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Beyond tradition: The practice of *sadhana* in Odissi dance

ABSTRACT

*Based on fieldwork in sites such as New York and Bhubaneswar, this article exam-
ines how a group of dancers work within and beyond the traditions of Odissi dance
as a way to expand the existing repertoire or* margam *(literally, pathway). How
are new works produced and what constitutes innovation in a dance form that is
frequently identified as a traditional one? This article argues that tradition(s) func-
tion as an interlocutor that dancers engage with continuously and dynamically to
create innovative work. This innovation is accomplished via the daily practice of*
sadhana, *such that innovation becomes an embodiment of that effort. By exploring
Odissi through the embodied knowledge of its practitioners and their* sadhana, *this
article provides an alternate way to understand a dance rooted in a ritual form, now
performed on a global stage, in the language of the humanities and social sciences.*

In her article 'Dancing *off*-stage: Nationalism and its "minor practices" in
Tamil Nadu', Kalpana Ram (2009) argues that there are two fundamental
weaknesses in dance scholarship. She describes the first weakness as follows:
'Yet for all its insights into the political construction of gender and nation-
hood, 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 Ram identifies is that 'we have not sufficiently allowed Indian dance

1. 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.

2. The work of Janet O'Shea (2007) and other practitioners such as Pallabi Chakravorty (2000, 2008) and Uttara Asha Coorlawala (1994, 2004) has explored Bharatanatyam and Kathak in this global context. I am also aware of Anurima Banerji's (New York University) doctoral thesis on Odissi dance.

3. 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 of approaching the notion of tradition.

4. Ratna Roy discusses the ambiguity around this date in her book *Neo-Classical Odissi Dance* (2009).

and performance traditions to inform our epistemology and methodology in the social sciences and humanities' (2009: 4).[1] 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.[2] 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, change is also built into a cultural understanding of the tradition and practice of Odissi. The notions of tradition these dancers employ is distinct from western ideas that often suggest fixity and stasis.[3] Consequently, for many Odissi dancers terms like 'traditional' and 'contemporary' become a site of debate as these dancers present their work to non-Indian audiences and increasingly globalized Indian audiences.

I analyse the work of some 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 and new audiences abroad. Many of these dancers describe tradition via metaphors of nature, such as rivers and streams. Their ideas of tradition and their resultant innovation reflect the fluidity of these metaphors, such that the 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 even though the history of Indian dance has always been fraught with anxieties about maintaining the authenticity of traditional forms. 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 is what fosters innovation. Tradition(s) thus function as an interlocutor that dancers engage with continuously and dynamically to create innovative work that is accomplished through *sadhana*/daily practice such that innovation becomes an embodiment of that effort.

This article is part of a larger, multi-sited ethnographic study conducted in New York, New Delhi, Kolkata, Khajuraho, Alexandria, Virginia and Bhubaneswar from 2005 to 2009 and with a research population divided into three categories: dancers (gurus, students and performers), critics (dance critics and writers), and bureaucrats and presenters (government officials and organizers). For this article, I focus my work on dancers in India and the United States who travelled between the two countries, as well as dancers who did not (or could not). 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 and embody the complementary sides of practitioner and scholar.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ODISSI

Odissi, one of eight Indian 'classical' dances, was officially codified in 1958 through the formation of Jayantika, a group of gurus and scholars who came together in the mid-twentieth century.[4] However, this fact is often elided in historical and national narratives of the dance that invoke a seamless trajectory back to antiquity citing both sculptural and scriptural evidence. The Odissi

of today is described as drawing on the traditions of the *maharis*, the female temple dancers, and the *gotipuas*, male dancers. The *maharis* participated in temple rituals as early as the ninth century AD, and their presence continued until the sixteenth century. By the twentieth century, the practice of their dance had declined and they found it extremely hard to survive. The *gotipuas*, who performed dressed as women, came into existence during the seventeenth century.[5] Unlike the *maharis*, they were not affiliated with the temple but with *akhadas*/gymnasiums. The practice of this form of the dance moved to the *akhadas* and its practitioners also became known as *akhadapilas* or boys of the *akhada*. 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).[6]

The British eventually took over the management of Jagannath temple in 1803. According to Patnaik, this time marked the beginning of the *maharis'* association with 'concubinage', largely because the temple, which provided stipends for the *maharis*, ceased to do 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 centre of Odissi dance and performance. 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, 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 (Chatterjea 2004: 149). As moral policing increased, their way of life became more penurious and unsustainable. Without a steady income, the *maharis* were forced to rely on other means, which sometimes meant sex work.

Many of the gurus who were part of Jayantika were originally *gotipuas* and part of *jatra* groups (street theatre). Notably, even though many of the gurus who participated in the reconstruction of Odissi were trained as *gotipuas*, they fashioned the form of the solo female dancer after the tradition of the *maharis*; the actual *maharis*, however, were excluded from the dialogue during the Jayantika revival and reconstruction. It is ironic that the mystique of the *mahari* was exploited and perpetuated even though she was excluded from the project of reconstruction. By drawing on the evocative tropes of the *mahari* dancer, the claim to authenticity becomes historically validated and spiritually sanctified, for it is considered closer to antiquity and spirituality than the more recent *gotipua* tradition. By doing so, it builds on the fetishization of a female form that forwards a more hetero-normative perspective of the dance than that of the *gotipuas*. The erasure of the old and arthritic *maharis* was a necessary step in the consolidation of the romanticized image of the *mahari*; middle-class and upper-caste female Odissi dancers with their male gurus reworked the image of the *mahari* and the 'new' national female dancer came into being, one who was able to cross regional and local barriers. 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.

Jayantika was responsible for the fixing of the Odissi *margam*, the developmental pathway of Indian 'classical' dance. Jayantika members decided the sequence and number of dances that count towards an evening-length recital, indicating a shift towards a western concert format. The original *mahari*

5. I intentionally do not use the phrase 'dressed in drag' because it belies a western notion of cross-dressing.

6. *Vaishnavism* is a school of Hinduism that worships Vishnu and his avatars. Krishna is believed to be an incarnation of Vishnu.

7. This opening dance item is sometimes also referred to as *Pushpanjali* in other styles of Odissi dance.

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, which began at its outermost premises and culminated at the inner sanctum. Similar to the items prescribed in Bharatnatyam, the pieces in the traditional *margam*, even today, are as follows: *Mangalacharan*,[7] an opening prayer to the presiding deity, followed by a pure dance rhythmic piece called *Batu Nritya* or *Sthayee Nritya*. *Pallavi*, a rhythmic item, is 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. It is this *margam* that is considered to be the correct and authentic version of Odissi, even though it is a significant departure from the Odissi of the *maharis*.

DYNAMIC TRADITION: THE NATURE METAPHOR

How does one begin the discussion of 'tradition' as a possible analytical category without the risk of essentialism? In interviews, various dancers discussed what tradition meant to them. Aruna Mohanty, an Odissi dancer based in Bhubaneswar, said:

> It [Odissi] is traditional. Like the flow of water, streams come from different directions and merge with the main stream. That keep[s] the water fresh and the flow will go on. But the boundary should not be eliminated [or] there won't be any difference between Bollywood dance and Odissi.

Mohanty's view of tradition is expressed as a flowing stream with several new ones adding to the mix, accommodating the flow of new ideas as it builds on older traditions. Despite this analogy of free-flowing movement, she stresses the importance of maintaining borders. Her analogy with water can be misleading since free-flowing streams do not necessarily respect boundaries. As much as this idea of a dynamic tradition exists, there is the simultaneous need for its fixity to be maintained, so that Odissi can be distinguished from more commercial forms of dance, especially those threatened by Bollywood. For Kolkata-based dancer-choreographer Sharmila Biswas, tradition is also a naturalized and dynamic concept, in her case 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 […] 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. 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 its practice and interpretation. By using metaphors of fluidity and movement to describe

tradition, the engagement with it also becomes a dialectical process. Part of this can be explained by a notion of a 'living' tradition that comes from the Sanskrit term *parampara*, which is a loose translation of the English word tradition. But *parampara*, unlike tradition, is closer in meaning to the fluid metaphors described above. *Parampara* 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, elaborates on this critical difference between *parampara* and tradition:

> Our tradition is always moving, otherwise it would have died if it were 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 the notion of a living, flowing continuity that explains these natural metaphors that suggest dynamism and movement. Further, since most of these dancers are bilingual (Hindi and English), trilingual (Hindi, English and Oriya) or speak as many as four languages (Hindi, English, Oriya and Bengali), 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 hand-ing-down of patterns of behavior, practices, and beliefs that are valued by a culture'.[8] Acknowledging this slippage of translation, Dipesh Chakrabarty in 'Provincializing Europe' describes a problematic of 'rough translation'. These were often derived from colonialist literature and replicated colonialist approx-imations, and to 'challenge that model of "rough translation" is to pay critical and unrelenting attention to the very process of translation' (Chakrabarty 2000: 17). Perhaps these 'rough translations' are such that tradition remains an inadequate and 'rough translation' for the word *parampara*. As these danc-ers move between the discursive worlds of India and the West – and between the languages of English and Oriya (or Hindi or Bengali) – they address the power and consequences of both languages in how they position and perform their work. These varied notions of tradition or *parampara* are perpetuated by highly naturalized metaphors of nature, allowing them the freedom to interpret the traditions of Odissi both strategically and innovatively.

THE PRACTICE OF *SADHANA*

How does one analyse a ritual practice entwined with the sacred, now performed on a global stage, in the language of the social sciences? Chakrabarty makes the argument that in order to write secular histories one often ignores the sacred (2000: 72). For a dance like Odissi that is both secular and sacred, especially in its current form, the scholar/translator/dancer faces a challenge of translation. I argue that the lines that are supposed to separate the 'sacred' and 'secular' are actually blurrier than Chakrabarty posits, and that though boundaries do exist, the cordoning off happens through everyday, unmarked movement practices, that are part of a daily practice as well as a perform-ance practice. Consequently, if we are to understand the secular and sacred, it is crucial that we pay attention to the daily practice and the performance, recognizing that the secular and the sacred are not easily demarcated, but can

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

be contained in the same spatial setting. To illustrate, the simple act of taking off our shoes before we enter a rehearsal or performance space can be viewed as an everyday demarcation between secular and sacred space. The *bhumi pranam,* the first movement phrase a student of Indian dance will learn, is described as asking permission from the Earth before dancing, and is a simple squat and bow to the ground, completed by placing dust of the floor on one's forehead or placing the crown of one's head on the floor. If the dancer practices alone, the *bhumi pranam* marks the beginning and the end of practice even if the guru is not present. The *bhumi pranam* during perform-ance is incorporated into the first invocatory dance of the *margam*, the *Mangalacharan*. And if the performance departs from the traditional *margam,* then often performers will do it onstage before the performance or back-stage in the green room. This *bhumi pranam* is an acknowledgement of the sacred, but is folded into an unmarked practice through a gestural and spatial demarcation that transforms the space from an unmarked, secular space into a sacred, performance space.

As another way to understand a bodily practice that is not completely 'secular', I employ the use of the term *sadhana*/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*[9] is not unique to dance, and is also used by practitioners of yoga, music and other performing arts. In yoga, the lived life of a *yogi*/yoga prac-titioner 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 or performing, *sadhana* informs how you conduct yourself both on-and offstage. *Sadhana* then becomes a means to develop this aptitude of bodily discipline through repetition and awareness. During my fieldwork, much of the anxiety that I heard about around the practice and performance of Odissi concerned a lack of *sadhana*. Kumkum Mohanty, a dancer based in Bhubaneswar, talks passionately about the importance of *sadhana*:

> *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. I must say that invisible power supports somebody. I must do 7 hours, 8 hours practice. Practice without supervision has no meaning. 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 is necessary for a dancer to achieve a level of success.

TECHNIQUES OF THE BODY

Marcel Mauss in his now classic essay 'Les techniques du corps'/'Techniques of the body' (1934) wrote of the 'self-developable' body in. For Mauss 'prestigious imitation' or education plays a crucial role in the development of our bodily techniques that are socially and institutionally prescribed (1934: 101). The person with authority performs the action that is then imitated

by the student. This analysis by Mauss 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 guided repetition, or repetition with awareness. It is a technique grounded in our social realities that eventually become part of our body memory. Mauss is aware of the limitations of these categories to explain the importance of the sacred within one's bodily training, 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'.
>
> (1934: 122)

Mauss is keenly aware that a deeper study of this mind–body connection, prevalent in certain bodily techniques outside western movement practices, could lead to a fruitful understanding. 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. I do not mean to suggest that this entwining of a dance practice with the divine is uniquely Indian. American modern dancer and choreographer Martha Graham has written about dance in a way that is closely aligned with the notion of *sadhana*,

> 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.
>
> (1988: 66)

It is clear that for Graham, too, the idea of practice is paramount and by honing our practice we access a realm beyond the human.

It is necessary to explain this 'communion with God' or the presence of the sacred further in the Indian context, and I do so through the notion of *rasa*, especially since Indian aesthetic traditions hinge on it. Most Sanskrit terms are polysemic, and *rasa* too translates as 'flavour' or 'essence', and also as 'mood' or 'feeling'. Richard Schechner has pointed out that *rasa* is similar to the notion of *prasad*/an offering to the gods, and performance is often 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 multivalent nature of this experience and concept. The *rasika*/the connoisseur is one who is able to appreciate and understand the performers' intention and is a crucial part of the performance (Schechner 1985: 138–39). So how does one 'learn' to express *rasa* in performance? This is where the

notion of *sadhana* comes in, the repetition of a guided performed activity via which a performer is able to achieve *rasa*. The idea of *rasa* is not dependent on a Cartesian split between mind and body or on a duality of performer and *rasika*. Rather it is an experiential pleasure or *ananda,* an experience akin to spiritual ecstasy. To illustrate how *rasa* can be achieved, 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 an 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 his or her continued *sadhana*, and the blessings of his or her guru, but it is not always a guaranteed outcome.

I discuss briefly the example of Nrityagram (literally, dance village), an international Odissi dance company that is based in Hessarghata, near the city of Bangalore, to illustrate the notion of *sadhana* as a lived practice. 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 practice of this dance with a twenty-first-century presence, press and publicity. Protima Gauri Bedi, an Odissi dancer, founded the institution in 1990. After Bedi died in 1998, the role of the guru was transferred to 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 yet reinvent themselves. This notion of 'living the art form' at Nrityagram is the embodiment of *sadhana* where the lines between life on and offstage are blurred. Even without the presence of a single, overarching vision, the practice of *sadhana* remains critical to their success, and what appears to have changed over time is the relationship of the dancer to his or her guru. Some learn Odissi within the *guru–shishya* framework, and others approach their training in a more peripatetic manner. As Odissi dance emerges as a commodity in a global economy, dancers are moving away from the *guru–shishya* framework and towards a more

individually suited quest for training. Nrityagram uses the dance village model to ensure rigorous training, but also allows them the freedom to experiment with gurus and dance styles outside Odissi.

SORTING THROUGH THE LABELS: CLASSICAL, TRADITIONAL OR CONTEMPORARY?

Rekha Tandon, a dancer and choreographer who divides her time between her dance studio in Bhubaneswar and a monastery in Wales, explains that *sadhana* is a personal exploration that builds on the traditions of the dance form. She talks about the physicality of her work that connects yoga to Odissi:

> 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.

Much of Tandon's work involves deconstructing these learned practices and understanding how they work on one's individual body. Tandon is of the view that 'unlearning' the form has allowed her to understand it on a deeper level. So if *sadhana* is such an intrinsic part of the dancer's practice, why is it not discussed more in scholarship on bodily practice? Is it taken for granted? Or is it discussed differently in 'secular' contexts? 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*. 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. This gives it an important currency in Indian and non-Indian contexts. 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. Modelled 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.

But what is less obvious is that the term 'classical' is a way to mark the rigour and seriousness of the training required by the dance form. However, by employing the term 'classical' instead of *sadhana* to describe this rigorous training, the sacred is left out of the description. 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,

Figure 1: Rekha Tandon and gotipuas *in the production Dhara. Photo courtesy of Michael Weston.*

describing more of a bodily ethic than just a dance form. She also hints at the sacred in her description of 'inner tranquility'. However, the use of classical is privileged over that of *sadhana*. Similarly, dancer and activist Ananya Chatterjea, based in Minnesota, and artistic director of Ananya Dance Theater, describes her practice 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. What I've learnt from classicism is incredible humility.
>
> (2004)

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. Interestingly enough, neither dancer uses *sadhana* to describe this bodily ethic and practice, but rather cast it in terms of 'classicism'.

Furthermore, dancers are often forced to choose between the categories of 'traditional' and 'contemporary'. I believe this is not a recent phenomenon, but

has been reinforced by the exigencies of performing in India and abroad with limited resources. 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 West 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 do contemporary dance'. I always add in a line there even though you're not supposed to: 'Contemporary dance entirely based on South Asian tradition'.
>
> (2004)

This doublespeak is one that many dancers face. Self-definition becomes a crucial part of how dancers are perceived, and performers have to be 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; others use 'traditional', 'traditional and contemporary', 'classical with a contemporary twist' and 'neo-classical'. As Odissi becomes an increasingly globalized form, and visible in 'secular' spaces, self-identification on websites and social media is carefully negotiated, even though on the surface these labels may appear to be only choreographic ones.

SITES OF INNOVATION

Odissi, like other Indian classical dance forms, has been reconstructed, and twentieth century cultural icons like Uday Shankar (1900–1977) and Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) have created what has been described as a 'legacy of innovation' (Stock 2006: 3). As much as Indian dance is touted in terms of 'ancient' and 'traditional', it is a form that has engaged with tradition since the beginning of the twentieth century, much of it linked to the politics of colonialism and postcolonialism. Kalpana Ram 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' (2009: 3). Studying the processual, in this case *sadhana* and its engagement with the traditions of Odissi, is extremely valuable because it makes transparent the link between the embodied practice of dance and the discourses with which these dancers engage. Furthermore, it highlights how the performance of Odissi dance is ultimately a process, not a product. So how can we understand innovation in this context and how does it take place within a dance form celebrated for its antiquity? Does the repetition of choreographies passed on dull the choreographic impulse, or does innovation come from repetition, such that it is absorbed into our body memory and newness occurs in the performance of it? Innovation in the context of Indian dance builds on a dialectical relationship with tradition and can take many forms. Innovation is not the restaging of established choreographies within the *margam* for five dancers instead of one, but can be a new way to think about the *margam* itself. For example, a *mangalacharan* can be done in a gestural idiom of Odissi and modern dance, and is innovative in terms of its spatial, choreographic and musical orientations.

It can take the invocatory quality of the *mangalacharan* dance and perform it anew. For example, 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 Tandon, these are semantic differences, and her innovations maintain the core of the Odissi form.

Ananya Chatterjea's choreographies are inspired by contemporary political themes, and her 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 New York City 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 led by activists who prompted their improvisational responses. Chatterjea's *sadhana*, or practice, is to develop these political and social themes, and have her dancers 'respond' to these issues through 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* and her way of embodying her activism. Although

Figure 2: Daak. *Courtesy of Ananya Dance Theatre.*

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.
>
> (2004)

For Chatterjea, the innovation comes from her process described above, and is enacted via her *sadhana*. Both Tandon and Chatterjea create innovative work but describe themselves as coming from within the traditions of Odissi, and are adding to the canon of the form via *sadhana*. This approach becomes an effective strategy that allows them to operate within the rubric of a 'traditional' dance form, and yet produce innovative work.

Innovation within 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 Odissi to a Bach concerto. To those who understand these nuances, these dances can be very innovative. What may not seem 'innovative' to an uninitiated eye may in fact appear highly innovative to the knowledgeable eye. For dancer Madhavi 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.

But to those who are unfamiliar with the dance form, these kinds of innovations are often viewed in an unfavourable light. One of the markers of Odissi dance is the brightly coloured silk costumes and silver jewellery, their aesthetic value often a draw for western audiences. But this visual appeal can become a barrier to being taken seriously, and Odissi dancers frequently complain of the backlash. An organizer at a reputable dance venue in New York told me that his colleague asked a Kathak dancer to 'put on more of the eye stuff' because the dancer did not seem 'Indian enough' to her. While appearing 'too Indian' can be advantageous for 'ethnic' or 'folk' festivals, some dancers fear that they are viewed as performing ossified forms that 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 for these dancers trying to innovate.

Traditionalists, such as D. N Patnaik and one of the co-founders of Jayantika, have critiqued much of this innovation. For Patnaik, it has taken over the form, and dancers *such as those at* Nrityagram have not maintained its integrity and the *margam* as codified by Jayantika. Ironically, Nrityagram received a similar critique of not being 'traditional enough' but from a member of 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 western viewer who subscribes to a static notion of tradition and an essentialist view of Indian dance. On the one hand, there is innovation in Odissi dance, and on the other, there is the argument that Odissi is losing its regional essence and integrity. But both positions on this continuum, despite their opposing attitudes, seem to agree that the traditions and *parampara* of Odissi today are 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.

Although this innovation may emerge from within the traditions or *parampara* of Odissi, it is not without criticism. These dancers negotiate between trying to make new work that is taken seriously by the Odissi establishment and a global audience. Odissi traditionalists criticize it as not being sufficiently traditional, and in the West it is sometimes viewed as not 'Indian' enough. But whether the innovation occurs as 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, by building on the rigorous and foundational training of Odissi dance. These dancers may or may not acknowledge the innovation of their work, but for them it is ultimately 'locatable back to a source', a source that draws on a body trained via *sadhana* and engages with the traditions of the dance. It is both strategic and crucial that the dancing body remain at the centre of the discourse and practice of Odissi.

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