



The Parting Pelvis: Temporality, Sexuality, and Indian Womanhood in Chandralekha's *Sharira* (2001)

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The Jewel-Box

Tishani, when you open your legs, it must look like you're opening a jewel-box. Do it slowly, slower, there must be some tension, a feeling of suspense . . .

(Chandralekha in Doshi 2010)

The powerful imagery evoked in the above words by Chandralekha (1928–2006), the late Indian choreographer, speaks on many levels. It can conjure troubling images of an objectified female body, presenting itself for voyeuristic consumption. But this would be a reductive reading of Chandralekha's fundamentally feminist verve. In instructing her dancer Tishani Doshi to part her legs slowly in order to gradually expose what lies between them, Chandralekha reveals a glimpse of her unique choreographic sensibilities.¹ She manipulates the audience's experience of time and heightens their awareness of the materiality of Doshi's fleshliness, by forcing Doshi to slow down the parting of her legs to a point that organically generates an excruciating bodily tension. This tension is viscerally experienced by the audience and is intensified further in Doshi as she physically processes the trepidations of revealing her jewel-box, her most precious possession, to the world. Although one could problematize the metaphor of the "jewel-box" as the space between Doshi's legs, it is more interesting to note that while most precious possessions are objects distinct from those who own them, Doshi and her jewel-box are inseparable. Thus to compartmentalize the significance of the space between Doshi's parting pelvis would be misleading, as it constitutes an extension of Doshi herself. It is therefore more valuable to analyze Doshi's parting pelvis as part of the same holistic entity that is her *sharira*, Sanskrit for the "unending and complete body."

This article examines Chandralekha's final work *Sharira*² (2001), an intense, sensual, and provocative duet between a woman and a man, as a challenge to heteronormative codes of male dominance and female submissiveness that govern the performance of Indian sexuality.³ There are two ways in

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which this challenge is relayed: first, through a haunting triangle motif that is evoked repeatedly through the controlled parting of Doshi's legs. This bodily triangle is symbolic of the *yonī* hasta in yoga, a hand gesture that is created by joining the tips of the two index fingers and the thumbs to evoke the *yonī*, Sanskrit for life-source, the divine passage and the vagina. The choreographic echo of this triangle in and through Doshi's body offers a constant visual reminder that her *sharira* is both a harbinger of life *and* a center of sexual agency. At the heart of my analysis, I therefore resolve to shift the perception of the Indian woman as an asexual *bharat janani* (Mother India) to a sexual *jagat janani* (World Mother). The second way in which the piece critiques heteronormativity is through an über-slowness of time, which emphasizes the materiality of Doshi's body and the extremes it can execute. This in turn allows her to embody an extended and heightened temporality that lies beyond real time, in order to challenge conventional constructions of her body and sexuality as passive. These two choreographic strategies are efficacious in subverting heteronormative codes surrounding Indian sexuality only because they work interdependently. As Doshi parts her legs in hyper-slow-motion, the evocations of her *yonī* move beyond the realm of an objectified, sexual body part that is to be occupied and consumed by a male partner. Instead it becomes a powerful emblem of her ability to contain and spawn sexual desire, as well as to create, sustain, and give birth to life. Chandralekha, for whom the body represents an important agent of sociocultural activism, confirms this: "*Sharira* depicts the secrets of creation, the secrets of life in a woman's body. It is about the living body without compartments where sexuality, sensuality and spirituality exist together. The *yonī* hasta is crucial to it" (Chandralekha in Mattingly 2007).

In Chandralekha's choreographic journey, *Sharira* is not unique in referencing this powerful visual symbol of female sexuality. In an earlier piece entitled *Yantra* (1994), Chandralekha herself performs the *yonī* hasta mudra contextualized alongside the *lingam*, the phallus, and hence the oppositional force of male sexuality. And if the *yonī* hasta mudra itself does not appear in Chandralekha's works, its triangular geometry finds more abstract resonances within choreographic formations, such as in the tight triangle created by three women in *Interim: After the End and Before the Beginning* (1995). The triangular motif of the *yonī* hasta is therefore never too far away from Chandralekha's artistic conscience and consequently her aesthetic. However, in *Sharira*, it acquires a unique, concentrated, and distilled form, as the visual reference to the triangle is no longer a metaphor for the *yonī*. It actually frames the *yonī* itself. Through Doshi's repeated, painstakingly slow parting of her legs, which creates the two arms of the inverted triangle, Chandralekha guides her audience's attention to that very thing that lies between them: the *yonī* in all its fleshly form. In *Sharira*, Doshi's parting pelvis and its explicit focus on the *yonī* becomes an important vehicle for Chandralekha's feminist commentary on Indian female sexuality. This focus on the pelvis is reminiscent of the metaphoric use of the spinal column through the iconoclastic "drag walk" of the female dancers in *Sri* (1991). While Ananya Chatterjea interprets the drag walk as Chandralekha's critique of the submissive condition of contemporary womanhood in patriarchal India (1998, 2004), Uttara Coorlawala argues that, far from being submissive, the drag walk symbolizes resistance to this patriarchy and hence a form of uprising (1999). Despite their oppositional readings of Chandralekha's depiction of the spinal column in *Sri*, Chatterjea and Coorlawala both recognize that the spine acts as a physiological fulcrum and a potent artistic and aesthetic medium through which Chandralekha's feminist critiques on Indian womanhood are communicated. In *Sharira*, the importance of the spinal column as a "metaphor for freedom" (Chandralekha 2003, 57) finds a new manifestation as Chandralekha shifts the focus from the verticality of the spine to its horizontal base in Doshi's parting pelvis. This shift is crucial; through a direct focus on the pelvis, which remains a highly sexualized zone of the female body, Chandralekha continues to address the ways in which femininity and female sexuality need to be reconsidered and rewritten through emphasizing the sexual agency of the woman, while simultaneously acknowledging her power to bring life into being.

While such a bold aesthetic is true of *Sharira* in particular, its alternative spirit and openness to explore human sexualities, vis-à-vis the middle-class consciousness that governs and constructs Indian sexuality, pervades Chandralekha's oeuvre as a whole, and characterizes her approach to

choreography as a “manifesto for an emancipatory politics of the body” (Arudra quoted in Menon 2003, 2).

Historicizing Chandralekha and Her Opus⁴

Based in Chennai, Chandralekha was a seminal figure in spearheading the aesthetic negotiations and artistic debates around what the term “contemporary” might mean in the context of dance in twentieth and twenty-first century India. However, as Rustom Bharucha writes:

While dance plays a central role in this oeuvre, it would be a mistake to valorize it over other creative, social and political processes animating Chandra’s life. To see her exclusively as a choreographer is not inaccurate, but it is reductive, if not misleading, because it plays into the professional protocols of a career Chandra emphatically rejected. The fact that she happened to become a full-time choreographer rather late in life was as much of an accident as it was a compulsive choice. Given another set of circumstances, Chandra might have devoted herself to writing or painting or “doing *nothing*,” as she often audaciously asserted. (2008, 3–5)

Chandralekha Prabhudas Patel was born in 1928 in Maharashtra, a state in west India, and grew up in the neighboring state of Gujarat. As a teenager she was forced to study law by her family, but she soon escaped a prescriptive and conventional career by going on to train as a bharatanatyam dancer under the tutelage of Guru Kancheepuram Ellappa Pillai. Chandralekha pursued a successful solo career as a bharatanatyam dancer through the 1950s at national and international platforms, until she decided she could no longer cope with the incongruences between India’s turbulent contemporary reality within which she danced, and the reified divine associations of the dance form, not to mention the adorned and objectified “dollification” (Chandralekha 2003, 54) of the female dancer herself. She had started to sense this disconnect from as early as her *arangetram*, her debut bharatanatyam performance, where amidst a season of severe drought, she performed a dance about the abundance of water in homage to the holy River Yamuna:

One of the crucial experiences that shaped my response and attitude to dance was during my very first public dance recital (*arangetram*) in 1952. It was a charity programme in aid of the Rayalseema Drought Relief Fund. I was dancing “Mathura Nagarilo,” depicting the river Yamuna, the water-play of the *sakhis*, the sensuality, the luxuriance, and abundance of water. Suddenly, I froze, with the realization that I was portraying all this profusion of water in the context of a drought. . . . Art and life seemed to be in conflict. The paradox was stunning. (Chandralekha 2003, 50)

Although she continued her solo dance career after her *arangetram* for around a decade, she was ultimately unable to reconcile between these stark oppositional realities. Growing increasingly uncomfortable with the cosmeticization of bharatanatyam on one hand, and its divine associations on the other, Chandralekha wanted to re-evaluate the meaning and role of “tradition” vis-à-vis contemporary Indian arts. She therefore chose to stop dancing altogether through the 1960s and 1970s.⁵

During her long hiatus she became a political activist; immersed herself in studying ancient Sanskrit texts on Indian aesthetics, iconography, and philosophy; worked as a writer and a graphic designer; and lived with some of the most influential Indian artists and thinkers of the time. At the heart of Chandralekha’s quest for the relationship between tradition and contemporaneity were the following questions: “Why have classical Indian dances become so insular and unresponsive to the dramatic social, historical, scientific, human changes that have occurred in the world around us . . . ?

What makes them resistant to contemporary progressive social values?” (Chandralekha 2003, 54). Chandralekha was searching for a dance idiom that acknowledged dance not as divine, but as originating fundamentally from the materiality of human bodies and the sociopolitics that frame them. She was also keen to understand dance not as an isolated art form, but one that emerged from an interdisciplinary and collective consciousness shared between the artistic traditions of Indian “dance, music, architecture, sculpture, yoga, medicine, martial arts, linguistics, grammar . . .” (Chandralekha 2003, 58). She thus deliberately searched for tradition not in “hierarchical and legitimating systems” (Chatterjea 2004, 44), but in “continual indigenous cultural practices” (44). Chandralekha maintained that: “The East, in order to be ‘contemporary’ would need to understand and express the East in its own terms; to explore to the full the linkages generated by valid interdisciplinary principles common to all arts . . .” (Chandralekha 2003, 51).

In search of such an open and fluid understanding of “tradition,” she turned to non-performance-oriented Indian somatic practices such as yoga and the Keralite martial art form of kalaripayattu, whose internalized focus was distinct from that of concert dance forms such as bharatanatyam.⁶ Writer, lighting-designer, and photographer Sadanand Menon, who was also Chandralekha’s creative partner, elaborates further on her experimentations with the dramaturgical principles of bharatanatyam and the organic qualities of alternative non-concert somatic practices:

Chandralekha works . . . with integrating the formal structures and internal strengths of classical forms like Bharatanatyam; the architecture of concentric energy centers in martial forms like Kalaripayattu; the totalizing philosophy and inner/outer connectivity of therapeutic forms like Yoga and the meditative charge of ritual forms like *hasta-mudras* (symbolic language of hand gestures), in order to comprehend and interpret the body in a modern sense. (2003, 4)

In the 1970s, embodying both “the language of the activist and the experience of a dancer” (Bharucha 1995, 128), Chandralekha returned to dance with her politicized agenda of finding an alternative movement idiom through a series of explorations about dance’s role in contemporary Indian society. She was keen to investigate and make explicit in her choreography the politics that governed “the internal relation between the dance and the dancer and the external relation between dance and society” (Chandralekha 2003, 51). Her explorations found an important national and international platform at the East West Dance Encounter conference in 1984 in Mumbai, where she performed extracts from her earlier pieces *Devadasi* and *Navagraha*, and a new composition entitled *Primal Energy*, and spoke candidly about her political manifesto through dance. This moment marked the beginning of her choreographic journey. Her radical thinking about the body and feminism, and her complicated relationship with dance and tradition fueled all ten pieces of work she created between 1985 and her untimely death in 2006. It is no coincidence that the titles of her first and last piece, *Angika* (1985) and *Sharira* (2001), both mean “the body” in Sanskrit, as they poignantly capture the question at the heart of each of her explorations: “where does the body begin . . . and end?” (Chandralekha quoted in Menon 2003, 9). Through her ten pieces, Chandralekha’s search for the role of the body in society and its relationship to dance intensified. In her final three works, *Raga* (1998), *Sloka* (1999), and *Sharira* (2001), her search turned to the body’s ability to critique heteronormative sexuality through exploring feminine energies in both male and female bodies in *Raga*, and depicting sexuality as a fluid and liminal condition in both male and female bodies in *Sloka*. However it is commonly considered by critics and scholars alike that her art, its politicization, and, most importantly, its critique of heteronormativity reached a crystallized and potent form in her final masterpiece, *Sharira*.



Photo 1. Tishani Doshi in Sharira. Photograph by Sadanand Menon. Used with permission.

Sharira

Accompanied by the music and vocalization of the Gundecha Brothers in the north Indian dhruwad style, *Sharira* (Photo 1) is a bold and intimate evocation of sexuality, particularly female sexuality. A heterosexual duet, it draws upon the synergies between yoga and kalaripayattu to create a somatic language that harbors great emotional intensity. The piece does not start as a duet however. In its provocative opening, which lasts approximately thirty minutes in real time but feels like an eternity in performance-time, a spotlight appears on Doshi lying on her belly, facing upstage with her back to the audience. She gradually raises her upper body into the cobra position from yoga and arches her back. She then slowly lifts her legs by her ankles and sculpts herself into a bow, as she balances on her belly. Her dominant position on the floor forces her audience to focus between her parted thighs, directly into the depths of her pelvis, and this moment seems to last forever. When Doshi melts into the floor and finally faces the audience, she sculpts yet another posture that directs their gaze once again into her pelvis. This time she sits on the floor facing the audience, raises her legs and then slowly parts them from a suspended mid-air position. She shifts her body weight forward accompanied by extended arms with her palms facing the ceiling, slowly reaching out to the audience before circling to the sides, as if to make an open offering of herself. She allows her hands to reach behind her and touch the ground on either side, in order to support her body weight, as she stares confidently at the audience. Her legs continue to part, feet flexed and knees slightly bent. This strong stance and inviting gesture licenses the audience to continue to gaze directly between her thighs without any sense of titillation. In these very moments, the audience become aware that they are in the presence of a woman who is self-assured in her sexuality through her willingness to make such a bold offering of it to them (Photo 2).

The parting of Doshi's legs creates an inverted downward pointing triangle, where each of her legs forms the arms of the triangle and appears to meet at, and therefore direct our attention to, her *yoni*. Doshi's parting pelvis and the triangular motif it repeatedly creates must be examined through the lens of *yantra*, an ancient Indian philosophical principle that recognizes latent occult properties in two- or three-dimensional geometrical shapes such as a dot, a triangle, or a square. According to *yantra*, the triangle, when extracted from the human body and isolated, becomes a universal metaphor of the pubic triangle or the *yoni* of womanhood:



Photo 2. Tishani Doshi in *Sharira*. Photograph by Sadanand Menon. Used with permission.

Ultimately, this triangle represents Womanhood, Femininity, Femaleness, the Cosmic Mother: the abstraction of the symbol transcends the individual, representational level and reaches the Universal. In Tantra, a downward pointing triangle symbolizes the Cosmic Mother, Femaleness, the Shakti. (Lysebeth 1995, 182)

According to the principles of *yantra*, when someone encounters and interacts with a geometric sign in either a two- or three-dimensional form, their mental focus is heightened and concentrated by the occult powers harbored in the shapes, which enables them to acquire a meditative state. In this heightened state, the person can engage with the shape; its aesthetic, metaphoric, and political dimensions; and look beyond its abstraction and/or materiality. Chandralekha was “a self-taught and an obsessive amateur practitioner” (Bharucha 2014) of such ancient Indian philosophical principles, and her choreographic oeuvre resonates with references to several esoteric and spiritual symbolisms from *tantra*. Her choreographic strategy to evoke the triangle *yantra* in *Sharira* through Doshi’s parting legs necessitates the audience to focus relentlessly at the geometric shape of the triangle and the heightened consciousness it induces, alongside the more profound issues it unearths regarding the female body and its relationship to female sexuality. What makes this experience even more efficacious is the way Doshi’s legs slowly reveal and frame what is hidden between them—the very fulcrum of female sexuality, Doshi’s *yoni*. And, for once, we experience it as an independent entity, isolated from the *lingam* and occupying space and time in its own right. This time and space occupied by Doshi and her parting pelvis feels eternal and permanently unfolding, making it near impossible to sense at what point in the piece she is joined by a man, Shaji John.

John enters the space with a sudden strong kalaripayattu kick. The initial masculine dominance of this movement instantly gives way to deference for Doshi’s strong female presence, as he kneels before her with his back to us. A series of intimate and erotic interactions that unfolds outside the constraints of a conventional narrative structure then develops between the two of them. Yet, it would be reductive to think of *Sharira* as a purely formalist choreography, devoid of content. Their interactions are often representational of the most intimate sexual acts, which go a great distance to dismantle heteronormative constructions of human sexual behavior established around male dominance and female submissiveness. Instead the power dynamics flow back and forth between the bodies, as the piece “goes beyond the ideas of sexuality as a translation of physical



Photo 3. Tishani Doshi and Shaji John in *Sharira*. Photograph by Sadanand Menon. Used with permission.

desire to its reality as the politics of power” (Menon 2003, 8). As Doshi sits with her legs wide apart, gazing straight at the audience, John lowers his head ever so slowly until it disappears into the very depths of her pelvis, as though engaging in an act of cunnilingus. She responds equally slowly by arching her back and flexing her feet even further. Through the most painstakingly slow pace, she ascends into a shoulder stand and the gradual elevation of her legs into the air seems to control him rising into a head stand above her. As Ketu Katrak suggests, such dominant verticality on stage from both Doshi and John is reminiscent of the Hindu emblem of masculinity, the *lingam*. Chandralekha seems to deliberately sculpt “two lingams on stage” (Katrak 2011, 51) and “asserts the female creative force to be as powerful, even more so than the male’s” (51).

Doshi and John mirror each other; they play, they tease, they “sway as if giving pleasure to each other, equal partners in this physicality and as if enabling each to come to orgasm together and/or separately” (Katrak 2011, 51). They seem to move in and out of each other, entwined in a prolonged sexual ritual where the powers shift back and forth between them, though often foregrounded in Doshi (Photo 3). Despite such implicit and explicit sexual imagery, Chandralekha’s choreography never objectifies either the female or the male form. Nor does *Sharira* ever titillate the audience in a way similar to contemporaneous and problematic constructions of the passive and objectified female bodies in mainstream Bollywood cinema.⁷ Chandralekha’s choreographic strategy of non-touch enables *Sharira* to be powerful through its ability to embody sexuality without falling prey to the codes of misogynistic erotica. Through the lack of physical touch between Doshi and John, their chemistry becomes palpably charged, generated from the physical distance between them. Doshi and John’s choice to maintain this narrow band of physical distance between each other makes their interactions powerful. There is also a distinct sense that it is Doshi who chooses not to be touched as she exercises great power in controlling the ways in which John interacts with

her. She crafts and manipulates the intimacy she desires, how far it travels, and at what point it ends. It is in Chandralekha's foregrounding of Doshi's sexuality through the conscious choices she makes and the dominant role she plays in the sexual ritual that *Sharira* becomes a powerful statement on female sexuality. In recent personal communication, Rustom Bharucha confirms that Chandralekha's choreography consistently emphasizes female sexuality as independent, primal, generative, and dynamic, where the male force often appears as a mere vehicle for the former, and therefore the less dominant of the two forces (Bharucha 2014). In strategically choreographing Doshi as an independent sexual agent who confidently occupies the space on her own for more than half the length of the piece, *Sharira* becomes a crystallization of the ways in which Chandralekha's oeuvre demonstrates a consistent resistance to the passive constructions of the Indian woman as abstinent, submissive, and asexual by evoking her instead as an autonomous sexual agent (Photo 4).

***Sharira* and Indian Female Sexuality**

Chandralekha's artistic challenge to Indian cultural sensibilities that govern heteronormative codes of sexuality of the dominant man and the submissive woman destabilizes the nation's social and legal sanctioning of respectable sexual behavior (Puri 2006, 340). Jyoti Puri confirms that, "In India, the norms of adult sexuality are quite unambiguous—it belongs within marriage and is meant to procreate . . ." (Puri 2006, 342). Geetanjali Gangoli clarifies that, even within a marriage, "criminal and civil laws in India construct women's sexuality as subordinate to male sexuality and systemise sexuality within a marital, heterosexist paradigm" (Gangoli 2007, 57), as exemplified by the fact that marital rape is not considered a criminal act. Male sexuality is by far the more dominant of the discourses on sexual behavior, and the act of penetrative sex (both vaginal and anal) remains the grounds on which criminalization of rape and sodomy are sanctioned. Female sexuality, considered the passive receptor in the heterosexist framework, receives little attention, and

Photo 4. Tishani Doshi and Shaji John in Sharira. Photograph by Sadanand Menon. Used with permission.



lesbianism, while not condoned, is not given social recognition or legal status (Gangoli 2007). Once constructed by and still framed within nationalist rhetoric, the post-colonial Indian *nari* (woman) remains the controlled vehicle for respectable sexuality:

Women bear the marks, sometimes violent marks of caste, ethnic and national imaginations. Not only has middle class, upper caste women been the ground on which questions of modernity and tradition are framed, she is the embodiment of the boundaries between licit and illicit forms of sexuality, as well as the guardian of the nation's morality. (John and Nair 1998, 8)

Not only is this chaste Indian *nari* a product of nationalism, she has more importantly become the emblem of the nation herself. Parker, Russo, Summer, and Yaeger argue:

This trope of the nation-as-woman of course depends for its representational efficacy on a particular image of woman as chaste, dutiful . . . , maternal This idealization of motherhood by the virile fraternity would seem to entail the exclusion of all nonreproductively-oriented sexualities from the discourse of the nation. (1992, 6)

The abstinent *bharat janani* (Mother India) is regulated by, and in turn regulates, the strict patriarchal codes that govern Indian female sexuality, disciplined within the procreative tropes of marriage and motherhood. The purity of the Indian *nari* also pervades the construction of the female Indian dancer as an equally abstinent and asexual figure. Her body is emphasized instead as a vehicle through which she and her audience can commune with the gods, and therefore dance, particularly as constructed in the classical forms, has been constructed as a pure, chaste, and devotional act, devoid of all human and carnal associations.⁸ This is an ironic reality when examined in relation to the role of the *sadir* dancer in pre-colonial temple premises, in whose body sexuality and spirituality co-existed as fundamentally entwined.

Sharira's efficacy in rewriting heteronormative codes that govern Indian female sexuality can only be examined with an understanding of this complex sociopolitical context that frames Indian womanhood and, in turn, the female Indian dancer. Chandralekha does not ignore the importance of the Indian *nari* as *janani*, mother and life-giver. Instead she connects the Indian *nari's* ability to create life to the fundamental act of sex, not as some divine metaphoric communion, but as a human and carnal act devoid of all religious associations. In Doshi, Chandralekha creates a *nari* who is as much a *janani* as she is a sexual agent, deliberately conflating the act of sex not only with the act of creating and giving birth to life, but also with the act of wanting and deriving pleasure. She thereby restores sexual agency to the mythical abstinent *bharat janani* by framing her as an autonomous and sexually fulfilled *jagat janani* (World Mother). This transformation shifts Doshi from the strict nationalist confines of Indian female sexuality to "hyphenated" transnational paradigms of female sexualities that cannot be defined by the nation (Puri 1999), and that in turn challenges the concept of an Indian *nari*.

Consequently, this further critiques the Indian heterosexist paradigm of the dominant male partner; at first John is absent from Doshi's explorations of self-fulfillment and then, when he does appear, he seems a mere incidental vehicle for Doshi's sexual experiences. Chandralekha successfully deconstructs Indian codes on sexuality by deploying two interdependent choreographic strategies: first, the repeated slow parting of Doshi's legs to emphasize the space in between them as a site that generates both life and pleasure and, second, a paratopic temporality (Banerji 2010) that manipulates the audience's perception of time.

Sharira, Temporality, and Indian Female Sexuality

Despite its highly sexual content, *Sharira*'s mastery of performing slowness makes it a "non-sensational anti-spectacle" (Bharucha 2008, 15). Anurima Banerji observes that, through this excruciating slowness, Chandralekha creates a "paratopic" temporality that "challenges notions of dance as virtuosity or exotic spectacle, and forces instead a concentration on dance as . . . a true bodily discipline" (2010, 359).

In an interview with the Canadian choreographer Richard Tremblay in 1997, Chandralekha rejected western notions of linear time that connect the past to the future through the present: "Time is conceived of as linear: a point of the present proceeds along a line and this shifting point divides the line into a past and a future. The line is thought of as having a scale and the present is always moving along this scale with the same velocity. This time has been embodied in clocks [...]" (Tiemersma 1996, 161). In rejecting such a clock-measured sense of time, Chandralekha emphasizes the importance of occupying and living in the present moment, without the pressures of linking this present to a past or a future. This dilated temporality in Chandralekha's works creates a prolonged sense of delay between the moment when the bodies of her dancers signify and the moment when the audience receives the signification of their message, creating a dilated temporal spatiality and reality within which Chandralekha's choreography can exist and be read.

In *Sharira*, this dilated temporality is further enhanced by and mirrored in Chandralekha's strategic decision to marry her choreography with the live vocal accompaniment of dhruwad by the Gundecha Brothers, Umakant and Ramakant. Dhruwad, an ancient north Indian music tradition and regarded as a precursor to modern Hindustani music, is a meditative form that has the ability to transport its audiences into a state of trance where any sense of clock-measured time ceases to exist.⁹ A dhruwad recital starts with a slow, deliberate, and melodic development of the *alaap*, the introduction, which seems to take an eternity to build in tempo and rhythm. An *alaap* can be performed for over an hour. This durational quality creates for its audience an alternative temporality to clock-measured linear time and "both emanates from and is able to instill deep states of consciousness" (Clarke and Kini 2011, 137) in them. The Gundecha Brothers' exquisite and soulful vocalization in *Sharira* creates a contemplative aurality that is trance-like, and their voices are so perfectly matched in tone that it becomes impossible to distinguish between them as they move in and out of each other, mirroring through sound the movements of Doshi and John.¹⁰ Ramakant Gundecha (2014) reflects on the chemistry between dhruwad's unique embodiment of temporality and Chandralekha's ability to elasticize time in *Sharira*:

We feel that the significant connection between our Dhruwad and Chandralekha's choreographic work is the meditative nature of both art forms. We find a lot of similarities in the movements of music in Dhruwad, and bodily movements in Chandralekha's dance work; and that's why it goes well together. The "Alaap" of Dhruwad is supposed to start with slow unfolding of the Raaga. Same way, Chandralekha's work also slowly unfolds the human body. Both, the movement of notes and the movement of body, phrase their own discipline of time.

If in form dhruwad matches Chandralekha's choreographic "paratopic" temporality, in content, it contrasts with her depiction of sexuality as both human and secular, through its explicit sacred and divine Sanskrit references to the union of Shiva and Parvati, the Hindu deities and primal emblems of male and female sexual energies. This layering of the sacred and the sexual, the divine and the secular, marks Chandralekha's ability to remind the audience, particularly those with Indian middle-class sensibilities, that eroticism is as divine an act as it is human. In *Sharira*, "normal time," which is bound by strict Indian cultural codes of propriety that govern expressions of sexuality, is relentlessly broken down and manipulated beyond recognition, such that these codes can be blown apart and rewritten by Doshi and John. And it is in this rewriting, enabled through the

marriage of Chandralekha's choreographed corporeality and the Gundecha Brothers' rendition of dhruvad, that audiences confront the ways in which their own bodies and sexualities have been codified and performed in accordance with social norms. In Doshi and John's materiality they recognize their own corporealities, as the heightened and dilated temporality of *Sharira* enables them to reassess their own selves and sexualities.

Writing about witnessing cross-temporalities created through re-enactments of historical events, Rebecca Schneider reminds us how such a "knotty and porous relationship to time" (2011, 10) complicates cultural sensibilities: "Crossing time sometimes meant crossing borders of comfortable political affiliation . . . and such crossing often caused a distinct discomfort at the edge of very difficult questions" (2011, 9). Although Chandralekha's creative impetus is as far removed as possible from such projects of re-enactments and preservation, and although her works do not necessarily cross time but rather dilate it into becoming a holistic entity, Schneider's observation about how the manipulation of performance time can challenge cultural norms holds true in *Sharira*. Banerji explains how experiencing this stretched temporality through Chandralekha's choreography creates discomforts in the audience that Schneider alludes to:

In their excruciating slowness, the gestures are simultaneously mesmerizing, alienating and unbearable, placing an intense focus on the struggles of the body—a feat that would have been rendered impossible if the speed was accelerated. For the audience witnessing this laborious performance, there is little possibility of catharsis, identification or escape. (2010, 359–60)

While Banerji suggests that the audience is not able to achieve identification with the dancers, I believe that in *Sharira* the opposite holds true. On edge with discomfort, the audience members become acutely conscious of the fleshly presence of Doshi and John, and realize that the dancers' bodies are no different from their own, which viscerally connects them to the dancers. Thus, through the materiality of the dancers' bodies, the audience become hyper-aware of their own, and this ultimate intellectual and sensorial transaction between the dancers and the audience makes experiencing *Sharira* "real." As an Indian woman in the audience, constructed by the same codes of the abstinent Indian *nari* as the ones that Doshi's body resists and deconstructs, this sensorial transaction between her body and my own is a memorably empowering experience. It licensed me to see myself as a sexual agent and also a generator of life, and has stayed with me since.

Chandralekha clearly emphasizes Doshi as an independent sexual agent in allowing her to occupy the stage on her own for the first half of the performance. In this time, Doshi's repeated evocation of the triangle *yantra*, through the painstakingly slow and controlled parting of her legs, invites the audience to look into the depths of her pelvis again and again. Doshi's parting pelvis stretches over a prolonged period of time that seems "slow and luxurious," yet always remains "disciplined and rigorous" and "never indulgent" (Banerji 2010, 360). She appears internalized in her focus, while simultaneously aware and open in inviting her audience's gaze further inward. At times it almost feels as though Doshi's open pelvis is another eye, meeting the audience's line of vision. As Doshi rocks back and forth in the bow-position, it is her pelvis that is charged with desire, which she is able to fulfill independently. Chandralekha creates an autonomous woman who plays out her sexual agency against the haunting vocalization of the words "*jagata janani*," mother who gives birth to the world. This juxtaposition and ultimate conflation between sexual agency and birthing life is vital to deconstructing the myth of the Indian *nari* as an asexual nurturing mother.

Chandralekha's focus on Doshi's parting pelvis further deconstructs the ways in which the partedness of a bharatanatyam dancer's legs in the *mandala* position (vertical standing posture) is obscured through ornate and complex *adavus* (footwork) and *mudras* (hand gestures) in the movement sequences that follow. *Sharira*'s economy of movement and paratopic temporality obscures

nothing. Doshi's movements are not ornate or superfluous in any way. Every gesture is loaded with intention and clarity. Her legs part not to achieve anything other than to sustain, for as long as physically possible, the powerful image of slowly revealing the space between her thighs. As the audience members' awarenesses of their own corporealities are heightened, so too are their cultural sensitivities toward the issues of sexual propriety that govern the Indian woman's body.

***Sharira's* Legacy**

It is undeniable that *Sharira* compels its audiences, particularly those who are Indian or aware of Indian sensibilities toward female sexuality, to witness the heterodoxy of the duet and, more importantly, to confront their own attitudes toward the Indian woman as a sexual agent. Chandralekha's framing of Doshi as a transnational *jagat janani* who gives birth to life just as much as she revels in the act of sex itself reveals the importance of her sociopolitical dialogue with the rest of the world from within India. This is not just vis-à-vis her explorations of female sexuality beyond a nationalist rhetoric, but also regarding her negotiations of a choreographic aesthetic that is as fundamentally Indian as it is transnational. It is this world-facing transnationalism that makes both Chandralekha's aesthetic and politics such a challenge to Indian middle- and upper-middle-class notions of respectability. However through this challenge, Chandralekha opens up other possibilities of being Indian. Priya Devi, an independent arts writer and commentator on Chandralekha's works, writes: "Nothing that Chandra does is ever in bad taste. Nothing she does lacks vitality and a sense of reverence... But for audiences accustomed to the watered-down flirtatiousness of cinema heroines under the name of minor goddesses, it may be more dangerous" (Devi quoted in Bharucha 1995, 136).

Thus, even as the Indian audience members are on the surface outraged by Chandralekha's bold aesthetic and socio-sexual content and are left "squirming at their uninhibited display of sexuality" (Rajan 2004), they are forced to reconsider their own sexual sensibilities as they witness Doshi rewriting the codes that govern the myth of the abstinent Indian *nari* through the ideological transaction that transpires between herself and her audience. In embodying a dilated sense of time, in which the materiality of the performers' bodies and their provocative actions are played out in elongated detail, *Sharira* pushes its audience to the brink of re-evaluating cultural propriety and their own attitudes toward sexual behavior, rewriting the Indian woman as a sexual agent and then also a life-giver. Significantly, this is done not as a post-performance intellectual exercise, but as an embodied experience in the performance itself. This lends *Sharira* its charge, particularly in contemporary India where the myth of the abstinent *nari* continues to circulate in the national imagination of middle- and upper-middle-class consciousness, even as the reality of Indian womanhood and her relationship to sexuality continues to be re-written in practice, as heralded in and by Doshi's *sharira* and the alternative possibilities it harbors.

Notes

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1. I must clarify here that while in this article I refer to the female dancer in *Sharira* as Tishani Doshi, this role was originally created on and performed by Padmini Chettur, a dancer who trained and performed with Chandralekha from 1991–2001 in the pieces *Lilavati*, *Prana*, *Angika*, *Sri*, *Bhinna*, *Pravaha*, *Yantra*, *Mahakaal*, and *Sharira*, and who is now herself a choreographer based in India. However, because it is Tishani Doshi who performs in both the versions I closely reference in this article, it is Doshi with whom I associate my own encounter with *Sharira*.

2. I watched *Sharira* in Amsterdam when it was performed as part of the international Julidans Festival in July 2007, having travelled specifically from the UK for what was being rumored to be its final performance. I remember sitting in an intimate black-box studio alongside a primarily white European audience with few other diasporic South Asians. Since then, *Sharira* has been performed many times all over the world, including India and the UK. A small excerpt from the piece performed at the Habitat Centre in New Delhi in 2009 is also now available on YouTube. In addition, filmmaker Ein Lal's documentary entitled *Sharira: Chandralekha's Explorations with Dance* (2003) has been a valuable reference point for this article. My analysis of the piece in this article is primarily based on my experience of watching the piece live in Amsterdam, but is enhanced in places, where my memory fails me, by both Ein Lal's documentary and the YouTube clip available here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L5HzPHATwpM>.

3. Although *Sharira* could be read as a universal commentary on the politics of performing heterosexuality, one cannot ignore the culturally coded bodies of the Indian performers Tishani Doshi and Shaji John; the Indian movement aesthetics of yoga and kalaripayattu; and philosophical reference points such as *tantra* and *yantra* in the piece. Therefore this article will primarily analyze the ways in which *Sharira* challenges heteronormative codes surrounding the performance of sexuality specifically in the Indian context.

4. Chandralekha's biographical details, the historicization of her opus, and its link to her socio-political agenda as a choreographer have been informed by the following sources: Bharucha 1995, 2008; Chandralekha 2003; Chatterjea 2004; Menon 2003.

5. The emergence of bharatanatyam as India's national dance was an integral part of the Indian nationalist project in which dance played a vital role. The modernist revival and "cleansing" of the banned temple dance *sadir* in order to construct the national dance form of bharatanatyam has been well-documented by scholars such as Amrit Srinivasan (1985), Saskia Kersenboom (1987), Avanthi Meduri (1988), Ananya Chatterjea (2004), Janet O'Shea (2007), Ketu Katrak (2011), and others. These scholars have observed that part of the revival project of bharatanatyam was to "cleanse" the ancient *sadir* form of all sexual imagery and carnal associations by replacing *sringara*, the erotic quality once prevalent in *sadir*, with *bhakti*, the devotional quality believed to be generated during the performance of bharatanatyam. Thus, the female bharatanatyam dancer became an emblem of purity and chasteness, her body became a site for the construction of national consciousness, and her dancing became a vehicle for communing with divinity, harking back to India's pre-colonial, untainted, and spiritual past.

6. Kalaripayattu is a martial art form originating in the southern Indian state of Kerala, which has received recent attention in Western performance studies scholarship in the study by Phillip Zarrilli (2000). Zarrilli writes about the value of employing this somatic art form as the foundation of Western actor training and uses this as the basis of his own practice. Characterized by athleticism, flexibility, clean straight lines, impossibly high leaps, and deep centered lunges, kalaripayattu is energizing and meditative, engendering a body that is both supple and compliant while being simultaneously grounded and focused. It is often used as part of the training regime for other south Indian classical dance forms such as kathakali.

7. Please see Ramkissoon (2010), Dark (2008), and Nijhawan (2009).

8. It is important to make a distinction between the Indian classical dance forms that were driven by the "purification" agenda of the Indian nationalist project, and folk traditions or other somatic forms such as yoga and martial arts that were not subjected to the same level of scrutiny by the morality police, and are therefore licenced to use the body in ways that are more earthy, thereby operating beyond the parameters of the devotional.

9. For informative and substantive sources on the style of dhruwad, please refer to the Gundecha Brothers' Web site (n.d.). For critical studies on the form, please refer to Sanyal and Widdess (2004) and also Clarke and Kini (2011).

10. The durational temporality created through the union of Chandralekha's choreography and the Gundecha Brothers' rendition of dhruwad is reminiscent of the layering of Robert Wilson's visual aesthetic with Phillip Glass's music composition in their legendary operatic masterpiece *Einstein on the Beach*. For an insightful discussion of the evocation of a similar alternative temporality in *Einstein on the Beach*, please see Broadhurst (2012). Both these artistic partnerships evoke an "infinitesimal fragmentation and hallucinatory expansion of time to create a hypnotic, contemplative reality outside of normal time" (Bradby and Williams 1988, 231) because of the way the corporeal and the aural interact.

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