

A Century of Negotiations: The Changing Sphere of the Woman Dancer in India

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Dance writing in India has largely centred on or drawn from the issues of social reforms and the Anti-Nautch movement, both initiated in the late nineteenth century. After more than a hundred years of the beginning of the reform process, the world of classical dance and the most of the writing on it, exhibit an intrinsic uneasiness in dealing with dance as an activity and a profession. It is still necessary to reaffirm the sanctity of the dance and its dancers (most of whom are women) by drawing visibly and heavily on its 'high caste' associations and the reconstructed past, in order to legitimise the dancer's position as a respectable one in contemporary society. A tremendous amount of resistance is evident even today against women who take up dancing as their career, making it difficult for girls to take up dance as a viable career.

The public discourse around dance developed from within the folds of, and as a part of the discourse of nationalism, formatting all value systems, normative understandings and requirements of Indian society and culture in the process. Hence dance ethics and dancers, and most importantly the grammar of dance had to fit into the mould that the nationalistic vision prepared. This vision shaped the 'ideal' dance, the 'ideal' dancing body, the 'ideal' dance narrative, the 'ideal' dancer, all of which was reiterated time and again by funding bodies, governmental patronage, the writings on dance and many such other external factors such that, in time, this vision became everyone's idea of the 'truth'. This was predominantly a Hindu, upper class, patriarchal vision, projected as *the* national image of culture, tradition and heritage, which the dance community made its logo, and *struggled tirelessly to re-affirm* The dance pedagogy in the 'neo-classical dance'¹ forms embraced this as the basis of the process of teaching, as a part of the continuation of *Guru Shishya Parampara*.²

¹ Noted scholar Kapila Vatsyayan refers to the restructured classical dances as the 'Neo-Classical' dances, as they were constructed from different sources, and had no single un-interrupted history, as other Western classical arts.

² The guild-like system of teaching dance, which continues till date, has been discussed in many contexts by authors. The system is based upon a systematized learning process, an apprenticeship, where the student

This process of history started with the whole agenda of reform—a sacred task of saving the *Devadasis* or the dancing women from themselves and the world, and saving the society from the evil spread by these ‘public’ women. Lakshmi Subramanian (2006: 129) writes –

The Anti- Nautch Campaign drew considerable support from a wide spectrum of opinion; for some it was only a campaign against obscene social practice that offended the moral sensibilities of the educated elite, for others it became part of the larger emancipator discourse for women, reinforcing the judicial initiative in Madras that was being organised around re-conceptualization of temple dancing girls in terms of patriarchal Hindu norms and the construction of a Hindu community around marriage. In fact, reformers extensively publicized marriage as a strategy to bring Devadasis into mainstream. C. Shankaran Nair in his presidential address to the National Social Conference in 1908, mentioned quite enthusiastically that efforts were being made to reclaim dancing girls and that a number of marriages had taken place.

From the time when dance reforms were activated to the present, in the last one hundred years, Indian dance has come a long way. From temple-dancers to *nautch* girls to professional women dancers, to Bollywood heroines and by-products like item girls, bar dancers and the popular local/regional professional women dancers like the *Kalbelia* dancers of Rajasthan or the *Nachni* women of Bengal—the story of earning a livelihood in dance is the story of survival – of pain and struggle, of subjugation and subversion repeated across various social strata, location, and time.

From the celebrated beautiful image of the traditional representative of classical dance to the excessive exaggeration of femininity portrayed in the Bollywood item numbers –women in the Indian dance scenario exist together in time and space; however, that is all that they share. The category is not an all-encompassing one, but is instead made up of differential positions in the public sphere. At the same time, these professional women performers have all been earning a living, of course, but have also been negotiating identities in the public sphere where their presence is always a matter of uneasy speculation – of where she negotiates the line between being the acceptable representative of culture and tradition to the ‘public’ and ‘available’ woman of disrepute.

In a sphere where even today, a woman is made to feel that she can only be powerful if she is beautiful, the negotiation of public and private remains an individual struggle as well as a gendered discourse involving the whole community of female dancers- whether or not they see themselves as a united whole.

The mythicized history of Indian dance remains a burden that all women dancers across class, caste and ethnicity continue to carry till date. The uneasiness of their existence becomes evident in all the recent endeavours of choice of patronage, classicization process and writing /re-writing history, where the national agenda still remains to project dance as ‘high art’ and the dancers, as the part of the images and agencies of responsible

devotes his/her attention in entirety to the master-teacher, unquestioningly submitting to the teaching process, till he/she is pronounced to be a an artiste on his/her own right.

representation of history/tradition/identity/transition/dignity/modernity/and respectability. In no other profession does a person have to take upon oneself so much of a burden.

Countless writings³ on Indian dance history records the year 1927, as the year which saw the Council of Delhi discussing the motion of a member from Madras for the prevention of dedication of girls as *Devadasis*. The same year, in the month of November, a unanimous resolution recommending that the Madras Government prepare a preventive legislation to stop dedication of *Devadasis* was passed by the Madras Legislative Council. In 1930, S.Muthulakshmi Reddy, belonging to a *Devadasi* family, herself a social leader and a doctor by profession, brought a bill in the Madras Legislative Council asking for the prohibition of performance of the ceremony for the dedication of *Devadasis* in any Hindu temple.

In the E. Krishna Iyer Centenary Issue (9th August, 1997) of the newsletter of the Madras Academy published by Sruti, the contributing editor Arudra writes about the annual conference of the Madras Music Academy, where on the sixth day of the conference, on the 28th of December, 1932, 'the fate and future of dance' was discussed.

He further writes (1997: 10) that after a long lasting debate between the 'self appointed social reformers' and the 'pro-art protagonists' like E. Krishna Iyer, the Academy drew up a resolution which was passed unanimously:

The final text of the remarkable resolution read, in part:

1. *Bharatanatyam as a great and an ancient art being unexceptionable, this conference views with concern, its rapid decline and appeals to the public and art associations to give it the necessary encouragement.*
2. *The conference requests the Music Academy, to take steps to disseminate correct ideas regarding the art and to help the public to a proper appreciation thereof.*
3. *This conference is of opinion that it is desirable that, to start with, women's organisations do take immediate steps to give proper training in the art, by instituting a course of instruction for the same.*
4. *This conference is of the opinion that, in order to make dancing respectable, it is necessary to encourage public performances thereof before respectable gatherings.*

The reference to the *Sadir* and the reconstructed history of *Bharatanatyam* still remains important as the dance community celebrates and relives history through its writings, performances and finds it difficult to let the past go. On the other hand, distancing themselves from all the references of pollution, including the lived stories of the *Devadasi* women on whose created platforms the movements of *Bharatanatyam* re-invented itself – has been the principal motto of first the reformers, and later the nationalists, strongly

³ Lakshmi Subramaniam (2006), Avanti Meduri (1996), Mathew Harp Allen (1997) are a few names of the huge number of scholars who have critically analyzed different aspects of the reforms that affected and initiated the birth of *Bharatanatyam*, the first of the eight presently enlisted classical dances of India.

influencing the nature of narratives around the dance, dancers and the dance history. In the process, from the very beginning of its reaffirmed presence in post-Independence India, dance writing carried a strong reference to religious sanctity and Brahminical texts.

I. Performance and the Public:

The notions of purity and impurity in Indian dance reforms and the initial resistance to the way it was being presented for the private patrons, (apart from the gods, for whom it was initially meant) was largely connected with the patron-client relationship, that is to say, with the audience, or who was viewing it. A dancer dancing in the inner sanctum sanctorum of a temple for the god, was of course dancing for ‘the one who sees all’, but would not affect the patronage on a day-to-day basis. That invisible and silent patron did not exercise the power to make or break a woman’s career. He did not immediately express his dislike for her expertise, or the lack of it, at least not vocally or verbally. The presentation was also not geared to be directed towards anyone sitting immediately in front, or in close vicinity. The dancer/s were engaging with the audience- but an invisible, all omnipresent one. The change in the nature of the patronage, which led to private patronage, also led to a closely situated audience, and an extended public nature of the dancer’s availability to such an audience – moving, many a times beyond the dance, to sexual encounters. The change that the actual presence of patrons brought, was seen in the addition of connections established through holding the patron’s gaze, as his liking or disliking the dance or the dancer, could actually translate into a complete change in the dancer’s fortune- either choosing one dancer over the other/s or rejecting and replacing a previous favourite for a fresher, younger, or more competent one. Barring the *Devadasis* from dancing in the courts and the temples, was a way to stop such encounters. The rescuing of dance ideally, for the reformers, meant moving it to a secular place, a proscenium, where, by the very nature of the space, the audience was expected to become differently inclined, in seeing the bodies and their owners in different lights.

The fate of the *Devadasis* and the *Nautch* girls and their dance became a matter of public discourse, wherein it was subjected to fierce debate, in which the practitioners of the tradition had no right or agency to participate. Hence, their fate along with the fate of their profession, rested in the hands of the so-called members of the elite society, who by birth, had the caste and class entitlement to be the decision-makers and the upholders of the culture and tradition. In this discourse, removing dance from its temple context was not, at any point of time, a conscious religious agenda.

Partha Chatterjee (1986: 110) writes:

In fact, the notion of “Hindu-ness” in this conception cannot be, and does not need to be, defined by any religious criteria at all. There are no specific beliefs or practices that characterize this “Hindu”, and the many doctrinal and sectarian differences among Hindus are irrelevant in its concept.

From the colonial to the nationalist discourse the transfer of power and responsibility for policy-making did not mean anything different for the *Devadasis*, as in both the discourses she remained the 'polluted one'. In the first, she was the pollutant, and in the second she became the one to be rescued and divested of her tools of entertainment. In both the phases, the decision-making remained confined in the hands of those in power, either male, or at least from the higher caste or class. The Nehruvian vision invested tremendous power in the hands of the nationalists in the later stage, which led to the laying out of a path – for all women dancers, by putting down strictures to govern not only how she should be performing, but also how she should be viewed.

Partha Chatterjee (1998: 10-18) in his 'Introduction' to the edited volume *Wages of Freedom: Fifty Years of the Nation-State* writes:

For a large section of the nationalist leadership, the project of modernity was not to respond to the demands of actually existing social institutions but rather to transform them; indeed, the project was to create a civil society that did not exist in traditional social practices. Here the 'pure' model of civil society as it had been depicted in the great texts of the western canon were, and still are, invoked to energize and shape the changing forms of social institutions. One would completely miss the intellectual grounding and persuasive power of what is often called the Nehruvian project if one did not appreciate the nationalist idea of modernity as a mission that is, as it were, forever waiting to be completed.

.... Contrary to the claims of the nationalists, the cultural identity of a nation is neither immemorial nor naturally given. It has to be fabricated, most deliberately so under the auspices of the nation-state.

The Proscenium brought its own discourses around it and also the complexities of the new audience, made up of people mostly from the urban areas of the country. This new audience consisted of people entrusted with the work of rescuing the society from all that was polluted and also the art enthusiasts whose enthusiasm was invested in the new cultural model of India. Many of these people came with a notion of a pilgrimage to tradition, and at the same time, a number of largely uninitiated viewers frequented the performances, whose knowledge of the dance and the performers did not stem from any previous historically shaped enculturation. The changing new urban audience now consists of many, who are there to view the product- with the most basic or no knowledge of its 'inglorious' past; rather they are schooled by the popular mythic/mystic explanation which traces a sacred history to the dances in India referring to Shiva as the sacred Lord of Dance. The requirements of the city audience, in terms of the length of the performance, aesthetic expectations, music, etc., also determines the selection and choreography that the dancers choose, and what the organisers look for when they plan any performance. While at times, it has been lamented that the absence of the 'educated audience' makes it difficult for the dancer to interact or feel in sync with the viewers, the performers seek out new patronage at home and abroad to expand their horizons and opportunities.

The audience for popular/folk performances has also become highly diverse. The traditional audience frequents the ritual/ social performances in the rural areas, largely because it is a part of the essential yearly cycle of festivities. These dances themselves form an essential part of ritually performed/viewed event list of the community life. The range of the specialized woman performers, at times an essential being as a ritual part of the celebrations (*Meitei* women priests of Manipur), or a sought-after dancer and a popular part of the tourist entertainments (the *Kalbelia* women dancers of Rajasthan), or the local, much maligned woman dancer (the *Nachni* woman of eastern India), while registered as the 'folk performers', belong to distinctly different categories, because of the very nature and function of their performances. *Meitei* women priests are essential in the ritual lives of the *Meitei* community in Manipur, as they perform the sacred duties of the rituals of *Lai Haraoba*, and other yearly celebrations, in the matrix of a partially matriarchal society. The *Kalbelia* women remain the popular entertainers, becoming more and more visible as a 'must see' element in the regional performances of Rajasthan which are regularly churned out for the tourists on the Rajasthan tourism circuit – basically catering to the patriarchal archetype of tourists, regardless of their actual gender. The State uses them to reaffirm the image of Rajasthan and its culture for the huge number of tourists that Rajasthan draws.

The *Nachni* woman, on the other hand, enjoys an entirely different notoriety. On the one hand, she is the local entertainer, drawing a huge audience for her performance, [to cull out a living from her contracted shows and yet on the other hand, constantly battling for her recognition and acceptance in the daily lives within her society where her presence is that of a fallen individual, who lives an immoral life. I mention in my chapter 'Tale of the Professional Woman Dancer in Folk Traditions in India: Commodification of Dance and the Traditional Dancing Women' in the book *Engendering Performance* (2010: 236),

An understanding of the different spatial relationships of women performers make it easy for us to locate her as a gendered and often marginalized entity in her social/cultural system. It also brings us to the important question of the empowerment of this woman performer, which is linked to her position in the society. The professional or the semi-professional woman performer, earning fully or partially through her performance in the traditional society is many a times considered to be a fallen woman – indicating the way of earning as coming out of questionable means. However the same family which ostracizes her for her choice of life, livelihood and profession has no qualms in accepting or even existing on her income. Here one needs to look at the 'ideal' and the real in the context of the woman performer's position and the society. The ideal/ metaphorical space (Niranjana, 2001)⁴ is one which usually places these women in the lowest position in society almost with the prostitutes, in comparison to the other women who choose to live their lives as ordinary members of the family,

⁴ Niranjana (2001) discusses how the notions of sexual differentiation born out of world views of different communities also determine both the material and metaphorical spaces in her book *Gender and Space*. She defines the concepts of 'metaphorical' and the 'material' space to mention how it is discussed by several geographers working with space that while the former (metaphorical/cultural space) with its connotations of stable, inert, absolute space, provides a fertile ground for 'metaphorical appropriations' it may be more important to focus on 'real' material space, including within this both geographical and social reality.

sometimes earning their living through various socially acceptable means, and sometimes just being a housewife. The society places severe strictures on her being considered at par with the other female members of the society- putting several layers of pointers at various stages in her life to highlight her status as different from others. However, in reality, her income sustains the family, partially or fully and there her status does not taint the money that she earns.

The 'ideal' space for the woman is considered to be within the domestic conjugal structure of a family. The dancer in India has always been viewed as 'un-domestic' and therefore unsuited to conjugal life. The city dancers have been negotiating the duality of their inner and outer world, battling the stereotyping for a long time in their occupational life. But for many of the dancers existing as performers in the living traditions of the communities in non-urban spaces, the position still remains more or less the same. Even the city audience views these women as instruments of entertainment, not as an integral part of the community life of a particular community. Here the principles of viewing are different than those that govern the 'high art' presentations of the classical dances. Many of us have grown up, never ever questioning or tracing the origin of dance never questioning the process in which the dance history tries to sever its connection with the woman-dancer who has been maligned time and again in public discourse in this country.

Considering the biological and the social role accorded to the woman as a member of the society, her role is defined as the natural vessel for childbearing and the nurturer of the child and the family. Any aberration in this process is viewed with uneasiness. Even when the society accepts the woman's space in community rituals and traditional performances, there is a certain degree of disdain about the ultimate choice a woman makes to become a performer, and thereby her choice to exist in the public space, playing out a non-domestic /unusual role. The society does not forgive her for negating or neglecting her 'principal' duty as a physical vessel for perpetuation of that society and culture. This leads us to the very basic question-- in what way is the woman expected to perpetuate culture? The answer remains controversial/contested. It would appear that the act of perpetuating culture for women does not mean actually performing cultural acts, but giving birth to, and acting as a mediator or agent for passing on the culture from one generation to the other, without aspiring to be a direct part of the process.

Niranjana (2001: 69) writes:

The biological underpinnings are recognized but rarely spoken about, while the moral order seeks to interpret and represent the biological in distinctive terms. Any understanding of the construction of femininity will, accordingly, have to take into account the inter-relations between the biological and socio-spatial. This would also be facilitative of a movement beyond the formative distinction underscoring gender studies – that between 'biological' sex and 'social' gender. Indeed we come to recognize that gender is implicated within socio-cultural practices regulating sexed bodies.

The point of discussion so far has been more to show how female bodies, at every step, are spaced, ensconced in layers of meaning and belonging than to draw attention to socialization practices or to the different stages of female life cycle. Such a process of female embodiment is facilitated through their insertion into what may be termed a *matrix of sexualisation*. The Matrix specifies certain codes

of moral conduct within the community and is often responsible for the active espousal of conceptions of the feminine.

For the classical dancers as well, the label of being 'un-domestic' is a reality, though not accompanied by a value judgement as to her moral character anymore. A huge change has taken place over the last thirty years. Dance has become a sought after hobby. Many parents want their daughters to learn some form of classical dance, perform as a part of the group to begin with, and then become a solo performer at least till she gets married or gets too busy in her career – whichever comes first. Here, also, the problem arises only in case she wants to become a full-scale professional dancer. The resistance of the society constantly rallies back and forth in to historical references and present day viability of dance as a career – or even a hobby of import. Most dancers then have to negotiate a path of moderation whereby she does not become a complete 'dancer' – the woman who has embraced a 'public' identity, or according to some unseen scale does not come across as an all-out practitioner, but someone who is private enough to be considered a 'home-maker' and a 'woman of good character'.

II. The Nation Performed

'Classicization of tradition' (Chatterjee, 1986: 73) was an important agenda of the nationalists as they believed that a nation must have a past. In his essay, *The Nation and its Women* (1986: 127-129), Partha Chatterjee writes:

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 barbarism and irrationality.

The new patriarchy was also sharply distinguished from the immediate social and cultural condition in which the majority of the people lived, for the "new" woman was quite the reverse of the "common" woman, who was coarse, vulgar, loud, quarrelsome, devoid of superior moral sense, sexually promiscuous, subjected to brutal physical oppression by males....

Indeed, the achievement was marked by claims of cultural superiority in several different aspects; superiority over the western woman for whom, it was believed, education meant only the acquisition of material skills to compete with men in the outside world and hence a loss of feminine (spiritual) virtues; superiority over the preceding generation of women in their own homes who had been denied the opportunity of freedom by an oppressive and degenerate social tradition; and superiority over women of the lower classes who were culturally incapable of appreciating the virtues of freedom.

Performing the nation, by way of performing the cultural values and the correct imagery, became a part of the agenda of the restructuring process of the newly classicized dances as the list of classical dances went on increasing over the last sixty years. As 'high art', dance needed to reflect all the values and norms that were Indian, national, modern, feminine and virtuous, along with being the embodiment of culture. As is well known, the right to perform

the nation, and be a part of the visible image of the nation has been given to only a select few. While for others from the so called 'popular', or 'folk' categories, who may be otherwise described by the same set of words that described those selected privileged few as 'women', 'dancers', 'continuers of tradition' are never considered to be ones who could at least be completing the image of the nation-state along with the dancers from the 'higher' classical traditions. This continues to be reflected as more and more dance forms move from being the representative forms of a particular region, to being the representative form of the State, and finally aspires to be a part of the image of the nation (in the same way as *Bharatanatyam*, or *Odissi* or *Kuchipudi* has been). Of course the usual in all such past journeys has been the fact that the dance itself also moves from the community, to be performed by a different set of new experts – the urban performers, who then become the role models for the dispossessed locals, while representing the nation in the global stage.

Nation-building and 'imag(in)ing' the nation may have been the agenda of the cultural bureaucrats and the first generation narrators of dance history, but continuing to reaffirm that image has been shaped by the dancers, who have let their bodies become the site for the story of the nation's ideal image of women to be staged over the 63 years after the Indian Independence. The reaffirmation continues in new sites- the new bodies in dance – of the newer generation of young dancers, whose actual lives may have become completely different from the lives of the first or the second generation dancers of the classical forms like *Bharatanatyam*, *Kathak* and *Odissi*, as the enculturation process within the 'global culture has gained momentum with all seriousness.

Shirin M. Rai (2008: 10-11) writes:

While nationalism provided new spaces of women to mobilize in – and even to use and endorse the universal construction of 'the citizen' in particular contexts – at the same time it framed those spaces, landscaped them through rhetoric and language in particular ways. Many women, however, themselves part of the national elites, participated in the construction of the nationalist imaginings and programmes, even though the process itself led to their simultaneous cooptation and /or exclusion from these constructions.

..... women are central to the construction of nationalist discourses as biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectivities, as reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic/national groups, as central participants in the *ideological* reproduction of the collectivity and as transmitters of its culture.

Dance and dancers became the epicentre of the discourse of continuity, boundaries, collectivities and culture, not by choosing to be so themselves, but through a process that none of them had any direct part in. Hence, their art was subjected to extreme policing and the women in the post colonial era continue to be ideally structured in the context of the larger projections of the continuing/changing patterns of cultural and gender norms.

III. Before and After: The Indian Glory at the World of Beauty Contests

Perception and expectation about the female body has changed in India. Usually, any ideational changes occur over time. But in this case one can pin-point the year almost precisely. The year was 1994 - the sponsors and organizers of the world competitions and beauty contests may have decided to look for and capture the huge Indian market to sell a range of beauty, skin whitening, slimming, anti-aging and fitness products – which were till then, only available and accessible to the special category of people who were exposed to foreign goods through their travels abroad or could afford to buy them from a few sellers of such imported products. Hence, in the same year, both Susmita Sen and Aishwariya Rai were made Miss Universe and Miss World in two different global competitions. India basked in the glory of their achievements. Here, one needs to consider a rupture that happened in the concept of the body of the woman in India seriously, to understand the discourse around the image of the woman perpetuated through classical dances. In the first half of the 90's 'global' culture actually invaded the Indian market and through that, the Indian minds, thus editing and re-formatting the expectations about the female body in the post - Universe/World-beauty contest -Susmita Sen-Aishwariya Rai scenario. Indian markets were flooded by huge multinational companies selling slimming, whitening, anti-aging and many such beauty enhancement products – promising everlasting beauty to women. These products found a huge market, about five per cent of the Indian population having the buying power that could offer a market bigger than many European countries - due to sheer numerical strength. The products replaced or at least shrunk the markets of the local companies or forced them to bring out similar products at cheaper, more affordable prices. The time to be 'beautiful' in the 'global' sense of the word had arrived.

Slimming and beauty salons – ranging from very expensive to moderately expensive to downright shady ones opened. The female body had to be 'made to order'. The Indian woman woke up to the 'needs' and the possibilities of 'manufactured and engineered body. Very young girls started frequenting beauty salons and gyms, making a conscious effort to make their bodies and faces (what they considered) worth looking at. The body had emerged from the closet that it had been kept a prisoner in.

Somewhere along the line the Hindi film industry – always a mirror of global fashion and trends – started ordering for and getting different female bodies. Gone were the days of the chubby 'Indian' beauties. Now the bodies from the heroine's to the item girls, to the woman dancer on the proscenium, had to be of a global standard, for the audience.

In the world of Western contemporary dance, two distinct trends are currently seen. While some dancers have long since started to shun the much trodden path of striving for the 'perfect body' – and have actually chosen to project the body as is, the other trend is an all out effort for extraordinary perfection, both for the body and the techniques- which diminish the distance between dance and gymnastics day by day. Their Indian counterpart

still remains largely bound by the value system, re-affirmed everyday with the help of powerful media images – from advertisements, television and films.

Susan Leigh Foster talks about the woman dancer's eternal quest for the ideal 'dancing body' which always seems just out of her reach. She says, 'Typically, a dancer spends anywhere from two to six hours per day for eight to ten years creating a dancing body. During the course of this travail, this body *seems* constantly to elude one's efforts to direct it.' (2003: 236). While that is true of the urban, trained dancer in India, one wonders then, whether one can call a professional woman dancer from the age old traditions 'dancers' at all, being deeply embedded in their community practice,. This woman exists within the domestic system, the inner social world, where she performs her domestic daughterly/wifely/motherly duties, throughout her life, and never even has the time to recognize her body as the dancing body, let alone tend to it. But she is also principally earning through dance, a dance that she has learned, she performs with all her skills, and uses to communicate with the outer world.

IV. The Body Performed: The Embodied Self Image

Seeking to analyze the woman's body in dance – I position myself as a social anthropologist who looks at the body as a product of social norms and practices that shape their bodily experiences and products. I also posit my position as an empirical feminist whose engagement with feminist theories is through a lived and shared empirical world rather than a philosophical one. Hence, for this paper, I take the body both as a conceptual category and a philosophical discourse, as well as an empirical reality – shaped out of and occupying a social space.

Dance is a form of embodied knowledge, and dancing therefore foregrounds knowledge production as an extension of the connection between symbols, cognition and externalization of images built thereby. The body that produces the knowledge is also at the end of the production. This negotiation between the inner and the outer world has the body as the site as well as the tool. This process has been acknowledged in the *Natyashastra* with a sizable amount of the text being dedicated to the functional systems of the kinetic connections between different body parts, the mechanisms of bodily techniques as well as the mind and body communication. Both materiality as well as the experiential and imagined realities is mentioned in this seminal text.

Alexandra Howson (2005: 14) writes

In the Cartesian view of the world, vision is privileged as the primary sense that connects the primary sense to the physical and the material environment in which it is located. The eye becomes the privileged medium of communication about self (Simmel, 1969) and of knowledge production through empirical observation.

Hence it is the eye which aids cognition of the by relating it to certain existing knowledge bank – which in turn is built by bits and pieces of acquired information from the day a child is born. Thus social codes become embedded in the body. For dancers, the proscenium space is for the beholder – the viewer here is the external world in general and an audience to a performance in particular. What the bodies can do, or more importantly, what the embodied code allows the body to do - are not born in a dance training only. The codes are already there – developed and shaped out of familial training, seeing and living a normative form of life in the society.

The repetition of any daily/weekly/monthly/annual task – becomes part of the habitual activities or performance – as in eating, breathing, brushing of teeth, playing etc. It is also a part of *encultured* activity that is shared by a group of people in the same culture. Hence, the body habits or the accepted bodily codes make up the arena where the cultural norms are played out or challenged.

The gendered body becomes a subject of discourse as soon as it moves out of any social stereotype. The invisible body of the domestic woman – invisible in the domestic, unsalaried chores and the act of child bearing/rearing, with implicit but never-talked-about embodied references to sexuality, is confronted by the gendered body of the woman who projects and communicates through her body with the outer world. She becomes visible, as she challenges all that is ‘usual’ – in terms of work, social duties, norms and economy.

V. The Timeless Image of the Woman in Dance

On the basis of the argument posited by me in the preceding section, I see the woman in classical dance as simultaneously existing in two time zones. One of those zones is the eternal time- where the timeless image of the ‘ideal’⁵ woman – the beautiful woman, with equal inner and outer beauty – of the high caste woman⁶ as a result of a long period of training, is achieved through practice. The other image is that of the woman whose ‘ideal’

⁵ Though the notion of ‘ideal’ has changed over the years for all categories, for both males and females, in India, some of the value systems still remain attached to the pre-industrial, colonial conceptualizations, especially where women are concerned. Thus, although a woman is expected to be an equal partner in many social and economic responsibilities whenever it comes to her visibility, notions often refer to the limited or no visibility of woman in the public sphere.

⁶ *Natyashastra* (translated by Adya Rangacharya, 1999) mentions that the women from the superior class, on the other hand, would be gentle, smiling, compassionate, understanding, modest, steady in social as well as work situations. They would be dependable, courteous, and always ready to serve the elders, and showing clearly the natural qualities of beauty, sweetness and noble descent.

body image is not the timeless eternal one, but is a contemporary societal product, born out of all the standards set by the global expectations.

One needs to look at the urban woman who dances today – with points of reference for her dancing body not having shifted at all throughout all this ‘worlding’ upheaval that her surroundings have gone through. For her, all the reference points remain the same as those experienced and framed by Rukmini Devi, Bala Saraswati, or even the much younger stalwarts they have learnt their dance from, who she has been taught to see as the Icons. The body as the tool for re-creating the dance movements and hand gestures that it has been taught, and as the site for the performance of all values and images, registers only those traditional values while dancing, whether or not in daily non-dance activities of life, it has been the site for complete shift in self-image, expectation and understanding.

The historical burden on the imagery of the body of the woman performer is undeniable. The concept of beauty, the notions of presentation, the audience perception and reception, the taught values of *how* and *why* of the ‘ideal’ constitutes the image that is a must for the dancers aspiring to become classical performers. Here, I would like to argue that dance is one of the tools which helps women ‘perform’ their identity – in the larger context of society and culture, by using their body as the site for such performativity. Judith Butler has commented on how, ‘gender is performatively produced’, which results in ‘constituting the identity it is purported to be’. Thereby, the body externalizes its corporeal experience through the performances, reflective of self, society and culture. Hence the body is at once the tool as well as the site for such discourses, and it also invests a huge responsibility in the audience to ‘read’ the performance subjectively.

It is also true that in the post-colonial world the self image of women can never be taken as one universal phenomenon, as awareness and knowledge of the body and its projection I would like to argue, on the other hand, that it is shaped by the class, ethnic affiliation and religion. In post colonial India, the upper class women have had access to a different set of historical reference and socialization – through their formal and informal education, outside and within the family structure. The way in which their voice has been heard or the space that they have been given in the changing world of dance, has been completely different from that of a woman performer from the lower strata of the social and class ladder. By *voice* here I mean, the accessibility of the policy makers, funds, visibility and also the patronage from different governmental and non-governmental organisations. The woman dancer from Manipur, who by tradition, dances the *Raas*, is not the public representative of *Raas*, and her place is taken away by the woman dancers from outside the community, who have accessed the expertise from sources from within or outside the community, and now represent the tradition in government organisations like the Sangeet Natak Akademi.

To come back to our original thread of discussion, one of the principal concerns of this paper is to analyze the self-image that women dancers have of themselves in relation to the public sphere of which she is a part. In this case, though it is important to understand how

the society views or positions her, but it is much more important to understand, how she would like to be seen, assessed or remembered.

Here, I would like to differentiate the women dancers into two categories. For want of a better term, I use the terms 'classical' and the 'popular' here, and would like to posit these two categories of woman dancers in two distinctly separate groups – with entirely different perspectives of the bodies that they bring to the performance.

Starting with the first generation of women like Rukmini Devi Arundale, Priyambada Mohanty, whose admirable determination in transgressing the so called 'given' social status and image to the women dancers, to the large number of (mostly upper class, urban, elite) women dancers, training to become classical performers in the present day, the 'body question' has been indeed a problematic one. This is a body that they love, train, use as the site for their public expressions and communication in dance. They train it, according to the rules of rightness, social correctness, and the expectations of the families and teachers. In the process, most of the awareness, is shaped and structured according to the perspective of the 'socially acceptable' viewership, many a times completely suppressing much of the instinctive expressions, by schooling these bodies through rigorous training. In other words, even before a mind starts any form of questioning, the bodily values of right and wrong are so deeply embedded in the minds and the bodies of these dancers, that the comfort zone of expressivity remains structured by these value systems all their lives.

Meenakshi Thapan (2006: 203) discussing Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'habitas' in the context of the Women's question, in her essay *Habitat, Performance and Women's Experience* writes-

Women's personal and social worlds are defined in terms of the home, family, childhood, workplace and life experiences at various times in their lives. In the process of articulating their life-worlds, women traverse untrodden paths of revelation, strength, and surprise as well as the more frequented ones of abuse, dishonour, shame and rejection. In these they revert to memory, narrative, the voice as tools for reconstructing their emotions, thoughts, and experiences in making sense of their own constitution as embodied, gendered beings.

While this holds true in the context of women's personal and social worlds in many ways today, I argue that many of the images that the body is the site for in the classical dances, are not formed on the basis of the bodily experience of subjective nature, but of the historical experience of learning a value system, belonging to a bygone era, and many a times not a part of the life experience of the lived life of the dancer herself. In other words, the reality of her everyday life is put aside, as she reclaims her tradition through her body and performance – entering into an imaginary realm of a world that begins and ends with the performance itself, and does not have anything to do with the everyday reality of the body.

Time and again, dancers claim to want to perform 'the imagined' as they slip into the comfort of not having to perform 'the real'⁷.

Meenakshi Thapan (2006: 216) argues

The element of self-construction is therefore always present in both perception and practice. In this section, I attempt an understanding of women's performance both in front of the mirror not only to present their embodied selves with a particular image but also as they see themselves performing for the gaze of the other. While it is true that through such performances women are not transgressing authority and their construction of gender identity remains embedded in particular images that exist in the social cultural and public imaginaries. They none-the-less give off expressions of themselves that they want to, in the process of construction of their self and public image. In this sense, the woman is engaged, in practical sense, in creating and performing images that show her to be how she wants to be seen. (2006: 216).

Keeping the above-quoted argument in mind, I would like to end my paper with two important threads of thought that come up – those of 'projection of my body as known to me' and 'projection of my body as is expected by others' - in all discussions with the women dancers in the context of the dancing body today, while discussing who they are and what they perform today.

What do you see your body as? A question like this usually brings an embarrassing smile to the urban woman dancer's face. Then one of the most common answer is 'my body is my tool'. *For what?* This is not a question the dancer is easy with. 'We dance with our bodies, but we finally forget them and transform them', said Rukmini Devi Arundale (2000: 06). Many young dancers today say that they are taught to use the body, to create a meaning that is outside the body, so that the dance does not begin and end in the techniques, but transcends them. The past history has shown us time and again, that we have silenced any bodily activities or at least muted them in and through classical dance by locating the female

⁷ I am grateful to the organisers of the Ananya Festival Seminar, 2009, for organizing a discussion with several dancers from classical traditions of *Bharatanatyam*, *Odissi*, *Kuchipudi* and *Mohini Attam* where I could ask a question to the senior dancers and dance teachers, 'While being strong, independent and self sufficient women yourselves, who have been managing their family, public life, media, publicity, practice, teaching, finances and a hundred other things, how are you able to slip into roles of the submissive traditional women – in dresses, characters and bodily aesthetics used in dance?'

In the Seminar 'Dance Matters', at the School of Media, Communication and Culture, during a presentation of Draupadi's 'Vastraharan' (taking away of clothes of Draupadi by Dusashan, after Yudhisthir lost her in a game of dice, the leading Kathak exponent and academic, Dr. Amita Dutt discussed about the devotion with which Draupadi placed her entire faith in Krishna and waited with complete submission for him to come to her rescue, while the vile act of trying to take off her clothes was going on. Prof. Dutt discussed the process of a workshop, through which she asked contemporary students of dance to understand this phenomenon of devotion and faith. In the Q&A period there were several comments and questions, and all of them centered around the fact that in the present world, the consciousness and the resistance of violations of personal space as well as the body and mind of a woman makes it impossible to put ones faith in, and wait for someone else's ability or intention to 'come to the rescue'. Hence, the young dance student today may just need to imitate blindly the gestures, instead of being able to identify with the same feelings of faith and devotion.

body within the historically derived public domain of the patriarchal society. A whole range of responses, starting from the denial of any direct consciousness about the body to an informed choice of words to state the intentional traditional projection, is encountered. Also common is a response where the confusion between the choice of being a part of the contemporary world and yet performing and embodying the values of another time becomes evident. Given the huge responsibility that the women are given, and also take upon themselves, they themselves set huge goals for themselves, which men were never expected to shoulder, or have never ever wanted to take on. Rukmini Devi's speech (2010: 110) on women's role, will, I hope, explain my argument clearly.

Women have everything to do with bringing culture into everyday life, with the expression of it, with the helping and influencing of a nation, not only because they are mothers but also because they themselves are an example as individuals. The modern world needs a new force for the revitalizing of its ideals.....

India's art has always been unconscious, unconscious of its own beauty, unconscious of others' admiration, unconscious of the physical though expressed in Form. India is now beginning to be conscious and we do not know how to express ourselves consciously. A great dancer's art must depend first on the life he or she expresses, secondly upon the beauty of technique and lastly only, upon its arrangement, costume, and presentation.... Though form, technique and skill are essential, great Art must have the impetus of genius, and inspiration. Then there is permanency.

This quote itself is the substance of not only the thoughts of Rukmini Devi – the founder of *Kalakshetra*, a woman who had Western education and dance training before even wanting to take up dance as her first love and profession- but it is what many of us have grown up, hearing from our dance teachers. At the same time the talk bestows responsibilities on women as mothers, educators, bearers of culture, helping and influencing the nation, being an exemplary human being and many such other essentialities. These responsibilities themselves, analysed carefully, makes it clear that there are simultaneous references to both the private and the public, in their lives. They are mothers, whereby they influence home and culture in the inner world, but they are also individuals, whereby their public responsibility continues all the time. For the dancer, the responsibility is even greater- with all her so called creative freedom, she is actually more bound than others of her same sex, by the sheer fact of visibility that she attains by means of her artistic expertise. Hence, the free woman dancer – a strong, independent entrepreneur/ artiste that she is, is not free to be herself. She learns to be and is tied into being what she is expected to be, by her society, by her teachers, as her art comes as a package of ways of thinking, blocking out notions of sexuality, bodily projections and gender.

The dancer hence, lives a life in the year 2011, with present-day aspirations, like many other women of the twenty first century, but she is given (in the package of added mytho-history of the form she is learning) the values that makes her exist also simultaneously in the mythical patriarchal world of the gods whose lives she continues to dance.

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