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## Dancing Odissi: Paratopic Performances of Gender and State

By Anurima Banerji. 2019. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. 467 pp., 50 halftones, 22 facsimiles. \$35.00. ISBN: 9780857425539  
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*Dancing Odissi: Paratopic Performances of Gender and State* by Anurima Banerji is the first critical book-length inquiry of the eastern Indian classical dance form called Odissi. It is an ambitious genealogical project tracing the plurality of stories and histories of the development of Odissi in ancient, medieval, colonial, and postcolonial periods. Showing Odissi's extraordinary scope in transcending quotidian norms in gender and sexuality, Banerji argues that the state functions as a choreographic agent "that generates and prescribes idealized movements of the body and social relations" (3). While describing the performativity of Odissi, the author coins the term "paratopic performance," which she defines as a practice that creates a space of alterity that reimagines social norms and orthodoxies of gender and sexuality. Using historical, ethnographic, discursive, and choreographic analysis, Banerji recreates a somatic history of the past critically re-membering class, religion, caste, region, sexuality, and gender. She presents a genealogy of history while attending to the possibility of the performative—a kinetic and social manufacturing of space. She focuses on the subversive potential of the dancing body to prescribe and exceed the systemic choreographies of the state. Attending to ballet's universalist pretense of classicism, Banerji shows the ritual, devotional, and sastric (Hindu) sanction of Odissi and untethers the form from its exclusive link with the sacred, contesting the prestige-drive mystique sanctioned by Hindu religiosity. Banerji's impressive theoretical and historical

exegesis revolves around two scholarly constellations associated with Odissi—one that precludes the possibility of deconstructing the religious sanction and another that views it as a political project deploying heritage politics to legitimize the form's emblematic status.

*Dancing Odissi* presents a rigorous methodological approach that is culturally situated in the praxis of Odissi while presenting an alternative to existing dance-history models. Positioning herself as an insider, Banerji challenges the dominant narratives of Odissi via insights drawn from fieldwork, material culture, and dance repertoire. Banerji's approach reveals Odissi's deployment of a hermeneutic strategy; her own practice is supplemented by literary, online, screen-based, photographic, musical, sculptural, material, and ritualistic mediations of the form. The maneuver of asserting the agency of the dancing body as opposed to an individuated dancer is particularly compelling. Odissi unfurls through a collective, social process across history. Banerji theorizes the distributed historical body of dance across embodied performance, ritual, philosophy, aesthetics, architecture, and material objects. Reading historical evidence anew shows the indelible connections between dance and the political, wherein the state deploys and depends on dance. Rightfully recognizing a gap in the field, Banerji dedicates a chapter-length inquiry to a rigorous analysis of ancient inscriptions and sculptures belonging to the Jain era. This problematizes the perceived exclusivity of Hindu religiosity as weaponized by right-wing Hindu fundamentalists for toxic, sociocultural engineering. By demonstrating Odissi's undifferentiated reverence for inscription, embodied motion, and material remains, Banerji provides an alternative to the Eurocentric dance history model.

As indicated above, Banerji locates a paratopic potential within Odissi: some practitioners, for example, are known to have transgressed gender norms. Historically, Odissi has been practiced by *Maharis*, ritual specialists appointed in the temple as brides of the male Hindu deity, and *Gotipuas*, young male dancers dressed as females. *Maharis* enjoyed divine status by virtue of her association with *Jagannath*, the Odishan male deity presiding over Odissi. The *Gotipua* act was also replete with divinity, since the performance took place as an integral manifestation of the *Bhakti* cult in which the devotee seeks the

devoted as a feminine entity. The transgender dancer, then, becomes an act constituted only in practice of embodying femininity to honor the divine. As within the Japanese performance genre Kabuki, where adult men perform as women, an indication of virtuosity in *Gotipua* lies in the ability to embody the feminine. While the *Gotipua* escaped colonial scrutiny, Banerji shows how the *Maharis* were subjected to the discursive violence of colonial discourse that led to a degradation from divine to deviant due to unmarried status and dancing that was perceived through a puritanical, Victorian lens. While recognizing the Western politics of deviance, Banerji theorizes sexual and gendered transgressions of *Mahari* and *Gotipua* practitioners as extraordinary.

Banerji charts a robust history across historical practitioners, the temple, and the deity to forge a distributed materiality of the corporeal subject contesting liberal subjectivity. This distributed body of dance survived diverse religious and political onslaughts. Given right-wing appropriation and distortions of history, Banerji's work is timely and urgent. Challenging Hindu populist demonization of Islam, Banerji shows the diverse practices of Muslim and Hindu rulers that led to the dance's continuity and disruption.

Banerji's impetus remains in the political centering of Odissi's embodied potential by complicating the narrative of purity that locates historical and cultural continuity of the form within the Hindu worldview. By analyzing Odissi's constitutive connection with ancient Jain relics—the Ranigumpha and Hatigumpha caved inscriptions—and by exploring the connections between performance and changing political governance by Mughal rulers, colonial authorities, and Indian sovereign governmentality, Banerji argues how Odissi is a regional syncretic dance with divergent encounters of various social and cultural factions. Banerji demonstrates how the dance moved away from localized roots defined by friction between the *Maharis* and the *Gotipuas* and became a high-art secular tradition sponsored by the Indian nation state. This shift provided artists with increased social and geopolitical mobility. In *Languid Bodies, Grounded Stances* (2016), Nandini Sikand discusses upwardly and geographically mobile Odissi practitioners who are able to sustain careers within neoliberal markets of global demand and supply. This

complicates Banerji's overemphasis on the state as an agent. However, the state's complicity in Odissi's iconic status can be further recognized by Odissi danseuse Sonal Mansingh's nomination to the Indian legislature by the right-wing Hindu nationalist government that received the Indian electoral mandate for the second time in 2019 for a five-year period. In her debut speech as a member of Parliament, Mansingh appealed to the state to bolster its role as an arts patron. Rather, this appeal needs to be read with caution, since it is interwoven with years of invisibilization and appropriation of movement by middle-class female dancers from the actual practitioners of the form—the *Maharis* and the *Gotipuas*.

Sentient mobilization of the historical somatic repository—the material culture, the sculpture, and the visual art—that is noticeable in contemporary Odissi repertoire will further accentuate the paratopic potential. The Odissi dancing body weaves together the materiality of other mediums, as the vertical measuring unit of *Tala* in sculpture corresponds to cyclical rhythms in Odissi musicality. The neutral positions or the *Bhangas* remain the vehicular conduits for percussive (*Nritta*) or expressional performance (*Nritya*). Footwork in rhythmic progression of *Tala*, composed of four, five, six, seven, nine, or ten beats, is encapsulated by the sculptural units of *Tala* and measures degrees of deflection from the central vertical axis, resulting in the corresponding *Bhangis* (postures). *Tri Bhangi* remains the most deflected posture, portraying the highest degrees of dynamism and an inherent expressive potential of *Shringara* (love). Postural expressivity combines with gestural and rhythmic elements within the Odissi canon established by practitioners and choreographers since the 1950s. Banerji chooses to organize her book chapters using Odissi repertoire: *Mangalacharan* (invocation), *Pallavi* (proliferation), *Abhinaya* (narrative expression), and *Moksha* (salvific ending). However, referring to these categories could benefit from deeper interrogation into the choreographic potential of each. For example, in theorizing the distributed body of dance across the bodies of *Mahari* ritualists, the body of the wooden deity of *Jagannath*, and the architectural body of the *Jagannath* temple, a discussion of Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra's iconic choreography *Ahe Nilo Sailo* seems pertinent. Presenting a

narrative yearning by the devotee for the devoted, the dancer mobilizes sculptural, technical, architectural, ritual, and material elements. Odissi *Abhinaya* insinuates multiple characters and their respective genders and sexualities. Odissi's iconic *Ashtapadis* (eight-versed songs from the eleventh-century text *Gitagovinda*) mobilize gender relations in intricate gestural expression. A choreographic analysis of the paratopic potential of canonical Odissi repertoire could extend Banerji's investigation. Overall, Banerji provides a rich study of spaces of alterity in

Odissi's extraordinary gendered and sexual embodiments.

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