



Indian Modern Dance, Feminism, and Nationalism

by Prarthana Purkayastha. 2014. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan. 216 pp., illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$45.00 paper.
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The idea of “Indian modern dance” at first appears to be an oxymoron. At least, that is how the subject has generally been treated in the dominant frameworks guiding dance scholarship in South Asia and abroad. India is often associated with “traditional” and “classical” aesthetics, while “modern dance” seems principally tied to the West. The phrase “Indian modern dance” thus may be disjunctive because it juxtaposes seemingly contradictory elements even though it exists as a vibrant yet tangential practice within the nation and worldwide.

In her new monograph on the subject, Prarthana Purkayastha sets out to challenge prevailing assumptions about the category by investigating its political history and aesthetic significance, closely analyzing its alliances with feminist positionings, and locating its emergence and establishment within a transnational nexus. This is a layered historiographic and choreographic study of modern dance within Indian borders, from its nascence to its progressive unfolding between 1900 and 2000—a time frame that allows the author to cover the style as it travels through the colonial, nationalist, postindependence, and contemporary eras. Born out of the twin motivations of inscribing Indian bodies into histories of modern dance and positioning modern dance as a central rather than a fringe concern of Indian aesthetics, Purkayastha’s work critically unpacks and destabilizes the hegemonic maneuvers that assign modernity to the West and tradition to South Asia. Her project can be summed up as offering a counterpoint to “the tendency in much twentieth-century Euro-American dance scholarship” to “attribute progressive change to theater-dance work created in the Euro-American worlds only, whilst sidelining cultural productions of non-western origin in native/ethnic/traditional terms” (119). This book performs the valuable work of interlacing the modern and the Indian—localizing

the former and so globalizing the latter, performatively restoring them to each other in a thoroughly original mode.

Following in the footsteps of renowned scholars Sunil Kothari (2003) and Ketu Katrak (2011) and building on Urmimala Sarkar Munsri’s (2008, 2011) and Joan Erdman’s (1987, 1998) abundant scholarship on the topic, Purkayastha usefully advances the study of Indian modern dance by substantively historicizing it, bringing together five of its key architects in a single canvas and reflecting on their contributions in relation to each other. This method has the merit of allowing the reader to witness the unfolding of Indian modern dance across disparate times while integrating a nuanced view of how each featured exponent innovatively interpreted the general set of aesthetic-political principles contained in the governing frame. In the process, through her scrupulous research and elegant theoretical elaborations the author illuminates the constellation of conundrums and possibilities generated by the praxis of Indian modern dance.

Purkayastha traces the trajectory of Indian modern dance as embodied by five major figures linked to its formation: Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), who attained iconic status for his prolific contributions to multiple genres of art, including dance; Uday Shankar (1900–1977), who served as the very embodiment of Indian dance for global audiences in the early part of the twentieth century; Shanti Bardhan (1916–1954), an activist with the Indian People’s Theater Association, who agitated against colonial occupation and struggled in service to communist ideals through dance; and the mother-daughter duo of Manjusri Chaki-Sircar (1934–2000) and Ranjabati Sircar (1963–1999), who actively sought to express their feminist ideals and unsettle patriarchal imperatives through their creative investigations of corporeality. Each chapter in the book is devoted to exploring the choreographic contributions of a single dance pioneer and highlighting a theme that, Purkayastha suggests, resonates prominently in that pioneer’s body of work: “performing alterity” and “eclecticism,” suborning art as protest, shaping a resolutely feminist oeuvre, and producing lucid critiques of

identity and difference. The author employs a method of granular analysis that effortlessly weaves together the choreographic and the historical, the empirical and the theoretical.

Before embarking on her case studies, Purkayastha contends with the vexed position of modern dance in India, noting that its marginality can be basically attributed to two dominant discourses, two intertwined phenomena: on the one hand, the persistence of the trope and ideology that not only generates a symmetry between modernity and the West, but also suggests that modernity *belongs* exclusively to the West, and on the other hand, the strategies of the self-Orientalizing postcolonial Indian state, which emphasizes modernity and progress in the realms of technology and science but apotheosizes tradition in the realm of the arts. This accentuation of culture as the archive of Indian histories and values is evident in the dance world, reflected, for instance, in the discourses espoused by the Sangeet Natak Akademi (SNA) or the National Academy of the Performing Arts, the major institution directing the production and preservation of dance, music, and theater in India. It categorizes and recognizes mainly three genres of dance: the classical, the folk, and the tribal. Together, these traditions (which hail from different regions of India) act as assimilative agents, magnifying the discrete contributions of the heterogeneous communities that make up the nation, and simultaneously uniting the polity into a single entity possessed of a rich cultural commons. The nebulous and anemic position of “creative dance,” added in the 1950s to the SNA list and reframed today as “contemporary and experimental work,” continues to be a problematic in India, as Purkayastha makes clear.

Among this group, the classical *dispositif* is dominant. The eight dances canonized under this rubric in India—bharatanatyam, odissi, kathak, kuchipudi, manipuri, sattriya, mohini attam, and kathakali—enjoy the highest levels of state patronage and prestige and command the concert stages of the subcontinent while standing in as symbolic representatives of Indian heritage worldwide. The classical forms illustrate and authorize the state’s nationalist narratives about India’s glorious antiquity, its cultivation of diverse indigenous knowledge systems, its representation and embrace of ancient values, its stable and robust cultural

foundations, and the sophistication of its aesthetic philosophies.

Note that in this schema, the “modern” is conspicuous by its virtual absence, alluded to only implicitly in the shadows of the “creative dance” or “contemporary/ experimental” construct. This is partly because, as Purkayastha notes, the expression of a modern sensibility in dance places in crisis a system that endows only traditional genres with social and economic import; further, as the classical/folk/tribal arts are configured as quintessentially Indian within the dominant matrix (even with their hierarchized valuations), modern dance has nearly always been situated in oppositional terms as foreign, alien, mimetic, aesthetically underdeveloped, unambiguously Western in concept and fundamentally antithetical to the Indian ethos. Only the three reigning types are regarded as capable of excavating and containing India’s plural cultural pasts, and the modern barely exists as a legitimate space in the national imagination, a condition reflected in the institutional landscape governing dance.

The most troubling implication of the modern, from an official perspective, is its refusal to be appropriated into state interests, since the idea of modern dance in India (as elsewhere) was indelibly wedded to an implicit politics of individualism, freedom from the constraints of custom, the expression of a deeply subjective vision, the interrogation of the status quo, potentially an insurgence against the normative order of things, and consequently linked with an inability to capture or celebrate uncritically a national-communal spirit. Purkayastha notes that “Indian modern dance is even today commonly viewed or regarded as the focus of isolated experiments by individual dancers who either perform ‘western’ dance imported from Europe or America, or mix ‘western’ dance with Indian dance to create ‘fusion.’ Attached to terms such as ‘fusion’ are the associated meanings of impure and inauthentic” (5). The promise, or menace, of political subversion and displacement thus seemed inevitably to haunt South Asian modern dance. If classical-folk-tribal dance sutured the Indian nation to a stable and distinguished past, modern dance threatened a transformative break from it. And yet, Purkayastha’s discussion reveals that in fact there was no strict boundary between modern and other types of dances, that they shared a significant overlap.

It is against this temporal and spatial backdrop, Purkayastha asserts, that Indian modern dance accomplishes its important labor of placing in the public sphere a set of provocative political articulations and debates. A fixed and solid definition of Indian modern dance is ultimately impossible, she states, given the fluidity of the category and its responsiveness to its immediate circumstances. Purkayastha identifies five dynamics that have historically marked its foundational and sometimes paradoxical ideals: (a) “a clear rupture from the temple and court traditions of dance performance”; (b) “a continuation of the home-grown aesthetic in an altered socio-cultural milieu”; (c) the excision of spirituality from the religious domain, salvaged for secular aims; (d) the direct mobilization of the dancing body in service to a given social cause; and (e) the remapping of Indian identification, the construction of a model “that openly and consciously celebrated a dialogical relationship between India and the world beyond it” (7). It is notable that although the author excludes diasporic expressions from the scope of her study, she takes care to speak of Indian modern dance’s ambitions and flexibility, its history of intracultural and transnational negotiations.

The author also remarks on the importance of the regional-ethnic Bengali background of the group of dancers she has chosen to highlight in her analysis, for an interest in both artistic expression and political agitation have been hallmarks of modern Bengali cultural life, especially since Calcutta became the colonial capital during the British Raj and concomitantly became an important site of anti-imperialist agitation. The city was also the birthplace of the Bengal renaissance, which refers to a period from the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth century, identified by the rise of cultural discourse and artistic production in relation to a new political consciousness about the intensity and power of Indian aesthetics.

Proceeding chronologically with her investigations, Purkayastha begins with an incisive analysis of Tagore’s choreographic contributions. Dance was central to the pedagogic project installed at Shantiniketan, the institution Tagore opened in 1918 as an alternative model of education and which adopted an arts-based curriculum. Prior to this, Tagore had experimented with dance, starting in the 1880s; Purkayastha mentions performances of noteworthy dance-

dramas, such as *Mayar Khela* (1888), *Raja* (1911), *Basanta* (1923), and *Natir Puja* (1926). It was this last piece, the writer states, that “marks the beginning of Tagore’s creation of willful, strong and . . . ‘transgressive’ women characters” in his work (31).

Tagore was prescient in drawing on classical genres such as Kathakali and Manipuri, which proliferated in their own regions but were yet to be fully recognized by nationalist activists as monumental cultural forces in their own right, and melding these forms with folk gestures and postures to originate *Rabindra Nritya*, a modern style set to Tagore’s own music and rhythmic structures. Like Tagore, Uday Shankar—who had established himself as one of the most eminent and recognizable names in modern dance worldwide and is still the figure most prominently associated with the history of Indian dance on the Western stage—derived a style called “hi-dance” early on. This was later rechristened “creative dance” and “Shankar style”; the choreographer assembled the form from a range of eclectic sources, including classical idioms such as Bharatanatyam and Kathakali, especially after he inaugurated the Almora Center for dance training and interacted with myriad artists and traditions. Purkayastha details Shankar’s technique as it extended to “combining recognizable Indian pose and gesture with free movement” and incorporated improvisational strategies, “the use of personal or autobiographical recollection alongside historical memory in dance, music, theater, fine art and filmmaking” (63). She reads Shankar’s landmark composition *Kalpana* as a dance document that “transcends Euro-American othering and proudly embraces alterity whilst simultaneously situating itself within the space of Indian nationalism,” reflecting that it leaves behind a parochial notion of self “in favor of a hybrid dialogue with international modernity” (78).

While Tagore and Shankar are well-acknowledged in dance history, Shanti Burdhan’s work is rarely the subject of critical scrutiny, and the section on his choreographies for the Indian People’s Theater Association (IPTA), Indian National Theater (INT), and the Little Ballet Troupe (LBT) is a welcome point of entry in this regard. Bardhan was an avid member of the Communist Party of India, which in a Gramscian vein promoted

the use of the cultural apparatus to ignite the political consciousness of the Indian public, crucially using forms that would be familiar and intelligible to the latter. Purkayastha quotes the 1943 IPTA manifesto, which makes this goal transparent: “The Indian People’s Theater has been formed to co-ordinate and strengthen all the progressive tendencies that have so far manifested themselves in the nature of drama, songs and dances. It is not a movement which is imposed from above but one which has its roots deep down in the cultural awakening of the masses of India” (84). The commitment to dance emerges for Bardhan in recognition of its potential to connect with ordinary citizens and generate an opposition to the elite, liberal, and imperial ideologies that prevailed at the time. His style, like that of his predecessors, drew from known sources, for example, the epic *Ramayana* and *Panchatantra* fables and from more contemporary texts such as Jawaharlal Nehru’s *The Discovery of India* (95–100).

Tagore, Shankar, and Bardhan’s innovative spirit is even more salient, according to Purkayastha, precisely because the period from the 1880s to 1940s saw the height of the anti-nautch or antidance movement. A conglomeration of British officials and conservative Indian activists sought to suppress variegated dance traditions on the grounds that the female dancer or “nautch girl” in particular was emblematic of the Indian nation’s cultural and moral degeneracy; therefore, she required rehabilitation, respectability, or outright suppression. To espouse dance as a form of expression in this environment of deep cultural and political struggle was a radical gesture. It is astonishing now to think about how these modern choreographers carved out a space to develop their creative visions and resist dual imperialist and nationalist cultural pressures, collectively participating in the project of writing “the figure of the public female dancing body at a time when her erasure from history was being demanded” (31).

Purkayastha next inquires into the interventions of Manjusri Chaki Sircar, the auteur of *Navanritya*, or Feminist New Dance, introduced in the 1980s. While the approaches of Tagore, Shankar, and Bardhan were indicative of a modern framework that consciously drew from repositories of tradition (including classical/folk/tribal vocabularies and ritual as well as

theatrical forms), Chaki Sircar and her daughter Ranjabati Sircar were resolute in their insistence on a rupture from the art of the past since they saw the residues of entrenched patriarchal values contaminating especially the classical styles and sought new forms of corporeal expression that would circumvent such decidedly masculinist prerogatives and norms. Purkayastha shows that the Navanritya style “selectively translated the aesthetics of Euro-American modern and postmodern movement *on its own terms*,” underscoring the role of the female protagonist, group choreographies, and “grounded movement” often drawn from quotidian life (119). *Chandalika*, *Aranya Amrita*, and *Krauncha Katha* are some of the pieces included in Purkayastha’s dance analysis, which exhibit the associated Navanritya traits.

Arguing that Chaki Sircar’s work manifests in its structure and content a “legacy of Bengali cosmopolitanism” (115), Purkayastha remarks that despite the artist’s encounters with Western dance—the insights of which were central to her questioning of templates of Indian forms—the choreographer persisted in her quest to counter what she labeled “cultural colonialism.” For example, she challenged a central tenet of one strand of Western modern dance by integrating narrative into her repertoire rather than rejecting it altogether, as many of her North American, European, and Indian counterparts had done. (At the time that Chaki Sircar was formulating her work in Navanritya style, the use of storytelling had come to be seen as old-fashioned). The recuperation of narrative would in many eyes disqualify Chaki Sircar’s from the claim to being truly contemporary, but Purkayastha specifies how she defied the “diktats . . . regarding what can or cannot comprise modern or postmodern dance” (119).

The final chapter assesses the contributions of Ranjabati Sircar, who tragically committed suicide in 1999 but who in her short career promulgated a startlingly original dance vision that laid out as its primary focus the investigation of female sexuality. In Purkayastha’s reading, Sircar adopts a decisively postmodern stance, as evinced in her deconstruction and reassembling of inherited movement legacies. Besides being a choreographer, Sircar was also an astute writer and produced several articles critiquing what she saw as the inescapable sexism embedded in classical pedagogies and performances. Purkayastha reveals how Sircar’s compositions

explored the autonomies of the female body and, by extension, the emancipatory potential of Navanritya/New Dance. She encouraged both performer and spectator to develop a heightened awareness of the gendered implications of traditional dance vocabularies and developed a new idiom capable of enacting a critique of what she viewed as the patriarchal conditioning of female bodies. Sircar “travelled between learned and discovered movement,” as she recast the lexicon of classical dance and martial arts to produce works that explicitly proposed a politics of Indian feminist resistance (155).

Although the literature on “Indian modern dance” is sparse, it is rich in its demonstrations of how significant the appearance and intercessions of the category are in an ideological and material milieu where the constitutive terms otherwise appear to be uncomfortably adjacent, inexorably in friction with each other. Purkayastha’s book unveils the hidden history of the Indian in the modern and the modern in the Indian, two lacunae in the existing scholarship that have now been critically addressed and remedied through the author’s compelling arguments and analyses concerning an important but peripheralized aesthetic movement. At moments one wishes for a more in-depth commentary on specific dance pieces (especially of Chaki Sircar and Ranjabati Sircar’s oeuvre) or a fuller engagement with the feminist strand of analysis throughout the book. But these are small quibbles. The originality of the arguments and the impressive archival materials make for a compelling book. This is a commendable and much-needed addition to the scholarship on South Asian performance, dance history, and theories of modernity, and it is certain to be of interest to a wide range of practitioners and scholars.

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Dancing Genius: The Stardom of Vaslav Nijinsky

by Hanna Järvinen, 2014. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 325 pp., notes, bibliography, index. \$95.00 cloth.

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Legend has become history in the life of Ballets Russes star Vaslav Nijinsky, writes Hanna Järvinen in her book *Dancing Genius: The Stardom of Vaslav Nijinsky*. Gazing out at us from sepia-toned photographs of his iconic roles in *Schéhérazade* (1910), *Petrouchka* (1911), or *Le Spectre de la Rose* (1911), Nijinsky seems inseparable from the personas he donned: “He was a golden slave, a harlequin, a specter, a blue god, the embodiment of the violence and beauty of nature itself” (Coe 1985, 22). His later institutionalization for schizophrenia only perpetuated the Romantic image of him as a wild, preternatural talent, driven by his genius to aesthetic extremes. As Järvinen writes, this image of Nijinsky persists through “nijiinskymania”—those sometimes kitschy, sometimes gorgeous cultural products familiar to us from Nijinsky-themed exhibition catalogues, picture books, paper dolls, and movies. *Dancing Genius* deconstructs the enduring depiction of Nijinsky as a mad, mute, seemingly natural prodigy, whose famous (and visually undocumented) leap offstage in *Le Spectre de la Rose* catapulted him into superstar territory. By analyzing the cultural formations framing Western and Russian