solely regional or historical one, I show Odissi to be a highly-produced, fluid and mobile medium that crosses boundaries, and is continuously reinvented. My argument is two-fold: first, there is a thriving global community of Odissi dancers from all over the world who practice, teach and perform this dance, yet this global community is one marked by broad variance and heterogeneity. Second, Odissi has changed to accommodate new

[1] Initially attributed to Sage Bharata (500 AD) and further developed by Abhinavagupta (1000 AD), *Rasa* is a theory of aesthetics which applies to all the arts.

contexts and audiences, and it continues to do so. This change is evident from its history, and is also built into a cultural understanding and practice of Odissi as a form of expression. The notion of tradition these dancers employ creatively and strategically, is one of fluidity, rather than one of fixity.

Odissi has emerged as a global dance in the context of neoliberal reform in India, and a consolidation of middle class economy and identity. An increased interaction with global capital in the last two decades, since neoliberal reform began in 1991, has in some ways been viewed as a threat to national identity, (Oza 2006: 2) and consequently the boundaries around culture, including dance have been challenged, and in some cases hardened. Contrary to some of the literature on globalization, the demise of the nation state (Appadurai 1996; Hardt and Negri 2000) has not taken place but rather given way to a solidification of these national identities. This is significant, especially as India positions herself as the next "superpower", and claims to "Indianness" in performance are often politically deployed. I am also interested, therefore, in how Odissi dancers are creating and challenging "Indianness" through the practice of their dance.

Stories abound of Odissi recitals by dancers like Ritha Devi and Indrani Rahman (Rahman 2002) who performed in the USA during the 1950s and 1960s, and how they put Odissi on the global dance map. However, it is in the last two decades that a global dance community has emerged with a transnational presence[2]. This new generation of dancers travels and performs across borders with an increased frequency at international festivals and much of its patronage, publicity and funding comes from workshops and tours abroad. These dancers travel the world to study, train, and perform Odissi in a way

[2] The cultural "exchange" prior to this decade has been called "internationalism" and "interculturalism". Rustom Bharucha discusses this in detail in his book, "The Politics of Cultural Practice" (2001).

that is different to that of their predecessors. The dancers in the mid-20th century performed to a relatively uninitiated Western audience. The dancers who travel internationally now are competing for global resources on a global stage. For example, in Britain, the process of Indian choreographers like Shobhana Jeyasingh and Akram Khan, competing with other global dance forms began much earlier. This was, in part, due to varying histories of immigration, and the long-established colonial relationship between India and Britain. In the United States, Indian choreographers are charting new territories, a process which began in the mid-1960s, and has continued. Performing at dance festivals of repute, and attending and giving workshops at conferences have become critical to a dancer's career, and to tours abroad, (regardless of where these companies are based) – and are now almost a requirement to build a reputation of "authenticity", both within the dance community and the public at large. As we shall see later, the notion of "authenticity" is continuously raised, challenged and is a site of much debate.

To study a global community necessitates a simultaneous understanding of the local context for these dancers, whether that local context is Kolkata or Minneapolis. This dual framing allows us to focus on the specificities and contradictions of their daily lives, as well as the larger framework within which they operate. In order to do so, this study is fashioned as a *pas de deux*, and like any other duet it is one that shifts and changes position constantly. It is an attempt to keep both perspectives alive on stage, sometimes bringing one dancer into focus, and losing the other dancer momentarily, but with both continually framed on stage as the subject of study. This dialogic and dialectical

relationship between a global Odissi community and the immediate and local realities of each dancer cannot be overstated.

There is another *pas de deux* at work, and that is between the dancer and her audience. As I show in this dissertation, it is a duet that has changed over time. From a temple ritual performed for *Jagannath* to a performance marketed to a global audience, new contexts have given rise to new audiences. The dancer and her audience have performed, and continue to perform a *pas de deux* of exchange.

Another challenge associated with this study is the challenge of placing a language of the body into words. How does one explain practices and body rituals in linguistic terms? Or in other words, how does one address the slippage between an embodied practice, and the discourse used to describe it? Dipesh Chakrabarty, in his discussion of the social sciences, describes this epistemological split located in two traditions, present in the "fault line central to modern European social thought". On the one hand, there exists the analytic tradition as embodied by Marx that tries to "demystify ideology"; and on the other, a hermeneutic tradition, best represented by Heidegger that produces "affective histories" (Chakrabarty 2000: 18). In this ethnography of Odissi I have tried to reconcile these two trajectories of thought by doing both -studying an embodied practice in terms of its "affective histories" **and** framed in the larger context of relational identities, such as gender, geography and class.

Odissi dance like other cultural forms is rooted in its local production, whether that "local" be New York or New Delhi; and (as I mentioned above), despite its transnational nature, its practice is marked by variance. I witnessed an example of this variance at the Second International Odissi Festival held in Washington D.C in August

2003, which was attended by Odissi dancers, scholars, critics, musicians and students from the world over. Backstage, as we dressed for our upcoming piece, a well-known dancer from India in her fifties had just finished performing, and returned to the green room. I asked how her performance went and she shrugged her shoulders and sighed, "It's hard trying to keep up with you younger girls." This seemed ironic to me, as earlier that day I had been chatting with a college-age Odissi dancer, born and raised in the US. **Her** concern was her own perceived lack of authenticity, performing alongside more established dancers from India. Each dancer had just voiced her own perceived inadequacy in performing at this international festival, where youth is associated with potential and stamina, and age with experience and skill. Each dancer separated by geography and experience felt inadequate in different ways at the festival. The dissertation is an investigation of the varied experiences of these dancers, in the contemporary presentation of Odissi, and explores how they negotiate a complex web of cultural codes that are policed by institutions (state-run and private), other dancers, and dance companies, as well as barriers of geography, language, age and gender.

Positionality as Scholar & Practitioner

An anthropological understanding of the art of dance, involves a rigorous as well as an empathetic understanding of the historical and cultural context from which it has sprung. In my methodology, theory and praxis are two sides of the same coin. My training as an Odissi dancer advances my scholarship of dance and performance. Working as a practitioner allows me to grapple with conceptual issues of "invented traditions" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) and explore how they play out in a global

context. These issues are particularly important in my thesis where dancers are asked to "tell" their story of this 'ancient' dance form and its embodied concepts.

My scholarship and my artistic development are intertwined. I started learning Odissi dance in New Delhi, as a child under Guru Srinath Raut, but it was not until I was in my late teens that I began to take it seriously. Due to family circumstances and study abroad I had to take several breaks from my Odissi training which was frequently interrupted. By then I had studied briefly, but intermittently with Madhavi Mudgal in New Delhi and Ritha Devi in New York. It was not until I was in my late twenties that I began working with Bani Ray[3] in New York and Guru Durga Charan Ranbir[4] in Bhubaneswar and started performing regularly in the tri-state area. This peripatetic but long-term mode of training and performance, is perhaps what alerted me to a variance in the practice of Odissi, because unlike many Odissi dancers, who stay with one guru for the majority of their lives, my own experience raised questions about how Odissi is practiced and performed by others. I began to wonder if my experience of learning Odissi was unique, or if other dancers also had more than one guru.

As a practitioner, and with my colleague, Kakoli Mukherjee, I recently co-founded Sakshi Productions (www.sakshiproductions.org), which creates and performs neo-classical and contemporary works based on Odissi dance. Before this, I was the co-founder and co-director of Trinayan Collective (www.trinayan.org) from 2003-2008, an Odissi dance company based in New York City. My work as an experimental and documentary filmmaker has given me a critical understanding of varying forms of representation across mediums and I have been able to incorporate film, technology and

[3] Bani Ray is an Odissi dancer based in Princeton, New Jersey.
[4] Guru Durga Charan Ranbir is considered the foremost exponent of the Guru Deba Prasad Das *gurukul.*

new media in my performance work. As the Associate Director/Choreographer for Harmattan Theater, (www.harmattantheater.com), a performance group committed to an environmentally and socially engaged theater, I have used Indian movement traditions to explore performance in urban and site-specific contexts. I have also been involved in all aspects of performing including fundraising, choreographing, directing shows, and working with several presenters, funders and community groups. These varied experiences have allowed me to develop a relationship with the dance community in the tri-state area, especially in New York City and in India. Over the last several years, I have attended conferences and festivals and continue to be inspired by, and learn from, this global community of dancers. Like the dancers I study, my location too is a shifting one, and I have researched these dancers as a practitioner/academic and colleague as I step into the boundaries between "diasporic" Indian and "native" Indian.

Methodology

Between 2005 and 2009, I conducted a multi-sited ethnographic study (New York, New Delhi, Kolkata, Khajuraho, Alexandria, VA and Bhubaneswar) of Odissi dancers and dance creators. In doing so, I was able to write an ethnography of dance that is not just an expression of a "local culture" or "tradition", but one that conceptualizes Odissi dance as an internationalized genre, shaped on a global stage, and renders itself amenable to different ideological usages and contestations. Studying the emergence of Odissi as a commodity within the global cultural marketplace contests the glib binaries of "traditional" and "contemporary", "local" and "global", "fixed" and "transitory," building in a methodological elasticity that has allowed me to better understand Odissi dance and its performing community as it traverses across multiple borders and identities. Helena

Wulff refers to this methodological strategy as "Yo-Yo Fieldwork" (Wulff 2007: 139) as a mobile and multi-local form of fieldwork. Despite the challenge of multi-sited locations, I chose to focus my work on dancers in India and the US who travelled between the two countries, as well as dancers who did not (or could not) travel. I conducted my research in India during three separate visits in 2005 (1 month), 2006 (3 months) and 2007 (one month), spending time in New Delhi, Kolkata, Khajuraho (specifically during the *Khajuraho Dance Festival*) and Bhubaneswar. I conducted the balance of my research over the last three years in New York with local and international dancers (from 2006-2009).

Figure 3: Odissi Students studying dance theory at *Nrutyayan Dance* in Bhubaneswar

I have spent time with my mentor and teacher, Guru Durga Charan Ranbir since 2000. His school and dance company *Nrutayan*, is based in Bhubaneswar, Orissa and here I was able to conduct participant-observation while I trained and lived in his home.

My research population is divided into three categories; dancers (gurus, students and performers), critics (dance critics and writers), bureaucrats and presenters (government officials and organizers). For each category I had a specific set of queries. These formal and informal interviews were semi-structured, and were accompanied by a guideline of questions that allowed me to discuss their work in detail, and discuss the logistics and challenges of performances, tours and funding. Some of the questions that have framed this study are: how do dancers address, if at all, the varied historical narratives of the dance, and how does that affect their productions, choreography, funding and patronage? Who gets to claim this dance, on a national and global stage? How does the performance of Odissi, originally a regional dance form called *Odhra Magadha*[5] from Orissa (1st or 2nd BCE), reify (or perhaps challenge) changing notions of national identity, and related multicultural discourses of diversity within the Indian diaspora? How does choreographic innovation take place with 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, especially on a global stage? I explore how some dancers rely on an essentialized notion of "Hindu culture"; others challenge a nationalist discourse through politically-inspired expressions and performances. I also investigate in what ways, if any, these varying cultural and political notions of "Indianness" have translated into the practice of Odissi in

[5] *Odhra Magadha* is referred to in the *Natyashastra*, a treatise on the arts of India, and written by Bharata somewhere between the 2nd century BCE and 2nd century AD.

the Indian Diaspora. Is the practice of this dance in the diaspora an echo or a reflection of its Indian counterpart or is it one of radical transformation? Besides talking to artists themselves, I spoke to national dance critics, representatives from governmental institutions and funding agencies on cultural production in India and the United States. I also followed discussions on listservs devoted to Odissi dance, and dance websites that post performance notices, and debate issues of "Indianness", using the language of "authenticity" and "tradition".

Below is a chapter summary of my dissertation. In Chapter 1, "From Ritual Practice to Transnational Performance," I use an ethnographic "incident" which took place at the 2006 International Odissi Festival in Bhubaneswar, and place it in the context of the colonial histories of Orissa and Bengal. This allows me to examine the underpinnings of Odissi dance as a complex construction of cultural nationalism, regional history and Hindu revivalism. With this incident as a point of entry, I discuss my theoretical engagement of this project with relevant literature, and examine various scholarly debates that provide the backdrop for each successive chapter.

In Chapter 2, "(Re)imagining a History of Odissi Dance," I tell the story of Odissi dance, as distinct from the other seven classical dance forms. Each of these dance forms, *Bharatnatyam, Kathak, Kathakali, Kuchipudi, Manipuri, Mohiniattam,* and *Sattriya* have their own particular histories and regional associations. Odissi can claim its origins in eastern India as *Odhra Magadha*, and its much later development into the dance form, Odissi which was officially codified in the mid 20th century. This fact is often elided in certain historical and national narratives that invoke a seamless trajectory back to the 2nd

century BCE[6] . I aim to provide an alternative history of an "ancient" dance form by focusing on issues that have come to define the form, and have influenced how Odissi is perceived, performed and presented on a global stage. By doing so, I position this dissertation not as an aesthetic history of the dance, but as one that problematizes some commonly-held histories of the form. It is, by no means, intended to be an exhaustive history of Odissi, but one that draws attention to the contributory factors that have enabled erasures in its more conventional narrative. I trace this history from its sculptural and scriptural roots, examine the role of the *maharis* and the *gotipuas*, explore how colonial and post-colonial events, and historiography have shaped its history, look at the role of the nationalist movement and its shaping of Odissi dance and finally elaborate on the role of *Jayantika* and the process of reconstruction that has contributed to Odissi as it is performed today.

In Chapter 3, "Beyond the Performing Body: Tradition(s) Revisited," I am concerned with the cultural construction of Odissi dance, and the differing notions of tradition in Western and Indian[7] schools of thought. The notions of tradition these dancers employ is one that is distinct from Western ideas of tradition that tend to build on ideas of fixity and stasis. The dancers, who are the subject of this chapter, describe tradition via metaphors of nature, like rivers and streams. Consequently, their ideas of tradition, and their resultant innovation reflect the fluidity of these metaphors, such that new works they create become strategic sites to explore the politics of the form. As

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[6] Some examples of these popular histories of Odissi are, "What, Why and How…Evolution, Revival and Technique" by Odissi dancer Madhumita Raut (2007) and those found on websites such as www.nandanam.com and www.rudrakshodissi.com.

[7] I do not mean to imply that there is a singular view or tradition for Western and Indian thought. I use it rather, as convenient shorthand to signal a dominant way or approaching the notion of tradition.

Odissi has become increasingly globalized, there has emerged a tension between varying notions of tradition, and a need to maintain fixity.

These dancers must negotiate boundaries, such that terms like "traditional" and "contemporary" become a site of debate as these dancers present their work to non-Indian audiences as well as increasingly globalized Indian audiences. This becomes apparent in my analysis of this group of dancers who work **within** the traditions of Odissi dance as a way to expand the existing repertoire or *margam* (literally, pathway) of Odissi dance, and yet must negotiate their innovation with Odissi traditionalists. I argue that tradition(s), and how dancers engage with them contributes to the broad variance of the dance as it is performed and practiced today, and their individual engagement with these varying notions of tradition fosters innovation. Tradition(s) thus function as an interlocutor that dancers engage with continuously to create innovative work, and the notion of *sadhana* or daily practice becomes the embodiment of that effort.

In Chapter 4,"*Choli Ke Peeche Kya Hain?* or What's Behind the Blouse?" I focus on an incident that took place in 2005, and has been referred to as the "costume controversy". This chapter borrows its title from the Bollywood song "*Choli ke Peeche Kya Hain*?" Described simply, a Kuala Lumpur-based dance company touring in India in 2005, and the costumes of the female dancers' (or lack thereof) came under intense public scrutiny. This led to various national and local debates around "appropriateness" or *auchitya.* This particular incident is a rich site of analysis because it highlights varying notions of "Indianness" and brings into focus three kinds of conflicts. The first one is around the female body, and the appropriateness (*auchitya)* of her attire, and the need to be distinguished from the excesses, vulgarity and commoditization of Bollywood. The

second conflict is centered on regional (Oriya) identity versus national culture and/or global forms of expression. The third conflict pertains to notions of tradition and authenticity with regard to choreography and apparel. I examine these conflicts in the context of Odissi as an emerging global commodity.

This is followed by Chapter 5, "The Marketplace of Odissi Dance". I show how Odissi dancers based on their location, experience, and background traverse the terrains of funding and performance opportunities. I explore how dancers make a living though dance, and the choices they make in order to do so. I look at how neoliberal policies coupled with limited funding for the arts in India and the US has caused Odissi to emerge as a commodity, linking private and public funding. Consequently, I explore how this commoditization of the dance and notions of "Indianness" work together in the context of nationalism and globalism.

In Chapter 6, "*Odissistan*: The Global Community", I examine how the Odissi global community performs a practice anchored to ritual and spiritual roots. I use Anderson's definition of a nation, an "imagined political community [that is] imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (Anderson, 1983) to arrive at a deeper understanding of the "imagined" to investigate how dancers deal with community. The term "imagined" in this context is not just a point of entry to understand the workings of nationalism, but rather a way to explore how this global community of Odissi dancers develops a sense of belonging, by imagining sacred and secular possibilities. Some dancers are able to "imagine" various ways of performing a dance form with sacred roots in secular contexts. For others, community and spirituality is tied to the notion of practice or *sadhana* (as explored in Chapter 3). For others yet, it is finding a "space" to dance that

gives them the freedom to explore ways of being in their bodies. I conclude each dancer defines their notion of "space" individually: geographical, psychic and/or spiritual, and I explore the parameters within which each individual dancer does so. Next, I use the vectors of *sthan/kaal/patra* or place/time/peoples to understand how dancers negotiate performance in heterogeneous spaces, contexts and audiences, and finally argue that the story of Odissi dance has shown us that practitioners have historically imagined new communities and audiences, and continue to do so. In conclusion, I restate the major arguments, summarize the findings, look at future outcomes, and pose questions for further research.

Chapter 1: From Ritual Practice to Transnational Performance

In 2000, IPAP, or the Indian Performing Arts Promotion Inc., a non-profit organization based in Washington DC, organized the first international Odissi festival, with subsequent festivals in 2003 and 2006. The first two festivals were held in Alexandria, VA. The 2006 festival held in Bhubaneswar, Orissa, was the largest of the three, and was attended by 500 Odissi dancers from 19 different countries, and over 100 musicians, scholars and gurus. The Bhubaneswar festival included hundreds of performances, exhibitions, heritage tours, lecture-demonstrations, and seminars that lasted from morning till late into the night. In the final chapter of this dissertation, I discuss the sense of "community" that festivals such as these help to foster. However, here I would like to focus on a particular performance at the 2006 Bhubaneswar Festival. One of the dancers performed Odissi to *Rabindra Sangeet*, music written and composed by Bengali Nobel Laureate (1913) Rabindranath Tagore[8]. The dancer, who also happened to be Bengali, was booed during the entirety of her performance by some audience members. This was not an isolated incident. During my fieldwork I heard of other Bengali dancers' in the Odissi idiom, who in the last few years danced to *Rabindra Sangeet* (instead of Odissi music), and were also met unfavorably by Odissi traditionalists in the audience. Incidents like this bring together many of the themes I explore in this dissertation. They highlight the strong regional identity of Odissi dance, and how it continues to shape the practice of the form. Such incidents also bring into focus the importance of colonial history (in this case the histories of the neighboring

[8] Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was a Bengali novelist, poet, playwright and lyricist and was the first Asian to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature. His compositions, *Jana Gana Mana* and *Amar Shonar Bangla* are the national anthems of India and Bangladesh, respectively.

states of Bengal and Orissa) that continue to be of consequence. Finally, it spotlights issues of "authenticity" and "tradition"; themes critical to the discussion of contemporary Odissi.

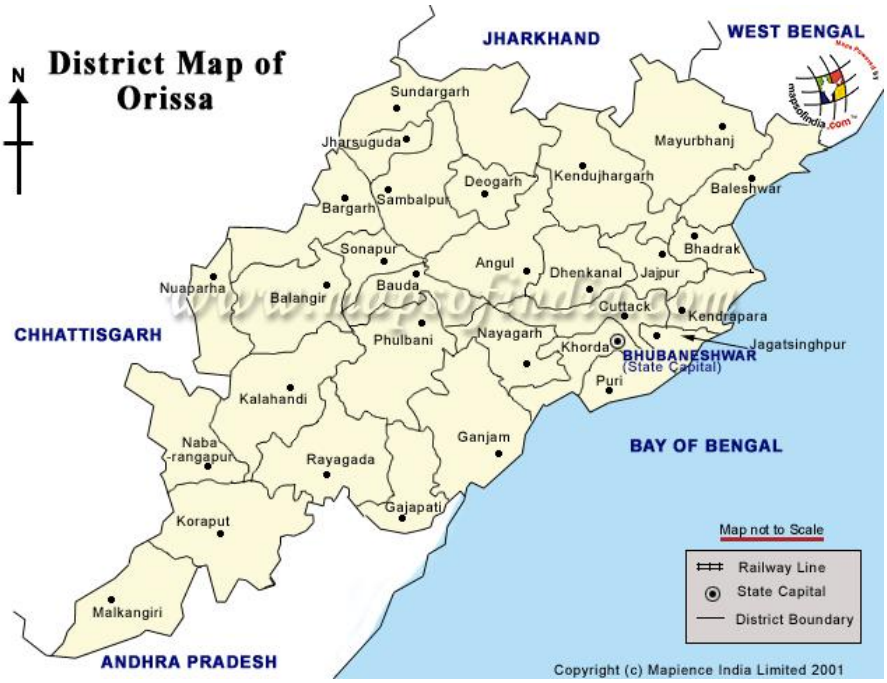

Figure 4: Present Day Map of Orissa

Beginning in 1803 and for most of the 19th century, Orissa was administered by the British as part of the Bengal Presidency. Orissa was grouped together with the states of Assam, Bihar and Bengal; the headquarters of the East India Company were founded in Calcutta (Bengal) in 1772[9]. Much of the administrative arm of the East India Company, and the British Raj, was dominated by Bengali elites, while Orissa was mostly relegated to a colonial outpost. In 1905, Bengal was partitioned into a Western, mostly Hindu state and an Eastern, mostly Muslim, one. In 1912, after much agitation by local

[9] The East India Company had their headquarters in Calcutta till 1912 after which they moved the capital to Delhi.

and national populations, East and West Bengal were reunited, but Orissa and Bihar became a single province under British rule. In 1936 Orissa was separated from Bihar, and after Indian independence in 1947 became a separate state. Some scholars have suggested that the first partition of Bengal in 1905 was the beginning of a colonial agenda to eventually divide India into East and West Pakistan, and was just another example of British policies of territorial separation (Christopher 1988).

This complex history between Orissa and Bengal continues to bear on the contemporary practice of Odissi. And Orissa's regional identity has, in part, developed in response to this colonial history. It is thus no surprise that Odissi dance, one of Orissa's most visible and global markers is a site of contestation and debate. Further, many Odissi dancers are Bengali[10]. Sharmila Biswas, a Bengali Odissi dancer based in Kolkata explains why she started learning Odissi:

> I think it is because Orissa and Bengal are very culturally close, and I can relate to Odissi easily so that's why I started Odissi.

India has eight recognized Indian classical dances, most of them with strong regional roots, and originating from a particular state. Bengal, which can boast of the *Shanitiniketan* style of dance as well as other folk forms does not, however, have its own "classical" form[11]. And because of a geographical and cultural proximity, many Bengalis study Odissi dance. I would like to use the 2006 dance incident cited at the opening of this chapter, as a way to understand all the various factors that are at play. The incident itself provides a valuable site to understand some of the themes that emerge in this study.

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[10] This group of dancers is mostly comprised of Bengali-Hindus.

[11] Dancer Mahua Mukherjee has argued that Bengal did have its own, unique regional and ancient classical dance form called *Gaudiya Nritya*. Electronic document, http://artindia.net/mahua/gautiya.html.
Accessed June 15, 2010.

One primary theme is the tension between Oriya dancers of Odissi dance, and non-Oriya dancers, especially Bengali ones. This tension fits within the larger context of Oriya regionalism, and a perceived Bengali chauvinism and/or appropriation of Oriya culture. Further, in the context of *Hindutva* (Hindu right-wing) movements, regional pride can be viewed through the lens of cultural nationalism,

Figure 5: Present day map of India

making it slippery to analyze[12]. As Rupal Oza (2006) has shown in "The Making of Neoliberal India: Nationalism, Gender and the Paradoxes of Globalization", India's political and cultural identity has shifted in the context of neoliberalism, and the rise of Hindu nationalists, specifically the *Sangh Parivar*[13]. *Hindutva* workers have attempted to situate the history of the deity of *Jagannath*, and the language of Oriya as spoken today with *Kalinga,* [14] seamlessly connecting pre-colonial and post-colonial Hinduisms (Chatterji 2009: 87). Consequently, the last two decades have witnessed a hardening of Oriya regional identity.

Shyamhari Chakra, a journalist I spoke to, refers to this history between Orissa and Bengal as a factor in why people in Bhubaneswar react poorly to Bengali dancers performing Odissi to non-Oriya music:

> People who complain here, they belong to the city, the local people. They are feeling threatened nowadays. You see, there was a time when Bengali people said that Oriya is not an independent language. So finally those people rebelled against it. They established Oriya identity. See the way these Buddhists in Tamil have conflict in Sri Lanka. Or the way the Naga people are also revolting. There is a reason behind it. Like Maoists revolting in Orissa. And the same thing is happening in our classical dance field.

Without knowing the history of Orissa it is easy to dismiss these comments by Shyamhari as merely nationalist or regionalist. Shyamhari in his comments refers to a debate over language that took place in the 19th century, and centered on Orissa's struggle to maintain a linguistic identity. In 1868, Rajendralal Mitra, a Bengali and important figure in the Bengal Renaissance, argued to the colonial administration that the Oriya

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[12] Angana P Chatterji's "Violent Gods: Hindu Nationalism in India's Present: Narratives from Orissa" (2009) has a detailed study of the *Hindutva* movement in Orissa.
[13] A Hindu nationalist umbrella organization which comprises several smaller ones, including the *RSS* or the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*.
[14] Kalinga is a kingdom situated approximately around the middle of 1st century BCE whose domain is said to have included much of modern day Orissa.

language should be replaced by Bengali in the school system. Mitra built his argument on the fact that there were more Bengali school texts published and available than there were Oriya ones. Thus began a controversy that continued for several years during which it was also argued that Oriya was a dialect of Bengali. Angered by these developments, Orissa's intelligentsia led the mobilization around Oriya, and helped to develop Orissa's language identity as *Utkal* or *Odisha,* (the high-caste nomenclature) as opposed to *Odresa* (indigenous communites). These events around the linguistic controversy formed the basis of Hindu majoritarianism in the state, and became eventually intertwined with Oriya regionalists seeking separation from Bengali cultural and linguistic dominance (Chaterji 2009: 32-33). This controversy is what journalist Shyamhari Chakra refers to in his earlier comments. The booing of a dancer on stage dancing to *Rabindra Sangeet* therefore is rooted in a specific history of cultural and political events than appears at first glance.

Sharmila Biswas, a Bengali dancer, elaborates on the way some Bengali dancers have embraced the dance form, yet disrespect the Oriyas:

> That's because most of the dancers think if they can pick up the dance technique and ten items, they have learned the dance. If your knowledge in Odissi is restricted to these chance pieces, you know nothing about Orissa; you don't know this or understand these people. And you are happy to do this Odissi dance, how can you have such disrespect? This is what bugs me, especially Bengalis saying, "Aero khum Oriyader kotha gulo soonish na" ["Don't listen to those Oriyas"]. All this kind of talk coming from Odissi dancers? If you think these people are capable of producing this dance, which is so beautiful, then are they stupid? You went and taught them? Your forefather went and taught them?

Biswas acknowledges the cultural chauvinism by some Bengalis towards the Oriyas as being highly problematic, as well as a factor that continues to play out between Bengali and Oriya dancers. Shyamhari Chakra talked about another performance, in

Kolkata, the capital of West Bengal, during which Odissi dancers performed to *Rabindra Sangeet*:

> There was a *Barsha Utsav* organized by Orissa Dancers' Guild. All who performed, none of them used Odissi music. All of them used *Rabindra Sangeet.* I asked the dancers, "Why do you use *Rabindra Sangeet*? Rabindranath does not belong to Bengal alone. He belongs to the whole of India. I'm equally proud of Rabindranath. But you should know Odissi dance is a confluence of Odissi *mardalam*, Odissi music, and Odissi dance and music. And the music must be Oriya also". Now these people have a new theory, "Why can't we dance [Odissi] to *Rabindra Sangeet, Thumri, Meera Bhajan, Carnatic* Music?" It's a good experiment. But don't make it a rule. Make it an exception rather than making it a rule. So one day you will see somebody dancing Bharatnatyam to Oriya music and Kathak to *Carnatic* music and you will say "We have come a long way."

For Shyamhari Chakra, dancing to non-Oriya music is at best an experiment. However, Pratap Das, the organizer of the Bhubaneswar 2006 said that for him, one of the biggest challenges he faced during that festival was that the audiences were unable to accept contemporary or experimental Odissi.[15]

Ananya Chatterjea, another Bengali Odissi dancer, based in Minneapolis, also talks about the tension between a hardening of Oriya regional identity, and the consequences of this history of "Bengali colonization":

> The fear I have about Odissi is this reinscription into a very *Hindutva* narrative, because of the current Orissa Government, and because of BJP politics. There is also something else that I have to acknowledge. Oriyas have been long irritated by Bengali colonization of all things non-Bengali, especially Oriya stuff. I really try to think about how I can be humble, always acknowledge that Odissi is from Orissa and I am a student of it. But at the same time I'm troubled. When I go to Orissa, to a big festival and Sharmila [a Bengali dancer] is doing a piece to a Bengali song, and people booed her off stage - that troubles me. At the same time I see *gotipua* troupes performing in Kolkata Maidan and they are saying "Mo Oriya" [I'm Oriya] claiming their Oriyaness. That's great Oriya pride, right? That's problematic, right? There's a kind of nationalism sort of

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[15] E-mail from Pratap Das dated April 28, 2010.

> leaking in. Sure, I repeat some violences myself. Chandra Mohanty pointed out to me, "Ananya, on your website you need to say Odissi comes from Orissa." Okay, got it. Lesson learned. I didn't think about it, but I was in the position to **not** have to think about it. So I understand how I'm guilty of those, too. But that opened my eyes. It troubles me to see Sharmila booed off the stage in dancing to a Bengali song because she is unfortunately in the position of this huge history.

Ananya Chatterjea, in the above comment, acknowledges the historical and colonial context of Odissi dance, and a sense of regional pride that sometimes forms the backdrop for Odissi dance and its traditionalists.

How important has the Bengali-Oriya connection been to the development of Odissi dance in recent decades? Indrani Rahman, one of the first dancers credited with popularizing the form in India, and abroad was married into a Kolkata family. The proximity of the cities of Cuttack and Bhubaneswar to Kolkata (260 and 275 miles respectively) has allowed for Odissi dancers to find audiences in Bengal. It also explains why many Bengali girls begin Odissi training at a young age. According to Ratnikant Mohapatra, dancer and son of legendary guru Kelucharan Mohapatra, Odissi dancers from Orissa are very well-received by Bengali audiences in Kolkata, and viewed as being authentic:

> If you move a little bit further [from Bhubaneswar] to Kolkata, you get a bigger audience, very enthusiastic. "Odissi dancers from Orissa? Must be something better than what we do".

National dance critic, Leela Venkataraman talks about Oriya regional pride that borders on nationalism, and describes the current regional political climate and its effect on Odissi dance:

> You want to show that you are so patriotic and everything that belongs to the soil is what really appeals to you. And the politicians also keep addressing us in so many different constituencies. They say, "Scheduled

> caste, this caste and that caste, the Muslims and so on". So you are sort of increasing the feeling of difference. But you are not saying you may have your individual differences, and ultimately we are all Indians, and that is what is more important. So you are not highlighting the unifying thread that really holds this country together, and that for me is a very disturbing thing, because that kind of parochialism has begun to come into dance also. And these *Neta's* [politicians] who use some of these *gundas* [hooligans] come and create problems. And they have their nuisance value, and politicians seem to be like them a great deal, and all the parties they behave in this kind of way. But there is a lot more of this in dancing today than it ever was in the past. I don't think I saw this kind of reaction. I mean people took in whatever you did, and maybe they liked it or they may not have liked it, but I don't think this kind of rabid reaction was there. This kind of anger when you interact with another language or any other music excepting your own, I don't think that augurs too well. That frightened me actually this time in Orissa.

Venkataraman refers specifically to the incidents of the 2006 Bhubaneswar festival. According to her, the climate in Indian classical dance, not just Odissi, has shifted to reflect stronger regional identities, especially as most of these classical dance forms are anchored to a geographical location. This hardening of regional identities can be tied to neoliberal reform in India since 1990, and the rise of Hindu nationalism.

Ananya Chatterjea talks about the poetry of Salabeg[16], a Muslim poet who sang in praise of Lord Jagannath as an example of the complications involved in "claiming" Odissi dance and music. According to Chatterjea, Salabeg's poetry, and how it is contextualized varies, making one version more problematic than the other:

> What I want to say is that Odissi with its incredible richness actually is capable of working through this. It has a wide range of expressivity. I mean there are two ways of looking at it, right? For example you look at Salabeg's poetry, brilliant, right? You could say, "Wow!" What that is saying is actually in Oriya repertory, there could be a way to really open this Hindu-Muslim stuff and say "Yeah, actually Salabeg's poetry is part of the traditional repertoire" Or you could say, "This is the colonizing moment of Odissi; **even** a Muslim poet can be involved and brought into the Hindu fold." So there are two ways of looking at it. I feel like for me

[16] Salabeg was a 17th century Muslim Oriya poet, born to a Muslim father and a Hindu mother.

> the important thing is to be really conscious about the fact that both arguments are possible and that one is much more dangerous than the other. I can always say, "Hinduism for me was never about **this** kind of knowing". It doesn't matter. The rest of the population, the Muslim and Christian populations are feeling the shit about my claiming of Hinduism. I have to be really careful about **how** I claim it. You know it sort of places us in a weird oppositionality and becomes really messed up. I don't know more than that. I just know that I have to always acknowledge that I'm a student of it [Odissi]. Beyond that, I can say I love the form.

Framing this 2006 incident in its historical context is critical to understanding some of the serious developments around religious and cultural nationalism in India in recent decades. While *Hindutva* politics traces some of its beginnings to the 1920s,[17] and the construction of the categories of "Hindu" and "Muslim" as colonial classifications[18] there have been watershed moments in recent history such as the destruction of the Babri Mosque in 1992, and the Gujarat Riots in 2002. As mentioned earlier, the encounter with global capital has resulted in the hardening of national identities, especially in cultural arenas (Oza 2006). These varied claims to "Indianness" have brought sharply into focus the conflation of 'Hindu" culture with right-wing *Hindutva* ideologies. For example, recent *Hindutva* agendas included the rewriting of history textbooks in California in 2006 and in India in 2002 to reflect *Hindutva* ideologies. As *Hindutva* ideologies have permeated many arenas of daily existence, (Ludden 2005, Gupta 2001) cultural expressions such as dance have become fiercely contested arenas of public discourse. With this in mind, dancers can sometimes rely on an essentialized notion of "Hindu culture"; others challenge nationalist discourse through politically-inspired expressions and performances. These varied claims to "Indianness" are often politically deployed and

[17] Although some studies track the rise of Hindu nationalism from the 1880s onwards, exponents of the Cambridge School, such as Christopher A. Bayly (1998) argue that Hindu nationalism in India had its origins in the early eighteenth century.

[18] For example, Romila Thapar in "Imagined Religious Communities? Ancient History and the Modern Search for a Hindu Identity" discusses this in detail.

can embody a range of meanings; alienation from the homeland to a conflation of 'Hindu" culture with right-wing *Hindutva* ideologies. I do not in any way mean to suggest that Odissi dance has been appropriated by the Hindu Right, but rather that Odissi like other cultural forms needs to be framed and understood within a particular landscape, and like other cultural forms Odissi, too has become a site of debate. As dancers from all over the world travel through India (for study, performances and conferences), the study of Odissi "at home" suggests the degree to which "Indianness" at home influences "Indianness" abroad and vice versa.

In the remainder of this chapter, I lay out the themes that provide the backdrop for dissertation, and how I have framed my research questions and research.

The Problem of Historiography

This study draws heavily on the idea of India as a national imaginary, as a category in social science of a particular geographical and discursive bent. In the United States, post-World War II politics required, and generated a new interest in this newly independent nation, and marked the beginning of Area Studies in South Asia. It must be pointed out that a problem inherent in the discipline of South Asia Studies even today is the collapsing of the category of "India" with South Asia. This uneven representation tends to ignore the other countries of Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Bhutan, privileging the academic study of India, which in turn can be conflated with Hinduism.

Early scholarship was limited to what was referred to as "Indology," and focused largely on studies of philology and religion. Some of this Indological scholarship by W. Norman Brown and Franklin Edgerton reified colonial assumptions of India, especially

with respect to caste as a means of classification and theories of state[19]. In the 1950s, with the institutionalization of South Asia Studies at various universities such as Penn, Columbia, Chicago and Michigan, theoretical work on India shifted to analyses of social and political change. Until this time, the social science heritage of Max Weber and Emile Durkheim had provided little guidance for the complex social and political workings of the Indian subcontinent. The "village studies" project of the 1950s which emerged at the University of Chicago, spawned other trajectories of anthropological scholarship, such as the ahistoricism of Louis Dumont's caste analysis, or the project of ethnohistory in the 1970s, influenced by the ethno sociology of McKim Marriott, David Schneider and Ronald Inden. Ethnosociology for these theorists meant an understanding of India through "native" terms and contextual fieldwork. This mode of enquiry later came to be critiqued as a "peculiar product of a certain strand of American liberal social theory" (Dirks 2004: 357). The publication of Said's, "Orientalism" in 1978 was a major intervention in the study of the "Other" and most of the work on South Asia that emerged after 1978 engaged with Orientalism in some way. Other schools of thought over the last few decades such as post colonialism and subaltern studies have addressed the theoretical and methodological limitations of previous studies, claiming either intellectual heritage or engaging with them as interlocutors (Dirks 2004).

Bernard Cohn's classic essays, "An Anthropologist Among the Historians" (1987) and "History and Anthropology: The State of Play" (1980), were perhaps among the first to draw attention to the importance of the study of history, especially in the Indian

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[19] Nicholas Dirks provides a detailed discussion on the history of South Asia Studies in his article, "South Asia Studies: Futures Past". In The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines. Eds. David L. Szanton. University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, California 2004. I rely heavily on his account in this section.

context. For Cohn, any anthropological study of the postcolonial state needed to be anchored to its colonial history. By doing so it countered the prevailing notions of non-western societies as "timeless and unchanging". Gyan Prakash in his foreword to Bernard Cohn's, "India: The Social Anthropology of a Civilization", argues that the notion of an "ethnographic present" was attributed only to "primitive societies" in the belief that they were outside "Western historical time" (Prakash 1999: v). Cohn's work was in striking contrast to mainstream anthropology at the time which tended to view small-scale communities and valorized synchronic descriptions. Bernard Cohn's underlying suggestion, according to Prakash, is that the binary opposition between myth and history is unsustainable and operates as a "cultural means to constitute the present" (Prakash 1999: vii). This sense of a mythic-historical view of the past is crucial to an understanding of Odissi dance, its history, and how the past impacts its contemporary practice. I elaborate on this role of a mythic past in Chapter 2.

If culture as a product of anthropology has been colonized, then so has culture's history (Dirks 1990). And both need to be adequately interrogated, keeping the relationship between history and anthropology in focus. In the colonial classifications of Indian "culture" and "tradition", it is important to recognize that some cultural forms were deployed and privileged over others (and continue to have ideological ramifications). Eric Hobsbawm in "Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality" (1990) looks specifically at the Indian context in the period between 1860 and 1877, during which British colonialists began an expansion of the classification of scholarship and research on India, and a systematic definition of knowledge on Indian society, religious beliefs and practices. This was accomplished in some ways through the

legal apparatus as we shall see later in the context of the *devadasis,* and also through the development of institutions such as the Archaeological Survey of India in 1860. It was via such institutions that legitimate "heritage" was decided as well as what was fit for preservation. Schools were founded to create sculpture, art and painting with "oriental" motifs, and Indians were encouraged to learn about their culture as mediated through European ideas of scholarship and learning.

Antonio Gramsci's "unromantic" approach to folklore can be helpful in this analysis. Viewing (other) culture, as not simply "picturesque" (or exotic or orientalist or timeless), but as culture to be viewed within a specific historical and national context can be useful for anthropologists in terms of how we study the "other". Even though there may exist a "science of folklore" which, "collects, selects and classifies such material", Antonio Gramsci[20] proposes that folklore should be studied as "a conception of the world", a strategy especially valuable for subordinate groups. These "fragments" and "surviving evidence" can have several implications for the study of Indian classical dance, and its historiography, especially as certain sources of history were privileged over others, and an attempt was made to move away from the folk aspects and celebrate the "classical". This process of codification and its claim to antiquity has been an integral part of how Indian classical dance has been analyzed, as explored in Chapter 2.

In the context of nation-building, both history and anthropology have played and continue to play an important role. Nicholas Dirks[21] (1990) has analyzed the complex relationship between history and the nation-state, and has shown how the discourse of

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[20]Gramsci, Antonio. 1971. Selections from the Prison Notebooks. eds, Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, International Publishing Company.
[21]Dirks, Nicholas B. 1990. History as a Sign of the Modern, In *Public Culture* 2(2).

nationalism was influenced deeply, in the late nineteenth century, by anthropology and the colonial construction of India. The "rescue" of this history became a factor in determining the construction of the nation, via the Nehruvian and modernist project in the 1950s. For Dirks, the "modern" defines and constructs itself in relation to tradition. Anthropology then, became the discursive means by which tradition and dance forms like Odissi were controlled and transformed into the knowledge of tradition. Dirks explains, "When colonial discourse debated Indian tradition, it installed certain versions of customs over others" (Dirks 1990: 29). Ironically, in an attempt to redress colonial classifications, Odissi history is founded on some of these classifications, reifying certain foundational suppositions while discarding others.

Popular versions of Odissi history invoke a seamless link to its "ancient" history, and much of this history, even today builds on Orientalist assumptions. Gyan Prakash examines the role of colonial writing in the discourse and study on India, and points out the variance in colonial writings: that ranged from a benign version of India as "passive" and "eternal' to the "cold utilitarian scrutiny of James Mills and then to missionary contempt" (Prakash 386). As many historians have pointed out, (Prakash, Thapar et al) much of Indian history has built, until recently, on a colonial periodization of the past. James Mills and his division of Indian history into the glorious Hindu Golden Age, the Dark Middle and Muslim Ages, and the British Colonization have provided a historical hangover that still has deep ideological ramifications. The emergence of a nationalist historiography in the 1920s and 1930s also built on the glorious ancient past. Historian Romila Thapar has also effectively problematized the notions of "Hindu" and "Muslim" that were fluid classifications, but hardened during colonial rule. Colonial

anthropological studies, coupled with their expansionist policies, created a fertile environment for the creation of this kind of history. It was, in part, a response to this periodization, Orientalist assumptions, colonial classifications and nationalist historiography, including the standard Marxist narratives that the Subaltern Studies group came into being. The founders, a group of young historians[22] based in the UK began to discuss their overall discontent with these versions of history and the anti-colonial struggle. Their project was to rewrite the struggle for freedom in India in a way that privileged the voices of those who had been ignored by an "elitist" nationalist agenda and redressed the imbalance of colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism — both consequences of British colonialism.

Nationalization of the Feminine Ideal

In 1997, members of the ruling *Bharatiya Janata* Party objected to the inclusion of a nude dancing-girl from *Mohenjo daro* in the annual diary published by the Delhi Tourism and Transportation Development Corporation (Gupta 2001). This dancing-girl, a statuette (see figure 6 below) that dates back to the *Harappan* civilization (2500 BCE) is presently housed at the National Museum in New Delhi. This contestation by the Hindu Right over the representation of women's bodies in the arts alerts us to the complexity of nationalism, and how it is played out in the context of women's bodies.

[22] Namely Shahid Amin, David Arnold, Partha Chatterjee, David Hardiman, Gyan Pandey and Ranajit Guha.

Figure 6: *Mohenjo daro* dancing girl statuette (2500 BCE)

My research is situated within the historical and contemporary debates in theories of nationalism, and how it has (re)invented itself in the postcolonial context, drawing attention to gendered dimensions of nationalist discourse. Much of this literature points to the role of the woman as a repository and embodiment of national values. For example,

Ann Stoler's[23] work on the heterogeneous experiences of gender relations and sexual taxonomy during European rule in African and Asian colonies, addresses the sexual practices of both the colonized and colonial woman. Similarly Ann McClintock's scholarship[24] makes the argument that gender cannot be separated from race and class, especially in colonial and postcolonial contexts.

For Partha Chatterjee (1993), the schism between the material/spiritual, and the outer/inner spheres is a foundational feature of anti-colonial nationalisms in Asia and Africa. Chatterjee argues that Western scholars have mistakenly imposed western models of nationalism on the "non-West". He demonstrates how anti-colonial nationalists produced their own domain of sovereignty within colonial society by dividing culture into the "material" and "spiritual" domains, the latter represented by women and family. The Indian woman embodying a "religious/spiritual" form of expression became a marker of "essential" Indian identity. In Hindu religious institutions, Brahmanic control increased, and became the defacto interpretation of Hindu ritual which led to the prescribing of certain Brahmanical values such as prayers, vegetarian diet, and a homogenization of various marginal groups that typified the "religious/spiritual" sphere. Chatterjee argues that nationalism **did** provide a clear answer to the position of women, remolded in the subjection of the woman to a "new" kind of patriarchy. While retaining key qualities of her "Indianness" she now combined the "modern" with the "traditional".

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[23] Stoler, Ann. 1989. Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in 20th Century Colonial Cultures. In *American Ethnologist* 16(4): 644-660.
[24] McClintock, Ann. 1995. No Longer in a Future Heaven: Nationalism, Gender and Race. In *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest*. Pp.352-389. New York: Routledge.

The new Indian woman became the locus of female emancipation, as the nationalist agenda located its subjectivity in the spiritual domain of culture.

Uma Chakravarti's essay (1989), "Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi?" builds on the work of Eric Hobsbawm who discusses the "invention" of Indian tradition which began in the 19th century. Chakravarti's argument, similar to Chatterjee's cited above, is that the Indian woman came to symbolize the new order; she was unlike her western counterpart, but also unlike the traditional "unsophisticated" low-caste and low-class, Indian woman. This image of the Indian woman was based on the "myth of the Vedic golden age" (Sangari & Vaid 1989: 7) and on Orientalist revivals and translations of Vedic texts. This new archetype combined the "best" of both; she was the Brahamanical ideal, such that caste was not rejected, but reconfigured and celebrated. She was sufficiently modern and educated, yet traditional, and maintained piety and decorum. More often than not this image of womanhood translated into an upper-class conception of Indian womanhood. It has been argued that this idealized image became the center of the debate on the "women's question" for both colonial discourse and cultural nationalism (Chakravarti 1989; Chatterjee 1990). Feminist scholarship, such as work by Tanika Sarkar has demonstrated how nationalist discourse on the "women's question" has shifted over time. In colonial times, the ideal Hindu woman served as the template on which to build these nationalist ideologies, and more recently it has been used by female Hindu nationalists in *Hindutva* movements (Bacchetta 1993).

In her essay, "Instituting the Nation in Art" (1998), Tapati Guha-Thakurta looks at the originary moment of Indian independence in 1947 and how it was institutionalized in Indian art through an exhibition at Government House in New Delhi. She examines the

1948 exhibition's claim to authenticity and representativeness of five thousand years of "culture," and notes how the aestheticization and historicization of Indian art shifted from archaeological treasure to aesthetic excellence. By placing these artifacts in literal and metaphorical glass cases in a museum, the highly idealized figures of the feminine form, such as *yakshi* figures from *Bharhut* and *Didarganj,* or sculptures from the *Kushana Mathura* School, served to institute and celebrate a particular type of female form, a prototype of Indian feminine beauty, with her small waist and voluptuous form (See Figure 7 below). Indian art became institutionalized, a nationalized subject, the mirror to "all the great periods of Indian history," and to understand India one "must enter the threshold of art" (Agrawala quoted in Guha-Thakurta 1948: 98). Guha-Thakurta elaborates:

> (T)he motif of the religious and the spiritual was of particular importance. Construed as the special affective domain of art (as a domain of emotion and aesthetic sensibility and not just of faith and belief), the religious/spiritual constituted the core of the "fictive ethnicity" that bonded the Indian people in the present and bonded them to the artistic creations of the past (Guha-Thakurta 1998: 98).

The spiritual core thus identified, is what distinguished India from the west, her inalienable essence, and art then was the evidence provided by history. Thus, it was not enough to compete with western art; an attempt had to be made to set up a different set of criteria that were spiritual and transcendental.

Figure 7: Female figure of *Didarganj Yakshi*

The Politics of Cultural Practice

Scholarship in the last decade has helped theorize questions of national identity in many ways; as the erosion of national boundaries by communication networks (Appadurai 1996, Smith 1986), as the "hybrid" location at the margins (Bhabha 1994), the complex web of nation, race and ethnicity (Wallerstein 1991), or the construction of "individual" or "collective" identities (Balibar 1991). The focus is not simply the crossing of national borders, but rather the creation of new socio-cultural entities (such as institutional, political etc.) and networks that result from current global phenomena.

These could be transnational networks of the Israeli diaspora community[25] (Gold 2001) or the role of the internet as a tool of political mobilization in the diaspora politics of the transnational Chinese[26] (Ong 2003). Similarly, when Indian art, dance or theatre is transported to European and American metropolitan centers, it reifies the antiquity and aura of Indian culture, notions that are central to the nationalist project. This platform often given to the arts takes place under the rubric of "multiculturalism" or "diversity," discourses that can thrive on a singular notion of identity. On the surface these discourses appear to be a haven for diversity, but in a global context, the multicultural rhetoric relies heavily on the nationalist rhetoric of ancient culture, both employing a seamless connection to antiquity. Consequently these singular notions of identity get reified ad infinitum within the global context. Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall, Homi Bhabha and Rustom Bharucha theorize various possibilities of cultural practice as ways to address the homogenizing influences of nationalism and multiculturalism.

Current uses of the term, "hybridity" in cultural practice have served to challenge essentialist models of identity, by subverting the language of evolutionary hierarchy. Both Paul Gilroy[27](1993) and Homi Bhabha[28] (1994) have used the term as a way to affirm certain ethnic, cultural, transnational, diasporic and mixed communities. And cultural discourse from the margins has the potential to transgress grand narratives[29] of nationalism (Bhabha, 1997) and multiculturalism.

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[25]Gold, Steven J. 2001. Gender Class and Network: Social Structure and Migration Patterns among Transnational Israelis. *In Global Networks* 1(1): 57-78.

[26] *Ong*, Aihwa. 2003. Cyber republics and Diaspora Politics Among Transnational Chinese. In *Interventions: The International Journal of Postcolonial Studies.* 5(1).

[27] Gilroy, Paul. 1993. The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

[28] Bhabha, Homi. 1994. *The Location of Culture.* London: Routledge.

[29] Bhabha, Homi. 1997. Life at the Border: Hybrid Identities of the Present. In New Perspectives Quarterly, 14, 30-31.

Stuart Hall in his 1991 essay on "The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity," looks at cultural flows in the context of identity and the nation-state of the UK. He argues that with the erosion of the nation-state, and in the face of the "disappearing English identity," there is also a narrower definition of "Englishness" as evidenced by Thatcherism. Accompanied with this seeming decline of the nation-state in the context of globalization, we see a more aggressive form of racism emerge. This new kind of globalization, according to Hall, relates to a global mass culture that is uniquely American, one characterized by a focus on the west, which functions on western technology and western capital, where English is the spoken language. It heterogenizes a variety of languages such as *Spanglish* or *Hinglish* but remains firmly centered on the west, which provides the core for the master cultural narrative. The second feature of globalization, Hall cites is the "peculiar form of homogenization" and its "highly absorptive" quality, where the desire is to take on these ethnic and diverse cultures and place them within an American conception of the world. This absorptive quality can be observed in how Indian arts have exploded and absorbed within the US arts landscape. Ranging from Bollywood Cinema (now available on Time Warner cable) to Broadway musicals, *Bombay Dreams* (2004), Indian arts have been refashioned into this multicultural and diverse landscape. Specifically, Odissi dancers have made cameo appearances in Michael Jackson's 1991 "Black or White" video, in a celebration of multiculturalism.

For example in Michael Jackson's video, a female Odissi dancer performs a duet with Michael Jackson in the middle of a busy urban intersection 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.

Figure 8: Still from Jackson's "Black or White" video

The Odissi dancer is one of many "world performers" in the music video, and is preceded by American Indians dancing outdoors, and followed by Russian performers performing in front of the Kremlin beneath swirling snowflakes. The song became the best-selling single of 1991, and shortly after Jackson's death in 2010, the video was

circulated on the Odissi listserv. In 1998, at the MTV awards Madonna performed alongside the California-based, Patnaik sisters. Trained in Odissi, Laboni, 20, Shibani 17 and Shalini, 16 choreographed and performed Odissi in its traditional idiom, alongside the famous pop star. And even the young Kashmiri village girl, Boonyi, featured in 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[30] as a way to inculcate in her the training and sensuality associated with the dance form.

Rustom Bharucha's argues that productions like Attenborough's *Gandhi* and Peter Brook's *Mahabharata* build on an essentialist view of Indian culture and is a form of cultural appropriation removed of historical, geographical, and social context. Bharucha however, in his more recent work in "The Politics of Cultural Practice", looks at "cultural borrowing" or "interculturalism" as another way of negotiating the terrain of cultural practice and multiculturalism in the global context. According to him, it is possible that "interculturalism" may be used as a "discourse of opposition." Bharucha argues that while multiculturalism assumes a certain privileged universality and centrality of experience, "interculturalism" assumes a less one-sided relationship between cultural others.

Another way to theorize culture in a global context is to focus on certain "zones" as they pertain to Appadurai and Breckenridge's notion of "public culture." They posit that existing categories of folk art or popular art are inadequate to reflect the cosmopolitanism of contemporary cultural production. Using "zones" as an analytical

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[30] Hejmadi, Priyambada Mohanty 2010 "Rushdie does an Odissi". http://www.narthaki.com/info/articles/art271.html, accessed June 7, 2010.

device, "allows us to hypothesize not a type of cultural phenomenon, but a zone of cultural debate" (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1988: 6).

Hall maintains that marginality in cultural practice for the producers can also function as a place of agency. The creators of cultural capital may operate from the margins, but the margins can also be a place of power. This is evidenced in the work of diaspora artists. While much of Indian art is "absorbed," many artists in the US also use it as a way to unpack notions of nationalism, location and identity. These artists and performers are sometimes driven by the need to redefine "tradition" and "heritage" as a reflection of some inalienable "Indian" essence. Dancers in the diaspora must also deal with how they are perceived by presenters and other dancers. Lata Pada, a Bharatnatyam dancer based in Toronto talks about these labels as they relate to being presented in the US:

> Part of what we do is investigate our own form. But equally a part of our effort is how we get out of the work out there. It's a market place, let's not ignore it. The presenter is a person that we need to convince that our work is fresh, it's new and it's relevant. The presenter says, "The music is still very classical, you still wear bells on your feet. You still wear Bharatnatyam costuming. So how do you deal with the presenter who doesn't understand? Do you have to turn into a modern dancer? Should we be dressed in black only? Should our music only be digitalized music?

For choreographers and dancers such as Pada, situating oneself in a global marketplace remains a challenge. I discuss this double-bind that dancers find themselves in detail in Chapter 3. Dance scholar, Uttara Asha Coorlawala sums up the challenges that these dancers face, and how Indian art continues to be viewed in a singular dimension:

> In a series of expanding repercussions and dialogues between India and the "West", each exchange modifies and influences the following one. Audiences abroad consistently expect to see an ancient (read "beyond

> criticism), timeless (read "unchanging"), mysterious (read "incomprehensible), spiritual, beautiful, ecstatic, complex art form. Even now, the dances that India exports to the West are selected (by both Western and Indian impresarios) as they correspond to Western concepts of what Indian dance should be. In India, this process is legitimized by its rewards, performances abroad, acclaim and a sense of self defined against the Western "other". Dancers acclaimed outside India return to a new level of acceptance and respect for their art within India, where dance is perceived as epitomizing the highest values of Indian culture (Coorlawala, 147-148).

This mirroring between "east" and "west" happens with a specific kind of Indian dance: one that builds on traditional markers of the form rather than its more dynamic iterations. Ossified notions of the performing arts are often perpetuated by global and national agendas. Rather than focusing on the dynamism of these traditions, they become emblematic representations of their country of origin.

Towards a New Anthropology of Dance

While the anthropology of dance can be traced to the 1960s, many of these studies have analyzed, and subsequently romanticized the form rather than interrogating dance as an expression of power relations in the areas of national identity, gender and class (Reed 1998). As Susan Reed has pointed out in her review article[31], dance scholarship since the mid-1980s has increased dramatically, and anthropologists have played a significant role in contributing various kinds of analyses that range from a critique of colonial categories to the production of social bodies. Developments in other expressive forms such as theatre and music, as well as the introduction of the field of "performance studies" by Victor Turner and Richard Schechner, were in part motivated by the need to problemtize Western notions of non-Western "dance" and "theatre" (Lewis 1995). Additional work

[31]Reed, Susan A. 1998. The Politics and Poetics of Dance. In *Annual Review of Anthropology* 27: 503-32.

of theorists to find ways of "bringing bodies back in"[32] (Csordas 1989) into the debate has been inspired by the work of feminists, such as Butler (1993) and Suleiman[33] (1986), as well as Foucault[34] (1977 and 1978). These studies of the body are not limited to dance but are interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary in nature. Scholarship in medical anthropology such as the work of Rayna Rapp and Faye Ginsburg[35] (1995), and A. J Sthrathern[36] have contributed to a more nuanced understanding of the body (Farnell 1999). Although dance has been the subject of study by early anthropologists such as Radcliffe-Brown and Boas, the emphasis was more on the social function of dance (Williams 1991). Scholars in the 1960s and 1970s, such as Drid Williams and Anya Peterson Royce emphasized the study of the form, structures and functions of dance (Reed 1998).

Comparative analyses of the development of national dances have helped to shed light on the role of political ideologies. For example, the adoption of the *Rumba* in Cuba (Daniel[37]) by the Ministry of Culture, as opposed to the other popular forms such as the *son* or the *Conga,* occurred because it was seen to be the best expression of egalitarianism. Sally Ann Ness's 1997 study of the *Igorot*, looks at how ballet has been transformed through a process of "indigenization", resulting in a Philippine transnational hybrid (Reed 9-10). The work of practitioner and theorist, Randy Martin in "Critical

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[32]Csordas TJ, ed. 1994b. *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
[33]Suleiman S, ed. 1986. *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
[34]Foucault M. 1977. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison.* Translated. A Sheridan. New York: Pantheon (From French) and Foucault M. 1978. *The History of Sexuality,* Vol. 1*, An Introduction.* Translated. R Hurley. New York: Random House (From French).
[35] Rapp R, Ginsburg F, eds. 1995. *Conceiving the New World Order: The Global Politics of Reproduction.* Berkeley: University California Press
[36] Strathern AJ. 1996. *Body Thoughts*. Ann Arbor: University Michigan Press
[37] Daniel YP. 1995. *Rumba: Dance and Social Change in Contemporary Cuba*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana Univ. Press Daniel YP. 1996. Tourism dance

Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics" (1998) engages with the study and practice of modern dance as a means towards social justice and activism through the language of mobilization.

I situate my work within the trajectory of other dance scholars working in postcolonial India, as well as those working outside India (as cited above), who have interrogated these dance forms not just as aesthetic forms, but as embodied practices shaped by specific histories, and as valuable sites for analyzing the power (and lack thereof) embedded in its practice. Some prominent examples of this kind of scholarship are the work of Pallabi Chakraborty (1998; 2000), and Veena Oldenburg (1990) in their studies of Kathak. Scholars, Kalpana Ram (2000; 2005; 2009), Amrit Srinivasan (1984; 1985), Kalpana Kannabiran (1995), Avanthi Meduri (1996), and Janet O'Shea (2003; 2007) in their interrogation of Bharatnatyam and its histories. Uttara Asha Coorlawala (1992; 1993; 2003) has written about various aspects of Indian dance ranging from *Rasa* theory to different facets of its complicated history. Ananya Chatterjea (2004) and Alessandra Lopez y Royo's (2003) studies on Odissi has helped frame my own research and study of Odissi.

I explored an incident of an Odissi dancer being booed off stage at the 2006 Festival in Bhubaneswar at the beginning of this chapter. Using that incident as a point of entry, I hope to have shown that dance is not simply dance, but rather an embodied practice influenced by various historical, political and cultural factors. It is towards such an anthropological understanding of dance and performance that I situate my work.

Chapter 2: (Re)imagining a History of Odissi Dance

> ***I said, "Before you did all this, what was Odissi? Sit down and think about it. Before you got together and worked out this margam (repertoire) with the other gurus. What was there?"***
>
> ***He thought for a while and said, "Mahari[38] thila. Gotipua[39] thila" (There were the maharis. There were the gotipuas.)***
>
> ***I said, "Thila kuti? (Where were they?)The maharis were already finished. Didn't you take whatever historical memory you had of the mahari form, and what you got out of the gotipua, refined it and put it together? You created something entirely new which you say is traditional.***
>
> Leela Venkataraman, dance writer and critic in conversation with Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra (2000)
>
> ***This service of mine continued for forty long years. All I used to get was twenty-five paise as "khei" (salary) and a lot of divine love. I wanted nothing more. Those days we were a respectable community, and were treated as goddesses. But this did not continue for long. Slowly we were suspected to be associated with ganikas (prostitutes). This gave rise to a rebellion inside the temple. Little did we realize that this was the beginning of an end. All those people who respected us started despising us. Only my Lord knows what the truth was.***
>
> Sashimoni Mahari [40](2003)

One of the ways the nationalist movement in India, especially during the nineteenth, and first half of the twentieth century attempted to map a new nation through the reconstitution of high culture, including the performing arts, was in concert with the emergence of a mostly Hindu middle-class elite (Chatterjee 1986; Subramaniam 2000). Aesthetic forms like temple dances were particularly prized, not just as an outcome of the

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[38] This is the Oriya word for *devadasi* or temple dancer
[39] *Gotipua* is a male dancer in Odissi, it translates literally as "a single boy."
[40] Acharya, Rahul . 2003. From the Mouth of a Mahari, Electronic Document. http://www.narthaki.com/info/articles/art102.html, accessed June 7, 2010

nationalist agenda, but these expressive forms actually helped to constitute it. As indicated in Chapter 1, Odissi is one of eight Indian "classical" dances, and archaeological evidence dates it to the 2nd century BCE. This chapter tells the story of this regional dance form that originated in eastern India, and its development into a genre of classical dance that was officially codified (explained below) in 1958[41]. This is a fact that is often elided in historical and national narratives that invoke a seamless trajectory back to the 2nd century BCE. In the pages that follow, I write an alternative historical account of Odissi dance that contests this unruptured history of an "ancient" dance form. I begin by looking at sculptural and scriptural evidence from as early as the 2nd century BCE, and end with an understanding of how contemporary Odissi was shaped through the formation of *Jayantika*, the group of gurus and scholars that came together in the mid-20th century to codify Odissi. To do so, I focus on issues that have arisen and have influenced how Odissi is perceived, performed and presented today. This account is by no means intended to be an exhaustive history of the dance form, but rather a history that draws attention to the contributory factors as well as the erasures that have been obscured in its popular re-telling. It is helpful to view this history as analogous with the body of the dancer because it is through the discovery, erasure, condemnation and eventual revival and rehabilitation of the dancer's body that the story of Odissi comes more sharply into focus.

There is a popular history of Odissi that has come to be widely accepted, one that is found in the large collection of Odissi coffee-table books, and on the websites of dance companies based both in India and abroad. This popular history is distinct from academic

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[41] Ratna Roy discusses the ambiguity around this date in her book, "Neo-Classical Odissi Dance" 2009. New Delhi: Harman Publishing House.

histories [42] of Indian classical dance that problematize the conventional historical periodizations and classifications. A typical version of the popular history that is aimed at a more general audience would be:

> Archaeological evidence traces Odissi back to the 2nd century BC to the temples of Orissa. The dance began as an ancient temple dance within the sacred *Jagannath* temple in Puri (Orissa). This devotional dance was performed by *devadasis,* temple dancers wed to Lord *Jagannath*. With the onslaught of a series of Islamic invasions during the Middle Ages, the dancers and the dance fell into disrepute, and were further discredited by many centuries of colonial rule under the British. The *devadasis* were forced into prostitution in order to survive and later disappeared into oblivion. The dance was finally resurrected by the nationalists after independence and the eminent Odissi dance gurus of today restored it to its original glory. This ancient temple dance is now flourishing, and being performed all over the world[43].

Anthropologist Kalpana Ram refers to this type of historical narrative in her work on Bharatnatyam[44] (another form of Indian classical dance) as "common-sense" versions of a dance history that were constituted in the context of nationalism. In Odissi too, these "common-sense" or popular versions are in abundance, and have tended to obscure the modernization processes that have contributed to the codification of Odissi as a classical dance form. Much of the scholarship on Odissi dance to date has been done by dancers trained in the 20th century by the gurus responsible for its revival. And while many of these accounts are rich treatises on the aesthetics and unique characteristics of Odissi, they tend to replicate this standardized, common-sense history. Recent studies of Odissi

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[42] Some prominent examples of these academic histories are by scholars Pallabi Chakraborty and Veena Oldenburg in their studies of Kathak. Kalpana Ram, Amrit Srinivasan, Kalpana Kannabiran, Avanthi Meduri, and Janet O'Shea look at the history of Bharatnatyam. Alessandra Lopez y Royo, Frederique Marglin and Ananya Chatterjea's work is specific to the study of Odissi.

[43] This "history" is a synthesis of several websites and text books on Odissi and Indian Classical dance with similar historical explanations. Some examples are the book, "Odissi: What, Why and How…Evolution, Revival and Technique" by Madhumita Raut (2007) B. R Rhythms Delhi and websites such as www.nandanam.com and www.rudrakshodissi.com.

[44] Ram's article, "Dancing off-Stage: Nationalism and its 'Minor Practices' in Tamil Nadu" (2009) appears in *Dance Matters: Approaches and Issues in Indian Dance.* Ed. Pallabi Chakravorty. Routledge India.

dance that question these "common-sense" versions, as well as use social and critical theory to problematize the history and historiography are rarely part of this popular version of Odissi history[45].

Finding a Nomenclature

Besides problematizing the existing history, certain terms used to describe Odissi dance, call for critical attention. One such term is "classical." Frederique Marglin, who completed an ethnography of the *maharis* in 1985[46], points out, there is no adequate Hindi or Sanskrit translation for the term "classical," and dance was simply referred to as *nach* (dance) by the *maharis*. The distinction between "classical and "folk" dance is one that is based on a western model, and emerged in India at the turn of the 20th century, when institutions and research academies focused on the performing arts were set up. This creation of the category "classical" reiterated a need to position Indian art and culture in western terms, and by making dance a "classical" form, these institutions were able to align themselves with the values and antiquity of ancient Greece and its art. Consequently, many of the terms used to describe Odissi developed in dialogue with Western notions of dance. Some dancers[47] today use the term "neo-classical" instead of "classical" because it acknowledges the codification and institutionalization of this dance form in the 1950s and 1960s. But most Odissi dancers and dance companies prefer the use of the term "classical" because it allows them to build on the discursive and institutional advantages of this dance form. Further, use of the term "classical" also

[45] Some exceptions are the work of dance scholars, Ananya Chatterjee , Ratna Roy, Dinanath Pathy and Frederique Marglin.
[46] Frederique Marglin's book, "Wives of the God-King: The Rituals of the Devadasis of Puri" (1985) has been the first ethnography of the *maharis* of Orissa. Marglin was also trained in Odissi dance.
[47] For example, Courtyard dancers (Kathak) and Sakshi Productions (Odissi)

signals a rigorous training that builds on the *guru-shishya* (guru-student) relationship. I elaborate on this advantage, and the varied use of these terms in the following chapter.

Marglin also points out that the terms *marga/deshi* could possibly correspond to the binary of classical/folk, but they are inadequate and inaccurate. *Marga* means "pathway" or "the way". Though it is commonly acknowledged that the established repertoire in Odissi dance follows a traditional *margam*, this does not correspond to the notion of "classical" as understood in the Western context. Referring to these Indian dance forms as "classical" placed them on par with Ballet, favoring the secular over the traditional (Marglin 1985: 2). Using the terms *Deshi* or *desi,* "of the land" or "place", loosely corresponds to the idea of folk or being rooted in a place, but remains an inadequate translation as Odissi classical dance is also tied to the notion of place. Another set of terms sometimes used to describe the classical/folk binary include, *natyadharmi* (highly stylized behavior or adaptation for the stage as in dance, associated with the elite) and *lokadharmi* (natural daily behavior or common-folk). Some dancers prefer these terms to avoid using the classical/folk binary, with the assumption, however, that Odissi dance falls into the former category. In truth, much of Odissi dance builds on **both** *natyadharmi* and *lokadharmi* forms of *abhinaya*[48]. In short, these terms come with their own linguistic baggage, but use of the term "classical" still remains the most common and advantageous way of referring to Odissi dance. For the purposes of this study, I use the term, "classical" to mean a dance form that follows a systemized method of instruction and curriculum, and draws on a somewhat fixed vocabulary of movement.

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[48] I explain *abhinaya* in the following paragraph. Ratna Roy discusses this binary between *natyadharmi* and *lokadharmi* in more detail in her 2009 book, "Neo-Classical Odissi Dance. New Delhi: Harman Publishing House," pgs 5-9, as does Dinanath Pathy in his 2007 book, "Rethinking Odissi." New Delhi: Harman Publishing House, pgs 56-64.

The very distinction between dance and theatre is a largely western one. As per the *Natyashashtra*, a treatise on the performing arts, Indian theatre includes both dance and music, and the practice and study of dance in India has historically conflated the two, making this distinction between dance and theatre or dance and drama, a debatable distinction. Most Indian dance is divided into *nritta* (pure dance) and *nrittya* (expressional dance). The latter incorporates *abhinaya,* which is the art of expressing a particular mood *(rasa*) or sentiment in dance or in drama. It is sometimes referred to as stylized mime and is considered distinct from pure dance or *nritta. Abhinaya* is accomplished through facial expressions and stylized mime, and symbolic hand gestures *(mudras)* are employed to interpret a story or theme. If one were to use the western framework of characterizing Indian dance then, *nrittya*, with the use of *abhinaya*, is dance-drama.

Scriptures & Sculptures Intertwined: Ancient Proof

Most scholars writing on the history and origins of Odissi dance employ the use of two kinds of evidence, scriptural and sculptural. For example, more than half the text,

Figure 9: Tribhanga dance pose at Buddhist site of *Ratnagiri, Lalitgiri* and *Udayagiri.*
Photo credit: Chloe Romero

"Odissi Dance" (1971), one of the first books on Odissi dance by D. N Patnaik, focuses on the sculptural history and texts of Odissi. The most often-cited sculptural evidence of this dance form is traced to the Jain sculptures of *Khandagiri* and *Udayanagar* near Bhubaneswar, the capital of Orissa. These *gumphas* (or caves) house reliefs of dancers and musicians that date back to the 1st century BCE and reflect various poses, including the *chauka,* or square, one of the two basic positions in the Odissi vocabulary as it is performed today[49]. Figure 9 in the sculpture above is one of the two basic dance positions, *Tribhanga* (three-bend) depicted at the Buddhist site of *Ratnagiri, Lalitgiri* and *Udayagiri* in Orissa (2nd - 12th century AD), and *Chauka* is also believed to depict the square stance of Lord *Jagannath* himself (see figure 10 below).

Figure 10: Papier Mache sculpture of Lord Jagannath

Though there are more elaborate sculptural representations of the dance to be found all over Orissa, such as the Sun Temple in Konarak, these caves are considered to be the earliest ones, making Odissi the first documented form of all Indian classical

[49] The *Chauka* pose in the *Ranigumpha* (Rani cave) in *Udayagiri.*

dances. This focus on "concrete" evidence is one that is continually employed in the history of Odissi dance, and this primary, evidentiary stone text gives Odissi its status as an "ancient" dance form. The body of a dancer carved in stone provides physical, and concrete proof to the early existence of Odissi locating it firmly in the state of Orissa. The primacy of archaeology in the making of national culture and nationhood has been well documented[50] and it is significant that these stone sculptures play an important role in any retelling of Odissi dance history, especially the popular versions.

Art historian Tapati Guha-Thakurta has discussed this move from the "archeological" to the "aesthetic" within the field of art history. Indian art historians and scholars, in response to colonial critique, had to reconstitute Indian art as being worthy of its western counterpart. But first, Indian art needed to establish its archaeological and historical bonafides before it could engage in the more subjective aesthetic debate. Once this goal was achieved, scholars and historians were able to begin the more difficult task of recuperating the aesthetic value of the art. As Guha-Thakurta explains with respect to the erotic sculptures of Khajuraho, it was the job of the art historian in a newly-independent India to rescue these sculptures and "recover the erotic from earlier connotations of the lowly and obscene to a new reified status of the spiritual and the symbolic" (Guha-Thakurta 2004: 244). Khajuraho, now a "World Heritage[51]" site, challenged scholars to find a way to explain the explicit sexual motifs within a spiritual context. Creating this kind of spiritual allegory helped pave the way for the erotica of Khajuraho to be celebrated rather than be seen as a source of shame. As we shall see

[50] Nadia Abu El Haj's work, "Facts on the Ground: Archaeological Practice and Territorial Self-Fashioning in Israeli Society" (2001) University of Chicago Press is a good example of scholarship that establishes the connection between national identity and archaeology.
[51] UNESCO deems certain sites having "universal world value" as "World Heritage sites." This is based on meeting one of ten selection criteria.

later, this recuperation of history is not unique to the field of art, Odissi too was reconstructed over several decades to become the dance form that it is today. And similar to the female form in art history, the female form in Odissi dance underwent a strategic reconfiguring, and negotiation as an aesthetic and religious embodiment.

In terms of their evidentiary value, "scriptures" or texts played an important role too. There are several texts that pertain to Indian classical dance, and Odissi in particular, however there are three that are cited most frequently. The first is the *Natyashastra,* written by Bharata, which contains the first mention of Odissi dance. It is acknowledged as the oldest surviving text on stagecraft in the world, and is dated somewhere between the 2nd century BCE and 2nd century AD. The *Natyashastra* is not specific to Odissi but encompasses dramaturgy, dance and music.

The second text used as classical evidence is the *Abhinaya Darpana* that is placed somewhere between the 5th and 13th centuries. It is written by Nandikeswara, and is devoted to an exposition of *abhinaya* and hand gestures.

The third text is the *Abhinaya Chandrika*, which refers to the dance as *Odra Nrutya*, the dance of Orissa. The *Abhinaya Chandrika* is a short Sanskrit document in Oriya script dated between the 12th and 17th century AD. Dinanath Pathy in his book, "Rethinking Odissi" has an extensive comment on the accuracy of this date and concludes that it is most likely a 20th century text. In the early edition of his book on Odissi dance, D. N. Patnaik cites the *Abhinaya Chandrika* as written during the 12th century AD although in a later edition cites it as the 17th century. It is a regionally-specific text and details the unique elements of Odissi dance such as certain *hastas* (hand

gestures) that are not found in other Sanskrit texts such as the *Natyashastra* and the *Abhinaya Darpana.*

Most scholars, historians and practitioners, writing about Odissi dance regard these three texts as canonical, and there is a reliance on them as if they were scripture. Of the three texts, the *Natyashastra* is the one cited most frequently. In the preface to her book on dance, Mandrakanta Bose writes:

> Discovering the oldest forms of dancing in India requires, as do other historical quests, a reconstruction of the past and, again as in other historical investigations, the primary sources of knowledge are records from the past. In this case the records are treatises and manuals in Sanskrit that discuss and describe dancing" (Bose 2007: 1).

It is clear that for many scholars and historians, texts become the primary source of authentication.

"Textures of Time" authors, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, V.N Rao and David Shulman, contest Ashis Nandy's argument that history-writing in South Asia is a "Western, mainly a nineteenth-century import into India – and thus entirely alien to the authentic conception of things" (Subrahmanyam, V.N Rao and David Shulman 2003: xi). The problem with Nandy's view of history-writing, according to them, is that it ignores the wealth of non-Western historical materials that can serve as sources, and that historical materials may vary depending on context. These materials may take the form of prose, if prose is the dominant literary form of the time. Like other recent scholars, Subrahmanyam, Rao and Shulman attempt to enlarge the body of materials of what is considered history. For example, Dinanath Pathy (2007) and Kapila Vatsayan (1980) draw attention to the importance of painting as a valuable historical source. Pathy especially draws on his own expertise as an artist to analyze drawings in regional palm

leaf manuscripts and *pata* paintings, in texts such as the *Abhinaya Chandrika* and *Shilpa Prakash* that originated near the 12th century or later.

However it is only in the last two decades that Odissi has been looked at through historical sources beyond the scriptural to include oral testimonies of the *maharis* and the *gotipuas*. For a dance form that has passed on from *guru* to *shishya* (student) through demonstration and practice, and only supplemented by the "text" why is it that sculptures and scriptures have become a primary source of validation? Why is an embodied practice validated more through textual rather than oral evidence? Is this in response to colonial writings, many of which vilified native practices? Or is the impermanence of oral discourse considered less credible than concrete stone and text? Ananya Chatterjea (2004) acknowledges this logocentric approach to history writing, and its reliance on more concrete forms of historical texts. According to her, it is "**natural** (my emphasis) in contexts dominated by bodily and oral modes of transmission" (Chatterjee 144). Chatterjea's argument in my view, naturalizes this mode of historiography, and ignores the potential of historical sources available to us.

Most scholars privilege these scriptural and sculptural sources over the experience and knowledge of the *maharis*: the written over the verbal, and the documented over embodied experience, a reliance on the *shastras* (or the written word) as opposed to the lived realities of embodied practice. Given that dance is constituted through movement, it is especially ironic that the static word and stone image is privileged over a more dynamic and mobile oral and physical discourse.

The Influence of the *Maharis* and the *Gotipuas*

The Odissi of today is described as drawing on the traditions of the *maharis,* the temple dancers and the *gotipuas,* male dancers. The *maharis* participated in temple rituals as early as the 9th century A.D, and their presence continued till the 16th century. By the 20th century, the practice of their dance had declined and they found it extremely hard to survive. The *gotipuas*, male dancers, who performed dressed as women[52], came into existence during the 17th century. Unlike the *maharis*, they were not affiliated with the temple but with gymnasiums or *akhadas* (Chatterjea 2004: 148). Frederique Marglin's ethnography "Wives of the God-King: The Rituals of the Devadasis of Puri" (1985), gives us a rich and detailed study of the surviving *maharis* and their relationship to the temple. When Marglin began her research in 1975, there were only nine women that could be identified as *maharis*.

Prior to the building of the famous *Jagannath* Temple by ruler Chodagangadeva, (sometime after 1112 A.D), a shrine was dedicated to the goddess or *Sakti* (D.N. Patnaik 45). It has been suggested that dance and music in Orissa temples arose prior to the actual building of the *Jagannath* temple (Panigrahi 2003: 11)[53], though it was characterized by more informality. It is after the building of the actual *Jagannath* temple that dance and music became a central part of social and political milieu in Puri. Ruler Chodagangadeva and his son appointed several *maharis* to serve the deity. Many references to the *maharis* and *devadasis* are found in the *Puranas*[54] (Patnaik 2003: 68)[55]; moreover these *maharis* were not limited to the temples of Orissa but were employed in several temples all over

[52] I intentionally do not use the phrase, "dressed in drag" because it belies a Western notion of cross-dressing.
[53] Published in monograph from 2nd International Odissi Festival held in Washington D.C. 2003.
[54] Religious Hindu, Jain or Buddhist texts in written form (3rd -5th BCE), although they may have existed in oral form before these dates.
[55] Ibid.

India, and enjoyed considerable advantages, and a high position in society[56]. Patnaik gives a detailed description of the duties of the *maharis* and their relationship to the temple and its services, citing the various divisions within the *maharis* that appear to be based on their spatial relationship to the temple and levels of access (Patnaik 62). The *maharis* of Orissa were wedded to Lord Jagannath in a ceremony, after which were expected to perform ritual service. According to Marglin, the Oriya word, *mahari* comes from the word *maharani* or "queen", and *maharis* were the consorts of Lord Jagannath, the presiding deity of Odissi dance. (The term *devadasi* is often used interchangeably with *mahari,* and in other parts of India means "at the feet of the god")[57]. The *maharis* were not permitted to marry but did partake in *gandharva* marriages, which were loosely defined marriages with temple priests that did not typify the structure of marriages of the time (Marglin 1985: 6)[58]. In later years, these sexual liaisons came to be the cause of misunderstanding and moral outrage, as I discuss later in this chapter.

From the 12th century onwards, intermittent invasions of temples by Muslim armies culminated in Afghan rule in India in 1568 A.D (Patnaik 68). The Jagannath temple was destroyed but eventually rebuilt at the beginning of the 17th century. According to D.N Patnaik, the *gotipuas*, male dancers who dress as women, first appeared around the 17th century (Patnaik 1971: 74). Perhaps the practice of *mahari* dance and ritual moved away from the temple because it was under siege from various invasions. Or as Chatterjea posits, under later *Vaishnavism*[59] women dancing in public

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[56] Oldenburg, Veena Talwar. 1990. Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow. In *India Feminist Studies* 16(2).
[57] To maintain geographical specificity of Orissa, I use the term "*mahari"* instead of "*devadasi"*
[58] Published in monograph from 2nd International Odissi Festival 2003
[59] *Vaishnavism* is school of Hinduism which worships Vishnu and his avatars. Krishna is believed to be an incarnation of Vishnu.

was frowned upon (Chatterjea 2004: 148). Either way the practice of this early form of the dance moved to the *akhadas* or gymnasiums that were used to train these young men, who also became known as *akhadapilas* or boys of the *akhada*. This bodily training was encouraged by King Ramachandradeva in an effort to develop the combat skills and bodies of young men in the event of war. Although the *gotipuas* came to be associated with temple events, and *Vaishnavism* through their song and dance, unlike the *maharis* they never performed inside the temple (Chatterjea 2004: 148).

The British eventually took over the management of the temple in 1803. However, until their arrival, the temple enjoyed periods of relative calm interspersed with occasional looting by Hindu and Muslim officials of the Mughal Court. According to Patnaik, this time marked the beginning of *maharis'* association with "concubinage", largely because the temple which provided stipends for the *maharis* no longer did so and these women had to look elsewhere for employment. This led to a shift in the spiritual and psychic home of Odissi, and also effectively removed the *maharis* from the center of Odissi dance and performance. Ananya Chatterjea discusses the irony of the position occupied by the *maharis* in Orissa. On the one hand they enjoyed special privileges such as access to the temple, and a sexual freedom that other women at the time were denied. On the other hand, with limited royal and temple patronage, and with increased involvement by the British in temple affairs, they were subject to a decline in their lifestyles. As moral policing increased, their way of life became more penurious and unsustainable. Without an income the *maharis* were forced to rely on other means, and this sometimes meant sex work.

According to Marglin, there is a strong link between the dance of the *maharis* and sex. There is the association with sexual freedom as discussed above but there was also a sexual association with their ritual dance. Marglin's analysis of the midday dance (*sakala dhupa*), posits this as the most important in a ritual day at the temple. It is considered to be a part of *Shakta* tradition (related to worship of the goddess) during which the *mahari* dance conveys a union of her "essence"[60] with the "sacred" which is supposed to ensure the prosperity of the kingdom. The prostration of the devotees on the ground after the *mahari* performs this ritual dance is not to gather the dust of her feet, as is sometimes thought today, but rather to benefit from her sexual essence that this event has produced. Most of the writings on the *maharis* rarely mention this "sexual" aspect of her dance. Marglin blames social reformers during colonization for the eventual disappearance of the *maharis* from the temple due to their inability to deal with the mingling of female sexuality with divinity in the same spatial and temporal context. This development is believed to coincide with the popularity of the *Vaishanava* movement discussed earlier, and a move away from *Saivite*[61] rituals. This would explain why Odissi dance today is more heavily influenced by *Vaishnavism*, whereas the *Tantric*[62] elements that are associated with *Saivite* and *Shakta* rituals came to lose importance. Even today this sexual aspect of the *mahari* ritual is rarely mentioned in writings on Odissi.

The dance performed by the *gotipuas* differed from that of the *maharis* in a few ways. First, the music was based on *Vaishnava* poets of Orissa at the time, and focused largely on *Radha-Krishna* stories. Based on Jayadeva's *Geeta-Govinda*, these stories of

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[60] According to Marglin, this is why the maharis always wear a sari, rather than the costume that is passed between the legs, and is favored by most Odissi dancers.
[61] A branch of Hinduism which focuses on the worship of Shiva.
[62] *Tantra* is a form of Hindu and Buddhist religious practice.

Radha and *Krishna* celebrate divine longing, and are a central theme in *Vaishnavism*. There was also an emphasis on *Sakhi Bhava*, a *Vaishanava* practice, which perpetuated the idea that divine longing was expressed and often articulated from a feminine perspective (regardless of gender). The *mahari* dances on the other hand, were more of a ritual practice and combined spirituality with movement. According to Ratna Roy, these *mahari* dances combined the syncretism of *Vaishnavism* and *Tantrism,* (Roy 2007: 75) and choreography by Guru Pankaj Charan Das who was raised in a *mahari* household focused on powerful female characters. The erotic when present was expressed in terms of a longing for and/or union with the divine through *bhakti* or devotion, focusing more on the spiritual rather than the erotic. This distancing from the erotic may have been an attempt to remove the "taintedness" of a dance form, historically associated with temple dancers whose reputation had fallen into disrepute. Perhaps because of this move towards *Vaishnavism,* away from the *Tantric* aspects, and its associations with the erotic and the tainted, the *maharis* were excluded from the codification processes of Odissi dance in the 1950s. It is interesting to note that only one of the[63] styles of Odissi dance, namely the Deba Prasad Das *gurukul,* that an item such as *Dasamahavidya*[64], or the ten *tantric*[65] goddesses, is taught and performed.

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[63] It is widely accepted that there are four *gurukuls* of Odissi dance, each with its unique aesthetics, and spear-headed by four of the Odissi revivalists, Guru Pankaj Charan Das, Guru Deba Prasad Das, Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra, and Guru Mayadhar Raut. Other "transgressive" styles such as that of Guru Surenderanath Jena are sometimes included as a fifth *gurukul*, although this is debatable. Alessandra Lopez y Royo in her study (2006) on Odissi elaborates on this last inclusion.

[64] A dance item showcasing ten goddesses depicted with powerful female iconography.

[65] Wendy Doniger in "The Hindus: An Alternative History" Penguin Press, New York (2009) and David White in the "Kiss of the Yogini: Tantric Sex in its South Asian Contexts," University of Chicago Press(2003) discuss *Tantra* as a religious practice that was "Brahmanized" in the 11th Century contributing to *Tantra* becoming a marginal and esoteric practice.

Figure 11: A *gotipua* performance in Orissa. Photo credit: Luna

The other point of difference between the *gotipua* and *mahari* styles of dancing was the *gotipua* use of *Bandha Nrutya,* an acrobatic form of the dance that emphasizes flexibility over choreography. Even today, when young *gotipuas* perform at many of the international festivals, it is their acrobatics that is the point of focus[66]. Unlike the *maharis*, the *gotipuas* performed largely for the public, as opposed to the *maharis* whose dance took the form of a ritual performed especially for *Jagannath*, and public presence was happenstance. *Gotipua* villages such as Raghurajpur in Orissa exist to this day, and dancers such as Rekha Tandon have collaborated with these young male dancers showcasing them nationally and internationally. Similarly, Guru Gangadhar Pradhan who was dedicated as a *gotipua* at a young age has also patronized *gotipua* performers. Many of the gurus who were part of *Jayantika,* the revivalist group that helped rescue Odissi

[66] An exception to this is the recent work of Rekha Tandon with the *gotipuas* of Raghurajpur in *Dhara* (2007), which is focused on the nuance of *gotipua* movement traditions.

from oblivion, were originally *gotipuas* and part of *jatra* groups (street theatre). I discuss this in more detail at the end of this chapter.

Uma Chakravarti makes a distinction between actual continuity and desired continuity (Chakravarti 1989: 17) in historical processes and consciousness. This is a valuable distinction, since it highlights the way *maharis* have been positioned, and how women within the reconstruction of Odissi dance have been (re)imagined. Chakravarti points to the danger of "feminist" attempts to give voice to the marginalized woman. In creating a positivist history of the female experience and celebrating their contributions, she points to the danger of masking their real experiences. Notably, even though many of the gurus who participated in the reconstruction of the dance were trained as *gotipuas*, they fashioned the form of the solo female dancer after the tradition of the *maharis*. As I argue later, the *mahari* dance provided a more powerful trope to draw on. The more "traditional" performances today attempt to replicate rituals from Jagannath temple such as the placement of Lord Jagannath at the downstage left corner[67] to create the presence of the deity and the use of incense and/or lamps (Lopez y Royo 2006). But in terms of the actual performance, it is very different from the *mahari* rituals: the use of live musicians (*maharis* would sing and dance at the same time), the specially choreographed items for a public audience, and the costumes are all elements that are dissimilar from the *mahari* versions of the dance. So how much of the *mahari* dance is evident or present in Odissi as it is performed on stage today? Scholars like Uttara Coorlawala[68], maintain that the Odissi of today and the dance performed by *maharis* are fundamentally different forms,

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[67] This practice is followed by the majority of Odissi *gurukuls* except the Deba Prasad one. They believe that Jagannath leaves the temple only once a year during the annual Rath Yatra or procession.
[68] As quoted in Lopez y Royo (2006).

and that there is little to be seen of the *mahari* tradition in present-day Odissi dance. Even the ethnographies of Marglin and other dance scholars are not able to detail actual choreographic elements. Although Guru Pankaj Charan Das, born in 1925 and one of the founders of *Jayantika* (he is no longer alive) was raised in a *mahari* family, assessing how much of his choreographies contain actual *mahari* dances and how much was inspired by his own vision and creativity, remains a challenge.

Figure 12: Mahari Sashimoni. Photo credit: Rahul Acharya

This lack of "evidence" allows one to reimagine the role of the *maharis* in various ways. Recent works by dancers like Sharmila Biswas who created the dance, "*Sampoorna*" was inspired by the *maharis*. Below is an excerpt from an article about the performance which took place in 1999:

> Sashimoni, the 82-year-old mahari, is bent and arthritic. But when she opens her mouth to sing a love song to her eternal husband Lord Jagannath in her cracked voice, her eyes light up and her limbs take on a life of their own. The effect on the audience is electric and they sit up in their seats to applaud this odd vestige from a long bygone era. For the first time in her life this *mahari* -- the local name for a *devadasi* of the Puri Jagannath temple -- has left her dingy room near the temple to grace the stage in Delhi, and she is not impressed. "What is all this song and dance about?" she asks the battery of television and print reporters who crowd her after the highly moving Odissi dance-drama, *Sampoorna*, which is based on her art and life. "All my life I have served my Lord and what do I get in

> return? A measly Rs 300 as pension and not a word of appreciation from either the Government or the dancers and dance teachers who live off our art", she says, clutching at her thin *Sambhalpuri odhni* (shawl) that was part of her trousseau when she was married off -- aged barely seven -- to the idol."(Kalidas 1999)[69]

Marglin and others have lamented the lack of attention paid to the *maharis* by government authorities, despite repeated letters of reference written by dancers like Indrani Rahman and other revivalists of Odissi dance in later years. The *maharis* too applied for grants to the newly instituted State Academy for Music and Dance but were denied repeatedly (Marglin 1985: 29). Although the *mahari* contribution has been acknowledged in recent years it has not benefited them. For example, the institution of the *mahari* awards in 1995 is given to talented soloists of today. The *maharis* was excluded from the dialogue during the *Jayantika* revival and reconstruction in the 1950s. It is only in the last two decades that dancers and institutions have attempted to resurrect the *mahari* and her legacy, although her origins are romanticized and idealized by the Odissi dance community.

It is both ironic and strategic that the mystique of the *mahari* is exploited and perpetuated even though she was excluded from the project of reconstruction. With few surviving *maharis* left, this reimagined ritual of the *mahari* dance becomes a powerful performance device that dancers incorporated in their shows. By drawing on the tropes and discourse of the *mahari* dancer, the claim to authenticity becomes historically validated and spiritually sanctified, for it is considered closer to antiquity than the more recent *gotipua* tradition. In acknowledging the *mahari*, Odissi dancers in recent years have addressed her erasure, but in ways that gloss over her disenfranchisement. I argue

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[69] An article in India Today Magazine called, "*Devadasi's*: The Lords Damsels" (1999).

this practice in Odissi dance and in Indian art is based on the fetishization of the female form which perpetuates a more hetero-normative perspective of the dance than that of the *gotipuas*. The erasure of the "poor, old and arthritic" *maharis* was a necessary part of the consolidation of the romanticized image of the *mahari.* This new image of the *mahari* was reworked by female Odissi dancers that were middle-class and upper caste. I discuss this further in the final section of this chapter. The figure of the female dancer was rehabilitated into one that is devoid of the sexual excess associated with the actual history of the *maharis*, to provide a source of powerful imagery and authenticity.

The Colonial Impact and the Nationalist Ideal

> ***Indecent ceremonies disgraced the ritual, and dancing-girls with rolling eyes put the modest female worshipper to the blush.***
>
> William W. Hunter, 1872 (quoted in Patnaik 1971)

Social reform in India can be roughly divided two phases[70]. Prior to 1858[71], and the official assumption of power by the crown, colonial authorities were more willing to interfere and deliberate on traditional customs. The second phase, marked by the Revolt of 1857[72] against the British crown, and roughly the second half of the nineteenth century, marked the beginning of nationalism spearheaded by the Indian elite and the creation of a "domain of sovereignty around national culture" (Chatterjee 1993:6). Consequently, a strong resistance to the British articulation of culture via institutions and

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[70] I rely on Partha Chatterjee's account of social reform in "*Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*" (1993). Princeton: Princeton University Press.
[71] I choose 1857 as a moment of entry as it marks the Indian Mutiny or the First War of independence. This historical moment is also considered by many historians to be the transition from the East India Company to the British colonial state. Others see 1885 as this originary moment marked by the founding of the Indian National Congress.
[72] It is also referred to as the Indian Mutiny of 1857 or India's First War of Independence.

social practices occurred. After 1858, colonial authorities responded through legislation and were more hesitant to intervene directly in social reform. As Marglin has pointed out, much of the response of the Indian social reformers can be attributed to early colonial writings, especially in the early 19th century that attempted to document "native" religious practices. As an example of colonial writings at the time, I cite below at length the oft-quoted Abbe' Dubois (1816) who has a particularly relevant section on *devadasis*. It must be mentioned that though Dubois, a French Christian missionary is credited with this work, it is primarily based on an older work by Pe're Coeurdoux in the 1760's[73]. The Abbe' was paid by the British colonial government for these "ethnographic" writings which were later published in English in 1816. This moral condemnation evidenced below inspired the beginnings of movements such as the Anti-Nautch[74] (Anti-dance) campaign. Perception of the *devadasis* as "prostitutes" was rampant at this time, partly due to their non-monogamous sexual relationships, and the fact that their community was not governed by traditional divisions of caste and class:

> Next to the sacrificers, the most important persons about the temples are the dancing girls, who call themselves devadasi, servants or slaves of the god but they are known to the public by the coarser name of strumpets. Their profession requires them to be open to the embraces of all caste…the service they perform consists of dancing and singing. The first they execute with grace, though with lascivious attitudes and motions. Their chanting is generally confined to the obscene songs which relate to some circumstance or other of the licentious lives of their gods…it is nothing uncommon to hear of pregnant women, in the belief that it will tend to their happy delivery, making a vow, with the consent of their husbands, to devote the child, then in the womb, if it should turn out a girl, to the service of the Pagoda…a religion more shameful or indecent has never existed amongst a civilized people….these prostitutes are the only females in India who may learn to read, to sing and to dance. Such accomplishments belong to them exclusively, and are, for that reason, held

[73] Nicholas Dirks discusses this in detail in "Castes of Mind' (2001) crediting Sylvia Murr for this "discovery".
[74] Nautch is the anglicized version of *nach* or dance.

> by the rest of the sex in such abhorrence, that every virtuous woman would consider them as an affront….perfumes, elegant attire, particularly their beautiful hair, multitudes of ornamental trinkets adapted with infinite taste to different parts of the body, a graceful carriage and a measured step, indicating luxurious delight; such are the allurements and the charms which these enchanting sirens display to accomplish their seductive designs.
>
> At the same time, notwithstanding their alluring demeanor, they cannot be accused of those gross indecencies which are often publicly exhibited by women of their stamp in Europe; particularly the exposure of the person and the lascivious airs which one would think capable of inspiring the most determined libertine with disgust: On the contrary, of all women in India, the common girls and particularly the dancers at the temples are the most decently clothed. They are so nice in covering every part of the body, as to have the appearance of being effectively precise, or as if they intended, by the contrast with the more open attire of other dames, to excite more strongly the passion which they wished to inspire, by carefully veiling a part of the charms which it covets. Such is the outline of the religious ceremonies of the Hindus and such the spirit of idolatry which prevails among them. (1816: 401-402)[75]

Frederique Marglin draws attention to the contradiction apparent in these writings as well as the orientalist assumptions. While the writings do not mask the missionary's disdain, they focus on the allure of these "prostitutes", contrasting them with those in Europe. "This mixture of the sinful and the sensuously beautiful is Europe's classical recipe for the exotic" (Marglin 5). It is in response to colonial writings such as these, and its association with the erotic that nationalists campaigned to sanctify the dance form, and in order to remove these tainted notions, it was necessary to remove the dance from its spatial setting, i.e., the temple. In his later writings on caste and Hinduism, Dubois reserves a special disdain for Brahmins as being the most important stumbling block to conversion. Though he was especially critical of Hindu morality, Dubois held an appreciation for the caste-system (Dirks: 25). Perhaps the clear social demarcation

[75] Abbe J A Dubois's account of India, entitled "Description of the Character, Manners and Customs of the People of India" (1879).

appealed to his sensibility, especially since the "strumpets" who transgressed the barriers of caste were perceived outside of it.

Scholars such as Amrit Srinivasan (1984) and Avanthi Meduri (1996) situate the *devadasi* or temple dancer in Tamil Nadu at the intersection of colonial and nationalist ideologies with respect to the revival of Bharatnatyam, the dance of India, (originally called *sadir)*. This important historical debate took place around two distinct movements of the Reformists and the Revivalists, largely in response to the Anti-Nautch campaign of 1892, and played a key role in how the temple dancers and Indian classical dance were framed and eventually reconstructed within the national context.

The Reformists & the Anti-Nautch Movement

The Anti-Nautch movement began in 1892, started by colonial and Indian social reformers who proposed that temple dancing be abolished, and the practice of young girls dedicated to the temple to be raised as *devadasis* be discontinued. The movement gained momentum in the context of social reform, which began roughly in 1860, and debates around the "women's question", which condemned practices such as *sati*, female infanticide, and widow remarriage, and labeled all *devadasis* as prostitutes. It is important to look at the Anti-Nautch movement, not simply in the context of legislation on temple dancing, but also to understand how temple dancing became a site of contestation, and a way for colonial authorities to further legislate on women's roles in society: on their sexuality, bodies and social status.[76] The Reformists, dominated by the Dravidian Movement, a political movement fighting Brahmin domination, attempted to do away

[76] Nicholas Dirks comes to a similar conclusion in his study of the custom of "hook swinging" in colonial India in Castes of Mind (2001).

with the "prostitute" by forcing the *devadasi* out of the religious temple sphere into a public, secular one. *Devadasis* were either rehabilitated through marriage reform or excluded and criminalized under the law. However, in reality only a few women were able to marry upper-caste and upper-class men, as it was easier to criminalize and penalize them (Srinivasan, 1985). Similarly, Kalpana Kannabiran (1995) in her study of the legislation of *devadasis* under the Madras Presidency shows that women who fell outside the parameters of circumscribed notions of womanhood had only these two choices of rehabilitation or criminalization available. However, the ambiguity of "prostitution" as a legal offense was problematic, and *devadasis* could not be easily accused of it. It was under the guise of endangering the lives of minors that the lives of the *devadasis* were eventually controlled. Young girls were often adopted by *devadasis* and trained as dancers, the *devadasis* were the only women allowed to adopt under customary Hindu law (Srinivasan 1985: 1872).

In an attempt to forge the archetype of the new Indian woman, the regional specificities of women, including *devadasis* were homogenized. The reformers, mostly colonial missionaries, and some educated upper-middle class Indian men and women positioned these dancers as women of ill-repute, and sought to remove them from performing in public spaces, such as courts and temples. The ban was accompanied by moral censorship, and as a result the *devadasis* were ostracized from public life. Many of these women who had traditionally received financial stipends from the temple lost their incomes, as the management of temple trusts came under colonial scrutiny. In November, 1892 the Madras Hindu Social Reform Association was founded, and the aims of the organization were to encourage female education and marriage reform. A condition of

membership to the association included the banning of "nautch" women in public spaces as it was considered antithetical to their aims (Marglin 1985: 6). Marglin also points out that using the anglicized term "nautch-woman," could refer to a dancing girl, a courtesan or a prostitute (Marglin 130). "Nautch" connoting any type of dance, thus elided the boundaries of genre (street, folk etc) or geography (Orissa, South India etc) (Coorlawala 1992: 130). Even though actual legislation preventing temple dedication of minors did not happen till 1947, the 1920s witnessed a vociferous campaign against the *devadasis* that became embroiled in the politics of the Dravidian movement (Srinivasan 1985: 1873). Though the Anti-Nautch movement began in the South, it quickly assumed a national context, and the overall influence of the campaign eventually included Orissa.

Veena Oldenburg's ethnographic study of the courtesans of Lucknow (1990) provides a similar reading of these "fallen" women who found ways to contest male authority. According to the civic tax ledgers of 1858-77, these women were among some of the highest tax paying members of Lucknow society, a testament to their prestige and position at the time. After the revolt of 1857, it was discovered that more soldiers died of disease rather than combat, and that 1 in 4 British soldiers had venereal diseases. As a result, Act XXII of 1864 in India, inspired by Britain's Contagious Disease Act of 1864, required all courtesans and prostitutes to subject themselves to regular medical examinations in 110 cantonment cities in India. These women were blamed for the ill-health of the soldiers, and subjected to heavy penalties. British authorities exercised punishment by policing these women and their bodies. In her essay, Oldenburg describes the ways in which these courtesans evaded this civic policing of their bodies as part of the resistance. The courtesan was "outside" normative society, and did not need to define

herself in the context of heterosexual and patriarchal expectations. Therefore the need to contain her, and what she embodied became paramount. These courtesans ultimately represented a sexual and social excess that needed to be contained, and colonial authorities, collaborating with moral authority of the Indian elite, used various tactics, and legal recourse to do so.

The Revivalists

Dance in India became a site of contestation around two colonial and national movements. At the same time as the Reformists launched their campaigns against *devadasis*, the Brahmin-dominated Revivalists attempted to rehabilitate Indian dance as a classical form. This was done through the inscribing of certain Brahmanical social values, such as prayers and vegetarianism, and Brahmanic control increased making it the defacto interpretation of Hindu ritual. The ancient Sanskrit text, the *Natyashastra* became the almanac for the codification of all Indian dance under the nationalist agenda. A well-known product of the revivalist movement is Rukmini Devi Arundale, an Indian Bharatnatyam dancer who was feted by the Theosophical Society, and became a leading figure in the codification of Bhartanatyam, or the dance of India. Arundale was married to Sir George Arundale, and was one of the first women to study Bharatnatyam formally. She established the Kalakshetra College of Dance and Music in Madras in 1936, having successfully rescued the dance from its nefarious associations with prostitution (Chatterjea 146). The regional dance form of Tamil Nadu or *sadir* transformed into Bharatnatyam, and became India's first classical dance creating the roadmap towards classical status, and institutional validation for dance forms, such as Odissi.

Uma Chakravarti in her 1989 essay, 'Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi?' looks at the construction of the archetypal Indian woman created at the intersection of colonial and nationalist ideologies, and how ultimately the image of the Hindu-Aryan woman with Brahmanical values became "the only object of historical concern" (Chakravarti 1989: 28). As a result, the *dasi* (female servant or low-caste woman) was erased from the historical and public imagination. Chakravarti accounts for how this image of the Hindu-Aryan woman came to the forefront of public thought by citing the work of *Krishnacharita* by Bankim Chandra as representative of 19th century cultural nationalists. Writers such as Bankim represented the next wave of Orientalists who after 1850 reworked the identity of Indian womanhood, an identity that fit in with a national agenda. In *Krishnacharita*, the eroticism surrounding Krishna was reworked presenting him as a high-caste, warrior-philosopher. Additionally, lower caste and non-Hindu men (primarily Muslim) were removed from this idealized male image. Bankim Chandra created a similar role for women. This female archetype could serve the nation as warrior as well as maintain her feminine qualities:

> Nationalism itself came to occupy the same place that religion had before, it was a permitted area for women's participation. In this model of womanhood there was no difference between the perception of progressives and conservatives (Chakravarti 1989: 79).

More often than not, this translated into an upper class conception of Indian womanhood. Hobsbawm's thesis on nationalism[77] supports this analysis. He argues that the "deliberate Sanskritization of the literary Bengali separated the literate upper classes from the popular masses but also Hinduized Bengali high culture, thus demoting the

[77] Hobsbawm, Eric J. 1990. Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bengali Muslim masses" (Hobsbawm 1990: 111). This was evident in the case of *Krishnacharita* cited above, thereby alienating the Bengali Muslim masses.

The Revivalists succeeded in creating this new female archetype in the context of nationalism. Partha Chatterjee says:

> Sure enough, nationalism adopted several elements from tradition as marks of its native cultural identity, but this was now a "classicized" tradition – reformed, reconstructed, fortified against charges of barbarism and irrationality (Chatterjee 1993: 127).

Chatterjee also argues that this reformed and reconstructed tradition occurred through the erasure of sexuality, which as we shall see later on in this story, took place in the reconstruction of Odissi by *Jayantika*.

Les Bayaderes, an early nineteenth century operatic play, first performed in 1877 in St. Petersburg, and inspired by *devadasis* is an example of the prevalent discourse around temple dancers in Europe. These artistic comings and goings of European dancers looking for new material alerted the Indian elite to the worth of their art and dance forms, and they sought to capitalize on it. Ruth St. Denis, an American modern dancer toured India with her company in 1926 for eighteen months, performing over a hundred times in several parts of the country. She was followed by Anna Pavlova, but for some reason it is Pavlova who is credited by Bhartanatyam dancer, Rukmini Devi Arundale, for the rediscovery of Indian dance (Coorlawala1992: 123-124). But while St. Denis may not be as favorably remembered by dance history as Pavlova, it is possible that St. Denis' performances placed Indian dance at the forefront of the public imagination, especially at a time when the issue of the *devadasis* was also at the forefront of public debate. Anna Pavlova and Ruth St. Denis found it difficult to locate authentic Indian dancers on their visits to India but yet they performed versions of Indian dance themselves (Roy 38). The

reviews of these performances attest to the popularity and the warm reception that St. Denis received. However Sherman, an accompanying troupe member, acknowledges that Ruth St. Denis' popularity could be attributed to other reasons, namely the spectacle of a western woman performing evocatively-named dances such as "Nautch" and "The Dance of the Black and Gold Sari" (Coorlawala 140). Perhaps these performances which took place at the height of nationalist movement in India inspired Indian artistes and impresarios to pursue the marketing of these dances, realizing the possibility and potential of a "respectable" audience. Sherman recalls that the audiences were comprised mostly of colonials and upper-class Indians. Marglin, however, argues that these Western renditions of Indian dance did not positively affect the Indian public who seemed to react strongly to the moral condemnation surrounding **all** temple dance and dancers. This may be attributed to the reactions of the Reformists, but I would argue that the Revivalists were positively influenced by these foreigners in India, and inspired to rework the dances for Indian dancers, making the transition from temple to proscenium.

Another prominent figure in the development of Indian classical dance was that of dancer and choreographer, Uday Shankar[78]. Shankar presented a variety of Indian dance items to Western audiences, in a format they were familiar with. Rather than present Indian classical dance styles that hitherto catered to temple audiences of royal households, Shankar created dance presentations that had more in common with the "oriental dances" of Pavlova and St. Denis, but because Shankar was Indian his authenticity was taken for granted. Perhaps Uday Shankar can be seen as one of the first Indians performing a hybrid movement language, one that borrowed heavily from Indian

[78] An older brother of musician, Ravi Shankar.

movement traditions but were positioned in a Western concert-style format catering to Western audiences (Erdman 1987).

Jayantika and the Reconstruction of Odissi Dance

The Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act of 1947 made illegal the following:

> (T)he institution of dedicating young girls to temple deities, and prohibited dancing by a woman…in the precincts of any temple or other religious institution or procession. This affected the devadasis by making their practice one of "enforced bondage or prostitution" (Chatterjee 1995: 17).

The passing of this act was an aggressive move by the newly independent nation to legislate in the religious sphere. And in post-independence India, the elite played a definitive role in the reconstruction of this dance form. In 1955, management of *Jagannath* temple transferred from the king to the state government, and is one of contributory factors towards the institutionalization of Odissi. Institutionalization of the dance form meant more than just schools dedicated to the instruction of each form, but also the governance by institutions such as *Sangeet Natak Akademi*, a national cultural academy started in 1953, and devoted to the performing arts. By removing the dance from temple premises, dance became a respectable profession for (read "upper class") women who were encouraged to study and become cultural ambassadors of the form.

In 1953, Rukmini Devi Arundale,[79] the doyen of Bharatnatyam, attended a cultural event in Cuttack, Orissa. Laxmi Devi, dancer and actress, and the wife of Odissi revivalist Kelucharan Mohapatra, performed Odissi, and Arundale allegedly responded

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[79] As poster-child of the Theosophical Society, Arundale was referred to as "mother", "goddess" and "dancer", in short, the complete Hindu woman.

that it was a "poor imitation of Bharatnatyam". As mentioned earlier, Bharatnatyam had been recently transformed from *Sadir,* the regional form to Bharatnatyam, the dance of India and had been awarded "classical" status. This comment by Rukmini Devi Arundale led Kalicharan Patnaik, poet, playwright and musicologist, to begin research on Odissi dance, taking it upon himself to give the dance the status it deserved. A year later in 1954, Odissi was performed at a dance competition in Delhi by D.N. Patnaik and Priyambada Mohanty. Charles Fabri, an art critic of *The Statesman,* praised the beauty of Odissi and persuaded Indrani Rahman, a Bharatnatyam dancer and winner of the 1952 Miss India pageant, to study the dance (Patnaik 1971). These two events launched the beginning of research on Odissi and the formation of *Jayantika*, an organization started in 1957, comprised of leading Odissi scholars and dancers. As Patnaik describes in his book:

> (A)ll of them signed in blood a declaration to the effect that they would conform to the technique and style to be determined unanimously by discussion and demonstration by all its members (Patnaik 1971: v).

The gurus of *Jayantika* came mostly from the *gotipua* traditions of Odissi. In fact, much of the reconstruction happened through these gurus and performers in urban areas, and outside of temple societies. Some claim that Odissi really began in the dance theaters of Cuttack by these gurus in the 1940s (Citaristi 2001; Lopez y Royo 2007), and that it began as dance items choreographed especially for Cuttack theater groups, such as *Annapurna* and *Orissa Theatres* of Kalicharan Patnaik. These dance items were initially designed as vignettes preceding the main event and eventually became woven into the narrative of the drama. According to Lopez y Royo, a number of musicians, street performers and actors came together to create these dance numbers as a way to attract

wider audiences for the theatre. *Dasavatar,* or the ten avatars which is a frequently performed dance item in the Odissi repertoire (Lopez y Royo; Citaristi 2001: 73) is said to have been choreographed during this period. In 1949, Kelucharan Mohapatra who began his career at these dance theatres began giving private dance tuitions in Cuttack, teaching the very young Sanjukta Panigrahi, Kumkum Mohanty and Minati Mishra. What is significant to note is that these theatres were not catering to the elite Odissi audiences of today, and had its roots in more popular forms of entertainment.

In 1958, the members of *Jayantika* began the project of Odissi's reconstruction. Those who dominated the proceedings were Deba Prasad Das, Kelucharan Mohapatra, Pankaj Charan Das, Mayadhar Raut and Dayanidhi Das (Chatterjee 151). They were joined by Odissi scholars and writers, Jiwan Pani, D.N Patnaik, Kalicharan Patnaik, Charles Fabri and Mayadhar Mansingh. The dancers in this group (all male) were mostly *gotipua* dancers, and had worked in *jatra* or street theater. Together, these scholars and Odissi dancers, combined with an interest from dancers trained in other forms, such as Sanjukta Panigrahi, and Sonal Mansingh, and state support, moved Odissi towards obtaining its classical status. *Jayantika* functioned for a few years into the 1960s. During this time the principal concerns of the group were to create a classical form distinct from Bharatnatyam, and to remove its tainted association with prostitution (Roy 126).

The revival initiated by these gurus was put into practice by a group of prominent middle to upper class women dancers who brought Odissi to national and international audiences. Dancers such as Sanjukta Panigrahi, Indrani Rahman, [80] Yamini

[80] Rahman performed for Queen Elizabeth II and other heads of state, led by Guru Deba Prasad Das as described in "Shradhanjali: A 3 Day Festival in Tribute to Odissi Genius, Guru Deba Prasad Das" an article by Rajika Puri (2001), Electronic document http://www.narthaki.com/info/reviews/review36.html, , accessed June 7, 2010

Krishnamurthy and Ritha Devi with their accompanying gurus, Kelucharan Mohapatra, Debe Prasad Das and Pankaj Charan Das, respectively popularized Odissi in the US and Europe from the 1960s onwards (Chatterjea 2004: 153). The female dancers were mostly from middle and upper middle class families while the male gurus were generally from working class backgrounds. Each needed the other, and a symbiotic relationship between (female) dancer and (male) guru developed. The male guru provided the authenticity and training of the form, while the female dancer/performer typified the exotic for a western audience, and became the body and voice of the form. The middle and upper-class female dancer was able to communicate to a western audience not just through her dance but through English, interpreting Odissi through lecture demonstrations and introductory statements to a relatively uninitiated western audience in the 1960s and 1970s. These demonstrations preceded the actual performance and translated what the audience was about to see into a language intelligible to that audience[81]. The gurus provided the compositions, the music, the authenticity and training. Gender intersected with class in a way to produce a relationship that allowed Odissi to blossom and gain recognition abroad and at home.

These dancers were also involved in the project of reconstruction. Sanjukta Panigrahi, a foremost disciple of Guru Kelucharan Mohaptra studied at *Kalakshetra*, the primary institute devoted to classical Bharatnatyam and used her experience towards the codification of Odissi. Early writings on Odissi and its history mention how "girls from aristocratic" or "Brahmin" families came forward to learn this dance, making caste and class important factors for the validation of this dance form, and distancing them from the

[81] I discuss the problematic of translation in detail in Chapter 6.

maharis. Together with their gurus, these women dancers built their own careers, the careers of their gurus as well as widened the audience for Indian dance in the West. As Ananya Chatterjea astutely points out, gender may not have served the *maharis* well, but it did for these women. Compared to the *maharis* who were excluded from the revival completely, these women became cultural representatives of Odissi and the nation. Gender coupled with the privilege of class (and the accompanying perquisites of dress, access, language and geographical location) allowed for these women to take Odissi into a new arena. The "new" national female dancer came into being, one who was able to cross regional and local barriers.

In this history of Odissi, gender has also played out across caste and class in illuminating ways. On the one hand, the *maharis* were disenfranchised and excluded from the processes of reconstruction, yet the trope of the lone temple dancer retains exotic and nostalgic potential, and is used by Odissi dancers frequently. On the other hand, the upper and middle-class women dancers of the 1960s and 1970's are credited with popularizing the dance form in India and abroad, but ultimately viewed only as bodies that performed Odissi as taught to them by their gurus. Despite the fact that many of these female Odissi dancers came to have their own respected dance institutions, these women did not use the prefix of "guru," and even today most female dancers do not refer to themselves in such a manner.

Largely due to financial reasons, male dancers have had to pursue teaching over performance careers. The men from working class and lower-middle class families who went on to become gurus faced opposition from their families. Guru Kelucharan

Mohapatra came from a family of painters and was expected to take after his father[82]. Guru Durga Charan Ranbirs' family disowned him after he decided to become a dancer. Ranbir comes from a *zamindari* or land-owning family, and to take up a dance career was considered beneath him. And for many young men it was also considered a financially unstable career choice.

Figure 13: Odissi dancer, Rahul Acharya performing in New York City (2007).
Photo credit Frank Ishman

Consequently, male dancers often had to choose between a performing career and a teaching one. Kelucharan Mohapatra, described as a legend of Odissi dance and Birju Maharaj, a Kathak maestro are considered exceptions to this rule. Now with dance having gained respectability more male dancers are choosing to pursue fulltime careers. It is mostly in the last decade that young male dancers have emerged as soloists and are

[82] 'The Making of a Guru' by Ileana Citaristi (2001)

choosing to pursue a dance career, without only turning to teaching. Yet male dancers from middle-class families, and with graduate degrees who pursue dance as a fulltime career are still rare, warranting articles in the press[83]. This shift is evidenced by the special *Purush* section (an event showcasing only male dancers) at the Bhubaneswar International Dance Festival in 2006 that was a sold out event. *Srjan* a dance institution hosts a festival in Bhubaneswar exclusively featuring male dancers from all the classical dance forms.

Jayantika was responsible for the fixing of the Odissi *margam*, the developmental pathway of Indian "classical" dance. *Jayantika* members decided what sequence and how many dances would count towards an evening-length recital, indicating a shift towards a more Western concert format. The original *mahari* version was about ten to fifteen minutes of uninterrupted ritual during which they would dance and sing. The *Jayantika* group codified a full Odissi recital to include five dance items that mirrored the entry into a temple. It began at the outermost premises and culminated at the inner sanctum, following the developmental pathway, and similar to the items prescribed in Bharatnatyam. The pieces in the traditional *margam*, even today, are as described below: *Mangalacharan*[84], an opening prayer to the presiding deity, followed by a pure dance rhythmic piece called *Batu Nritya* or *Sthayee Nritya.* Then a *Pallavi*, rhythmic item, set to a particular *raga,* and followed by an *abhinaya,* or mimetic piece. Another dance item combining *abhinaya* and *nritta*, for example, a dance like *Dasavtar* which describes the ten avatars of *Vishnu,* follows the *abhinaya*. And then *Moksha,* a final culmination of the performance that represents the merging of the dancer with the divine. All of these

[83] Shyamhari Chakra's article, "Dance Like a Man" in The Hindu profiles male Odissi artists. February 19, 2010.
[84] This item is sometimes also referred to as *Pushpanjali* in other styles of Odissi dance.

choreographic pieces involved the exclusion of the erotic from the repertoire; if there was any expression of the erotic it was couched in terms of a longing for the divine, always characterized by *auchitya* or "appropriateness" in demeanor to ensure that the tainted legacies of the *maharis* did not affect this neo-classical form.

Hotly debated issues in *Jayantika* occurred over the terminology used to describe the dance, such as the Sanskrit names over Oriya ones. "Folk" and "tribal" elements were marginalized in favor of more "classical" ones. By doing so, members of *Jayantika*, hoped to solidify the ancient, scriptural connections of Odissi in its reach towards classical status. The favoring of Sanskrit over local Oriya terms was contested by Deba Prasad Das who opted to preserve the local Oriya flavor both in language and dress. He left *Jayantika* early in the process, and Guru Pankaj Charan Das, also eventually disassociated himself from the group. The initial gurus of the form were all male and each developed their own aesthetic style and grammar that has come to define the variations between styles. For example, the Kelucharan Mohapatra *gurukul* has a more exaggerated torso movement than the Deba Prasad Das style. Although today there are arguably four recognized *gharanas* or *gurukuls,* the lines between them are easily blurred. Surenderanath Jena, the latter being a younger member of *Jayantika* is considered by some as representative of another style in Odissi. Jena, a former student of the fourth revivalist, Mayadhar Raut moved away from the *Jayantika* standard of Odissi after a trip to Konarak in the early 1970s, the sculptures of which inspired him to create his own version of Odissi (Lopez y Royo 2007).

Tussles within the group were not limited to language but also arose in discussion around apparel. The tied sari gave over to the stitched costume, perhaps another attempt

to distance the dance from its *mahari* antecedents (There is a detailed discussion on costumes in Chapter 4), although students such as Indrani Rahman, of the Deba Prasad Das *gharana* wore the sari wrapped in *dhoti* style. To this day, schools can be differentiated by the pleats down the side versus down the middle. Costumes and jewelry were standardized and finally found their way into the written form of the Odissi Dance Pathfinder, a foundational textbook published by the Odissi Research Center in 1988.

Figure 14: Dungri Mahari, one of the last maharis. Photo by David J. Capers

Ratna Roy, a dance scholar and student of Guru Pankaj Charan Das provides a scathing critique of Jayantika and the process of reconstruction that:

> (T)akes no account of the philosophical basis of original temple dances; second, employs movements best suited to a secular, international audience while maintaining the facade of religious philosophy; and third, incorporates colonial values of Christian morality, classicism and so-called "civilization" achieved often through silencing of the female voice (Roy, 8).

As we have seen the *mahari's* role was almost non-existent in the Jayantika processes of reconstruction. And although little of the actual *mahari* dance is seen on

stage today, her image and mystique is one that is continually employed in how traditional Odissi dance is presented. The erasure of the *mahari* legacy from the codification process, and the privileging of the male, and mostly *gotipua* legacy, is what we see on stage today, even though the *mahari* is still used as an effective trope for the Odissi dancer. Odissi history, like that of the dancer's body thus comes full circle, reconstructed, rehabilitated, and pieced together through various narratives, and with many details that remain unknown.

Chapter 3: Beyond the Performing Body: Tradition(s) Revisited

Yatho hasthas tha tho drushtir
Yatho drushtis tha tho manaha
Yatho manas tha tho bhavo
Yatho bhavas tha tho rasaha.

Where the hand, there the gaze;
Where the gaze, there the mind;
Where the mind, there the feeling
And where there is feeling, there is the mood.

Nandikeshwara in Abhinaya Darpana, 2nd Century A.D.

Problematizing an Embodied Practice

In her article "Dancing *off*-stage: Nationalism and its 'Minor Practices' in Tamil Nadu" (2009), Kalpana Ram argues that there are two fundamental weaknesses in dance scholarship. The first weakness she says is that, "Yet for all its insights into the political construction of gender and nationhood, this body of work betrays a singular imperviousness to the aesthetics or the embodied experience of dance or performance" (Ram 2009: 3). The second weakness which Ram identifies is that "we have not sufficiently allowed Indian dance and performance traditions to inform our epistemology and methodology in the social sciences and humanities[85]" (Ram 2009: 4). In short, we have much to learn from these performance traditions that have emerged within the Indian context, and these weaknesses continue to be a challenge for scholars writing about embodied practices. On the one hand, it is critical to understand the physicality of

[85] In her ethnography, Ram looks at everyday folk practices in Tamil Nadu to broaden our understanding of methodology and epistemology in the social sciences. According to her, these "subaltern aesthetics" are rarely recognized and contain the possibility of creating new insights for research.

the dance, the dancer, and her quotidian experiences as they relate to her practices but **also** the non-quotidian experiences, and how these inform her dance, and the roots of the aesthetics embodied in the forms she uses. These considerations are framed within the constructions of class, gender and age that she dances between and around.

Besides addressing the two weaknesses that Ram highlights in dance scholarship[86], I am also concerned with the cultural construction of Odissi dance, and the differing notions of tradition in Western and Indian[87] schools of thought. Odissi, especially in recent years, has transformed dramatically from a ritual form to a transnational performance. It has changed to accommodate new contexts and audiences, and continues to do so. Although this change is evident from its history, it is also built into a cultural understanding of a notion of tradition and practice of Odissi as a form of expression. The notions of tradition these dancers employ is one that is distinct from Western ideas of tradition that tend to build on ideas of fixity and stasis. The dancers, who are the subject of this chapter, describe tradition via metaphors of nature, like rivers and streams. Consequently, their ideas of tradition, and their resultant innovation reflect the fluidity of these metaphors, such that new works they create become strategic sites to explore the politics of the form. As Odissi has become increasingly globalized, there has emerged a tension between varying notions of tradition, and a need to maintain fixity. These dancers are forced to negotiate boundaries, such that terms like "traditional" and "contemporary" become a site of debate as these dancers present their work to non-Indian audiences as well as increasingly globalized Indian audiences. This becomes apparent in

[86] The work of Janet O'Shea (2007), and other practitioners such as Pallabi Chakravorty (2008) and Uttara Asha Coorlawala (1994) have explored Bharatnatyam and Kathak in this global context. I am also aware of Anurima Barnerji's (New York University) doctoral thesis on Odissi dance which is in process.

[87] I do not mean to imply that there is a singular view or tradition for Western and Indian thought. I use it rather, as convenient shorthand to signal a dominant way or approaching the notion of tradition.

my analysis of this group of dancers who work **within** the traditions of Odissi dance as a way to expand the existing repertoire or *margam* (literally, pathway) of Odissi dance, and yet must negotiate their innovation with Odissi traditionalists.

Based on my fieldwork in sites such as New York and Bhubaneswar, I argue that tradition(s), and how dancers engage with them contributes to the broad variance of the dance as it is performed and practiced today, and their individual engagement with these varying notions of tradition fosters innovation. These dancers accomplish this through *sadhana* or daily practice to create innovative work, and *sadhana* becomes the embodiment of that effort.

Dynamic Tradition: The Nature Metaphor

> ***(A)ll of us have inherited a past. This is a thing which has been handed down from generation to generation. It's very precious, it's a wonderful legacy but how many people really know what it's all about? How are you going to make it meaningful in the present context? I think it is a very, very big challenge. But this tradition and modernity you know, not that this is new issue for us, it's been there all the time and from the time of Kalidasa[88] till today, this is always there, this tug and how you're going to handle it. And tradition has to move and it does move.***
>
> Leela Venkataraman, Dance Critic (2007)

How does one even begin the discussion of "tradition" as a possible analytical category without the risk of essentialism? Tradition in the West has been defined as, "a body of long-established customs and beliefs viewed as a set of precedents" (Encarta Dictionary: English). Against this idea of tradition being fixed or static, it has also been argued that tradition is "not an absolute body of work but a continual selection and

[88] Kalidasa is a Sanskrit poet and dramatist who lived between the 4th and 6th centuries AD.

interpretation" (Willams 1961:69), and that tradition is "invented" in the project of nation- making (Hobsbawm 1983). "The invention of tradition" is taken to mean:

> (A) set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norm of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past (Hobsbawm 1983: 1).

Though Williams and Hobsbawm alert us to the practice of interpretation and invention in tradition, respectively, the notion of tradition is expressed differently by these dancers. These dancers build on notions of tradition that are dynamic, and characterized by movement. Tradition for them is one that builds on the past, and creates anew, a dualism that is not binary. Wendy Doniger in "The Hindus: An Alternative History" (2009) describes dualism[89] as, "the Indian way of thinking". To illustrate her point Doniger says:

> 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).

Perhaps then, the notion of tradition for these dancers is a dualistic one, the ability to view tradition as dynamic **as well as** building on a past.

Various dancers discussed tradition with me in the context using metaphors from nature to describe their understanding of tradition. In doing so they subscribe to a notion that embodies movement, as evidenced by the connotations of the metaphors from nature they choose. Aruna Mohanty, an Odissi dancer based in Bhubaneswar told me in 2007:

> It [Odissi] is traditional. Till now it is and it will be. Because when you carry your tradition, in the process of evolution, it's like a circle. Like the flow of

[89] McKim Marriot discusses the concept of dualism in "Hindu Transactions: Diversity without Dualism" in Bruce Kapferer, ed. Transaction and Meaning 1976.

> water, the streams will come from different directions and will merge with the main stream. That only, you know, keep[s] the water fresh and you know, the flow will go on. The water that is flowing, tomorrow it will be *purana* [old]. You can't have the present without the past. You can't have future without the present. It's all connected. So I think we should take our tradition with us, but definitely there will be contemporary ideas and inputs will be there to enrich it. We should work for the enrichment of our particular form. But the boundary should not be eliminated. If the boundary is eliminated, there won't be any difference between the Bollywood dance and Odissi.

Mohanty's view of tradition is expressed as a flowing stream with several new ones adding to the mix, accommodating new ideas as it builds on older traditions. Despite this analogy of free flowing movement, she does stress the importance of maintaining borders within her view of tradition. Her analogy with water therefore, can be misleading when talking of boundaries, as free flowing streams do not necessarily respect boundaries. As much as this idea of dynamism of tradition exists, there is the simultaneous need for its fixity to be maintained, such that Odissi can be distinguished from more commercial forms of dance, such as those typified by Bollywood. That said this likening of tradition to flowing water is not uncommon. Sunil Kothari, a dance writer and critic speaking on Odissi and its practice outside India also employs the metaphor of a flowing river:

> (T)radition is like a flowing river, it can't be a moribund spot, it has to grow, it has to flow, and it has to change color. It has to meander with the banks, it will not overflow the banks. It has to capture the beautiful shades of the tree, of the passing clouds, it has to all reflect over there. So Odissi getting globalized is a welcome step because dance cannot be moribund, it cannot be an object of art or kept in museum with so many facets to be admired. We should not issue binaries between tradition and modernity but how will we modernize the tradition?

Kothari proceeds to answer his own question on how to modernize the tradition by quoting the poet, Kalidasa:

> It is in our traditions that Kalidasa says, "That which invests itself with newness every moment is what we call beauty. That is what Odissi does.

Kothari makes an argument for newness that is found **within** the traditions of India, by quoting Kalidas, a poet from between the 4th to 6th century. His view of tradition then is one that is inherent in the definition. And this newness comes from within rather than from an outside influence. Leela Venkataram a well-known dance critic on the national scene also uses a metaphor from nature, but hers is a specifically botanical one to explain what makes Odissi authentic:

> I think there is how much you become one with the style. How deep your roots are. You spread from there. It is authentic because it comes naturally from the roots. But if I didn't do that, and I suddenly try to acquire a certain vocabulary which makes it look modern, when my ancient thing itself is not too much, or is not too wide spread then the whole thing somewhere is lost. So I have a feeling that the authenticity, this whole thing comes from the how deep-rooted you are.

She stresses the importance of the strong roots before one is able to "flower" outward, a rooting of the practice to the soil before one is able to master the form. For Kolkata based, dancer-choreographer Sharmila Biswas, tradition is also natural and akin to one's mother, a presence to which one can always return for reassurance and guidance.

> (B)ut tradition is not something which can make me immobile. It's like a mother**,** a good mother. I don't know where I would be without the traditions…that they are there for me, generously there…but they are also there to guide me, they are also there for me to check back, cross check and all that.

For these dancers, this conflation of tradition with nature serves two purposes. First, the construction of tradition becomes highly naturalized, making it less an object of enquiry, but one that is taken for granted. Consequently, such a model of explanation legitimizes change and/or innovation that might otherwise be a target for criticism. Second, it allows for a categorization of Odissi dance that is fluid, one with myriad and continuous possibilities for both practice and interpretation.

I also argue that this notion of a "living" tradition comes from the Sanskrit term, *parampara*, which is a loose translation of the English word, tradition. *Parampara*, unlike tradition, is closer in meaning to the fluid metaphors described above. *Parampara*[90] means "a series" or "succession" and is often used in the context of a continuation and builds on previous knowledge and/or entities. Madhavi Mudgal, a dancer based in Delhi points out:

> Our tradition is always moving, otherwise it would have died if it was static and stagnant. The word, *parampara* means something flowing, which has *prabaha*, which moves on, taking the inputs of each generation of artists. It's not static.

Parampara builds on a notion of a living, flowing continuity which explains the metaphors of nature that indicate dynamism and movement. Further, because most of these dancers are bilingual (Hindi and English) or trilingual (Hindi, English and Oriya), their practice as dancers often necessitates that they address the discursive implications of tradition **and** *parampara* in their different spoken languages. Consequently, these dancers engage with both terms, in India and the West, even though the word *parampara* connotes movement and flow whereas "tradition" in Western cultural terms is defined as, "the handing-down of patterns of behavior, practices, and beliefs that are valued by a culture."[91] The use of the term *parampara* instead of tradition is important as a way to address what Dipesh Chakrabarty in "Provincializing Europe" describes as a problematic of "rough translation". These "rough translations" were often derived from colonialist literature and replicated colonialist approximations, and to "challenge that model of "rough translation" is to pay critical and unrelenting attention to the very process of

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[90] *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* by Sir Monier Monier-Williams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1899), Page 587
[91] Encarta Dictionary: English (North America)[91]

translation" (Chakraborty 2000: 17). Perhaps it is these "rough translations" that the dancers are engaging in; they use the terms tradition and *parampara* almost interchangeably but tradition remains an inadequate and "rough translation" for the word, *parampara.* As these dancers move between two discursive worlds of India and the West, they must address the consequences of **both** terms. And the varied notions of tradition or *parampara* as described by the dancers above are perpetuated by these highly naturalized metaphors of nature and movement as continuous and undivided.

The Practice of *Sadhana*

> ***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, Dance Scholar (1980: 8)

> ***I am a dancer. I believe that we learn by practice. Whether it means to learn to dance by practicing dancing or to learn to live by practicing living, the principles are the same. In each it is the performance of a dedicated precise set of acts, physical or intellectual, from which comes shape of achievement, a sense of one's being, a satisfaction of spirit. One becomes in some area an athlete of God.***
>
> Martha Graham, Dancer

Dipesh Chakrabarty points out that:

> Labour, the activity of producing, is seldom a completely secular activity in India; it often entails, through rituals big and small, the invocation of the divine or superhuman presence. Secular histories are usually produced by ignoring the signs of these presences (Chakrabarty 2002: 72).

How does one analyze a ritual practice entwined with the sacred, and now performed on global stage, in the language of the social sciences? Chakrabarty argues that in order to write secular histories one often ignores the sacred (Chakrabarty 2002:

72). In an effort to make the dance more accessible, scholars have used universal categories to explain it. So for a dance like Odissi that is **both** secular and sacred, especially in its current form, the scholar/translator/dancer faces a challenge: What gets lost in translation? I argue that the lines that are supposed to separate the "sacred" and "secular" are actually more blurry than Chakrabarty posits, and that though boundaries do exist, the marking or cordoning off happens through every day, unmarked practices. Again this is permeated by a dualistic notion of these practices, the idea that the secular and the sacred are not easily demarcated, but can be contained in the same spatial setting. To illustrate, the simple act of taking off one's shoes before we enter a rehearsal or performance space could be viewed as an everyday demarcation between secular and sacred space. Or the *Bhumi Pranam*, which marks the beginning and end of any dance practice or performance. It is the first movement phrase a student of Indian dance will be taught. The *bhumi pranam* is described as asking permission from the Earth before dancing, and is a simple squat and bow to the ground, completed with placing dust of the floor on one's forehead or placing the crown of one's head on the floor. And prior to this movement the student touches the feet of the guru on entering the practice space, and bows to the deity of *Jagannath* or *Ganesh* in the room. If she or he practices alone, the *bhumi pranam* marks the beginning and the end of her practice even if her guru is not present. Shoes are left outside the studio space which has been cordoned off, and purified by this demarcating of the space. The *bhumi pranam* during performance is incorporated into the first invocatory dance of the *margam, Mangalacharan*. And if the performance does not begin with a *Magalacharan*, then often performers before the audience arrives, will go on stage, and do a *bhumi pranam* or do it backstage in the

greenroom. This *bhumi pranam* is an acknowledgement of the divine but is folded into this unmarked practice. How much of this is "collectively invoked by rituals rather than conscious belief?" (Chakrabarty 2002: 78). Again, this distinction becomes less relevant in the context of the *bhumi pranam*. To understand how we translate a bodily practice that is not completely "secular," I employ the use of the term, *sadhana* or daily practice. *Sadhana* is a combination of discipline and practice ideally done with the guidance of a guru. It is a practice characterized by intention, and is based on the idea that through repetition and awareness there is a movement towards perfection. *Sadhana*[92] is not unique to dance, and is also used by practitioners of yoga, music, and other performing arts. Similar to yoga, the lived life of a *yogi* (yoga practitioner) is not separate from the practice: the lines between the practice of yoga and one's daily life are blurred. Similarly in dance, even if one is not rehearsing or practicing steps or performing, *sadhana* informs how you conduct yourself both on and offstage. Chakrabarty addressing the problematic of translation and says, "Writing about the presence of gods and spirits in the secular language of history or sociology would therefore be like translating into a universal language that which belongs to a field of differences" (Chakrabarty 2002: 76). Using the term *sadhana* as a way to study the practice of Odissi, allows me to accommodate an understanding of the sacred and examine how these notions and rituals for these dancers are embodied through movement.

[92] *Sadhana* is sometimes also referred to as *riaz* or *riyaz*, the Urdu word for daily practice.

Techniques of the Body

Marcel Mauss in his now classic essay (1934) wrote of the "self-developable" body in "Les techniques du corps or "Techniques of the Body." Mauss distinguishes between "habitus" and "metaphysical habitudes" (Mauss 1934: 101), as well as techniques of the body as being distinct from body memory:

> It does not designate those metaphysical habitudes, that mysterious memory, the subject of volumes of short and famous theses. These 'habits' do not vary just with individuals and their imitations; they vary especially between societies, educations, proprieties and fashions, prestiges. In them we should see the techniques and work of the collective and individual practical reason rather than, in the ordinary way, merely the soul and its repetitive faculties (Mauss 101).

For Mauss "prestigious imitation" or education plays a very important role in the development of our body techniques that are socially and institutionally prescribed. The person with the authority performs the action that is then imitated by the student. According to Mauss, this action is comprised of three elements: the social, the biological and the psychological. I employ this analysis by Mauss because it corresponds loosely to the way *sadhana* works. As dancers, we build on these faculties of the biological, the social and the psychological. However with *sadhana*, there is no separation of mind and body, or a separation into social, biological and psychological as Mauss indicates. *Sadhana* is a technique that intertwines these faculties, and allows us to learn by repetition. It is grounded in our social realities that eventually become part of our body memory. Mauss is aware of the limitations of these Western categories to explain a mind-body split and concludes his essay with a recommendation:

> I believe precisely that at the bottom of all our mystical states there are body techniques which we have not studied, but were studied in China and India, even in very remote periods. This socio-psycho biological study

> should be made. I think that there are necessarily biological means of "entering into communion with God" (Mauss 1934: 122).

It is clear that Mauss is keenly aware that a deeper study of this mind-body connection, prevalent in bodily techniques outside the Western could lead to a fruitful understanding. Talal Asad explains Mauss' final comments as "the inability to enter into communion with God becomes a function of untaught bodies (Asad 1993: 77). Mauss in his analysis was trying to understand the relationship of bodily techniques with the divine, one that *sadhana* includes: an embodied practice that allows for an expression of the sacred as an inextricable part of the dancers' experience.

The Notion of Rasa

Before I attempt to explain this "communion with God" or the presence of the sacred, I need to elaborate on the notion of *rasa,* especially as most Indian aesthetic traditions hinge on it. *Rasa* translates as "flavor" or "essence," and also sometimes as "mood" or "feeling". According to the *Natyashastra* there are 8 *rasas*. These are *shringara* (love in union or separation), *hasya* (humour), *karuna* (compassion or pathos), *raudra* (anger), *vira* (heroism), *bhayanak* (fear or panic), *bibhtasa* (disgust or distaste) and *adhbhuta* (wonder or surprise). A ninth one was added later, *shanta* or peace, the *rasas* are now commonly referred to as *navrasas* or the 9 *rasas*. Marglin offers the term "embodied thought" as a more nuanced way of understanding *rasa*. According to Kapila Vatsayan, *rasa* has two aspects. One is the:

> (E)voked state in which transcendental bliss is experienced and the second is the sentiment, the moods, the permanent and transitory states which were the object of presentation. The second provided the content of the art; the first was its ultimate objective (Vatsayan 1968: 6)

On the one hand you have this physicality and content of the performance, and on the other this transcendental state (sometimes referred to as *ananda*), where *rasa* becomes a state of consciousness akin to bliss or *ananda*.

Richard Schechner has pointed out that *rasa* is similar to the notion of *prasad* (an offering to the gods), and performance too can be viewed as an offering. *Rasa* happens in the partaking of this offering, a gesture of mutuality between performer and *rasika* (spectator or the one experiencing the *rasa)*. *Rasa,* then is not only experiential, but also relational because it is dependent on this interaction between performer and *rasika,* emphasizing the dualistic nature of this experience and concept. The *rasika* is one who is able to appreciate and understand the performers' intention and is a crucial part of the performance (Schechner 1985: 138-139). How does one "learn" to express *rasa* in performance? This is where the notion of *sadhana* comes in, the repetition of a performed activity that is routine-like. It is not simply bodily habit, but it is via this bodily and daily practice that one as performer is able to achieve *rasa.* The idea of *rasa* is neither dependent on a Cartesian split between mind/body nor on a duality of performer and *rasika.* Rather it is an experiential pleasure or *ananda,* an experience akin to spiritual ecstasy. And unlike the Method School of acting where the performer draws on a well of emotional experiences, the *Rasa* theory of performance builds on the notion of *sadhana* and the idea that sheer repetition will ultimately result in *rasa*. This is not to say that performers do not draw on a well of emotional experience. An Odissi colleague of mine told me that her guru only agreed to teach her an *abhinaya* (the expressive form of the dance) item after she was married. The item, *Yahi Madhava, Yahi Keshava*, describes the despair and jealousy of Radha who has spent all night waiting for her lover Krishna to

arrive. Her guru felt that until she was married, i.e., in a "real" relationship, she would not be able to draw on the necessary emotional experience. But it is this experience **coupled** with bodily practice that performers draw upon. My own guru, Durga Charan Ranbir has repeatedly said that *abhinaya* cannot be taught, only felt. For him, performing *abhinaya* is unlike any other Odissi dance item, because in *abhinaya* the steps or the rhythmic patterns are less important than conveying the emotional quality of the dance. Done well the performer embodies and creates *rasa*. Dance critic, Leela Venkataraman, described an *abhinaya* dance item performed by a male dancer in California, *Kuruyadu Nandana* in which Radha asks her lover, Krishna to help her dress after their erotic encounter:

> Here he is as Radha who is totally naked and says, "Give me back my clothes." He just took my breath away. He was so good. I lost all sense of his height, the fact that he was male, and doing this role. It was beyond gender, and beyond anything else.

Such is the power of *rasa,* to be able to transcend the body and convey the essence of such an erotic scene. In sum, a successful performance is one where the performer and *rasika* experience *rasa,* and eventual *ananda* or pleasure. However, the experience of *rasa* cannot be guaranteed, it is happenstance and/or bestowed. The dancer can only hope to achieve *rasa* through her continued *sadhana* but it is not always a guaranteed outcome.

Sadhana becomes a means to develop this aptitude through repetition. During my fieldwork, much of the anxiety that I heard about around the practice and performance of Odissi was a lack of *sadhana*. Kumkum Mohanty, a senior dancer based in Bhubaneswar talks about the importance of *sadhana*:

> My only request is not to leave the tradition or the grammar of Odissi. Not to spoil Odissi. What our gurus have done, at least, please pay respect to original composition. Don't try to spoil them. And don't try to compose

> something which you don't know. Wait. Have patience. Do practice. Now *sadhana* is most essential factor for an artist. How many people do *sadhana?* They are scared of *sadhana*. This capsule age, everybody wants to get the maximum without having the minimum level. Those who really do hard work, they get reward. But again I must say that invisible power supports somebody. I work hard. If I'm blessed by God, I can go up. Otherwise, if I'm not blessed, I remain along my level. I must do 7 hours, 8 hours practice. Practice without supervision has no meaning. It's visual art. If somebody says, "For 2 years, 3 years I have leant from Kumkum Mohanty then I will do my own". That will be totally wrong. Because personally I feel if I'm doing well now it is because of my guru's supervision for 40 years. I tell you, each cell of my blood, it's full of instruction.

For Mohanty, *sadhana* alone cannot ensure the success of a dancer. But *sadhana* coupled with the guidance of the guru, and divine blessings are necessary for a dancer to achieve that level of success. Mohanty argues that the frequency and regularity of the movement becomes part of the necessary body memory and she stresses the importance of keeping the body fit and well trained, so one is able to build on a solid foundation. Mohanty, the person responsible for the publication of the Odissi Dance Pathfinder, an exercise manual published in 1988 by the Odissi Research Center in Bhubaneswar indicates the importance of training. The foreword in it states:

> It is our fond hope that "The Odissi Dance Path Finder" would serve the purpose of imparting a uniform mode of instruction to the thousands of young Odissi dance students. We hope that we are not being over-ambitious in ascribing to this publication the role that an alphabet primer has in relation to Academic Education. Stylistic purity is indispensible in the learning of any classical dance form; without it, no training is complete (Odissi Dance Pathfinder, Volume 1).

The language above indicates the importance and stress on notions of "purity" and "uniformity". While the term *sadhana* is not explicitly stated in the manual, it is clear that there is an anxiety that developed after *margam* was codified in the 1960s, accompanied by a need to maintain fixity, and a standard for the dancers and the gurus who teach them.

Figure 15: Image from Odissi Dance Pathfinder of chowka. It is one of two basic positions in Odissi

So what happened to the gurus after they became established? How were they able to maintain their standard of work? Mohanty also talks about her additional motivation for publishing the Odissi Dance Pathfinder which emerged from her experience of organizing teacher training for gurus. Gurus were offered a stipend to attend but it was not as successful as she had hoped. She says:

> I had introduced one scheme, "Training the Trainers Program" in Odissi Research Center for those who are teaching Odissi. It was an approach to come refresh your training and then go back to teach. First, I got nearly 15 teachers from all over India, Bombay, Delhi, and Calcutta. Second time? Zero. Then I asked them, "What happened?" (They said) "Madam, we are earning Rs. 5000 per month by teaching here. Why should we go?" I said, "Don't you think it's a physical art? You need your own refresher course. Do your own s*adhana*". That is why I want to write this book. At least the original footwork or body position or basic stances of Odissi will be preserved. Temples are going down day by day. At least this book will remain.

Figure 16: Image from Odissi Dance Pathfinder of tribhanga. It is one of two basic positions in Odissi

Sujata Mohapatra, another student of Kelucharan Mohaptara who is based in Bhubaneswar also talks about the importance of maintaining the tradition and the body's preparation through *sadhana:*

> Now how far the dancers are keeping the tradition and doing the dance form? There are few, not everyone. But some of them are trying to keep the tradition and some of them are trying not to keep the tradition, to make something new. But old is always gold. If the old things can be performed nicely, it will be never ending. If you perform 100 times, people will never get bored. There is a charm to it. So I believe in my tradition, more preference to have whatever Guruji have taught us, we must keep that. We should do something new, but don't forget the old. Because once the basic is done on your body, the body is ready. Then you put whatever, it shows nice. If you are not in a correct body, if you put whatever nice, very nice thing, but it won't show the good thing.

Both Sujata Mohapatra and Kumkum Mohanty employ this notion of *sadhana* as a repetition of practice, and as a technique to train the body for further instruction. *Sadhana,* as guided by the guru becomes very important, and without this one cannot

even begin to think about innovation. Madhavi Mudgal, a Delhi-based dancer stresses the role of the guru as well:

> Because the role of a guru is not just a guru who teaches. It's somebody who shows you the path and the guru should just lead you to be on your own completely. It is somebody who can tell you, "*Yeh theek nahin kar rahe ho*" (You are not doing this properly). You need that. Luckily, till the end I had Guruji. Tell me, 40 years? That's very important. You can see dancers with a teacher and without a teacher, the difference that makes. I think even if there is great hurry in this generation to learn, there are some serious learners also. And there will always be some. If a thousand people learn, I think, out of that maybe one will be a good dancer. I mean who has the talent, who has the right brain. I have seen lots of good dancers. But they need consistent training and they also need to have the humility to still continue. That's where the role of guru comes. But then they don't even want to listen to the gurus because they think there is no more to learn.

Jyoti Srivastava another Delhi-based dancer talks about the guru as a source of continual energy even after the dancer is a performer in her own right:

> If you are not with your guru, after sometime, maybe you will be like a car in a garage. Maybe after 10 years if you take out your Mercedes, it also goes off. So we are normal human beings. If you are not connected with your guru, that energy goes off. Although sometimes we can feel like, "Okay now I can create my own choreography, I can do everything, why should I spend money for gurus?" But that money is not just the item - that is energy also. This is an art of *parampara.* Why is child always quiet when you take him like this (gestures cradling a baby) You let him lie down and he will be not satisfied. The same thing happens to guru and *shishya* (student). Maybe your Guruji is not giving you time, guruji is not seeing you but you just go there and stay with him and spend some time with him. Definitely you are getting some unseen energy which works with your life. That way, dancer can keep himself fit and satisfied. Because there is competition, politics, so many things. It's not only dance. The whole world is full of politics. But if you keep yourself limited with your guru and your students, your husband and child, you are the happiest person in the world. If you are going to see your mother-in-law and father-in-law, this and that, definitely you have some tensions because the more people, the more tension. The same thing happens with guru and *shishya*. If your relationship is good with your guru and with your *shishya*, I think, the dance family is complete.

Figure 17: Students at Odissi Vision and Movement Centre in Kolkata

The guru provides a pedagogical lineage such that dance reviews in India will sometimes cite a guru's guidance (or lack thereof) as being one of the influencing factors for a dancer's performance. *Sadhana* coupled with guidance, or receiving this "energy" from the guru is important throughout a dancers' career, even after she is well-established in her career.

Institution as Guru

Nrityagram (dance village) is an international Odissi dance company that is based in Hessarghata, near the city of Bangalore. *Nrityagram* has toured the world extensively and to a large extent has transformed how Odissi has been performed and received,

especially in a global arena. *Nrityagram* has successfully managed to negotiate the worlds of this traditional practice with a 21st century presence, press and publicity[93]. It is arguably the first internationally renowned Odissi dance troupe to combine artistry, and choreographic excellence with exceptional marketing and press, and perhaps the only Odissi dance troupe to have a USA agent for bookings and tours in the US. Protima Gauri Bedi, an Odissi dancer, founded the institution in 1990. After Bedi died in 1998, the role of the guru was transferred to the *Nrityagram*, the institution she founded. Their website states:

> The lifestyle that we follow is based on the age-old Gurukul tradition. As per this ancient method, the students look after and care for their Guru by growing fruit and vegetables on the land, cooking, cleaning, and earning through dance recitals. **At Nrityagram, the institution fulfills the role of the Guru** – as protector and as someone who makes available knowledge and experience. Trainees will learn under the tutelage of several Gurus, however, their duties towards Nrityagram are of prime importance (www.nrityagram.org, 2010).

This conception of the "institution as guru" allows the dancers of *Nrityagram* to maintain a fluidity of tradition, and constantly reinvent themselves. In a Colorado newspaper a description of the internationally acclaimed Odissi dance company appeared as follows:

> As you watch the Nrityagram Dance Ensemble perform the dances that were once a part of ancient Hindu worship, you might wonder how women wrapped in 27 feet of sunset-colored sari fabric manage those precarious positions.
> "It's an expression of the lives we lead," says Surupa Sen, the group's choreographer.
> The physical and mental discipline, strength, stamina and flexibility required of the traveling dance troupe from Bangalore, India, result from many years

[93] I discuss this further in Chapter 5.

> spent studying and practicing not just the seven types[94] of traditional Hindu dance, but yoga, meditation, martial arts and Hindu beliefs and scripture. "Hard work is a dancer's religion," Sen says. "We live the art form."

This notion of "living the art form" at *Nrityagram* is the embodiment of *sadhana* where the lines between life on-stage and off-stage are blurred. Even without the presence of a single, overarching guru, the practice of *sadhana* remains critical to their success.

As is clear from the example above, what appears to have changed over time is the relationship of the dancer to her guru, and there are some interesting contrasts between dancers who continue to learn Odissi within the *guru-shishya* framework, and others who approach their training in a more peripatetic manner.

As Odissi dance continues to emerge as a commodity in a global economy, more dancers are moving away from the *guru-shishya* framework and moving towards a more individually-suited quest for training.

The Meaning of "Classical"

For Rekha Tandon, a dancer and choreographer who divides her time between her dance studio in Bhubaneswar, and a monastery in Wales explains that *sadhana* for her is a personal exploration that builds on the traditions of the dance form. Rekha Tandon received her initial training in Odissi from Surenderanath Jena, and subsequently with Madhavi Mudgal, Guru Trinath Maharana and Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra. She was part of Madhavi Mudgal's Delhi-based, dance company from 1985-92. Rekha Tandon also has a Ph.D. in Dance Studies from Laban in London. Tandon, with her partner and collaborator, Michael Weston founded Dance Routes in 1997. She talks about

[94] Although Nrityagram conducts training in Odissi, Kathak and Bharatnatyam, it performs primarily as an Odissi dance company.

physicality of her work that connects yoga to Odissi and her attempt to communicate the notion of *sadhana* to an uninitiated audience:

> One intuits a certain way of moving and certain way of feeling your body when you do any form of classical Indian dance. Because you're doing it in the parameters of a spiritual tradition, and you're addressing deities, or you're working with *bhakti* literature or whatever, you get inducted into that way of thinking through the practice. And now I can see how it works on a particular body map, which it shares with yoga. These are the things that you feel experientially in your body after years of practice even though you may not ever define it as such. Because when you are in a contemporary dance class, which works on different principles, when you have something of this kind so deeply ingrained in your system, it's very hard to make sense or to have it work for you in the same way. Because you have to think back to where and what everything you were doing have come from, which is very useful. You have to be able to communicate to it to someone who comes with a completely different point of view, and also design experimental structures that they could participate in to get a sense of what you were talking about. So having been involved in all that, when I come here (Bhubaneswar) I really want the space and time to develop my own work. I couldn't do that with a guru supervising me. Especially since I would be in the face of so many things, I wanted to work in English because I think and feel in English, I don't in Oriya or in Sanskrit.

Much of Rekha's work involves deconstructing these learned practices and understanding how they work on one's individual body. Rekha is of the view that "unlearning" the form has allowed her to understand it on a deeper level. So if *sadhana* is talked about as such an intrinsic part of the dancer's practice, why is it that it is not discussed more in scholarship on bodily practice? Is it simply taken for granted? Or does it get talked about differently in "secular" contexts? I argue that similar to the overlap discussed earlier between the fixity of the term "tradition", with its Western connotation of fixity, and, *parampara*, with its Indian connotation of fluidity, the Western term, "classical" is a preferred way to signal this rigorous training and *sadhana*. By describing it as a "classical" form signals that there is a certain pathway or established route to achieve proficiency that typically involves study with a reputed guru and many years of

training and study. This gives it an important currency in both Indian and non-Indian contexts. As discussed in Chapter 2, the fight for "classical" status was a hard-won battle for Odissi, and dance forms that were termed "classical" were more likely to receive patronage and funds from governmental and cultural institutions. Modeled after Western ballet, classical dance in India has come to mean institutionalized practices, rather than dance simply for enjoyment, such as folk forms or, worse yet, Bollywood.

Figure 18: Rekha Tandon. Photo Credit: Avinash Pasricha

But what is less obvious is that the term "classical" is a way to mark the rigor and seriousness of the training required by the dance form. Rekha Tandon on her company website states:

> At its core, all "classical" dance in India shared common fundamental principles with other Indian art traditions. The primary objective was learning to still the mind through skill in the practice of art, and value in any artistic work rested in its ability to imprint the viewer with an experience of this inner tranquility. Odissi is "classical" in that it bears allegiance to this tradition (Dance Routes website, 2010).

Rekha Tandon talks about classicism in terms of a mind-body connection that is associated with *sadhana*, relating it to the rigorous training of the body, describing more of a bodily ethic than just a dance form.

Similarly, dancer and activist, Ananya Chaterjea, who is based in Minnesota, and is the artistic director of Ananya Dance Theater describes *sadhana* in a similar way:

> Classicism is relevant to me as a pedagogy and an aesthetic of work. I think it means detail. You want to do social justice work and your dancing is bad? Forget it. Don't even try it. If you can't move your audience, don't dance. If you want to get engaged in dilettantism, that's something else or dance for your ego - that's different. Social justice? There's too much at stake. What I've learnt from classicism is incredible humility. Don't try to try something on stage. Work on it, do your rehearsal, work like crazy, then **maybe** you will be able to harness some power on stage. That is an incredible lesson to learn. Classicism is absolutely, absolutely indispensable in learning some of those lessons. Learning humility, learning a whole body attitude. Performance is not about self-indulgence, but about transcending that moment. I feel that's what I've learnt from Odissi or my classical training. So I don't know whether the tradition is helpful but established cultural practices - call it tradition, call it Kathakali, call it Odissi - are incredibly helpful to me, because there is knowledge there. It didn't just come around. And there is no tolerance for bad dancing.

By self-identifying as "classical," Chatterjea acknowledges the significance of her rigorous classical training which points to the strength of her *sadhana*. In addition, the notion of humility is intrinsic to the notion of *sadhana* or in her words, "a whole body

attitude" where the practice and the repetition move the dancer towards humility. And no matter how innovative her choreography or how much of a departure from the *margam*, Chatterjea uses the currency of "classical" as a way to describe her work.

Sorting through the Labels: Traditional and Contemporary

On the one hand there are these fluid interpretations of tradition and *parampara,* but on the other dancers are also forced to choose between two categories of "traditional" and "contemporary". I believe that this binary is a recent phenomenon created by the exigencies of performing in India and outside, and is reinforced and hardened by funding sources and patronage. In practice, the work of these dancers is much more diverse than their label belies. For example, funders, dance festivals and grant-making organizations in the US have very clear guidelines. If one is presenting "new and innovative" work then one has access to a particular kind of funding and opportunities versus others that fit into categories of "traditional" (or "ethnic" or "folk"). In order to compete for funding, dancers must clearly announce their mission statements and agendas on their websites, and in their grant proposals. Ananya Chatterjea tries to position her work strategically:

> (I)n every grant application, I try to say "No. I'm not an ethnic dancer. I don't do ethnic dance. I do contemporary dance. Yes, I'm Asian" and I always add in a line there even though you're not supposed to: "Contemporary dance entirely based on South Asian tradition". So I don't know if that has helped any over the years, but I hope it has.

Figure 19: Ananya Chatterjea. Courtesy of Ananya Dance Theatre. Photo credit Paul Virtucio

This doublespeak is one that many dancers face. Self-definition becomes a crucial part of how dancers are perceived, and performers are very careful in how they position themselves and what they perform. Consequently, many dancers use a combination of "traditional" and "contemporary" as a way of describing their work. The opening page on Rekha Tandon's website opens to a graphic of the eyes of Lord Jagannath with the text,

"Shaping Indian Dance for a Contemporary World" and "Linking dance to yoga, ritual music and Tantra" before visitors are invited to enter the website (www.danceroutes.com). As Odissi becomes an increasingly globalized dance form, and more visible in "secular" spaces, such as websites and other forms of social media, dancers negotiate how they must position themselves for a global audience. Consequently, on the surface these word choices may appear to be aesthetic and choreographic choices, it is one that is carefully negotiated, especially in terms of such practical concerns. Some of the ways Odissi dancers self-identify are "traditional", "traditional and contemporary", "classical with a contemporary twist", or some similar variation. Rekha Tandon talks about what is at stake with the use of these labels:

> They are helpful. I mean, the label used for my work is "contemporary classical dance". It's not a label, I coined. "Traditional but not classical" was another description of it which looks just like something of some website I'd seen. I think there is enough of this kind of work been done now in the UK and wherever else. And people are looking at websites and photographs and whatever and arriving at labels and trying to find labels.

Perhaps the fault lies in our analytical tools in imposing the categories of "traditional" and "contemporary" or perhaps these forms of categorization have been produced in the guise of specific histories of Western and Indian thought? Or perhaps Odissi dancers are catering to a global market by building on the traditions of Odissi dance, as well as positioning it for a global audience. I discuss this further in Chapter 5. So what is considered traditional Odissi dance and by whom? The *margam* (literally, the pathway) that is often referred to as an indicator of a traditional presentation comprises a specific repertoire of several dances. The *margam*[95] codified in the late 1950s and 1960s by the revival group, *Jayantika,* is still widely accepted as a "traditional" repertoire of

[95] I refer to this in Chapter 2 as well.

Odissi. It is mostly performed by a single dancer, and begins with a *mangalacharan*, (literally, auspicious feet). This is an invocation to a particular deity, often *Ganesh,* the "remover of obstacles", at the beginning of any auspicious event such as a *manachapravesh* (dance debut) or wedding. It is marked by the *trikhanda pranam* (three-way salutation) to god, guru, and audience. It is followed by *battu,* also referred to as *sthayee* (in other Odissi *gharanas),* a short, pure dance item that builds on rhythmic syllables and notations. This is followed by a *pallavi*, which is based on a particular *raga* or *ragini*, a musical melody that is set to five or more musical notes, building in complexity and speed for dancer and musicians. The *Pallavi* is typically followed by an *abhinaya*, a highly stylized emotive performance often based on an Oriya song or a particular vignette taken from Jaydev's *Geetgovinda*. This is followed by another dance item that combines *abhinaya* and footwork, such as *Dasavtar* that describes the ten avatars of *Vishnu*. The finale is *Moksha* or the dance of liberation, a joyful and rhythmic dance that ends with a *shloka* or prayer. These dance items and in this order is considered to be a complete *margam* of Odissi dance. It can range from one to three hours, and is followed especially during a *manchapravesh*, or a dancer's debut, a test of endurance, stamina and skill. The stage is set (always stage right) with a full suite of live musicians, a vocalist, a violinist, a *pakhawaj* player (two sided drum), a flutist and the guru of the student who will provide the rhythmic syllables in the dance and accompanies by *manjira* or cymbals. Across from the musicians, a deity of Lord *Jagannath*[96] presides downstage left and incense fills the room. Dancers, especially soloists will generally follow this

[96] The Deba Prasad gharana does not follow this strictly but instead lights a lamp and places flowers. The belief being that Lord Jagannath only leaves the temple on his annual *rath yatra* (procession).

margam with minor variations. I cite this *margam* here to create a baseline of what is considered the traditional repertoire.

There appear to be two strands of thought around Odissi dance: the traditionalists, such as D.N Patnaik, one of the founders of Jayantika has argued that there are problems with innovation. For Patnaik, innovation in Odissi has taken over and dancers do not maintain the integrity of the form, such that each major city in India has its own variation of Odissi:

> Now they are taking the material: Nrityagram, Bijoyni and Surupa mixing it around, a lot of *abhinaya,* and mixing martial arts, acrobatics. Now you see the Odissi of Calcutta, the Odissi of Mumbai or Odissi of Delhi, now their music is different. Madhavi is doing it with Hindustani music, now in Calcutta, you have the Rabindra Sangeet, and other things like that. When there has been globalization, there is no penal code for it to stop.

Patnaik believes that Odissi is being influenced by external factors, and *Nrityagram* and others have not maintained the tradition as codified by *Jayantika*. Ironically Nrityagram received a similar critique of not being "traditional enough" from the Western press. A review in the Village Voice entitled, *"From Exotic Climes, Half a Dozen Dancing Princesses. Collect 'Em All!* states:

> Dare I say that the show sometimes seems unreal in its surface perfection, as if the irregularities and ambiguities that make art and life profound had yielded to Disneyfication? To my mind the company goes astray when trying to fuse latter day Western dance genres to its traditional form (Tobias 2005).

Notwithstanding the problematic comparison to Disney princess caricatures, the author takes issue with *Nrityagram's* innovation. Companies like *Nrityagram* end up displeasing traditionalists such as Patnaik who feel that their work is too innovative as well as displeasing a particular type of viewer who subscribes to a Western notion of tradition, and a particular definition of what constitutes authentic Indian tradition.

On the other hand, Dinanath Pathy, a Bhubaneswar-based artist and writer, argues, that there is an inevitable need for innovation. His view of Odissi is one more closely aligned with the dancers who spoke of tradition as metaphors of nature at the beginning of this chapter:

> If you think that you take the same product and go on selling it, you can't do it. You have to change, evolve and all that. It will evolve, whether I do it or whether he does it. A lot of people have come up to do that, to make a change. If you can't do it in Orissa, it will be in New York, they will change it, but see there's a need for change, if life and dance are two different things, then dance cannot exist. Life and dance has to go on, society has to go on, it has to be integrated.

On the one hand, there is an argument for change and innovation in Odissi dance, and on the other, there is the argument that Odissi is losing its regional essence and integrity. Both positions on this continuum, despite their opposed attitudes, seem to agree that the traditions and *parampara* of Odissi as it is practiced today, is in constant movement and that change is inevitable. But it is the **kind** of change that is under dispute, as well as **who** gets to decide what constitutes innovation, and what is harmful to the practice of the dance. Pathy in his first sentence, also talks about Odissi as a product acknowledging how Odissi and its practice has been commodified.

Creating New Work

How does innovation take place within Odissi dance, and what are some of the challenges for dancers and choreographers? By innovative, I mean creating new works rather than restaging established choreographies, even though the latter can never be repeated in **exactly** the same way. Does the repetition that comes with *sadhana* dull the choreographic impulse, or does innovation come from having done a piece several times, and is absorbed onto our body memory that allows for newness in the doing of it. Odissi

dancers, especially those that I focus on in this section create innovative work but describe themselves as coming from **within** the traditions of Odissi dance. They do not see themselves as thwarting a tradition but rather argue they are part of the tradition or *parampara* and are adding to a canon of established work. And in order to do so *sadhana* is critical to achieve a level of excellence in their technique **before** they can innovate. As these dancers negotiate a global audience, this approach allows them to operate within the rubric of a traditional dance form, and also becomes an effective strategy allowing them to draw on the benefits (monetary and otherwise) of being traditional dancers, and produce innovative work.

Either way, for these dancers, this "breaking away" from tradition is not as much of an issue as it is for those who subscribe to a static notion of tradition. Innovation within the Odissi may involve taking a new *raga* or *ragini,* and choreographing a *pallavi* to it. Or taking a *shloka* (verse) from the *Rig Veda* and scoring it to music, or performing traditional Odissi to a Bach concerto. To those who understand these nuances, these dances can be very innovative. But to those who are unfamiliar with the dance form, these kinds of innovations are not viewed in a favorable light. One of the markers of Odissi dance is the brightly colored silk costumes and silver jewelry, their aesthetic value is often a draw for Western audiences. But this visual appeal can become a barrier to being taken seriously as a dancer or dance company, and Odissi dancers frequently complain of the backlash. An organizer at a reputable dance venue in New York told me that his presenter colleague asked a Kathak dancer to "put on more of the eye stuff" because the dancer didn't feel "Indian enough" to her. While appearing "too Indian" can be advantageous for "ethnic" or "folk" festivals, some Odissi dancers fear that they are

viewed as performing ossified forms which have exotic appeal, but are not taken seriously in choreographic terms. This kind of reading of Indian dance by critics and organizers in the West, as well as those not familiar with the cultural context from which these innovations emerge, becomes highly problematic. Mesma S. Belsare a trans-performer based in Boston talks about the importance of trying to "resignify" these dance forms. Belsare relates an experience conducting a workshop at a museum in the Boston area:

> After having done a workshop with adolescents they came and said how wonderful the workshop was, and how much they have learnt. But they couldn't understand why I didn't paint my hands and feet. There is a history, a predecessor who was also a Bharatnatyam dancer and who at the workshop promoted herself as an ethnic dancer. So how do we resignify the importance of context? The visual definitely has a very important significance as we all know. At the same time, I think what we do to it is our own contribution. Tradition as continuum has to be addressed. You are not looking at bracketed fractions of time. We are looking at something that is stretched, and will be stretched in the future.

Sites of Innovation

Kalpana Ram (2009) argues that it is only recently that "new attention is paid to the choreographing of dance pieces as active sites in which wider historical and political processes can be seen at work" (Ram 2009: 3). These sites are a helpful window into understanding how these dancers engage with tradition, what threads they are concerned with, what issues get fore-grounded in the process, and what is ignored. This attention to the processual is valuable because it creates the link between the embodied practice of dance and the discourses and traditions, which these dancers engage with. Furthermore it highlights that Odissi dance is ultimately a process, not a product. The dancer therefore has to achieve a careful balance between maintaining a level of classicism (often

interpreted as tradition) and technical excellence, while creating new choreographies and critically acclaimed work. A well-known dance critic summed up this double-bind that many dancers face:

> You are trying to negotiate between these two extremes and you hope to satisfy both sides. You may end up like the man and the donkey by satisfying neither side. That is what all dancers have to do today and you cannot help it, and it is very difficult. There is a great urge for the new. Everything has to be original, has to be new and what kind of the newness do they want? And they want contemporary themes. I find it very difficult to say a complete yes or no when people ask "Do you think the *margam*[97] is relevant today"? I am not able to say 'yes' or 'no' because I have seen certain people do it and it is so extraordinary that I say "My God, this really **is** the dance and this is the way it should be. And then most people I've seen doing it I say, "This is totally disconnected in terms of context and everything else and these people just don't know what they are doing". So I think it depends very much on the individual dancer and I wish people would have the integrity not to do what they don't feel completely at ease with.

Ananya Chatterjea's choreographies are inspired by contemporary political themes. The mission statement on her website states:

> Ananya Dance Theatre (formerly Women In Motion) is a company of women artists of color, diverse in age, race, nationality, and sexual orientation, but uniformly committed to artistic excellence and passionate articulation of our dreams, hopes, and desires. Our mission is to create and stage original works and powerful images inspired by the lives and work of women all around the world. Based on contemporary interpretations of the Odissi dance form, aesthetic traditions of Bengal, and practices of street theater created by women's groups, the company seeks to reach and engage diverse peoples. Ananya Dance Theatre works with the belief that the search for excellence in artistry forges pathways to galvanize strong communities and generate forces of strength and beauty. With every project we seek to challenge ourselves in terms of artistry, execution, and production values and ultimately to question the widely-held assumption about the lack of artistic excellence in community-based artistic projects (Ananya Dance Theatre website, January 2009).

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[97] The *margam* (literally the path) is an established repertoire of dances that begins with an invocation and continues to the finale, generally the *moksha* (dance of liberation).

Ananya Chatterjea's creative process is elaborate and complex. The creation of a new piece begins with choosing a theme, and developing it for a year and half prior to the performance premiere. Dancers complete training exercises that are a mix of traditional Odissi, yoga and *Mayurbhanj Chau* (a form of folk dance that originated in Orissa). The dancers then work with activists in the community around the selected theme. Her recent piece, *Daak* (Call to Action) was performed at the IAAC festival in NYC in 2008. It is a work that is a response to "historical and continuing land rights violations." This work linked the cities of Kolkata, Tijuana and Minnesota, creating "a transnational collaboration". The dancers took part in interactive workshops that were led by activists who prompted their improvisational responses. During the premiere, a pre-performance lobby exhibit about the work, and the foundational issues are also presented.

Chatterjea's *sadhana,* or practice, is to develop these political and social themes, and have her dancers "respond" to these issues through innovation and improvisation. Chatterjea has found a way to take a concept, map it in a workshop setting with other dancers, and present it choreographically. This process of collaboration and innovation has become her *sadhana.*

Figure 20: Ananya Dance Theatre in *Duurbaar* (2006). Courtesy of Ananya Dance Theatre

and her way of embodying her activism. Although Chatterjea's work has been critiqued as "not traditional Odissi," she defends her process:

> I believe strongly that contemporary Indian dance can emerge from entirely Indian practices or the range of Indian practices. That's why I said very carefully that every single one of my movements, I can trace it to the "t". **How** I do something is always locatable back to a source.

There are other dancers like Rekha Tandon who use the traditional *margam*, to build on or "subvert" it. Rekha Tandon talks about her work *Odissi Mandala* and how she has reconfigured the *margam* in her own way:

> The production that I'm doing as a solo now, *Odissi Mandala*, redefines the classical *margam* according to me. So it starts with an invocation which is not *mangalacharan*, but it is an invocation, then it gets into a *mangalacharan* and explores the relationships between devotee and deities through Tagore, through Surdas. Then it strips down things like your basic movements in *chowka* and *tribhanga*. We use a different soundscape for *batu* which is drums. But also a different way of embodying it, you are not getting into

> mudras (hand gestures) so much as into the spirit of just working with those lines. Then that leads into a piece that uses *bij mantras*[98] instead of pneumonics. But in a similar way you are working with the same vocabulary. But you are taking it slightly further in terms of how it's experienced. It's very conscious projections from vitals points of the body, and very clear geometry and the way it's used. And expressive of this idea that believe in; that your spatial patterns draw *yantra*[99]*s* in space. That's why you work symmetrically and that's why you work the way you do. So giving body to that or a form to that - and then it concludes with a very flip piece with Maya Angelou with this poem 'Phenomenal Woman'. But it's the way you interpret it. You are the phenomenal woman. You are *Shakti*[100]*,* you are *Devi*[101]. You can give it that intonation when you dance with it. That's what it can mean for you.

Rekha Tandon reimagines the *margam* and presents it with her own gendered interpretation. Her use of poets such as Surdas and Tagore could possibly be critiqued by the Odissi traditionalists for using non-Oriya poets, or for using Maya Angelou, a western poet to express the notion of *Shakti* or cosmic female energy. For Rekha Tandon these innovations make sense, and the richness of the Odissi form and its history call for it:

> It's such a rich dance form. It's so grounded in such a wonderful spiritual tradition that has validity and efficacy in today's day and age. The work Kelu Babu, Deba Prasad Das and all these people did was incredible. They had the infrastructure to do it and all that. Yes, but what they did with it was brilliant. That needs to be celebrated as much as the antiquity of Odissi. And their creative journeys need to be described and understood. And everyone today should strive for a similar creative palette to cover that kind of distance. And unless you do, you're not doing service to these gurus either, that's really the way I feel.

Rekha Tandon argues that the historical narrative of Odissi is one characterized by creativity and innovation, and as we go forward it is important to continue this tradition.

Rekha Tandon here speaks to the creativity of the gurus of Odissi to stress the importance of innovation in Odissi, such that Odissi becomes a pathway for each

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[98] *Bij mantras* are single-syllable vowels designed to resonate with each bodily *chakra,* energy centers of the body.
[99] *Yantra* is a Sanskrit term which means "instrument". In this instance, it is used to describe geometric patterns or symbol.
[100] A term used to describe feminine divine energy.
[101] Goddess

dancers/choreographer's personal journey, and as a way to contribute to that tradition. But she acknowledges the obstacles with this approach in a conversation she had with a prominent dancer in Bhubaneswar in 2002:

> I said, "Why don't you do something yourself?" She said, "I will do it after Guruji passes away." But it had such an impact on my head. Because it's so reflective of the fact if you are your own author in any way, you are trespassing on your teachers' territory. That's the way it's structured. And that's not the way forward. But unfortunately it's an ingrained way of thinking.

It could be argued that with such fluid notions of tradition, having a guru to guide one is especially important. However, sometimes the guru can be the stumbling block for innovation. Many dancers have confided to me that if they were to undertake innovative projects, their gurus would disapprove.

Rekha Tandon goes on to discuss the richness of the Odissi vocabulary, and how each dancer needs to move the form forward. These innovations provide richness to the existing repertoire, rather than detract from it:

> (T)hat's what I feel about Odissi. It's a very versatile language and if it is coming from place that is meaningful for you where content is as important as form. Then, there you can do a lot with it. And quite frankly, if it's not, it's very boring. I do get incredibly bored watching dance when it's not saying anything, when it's repeating the form. - because we've all seen the form. We all do the form. And I think the 70s and 80s were very important for preserving the form because the tradition was very young. But now it's well past its maturity. It has to take its next step. And the next step has to be like in any art form with personal, individual journey reflected in it. That's the only way forward.

Figure 21: Rekha Tandon and *gotipuas* in the production, *Dhara*.
Photo courtesy of Michael Weston

Madhavi Mudgal is a highly respected and well-established Delhi dancer. She has however been criticized by some Odissi traditionalists as working with music that is more Hindustani and less Oriya (read "more national than regional"). Mudgal has found her own areas of innovation within Odissi. Rather than staging "dance-dramas," which she does not find as interesting to explore, her ensemble work focuses on musical explorations of *taal*, roughly explained as a beat cycle.

> In groups I deal mostly with *taal* structures. Of course all in Odissi is spatial exploration. And there is a lot, a lot, lot of possibility in *taal.* People just take as 1,2,3,4,5,6,7, if it's a 7 beat cycle, It's not like that. The most interesting part of the *taal* is the spatial exploration within the *taal* structure. That is what attracts me. And that's very abstract and very challenging, and very beautiful to explore. Because *taal* is not just a certain number of beat cycles. You know, the way the *taal* flows, so many things happen in that. For me, that is interesting, and I try to work on it.

Again, to the uninitiated these experiments with *taal* and exploring the spaces between them are not always perceived as being innovative, especially to non-*rasik* audiences. Mudgal talks about choreographing, and the organic process of creating and composing music:

> (Dancers) will have something done by our composer, and they just transplant their choreography to it. I don't think choreography works like that. For me, it doesn't. It's not something given to you unless you interact with composer, with your idea, what to do with the music. For me that should be the music for dance choreography. Not that I phone and say "Please send me one *pallavi,"* and *pallavi* arrives by courier.

For Mudgal choreography is a very organic process. To do so, it is essential to have the necessary training that comes from *sadhana*. It is only once the techniques are mastered, that one should begin to choreograph. She says:

> In Odissi you have the basic body positions, the basic way of moving your body and legs, hands and feet, every style, whatever style you might be using. That is the structure that's given to you. The structure is there for you to explore and expand and elaborate upon.

And for Mudgal there is much to innovate **within** the tradition:

> What I find sometimes is, especially in India, people think anything that copies something Western is modern. That is the saddest part. Because I firmly believe that any kind of innovation must stem from the roots. And there is no limit to what you can do. You have to master the techniques. There are so many things you should know. Only then, one should dare to choreograph. You can't start in 5 years, "Oh, I'm very bored so I must do something new." If you really know, you cannot be bored of what you are doing.

For Madhavi, this binary between "classical" and "contemporary" does not exist in India; it is purely a western construct, and all dancers engage in contemporary dance (temporally speaking), whether they know it or not:

> Our classical is our contemporary. Simply because I choose to do it. I'm not a born *devadasi* (temple dancer) or anything. The form attracts me, and I find

> it has enough strength for me to explore and, also because people abroad imagine something, when you say Indian classical, it means something like 500 years ago. Because that is needed when you are not from the roots. Then you need to shout from the rooftop, "Hey, I'm doing contemporary".

Sharmila Biswas also addresses the issue of the "contemporary" versus "traditional," in her work, and what that means:

> I am not too comfortable with the word "contemporary" because I think every work when it's done at that particular time is contemporary. And the traditional dance I present, is a contemporary statement because when I am doing it, I am doing with a contemporary mind. I am not flying back in a time machine. As a dancer I am choosing elements from the past. I am not taking it as a whole. I am also greatly influenced by the music, the color idea, the fashion idea, and everything which is happening around me, and putting that into dance. And then I am putting my own respective, individual vision.

Sharmila Biswas too talks about knowing the traditions of Odissi dance and mastering them before one should choreograph or innovate. The notion of *sadhana* for her is being strongly grounded in ones' body. Her creative process is as follows:

> (B)ut I always knew if I want to create, my language would be Odissi, and it was important for me. I suppose for a writer he also chooses the language, his creative ideas come from some language. It's very important and I never thought technique is a hindrance to that. In fact, I see it as a great stepping stone. To look beyond the technique you have to know the technique - absolutely, absolutely well.

Lata Pada, a Bharatnatyam dancer based in Toronto, who spoke during a panel at the IAAC Erasing Borders 2008 Dance Festival in New York City, raised some relevant issues in the "contemporary versus traditional" debate. Pada argues that if "contemporary" and "traditional" come up, we need to ask **who** is framing these questions and why:

> These are really loaded terms. While we continue to talk about them as being a part of the continuum, recognizing that tradition is dynamic and ever evolving, and contemporary of course becomes tradition today. But what is contemporary today becomes tradition? Certainly not. But I beg the question. Contemporary and traditional on **whose** terms? That is a question that I have been talking about quite

> a while. Because we have been largely necessitated by how artists have to define themselves in the funding existing in Canada. Multiculturalism has been the cornerstone of its political policies since the 1970s, and multiculturalism then took upon itself a mandate of supporting cultural diversity. I sat on many juries so I know exactly what categorizations we were put into. It was the "other" because they have no term for it. Then they stuck it into folk because they still couldn't stand it, then they ethicized it by putting it into 'ethnic dance', and then later what they put it into culturally diverse dance where we still remain today. Then we sent further into another category and that was because they recognized the historic inequity that culturally diverse dance faced in Canada. So we now became equity dance. So all these terms have actually necessitated a real investigation of who am I as an artist today? And what does contemporary mean to me? I do want to discuss the issue of excellence. I think ultimately that will be the only sustaining criteria that will be applied to dance that is non western.

Charting through a brief history of cultural policy in Canada, Lata Pada alerts us to some of the challenges that face dancers competing for funds and opportunities on a global level with other dance forms. In the United States, these labels of "contemporary" and "traditional" become labels that dancers, based in cities like Minnesota and Bhubaneswar, still need to negotiate, especially as Odissi dancers are performing in a global context.

Figure 22: Sharmila Biswas and her troupe performing in 2010

In a conversation I had with a well-known dance critic, she related a conversation that she had with (now deceased), Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra, one of the most prominent figures of Odissi dance. She was sitting next to him after the Odissi Dance Festival in Washington DC in 2003, and asked about a performance by Sharmila Biswas. To her mind the performance was excellent; she wanted to know why Mohapatra had reacted poorly to it:

> I had seen Sharmila Biswas' work, beautiful, beautiful work, and why did you react so badly to it? And then he said, "If I don't hold the horses tightly they will just bolt. And there will no control at all" So there is this fear, like what they have worked at so hard would completely change. But despite all the efforts you must have the openness to understand that you have done your bit. Now let other people carry it forward.

Biswas in her Kolkata studio told me that after many years of struggle and criticism by the Odissi establishment, she has actually benefited from it:

> (B)ut the initial years were kind of bad, it was very difficult. But now I have opened up because I have gained confidence so I am more readily interacting with the musicians and gurus there, they are also readily interacting with me. So those barriers are not there anymore, and now I think even the greatest critics of Orissa, who have criticized me very badly, I have understood his point of view. So we share a good rapport and in such a way that, now whatever we dislike about each other we talk and we resolve most of it, all of it in fact, and I found out that they give good advice and they have found out that I am not an upstart who comes to create something just because they want it to be different and wanted to be popular.

Biswas was recently awarded the *Mahari* Award[102] in 2010 in recognition of her work. All the dancers mentioned here, have been subject to informal and formal criticism for not being Oriya or traditional enough. When I met Rekha Tandon in 2007, she said she would not dare perform her works in Bhubaneswar:

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[102] An award instituted by the Guru Pankaj Charan Odissi Research Foundation to honor an internationally acclaimed soloist.

> It's been excellent in Delhi and in London. I haven't dared perform it in Bhubaneswar. In a sense, I haven't even felt the need to. You are still in a region where it is Oriya poetry, more *pallavis* and whatever that everyone makes and that everyone looks for, and everyone wants to see, which is very unfortunate. Because you can't have a global dialogue if you're not willing to (laughs) open your palette a little bit.

Since then Rekha Tandon has been working with the *gotipuas* of Raghurajpur on a new project called *Dhara*. *Dhara* has been showcased at the House of World Culture in Berlin at the 60th anniversary of Indian Independence, and at dance venues in Liverpool, Manchester and New Castle in the UK, in addition to prestigious venues in New Delhi, Kolkata, and Chennai.

What may not seem "innovative" to an uninitiated eye may in fact appear highly innovative to the knowledgeable eye. And even though this innovation may emerge from within the traditions or *parampara* of Odissi, it is not without criticism. Many Odissi dancers negotiate between trying to make new work that is taken seriously by the Odissi establishment, and being innovative for a global audience. The Odissi traditionalists criticize it as not being sufficiently traditional, and in a global context it can face the critique of not being "modern" enough or conversely not "Indian" enough. But whether the innovation comes from **within** tradition, such as the creation of a new *pallavi* set to a *raga* or a work that references environmentalism and land rights, there is a continuum of work that stretches definitions of the traditional, as it builds on the rigorous and foundational training of Odissi dance.

Chapter 4: *Choli Ke Peeche Kya Hain?* Or What's Behind the Blouse?

This chapter borrows its title from the hit Bollywood song, "*Choli ke Peeche Kya Hain*" from the film *Khalnayak* (1993). The chorus in the song asks the heroine, Madhuri Dixit, what is behind her blouse, to which she coyly responds, "My heart is behind my blouse." Similar to the double entendre in this song, this chapter examines an apparel-related incident that draws on over-determined categories of tradition, history and culture, as they relate to the female body. It focuses on an incident that took place in India in 2005, and in the world of Odissi dance, and on the dance website, Narthaki has been referred to as the "costume controversy" or the "storm in a teacup". Described simply, the incident involved a Kuala Lumpur-based dance company, *Sutra Dance Theatre* which was touring in India and during their visit; the female dancers' costumes came under intense scrutiny.

In this chapter, I argue that this particular incident brings into focus three kinds of conflicts that highlight varying notions of "Indianness". The first centers on the female form, and the appropriateness or *auchitya* of her attire. The outrage is not simply a flouting of "tradition" but represents the danger of a possible shift to a vulgar and eroticized Bollywood culture. Underpinning this seems to be a more general anxiety about Odissi's relation to the erotic. The second conflict focuses on the tension between regional (Oriya) identity and national culture and/or global culture. On one hand, there is a matter of pride that foreigners are taking up this dance form. On the other hand, there is the question of the degree of control that "indigenous practitioners" are able to and want to exercise over it. I posit that this tension between the "national" and "regional" is akin to what has been described by geographer, Wes Flack, as "neolocalism". It reflects the

desire of a local or regional (in this case) community to reestablish the importance of local communities in an effort to do away with the homogenization associated with national and globalizing cultures (Flack 1997). Similarly, David Harvey has argued that there is a reassertion of collective local identities in response to a globalizing economy (Harvey 1990). Odissi in the last few years has come to be recognized as a global form of expression, and this new visibility has created a tension between the regional and the national. In the 1960s and 70s when Odissi dance was struggling to find national recognition, much of the debate centered around a discussion of national heritage, and building on its regional specificities to make itself distinct from *Bharatnatyam,* which is sometimes viewed as **the** national dance. The third conflict focuses on notions of tradition and authenticity as they pertain to choreography and apparel, and raises questions as to what is considered authentic? These conflicts are not new ones, but I argue that in the last decade with the increased global visibility of Odissi dance, this dance has come to be seen more as a regional heritage, rather than a national one, and consequently the lines around the perceived traditions of the form appear to have hardened.

This incident also needs to be read in the context of serious developments around religious and cultural nationalism in India in recent decades. It is another event in a long list of events in the arts (painting, dance, music) that have come under fire from right-wing *Hindutva* agendas.

The Costume

Before I discuss the incident that is the focus of this chapter, I would like to provide some background on the concept of the *odhni* or sash itself, especially since it is this covering (or lack thereof) that caused the controversy.

Figure 23: Odissi dancer, Kakoli Mukherjee in a five-piece stitched costume with *odhni*. Photo by Brian Kerrigan

Odissi costumes can vary according to *gurukuls* or *gharanas* (lineages) within Odissi, and most female Odissi dancers wear either a "stitched" costume (see Figure 23 above) made up of five separate pieces, and cut from a sari. Or dancers wear a sari wrapped as a costume with a separate blouse (See Figure 24 below).

Figure 24: Nandini Sikand in sari costume.
Photo by Alex Beauchesne

In both cases, the legs are covered by *dhoti*-style pantaloons, and the *odhni* is worn across the left shoulder, draped across the chest covering the exposed midriff, and the front of the blouse. In the case of the stitched costume, it is a separate piece of cloth, called the

odhni that performs this function. When wearing a sari costume, one end of the sari is draped across the blouse, and serves as the *odhni*. Sometimes the *odhni* is made from a translucent fabric like chiffon. Dancers like Madhavi Mudgal and her students Bindu Juneja and Reela Hota use this variation. But most often it is made from the same fabric as the rest of the costume. Dancers like Ritha Devi, Indrani Rahman (see Figure 25) who popularized the dance form in the fifties and sixties, and Protima Bedi, founder of dance village, Nrityagram wore the costume without an *odhni* at all.

Figure 25: Indrani Rahman in an *odhni*-less costume

Similarly the Sutra dancers, the focus of this chapter, wore saris wrapped as a costume with a blouse and without an *odhni*.

The Contested Female Form

This controversy needs to be seen within the context of various incidents that have taken place within the arts in India in recent years. There have been several events involving the arts and artists, many of whom have come under fire from *Hindutva* politicians. In 2007, a student at Maharaja Sayajirao (M.S.) University of Baroda in Vadodara was beaten and arrested for his paintings that were exhibited at the final year student exhibition at M.S. University's Faculty of Fine Arts. The student was charged with "offending" religious sentiments in his depiction of Hindu iconography. Another incident that began in 1996, involving prominent artist and nonagenarian painter, Maqbool Fida Husain, made the national and international press. Husain is a high-profile, modern artist who also happens to be Muslim. His paintings have sold for thousands of dollars at Sotheby's and Christie's auctions. The first eruption over his work was caused by a painting of goddess Saraswati that was completed two decades prior to the protest (Guha-Thakurta 245: 2004) indicating that the protests did not take place at the time of its painting in 1970 or at its initial exhibition but many years later when *Hindutva* politics had become more strident in the 90's and 00's. The protests moved to various cities and his other works were brought into the fray. Husains' nude sketches of other Hindu goddesses and *Bharat Mata* (Mother India) were protested in parts of India, and his effigies burned publicly. Many of his paintings were also vandalized in India and the UK. A public apology was demanded from Husain who had just completed the film, *Gajagamini*, which was banned in Maharashtra and Gujarat. Husain was also forbidden to enter the city of Ahmedabad, Gujarat, which at the time was under the leadership of BJP politician, Narendra Modi. Guha-Thakurta posits how Husain's paintings:

> (H)ave passed from India's colonial past into its popular religious iconography, where the sexual has come to be strategically rewritten in the fashioning of feminine images that can effectively negotiate both visual appeal and religious faith (Guha-Thakurta 2004: 249).

Husain in several interviews has argued how his art is a continuation of a 5000 year-old Indian culture, and his inspiration for these paintings are derived from ancient sculptures and art. As Guha-Thakurta points out, Husain's invoking of tradition is a defense that legitimizes these paintings and his right to paint them. His strategy for addressing his critics has not been to claim a universal right to artistic freedom (As Salman Rushdie did during the *fatwa* and controversy of "The Satanic Verses" published in 1988) but rather Husain claims his legitimacy as an Indian artist who (like the dancers profiled in Chapter 3) is functioning well **within** the Indian tradition, and the depiction of the female form is an inalienable part of Hindu iconography. Though the nude female form is an accepted aesthetic within the Hindu artistic traditions it remains a deeply contested one. And for Husain, especially as a Muslim to depict these goddesses was labeled as "the rape of Hindu goddesses"[103] by the *Hindutva*. Of note is that the defense used by Husain is similar to the one used by Ramli Ibrahim, the artistic director of Sutra Dance Theater, as we shall see later, in defense of his costumes. Like Husain, Ramli Ibrahim did not invoke a right to artistic freedom but argued that his costumes were part of the "tradition" of Odissi dance, and also more aesthetically appealing. Although, Ramli Ibrahim made the aesthetic defense his primary one; his defenders used arguments akin to Husain's based on tradition. I shall discuss this strategy in more detail.

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[103] Quoted in The Telegraph, October 5 1996 by a representative of the VHP Party in Jamshedpur. See Guha Thakurta. Page 356.

The Incident

In August 2005, Ramli Ibrahim, a Malaysian-born Odissi dancer who lives and works in Kuala Lumpur, and is the artistic director of Sutra Dance Theatre, began the international tour of the production, "Spellbound". The show premiered in Kuala Lumpur, and the dance company proceeded to India where they were scheduled to perform in the cities of Auroville, Pondicherry, Chennai, Bhubaneswar and Delhi.

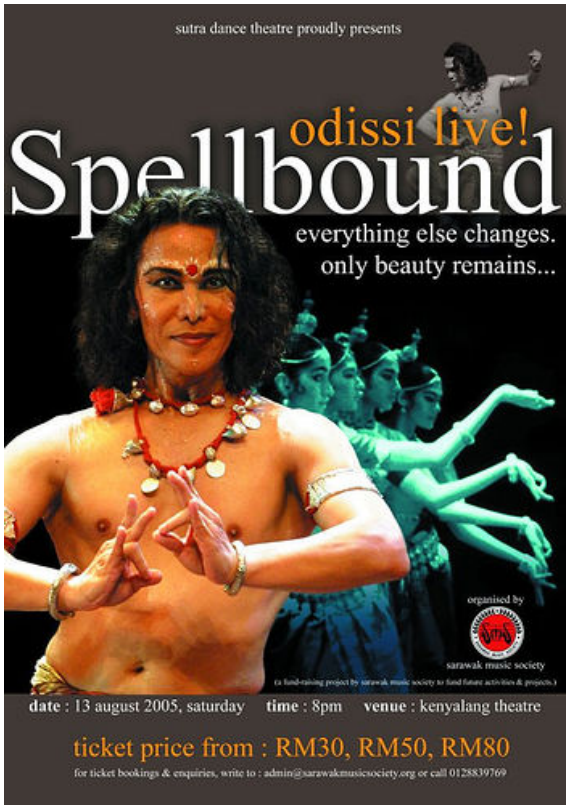

Figure 26: Poster advertising Spellbound tour in Malaysia

Performances leading up to the one in Bhubaneswar were well received, and the review of the Chennai performance was full of praise for the show, "Proficiency is the order of the day with this well-rehearsed group, and the credit to the Guru (Ramli Ibrahim) is all the more for having nurtured such passion on foreign soil" (Srikanth

2005). There was no mention of the costumes by this reviewer other than that they were "uninspiring" for the traditional section as opposed to the contemporary segment that featured adaptations of Nijinsky's "L'apre Midi D'une Faune" and Ravel's "Scheherazade". However, it is the September 5th 2005 performance in Bhubaneswar, the capital city of Orissa at the *Rabindra Mandap*, and the ensuing costume controversy that is the subject of this chapter.

Besides Ramli Ibrahim and guest artist Rahul Acharya[104], a young Bhubaneswar-based dancer, the performance featured five female dancers. The dancers besides Ramli Ibrahim ranged in ages between 18 and 25. The dancers showcased items such as a *Saraswati Managalcharan*, an invocation to goddess Saraswati, followed by a rhythmic *Pallavi*, a pure dance item. Other pieces in this traditional repertoire were *Ashta Shambu*, a depiction of *Shiva* in his eight forms, *Krishna Tandava, Ashta Nayika* and the finale *Aditya Archana*, a piece dedicated to *Surya*, the sun god. This performance mostly followed the standard Odissi *margam* or repertoire. The production was held on two days, the first day featuring the above-mentioned items performed on September 5, 2005 and the second, the contemporary program was performed on September 7, 2005.

As the incident takes place over several weeks, I have created a timeline to provide clarity, and then discuss the incident in more detail in the rest of the chapter.

Timeline of Events[105]

September 5 and 7, 2005: Sutra Performance in Bhubaneswar

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[104] Rahul Acharya, wore a *lungi* (sarong-like garment) as opposed to a short loin cloth for the contemporary section for the show in Bhubaneswar.
[105] All articles were originally published in English.

September 16, 2005: Article in national newspaper, *The Hindu* by journalist Bibhuti Mishra critiquing the Sutra show.

September 25, 2005: Article in national newspaper, *The Statesman* by journalist Bibhuti Mishra critiquing Sutra show.

September 28, 2005: Rejoinder issued in response to Bibhuti Mishra articles by Odissi dancer, Rahul Acharya and three Oriya intellectuals.

September 29, 2005: Interview with Ramli Ibrahim, Artistic Director of Sutra on Narthaki.com, (a popular dance website) discussing the controversy. National dance critic, Shanta Serbjeet Singh responds to controversy in defense of Ramli Ibrahim.

October 4, 2005: Article written by US-based, Sukanya Rahman and Ram Rahman, defending Ramli Ibrahim. They are the son and daughter of Indrani Rahman, Odissi dancer in the 1950s who did not wear the *odhni*, in defense of Ramli Ibrahim.

October 14, 2005: Rejoinder by Bibhuti Mishra, and signed petition by various Odissi dancers protesting the distortion of Oriya culture, and a rejoinder to Shanta Serbjeet Singh's article.

October 14, 2005: Articles written in *The Hindu* by Bibhuti Mishra reporting on the rally organized to protest the corruption in Odissi dance. A similar signed petition was submitted to the Governor of Orissa, Rameswar Thakur.

The initial article by journalist Bibhuti Mishra accuses Ramli Ibrahim and the performance of many shortcomings. Mostly Mishra critiques him for the costumes of his female dancers, and the lack of the *odhni.* Mishra supports his arguments with testimonials from various Odissi gurus, students and other connoisseurs of the form that

attended the performance. I quote most of the article below as there are several arguments put forth which are relevant to my discussion:

> **"Caught on the Wrong Foot"**
> **Dancer Ramli Ibrahim stepped on connoisseurs' toes with his special brand of traditional Odissi. Bibhuti Mishra lifts the curtain.**
>
> Malaysian Odissi dancer Ramli Ibrahim called his current tour of India Spellbound — Odissi Live. But although he seems to have got away with his brand of Odissi in Chennai and Delhi, Ramli, a disciple of the late Guru Debaprasad Das, drew flak in the land of Odissi for the liberties he took with Odissi tradition. Even the widow of his guru was upset with Spellbound…Odissi dancer Ramli Ibrahim and his dance troupe from the Sutra Dance Theatre, Kuala Lumpur, fresh from their conquests in Chennai danced in Bhubaneswar on their way to Delhi. And they made Odissi connoisseurs and dancers gasp in horror. His improvisations may have been accepted had he not referred to the first evening's programme as traditional Odissi. What shocked everybody was the liberty Ramli took with the Odissi costume. Ramli's lady dancers took the stage in tight blouses without any draping while navel rings flashed on their bare midriffs. The traditional Odissi sari and blouse were flung to the winds!
>
> Ileana Citaristi, a national award winner for film choreography and noted Odissi dancer said: "I would certainly not have done it! It reeks of Bollywood. Even Rani Mukherjee[106] dances Odissi wearing properly draped saris and here we have in the land of Odissi, dancers with just blouses on!" Eminent scholar of Odissi dance and president of Orissa Sangeet Natak Akademi, D N Patnaik[107] also aired his reservations and said that nothing other than a sari has ever been approved by any guru. Patnaik, who is the president of Sangeet Natak Akademi, a co-organiser of the show, felt that such distortions compromise the dignity of Odissi as a classical dance……..Odissi research scholar Chittaranjan, however, has a valid point to make: "Forget about texts! Wearing only a blouse with the midriff exposed looks undignified for a classical dance. It is not pop Odissi, is it?

According to the article, Ramli and his dancers not only flouted tradition by wearing *odhni*-less costumes but they also had the audacity to present this as "traditional". There also appears to be an overall anxiety around the eroticism of these

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[106]The name of a popular Bollywood actress.
[107] D.N Patnaik is one of the founders of "Jayantika" the Odissi revivalist organization of the 1950s and 1960s.

costumes, making it not a simple flouting of tradition, but one that smacks of Bollywood overtones. The references in the article to Bollywood actress, Rani Mukherjee and "pop" Odissi underscore this anxiety, even though concern around the exposure of women's bodies is hardly a new phenomenon. As explained in Chapter 2, Odissi, as is performed today, derives some of its origins from the *maharis* or temple dancers. Consequently, the trope of the dancer as devotee, a practitioner of a religious ritual was under threat. With the Sutra costumes the line between religion and eroticism was in danger of being transgressed, of the dancer becoming an object of desire rather than a practitioner of a spiritual dance form. As discussed earlier, Frederique Marglin's ethnography (1985) on temple dancers has shown that the erotic was always a part of the *mahari* temple rituals[108], and the reconstruction of the dance in the mid 20th century elided connotations of the erotic, making this demarcation between religion and eroticism a fairly recent phenomena. The fact that the costume worn by Odissi dancers on stage today barely resembles the one worn by the *maharis,* and was specifically reconstructed during the codification of Odissi dance this particular debate around the costumes is particularly illuminating.

To support his argument, journalist Bibhuti Mishra uses several quotes in his article from Italian-born Odissi dancer Ileana Citaristi. Citaristi has studied Odissi for several years and has made Bhubaneswar her home. She is a senior disciple of Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra, one of the Odissi revivalists and perhaps one of the most well-known Odissi exponents in the world. Quoting Citaristi, is not an accident but rather is a way to signal that another "foreigner," unlike Ramli Ibrahim, is aware of the codes of

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[108] There is a more detailed discussion of this in Chapter 2.

Odissi dance. Mishra in his article seems to be making a distinction between "appropriate" instances of Odissi by foreign-born dancers versus "inappropriate" ones, and that Citaristi, even though she is of Italian origin, unlike Ramli, knows better than to flout tradition. Despite Mishra's disdain towards film, he introduces Citaristi as an award-winning film choreographer as a marker of her authoritative position.

This category of "foreign" performers is important. With the increased number of non-Indian performers in Odissi dance, reviewers and critics rarely fail to mention this. This often takes the form of, "Despite the fact that Dancer X lives in (foreign place), she is a talented dancer" or "Dancer Y is the best Odissi dancer amongst the foreigners." Similarly even the journalists who wrote in defense of Ramli Ibrahim and his work mention his "foreignness." For example, "It should be a national pride of Orissa that a foreigner has embraced our art form" (Pathy et al 2005). However, according to journalist Bibhuti Mishra there is a distinction to be made between "foreigners" such as Ramli Ibrahim and Ileana Citaristi. Although it is a matter of pride that foreigners are taking up the study of Odissi, it is more important that these foreigners maintain the traditions of the dance.

After the Mishra article appeared in the press, Ramli Ibrahim[109] was interviewed on narthaki.com, a dance website dedicated to the coverage of Indian dance. His reasoning for the costumes was primarily an aesthetic one:

> The reason why female Sutra dancers don't wear this sash is mainly aesthetic. However, I am also aware that the *odhni* was a contemporary and not a traditional embellishment of the Odissi costume created during the *Jayantika* (crusaders of contemporary Odissi) times, a group of which the late Debaprasad[110] eventually opted out. Where the *odhni* is concerned, I can

[109] I attempted to contact the dancer regarding this controversy via email but did not get a response.
[110] Deba Prasad Das is the (now deceased) guru of Ramli Ibrahim.

only speak for my own Sutra dancers. Most of my dancers are young and on the thin side. Due to their simultaneous training in modern dance, ballet and yoga, Sutra dancers are also well 'pulled up' out of their waist. They tend to look sloppy with these extraneous pieces of material which drop to the sides when they bend, subsequently obscuring their delicate *bhangis*[111]. This fact was pointed out to me several times by the visual artists and photographers who draw or photograph them, whenever they wear the '*odhni*'. It was also obvious in our photographs that these materials can be a hindrance if they are not 'securely' pinned and stitched to the blouses! They are a hindrance because when they are stitched too tightly, they hinder the full movement of the arms! Apart from this, we do not wear stitched costume; we wear full length saris, which are tied during our quick changes between dances even by the youngest member of the troupe, without any assistance. We normally do at least two quick costume changes in a full length program. Securing the '*odhni*' has always been an unnecessary hassle apart from its 'unaesthetic' aspect (Narthaki.com 2005).

Figure 27: Sutra dancers in *odhni*-less costumes with guest-artist, Rahul Acharya in Spellbound

Here Ramli defends himself and draws attention to the constructed nature of Odissi dance and its costumes. He highlights that the costumes used by dancers today were an invention of *Jayantika,* the Odissi revivalist group from the 1950s and that each *gharana* of Odissi dance has developed its own style of Odissi costumes. Ramli also discusses how his dancers wear real saris (rather than stitched costumes), and change

[111] Basic postures or stances used in dance.

during a performance "without assistance". By doing so, he draws attention to the fact that even though Sutra dancers are not "Indian" they are able to dress authentically and without help.

Ramli Ibrahim's mention of his slim dancers addresses a theme that I have heard before, namely that overweight dancers are frowned upon. Other dancers that I spoke to, defended Ramli, and talked about the importance of slim dancers being able to articulate the various postures, and subtle torso movements more effectively. Reela Hota, a Delhi-based dancer, in discussing Ramli's performance was one such dancer who expressed more of a concern with body type rather than tradition:

> I personally loved that (Sutra's Spellbound) performance and it never struck me because his girls are already slim and trim. All the time I was thinking about what lovely *bhangis* (postures) they are doing, what lovely choreography they are doing, what lovely pieces they are doing, what lovely lights they have, it was very aesthetically done. And if you see traditionally, that is the costume. That is how the costume was. But when I saw an Indian girl a long time back, I just couldn't stand it. You know it was so distracting, and it was just not good enough. Probably she was plump, probably she was not even a good dancer. You know probably she herself was not comfortable with it. I personally wear a very small blouse, because I am very slim and especially the Kelu Babu style today, the upper torso movement is so important to the style, that when I do it with a very covered costume it doesn't come out that well. If you would see my dance you would know, and if I wear a smaller blouse with skin on the waist showing a little bit, and smaller sleeves then somehow my figure, and my postures look far more pretty, and everybody who knows dance will say the same thing. But nowhere have I had people objecting so I don't know why people disliked Ramli's costumes.

Talking to dance critic, Leela Venkataraman, she too talked about overweight dancers as being vulgar:

> I think what happened is ridiculous and disgusting. Here they have these fat, fat women dancing. Dancer X - she's become enormous, humungous and she comes and dances on the stage. It was unsightly to watch it. That is not vulgar? I think that is really vulgar. I mean the way you dress and everything and wear those costumes. They are tight and you show everything that you

> have to hide and then you dance. I think that's kind of vulgar. I can understand a love for the dance, you may want to do it but then you need to wear something more modest.

What is interesting to note that these responses to being overweight came up when respondents were asked about this particular incident. For them vulgarity and inappropriateness were not breached by the Sutra dancers but rather by these overweight dancers. The question that remains unanswered is if the Sutra dancers were overweight, would this controversy have played out in the same way?

What is Authentic?

Having addressed the costumes, journalist Mishra went on to critique the performance in terms of its authenticity:

> In spite of the artistry of the dance, Ramli drew flak for tampering with original compositions of dance gurus as well. The traditional Odissi segment of the programme was a mixed bag of invocation to goddess Saraswati as *mangalacharan, Mukhari pallavi, Ashta Sambhu*, an abhinaya piece dedicated to the eight-fold forms of Lord Shiva, *Krishna Tandava, Ashtanayik*, a well-known piece depicting nayikas or heroines in eight dramatic situations and finally *Aditya Archana*, a paean to the Sun-god. While the dance compositions were original creations of Ramli's teacher, Guru Deba Prasad Das and his star disciple Guru Durga Charan Ranbir, each has been reworked by Ramli for group compositions thus distorting choreographic authenticity. Though the production was a visual spectacle, the neatness and compactness of the original choreography became casualties that rattled Odissi dancers and disciples of Guru Debaprasad, to whom ironically, this programme was a homage. "I dislike such patchwork. Ramli should not have tampered with the original pieces. Let him come up with his own. Either you're traditional or you're not," said Italian Odissi dancer, Ileana Citaristi. Many like Manjushri Panda, a disciple of Guru Ranbir, echoed her sentiments. On the second evening, the second programme of Spellbound, Ramli again reworked the famous choreography *Shankarabharana pallavi* of late Guru Pankaj Charan Das, distorting it. Using Odissi mudras in ballet-like contemporary dance called might be acceptable but the reverse can rub people up the wrong way, especially while presenting traditional Odissi.

The original Mishra article cites "choreographic inauthenticity" as one of the problems with "Spellbound". To explain this, I will briefly discuss Odissi choreography. Within Odissi there exist dance items or performance pieces that have been choreographed over the years by gurus for solo dancers, and these prized compositions are performed the world over. Very often these items are "restaged" to accommodate several dancers or other presentational logistics. Further, a particular choreography may be taught differently to various dancers depending on the abilities and suitability of the dancer. Ramli Ibrahim restaged the dances with Guru Durga Charan Ranbir, a well-respected guru in Bhubaneswar, and the senior-most disciple of Guru Deba Prasad Das to accommodate a large troupe. This is not unusual and is done by most gurus,[112] however in the case of Ramli Ibrahim, this became "choreographic inauthenticity" for Mishra, even though this "restaging" takes place all the time to accommodate group shows both in India and abroad. By calling Ramli Ibrahim's choreography "inauthentic" Mishra attempted to discredit the entire production. Furthermore calling it inauthentic makes it especially difficult to refute, as opposed to choreography being critiqued for a lack of aesthetics, or innovation. Ramli Ibrahim responded to the critique:

> I am not at all tampering with it, and on the contrary Spellbound has the blessing of Ranbirji who conducted its world premiere in Kuala Lumpur. *Aditya Acharna*, for instance, was created new for Sutra and is different from the way his dancers in Bhubaneswar were taught.

Ramli validates his choreographic choices by saying that Guru Durga Charan Ranbir was responsible for the choreography. By aligning with him, Ibrahim attempts to address the charge of "inauthenticity" because as a foreigner it is one that is especially difficult to refute. Ramli Ibrahim is credited by many to be one of the most talented

[112] I discuss the choreography of group versus solo performances in Chapter 5.

choreographers in Odissi today, but yet his "foreignness" allows the Odissi traditionalists to make this charge. It is a charge that is rarely leveled against those who reside, and study within India's geographical borders or are perhaps themselves, Indian or of Indian origin. In the next section, I discuss a rejoinder to the initial criticism, this time not by Ramli but his defenders in Bhubaneswar. This rejoinder builds on notions of "tradition" and "history," but unlike Ramli Ibrahim they are able to use a different strategy to contest these critiques.

The Rejoinder

After this exchange between Ramli Ibrahim and Mishra in the press, a few dancers and Oriya intellectuals got together to issue a rejoinder to the initial articles written by Bibhuti Mishra. One of the co-authors of this rejoinder was guest artist, Rahul Acharya (who performed in the controversial production of 'Spellbound') and other Bhubaneswar residents. The thrust of ***this*** argument (unlike Ramli's) builds on a historical justification for the costume:

> There is no specific dress code in Odissi because the Jayantika has not prescribed any sample. The different Gurus have followed their own styles. Debaprasad was very much conscious of his own creative vitality. So he rebelled out of the Jayantika style and practiced an individual style and dance costume of his own. The dress code followed by Guru Debaprasad Das and his students, Indrani Rehman and Ramli Ibrahim is typical and conforms to the tradition mentioned above. Any other evidence from the present practice is fallacious, modern and populist. They are not traditional. Therefore a purist is he who follows this long Orissan tradition and not he who depends on the modern practice.

The authors make extensive use of "proof" from sculptures, and cite historical evidence that was part of Kalicharan Patnaiks' initial presentation to the *Sangeet Natak*

Akademi[113] to have Odissi dance formally recognized as a national art form in the late 1950s. In using Patnaik's body of evidence, the authors are building on a nationally accepted and institutionalized history of Odissi dance. Similar to art historians who were faced with the task of re-contextualizing and validating temple erotica (Guha-Thakurta 2004) into the canon of Indian art history, Kalicharan Patnaik had to make his case to have Odissi instituted as a classical form[114]. The authors of the rejoinder build on this "evidence," and attempt to re-contextualize the Deba Prasad Das tradition (the one that Ramli claims lineage to) of wearing the costume (without the *odhni*). This "invention of tradition" was key to the new and elevated status of Odissi dance in the 1950s and is similar to the rhetorical argument made by the authors of the rejoinder excerpted below:

> Patnaik presented a paper establishing the classical aspects of Odissi dance. Indrani danced wearing this pure and traditional Odissi costume [unstitched *bandha* sari]. Eminent critic of Indian classical dance, Charles Fabri was also present at Indrani's performance. Debaprasad Das had restored this costume from history, back to practice in Odissi dance through his disciple Indrani, and Kalicharan Patnaik and Charles Fabri had approved of this costume as authentic Odissi. Kavichandra Kalicharan Patnaik, the Guru of the Gurus, considered as the main crusader of Odissi dance, who had contributed and sacrificed his whole life for the sake of Odissi dance, revered as the guide and philosopher by the three Odissi dance maestros, Pankaj Charan Das, Kelucharan Mahapatra and Debaprasad Das, had never objected to this costume. Indrani Rehman had danced in this costume in Delhi and all over the globe with her Guru Debaprasad Das….Times of India (8th April 1958) wrote on that celebrated occasion: "Testimony for the recognition of Odissi as a classical dance on par with Bharatanatyam by the dance Seminar on Monday, was found the same evening in the dance numbers presented by Indrani Rehman at the Talkatora Gardens." Statesman (8th April 1958) wrote: "It was fit occasion for Mrs. Indrani Rehman to dance on the very day on which the Sangeet Natak Akademi officially recognised Orissi dancing as a classical system equal with Bharatanatyam and Kathakali." Hindustan Times (8th April 1958) wrote: "Within a few hours of the Sangeet Natak Akademi dance seminar's according national status to a

[113] The National Performing Arts Academy in India.
[114] I discuss this is more detail in Chapter 2

> fifth school of Indian classical dance, namely Odissi, a large audience had the opportunity to witness the same performed by Indrani Rehman…"Was the media blind to Indrani's *kanchela*[115] costume?

There are several points to note here. By claiming a history that was instrumental in institutionalizing and codifying a dance form, the rejoinder uses this historical evidence to argue in favor of the Sutra costumes. At the end of their rejoinder, the authors provide a series of "proofs" that range from 2nd century BCE to the 20th century claiming that Odissi dance was recognized as "classical" by the *Sangeet Natak Akademi* based on these evidences. By using the same evidence that was used by Kalicharan Patnaik in 1958, they align this performance of Sutra with earlier traditions of Odissi dance. Strategically if Ibrahim's critics were to reject the Sutra costumes then they would **also** be calling into question the proof employed by Kalicharan Patnaik, the proof used to bestow on Odissi dance its hard-won national and classical status. Rather than shun the notion of tradition or employ an aesthetic justification (as Ramli Ibrahim did) they argue that the Sutra dancers were in keeping with the Deba Prasad tradition of Odissi dance. In another part of the rejoinder they state, "We should celebrate variety and diversity, as our culture holds this principle as essence**".** Their use of the "variety and diversity" discourse as being an inalienable part of Indian culture is a common one and echoes with the "Unity in Diversity" themes often articulated in Nehruvian nationalist discourse. It is a discourse that does not make a distinction between national or regional culture. This regional versus national debate around Odissi dance is clearly another source of conflict. In the petition that was circulated in Bhubaneswar during this controversy, as we shall

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[115] Blouse

see later on, Mishra makes a clear distinction between national and regional (Oriya) culture. I discuss this in more detail in the following section.

Another line in this rejoinder addresses the demarcation discussed earlier between the religious and the erotic. The authors state, "Now does the costume create visual pollution or is this a preconceived pollution pre-stored in the vision?" The insinuation here is that the critics of Ramli Ibrahim (Mishra et al) are seeing the erotic in a spiritual form, and the authors accuse them of "polluting" a spiritual dance form with their preconceived notions. In other words, the erotic lies in the eyes of the beholder. In another section of the rejoinder they state:

> Dhirendra Nath Patnaik has produced the photograph of Indrani Rehman wearing a *kanchela* without *odhni,* in a pure dance movement in his book "Odissi Dance", and has not written a single line objecting to it anywhere in his whole book.

The significance of mentioning D. N Patnaik's here is that he is was one of the *Jayantika* revivalists, and is cited by Mishra in several articles as denouncing the costumes worn by the *Sutra* dancers. Patnaik was also one of people who signed the petition, circulated by Mishra. They continue:

> So how could these reports based on the manipulated opinion of so-called dance scholars and a fistful of dance tutors challenge and condemn the long traditional costume?

It is significant to note the use of the term, "dance tutor" rather than "guru". The former lacks credibility, and has only a limited knowledge of Odissi dance. Through the article there is a definite charge of a lack of knowledge and that non-dancers (read "journalists") are discussing a subject without any historical background or knowledge of dance. Statements like:

> The reporters seem to have relied more on their ignorance rather than the rich visual documents that Orissa has.

or others like:

> These reporters are neither imbued in culture nor in different styles of Odissi. That's the real tragedy that in some newspapers, persons lacking proper knowledge and scholarship in a particular field become the journalists and reporters of that field" and further accusing these writers as being, "self-acclaimed dance critics who must be pitied**.**

critique journalist Mishra as having, "no stand in the national dialogue' and "without any depth in Odissi classical dance." Again here the notion of the "foreigner" arises but as an acknowledgment of the global appeal of Odissi, an event that should be celebrated rather than condemned.

As evidenced by the rhetoric employed, and even though Ramli Ibrahim and the authors above are arguing on the same side of the debate, they have very different strategies. These authors, (similar to Husain's strategy discussed earlier) claim to be **part** of the tradition rather than arguing for an aesthetic justification. Since these authors are Indian and Oriya they are able to make an argument that draws on tradition in a way that Ramli Ibrahim as a foreigner cannot.

National versus Regional Culture

Odissi, especially in the last decade has come to be recognized as a global form creating a tension between the regional and the national. In the 1960s and 70s, when Odissi dance was struggling to find national recognition, it was forced to highlight its regional specificities to distinguish itself from Bharatanatyam, literally the dance of India. With its increased global presence there appears to be a hardening of boundaries between its regional and national identity, history and origins.

At this point what started as a local controversy, and limited to (besides Ramli) the residents of Bhubaneswar became a national one. The national press, especially dance critics such as Leela Venkatraman and Shanta Serbjeet Singh, based in New Delhi, wrote in support of Ramli Ibrahim and his dancers. The following is an excerpt from an article titled "In Search of the Authentic" by New Delhi-based journalist and dance critic Shanta Serbjeet Singh:

> When we talk about "authenticity" we are implying the whole spectrum of "tradition"' that goes into making an authentic and revered art form. But at what point tradition walks into the zone of the non-traditional, is itself a very thin razor's edge. This is true even while talking only of the technique and the vocabulary of dance. If the focus is only *aharya* (the costumes and ornamentation) it becomes a debate on *auchitya*, good taste. Nothing else. After all, even the *Maharis* did not use *odhnis* and the 'traditional' dress; complete with a diaphanous *odhni* can look grotesque, at times, when draped over an ungainly body.

Again here Singh refers to the "tastelessness" of the overweight dancer I discussed earlier. She elaborates:

> When the *odhni*-less dancers of Ramli's troupe are being discussed, no one who has watched him and his disciples can ever accuse them of bad taste. Nor can one forget the stunning perfection of their technique, totally Odissi and totally traditional, even when it has a somewhat modern feel. As far as the *aharya* debate is concerned, what is relevant or ought to be, then, is the body which is clothed in it. The body in Ramli's dancers is an impeccable instrument of movement, never drawing attention to itself but only to the dance.

The costume or *aharya* for Singh is irrelevant, the dancer and her body is simply an "instrument of movement". Singh raises the gauntlet and goes on to challenge Odissi dancers in Orissa to produce the same caliber of dancer as Ramli Ibrahim:

> Come on, Orissa! Why not try to produce a Ramli in your state? After all, ever since Sanjukta passed away, Orissa has not produced one dancer of equal calibre, not even female, what to talk about a male! Reflect on that, and let the presence or absence of an *odhni* remain the trivia which it actually is (Singh 2005).

What is important to note that during the first few decades of the Odissi revival, in the 1960s and 1970s, besides Sanjukta Panigrahi, the dancers who popularized Odissi were mostly non-Oriya. Indrani Rahman, was of mixed parentage, her father was Indian and her mother was American. And Rahman herself was married to a Muslim. Ritha Devi came from an upper-class Bengali family. Both these dancers were non-Oriya. Other prominent dancers like Madhavi Mudgal, Protima Bedi, founder of Nrityagram are also non-Oriya. Shanta Serbjeet Singh's remarks on the lack of compelling talent in Orissa since Sanjukta Panigrahi added fuel to the fire. Consequently, this charge by Singh touched a wound, and widened the national/regional gap. Now it wasn't simply a divide between Oriya journalists and national dance critics, but non-Oriya (national) dancers and Oriya ones. Bhibuti Mishra responded to these comments in his next article:

> I am sorry Shantaji is wide off the mark when she says that Orissa has not produced any dancer of calibre after Sanjukta and should try to produce a Ramli. Ramli is good, but there are others, male and female who are as good if not better. From Oopalie Operajita through Aruna Mohanty, Sangeeta Dash to Sujata Mohapatra, we have had brilliant dancers. From Naba Mishra and Bichitrananda Swain to Ramesh Manoranjan, Amulya and a whole lot. And ask Guru Gangadhar Pradhan whether there are brilliant male dancers produced by him or not. Praise Ramli. But please don't give sweeping statements to discount others (Mishra 2005).

Similar to the initial article published by Bibhuti Mishra there was another one written by Shyamhari Chakra, a journalist and dance critic for *The Hindu*, a daily newspaper. I met him and asked about the Sutra controversy. A mild-mannered journalist, and prominent on the Odissi dance scene, Chakra told me that he wrote the article because after the performance several people came up to him to say that they had an issue with the attire of the dancers:

> But what prompted me to report it this way, there was a line like this [in my article], "People did not appreciate the overall use of the costumes, they were not using *odhnis*." They were younger dancers, they were not looking bad, but many people came to us and said you have to write about it, you have to air our sentiments. It has blown up in the media. From what I know, Ramli Ibrahim is a very nice person, I call him Ramli bhai[116] (Interview with Chakra 2007).

The following is a brief account of an email I received from him regarding this matter as I asked him to recount the controversy from his point of view:

> What you read on www.narthaki.com was blown out of proportion.
> The matter was so serious. It was like this: Ramli Bhai's troupe performed in Bhubaneswar without the traditional *odhnis*. I was reporting that event for Indian Express newspaper that evening. I liked the performance but could not understand why the costume was different and why a dancer was having naval ring. I asked senior journalist and dance critic Bibhuti Mishra (who is no more) about it and he said it was violation of the tradition. Then I asked Guru Deba Prasad's wife Jita Das. She said that late Guruji was not favoring Indrani Rehman wearing this way. Later on, before filing my report, I also called scholar D.N.Patnaik for his view. He also opined that it was against the tradition. The next day we carried the report that praised the performance but with a remark that Ramli's liberal use of costume was not appreciated by the people. A prominent Oriya newspaper and television channel ETV-Oriya interviewed Sangeeta Das, prominent dancer and disciple of Deba Prasad. She said she is quite friendly with Ramli but does not appreciate the change in costume style. Some other dancers and gurus like your guru Ranbir Sir, Ratnikant Mohapatra, Aruna Mohanty - all that we spoke to opposed the change.
>
> Later on late Bibhuti Mishra wrote about it in The Statesman too. What followed was a campaign against Mr. Mishra and the journalists in Orissa by four people - Dinanath Pathy's son Soubhagya who is known as the editor of Angarag and co-editor of IPAP's 3rd international Odissi festival souvenir, Rahul Acharya, an advocate friend of Soubhagya Pathy and another family friend of the Pathys. All of them claimed that we, the journalists of Orissa, have no knowledge of the texts and hence this kind of ignorant reporting. What followed were so much of remarks regarding Oriya press and Oriya people by the BIG names in the media (dance criticism) and it still continues till date all glorifying Ramli Bhai and 'highlighting' Oriyas in a poor perspective. Hope, you can imagine now

[116] *Bhai* translates as "brother"

> who blew the matter out of proportion and why. True, the journalists were not scholars; they can't be as they report matters as they are. But it was not fair to put them and the people of the region in poor light.... as if they were fundamentalists.
>
> Anyway, with the death of Mr. Bibhuti Mishra, the paper war over the issue died and I remember he had the last laugh. Hope I am able to tell you honestly all that I remember about the issue.

It seems clear to me that Shyamhari Chakra was more upset by the fallout from the controversy, and the accusations between national and established journalists versus the local/regional journalists. Chakra's account of the controversy was that the performance was critiqued by some, and eventually got blown out of proportion becoming a media war. It also appears that Shyamhari Chakra's concern was more with prominent dance critics and journalists from Delhi who wrote off the incident as being an over-reaction by "small-town" journalists.

This conflict between regional and national is evidenced in this discussion between the journalists in Orissa and the national dance critics. The former are mostly Oriya speaking and the latter non-Oriyas, and the Oriya journalists accuse the national dance critics as treating them as provincial (non-national). This is a conflict that in recent years has become more frequent, and attests to a kind of neolocalism in Bhubaneswar. Wes Flack's study of microbreweries in the United States argues that neolocalism is a "self-conscious reassertion of the distinctively local" (Flack 1997: 198). This costume incident can also be viewed as re-assertion of the home-grown and regional roots of the dance, especially as it has a strong sense of place.

The protests in Orissa continued against Ramli Ibrahim and Sutra, and articles documenting this (many written by Bibhuti Mishra) appeared in the press. I quote an excerpt from one of them:

> **Art as dissent**
> In another unique event, dancers, dance gurus, musicians and writers in Bhubaneswar got together to lodge a protest against the corruption in classical Odissi dance. The immediate cause for the protest was the distortion of traditional Odissi costume in a programme held recently by the Sutra Theatre of Malaysia and Ramli Ibrahim. The dancers not wearing an *odhni* or *dupatta* stirred controversy and Odissi dance scholars, gurus, performers and critics roundly condemned this departure from the traditional costume. A rally was taken out with placard-holding celebrities condemning the philistinism and a memorandum was submitted to the Governor, Rameswar Thakur.

During this time a petition was also circulated and dancers and gurus, mostly in Bhubaneswar signed this as protest:

> Odissi dance is the Orissa culture. But we note with regret that there have been attempts at distorting our noble Odissi traditions of late. In a recent programme hosted by the Sutra theatre of Malaysia the Odissi costume was tampered with and female dancers were made to dance with just blouses on without any drapery. This has offended the sensibilities of the Oriyas who are proud of their heritage and tradition. We protest such distortion and corruption or our culture. While pledging to fight against it at all levels we request your intervention for the protection of Orissa's Cultural essence and sanctity.

This petition underscores how Odissi dance, especially in recent years has come to be viewed as distinctly "Oriya" culture. Not once do the words "national" or even "classical" appear in the text of the petition. The petition also makes clear that it is "Oriya" culture that is under threat not "Indian" culture or a "national" classical form of India, underscoring again this national versus regional dimension. The use of the phrase that, "female dancers were **made to** dance with just blouses on" points further to the contestation around women's bodies, and the need for them to be covered, draped or appropriately attired.

Many dancers, especially those in Bhubaneswar were forced to pick a side of the debate. One was either on the side of the traditional, preserving the moral culture of Orissa or one was amoral, immoral, polluting the very nature of Odissi. Some dancers I spoke with were hesitant to sign the petition but felt they had no choice but to condemn Ramli Ibrahim and his dancers in this public forum. They signed mostly to make peace or otherwise risk harassment, and be viewed as non-traditional or non-regional or worse yet, be seen to be siding with the inauthentic.

Ananya Chatterjea (2004) points out that Odissi has followed the precedent set by Bharatanatyam in gaining its national and classical recognition:

> This left dancers and advocates of several other dance forms, in particular Odissi, Kuchipudi, and Mohini Attam, in a quandary, for while they felt strongly that these forms had their aesthetic and regional specificities, they also recognized the necessary uniformity of any notion of "classicism", and that, in order to support their claims to classicism they would have to work with the already established model (Chaterjea 2004: 147).

Chatterjea argues that this "troubled desire" for the classical label is part of the "developmental pathway" of Odissi dance, and that this particular history of having to define itself in relationship to Bharatnatyam has contributed to the need and desire for this label of classicism. However at the same time this history of Odissi builds on national narratives of art, and has homogenized the regional influences, as discussed in Chapter 2. This petition, however, appears to be indicative of a shift away from Odissi's "national" label towards a more regional one, and signals a historical tension for the gatekeepers of Odissi dance between national and regional identities.

These incidents created a widespread debate within the international dance community as well. Many people in support of Ramli Ibrahim and his dancers cite two main points as evidence. First, is the precedence set by Indrani Rahman, a student of

Guru Deba Prasad who is credited with taking Odissi to the international stage in 1957 and later. Her first performance has been described in detail by her daughter, Sukanya Rahman in her 2002 book, "Dancing in the Family". Indrani Rahman traveled all over the world performing Odissi and her costume, it is often pointed out during this heated debate, was an Orissa sari worn without it draped across the chest. During this controversy, both Ram and Sukanya, Indrani Rahmans' children wrote in response to this incident.

Ram Rahman is a photographer and visual artist based in New York and New Delhi. Even though he did not mention his mother specifically, his byline states that he is the son of Indrani Rahman. Ram Rahman refers to the systematic policing of the arts that have taken place in recent years and wrote:

> Sadly, we in India are allowing legitimacy for all kinds of retrograde ideas, especially in the cultural field. Painters are being attacked for what they paint, singers because of their religion, even Ustad Allaudin Khan was branded a "Bangladeshi"' (read Muslim) by the BJP Govt in Madhya Pradesh. It is hugely important to confront this kind of moral policing with logic and especially with factual information on cultural history. Our culture needs no lessons from anyone and stands solidly on its own sophistication. And it has always been dynamic and adapting. If these people are so concerned about 'tradition,' let them take the dance back into the temples, make sure it is not performed anywhere else, removed from television, under only oil lamps. Of course, if we do go back to the "glorious" past, these moral purists may be more than embarrassed by the outfits displayed all over India on all our temples! (Rahman 2005).

While Sukanya, Indrani Rahman's daughter wrote:

> I was in Puri with my mother Indrani in the summer of 1957 when she, under Guru Deba Prasad Das's guidance, created the costume she chose to wear for Orissi. It was in contrast to the velvet blouses and Benaras tissue *odhnis* then prevalent with dancers in Orissa. She drew inspiration from the sculptures of dancing figures in Konarak and other temples in Orissa in her choice of ornaments and costume. While he was teaching my mother, Deba Prasad Das spent many months in our home in Delhi and became a veritable member of our family. All I recall him insisting on in the way of

> costume, was that she wears a tied sari and not a stitched costume. That he objected to her not covering up with an *odhni* is a fallacy (Rahman 2005).

Deba Prasad Das is one of the revivalists of Odissi dance, and according to some his widow commented that if he Das had been alive he would never have allowed the dancers to go onstage without an *odhni.*

Some of this controversy has also been explained in terms of the competitiveness between two distinct *gurukuls*/schools. Ramli Ibrahim belongs to the Deba Prasad *gurkul*. It is possible to argue that this incident speaks to a fierce competition in the arena of Odissi. Ramli in his interview says:

> It is quite likely that Sutra's brand of Odissi is getting to be just a little too threatening to some of the above-mentioned people. Billboards of Sutra stood side by side with that of the Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra[117] Award performance, which took place just three days later in the same venue. (Narthaki 2005).

On the question of competitiveness Bibhuti Mishra wrote in response to Ramli Ibrahim's comments denying that there was any issue of jealousy.

Odissi dance continues to be highly visible and contested and this incident raises many issues. One thing is clear, no one seems to doubt the technique and training of Ramli Ibrahim and the Sutra dancers. In fact, most regard him as being an incredibly talented choreographer. Many dancers I spoke to had varying theories of this outburst. Some contend that it was because people were jealous of Ramli and his success. Others did not think he should have flouted the traditional costume and some think it was a way to create "cheap publicity". At the time, this incident led to a fissure in the dance community especially in Bhubaneswar. However Ramli has performed in Bhubaneswar

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[117] Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra, who is considered to be the last "living legend" of his time died in April 2004

several times without controversy and ensures that his dancers use the *odhni*. When performing "contemporary" works he describes them as being "Odissi inspired", rather than performing them as traditional Odissi. Performing in Bhubaneswar is acknowledged as being one of the hardest places in India to perform Odissi. Rekha Tandon, an Odissi dancer who divides her time between Bhubaneswar and Wales, talks of her new choreographic work that departs from the traditional repertoire, and half jokes that she wouldn't dare show some of that work in Bhubaneswar. Ramli too acknowledges this, "So, definitely, there is jealousy. As you know, Bhubaneswar is not exactly an easy place to deal with." Was this entire controversy designed to discredit a particular lineage of *gurukul* of Odissi dance, namely the Deba Prasad Das style of Odissi? Or was it something more insidious? Ramli Ibrahim in another article on Narthaki states:

> In the two-day Seminar "Dialogue with disciples of the late Debaprasad Das," organized by Sutra and convened by Dr. Dinanath Pathy in Bhubaneswar, just prior to Sutra performances, (with the objective of gathering precious information of the late Guru) there were unscheduled black-outs. Rumours of jealousy and conspiratorial gossips were rampant and there was even anticipation of interruption to the performance. The organizers had received threats of sabotage. These included using the fact that I was a Muslim and should not be doing Indian classical dance! To avoid untowardly circumstances, security guards/police were employed in and around the theatre as a safety measure. A generator was hired and used as we could not afford any un-scheduled electricity cuts (narthaki.com, 2005)

Bibhuti Mishra in response denied the accusations that Ramli Ibrahim was being mistreated because he is a Muslim. He begins his argument by citing the Italian born dancer Citaristi's example of being a non-Oriya (verify) as "proof":

> Orissa has welcomed many foreigners who have come to learn Odissi and someone like Ileana Citaristi has settled here. So his comments about there being intolerance because of his being a foreigner or a Muslim (Sorry, no bigotry in Orissa, Ramli. Your friends are poisoning you for their own interests) or Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra billboard being there as proof of

> his brand of Odissi being a threat to others, are baseless and ludicrous. I went through your interview carried in Narthaki; I would like to assure you, there is absolutely no foundation for your fears of sabotage, boycott or jealousy by rival groups. I am in Orissa since the last 26 years and you can imagine, being an outsider myself, if I have not been the target of local parochialism and narrow-mindedness by a certain section of the society. There was no threat of sabotage. It is just the figment of imagination of some clever people who were trying to make a fast buck at Ramli's expense, perhaps giving him a picture of imaginary Taliban in Bhubaneswar! Contrary to what he says, Bhubaneswar is the easiest of places without any problem or rabid fanaticism (Mishra 2005).

Again Mishra ridicules Ramli Ibrahims' claims of being singled out as a foreigner/Muslim, citing the example of Citaristi, the Italian born dancer.

Conclusion

Two of artists I highlight in this chapter have attempted to negotiate the charges of inauthenticity and violation of tradition. Ramli Ibrahim is a Malaysian Muslim artist practicing Odissi dance, and Maqbool Fida Husain is a prominent Indian Muslim artist. However, their rhetorical strategies for addressing a similar charge have been different. Husain has argued that he is well **within** the Indian tradition, and therefore has the right to depict Hindu iconography. Ramli Ibrahim on the other hand uses aesthetics as a way of justification. However, Ramli's (Indian) defenders in Bhubaneswar employed a response similar to Husain's citing that the costume use was in fact **within** the traditions of Odissi dance. Ramli Ibrahim also claimed an alliance with Guru Durga Charan Ranbir as a way of authenticating his aesthetic and choreographic choices. But he also acknowledges his "foreignness" and said:

> In another layering, there are so-called traditionalists who have their own views often coloured by their insecurities and possessiveness of the art form, which they feel is about to be hijacked from them. In their views,

> Odissi is theirs and theirs alone. Foreigners like me can't hope to understand or feel a fraction of what they can of Odissi or its music (Narthaki 2005).

Ramli acknowledges that he is a foreigner, and will always remain an outsider to the dance form and to Orissa. Unlike Husain, Ramli is not stating that he needs to be acknowledged as part of the tradition, but rather that Odissi is derived from a particular tradition that has blossomed in other parts of the world. Ibrahim attempts to reassure his critics that ultimately, "Odissi is theirs and theirs alone." Though there are varied sites of contestation around the arts, as we see the strategies employed to address them depend on the artists' positionality and ability (or inability) to claim a certain kind of belonging, or a certain kind of "Indianness". This controversy did not happen in isolation from this landscape of events in the arts in the last two decades, but it is important to emphasize that it has its own regional and discursive particularities. And although I have used Husain as a way to compare this incident, there remain fundamental differences between the two artists and incidents.

But why this attention to costumes **now**? After all one of his dancers had performed without the *odhni* several times before in Bhubaneswar and had not been criticized. An article in Narthaki says:

> (T)here were such distinguished luminaries as Dr. Sitakant Mahapatra who said after the performance that, "Traditional Odissi has been given another dimension by Sutra. In Spellbound, tradition also becomes "modernity" but does not stay out of tradition. Tradition is not a cage but provides a backdrop…" I think it is refreshing to have diversity in how Odissi is interpreted as long as the real values are not transgressed. And we have certainly not done that at all! In fact, Sutra has done much to promote Odissi at its highest level. After all, according to January Low, Sutra's star Odissi dancer who had performed in Bhubaneswar many times… "I had always performed without the *odhni* in Bhubaneswar. There had been no major outcry. Why the fuss now?" (Narthaki 2005).

I think the answer to this question lies in the fact that this costume controversy is part of a larger landscape of hotly debated and contested events in the arts in India, and needs to be framed within this particular historical moment. Odissi is a highly globalized dance form, and has become increasingly visible in the last two decades. E-mails, rejoinders, petitions being circulated across the globe indicates the transnational space the dance occupies, as well as how invested practitioners and critics are attempting to maintain these traditions.

In the last decade, Odissi has also become visually and discursively identified with the culture of Orissa and India, and these sites of contestation are especially powerful because they translate into revenue, collaborations, patronage, festivals, and media attention for dancers, institutions related to dance, the State government and ancillary professions such as, musicians and performance spaces. As Odissi continues to be performed on global stage, with new dance and culture festivals that drive tourism, and a widespread exchange between national and international dancers, how Odissi is performed and policed becomes extremely valuable within the national and the regional dance community. As the first line of the petition points out, "Odissi dance is the Oriya culture," this statement clearly marks a shift from a national form to a regional one. This tussle between a regional and national identity attests to my larger thesis that although there is a global community of Odissi dancers, it is one marked by broad variance and heterogeneity.

Chapter 5: The Marketplace of Dance

> ***I feel incredibly privileged to not have to do any other job and I think it's great to have this spirit of time and money needed to pay for one's own life. We can do our work and be paid for it. It is brilliant. That's an incredible privilege in life. The fact that I'm not dancing in 500 festivals or every second day is of no consequence. Because being able to do what one wants to do, exactly the way one wants to do completely on one's own terms, I feel incredibly blessed about that.***
>
> Rekha Tandon, Odissi dancer

> ***We get bio-datas from hoards and hoards of artists, and that's one area which causes great concern. For somebody like me sitting at a venue -because of the burgeoning number. And you always wonder, my god where are they going to go from here? I mean, what is the future for them?***
>
> Srilata Prabhakar, Presenter

In March 2008, a posting went up on the Odissi listserv that caters to a global Odissi on-line community. The Odissi listserv is a source for festival announcements as well as discussion threads on various topics as they relate to Odissi dance. This particular posting was to solicit applications for the first dance festival by the IAAC, or Indo American Arts Council, a New York City based, not-for-profit that organizes cultural events such as dance, film, music, and theater events by supporting artists from India, and of Indian origin. Their goal with this dance festival was outlined on their website as follows:

> The mission of the Dance Festival is to present Indian dance through its multiplicity of forms and expressions. The festival will explore the complexities of aesthetics, sensibilities, issues and perspectives while celebrating rich tradition in Indian dance and nurturing exciting new dimensions developing in the Indian, American and global contexts. The festival is a first of its kind in New York that seeks to bring together dancers sharing movement,

> heritage and inspiration from the Indian subcontinent. It will feature artists from India and the South Asian Diaspora and the presentations will range from traditional classical repertoire to contemporary, modern and post-modern works that are inspired by India or Indian dance vocabulary (IAAC website 2008).

The posting asked dancers to apply to the festival titled "Erasing Borders 2008: IAAC Festival of Indian Dance" scheduled for August 2008 in New York City. It engendered a lively debate on the listserv around remuneration for dancers as the posting stated that the organizers would not be able to pay for travel or stay besides a small honorarium to selected dancers. Some dancers responded angrily stating that dancers were being taken advantage of by organizers of such festivals. A few of the comments addressed to IAAC were as follows:

> I think it is absolutely unfair and demeaning to the art fraternity that as organizers & host, you cannot even provide for accommodation & transportation. After all the effort & hard work that goes into their creative expression, if artistes do not even deserve a decent honorarium then I am curious to know which artiste is willing to perform.
>
> (Prakriti Bhaskar email on March 7, 2008)

Another dancer commented:

> I say to many of u who agree to cow down and say yes to events that do not pay u that it's better to pitch up a tent from town to town, village to village travel with ur troupe with a stage that u can dismantle. And pass the hat around after each show. There is true dignity because u will be not only taking ur art to where it will be creating wonder and lasting value but u will at least be paid for ur effort. And god willing make a living no matter how small. So please let's not hear about how the artist is being maintained by nonprofit organizations. Why nonprofit? Create profit! Create a life for each of us so that we can live and eat as well and be paid for the dreams that we create for the people to wonder with. Don't we deserve even so little?
>
> (Monica Singh email on March 12, 2008)

Clearly, the IAAC posting touched a raw nerve with many dancers, and brought to light an issue that is agreed to be contentious, but rarely debated in a public forum. After a few of these emails posted on the listserv the executive director of IAAC, Aroon Shivdasani responded:

> Fact: We do not have money to provide accommodation and airfare.
>
> Fact: We ourselves survive on passion – it is a predilection of the arts….unfortunate but true.
>
> Request: Please list all the festivals at which you have performed that have provided airfare & accommodation **in addition** to what we are providing: packed audiences, theatres, rehearsal space, tech, workshops, lecture-demonstrations, local transport, meals in NY, honorariums, media attention, opening night reception.
>
> Request: if you have the means to provide airfare and transportation to these dancers, please provide it and we will give you all the credit you deserve.

Access to the internet for many dancers has created a global community as well as allowed for a greater visibility of the issues and concerns of dancers. However, even though dancers with access to the internet are able to participate in these discussions, post festival and performance notices, and other articles, not all dancers are able to partake equally in this global community (as evidenced by the exchange above). Only a few dancers were able to perform at the festival because they are based in North America. Despite this acrimonious email debate, IAAC went on to have a very well-attended and highly publicized festival in NYC at the Alvin Ailey Theaters in Manhattan and at Chase Manhattan Plaza as part of the Downtown Dance Festival in partnership with Battery Dance Company, a small non-profit, downtown dance organization.

Dancer, Rekha Tandon believes that this lack of payment for dancers by festivals is an extension of the class dynamic history[118] embedded within Odissi dance that has been institutionalized by these dancers:

> Odissi practitioners come from reasonably affluent families, particularly the profile of the cosmopolitan, middle class, upper middle class, who are not required to earn a living by dancing. And we had that profile for ever since the inception of Odissi. The whole system of paying to perform which is so prevalent everywhere has institutionalized itself and I think no one is responsible as much as Odissi dancers themselves. So it's a situation peculiar to upper class Indian women.

It needs to be noted that the majority of critiques against IAAC were posted by dancers who lived in India, and that most of the dancers who performed in the festival lived in North America. While this thread petered out eventually the discussion is indicative of an unevenness of resources that exists (real or perceived) by these dancers.

A Dancer's Guide to Survival

Dancers face a lack of compensation for their work, and organizers argue that they spend time and money creating a platform for dancers, and paying for organizational costs. This was an issue that also emerged during my fieldwork in India. Many of the dancers I interviewed felt that the organizers paid monies to organize festivals but did not compensate the dancers. Ileana Citaristi, who played a significant role in the "costume controversy" in the previous chapter, reasons that dancers sometimes perform for a low fee because they fear they may lose the chance to perform altogether. Citaristi suggests that it is important for dancers to have a discussion around prices openly, to enable transparency of the process, and also as a way to standardize prices:

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[118] I discuss this in detail in Chapter 2.

> Up to now all of us have been dealing with this all individually. We don't know what other people are charging; we don't know what our bargaining power is. We just know that if you ask too much, you might lose the program. Somebody else is ready to get it. I start thinking it should be high time to really sit down and talk and see how everybody is dealing with it. How much you are getting from organizer, how much you are giving to musicians, how much you are giving to dancers? I think it's becoming quite complex.

It is a well-known fact that dance is not a lucrative profession. How do organizers continue to put on festivals with a global lack of funding for the arts? How do dancers navigate issues of funding, and when do they choose to perform for a small or no stipend? Furthermore, do dancers based in India navigate these issues differently from their non-Indian colleagues? Finally, do dancers and organizers perpetuate the "authenticity" and exotic appeal of Odissi as a way to survive in the dance marketplace, and if so, how?

The experiences of these dancers diverge based on their individual positionality, and this coincides with the overall argument of this thesis, that although these dancers are part of a global community, they do not experience the global (or the local) in the same way. In this chapter, I show how Odissi dancers depending on their varied location, experience, and background traverse the terrains of funding and performance opportunities. I do so by examining how dancers try to make a living through dance, as well as subsidize their careers with alternative sources of income. I argue that a lack of funding has forced dancers and organizations alike to come up with creative ways to survive, and with these financial restraints, Odissi as a dance form is emerging as a global commodity. Second, with Odissi becoming increasingly globalized in its practice, I argue that the discourses of nationalism and globalism collude to reproduce notions of

"Indianness" through this dance. Finally, I explore the link between private and public funding as an insight into discourses of diversity that reaffirm and/or contest this "Indianness."

Is it possible to survive as an Odissi dancer without any form of subsidy, grants or private funds? The answer is, no. Dancing remains an expensive business. Each of the dancers, whether they live in Bhubaneswar or Newark, support themselves through dance-related jobs, such as teaching or non-dance related work. Some open schools and teach local students while others rely on parents or spouses to supplement their dance earnings. This is not unique to Odissi dance, as most dancers struggle to make a living (Samanth 2006). But what I detail in this chapter is the unique ways in which Odissi dancers make a living. As I have pointed out in Chapter 2, Odissi dance as a recognized "classical" form began (in addition to other factors) through the patronage of middle-class and upper middle-class female dancers. It is rare and recent that male dancers are able to perform **and** maintain a livelihood as a guru. I do not include the revivalists and members of *Jayantika* such as Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra, Deba Prasad Das and Pankaj Charan Das in this observation; they certainly struggled during their initial years but eventually became sought-after gurus. They were unique and placed at a particular historical moment when they codified Odissi in its nascent stages. Today there are far more female than male performers.

The journey for any dancer is not easy and they have to be creative in finding sources of income. The expense to perform is high. First, there is the training that can last a lifetime. Most dancers start at a young age and begin in a local school or take private lessons. After several years, if they continue to exhibit talent and interest, and do not give

up due to the pressures of education and/or college, marriage, or family commitments, they continue to perform with their guru as part of the latter's troupe. Many senior students conduct class for their gurus and teach younger students as they become "junior faculty". Students that come from poorer families will pay the institution a nominal fee for sometimes as little as 60-100 rupees a month (approximately 1 to 2 dollars) in Bhubaneswar and more in Delhi. For older students, fees to the guru vary, and not all dancers pay equally. There is often an informal understanding between dancer and guru. Senior students who have made their debut as a soloist pay by item, by ability or by performance. Once they do so, the costs increase dramatically. Reela Hota, a young dancer based in Delhi says that it takes a minimum of ten years of a performance career before one can even think about making money as a single performer:

> If you want to run a home and be independent, then just forget about it for ten years. You should come from that kind of background, you should have saved some money or you should have some other profession. Once you've gone through the grind and made a name. The big festivals, they are paying very well, international tours once they start, then you start raking in the moola and then it's good. You have to go into it knowing fully well that the audience is limited. Another good thing about classical dance is you can dance forever. You are 60, you are 70, you can't move, the life shelf of a dancer, of a musician is forever and the older you are, the more respected you are. You may not able to dance with that kind of excellence, but if you just do *abhinaya* and because you are that name, and you have that respect people will still take you.

Even for dancers like Reela, dancing remains an expensive proposition and it is years before they see financial return. For each performance, dancers pay the musicians, generally four or five in total. A typical suite of Odissi musicians are as follows; the vocalist (who also plays the harmonium), a violinist, the *pakhawaj or* two sided drum, the flutist and a sitar player. They are usually accompanied by the guru, who also plays the

manjira and provides the *ukkuta* or *bol,* rhythmic vocals. Most of these musicians tend to be male, though occasionally the *manjira* or the *sitar* is played by a female musician. In addition, the dancer must pay for the venue, publicity, costumes and jewelry. The elaborate Odissi jewelry made from pure silver can easily cost up to Rs. 10,000 ($500). Many dancers who cannot afford this use the cheaper white metal versions of the same. Similarly costumes can be pure silk, hand-woven saris that can cost several thousand rupees. Dancers who are unable to afford these wear imitation silk costumes with stitched on sari borders. Kumkum Mohanty, a dancer based in Bhubaneswar highlights the difficulties and expenses of performing:

> The musicians charge so much nowadays. I call them a son-in-law in the family of dancers. For everything they have to be paid. Everything. That is where the dancer is killed. Totally killed. What money she gets? Rs. 10,000 or 12,000? Out of that, Rs. 8,000 or 9,000 are used for musicians. How does she thrive? What about costumes? They are so expensive. The jewelries are so expensive. Unless you come from a very rich family, it's very difficult. I was talking to the musicians, "You fix a rate for the musicians from the cultural department". But nobody will take this daring decision. I don't advise anybody to make it a profession. Do something else. Keep it as a love. Then only you can thrive.

Performing for a single night in New Delhi can easily cost up to Rs. 50,000 or about $1000. And these are mostly unticketed performances. Dancers in India cannot rely on box-office proceeds to help allay performance costs whereas dancers in the United States are able to charge for their performances[119]. For example, on any given night in New Delhi, one is able to see a number of Indian classical dance performances for free. The performances are held mostly at venues that are membership only, or by invitation. Dancers and organizers are more concerned with having a full house, and

[119] Exceptions to this are when dancers or dance companies are being presented by a presenting organization. In these instances dancers are paid a stipend.

charging tickets would make it much harder to get an audience. The reason organizers put on these shows are many. One, even if they don't make a lot of money, being a cultural impresario has its own perquisites, such as alliances with other dancers, organizers and funders. Second, for dancers it is a means to creating a venue for themselves; as a dancer-organizer, one can perform alongside famous artists that are a draw for audiences. For dancers that do not have access to these kinds of funds, performing as a soloist is especially difficult. The guru then becomes especially important, not just in terms of one's training but also as a way to perform in his or her troupe. In order to advance their careers, dancers try to affiliate with a well-known guru or institution so that they are able to perform at the visible venues necessary to garner attention. When in conversation with other dancers, who one's guru is comes up frequently as a way to demonstrate lineage, technical expertise, and marketing potential. Even dancers performing contemporary Odissi use the name of their gurus as way to signal their level of training[120].

Shagun Bhutani, a dancer based in New Delhi points out that a mediocre dancer from a wealthy family will go further than someone more talented, but with limited access to funds:

> Odissi, is a dance form which can be very easily corrupted, because it's easy to think that it's very easy but it's really tough, the strength of your lower body and then the grace in the upper body. And people are in a hurry to be performers, which is okay because in this day and age everybody wants to start earning. If you are from a good family and you've been learning, you start performing, you have the money to put yourself on stage or get a program. So in that sense it is easier, you can get a few write ups.

The ability to self-promote is tied to available funds. Dancers who are able to spend a lot of money on self-promotion are therefore more likely to succeed than ones

[120] I discuss this in detail in Chapter 3.

who cannot. Coupled with the expense of dance, is the long gestation period to see financial return.

Ananya Chatterjea, artistic director of Ananya Dance Theatre in Minneapolis, also struggles for funds, but has access to other resources due to her faculty position at a university in the United States:

> I do what I do call the wiggle. Because I'm a professor, I have rehearsal space. I have lots of resources I can really use. There is an undergraduate research opportunity program. One of my dancers had an idea to bring together education, and dance, and gets to work with me as a consultant. But really, I can never pay myself for the work I do for the company. I really can't pay my dancers shit. This is year-round. When it gets close to the show, we are rehearsing 4 hours a day, 5 or 6 days a week. That's incredibly intense. People borrow time from their family. It's a lot. That's what it needs. So it's really hard.

Madhavi Mudgal, a well-established, Delhi-based dancer acknowledges the difficulty of dance as a profession, but argues that one has to be willing to make the necessary sacrifices:

> It has to do with many things, luck, right guru, funding. Now what happens is that the 21 year old girl wants the same amount of money that her friend is getting by working from 9 to 5. That is not possible. You cannot. You are educated. You can work. When you work in a call centre, you can get more money than when you dance. But if you are a dancer or a painter, you cannot be looking for that. I'm sorry. They don't love their art enough. If you are really good, the money will come. If you are bad, then too bad. Then you should not be a dancer. But dance itself is a difficult profession. I mean opportunities, at least in India, it's not easy. No form of dance anywhere in the world.

Another Delhi based dancer, Jyoti Srivastava talks about how dancers take to teaching as a way to build their practice and find an additional source on income. This is perhaps one way to explain the increase in the number of Odissi dance schools and female gurus:

> But if you take it as a teaching career, then it is easier. If you teach whatever you have learnt, then you find your own way. Maybe one or two years, it will be failure. You are not getting anything but after sometime, if you are working in a proper manner, definitely you will have good students and they are paying you something. You earn from teaching and you spend that money for the presentations. Less tension because taking money from your husband or from your father is not healthy and it's not even possible. You have to find ways to make the ends meet. I am not very optimistic. But I don't want to sound pessimistic. Then I won't be able to do anything. But I always pray, "God, give me enough money to do my work. Good work". Because after I die, I'm not going to carry anything with me. That's my philosophy. But it's really depressing to see the funding now. So we depend on people, like sponsors outside like USA and UK and other places.

Although teaching provides another source of income for dancers, it can also hinder one's ability to perform. Shagun Bhutani talks about the class difference for dancers and especially how poorer dancers need to supplement their income by teaching in schools, citing this as a cause that their performing careers suffer:

> I have been lucky because I have a home to stay and I have food to eat. But there are a lot of dancers who come from very poor backgrounds and it's so commendable that they are practicing what they are doing. But because they don't get a chance to perform, their spirit wears off and they end up taking jobs in schools because you have to sustain yourself. It's real murder for some. I think a lot of dancers sacrifice because of this lack of finances.

Shagun also talks about how dancers, especially those from Bhubaneswar, have a hard time establishing themselves in the capital and as a result get stuck in a rut teaching but are not able to establish themselves as performers:

> It's very difficult for people like that to establish themselves as performers, and then they also get into the rut of teaching and neglect your own practice. But I think if you are from a regular middle class family, who has an income and you've been learning for five, six years, then your parents can support a few performances, then you become an Odissi dancer. But if you go and watch performances you will see that about 90%, there is no substance.

Rajshree Behera talked about a dancer whom we knew in common, Rani. In her mid-twenties, and based outside Bhubaneswar, some criticized her for going to perform in folk dances. Defending her, Rajshree said:

> She has to earn her living. Don't criticize. If she cannot earn from Odissi only, let her do folk. What's wrong about that? She's got into an institution and they have to do Odissi and do folk dances. That's her job. Why not?" If there is scope to do other things and earn for dance, then why not? If you do a job and if you earn money, it's very good. You can then spend on dance. Because dance needs money.

Some dancers teach, not because it provides them with a source of income but is a resource for dancers. Ileana Citaristi, teaches because having students allows her to work on group choreographies. She receives a salary grant from the Central Government and started her dance school in Bhubaneswar, not to supplement her income but to have a group of dancers that she can use as "bodies" to work on group choreography. This has come with its own challenges, because young students from middle-class families expect their unmarried daughters to bring in an income:

> But the families demand that she earns some money. There was a girl who wanted to refuse employment in a bank and her father was forcing her. She came to me and said, "No, I refused it. I want to maintain myself as a dancer". I can't cheat her. I said, "Listen, that is Rs. 5000 per month and I don't know when you will start to earn 5000 per month [in dance]."

In my own experience as co-founder and co-director of an Odissi dance company in New York City for over five years, funding has been hard to navigate. How one positions oneself, whether as a "traditional," "contemporary," or "folk" dance company alters the funding and performance opportunities drastically[121]. Our dance company was

[121] I discuss this in detail in Chapter 3.

structured as a collective, and while we were lucky enough to get favorable reviews and some grants, we had to supplement this with personal funds and private donations. We were not able to hire fulltime or even part-time staff, and most of the administrative and day-to-day tasks were performed by members of the collective. Monies that we did receive were spent on performance costs such as rehearsal space, publicity, postcards, venues, technical crew, like sound and light, and on rare occasions, live musicians. Friends were recruited to act as stage managers, ushers, and as technical crew. Favors were asked from other friends who were photographers and graphic designers. Subsidized rental programs at venues like Joyce Soho, and small grants from the Asian American Arts Alliance, and the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council allowed us to perform frequently. Despite this, institutional funding for emerging dance companies in the US, especially New York City remains extremely competitive. Not least because due to the cutbacks and restructuring measures in arts funding in the late 1990s, small contemporary dance companies have to compete with large institutions, e.g. New York City Ballet etc. The recent fiscal crisis which began in 2008 has forced another wave of cutbacks for arts funding in successive years.

Sources of Institutional Funds

Citaristi has been receiving a salary grant for the last seven years from the Central Government which pays for her musicians and a stipend for herself as guru/choreographer. According to her, most dancers who have opened their own schools/institutions in Bhubaneswar receive very little in way of tuition monies compared to what students in New Delhi or Mumbai pay. There is also a prevailing sentiment

among dancers in Bhubaneswar that dancers based in cities like Delhi are more visible to government officials and institutions, consequently recognition and accolades are easier to come by[122]. The Government of India has a national scholarship program, a junior scholarship, and a senior scholarship, administered by the Department of Culture and Tourism that lasts for up to two years. The junior scholarship is awarded to dancers between the ages of 10-14 in the amount of Rs. 2000 ($40) per month. This is split equally between the dancer and guru. The senior scholarship is also split equally between dancer and guru, and is awarded to dancers between the ages of 18-25 in the amount of Rs. 5000 ($100) a month. There are also fellowships available for dancers over the age of 25; junior fellowships are awarded in the amount of Rs. 6000 ($120) per month, and the senior fellowships for dancers over 40 are given Rs. 12000 ($240) per month[123]. These scholarships and fellowships are not simply monetary amounts but also provide institutional validation for dancers allowing them to advance their careers:

Shagun Bhutani, a recipient of a government fellowship from the Ministry of Culture says:

> The Ministry of Culture actually has a lot of schemes [programs]. If you are running a school to pay your musician or teachers, they give you production grant. A production grant is a *lakh* [Rs. 100, 000 or $2250] which is not bad. It's good money for an artist. Then they give you a building grant if you're building a school but you have to be a registered organization and give them your audited accounts. But the way they select, you don't know. You just put in your application and you don't know what will happen. If you don't know anybody, you'll never hear of it again so it's inaccessible to a lot of deserving artists.

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[122] I discuss this further in the following chapter.

[123] "While Delhi has one of the highest per capita incomes of Rs 66,728 (US$1,440) per annum, the national average for India in 2006-07 was Rs 29,642 (and about Rs40,000 or US$950 for 2007 according to World Bank estimates)" Trendsniff 2008.

The *Sangeet Natak Akademi*, a national institute located in Delhi, and dedicated to the performing arts (music, dance and drama) was inaugurated in 1953. Shortly after Indian Independence in 1947, institutions such as these, dedicated to the arts came in to being[124]. It was conceived as the apex body for the work of preservation and promotion of performing arts traditions of India. It is considered the final authority on matters of classification and providing financial assistance to national institutions for activities related to the performing arts. The Academy also supports artists by organizing specialized festivals and conducting interstate exchange programs. For example, the *Prathiva* series encourages young talent (below age 30). The whole process is conducted via nomination by state academies, dance committee experts and dance gurus. The *Sangeet Natak Akademi* also conducts the *Sangeet Natak Akademi* awards by nomination from culture departments of state governments, state academy chairpersons, and vice-chancellors of universities that cater to the performing arts. They receive approximately 400 nominations and 33 nominees are awarded.

They also work closely with the ICCR, (the Indian Council for Cultural Relations) towards culture exchange. Each state in India has its own academy that is funded by the respective state governments. These are some of the institutional opportunities available to dancers, and are extremely competitive. Institutional recognition and support at the state and national level can be difficult, and out of reach for many. Again affiliating with the "right" guru or institution becomes increasingly important for a young dancer.

According to dance critic and writer Shanta Serbjeet Singh, "Dance remains a pursuit of an obsessive personality. It remains the bastion of a kind of madness which is

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[124] Similarly, the *Lalit Kala Akademi* supports the visual arts in India.

not easy to sustain". In Singh's opinion, many dancers that came of age in the first wave of Odissi (1960s and 1970s) were provided with subsidized funding, and land on which to build their schools and institutions. These subsidies have helped individual dancers of that particular generation solidify their careers. But although it has provided training to successive generations of dancers, it does not give them the support needed to create their institutions:

> At one level India has done fantastically, generously for individual dancers. At another level it has failed when it comes to creating public institutions for the arts. There are at least 200 institutions which have taken up prime property and the government has funded them with land and with buildings and grants. You name it, they have got it, but it doesn't go down to the young.

For Singh many dancers that were influential in building the dance from the 1960s onwards were rewarded with government grants and buildings. However, for dancers now access to these kinds of generous funds is much more limited. Government funds are available but with the increase in the sheer number of dancers, and a shift in the global economy it is not possible for all of them to receive building grants.

Besides government funding for dancers, prominent institutions like *Nrityagram* have begun to offer scholarships for young dancers. They provide a stipend of Rs. 3500 for trainees and Rs. 5000 (approximately $100) for performing artists. Both groups receive free board and lodging, and trainees get a year of free training. This scholarship is intended for dancers with a minimum of ten years of Odissi training. Those chosen as performing artists also get to tour as part of the *Nrityagram* Dance Ensemble. A similar scholarship is provided by the *Mahagami Gurukul* in Aurangabad. Young dancers receive Rs. 2000 with free board and tuition, and after four years of training are absorbed into the repertory. Aruna Mohanty, a well-established dancer who teaches at the Orissa Dance

Academy in Bhubaneswar, helps dancers from villages in Orissa. She talks about setting up a scholarship for them:

> We are giving them free training. So I'm trying to organize 500 to 2000 rupees per month for their lodging and boarding, for the expenses. I'm kind of begging people. This is a financial support for the sake of culture, if you love dance, music and things like that. Without your support, they are going to fade into oblivion. I have collected students from rural area, remote villages; they are very, very talented. But without economic assistance, they won't be able to come and learn here. So I'm giving them scholarship. So it's nothing for you people to give 100 dollars. So when they become successful, they owe it to you people.

Although these are valuable opportunities for young dancers, dance companies and institutions also benefit by being able to train and groom their next generation of dancers.

Performance Opportunities for Dancers

Arshiya Sethi, a presenter who has programmed for *Doordarshan*, the state-run Indian television, and other prestigious venues and conferences in New Delhi says that dancers often lose money to perform, but use the opportunity to obtain performance stills for brochures, and/or publicity, and press reviews. While government monies and scholarships provide institutional validation, corporations provide additional funds, such that corporate houses and sponsorship have become a popular source of income. Underwriting of cultural events by corporations has been done in the US and UK for several years. And what was once a sole mission of the nationalizing project, funding for dance and opportunities for dancers now require a careful working between corporate sponsors and government institutions. Many festivals and dance series are paid for by both. The Habitat Center, a major performance venue in New Delhi holds the HCL series

which is named after HCL, a global technology company. One of the presenters of the Habitat Center, Srilata Prabhakar, talks about the venues and the large number of applicants for this series:

> We gave them the venue free of charge. We have two venues - one which can seat about 422 and a smaller auditorium which can seat about 140 to 150 people but it's a very intimate kind of space and a lot of dancers, the younger ones, you know it's ideal for them because there is an instant rapport with the audience. And sometimes they're too new, too fresh, to really command that kind of an audience in the main auditorium. But in the basement even if you have just 100 people it looks full, and it's also ideal for your *abhinaya*, for your facial expressions, so we've had artists like Priyadarshani Govind and Sonal Mansingh. Madhavi Mudgal performed pure *abhinaya*, which is really delightful because you can see every nuance of their facial expressions.

Despite these prestigious venues for dancers, Prabharkaran feels that the Habitat Center is barely able to keep up with the number of applications they receive from dancers, and blames this on the glut of schools that have emerged in the last decade:

> There are schools mushrooming everywhere. There is somebody who's learnt for a few years and becomes a Guru and she is taking disciples. Where do all the disciples go? They have to perform, they need platforms to perform, and many of the good dancers have also reached a stage where they don't want to share space with their Gurus, they want to have individual stage appearances, because they feel they have reached a stage where they want to be noticed individually. So if you have ten very good dancers who have been dancing with you, now you have to offer space to ten more and of course a lot of them fall by the wayside.

For example, to perform in Delhi, and besides the dance festivals and corporate and government and NGO conferences, some of the major venues are the Indian International Center, The Habitat Centre, Kamani Auditorium and Triveni Kala Sangam. The latter two are available to rent, and the first two are by invitation or application only. Kamani Auditorium costs Rs. 35,000 ($700) to perform for a single night, and rehearsals

and breakdown can cost up to another Rs. 30,000 ($600). That is why being invited to perform at a series or venue helps immeasurably with the cost. Prabhakran talks about the audience at the Habitat Centre and how even they must compete with other events:

> Because we are part of the Habitat Centre we have a calendar and it's a member-based place. We have to be very, very careful about the quality of the program. We have, over the years put together a list of music lovers and we send them invitations for these kinds of programs. So it's a mix of people, people who are traveling, in transit, a lot of foreigners come, because they read the *Delhi Diary*. A lot of foreigners are interested in the Indian classical arts. Of course if it's an artist who's from Delhi, they bring in their own crowd. Audience is a problem everywhere now I'm told, whether it's Madras even during their Academy month, audiences are dwindling because there are so many different things happening in the city.

As Prabhakar cites, audiences are an issue for presenters like her. Is this because classical dance forms are competing with other forms of entertainment? Has 24-hour cable television, Bollywood, and music festivals forced organizers to make their venues more grand and large scale? Or have *rasik* audiences, the connoisseurs of the classical art forms begun to age and dwindle? Ratnikant Mohapatra laments this breakdown of traditional audiences and the change that has come about in recent years. In his own experience as a father, and running *Srjan*, a dance institution in Bhubaneswar he says:

> I don't know whether my daughter will be an Odissi dancer or she will be a modern dancer, or she will be a computer engineer. You cannot force. Children come for admission [to *Srjan*], and their parents ask "Accha, when will she be ready for boogie-boogie show?" They don't even understand what kind of institute this is, and what we are doing. They don't understand. It's very pathetic.

Figure 28: Bollywood actress Shilpa Shetty learning Odissi from Ratnikant Mohapatra for Indo-China co-production, *The Desire*

Perhaps this anxiety around the commercialization of dance, and the dwindling funds would explain why there is a move towards grand scale, outdoor performances with forts and temples as backdrop so that organizers are able to draw on wider audiences. Organizers and presenters of classical Indian dance are being forced to compete with a Bollywoodization of culture, and have done so by increasing the number of dance festivals in India, favoring group shows over solo ones.

Festivals in India

In the last decade, there has been an increase in the number of dance festivals[125] in India. While there has been a corresponding increase in the number of available opportunities for dancers to perform, it has not necessarily made it more profitable because the number of dancers has also increased. The increase in the number of festivals and dancers is accompanied with a concern around proper training of Odissi perfromers, and that the increase in the number of dancers does not necessarily correspond to better dancers. Additionally there is a concern that in becoming a global form, the regional roots of Odissi will/are being lost or unacknowledged. And what used to be mostly a solo form, especially for established dancers is now being performed in groups.

Figure 29: Poster promoting Khajuraho Festival of Dances in 2010. Photo credit Eiko Shinohara

[125] A worldwide increase or "festivalization" in the arts has been documented in, "Cultural Tourism: Global and Local Perspectives" (2007) Greg Richards, ed. Binghamton, New York: Hayworth Press.

There are several reasons for this. One, the festivals have become choreographed spectacles in tourist areas such as Khajuraho, famed for its erotic sculpture and Konarak, well-known for its sun temple. The *Khajuraho Festival of Dances* and *Konarak Dance Festival* with their exquisite temples and sculptures provide a magnificent set for the dancers. The group dance, sometimes with dancers on parapets, and against a setting sun lends itself well to such a grand backdrop. Such festivals are mostly organized by the Tourism and Culture departments of the state that they are held in. The Orissa government and other state governments sponsor dance festivals to these heritage sites, and explain the increase in the number festivals as a way to encourage tourism. All kinds of visitors witness a range of Indian dance and music, and see them in outdoor settings against illuminated sculptures and temples. It is no accident that aesthetics aside, these festivals are also designed to exploit the sculptural authenticity of the architecture by framing the dancers within them. The dancers animate the stone facades with their movement, and they, in turn, provide an added layer of authenticity to these highly choreographed performances. Established festivals such as *Khajuraho Festival of Dances* and *Konarak Dance Festival* invite well-known artists to perform and pay up to Rs.40,000 ($800) plus expenses for soloists and Rs. 70,000 ($1400) plus expenses for group shows. The ticket prices are designed to cater to all: the highest cost for a season ticket to the show is Rs. 600 (approximately $10), and with others at lower prices. There is also free seating available. The use of a video camera is allowed, for a permit cost of Rs. 500/day.

Consequently many gurus and dance companies are moving away from solo shows and towards group choreography because they complain that organizers ask for

group choreography because of the "spectacle" of the dance form. Further group shows become a way to accommodate the increase in the number of dancers. Madhavi Mudgal, an established dancer in Delhi is often asked to accommodate group shows:

> It's changing in the sense that people now have larger spaces and say; "*Arey, jaga bahut barhiya group mein karne ke liye*" (This space is beautiful for a group performance). And also when I teach I find many people can dance well in a group. To be a soloist is a completely different cup of tea. You have to be really, really exceptional. That's why solo dancing is something very, very difficult. You cannot just learn items to become a soloist. You can't be. It's much more that, you have to understand everything. I mean you have to feel and it's a long process. After learning 7, 8, 10 years, they think now they know. That's when they **start** to know. You have to be really rooted to be a good soloist. All my girls in my group, they can dance solo for one and a half hour but how many of them really have the strength to keep the attention of the audience?

Leela Venkatraman, dance critic, also talks about the new group preference by presenters and organizers:

> Group has become very popular because the performances spaces are becoming so large that for a single dancer you get lost and then you are yards away from the stage.

Group performances or these spectacles that are held outside can also accommodate large audiences. However, Reela Hota, a Delhi-based dancer, performed for a large dance festival in southern India, and did not enjoy the experience of performing before such an audience:

> When I came to the stage they all rushed back and started whistling, showing their appreciation but that is not what I am looking for. I am not looking for forty thousand people. I don't want to be a Daler Mahendi. I don't want to be a popular musician with one lakh people hooting and whistling, and clapping and enjoying themselves. I want five hundred people who are intellectuals who understand *taal*, who understand *raag*, who understand what I am doing, whom I can take to a different level.

Dancers like Hota fear that the dance form is becoming popularized by indulging in these choreographed spectacles that do not favor the soloist. She would prefer the small venues with a *rasik* audience.

Shagun Bhutani, a Delhi-based dancer, also talks about the loss of the solo form to the group spectacle:

> I think when you start dancing in a group you stop nourishing yourself as a soloist because you have the support of many dancers, so the strength and the energy which you need to do a solo is totally different. If you are dancing with ten other people you have the support of all these other dancers. If you are performing for an organizer they will always say *ki ek ek group karein* [each perform in a group]. Nobody wants a solo; because people don't have the time to enjoy a solo, but if you see these old recordings of Sanjuktaji you see so much energy there, which is no longer there. I think what needs to done is that people should do solos but maybe make them shorter, like do five, seven minutes, don't make them fifteen minutes, twenty minutes because people don't understand unless you're doing it for the really *rasik* audience which is very difficult to get. But in places like Delhi people don't understand, nobody understands stories from mythology and everything that we're showing through dance, the traditional repertoire, nobody really understands. People don't understand unless you explain each *abhinaya,* explain the meaning, but you can't do that, something has to be left to the imagination and suggestion, so for me that's the worst part that the solo has suffered.

Aside from these choreographed spectacles, group choreographies can sometimes be unimaginative multiplications of the same dance by five dancers in unison. The innovation occurs in how a single item can be reworked for several dancers on stage, and many have found imaginative ways to rework these choreographic gems. Rajika Puri, a Bharatnatyam and Odissi practitioner, in *Resculpting Odissi* worked on a dance item, *Sthayee Nritya,* and reworked it for several dancers. At Trinayan Collective, we did something similar, but adding a visual and choreographic layer of a projection of the

dance being performed at various New York City landmarks. Guru Durga Charan Ranbir, in his dramatic *Sapta Matruka*, tells the story of seven mothers, each with dramatic entries and reentries of dancers, and with several dancers morphing into a single body.

Nrityagram, (profiled in Chapter 3) has successfully managed to showcase soloists and ensemble work. They have adopted the western model of dance institutions that are platforms for principal dancers and dancers in training. For young dancers this becomes an opportunity to tour and gain prominence with a celebrated organization, rather than become one of several soloists trying to gain prominence in a field that is severely competitive. Companies like *Nrityagram* and *Sutra* have established a strong artistic vision, and developed equally strong ensemble work. They have performed in India and abroad successfully, and are two examples of a western approach to marketing, and a sophisticated public relations effort and presence. Additionally, their technique is solid and they have a mastery over their stagecraft. The managing director of *Nrityagram*, Lynne Fernandez is also a highly-acclaimed lighting designer. Consequently dance companies such as these are able to compete at a global level. In doing so, they are able to package the beauty and aesthetics of a dance form along the lines of Western and contemporary dance companies.

Sharmila Biswas thinks that this increase in the number of festivals has reduced the quality of the dancers and that dancers should just refuse to perform:

> These festivals are great things for promotion of the art. There are so many dancers and all of them need platforms so we have to have so many festivals. That's a justification. But I think all dancers, we are forced to repeat ourselves and that the interest of the audience goes down. If you study the economy of this, there has to be a balance of the market, what the market needs, or wants and what you are providing. If we have ruined that balance because no one is ready to pay five rupees to go and see, then what balance

> are you talking about? What demand and what promotion? My idea is wild, but I feel all dancers should stop dancing, and dance only when they think they have something to say. Even at the cost of saying 'no' to shows. Yes, they do pay well because it's all sponsored by either private companies or government agencies, they need to promote, so the intentions are all very good, but then if you spend a lakh of rupees and you get hundred bored audience for five days, then why spend that money? In Delhi, last year, I showed three of my works, now when I was invited again in March I refused because I felt I'll be repeating myself. Go do your show somewhere else; go show your work where they have not seen it. If I had to do a show in March, then it either would have been a repetition, or an idea which is not mature. Why should I show it? Show when you have something to show.

Jyoti Srivastava seems to think that festivals are a way to make money for the organizers and dancers should get more savvy and organize festivals themselves:

> We are basically foolish. Dancers are always short of money. And they always complain you are not able to earn money. But if you have business mind, art is the only thing where you can earn more and more money with less efforts. So this is the easiest way to earn money, but you should have the right approach and the business. And that is why so many festivals are taking place. All the classical festivals are increased, mostly dance. You get more sponsors.

Some dancers have taken to organizing festivals. Leena Mohanty, a dancer and now one of the organizers of the annual *Basant Utsav* festival in Bhubaneswar says:

> In Orissa in every lane there are so many Odissi dancers. There has to be a support system. There are so many festivals, but none are paid. When you dance, you have to spend from your pocket and dance. So it's very difficult to make it your profession. How do you survive? For me, yes, my father was so kind to support me and now my husband is kind enough to support me. But it's not possible for everyone. Something has to be worked out. Even organizing a festival is so difficult. We don't have enough funds to organize. Even for organizers to pay each and every artist has become so difficult. It doesn't have funds. And artists need platform. There has to be something done for artists. But we need corporate sponsorship. How much can the Government do? You can't depend on government. Or it depends on the public. So pay at

> least 10 rupees to go and watch a show. Because the dancers, they are going through lot of training, lot of practice.

Leena Mohanty also runs a travel portal called *Nirguna*, providing affordable travel packages for travelers to India, focusing on tours to Orissa and Vrindavan, a city of pilgrimage.

Ratnikant Mohapatra who runs *Srjan* a dance institution in Bhubaneswar, says most people organizing festivals get funds through sponsors, generally corporate and/or state government ones. *Srjan* has been able to get a grant from *Sangeet Natak Akademi:*

> To organize a 3 day festival, minimum amount you need is 2 lakhs, if you do it in the proper way. In Rabindra Mandap, the hall is Rs. 9000. For three days, it is 27,000 rupees, plus you have to do the publicity, printing, some kind of token, flower, tiffin, tea, children's transportation, artists' transportation. Even if you call somebody who doesn't want money, [you pay for] their travel. Nowadays if you call somebody great, they all come on a train and demand first class. Normally it's 15000 rupees, if you go on the first class, then 30,000 rupees. State government is doing good. Naveen Patnaikji is a very good Chief Minister. He does lots of work for culture. Department of culture is also very active. When especially Pankaj Charan Das and Guru Debe Prasad, these 3 gurus are involved, the state gives lots of respects, not just to the gurus, even to us who are carrying forth the legacy. We also get great support from them; they give us hall for free sometimes. Then you save 27,000 rupees. The tourism department, they sponsor and artists can stay freely. Also the government gives grants for project landing, construction grant. Again it depends what kind of contacts you have. These corporate houses really support art and culture. Without them this kind of festival is just impossible.

As Ratnikant Mohapatra points out, "contacts" and whom you know is important. To organize these kinds of festivals, corporate houses also work closely with government institutions. The latter often provide performance venues at prestigious locations, as well as grants towards special projects. Corporate sponsorship provides the monies in

exchange for publicity and promotion. Leena Mohanty continues on her experience organizing:

> In India, no way you see ticketed performances. In Malaysia we pay 30 ringet for a show. Here, who will come to the show? But maybe, maybe, maybe people will. Then we have great support of my parents and *Sangeet Natak Academy*. Actually if you have a passion, from somewhere, something works out the last moment. You have to just think positively [laughs]. That's how we work.

Pratap Das, who is based in Maryland, and organized the 2006 International Odissi Festival, shared his experience of hosting the festival in Bhubaneswar:

> To host a program of such magnitude in India –it's a business to run a program like this. [The Indian] government is a nuisance for their interference even though they provided such a beautiful complex, built the largest amphitheater of India - *Kalinga Mandap*. I find people in India are less professional, direct, and [want] a quick-profit.

According to Jyoti Srivastava, one of the 500 dancers who performed at the Bhubaneswar, all the dancers were paid well:

> It's not a small amount. I got Rs. 19000 for only 12 minute presentation. It was just 12 min. presentation and I got Rs. 19000. Ramli himself got Rs. 24,000 and all his 13 dancers, everyone got Rs. 8000. All of them were so happy, "Oh, we got 8000!" And they all rushed to buy Odissi saris and jewelries. So it was nicely paid. And obviously Pratap Das got money when we got money.

Aruna Mohanty, a Bhubaneswar-based dancer, and on the board of the local *Sangeet Natak Academy* talked about the administrative aspects of the festival:

> I came into the picture when they wanted someone to coordinate here in Bhubaneswar. So I settled down with the list of names that's been sent by them and kind of categorize them into A, B, C. Accordingly we put them in different slots, like Gurus, senior dancers and established dancers, and the youngsters, male dancers, and different group choreography, different institutions. And then I had requested Pratap da to be in touch with Central *Sangeet Natak Academy* where I'm in the board and they sanctioned money, so that money goes to different artists, payment, not for any other

> purpose. The dancers didn't expect any money from the festival, but they went back with good money. So I think they are also happy and I'm extremely happy.

There was some discrepancy on which dancers were paid. Some dancers, mostly US based ones, did not receive any money at all and others, India-based dancers did. This is one example of the economic unevenness that exists within this community of dancers. The festival was also marked by certain discrepancies in terms of fees that favored the India-based dancers. Food, for example was more expensive for dancers who came from outside India, even though they had to pay their own travel and expenses. According to the registration form, three meals were served at the festival venue for the duration of the festival, from December 26-30. Meal tickets for these 5 days were sold at a cost of $100.00 or Rs. 1000.00 (for Indian) per person. Meal tickets for non-India based dancers cost five times as much for their Indian counterparts. Similarly the registration fees varied for participants varied. Were the organizers using the non-Indian dancers to address an imbalance of global currency? Pratap Das explains:

> There will always be some discrepancy in registration fee between Indian and non-Indian participants. We charged $100 for foreign students and Rs. 500 for Indian registrants. We had to charge [people of] Indian origin because it will be unfair for foreign registrants to pay only. In future we have to address the issue.

Speaking of funding for the festival, Pratap Das said:

> We have managed with charitable contributions and government funding. Funding is very important. The 4th International Odissi Festival [scheduled for December 2011] depends on that. I have managed with a few well wishers who have given money, and I have personally contributed lot of money from my pension and home equity loans.

The Nexus of Culture and Tourism

International acknowledgment through tours abroad serves as a legitimizing factor. Given that the official India Tourism website showcases Odissi dancers posing against architectural relics, Odissi in particular, has become a "trademark" of Indian culture, and is still viewed in India, and beyond as an essential marker of "Indian" identity. The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) plays an important role in perpetuating this idea. Under the auspices of the Ministry of External Affairs (which deals primarily with diplomatic affairs and defense matters), artists go through a process of empanelment with the ICCR. This process of validation is a mark of authenticity for the dancer that allows the dancer, her guru and a suite of musicians to go abroad on tour. Dancer, Madhavi Mudgal does not think of the ICCR as a preserver of the standards of Odissi but one that facilitates these tours, and as I explain later, their own agenda.

> ICCR has nothing to do about nurturing the standard. They send lots of young dancers when they get the stage. But of course people look at it as a major thing because that's the only way to go abroad. So everybody tries to get it. I think it's more important to dance in India and get to be known in India and get appreciation from Indian audience.

Arshiya Sethi, a presenter of the performing arts based in Delhi, explains this nexus between tourism and culture, and how dance is used at various kinds of venues for different reasons:

> Culture and tourism go together. I mean, ministries of culture and tourism, but culture has the most checkered movement and path. Now what kind of tourism opportunities? There are three types of tourism opportunities. One is when the tourism department creates a festival to give a boost, and you have a lot of tourism festivals in Orissa, so that takes care of the local *maal* (booty). You have tourism as touristy performances, which is part of the publicity drive kind of thing that have a beautiful angle like forts and temples, and things like that. Then you have tourism as a sector in

> hotels. Often such dance performances are very low in caliber, we have dance with eating of food and chatting, and so it's just like a show. The third tourism opportunities come from conference tourism, there is a very big conference, and every day they have no less than three or four conferences happening in the city which have scope for performances, and so that is an opportunity. And you have religious opportunities (at temples and religious holidays), and I would put the entire Durga Puja's pandals first or the Rath Yatras. Let's talk about the diplomatic opportunities, SAARC-conference, or one of the great India bilateral visits with Pakistan, India's Prime Minister at Rashtrapathi Bhavan with heads of state dinner, and then the performance that are sent abroad to show India's rich diverse culture.

As Sethi points out there are many kinds of tourism that get promoted by Indian dance. Tourism brings foreign revenue into the country as well as the possibility of investment opportunities. Many of these festivals are organized with the primary goal of building capital investment and tourism in India. The "nationalizing" of culture beyond geographical borders, takes place such that culture becomes an export, or marker of authenticity. Festivals that promote culture and opportunity become a comfortable playground for agendas of nationalism and globalism projects to coexist peacefully.

Pavan Varma, the Director-General of the ICCR acknowledges this nexus between India's "ancient past" and her "promising future":

> Earlier the festivals were to showcase our past. Today the demand from us is to use these festivals in order to open a window as much to India's past as to its contemporary potential and possibility, that's why we revived the festival. We had a year-long festival unfolding near Brussels and Lille and on its own 9 million Euros they raised to have three months long extravaganza on India. There's a huge interest, I don't know how to meet it. The festival, in Brussels was structured in new ways so that you gave a presentation of both India as an ancient civilization and India as an emerging global power.

Varma's goal then is to present India by building on its Orientalist mystique as well as positioning it as a place for tourism and foreign investment. Contrary to some of

the scholarship on nationalism and globalism, both work in ways that reinforce one another. For example, Appadurai (1996) has suggested that the processes of transnationalism and globalization reflect, and contribute to a disempowering of the nation-state. In this particular instance, it appears that they work together towards a common goal. Festivals abroad, as we see in the case of the spectacles, and the many-sited Incredible !ndia @ 60 campaign seamlessly bring together commerce and government, such that national belonging is reproduced.

Figure 30: Incredible !ndia @ 60 advertsiing campaign featuring *Nrityagram*

The "Incredible !ndia@ 60" in New York City held in September 2006 was a three-day extravaganza of dance, and myriad other events at various New York City locations such as Lincoln Center, South Street Seaport, Port Authority and Bryant Park. The press release for the event stated, "India @60 is the largest initiative undertaken by CII outside India to showcase the plurality of India's cultural, business, intellectual and culinary delights."

Some of the highlights included an enormous sand sculpture at Port Authority, roses flown in from India, hundreds of performers flown out from India, all aimed to generate tourism and investment dollars for the country. This celebration of India's sixty years of independence was jointly organized by the Ministry of Tourism and the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII). This collaboration between private and public is increasingly common as a way to ensure additional foreign investments in India and not simply to promote tourism. The CII partnered with cultural organizations such as The Asia Society, educational ones such as Yale University, and business ones such as the New York Stock Exchange, in addition to various Indian ministries of Tourism, Culture, Textiles, External Affairs and Civil Aviation. Press kits handed out included booklets on spices and tigers that build on the mystique of the Orient, in addition to materials promoting "medical tourism" and various business opportunities. With rising costs of healthcare in the US, the Indian government is seeking to capitalize on the reputation of Indian doctors in the US, and promote India as cheaper alternative. The campaign also had a three-day event that showcased Indian classical dance at Lincoln Center in New York City. Dancers were flown in from India and the Incredible !ndia website had several pages devoted to Indian dance, with Odissi having its own page.

The processes of globalization function to make nationalism more pervasive, while at the same time commoditizing these cultural forms, and building on their "exotic" value to create authenticity. Pavan Varma (ICCR) explained the importance of using culture as a hook for tourism, and ultimately as a business and economic opportunity:

> The perception of the West has changed about India, not in terms of the refinement and achievements of its heritage, but in terms of a new desire to link that heritage to the excitement of the present and the potential in the future. That's a generic change in the

> perception of India, as India is seen to be emerging as a global power. And the challenge for ICCR and us is to see how we can best do that without diluting our heritage but yet linking it to economic and business summits as well so there is a window to contemporary India as much as there is an access to its past and our heritage.

For Varma dance becomes a way to seamlessly link India's national heritage with its global future. However, it is a specific kind of dance that is promoted, one that builds on traditional markers of the form rather than its more dynamic counterparts. Static notions of the performing arts are perpetuated by global and national agendas. Rather than focusing on the dynamism of these traditions, they become emblematic representations of their country of origin. In addition to the performance itself being choreographed, the setting of the venue and stage is also highly choreographed. Varma explains the importance of sending the right message:

> I have repeatedly sent messages to our investors that if an outstanding Odissi artist is going perform, to collect 200 NRIs, this is not a difficult task, but it has to be prepared for – the right venue, the right guest list, chief guest the pre-publicity and the presentation - the stage, the setting, the lights, the acoustics, the introduction. I will not be third-world in our cultural presentation, the post-publicity so it's a package that I am emphasizing on.

This unwillingness to be "third-world" is clear from the thousands of dollars that were spent on the Incredible !ndia @60 campaign. The exoticism and depiction of a dance form that requires years of practice and training also provides a saleable narrative, one that fits nicely with the mystique of the Orient. Varma, however, is careful to ensure that this attention to globalism does not compete with the "authenticity" of these dances by ensuring allegiance to their regional **and** national roots. He says:

> All dance which has its roots in a common civilizational culture is both regional and national. If in Manipuri they dance on the theme of Krishna and Radha, of Odissi they do the same and if in

> Bharatnatyam they do the same then all these dances are national. However we must respect diversity, we must understand that dance forms have very authentic and valid local and regional roots. This whole myth that globalization has formed, that everyone can be like everyone else, needs to be countered so we respect that diversity, but we don't have to mesmerized by it; because there is an underlying unity which is national.

These ideas by the director-general of the ICCR, Pavan Varma were echoed recently by the Prime Minister of India at the *Pravasi Bharatiya Divas,* an annual meeting held in India, hosted by the Indian government for NRI's (Non-Resident Indians).

The primary goal of this event is to promote and sustain a mutually beneficial relationship with the Indian diaspora. These meetings have been very influential in making legislative changes such as the PIO card (Persons of Indian Origin), and are an excellent opportunity for investment and business in India. Sites such as these foster a partnership between multinational and national agendas. The Prime Minister of India, Manmohan Singh at the inauguration of the *Pravasi Bharatiya Divas* in 2008 said:

> The idea of India transcends the narrow barriers or religion, language, caste or class, both within and outside the Indian nation. What then do our common cultural values stand for? Throughout history Indian culture has been a living example of pluralism, of assimilation, of tolerance, of inclusiveness and the eternal values of truth and non-violence. It is these values of Indianness that unite us both in ideology and in practice. This is what makes us globally Indian. It is these values that we must uphold to the world in all that we do (Singh 2008).

This address by Singh and the earlier comments by Pavan Varma build on the Nehruvian "Unity in Diversity" discourse, and perpetuate the idea that the strength of Indian culture lies in its ability to absorb the best of other influences, masking a largely

Hindu hegemony. The idea that Hinduism is a highly tolerant religion maps comfortably onto a global discourse of Indian spirituality and pluralism.

Figure 31: Odissi Dancers in coastal Puri, Orissa. Image used for a Orissa tourism website. Courtesy www.orissatourism.org

As Odissi emerges as a global commodity, its ritual roots are marketed to coincide with popular discourse on spirituality that is becoming increasingly intertwined with neoliberal ideals of capital (Carrette and King 2004: 2). Yoga, a six billion a year industry (according to Yoga Journal) provides the missing link between Odissi and new-age spirituality.

Figure 32: Incredible !ndia Tourism Campaign advertised on a bus in Toronto, Canada (2010)

The "Incredible !ndia" tourism campaign in 2010 has a woman cross-legged seated in a lotus pose, alongside an image of an Indian classical dancer on the side of a double-decker tour bus in New York City. These two images place dance and spirituality in the same advertising frame that perpetuates this nexus of spirituality and neoliberalism. Other similar images (see figure 35 below) position the yoga practitioner alongside a bejeweled Indian woman, a tiger, and the Taj Mahal. Similarly yoga entrepreneurs, such as Bikram Choudhury (Carrette and King 2004) have built successful businesses based on the ability to package yoga for a Western audience. In 2004, Choudhury sued various yoga schools across the country on the grounds that he owned the copyright to a series of

yoga poses.[126] A countersuit was filed by various US yoga teachers in federal court, claiming that Choudhury's case was "unenforceable" and yoga was in "public use for centuries" (Hodgson 2004). Consequently, yoga and dance are packaged as ancient spirituality but the enforcement of these claims is hardly "ancient" or "third-world".

[126] The Guardian February 9 2004.

Chapter 6: *Odissistan*: A Global Community

> ***If the body isn't Indian, the body is brown. And brown is the politics. But clearly the location is in a certain practice.***
>
> Ananya Chatterjea, Dancer

This chapter begins by problematizing the notion of a global community framed within the context of space and place. Using Anderson's notion of the "imagined," I find that each dancer imagines community individually, contributing to a broad variance of the notion of "community." Next, I use the vectors of *sthan/kaal/patra* or place/time/peoples to understand how dancers negotiate performance in heterogeneous spaces, contexts and audiences, and finally argue that the story of Odissi dance has shown us that practitioners have historically imagined new communities and audiences, and continue to do so.

My dissertation is founded on the argument that there is a global community of Odissi dancers who practice, teach and perform all over the world, but the ways in which they do so are very different. But first, what do we mean by "community" and who gets to participate in it? Although I use the term "community" in the singular, I stress that it is comprised of several communities. As Raymond Williams has pointed out, "community" is one of the few words used to describe a form of social organization that does not have negative connotations, such as "society" or "nation" (Williams 1976: 66). Gerald Creed argues that it is precisely this uncontested and common-sense understanding of "community" that warrants scholarly attention (Creed 2006: 4). The notion of community can also connote homogeneity of experience, and my fieldwork has demonstrated that

nothing could be further from the truth. Though these dancers are all practitioners of Odissi dance, there is a variance in each one's experience of the form, and this Odissi community is made up of groups, subgroups, and individuals. Dance as a practice travels via physical bodies, and though Odissi dance is performed all over the world, the bodies performing this dance remain defined and contained by passports, visas, capital flows, language, gender and other resources. Despite the globalism of this dance form, this community exists within geographical, institutional, linguistic, regional, national and gendered borders that do not always allow for a simple composition of dancers and performances. Even dancers who do not (or cannot) travel to perform outside their "local" areas must contend with this globalism of Odissi, and consequently compete with other dancers in local, national and global arenas. This unevenness of access also plays out through cyber networks such as those found on Odissi listervs or online dance journals, local communities, international and national dance festivals and performance opportunities. As Arif Dirlik has pointed out (Dirlik 2003), the local is not untouched by these networks, and that the global functions locally. The local has come to be associated with the "authentic" and the "natural," and the global with the "new" and the "inauthentic' (Malkki as quoted in Gupta and Ferguson 1992: 7). However, trying to distinguish between the two can be a futile exercise. In fact, the local and the global may have more in common than is initially apparent, and as Dirlik's analysis of these terms suggests, they actually depend on one another:

> The question then is not the confrontation of the global and the local, but of different configurations of 'glocality'. Instead of assigning some phenomena to the realm of the global and others to the realm of the local, it may be necessary to recognize that in other than the most exceptional cases these phenomena are **all** both

> local and global, but that they are not local and global in the same way (Dirlik 2003: 29).

All Odissi dancers in their practice of the form experience the local and the global but in remarkably different ways from one another. Leela Venkataraman, a dance critic, told me about a recent conversation she had with Ustad Birju Maharaj, a celebrated and legendary dancer of Kathak on the subject of the *gharana,* a term used to describe a particular school or lineage within a dance form:

> He [Birju Maharaj] said, "If my father had been here he probably would not recognize a lot of what I have taught my students as Kathak at all". So the whole thing has changed within a *gharana,* and a man who is the "*gharanedar"*, the one who is really carrying the mantle of that *gharana.* If **he** talks like that, it shows you that the compulsions of operating in a particular space and time in that age, and context are so important. And then you take the dance to other places, it is bound to change. It's happening all the time.

Birju Maharaj acknowledges how Kathak has changed over successive generations in his own *gharana*. This points to how performing beyond the "local" has affected all dance forms in India, including Kathak.

Gupta and Ferguson (1992) in "Beyond Culture, Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference" problematize the study of "culture" and "cultural difference" as it relates to the study of space, and do so in several ways. They argue that tied to the idea of global community are notions of space and place, and in anthropology, there has been a tendency towards an isomorphism to superimpose a location or a place over a particular people and/or a culture, assuming a neat fit. They raise several concerns: first, how do we theorize around those who inhabit the borderlands, and fall outside these spatial overlays. Second, how does one begin to understand cultural difference without homogenizing these differences through diversity discourses, such as multiculturalism? Third, how has

postcoloniality affected this isomorphic relationship between space and place? Finally, the authors argue that some of the current thinking within the social sciences is built on assumptions that these spaces are autonomous and disconnected. Gupta and Ferguson posit that studying them as "hierarchically interconnected" spaces allow one to "rethink difference **through** connection" (Gupta & Ferguson 1992: 8).

Building on this recommendation, I have studied this group of dancers as a global community, but one that is "hierarchically interconnected." I destabilize the notion that Odissi dance is tied to the state of Orissa, or to India, but rather is a global dance community, even though it is one marked by difference. By studying Odissi dance and its practitioners, and allowing for "difference," regional roots and national identity are spatialized, such that space is not rendered transparent, but brought into the frame of study. The increased global networks within this dance community and its visibility in a transnational public sphere in the last few decades make it necessary to reconceptualize notions of space and community, and the discussion of global/local practices. Consequently, these geographical preoccupations have not disappeared from the anthropological debate around space and place, but by "reterritorializing" space, one is able to shed light on the differences within this global community.

Having problemtized the notion of community, and framed it within notions of space and place, I would like to explore how the practitioners of this community "imagine" themselves. To do so I employ Anderson's foundational text on nationalism (1983). Anderson has been credited with being one of the first theorists to bridge the divide between the "subjectivist" and "objectivist" camps in the scholarship on nationalism. He historicizes the formation of the nation-state, by focusing on the rise of

print capitalism to develop his notion of "imagined communities." I use Anderson's definition of a nation, an "imagined political community [that is] imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (Anderson 1983: 7) to arrive at a deeper understanding of the "imagined" for this global community. And although this Odissi dance community is threaded through with various nationalist narratives, it is in no sense a nation. Anderson's text does not detail or problematize the notion of "imagined," other than to say that the members of a nation "imagine" their fellow citizens even though they may never see them face to face. However, what I find useful is the "imagined" in Anderson's conception of the "imagined community," as a way to explore how this global community of Odissi dancers develop and imagine **their** sense of community, but with broad variance. The term "imagined" in this context is especially useful because it allows the dancer to imagine "community", and the possibilities of sacred and secular spaces associated with it. This ability to imagine such spaces allows the dancer to incorporate the inherent spirituality of the form as she travels, and performs in various contexts, and to new and changing audiences. Imagining "community" in this manner gives dancers the freedom to explore ways of being in their bodies, such that each dancer defines her space individually. This can be accomplished through the embodied practice of *sadhana* (as dicussed in Chapter 3) or the spiritual content of the dances themselves

A Moving Target

So how does one begin to theorize a practice that is in flux, and continuously redefined by its practitioners? Studying this community without a presumed center destabilizes the notion of a "fixed" community, privileging the individual experience of

each dancer/practitioner. A unique feature of this global community is that it has no fixed center. There is a spatial unevenness that is relational, and it is constantly reconfiguring itself. Ten to fifteen years ago it would be argued that Bhubaneswar is the center for Odissi, but today that is debatable. The center is a shifting one, and it is important to acknowledge this lack of fixity. For Odissi training the center may certainly be Bhubaneswar, but for national recognition that center shifts to the capital of New Delhi. And for dancers that come from small towns outside of Bhubaneswar, Bhubaneswar becomes the metropolis. Sujata Mohapatra, a dancer who later became the daughter-in-law of Guru Kelucharan Mohaptra, tells the story of when she first started learning with him. Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra would tease her during group classes, and refer to her "Baleswaria" (one who is from Baleshwar, a district in Orissa). Mohapatra says:

> Guruji while teaching was having a lightness. He was always saying "Ay, Baleswaria!" Baleswar is a very interior place, people in Bhubaneswar and Cuttack, they are like city people, we are the "interial" [from the interior] people, village people. Guruji would say, "Ay Baleswaria, what are you are doing behind? Come in front."

Similarly, for other dancers who travel across national or state borders, and linguistic and/or economic borders, their community too is constantly shifting and changing. They pursue different objectives in different locations. For example, a dancer who was raised in Delhi, and now lives in a suburb of Milwaukee relates very differently to her community of dancers in her new home. She may be the only Odissi dancer in her town or state, and may choose or be forced to build alliances, collaborations with dancers of other Indian (such as Bharatnatyam or Kathak) or even non-Indian forms (African, Flamenco, etc) of dance. She then goes to Bhubaneswar for a year of training and

performances, culminating with a performance in New Delhi. After her return to Milwaukee, she continues to collaborate with other dancers and perform.

Scholar and presenter Arshiya Sethi, who has worked with several generations of Indian classical dancers, says that there is a need to establish a presence outside their region as well as be fluent in English and Oriya. To be a talented dancer in Bhubaneswar is insufficient. This talent needs to be accompanied with a comfort level in languages beyond dance, such as English and Hindi. Sethi says:

> They need to dance outside Orissa. They must dance in Delhi. If I wanted to be well-known only in Kerala, it is enough for me to speak Malayalam but if you wish to be known as a national dancer you must speak a mature Hindi and also English. I will not be able to follow you if you wish to be an international dancer. You have to learn to speak in English. The same thing [goes] for Odissi dancing. You have the finest talent in Orissa go unnoticed. You must be respected in your home state. Recognition on your own stage and recognition on the international and national [stage] are **both** very important.

Talent, without the recognition that comes from audience-performer interaction goes unnoticed. Here there is a stress on recognition, and speaks to the relationship between the performer and her audience. As we have seen, Odissi has emerged as a global commodity, and has had to reinvent itself in search of new audiences and opportunities.

Rajika Puri, a Bharatnatyam and Odissi dancer who is based in New York City who performs in India and the US stresses the importance of audience recognition, and exposure to the work of other dancers, and dance forms. According to her this exposure is critical for the development of choreographic ideas:

> Standing in Bhubaneswar is obviously the most important thing when you are living in Bhubaneswar. But you get it from going abroad, foreign travel, having the ICCR[127] from Delhi send you. I think when these people come abroad if they have the chance, which is usually tough they should go and see other dancing. And if they are part of the festival that means you get to see some other dancing. So they get a model of other kinds of choreography, other dance forms people are doing. The best thing about a festival is the possibility that people see each other's work.

The success enjoyed by a particular dancer or dance company varies highly due to such factors such as location and patronage. For example, the dancer in the diaspora faces the stigma of being less authentic than her Indian counterparts. Lata Pada, a dancer based in Toronto says:

> (H)ere in the diaspora we have to struggle with our own community audience who welcome with open arms artists coming from India, mediocre and everything else - just because they happen to be from India, not recognizing the fact that the diaspora has been around for 40 years. We've been working at our art form. We are not just importing materials we know from gurus. And we work very hard to be excellent, of the highest quality. So I think it's high time for us to be asking for our place in the sun.

A well-known and established guru based in Bhubaneswar told me how dancers closer to the center (New Delhi) are more likely to be recognized and get national awards even if they are mediocre dancers/performers compared to dancers/performers in Bhubaneswar. This charge of advantage is not simply because Delhi is a bigger city than Bhubaneswar, but also because it is the capital of the nation, and a site of government funds, recognition, awards and visibility. According to him, the proximity to politicians, national press and cultural impresarios allows Delhi-based dancers to be on their radar which is especially helpful with awards and tours that are eventually based on

[127] Indian Council for Cultural Relations

recommendations and nominations. Although these dancers belong to a global community, their success is determined locally, even though the local is a shifting site.

For international recognition tours in major European cities, such as London or Paris and/or the United States such as New York City or Chicago are essential. But even so, these performances depend on the visibility of the venue and audience. As a prominent dancer in Delhi once told me, "I don't want to go to New York, just to perform at some Diwali celebration at a Hindu Temple." Many of the India-based dancers come abroad through invitation and sponsorship (visa and financial) by local diasporic groups. These groups, in turn conduct workshops in local communities at temples, rehearsal venues and yoga centers. Many of these US-based students who attend these workshops go to India for further training after a few workshops. These workshops for traveling artists are a way to make money, and to create audiences for scheduled performances. They also create a base for dancers and gurus traveling from India to which they return each year to train, and build a network of students. This informal network is responsible for visas, board and lodging. Summer workshops such as ones organized by Milapfest in Manchester and DanceIntense in Toronto, are some examples of these workshops on a large scale. Similarly, Trinayan Collaborations has hosted a series of shorter workshops in New York City with various India and US-based practitioners of Odissi dance and yoga teachers. Travels abroad provide money, visibility and eventual recognition that is helpful for a dancer's career. However, maintaining a tie to India, especially for dancers in the diaspora provides an essential stamp of authenticity.

Imagining Community: The 2006 Bhubaneswar Festival

As noted earlier, IPAP, or the Indian Performing Arts Promotion Inc. is a non-profit organization based in Washington DC, and headed by Pratap Das. Das came to the US in the early 1970s, and has been deeply involved in the Oriya diaspora community. Das wanted to promote Odissi as an Indian classical dance in United States and abroad, to build a network among the Odissi communities such as students, teachers, schools, media, and institutions, and to inspire Indian children to learn about their culture and heritage[128]. IPAP organized three Odissi festivals in 2000, 2003 and 2006. While responses and comments on the festivals have been mixed, and sometimes controversial, most practitioners agree that it has been an exciting venue of exchange for Odissi dancers worldwide.

The 2006 Festival attended by hundreds of Odissi dancers from all over the world came together to perform, share ideas, and mostly watch each other dance. Several performances, exhibitions, heritage tours and seminars occurred in the last week of December 2006. The festival was co-sponsored by Government of India (Culture-Tourism), Sangeet Natak Akademi, which, at the request of the state of Government of Orissa, provided twenty five lakhs of rupees (1 lakh rupees is approximately $2250) towards stipends for the artists. The festival was also sponsored by the ICCR or Indian Council for Cultural Relations, Government of Orissa (Culture & Tourism), Odissi Research Centre in Bhubaneswar, Bhubaneswar Circle, and Utkal Sangeet Mahavidhalaya. Compared to the earlier festivals, this one was bigger in scope and attendance, primarily because it was held in India rather than the US, and many of the

[128] E-mail from Pratap Das April 28, 2010

dancers based in India were able to attend. Holding this event in Bhubaneswar allowed for increased representation from dancers in India, and US based dancers were more likely to travel to India for the experience, and because the dollar worked in their favor despite current market trends. The festival was scheduled over the December/January holidays to accommodate students and parents.

Many dancers talked about the sense of community they experienced at the festival in Bhubaneswar. Sharmila Biswas, a dancer based in Kolkata said:

> I think for first time, Odissi dancers from all over the world came together and there was a lot of interaction, and it worked. Even I didn't know so many Odissi dancers are dancing in such a big way all over the word. But there are so many thoughts and so many things. It was a real eye opener for everybody in Bhubaneswar I think and then exchange always is good. That way, I think it was a great thing.

Dance critic, Leela Venkataraman said of the festival:

> It's a mammoth canvas and to catch all that on one platform I think, in itself was a very big achievement. But they could have bothered to be little more selective because anybody and everybody were dancing. And there were so many people that you really had a brain fart because you are watching from about 9 in the morning till about 12:30 at night, literally the whole world of Odissi was there. So to that extent, I think it was very good festival.

Venkataraman comments on the range and number of performers, but also argues that there were just too many performers. Perhaps the success of the festival depended on having several hundred performers, as large numbers also translate into large audiences. Jyoti Srivastava, a Delhi-based dancer said:

> It was a beautiful festival. I feel God bless Pratap Das [organizer] so that we can have more and more festivals like this. The best part of the festival for me was I could see so many dancers. I met so many dancers, which is next to impossible for any dancer. We have such a rich culture but we don't have this culture to meet each

> other. If you ask any dancer, 'I'm very busy'. Who is not busy? Everybody is busy but we should have some time for each other. It's a family. So that's why I like this festival. At least we spent 3 or 4 days together. And there was nobody too busy. Everybody was there.

What many of the dancers felt was a sense of community, even though it was a short and intense festival. Dancer, Rajika Puri based in New York talks about the dance festival, and the importance of community that such festivals can foster:

> I'm very excited about the idea of Odissi, about these dance festivals, what they do. Because to me, the biggest thing is that tradition is a tradition when there's collegiality in it and we learn, where you share with each other.

For Rajika Puri, and like many other dancers discussed in Chapter 3, tradition becomes a place of exchange, rather than an ossified practice. And this notion of tradition, like that of community is one characterized by movement. Dinanath Pathy, painter and author who resides in Bhubaneswar, compared the festival, and its immense scale to the chaos of the annual procession of *Jagannath*, the chariot festival[129] in Puri during which Jaganath and his accompanying deities are transported a few miles away:

> It was a wonderful happening. A lot of confusion, we like the confusion, just like the Rath Yatra, the car festival. The memories are still pleasant, so many dancers, such a big thing never happened in Orissa, so that will remain only, everything will slowly dwindle away but the memory of a dance will remain. Who has done it earlier? Nobody.

Jayant Kastuar, a Kathak dancer and the secretary of the Sangeet Natak Academy said based in New Delhi said:

> I think it was a success in terms of the sense of participation of large number of dancers from India and also from abroad. I believe there was certain hiccups, certain glitches, organizational debacle but the report I received was, that on the whole Odissi dancers, you

[129] It is said to be the source of the word "juggernaut."

> know, are very happy being together, being there, and meeting each other, and having a little bit of dancing to do with the festival, participate in the festival, because obviously if there are a large number of dancers you can't give them larger slots to perform. I think it was good to have all Odissi dancers, a large number of them, dance together.

Although this festival brought dancers together for a few days, and succeeded in creating a sense of a global community, how does community sustain itself over time? Shagun Bhutani, a Delhi-based dancer talks about the challenges of sustaining these feelings of community, and the exchange of ideas:

> The international festival is a good sort of a platform where a lot of people meet. But I think the communication probably stops there. It's not that they are creating new links and communicating because everybody is so busy. I mean for everybody life has become very stressful. You can't have these old time things that you are sitting having cups and cups and cups of tea and thinking of a concept. And yet quality comes when you have this time, to have the communication. I think great work actually comes out of there.

Imagining the Community: Dancers in the Diaspora

How do dancers "imagine" the notion of community in the diaspora? Daniel Phoenix Singh, an Indian-born Bharatnatyam dancer and who lives in Washington DC, attended the Indo American Arts Council Festival in New York (2008). He spoke during a panel discussion:

> I grew up in a Christian family and my brother is a minister. They just couldn't tolerate me starting Bharatnatyam. They don't come to any of my performances. Even now it's a battle for me with my whole family.

For Daniel, dance is a refuge from the Indian community which in turn has forced him to seek out other communities:

> I'm gay and an atheist and for 8 years I'm doing Bharatnatyam and modern dance. The Indian dance community in DC itself is a hard nut to crack for me. I usually find community outside DC. They are more welcoming and supportive of my work. They don't feel threatened, as much as people in DC do. When I started working in DC, I found other communities of color and going to clubs which are non-hierarchical in their way of passing knowledge. I would go to a Salsa club or a hip hop club. You don't have to have a teacher. You get into a circle and people learnt from each other, watched each other. So I was more at home in these clubs with people of color. I often find myself divorced from what's happening in a community - because you're in a class or in a studio, working with a very elite group of dancers who are trained. When you go to a community setting, they have their own language and vocabulary. It's not that it's not as codified or as deep as ours, but how do I, as someone who is a trained dancer start relating at that level?

Daniel talks about being from a family background with limited access to the arts. For him, moving to the United States was a way to get into Indian dance. Unlike many Indian dancers, he had a very businesslike relationship with his teacher, a departure from the idea of mastering a particular technique or tradition for life:

> I didn't have the traditional guru *parampara*. I paid someone for one hour. If I didn't show up, I still had to pay for one hour of tuition. So in some ways it was kind of freeing. I didn't have all that weight that you would have after giving 16 years of your early life to your teacher. I had this freedom of going - here is my class and I'm done with it.

For Daniel, the traditions of Bharatnatyam have provided him with a sense of freedom:

> But I think that what's beautiful about dance is that it gives me the space, it gives me the freedom, and today I can be something, and tomorrow I can be something else. It lets me be in this place with these contrasting, and sometimes tense relationships between my culture and family. I don't feel like I have to know what I'm doing. And if it doesn't work, I go find something else and it kind of gives me that freedom as opposed to structure. In some ways the structure of Bharatnatyam, I feel, is so wise and all-encompassing, that gives me the space in Bharatnatyam itself. I don't feel like I'm going away from tradition by doing all these things.

Dance for Daniel has allowed him to "imagine" his sense of community, and the power to create his own space via his dance.

Indian dance schools and classes in the United States can provide more than simply dance instruction, they are a means of accessing community. And for young women that complete a *manchapravesh*[130] or debut after many years of training at these dance schools, this community acknowledgement is a source of pride for them and their parents. These lavish *manchapraveshas* and *arangetrams* in the United States have been widely documented (Ram, 2005)[131]. The *manchapravesh* (literally 'to enter the stage') of a young dancer is a transition from dance amateur to professional.

Figure 33: Guru Durga Charan Ranbir and musicians at an Odissi performance in New York City. Photo credit: Frank Ishman

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[130] In Bharatnatyam, this debut is referred to as an *arangetram*

[131] Phantom Limbs: South Indian Dance and Immigrant Reifications of the Female Body in Journal of Intercultural Studies Volume 26, Nos. 1-2 February-May 2005, pp 121-137.

Many middle and upper-middle class young Indian girls and women born and raised in the US, complete this debut after learning the dance form for several years, and before leaving for college. Sumita Banerji lives in a wealthy Connecticut suburb, and had her *manchapravesh* the summer before she left for medical school in 2007. During that summer, her Odissi teacher in New Jersey trained her every single day. For the final performance, musicians and her teacher's guru arrived from India. The *manchapravesh* is an invitation-only event during which family and friends give the young dancer their blessing. The performance is complete with a *puja* (ritual prayer) in the morning to Lord *Jagannath*, followed by the recital in the evening, and features a full suite of dances from the traditional *margam*. The successful completion of a *manachapravesh* is a display of skill and stamina. After the performance guests are invited to a meal hosted by the dancer's family. Sumita's parents who are working professionals, the *manchapravesh* cost over $20,000. For these immigrants from Cuttack, mastering the traditions of Odissi, became the perceived bridge between Connecticut and their homeland, allowing them to participate in a "mythologizing of tradition" that occurs through migration and diasporization (Shukla 1997). Although the *manchapravesh* is not a uniquely diasporic event, it tends to be far more elaborate and lavish in the diaspora. These kinds of "transition rites" are not unique to the Indian context[132]. As Amanda Wise, in her study of the East Timorese in Australia has shown, certain versions of culture and dance become

[132] Van Gennep, Arnold. 1960 [1908] comes to a similar conclusion in *The Rites of Passage*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Turner, Victor 1969. *The Ritual Process*. Chicago. Aldine., Best AL. 2000. *PromNight: Youth, Schools, and Popular Culture*. New York: Routledge.

more rigid and sharply defined in diaspora communities as they are seen to represent the culture in its entirety (Wise 2006).

On the other end of the spectrum, are dancers like Parijat Desai, a New York City-based dancer and activist who describes her experience as a child of immigrant parents. Dancers like her that seek to create new contexts in their work:

> My political engagement was actually through activism, not through dance. I think that the main, underlying political subtext for me is; on one hand from the perspective of being an immigrant, and questioning: how long do we have to live in this country before we are no longer considered foreign? And what does it mean to be from the United Sates and always be "other"? I guess that through humor, through just a fact of blending forms, I'm trying not to **tell** you "I'm an American"; I'm trying to **demonstrate** it. So that's one aspect. The other aspect that really concerns me is nationalism, whether it's religious fundamentalism or patriotism in this country. To me that's the root of a persistent belief in very simply speaking "us" and "them." We are "this", and you are "that." We are Indian, you are modern. Right down to the history of modern dance, there is a separation of how we understand this tradition, the development of these forms. So to me, the blending forms come not only out of identity exploration, but also challenging notions that we are a nation state, the boundaries based on the nation state are actually real. Like there really is something called Indian dance, actually it's a set of ideas. We are always changing. So those boundaries necessarily change with us. For the majority of my work so far, it has been more like an act of blending that I'm trying to challenge the notions of cultural purity and national divisions.

Desai's work then can be seen as a way to transcend "old ethnicities" (Anthias 2001: 619), and contest essentialist ideas of ethnicity and identity. Her work is more transgressive in addressing these notions of cultural purity and nationalism. Although it is common to overlay the notion of the homeland over that of the immigrant, both these dancers "imagine" community and their relationship to the homeland in different ways. Dancers like Sumita Banerji and Parijat Desai, who are very rooted in the dance

community in the United States, how they choose to engage with dance, and imagine their community is fundamentally different.

Mesma S. Belsare, a Boston-based dancer who self identifies as a trans performer, addresses issues of gender and sexuality, and comments on the topic of the feminine ideal in Indian dance. Belsare is also a visual artist and a museum educator, and is particularly interested in critical thinking around how traditional Bharatnatyam is perceived in North America:

> The performance base itself becomes the area of redefining and re-evaluating those kinds of gender patterns. To me as a performer, it's a body, both active and reactive moving in space without really conforming to any particular identity, and that is the beauty of dance. That is the beauty of the performance. It is that you, in that space are providing something based on your training and your own integrity as an artist, which becomes a sort of more important aspect for me as a person in the 20th century having coming from India and performing in a culture which is getting more interested in anything Indian.

Belsare acknowledges this "us and them" perception, and uses her work as a way to contest, as well as exploit, a recent interest in the United States towards Indian art.

Rajika Puri, also talks about the importance of this sense of community but recognizes that it has fissures. Though a community of dancers exists, Puri feels it is insufficient:

> In Odissi, I don't think there is enough of that sense of community. All these dancers are doing extraordinary work, but isolated, and that means, logically speaking, it's all piece meal, it doesn't add up to a community of dancers. The kind of collegiality that I liked is like when Trinayan first started out. The idea of women of different backgrounds and different things, to bring an Odissi dance company working together.

In 2007 dancers in the US came together to raise funds for Asako Takami[133], who was suffering from a long-term illness, and a tribute dance performance was held in New York City. Dancers donated performance time and resources to raise money. Sadly the fundraiser became a memorial as Takami passed days before the event. But it was a strong bi-coastal effort by various dancers who came together to organize this event. Rajika Puri describes the building of community with that event:

> And that wonderful moment, that group of Californian dancers, who got together, in support of Asako, the Japanese dancer who was dying of cancer and transmitted the sense of urgency to us here in New York. And Bharatnatyam, Kathak, Odissi dancers, everybody, musicians just came together wanting to do something and I felt it as much for Asako as a very deep thirst to be connected to other dancers.

Rajika Puri acknowledges the importance of festivals but has tried to replicate that sense of community in an ongoing way. She, along with other dancers, started a forum for Indian dancers based in the New York area as a way to help one another and build on this sense of collegiality:

> Many dancers come to me, and say, "I want to be connected with other dancers and I want a dance community." I think that's probably the most useful thing. That dance community is not confined to a style. The great thing is that if I'm not part of your style, then guess what I am? I'm your audience. They are going to each other's performances, and watching, and that to me has got to have a creative and artistic side effect. If they come here, and work with people there must be something that gets learnt, gets transmitted in that process. You go to an Odissi festival, of course it's amazing because you get to see what other people are doing and absolutely no artist can ignore the things they like, and you don't know where it came from, but it begins to affect your work.

For many of these dancers in New York City, it is a community that caters not only to Odissi dancers, but to dancers broadly trained in these movement traditions.

[133] Takami was an Odissi dancer of Japanese descent who lived in the San Francisco Bay area.

Consequently, it becomes a way of collaborating across artistic disciplines. Mekuria in her study of "pan-West-African" identity in New York shows how the performers who participate in African dance include West Africans, as well as Americans of African and European origin, as well as other groups (Mekuria 2006). This diversity is necessary for artistic as well as financial reasons. Similarly Odissi dancers collaborate, support, and work with dancers trained in other Indian dance forms as well as non-Indian dancers.

The Odissi listserv has also allowed for the blossoming of a virtual community. Dancers post ideas, have discussions, and ask questions about resources as they pertain to Odissi dance, adding to the discourse around Odissi dance. The emrgence and prevalence of YouTube has also played a role. Dancers post videos of performances and workshops so that for most of them, watching Odissi is a click away. A search on "Odissi" on YouTube (in June 2010) generated 2,010 videos ranging from professional to amateur, and with many of them having had over a thousand views each. These performances vary greatly in their production value, many are amateur productions shot on camcorders or mobile phones, while others are sophisticated multi-camera shoots. There are even "vintage" performances of famous Odissi dancers such as Sanjukta Panigrahi originally broadcast on *Doordarshan* (Indian Public television). The performers range in skill, age and talent, from young children performing at school functions to prominent Odissi dancers at prestigious dance festivals.

Figure 34: Bani Ray & Nandini Sikand performing NYC Sthayee at Times Square.
Photo credit: Kristy Hasen

Recently I was to perform with a dance colleague, Rahul Acharya at the 2009 Erasing Borders Festival in New York City. Rahul was traveling to New York from Bhubaneswar, and I was to learn the new 9-minute duet from him. Due to various visa and flight delays, Rahul and I were to have only 4-5 days to work together. I did not have the music recording of the *pallavi* we were to perform. Browsing on YouTube, I found the dance, similar but not identical. It was a recording of a performance by a dancer who belonged to my *gurukul.* The dancer lived in another state of the US, and had travelled to India to learn this item, and had uploaded a performance of this dance on YouTube. Despite some variations, I was at least able to familiarize myself with the music, the

melody and some of the choreography. Although this does not in any way replace learning from a teacher or guru in person, it certainly made my preparation and performance possible in a short period of time.

For many dancers the "imagined" community is expressed through these virtual and non-virtual interactions. The relative anonymity of the internet allows for different notions of belonging, such that dancers may coexist in ways that are sometimes impossible in non-virtual communities. It must, however, be acknowledged that many Odissi dancers are hampered by a digital divide. This is either due to limited or no access to computers, or the fact that the Odissi listservs, and other virtual communities mostly communicate via English. And although many dancers can communicate in English adequately, there is a self-consciousness in doing so in a global and highly-public forum.

Sthan, Kaal, Patra **or Place, Time, Peoples**

As we have seen the notion of "community", and how it is imagined can mean different things to different people, depending on their positionality. But how do dancers imagine "space"? The notion of space is important for any dancer especially as she dances **in** space, and for an Odissi dancer there is the additional component of a sacred space. Historically speaking, Odissi today derives some of its roots from *Jagannath* temple, and is now performed in public spaces, but the performer still (re)creates a sacred space on stage. Pre-performance preparation includes the lighting of incense to bless the performance space, and can take the form of a simple ritual, and/or a *bhumi pranam* (as discussed in Chapter 3). The performance space is also marked with the lighting of a lamp, or the placement of a *Jagannath* deity and/or flowers at a corner downstage to

symbolize *Jagannath.* Sometimes the lamp is lit by the presiding guest of honor which could be a politicians or dignitary, and the lighting of the lamp indicates a blessing and commencement of the show.

There is however another notion of "space", that is tied to a notion of community, and as we shall see later, it is determined through the variables of *sthan, kaal* and *patra* or place, time and peoples.

French Marxist and philosopher, Henri Lefebvre, in "The Production of Space" (1974) makes the distinction between "representational space" and the "representation of space." Representational space is "socially constructed" or produced, such as a home or a park, and its lived aspect implies a notion of time. But it is a kind of space that is characterized by fluidity. Lefebvre's discussion of representational space, (though not explicitly stated in his writing) is similar to recent discussions of place that are connected to the everyday (Dirlik 18). Michel de Certeau (1984) who explains the differences between "space" and "place" says:

> A space exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities and time variables. Thus space is composed of intersections of mobile elements. It is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it. Place occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities….In short, space is a practiced place (Certeau 117).

I am interested here in the variables and mobile elements as they relate to space and place as explained by Certeau, and argue that the concept of *Sthan, Kaal, Patra* or Place, Time, Peoples as used in Indian philosophy and logic have certain similarities. *Sthan, Kaal, Patra* is an indigenous conceptual category that is designed to fix particularity using these three coordinates. (*Sthan* comes from the Indo-Iranian root, and

means “place”. It has been used as a suffix as in Afghani**stan** or Paki**stan.** It is also similar to the word “stand” derived from Indo-European languages). T. N Madan, in a discussion of auspiciousness or *subh* observes that:

> Auspiciousness, then, is an absolute value which manifest as a quality of events in the lives of human actors (*patra*) and involves the dimensions of time *(kaal*) and place (*sthan*) (Madan 1987: 58).

Though Madan uses this triptych in relation to auspiciousness, this concept can be mined in this discussion on “space” and “place.” *Sthan, kaal* and *patra* become three vectors to analyze “space” as per Certeau’s discusion above. However, Certeau’s idea of mobile vectors is such that they are contained **within** space. In contrast, *sthan, kaal* and *patra* are separate variables, and one does not hold primacy over the other, allowing us to look at all three vectors simultaneously. Further, by analyzing *sthan, kaal* and *patra* as variables, we are able to overcome the problem of fixity or boundedness associated with the isomorphism of place and culture which I discussed at the beginning of the chapter. For example, by including *patra*, or people, one is able to accommodate the differences of gender, class or race as a variable. For dancers, these variables are what determines context. And context has been and continues to be critical in determining what is to be performed, for whom and when. Jyoti Srivastava gives an example to illustrate the variable of *sthan*:

> When we wear sari in Delhi, it’s different. The same sari, when we are using in another country, is different. Because we are not having same starch, same dry cleaners to fold the saris, so when we make our folds, it doesn’t come out in the same manner. And when we stay in some other countries, we are washing in washing machine, and we are, self-ironing, we don’t have that crispness. So the same thing happens in the art also. When we are presenting this Odissi in Orissa, we are practicing with guruji, having performances in Orissa, Bhubaneswar, Puri or anywhere, it’s totally different. When myself is presenting in Malaysian

> auditorium or USA or Holland, how can you feel Jaganathji and guruji? No guruji is there at that time. That time your motive is "Oh, this is Odissi. I have to present it in a manner so that people who are not aware of Orissa, are not aware of India, they could enjoy that moment." But that does not mean the West is wrong and Orissa is pure. It's not pure or impure. It's just a circumstance, situation of the geographical conditions. Because geographical conditions are everywhere very important.

The issue of time or *kaal* is also significant. For example, in Hindustani music, some *ragas* or *raginis* are prescribed for particular times of the day or seasons of the year. Kumkum Mohanty talks about *kaal* or time and how in her experience the audience has changed over time:

> Audience has changed a lot, I tell you. What I found in our time audience did not understand anything. But nowadays, you have much better audience. Like in bigger cities, in Bhubaneswar, if there is a dance program, mostly artists attend. Very rarely you'll find the common man. Naturally artists keep quiet. They judge.

Jyoti Srivastava has complained that changes in the audience are actually for the worse:

> It is totally changed now. Initially when we were performing in our younger age, audience expected only a pure form of presentation. They were least bothered about what color costume you wore, how many musicians were there. They were more concentrated on our style or purity of work or composition. But nowadays, people are least bothered about what *gharana*, what concept you are doing, they are not at all bothered. Sometimes they don't even read the pamphlet in hand. The first thing that strike in their mind is what type of costume dancer is wearing. Sometimes it is really irritating. Just after your performance, people are rushing to you and say, "Oh, wonderful! What costume you wore". How stupid? Dance for two hours and they were appreciating the costume? What they are watching, I don't know. So stagecraft is now much more important than your purity of dance. That is the change.

Both Kumkum Mohanty and Jyoti Srivastava talk about contemporary audiences, but in the cities of Bhubaneswar and New Delhi: that is a dissimilar *sthan* but similar *kaal,* and yet their experiences are not homogenous.

Aruna Mohanty addresses the concept of *patra* or people, and says that it is important to tailor your presentation to your audience. On a visit to the United States she performed in a more corporate setting:

> I was talking to a group of engineers from Microsoft, I thought, "If I talk about mythology, this is just useless for them." So I talked about rhythm. I said, "You have used computers and calculators to calculate the fractions. But our musicians and dancers, they calculate this fractions, they bring 9 into 4, 7 into 4". It's a matter of few seconds. And they go on multiplying it, dividing it and create patterns, rhythmic structure, and dance is based on that structure. So I challenge you to do that as fast as musicians." That made them really surprised. This is something we should listen to and understand and work out. So it was a very good interactive session. So you have to understand the level of intellect of audience and communicate accordingly.

This experience of Mohanty to communicate to a group of engineers is based on a key component of *rasa* theory of performance. Most Odissi dancers continually adjust to new contexts and new audiences, and the ability to know your audience is crucial. These adjustments can be varied, such as performing at Lincoln Center for hundreds of people to a performance at a small preschool in New Jersey. The dancer is constantly adjusting, compensating and translating, and makes decisions about what is kept and what is discarded. The dancers, therefore, take into account the factors of *sthan, kaal and patra,* deciding what and how to perform. Is it a daytime dance festival in an urban setting? Or is it a full-length evening recital for political and cultural dignitaries? Is it a recital hall or living room? The *patra* or people (both audience and the resources available, such as musicians etc), *sthan,* or the place, which includes the context and the geographical location, and the time or *kaal* of performance, all three vectors play a role.

Lost in Translation?

Many Odissi dancers particularly when performing for a non-Indian audience, present a simplified narrative of the piece they are about to perform. This is most often done before an *abhinaya* dance item rather than a purely rhythmic one. Under a single spotlight, the dancer appears before a microphone on stage to complete a two to three minute story with *mudras* (hand gestures) to preview what the audience is going to see. This process of translation before the actual performance involves more than translating the language (Oriya or Sanskrit) of the lyrics but also involves translating the dance. The dancer uses the *mudras* as a way to explain the item, that when used during the actual performance become signifiers for the audience, who are then able to follow the narrative more closely. Janet O'Shea in her article, "At Home in the World: The Bharatnatyam Dancer as Transnational Interpreter" explains the problematic of this kind of translation in a Bharatnatyam dance performance:

> The explanation of *mudras* in succession interprets the "Eastern" choreography through the "Western" linguistic system. The English-language epistemology thereby emerges as the means through which the audience finds the choreography intelligible. Thus, this style of translation relies upon a problematic that treats the English-language framework as a mere explanatory device without its own cultural coding. A spoken interlocution thus risks representing Bharatnatyam more as a means of entry into a cultural field of reference, than as a set of choreographic choices and compositional devices (O'Shea 2003: 177).

There are a few problems with this process of translation. One, it sets up a barrier for dancers who are not comfortable "performing" in English, and limits their choices as how best to "translate" their dance. Second, this kind of translation frames the dance as one that must be decoded by learning its cultural signs. Framing the dance in such a way, perpetuates the idea that in order to experience the dance fully, it must first be translated,

and builds on the assumption that the audience must be given certain basic knowledge. Finally, this kind of translation also contributes to the idea that these choreographies are "fixed texts," and can only be understood via translation provided by the dancer. Consequently, when dance forms like Odissi and Bharatnatyam are performed in the transnational public sphere they are viewed then not just as dance, but rather cultural forms that require translation. Also relevant to this discussion is the *Rasa* theory of performance as it relates to the audience-spectator relationship. The ideal spectator/viewer or the *rasika* (one who can taste the *rasa* or essence), is one who is well-versed in all the arts, as well as being aware of the cultural specifics of language and context. So when performing for a Western audience, it could be argued that this need to "translate" is required as per the prescription of *Rasa* theory. This means of translation is a way for the dancer to **create** a *rasik* audience, (for what is assumed to be an uninitiated audience), in a short period of time.

Many non-Indian viewers have confessed to preferring highly rhythmic dance pieces (*nritta*) to *abhinaya* ones because they feel it is easier to understand. Some of the non-Indian viewers I spoke with said they appreciated having the piece translated for them beforehand, while others felt it distracted them away from "experiencing" the piece. In contrast, Kumkum Mohanty, who is based in Bhubaneswar, posits that audiences there prefer *abhinaya* items to more rhythmic dances or pure dance items because they are generally performed in Oriya and easier to understand. Kumkum Mohanty explains:

> Previously audience used to like pure dance. Nowadays they like *abhinaya,* because they can follow. But if you do something in Sanskrit, they won't follow. Naturally there will be some murmur in the auditorium. But if you do one Oriya song, which they can follow, they will keep quiet and enjoy. So *abhinaya* is better appreciated by the audience than pure dance. But pure dance is

> understood only by 0.5%, only artists, who know rhythm. There are some items in which too many rhythm patterns are sung and played in the music, which nobody understands. If you perform that, nowadays, of course the audience keep quiet, but that interaction between the artist and audience is less than in *abhinaya.*

However, these same *abhinaya* pieces are not as popular with Western audiences because it is harder for them to follow. Consequently what is "accessible" to an audience in each city can vary. And dancers are aware of who their audience is. A dance performance in New York City, for example has a mixed audience of people, some of whom have never seen any form of Indian dance, others who may be rigorously trained Odissi dancers who live and perform in New York City, and still others who are dancers in other fields, and have a deep understanding of movement and choreography but are new to the Indian dance forms. So as performers what should be translated? Should it be akin to a literary glossary of terms? Or should one use indigenous terms and content to maintain the authenticity? By calling it translation, are we perpetuating the idea that dance is in need of translation? And when does translation shade into interpretation? Further, are these terms of translation, which originate from a linguistic model, adequate to talk about dance which is experiential? And does the act of translation in whatever language change the experience of dance from an experiential to a linguistic one?[134]

Many dancers have tried to find creative ways to "explain" their performances. For a Trinayan Collective performance of *Sakshi/Witness*, Rajika Puri performed the role of *sutradhar*, a concept borrowed from Indian theatre. *Sutradhar* is the "narrator" in traditional Indian theater – who weaves in and out of the narrative with stories, chants, poetry, and commentary. The *sutradhar* functions as a way to break the fourth wall

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[134] Some of these questions were posed by Joan L. Erdman in "Performance as Translation: Uday Shankar in the West." The Drama Review: TDR, Volume 31, No.1. (Spring 1987). pgs 64-88.

between audience and performer. In this case, Rajika Puri explained what was happening on stage, and performed with dancers onstage. At the beginning of the show, and with the house lights still on, several dancers ambled on to stage as they chatted with one another, and fixed each other's hair and jewelry. The *sutradhar* was part of this group that emerged from the audience, and gently faded offstage into the wings, but then remained on stage to seamlessly introduce the first dance. The goal of the *sutradhar* was to weave together the separate dances through storytelling and music, without a formal explanation, and find a creative way to impart contextual information. That is, to find ways to bring out the nuance of the dance or movement rather than explaining through more conventional demonstrations and program notes. Ultimately, it is a challenge to find a way to communicate information such as the history or myth that the movement builds on. And then how much information is too much? Madhavi Mudgal says:

> When I'm performing, normally I don't explain. In Europe, never. Even there are no announcements. Only written in program notes. But if it's a lecture, then it is a lecture demonstration. Performance should be a performance because when the dancer comes and stands in front of the microphone and speaks, I think the whole magic is destroyed. Why do you want everybody to understand everything? Let them perceive something. Let it be an exchange like that. I'm sure that good art doesn't need that. When it's otherwise, you need to talk about. Dance doesn't need any talk.

Finding a balance between the magic of performance, and clarity of content is one that dancers struggle with, especially as new audiences and contexts emerge.

I would like to stress the important role Indian music has played in introducing Indian dance to Western audiences. Performers such as Ravi Shankar and Ali Akbar Khan helped create audiences by performing at major music festivals in the United States and Europe in the second half of the 20th century. In fact, Odissi dancer, Ritha Devi

credits Ravi Shankar with helping her build her career in the 1960s (Avachat 2010). Western musicians collaborating with Indian artists, and an increase in diasporic audiences have also contributed to the popularity of Indian music. Performing with live musicians (as opposed to taped music) is worthy of advertisement, especially for non-Indian audiences.

Imagining the Sacred

At the Erasing Borders Festival in 2008, Shobana Ram, a Bharatnatyam dancer and Carnatic vocalist posed an interesting question to a panel entitled "Reinterpreting Tradition." She asked the panelists:

> When I think about tradition and traditional dance, in the way I learnt it, much of the emphasis was the relationship of the dancer to the divine. How does everyone interpret that?

I quote two of the responses to this question. The first dancer, Lata Pada talks about a piece she choreographed called *Shunya.* For her, exploring the concept of *shunya* was a way of interpreting her relationship to the sacred:

> *Shunya* is a new work about the concept of zero. For me, it emerged from a very personal journey into the investigation of that void, the absence of nothingness, absence of emptiness, And how different world religions perceive Shunya. In Darwinism, Buddhism and Sufism and Hinduism, and how it has been an important symbol to all these cultures but yet the emphasis has been different. For example in Buddhism, it's about *Shunnyata*, about emptiness, but emptiness, not meaning void; emptiness to be then filled again. Whereas Hinduism relates directly to the *bindu*, the point of consciousness, and the smallest representation represents the whole. So for me it's a deeply spiritual subject but interpreted in a very different way.

Preeti Vasudevan, another dancer answered:

> I'd say in the energy or flow of the movement. It means that you are not just going from point A to point B and stopping. You are actually journeying from the moment you begin, to the moment you feel you have completed a phrase you want to speak. Therefore you are not going from pose to pose or posture to posture. If you are calling it dancing, then the notion of dancing is that you are in constant motion of speaking or storytelling in whatever manner. Therefore that energy of realizing that is in your physical limbs. If you do martial art or yoga, starting from the breath to moving, your physical body movement is the discipline of it. It helps to connect the mind; there is no disconnection of the mind and body. It is one unit, it's one cycle. So my work is trying to locate that, it's trying to find that movement in your physicality until it takes you to a space of spirituality.

Both responses deal with the notion of spirituality, albeit in different ways. Lata Pada, explains hers via a comparative analysis of a philosophical concept, as delineated in various schools of thought. Preeti Vasudevan describes spirituality in the context of her body moving in space, in short through her bodily practice or *sadhana:* but both dancers define their own spirituality via movement and certain cultural contexts.

For most dancers, spirituality is imagined in different ways allowing dancers to create, and recreate their individual sense of belonging. Each dancer experiments with movement, and authors her own space, whether it a patch of grass, a dirt floor or a public plaza. A fluid notion of spirituality allows these dancers to borrow from the ritual history of Odissi, and perform it on a world stage. The specifics of the ritual may have changed, but the spirit of it has been reworked and reconfigured by these dancers. Or as Ananya Chatterjea describes it, this "politics of unbelonging" actually provide a source of belonging:

> That politics of unbelonging, I feel puts me in a great space. When I found politics of solidarity, I'd say it's my greatest joy that I dance with a group of women who kick my ass if I do something crazy. My home is where my dancing feet land with my women. I just wanted to claim that is a very radical and positive space in my life.

Conclusion

The major questions that have framed my research have been: what varying notion of "tradition"(s) guide these dance 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? And how has Odissi emerged as a cultural product in the context of a global market? I have shown Odissi to be a highly-produced, fluid and mobile medium that crosses boundaries, and is continuously reinvented. My argument is two-fold: first, there is a thriving global community of Odissi dancers from all over the world who practice, teach and perform this dance, yet this global community is one marked by broad variance and heterogeneity. Second, Odissi has changed to accommodate new contexts and audiences, and it continues to do so. This change is evident from its history, and is also built into cultural understanding and practice of Odissi as a form of expression. The notion of tradition these dancers employ creatively and strategically, is one of fluidity, rather than one of fixity.

The impetus for this dissertation, and the final formulation of these questions arose from trying to understand many of the contradictions and ironies that came to light during my work as a practitioner in India and the United States. Trying to theorize about a form that is in constant movement has been both a challenge and an inspiration. Many

of the dancers to whom I spoke have found strategies to articulate their views and perform them on a global stage, even if this global stage is highly heterogeneous. Since my work has focused primarily in the US and India, I hope that scholars will explore new sites of where Odissi is reinvented and imagined, and examine how practitioners engage and create new contexts. Additionally, how these movement practices, through collaboration and exchange, have affected other dance forms, both Indian and non-Indian is another area of possible research and exploration. A review of British Kathak dancer, Akram Khan in New Yorker magazine (October 2006) cited his work as being a stripped down version of Indian dance that kept the "steely parts" of the form. According to the reviewer, Joan Acocella, Khan's work is important not simply in itself, but also for its potential to bring back a musicality that is lost to modern dance in the West. The study of these interactions between "Eastern" and "Western" forms, are especially valuable, as are the ways in which Indian dance is perceived and written about.

I talked to dancers, critics and impresarios involved with Odissi dance and asked them to describe how they saw the future of the form developing. Jayant Kastuar, Kathak dancer and Secretary of the *Sangeet Natak Akademi* says:

> Odissi dance is a national art, and now an international expression of dance. We cannot expect, and cannot wish that our art, our style of expression travels worldwide, is accepted worldwide, practiced worldwide, and then not interpreted worldwide in different ways as creative minds would love to do. I would say that there will be these changes; there will be these attempts and, experiments. An artist must be allowed this kind of a freedom.

Figure 35: Ananya Chatterjea in *Ashesh Barsha* (2009).
All photos courtesy of Ananya Dance Theatre. Photo credit Paul Virtucio

Dinanath Pathy in Bhubaneswar predicts new forms of Odissi:

> The ownership, the possession will go from Orissa, Orissa cannot claim anymore, I don't mind because we belong to the world of global Odissi. It's nobody's property finally and this Odissi doesn't belong to Orissa, the present Odissi doesn't belong to

> Orissa, it belongs to everybody, so we should not claim. If you are happy with African music, if you want to dance who stops you from that? Tell me, nobody stops you from doing painting so why should somebody stop you? Is it a restricted kind of dance? No it's open, any creative art is open, so dance should be more open. But they fear that, "Oh probably it may not look like Odissi". So this Odissi, 21st century Odissi, is completely different from the Oriya Odissi, it belongs to everybody; everybody has the right to change it. Somebody is dancing to African music, I say it's okay. Fine, dance to African music, it's wonderful. It will evolve, whether I do it or whether he does it. If you can't do it in Orissa, it will be in New York, but there's a need for change.

There is an acknowledgement of the global nature of this form, and that if Odissi is to be taken seriously on a world stage then a certain "letting go" must occur. Lata Pada says that one way to ensure that Indian dance moves into a world arena is to move beyond Indian dance being looked at as Indian dance:

> Today we are not asking whether ballet originated in Russia or New York. We just call it ballet. Why can't Bharatnatyam or Kathak become such forms when they truly are the World art form, dance forms, yoga dance forms? Forget about who's doing it. Forget about whether it's the Diaspora, whether it's non-South Asian performing it. Forget about all these things. They are truly global art forms and they need to be recognized as such.

Leela Venkataraman, a dance critic and writer, predicted a separation of form and content for Odissi as it continues to spread to different parts of the world:

> More and more people will learn Odissi, there is no question. But it shouldn't become spread thin like a sandwich. I have a feeling that people could dance outside will know very little of either the Oriya language or the Oriya poetry. It's going to break up more. They are going to associate the dance form with just the movements and nothing else. And you don't have people to teach Odissi music, teach the language or to go into Oriya poetry, it's only one-sided. I think it's only the technique that is going to become more and more popular and the technique you can use anywhere you want to. The form and the content, I think they are going to split. And I don't think the entirety of it is going to go, the integrated outlook and that *desi* element is going to get less. It's bound to.

For Venkataraman, dancers will continue to learn the technique but will not learn the regional context from which it emerges. This separation of technique and context implies that in time, the context of Orissa may fade. I argue that technique and context have *always* been in dynamic engagement, as the story of Odissi, and the dancers in this ethnography have provided varying refractions of this engagement. Although the regional context of Orissa may shift dancers will create new contexts. And whether dancers perform *Krishna-Radha* stories or enact mythological demons, or whether they focus on transnational feminist issues, each dancer will continue to imagine and embody the spirit of the Odissi in varied ways. Ultimately, for a community characterized by movement, I am confident that Odissi practitioners worldwide will continue the tradition of dialogue, exchange and renewal, and each dancer will dance the form into new cities and spaces, creating new contexts and communities.

Key Informants (alphabetical by last name)

Rahul Acharya is a dancer based in Bhubaneswar, and a student of Guru Durga Charan Ranbir**.** He was recently awarded the prestigious *Bismillah Khan* youth award (2010) and has been a recipient of junior and senior scholarships from the Government of India.

Sharmila Biswas is a Kolkata-based dancer, and heads the *Odissi Vision and Movement Centre.* She has trained with Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra, and has received junior and senior fellowships from the Government of India, the *Sangeet Natak Akademi*, as well as the prestigious *Mahari* Award (2010). Sharmila has also been trained in a variety of folk and music traditions of Orissa.

Shyamhari Chakra is a journalist and dance critic based in Bhubaneswar. He currently writes for *The Hindu* (Bhubaneswar), a newspaper on arts, culture and tourism. Shyamhari also contributes regularly to *Nartanam Dance Quarterly, Sruti, Attendance Annual* and *Narthaki.com*.

Ananya Chatterjea is a dancer/choreographer and dance scholar based in Minnesota, MN. She is an Associate Professor at the Department of Theater Arts and Dance at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis. She is also the Artistic Director of *Ananya Dance Theatre*, a dance company of women artists of color dedicated to community building and social justice.

Ileana Citaristi is a dancer of Italian origin, based in Bhubaneswar. She is a disciple of Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra, and has received the prestigious *Padmashree* award from the Government of India for her contribution to Odissi dance. Ileana is also the author of a book of Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra, "The Making of a Guru" (2001).

Reela Hota is a Delhi-based dancer, and a disciple of Guru Gangadhar Pradhan, Madhavi Mudgal and Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra.

Sunil Kothari is a dance critic, writer and scholar of Indian classical dances, and has over 12 books to his credit. Dr. Kothari was a dance critic of the *Times of India* group of publications, and wrote for them for 40 years as a dance critic. He has held academic positions at Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata and Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

Madhavi Mudgal is a Delhi-based dancer and one of the foremost disciples of Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra. Madhavi Mudgal has been awarded the Sanskriti Award, the President of India award, the Padmashree and the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award for her contribution to Indian dance. She teaches at *Gandharva Mahavidyalaya* in Delhi, a premier institution dedicated to Indian music and dance. In 1985 she organized *Angahaar*, one of the first Odissi dance festivals.

Kumkum Mohanty is a senior dancer and foremost disciple of Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra. She was the chair of the Odissi Research Centre and carried out noteworthy

work in Odissi research, including the publication of the Odissi Dance Pathfinder. She is also the Special Secretary (Culture) to the Government of Orissa. She has been awarded the Orissa Sangeet Natak Akademi and the National Sangeet Natak Akademi Awards.

Leena Mohanty is a disciple of Guru Durga Charan Ranbir. Along with her sister, Leesa Mohanty they run *Bansi Bilas,* an institution involved in training young and upcoming dancers of Guru Deba Prasad Das gurukul in Bhubaneswar. They also organize the annual *Basant Utsav* dance festival in Bhubaneswar which showcases Indian classical dance.

Ratnikant Mohapatra is a Bhubaneswar-based dancer, choreographer and percussionist. He is the Artistic Director of *Srjan,* a premier institution founded by his father Guru Keulcharan Mohapatra. Ratnikant has won several awards for his work, and has most recently choreographed Odissi dance for the film, *The Desire*, an Indo-China co-production.

Sujata Mohapatra is a leading exponent of Odissi dance, and is based in Bhubaneswar. She is a foremost disciple, and daughter-in law of Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra. She is a principal dancer and senior faculty at *Srjan*, and has won recognition for her work including the prestigious *Mahari* Award.

Dhirenderanath Patnaik, a revivalist of the *Jayantika* movement and the author of Odissi Dance (1971), one of the first books published on Odissi in English.

Rajika Puri is a New York City-based Bharatnatyam and Odissi dancer. She has performed extensively and also has a career in Western theater. Rajika has studied western music, modern dance and Flamenco. She holds an MA from New York University, and has written for publications such as Semiotica and Playbill magazine.

Durga Charan Ranbir is the leading exponent of the Guru Deba Prasad Das gurukul. He is the founder and director of *Nrutyayan*, a dance institution based in Bhubaneswar, and has a number of disciples worldwide. He was awarded the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 2005.

Jyoti Srivastava is a Delhi-based dancer and a disciple of Srinath Raut and Guru Durga Charan Ranbir. She has also studied Mohiniattam, Manipuri and other folk forms. She has done in depth research on the style and compositions of Guru Deb Prasad Das in her capacity as the Director of the Nehru Institute of Odissi Research and Training in Delhi.

Rekha Tandon is a dancer/choreographer and divides her time between her dance studio in Bhubaneswar, and a monastery in Wales. She received her initial training in Odissi from Surenderanath Jena, and subsequently with Madhavi Mudgal, Guru Trinath Maharana and Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra. Rekha Tandon also has a Ph.D. in Dance Studies from Laban in London. Tandon, with her partner and collaborator, Michael Weston founded *Dance Routes* in 1997.

Leela Venkataraman is a Delhi-based dance critic and writer for *The Hindu* (Delhi). She is widely traveled and has participated in national and international seminars and dance events. Leela Venkataraman has written extensively for journals in India and abroad. Her publications include, “Indian Classical dance: Tradition in Transition”, “Bharatanatyam: Step by Step” and “A Dancing Phenomenon - Birju Maharaj.”

Glossary of Terms

Abhinaya: *Abhinaya* is the art of expressing a particular mood *(rasa*) or sentiment in dance or drama. It is sometimes referred to as stylized mime and is considered distinct from pure dance or *nritta.*

Abhinaya Chandrika: A Sanskrit text in Oriya script which details unique elements of Odissi dance. It is dated between the 12th and 17th century, though some argue it is a 20th century text.

Abhinaya Darpanam: A Sanskrit text on aesthetics that dates to a period between the 5th and 13th century.

Ananda: Experiential pleasure akin to spiritual bliss or ecstasy that is evoked by *rasa* in performance.

Battu: See *Sthayee.*

Bhakti: Literally "devotion." A form of devotional expression and mysticism that began in South India in the 6th and 7th centuries and later spread to North India.

Bhumi Pranam: The initial prayer to Mother Earth before dancing during practice or performance.

Bol: Rhythmic syllables used to keep *taal* or beat.

Chowka: One of the two basic postures in Odissi. It is based on the square stance of Lord *Jagannath.*

Devadasi: Another word for "temple dancer". It is a term used more commonly outside Orissa.

Ghungroos: Bells worn around a dancers ankles. They are either strung together on a rope or sewn on with a leather backing. The number of bells can vary across dance style.

Gotipua: It means "single boy" and refers to male performers in Odissi dance.

Gurukul/Gharana**:** A school or lineage within a dance style, the aesthetics of which are developed by the *gharanedar* or leading exponent of that particular style.

Guru-shishya: The traditional relationship between the guru and disciple.

Jayantika**:** A revivalist group comprised of gurus and scholars who were responsible for the codification of Odissi dance in the late 1950s and 1960's.

Mahari: The Oriya word for *devadasi* or "temple dancer."

Manchapravesh: It is the debut performance of a soloist. It is also known as an *arangetram* in Bharatnatyam.

Mangalacharan: Invocatory dance generally performed at the beginning of the Odissi *margam* and includes the *trikhanda pranam*, a three-way salutation to guru, god and audience.

Manjira: Brass hand cymbals that used to keep *taal.*

Margam: In Odissi, it is the standard repertoire of dances that were formalized by Jayantika. Most Indian classical dances have their own form of the *margam*.

Moksha: The final dance in the Odissi *margam*, symbolizing the merging of the dancer with the divine.

Mudras: Symbolic hand gestures that vary in meaning depending on context. Sometimes referred to as *hastas* or *hasta mudras*.

Natya Shastra: It is acknowledged as the oldest surviving text on stagecraft in the world and is dated somewhere between the second century BCE and 2nd century AD. Authored by Bharata, it encompasses dramaturgy, dance and music.

Nritta: Pure dance without a narrative. Often rhythmic in nature, and with a focus on the melody and rhythm.

Nritya: Expressional dance or dance that incorporates *abhinaya.*

Odhni:. The piece of cloth worn by dancers over the sari blouse and across the chest.

Pakhawaj: Two-sided drum unique to Orissa.

Pallavi: A rhythmic dance in Odissi based on a particular *raag* or *ragini* that builds in rhythmic complexity and speed.

Parampara: A form of successive tradition.

Raag or Ragini: A musical melody determined by the arrangement of the basic scale. The former is considered "male," and the latter, "female".

Rasa: The essence or mood conveyed through performance.

Rasika: A member of the audience who is able to appreciate the nuance of performance; a connoisseur.

Sadhana: The art of a guided practice.

Saivite: A branch of Hinduism which focuses on the worship of Shiva.

Shastra: Scriptures or canonical texts.

Shishya: Disciple.

Sloka or Shloka: Verse in Sanskrit.

Sthayee or Battu: A dance in the Odissi *margam* based on the sculptures and stone temples in Orissa.

Taal: Roughly translates as a cycle of beats in the music. Variations in a dance or by a dancer varies, and is often a showcase of the dancers' and percussionists' skill.

Tantra: A form of Hindu and Buddhist religious practice.

Tribhanga: One of two basic postures in Odissi, it is named after the three bends of head, torso and hip.

Trikhanda Pranam: A three-way salutation to guru, god and audience.

Vaisanavite: A branch of Hinduism which worships Vishnu and his avatars such as Krishna and Rama.

Ukkuta: Rhythmic syllables used to keep *taal* or beat. Also referred to as *bol.*

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