

Classicism, post-classicism and Ranjabati Sircar's work: re-defining the terms of Indian contemporary dance discourses

Alessandra Lopez y Royo*

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Introduction

Contemporary dance in India is a very broad and composite category. Any performance that occurs in the present addresses itself to a contemporary audience, therefore contemporary dance in India includes those forms which, following a Western-based model, are referred to as 'classical' or 'traditional', as well as those other forms which seem to have moved away from such 'classical' models, without renouncing 'classicism' but following a different trajectory. It is now becoming fairly common in Indian newspapers and magazines, among Indian dance critics and among the practitioners themselves to use the term 'Contemporary' (with a capital c) with reference to these 'non-classical' dance forms, borrowing the western nomenclature and juxtaposing 'Contemporary' with 'classical'.

In western contexts 'contemporary', when used with reference to Indian dance, is understood to mean 'non-traditional' or 'anti-traditional', setting up an oppositional relationship between 'traditional' - interpreted, in a dichotomous way of thinking, as stable and immutable and archaic - and 'contemporary', taken to refer to an engagement with modernity, with a suggestion of temporariness. In addition, there is a conflation with 'contemporary' in the sense of 'western contemporary techniques of dance' and this further complicates the issue, equating as it does Indian 'contemporary' with 'hybrid'. Evidently, these western notions are making inroads in India, too. When the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, one of the major sources of government funding for Indian performers, acknowledges 'Contemporary dance' (again with a capital c) as a distinct genre, when critics use the word 'Contemporary' in their reviews, when dancers increasingly refer to their dance practice as 'Contemporary', they all take fully on board this western dichotomy and ambiguity. Whether they are aware of this or not is a different matter.

The acceptance of these western categories causes confusion. Tradition in India (in the arts and more generally, in culture and society) has been and is acknowledged as being made up of organically growing, constantly merging, yet distinct strands, rather like a flowing river with its tributaries, hence capable of accommodating change, and therefore living, pulsating and contemporary. One must of course be aware that the reverence in which tradition is held makes such changes subtle and spread over a longish period. The idea of a sudden and complete break with the past is generally felt, within the context of Indian culture, as positively un-Indian. Although in practice such breaks occur fairly frequently, there is a conscious attempt to accommodate the change. However, through the influence of western categories, it would seem that the notion of 'tradition', within the Indian context, is becoming increasingly enmeshed with that of 'conservation' and

‘preservation’ of the status quo, from which the step to ‘conservatism’ seems an almost inevitable consequence, generating new power dynamics and configurations.

The dichotomous perspective of ‘modern’ versus ‘anti-modern’ carries a perverse logic of which we need to be wary: modernity is assumed to be western, a western legacy or a western import, ruinous according to some (but welcomed by others), seen as going fundamentally against the very fabric of Indian culture and society. This is an insidious view, an entrapment which locks minds and prevents us from seeing the entanglement of separate networks of power which make up contemporary dance discourses in India today.

In what is undoubtedly a challenging task, open to controversy, I aim, in this essay, to engage critically with such categories. I question the use of the term ‘Contemporary’ dance in today’s India. The term obscures the relationship with ‘classicism’ which, I argue, remains the basis of Indian dance. It has too strong a connotation of western ‘contemporary’ which refers to western modern and post-modern dance techniques, thus making ‘Contemporary’ synonymous with a hybrid approach. There is, I would suggest, only contemporary dance, which continues to be sustained, in a variety of modes, by ‘classicism’. This contemporary dance is about conservation, preservation, retrieval and painstaking reconstruction but it is also about tension, rupture, dynamism and subversion. In this sense contemporary dance in India is marked by fluidity and is a continuum underlain by and subject to constant challenge, rather than being an opposition of discrete categories – the ‘traditional’ and the ‘modern’, the ‘classical’ and the ‘Contemporary’.

As I write, I am fully aware that the issues at stake are numerous and that an essay, limited by its own conventions of length, can only deal with them partially and therefore unsatisfactorily. The debate on classicism is central to dance discourses in India and has strong repercussions in the South Asian diaspora. It is mandatory that we - scholars, practitioners and audiences - should fully engage with it, for more than just aesthetics is at stake. I deem my intervention as reflexive in view of my continuous participation in such debates and my own engagement with bodily praxis.

Dance, neo-classicism, nationalism and the establishment of modern ‘classicism’

If we look at dance theatre in India today, the most widespread forms are the neo-classical ‘styles’. This is the ‘classical’ dance exported abroad as representative of Indianness and Indian culture, presented as timeless and universal by cultural officialdom, and by the dancers themselves. Already we have a peculiarity: from ‘neo-classical’ we move to ‘classical’, whereas in western art discourses the move is usually from ‘classical’ to ‘neo-classical’. This will be clarified presently.

These ‘styles’ are quite distinct and originate from specific areas of India. I put the word ‘style’ in inverted commas for two reasons. Talking of ‘styles’ betrays a conscious attempt at unifying a plurality and diversity of forms or genres as mere stylistic variations of each other, effacing their uniqueness. Moreover, ‘style’ is here assumed to be an objective property. ‘Style’ is however also a ‘way of doing’, which “would include ideas, decisions, and practices within a cultural-behavioural system...the means by which objects are constituted as social forms” (Shanks 1999: 18). This argument has been made for artefacts, but it is equally applicable to dance, as in the way the dance ‘styles’ are discussed, they are objectified, thus equating them with artefacts (Lopez y Royo 2002).

The various neo-classical ‘styles’ are posited as having commonalities. They all trace back their ancestry to the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and similar Sanskrit texts of the early centuries CE and medieval times – including a form such as Kathak, which, as Bose (2001: 54) argues, was described in the *Nartananirnaya*, a text in the tradition of the *Sangītaratnakara*. They were all systematised and codified by the second half of the 20th century, becoming what is known as Indian classical dance.¹ The history of these dance forms prior to the 20th century cannot be discussed in the context of this essay. The relevant literature covers a scholarly output of over thirty years. It must suffice here to say that turning specific Indian dance forms into ‘classical dance’ was part of the movement to reinscribe them into modern artistic practice and provide them with a well-defined status, equivalent to that of classical ballet in the West. These classical ‘styles’ are, strictly speaking, ‘neo-classical’, a modern re-creation and re-making based on an earlier tradition deemed to be ‘classical’.

We need to be aware here of the act of cultural translation that has been taking place in the course of this re-codification and systematisation. The term ‘classical’ gained acceptance in the first half of the 20th century as a conscious borrowing from Western art discourses to refer to the canon that was being retrieved from the *śāstras*, the Sanskrit manuals on dance, music and drama and from the *sampradāya prayoga*, the teachings of the masters. This begs the question of whether there was in fact a ‘classical’ dance before modern times. Indian dance scholarship tells us that the answer is in the affirmative, if we substitute for ‘classical’ the expression ‘high-class dance’ - a highly formalised tradition, described and to some extent prescribed in the Sanskrit texts and referred to as *mārgī* (Vatsyayan 1968; Kothari 1979). Together with the *mārgī* there were also equally formalised traditions but more localised, known as *deśī*. However, what characterised the *mārgī/deśī* traditions was the process of negotiation which took place between *śāstra* (available for both *mārgī* and *deśī*)² and *prayoga*, canonical literature and praxis (Bose 2002: 27-35). By the early 20th century the relationship between *śāstra* and *prayoga* had ceased to have any significance and the practice of high-class dance was by then hereditary and in the hands of specialist practitioners. Among them the *devadāsīs*,³ ‘temple dancers’, were nearing extinction due to a complexity of causes – especially decline of courts and temples as sources of patronage, colonial rule, new educational paradigms, and a new sense of morality inspired by Victorian values. It was through the engagement with modernity that the project of recreation of dance as art began, and this would forever mark Indian dance. Indian ‘classical’ dance was thus born (Bose 2001: 1-7).

In other words, the adoption of the term ‘classical’ in the Indian context was political. It was not necessarily to do with importing ideals of harmony, alignment, symmetry and

¹ Indeed if it is not quite the case that each Indian state has its very own ‘classical’ dance, this will happen soon enough. The latest addition is the Sattriya dance from Assam, adapted for the stage by the Boras (David 2002: 20), whose efforts have ensured that the dance can increasingly receive state funding and patronage as well as international recognition.

² For example, the *Sangītaratnakara* of Sarngadeva discusses both *mārgī* and *deśī* (Bose 2002: 37-50).

³ Here I am simplifying matters, sacrificing accuracy to the altar of brevity. The *devadāsīs* were only one group of practitioners of high class dance, not an exclusive one. Dance was part of theatre and was thus also performed by male actors - *Kudiyattam*, *Kathakali*, *Bhagavatamela*, *Gotipua* dance are good examples. This theatrical dance was as highly formalised as the dance of the *devadāsīs* and *rājadāsīs*, ‘court dancers’.

proportion. These we acknowledge in the west as the hallmark of Graeco-Roman art and they remain the basis of our western (evolving) notions of classicism and our takes on it, described as forms of ‘neo-classicism’, of which we have had a long succession.⁴ Rather, the adoption of the term in India was an indigenisation, motivated by the desire to give recognisable national and international status to the dance that was being reconstituted. Rukmini Devi Arundale can be credited with the vision which led to the creation of a modern Indian ‘classical’ dance aesthetics, which she achieved through establishing the Kalakshetra institution in Madras, now Chennai. Kalakshetra had a strong impact not just on Bharatanatyam but also on all other forms of ‘classical’ dance, through the training it imparted and its stage productions (Meduri 1996). This process of indigenisation of the idea of the classical in dance, achieved through searching for parallel concepts in the Sanskrit textual tradition on the performing arts, is sometimes taken to be an indication that the Kalakshetra teaching was influenced by the ballet training Rukmini Devi Arundale received from Anna Pavlova’s student Cleo Nordi. This, it is claimed, is seen in the emphasis Kalakshetra training has given on line and symmetry in the creation of the Bharatanatyam dance body.⁵

The classical ‘styles’ are a re-embodiment of dance traditions and practices which go back several centuries. Such traditions are neither as continuous and uninterrupted as they are sometimes made out to be, nor do they necessarily follow a parabolic decline from a mythical Golden Age, through intervention of outside influences, only to be rescued from oblivion by cultural heroes and heroines, seen by some as appropriating a heritage that was not theirs. Their history is much more complex and more subtly nuanced than such polarised narratives would imply. In the process of creating a modern ‘classical’ dance the movement vocabulary of these forms has been fixed by convention and adherence to a specific aesthetics, carefully retrieved from relevant textual literature and oral sources, among which one counts the orally imparted teachings of the *gurus*. The dance repertoire has also been crystallised into a set format, with new compositions adhering to canonic rules, which ensure their ‘classicism’ is maintained.

The re-making of Indian ‘classical dance’ has been part of a wider project aimed at the re-making and re-shaping of Indian culture, which coincided with establishing the post-independence Indian nation and new ideas of Indianness. Bose (2001: 101) has argued that the rediscovery of the classical tradition was linked with the nationalist project of reclaiming India’s past, that the value of the nation’s culture could be defended through the act of rescuing it from oblivion, and that the cultural validation and cultivation of Indian dance as an exotic art was facilitated by Western romanticisation of the Orient. Whereas Nehru’s India was, immediately after independence, underpinned by his secular vision, it was not long before ideas of Indianness began to coincide with a Hindu identity,

⁴ Shanks (1996) has given an engaging account of this process which epitomised, until the modernist culture of the 20th century, western attitudes to the past and which involved, among other things, the birth of archaeology as a subject of enquiry, a project of the Enlightenment.

⁵ This claim can be traced back to Matthew Allen (1997: 94) when he writes “[Anna] Pavlova was the model - and ballet the style - most highly privileged by Rukmini Devi” in his essay about the appropriation of Bharatanatyam of the *devadāsīs* by the brahmanical, cosmopolitan elite of Madras.

at first subtly, later becoming totally entangled with a Hinduising discourse in the post-Nehruvian 1990s.⁶

The writing and re-writing of the history of modern Indian classical dance - its twentieth century history - has constantly reflected broader political concerns and has seen what Meduri has called the 'Talibanisation of Indian history' or a writing of 'selective histories' (Meduri 2001). The link that exists between dance and politics is often downplayed and needs to be more forcefully asserted and highlighted. In a seminal essay, first published in 1988 in *Asian Theatre Journal*, Meduri summed up the 20th century remaking of Indian classical dance from the point of view of the performer, addressing those political issues which perhaps other dancers would have been happier to leave alone. She talks specifically of Bharatanatyam but her remarks could be applied to any other of the (neo)classical 'styles' as the dynamics involved are the same:

Aestheticians and scholars of the 19th and 20th centuries unwittingly opened up a new kind of void for the contemporary performing artists when they cogently verbalized and made explicit philosophic rules that underlie and govern Indian art. The 20th century performing artist, living in a secular reality, struggles to embrace, emotionally and intellectually the theoretical ideal that has been set up. If she cannot personally achieve the ideal, she repeats the theory...[This] excludes the secular practice of bharatanatyam and the important contemporary reality of the performing artist...[This] I believe, chokes the vital breath of bharatanatyam by not accounting for its secularisation" (Meduri 2000: 52).

Thus 'classical' Indian dance is modern, as it was included in India's modernising project and is contemporary, in a way that Western discourse denies when positing 'classical' and 'traditional' dance as archaic. In a way, the Indian discourse denies this when it separates the dance from its socio-political reality, presenting it as a timeless, universal, rarefied art of the soul and spirit. 'Classical' dance is a modern remaking, a modern projection of specific notions of Indian cultural values. It is consumed by contemporary audiences. It is, at one end of the spectrum, a contemporary expression of the entanglement of an imagined aesthetic past with a social reality of conflict, embodied by the contemporary performer. Meduri (2000: 57) sums up this tension as a "confusion [which] lies in the dialectical tension between the secular and the religious".

Another dancer, Chandralekha, recalls a similar experience of tension, eloquently denouncing the split between the reality of the dancer and the make-believe world of the dance, when she writes of the experience which changed her own perception of dance and sent her on her journey of self-discovery, stimulating her subsequent political engagement and commitment:

My first public recital was a charity programme in aid of Rayalaseema Drought relief fund. I was dancing '*Mathura nagarilo*'... I was depicting the full flowing Yamuna, *gopikas*, *jala krida* or water- play of the *sakhis*, the sensuality, the luxuriance and abundance of water. Suddenly, right in the middle of the performance, I froze to a stop with the realisation that I was dancing and depicting all this profusion of water in the

⁶ The Nehruvian period extends to the time of the premiership of Indira Gandhi, Nehru's daughter, and her son Rajiv.

context of a drought. I remembered photographs in the newspapers of cracked earth, of long winding queues of people waiting for water with little tins in hand...The paradox was stunning: for that split second I was divided, fragmented into two people (cited in Bharucha 1995: 29).

This specific experience of entrapment caused by the tension of the secular and the religious, of a reality of conflict and a fairy tale world of harmonious living, is quite palpable to Indian dancers in today's India and also affects dancers in the South Asian diaspora. There is a sense, in Chandralekha's words, of the dancer as a trapped victim. It should not be concluded, however, that there is resigned acquiescence to this experience of entrapment, the dance trajectory of Chandralekha being itself evidence to the contrary.

When I refer to the 'dance continuum', I mean a notion of preservation, conservation, painstaking reconstruction and rupture, intending to highlight the inner tensions of contemporary Indian dance. Reconstruction, recreation and remaking under the disguise of recovery of an essentialised, unitary and revered - hence with a capital t - 'Tradition', is part of the process of making contemporary dance in India. This is what the project of reinvention and restoration of Indian classical dance can be described as. It is a recreation that involves the present which lends the condition and context of this recreation. Shanks and Tilley (1992: 16) have commented on this with reference to archaeology, but the same processes seem to apply to dance:

Recreation of the past is a practice which reveals the author, the subject in the present. To copy the past 'as it was', as exactly as possible, is to reflect the past; it is an illusion, a tautology. To reproduce the past 'as it was', to relive the past as a reflection is to produce an image which hides the observing present.

The remaking of Indian classical dance is symptomatic of this very process of reflecting the past in the present. Part of this looking back to a distant mythical past of unity and stability is also the re-embodiment of the *karana* units of dance described in chapter 4 of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and their reintroduction in the practice of Bharatanatyam attempted by the dancer and scholar Padma Subrahmanyam, who subsequently created another 'style', Bharatanrityam. This is contemporary dance and contemporary choreography under the mantle of a return to tradition, the rediscovery and recovery of an 'authentic lost dance'. The dancer/choreographer takes only partial responsibility for her own individual creativity and hides behind 'Tradition', attempting to exchange the present for a reinvented past which however cannot escape its being contemporary, for the dancer and her practice are "as much a product of her past as she is a reflection of her times" (Meduri 2000: 60). The ideological motivation of the project is articulated by Subrahmanyam (1997: 32-33) herself when she writes:

The duty of the next generation is to see that the artistic technique is revived in its full glory on a pan-Indian *Margi* line, as in the days of yore. The day we begin to perceive the time immemorial links, would usher a golden age of the modern history of India. For this the first step is to realise our common ancestry ...let us at least in the coming century learn to look at India from the Indian point of view. We have to rewrite our history, if we want people to be united, if we desire self respect and if we are sincere

about the idea of nation building... The *Margi* was the binding factor, uniting not only the whole of Bharatavarsa but also other parts of Asia.

Padma Subrahmanyam's work was featured in a TV documentary series entitled *Bhāratiya Nāṭya Śāstra* and broadcast by the national Indian TV network Doordarshan in 1992. Rigidly bound to the notion of return and restoration to former glory, Subrahmanyam's work is nevertheless extremely ambivalent for it also embodies rupture and a radical approach to creating movement. Stripped of its ideology of valorisation of the Hindu past, and of its Hinduising missionary zeal, it can also be seen as contemporary research into what may constitute dance technique in Indian dance and into possible movement roots of the same.⁷ Indeed this is the direction that some of Padma Subrahmanyam's former students have taken, in particular those no longer linked with Subrahmanyam's institution Nrithyodaya.⁸

The post-classical dance movement in India: form, content, ideology and the status of Hindu women

Tension and sudden rupture underlie contemporary Indian dance and its movement from 'classical' to 'post-classical', by which I mean the kind of contemporary dance that more openly aims to subvert and to free itself of the ideological boundaries imposed by Indian 'classicism'. In describing this work as 'post-classical', I am not implying a temporal relationship with 'classical'.⁹ I am only trying to emphasise what motivates the dancers' search. 'Post-classical' dance work is not a western import. The dancers/choreographers involved still base their work on the very same dance movements which are part of the 'classical styles', they still claim to be doing 'classical' work, in the sense that their dance is sustained by a grammar ultimately rooted in that retrieved from the *śāstric* sources. But

⁷ The 'search for roots' seems to have become the Holy Grail of Indian dance. This desire for locating roots is equivalent to a 'search for origins and authenticity' which is at the heart of the modernist project. In practice the roots are multiple and not clearly definable; one must remember here the complexity of relationships which developed throughout history between overarching oral traditions and the dynamics of the *śāstra* and *prayoga* relationship. There is not a single moment in history one can go back to, there are several moments with which the performer can engage in her personal creative quest and which can provide useful pointers. One's training and experience with the classical forms comprise a large part of that search for going back to the roots: the two are inseparable experiences.

⁸ British dancer Veena Ramphal is a case in point. She has recently introduced the notion of a 'contemporary *karana* technique' as wholly distinct from Bharatanatyam and from the Bharatanrityam of Padma Subrahmanyam. She is drawing upon this 'contemporary *karana* technique' as also Bharatanatyam and Bharatanrityam to create 'contemporary' choreographic work. Here we have yet another conceptualisation of 'contemporary' and of contemporaneity and the problematic use - in the perception of other dancers - of a descriptive category such as technique in relation to the *karanas*.

⁹ I must confess here a certain discomfort in the use of western art historical concepts and terminology with reference to dance in an Indian context, but I am left with no alternatives. Having established that 'classical' in India is a modern idea but that it is not wholly identical with the western notion, when using terms such as post-classical, I see before me the spectre of 19th century art historical writing which introduced the practice of discussing Indian temple art as 'classical', 'baroque' and 'rococo' thereby fully misunderstanding it. I am even more uncomfortable with the use of the term 'Contemporary' because of its connection with western 'contemporary dance' and because, as already remarked, it does not bring out the relationship with the modern Indian notion of classicism.

in terms of form, they engage in a search of the constituents of the codified classical forms and are interested in exploring the possibilities for growth, expansion and transformation that the classical 'styles' offer, especially when attempting to subvert the division between 'styles'.

In terms of content, their break with established classicism is evident in the choice of themes. This is of course more nuanced a process than a brief account can suggest. The angst and tensions which occasionally surface in the way performers relate to classical dance in form and content and how they perceive themselves remain as far as possible contained or are consciously suppressed. But in the 'post-classical' movement they can no longer be harnessed. The artists take it upon themselves to explore form and content in an attempt to mould the very 'language of dance' from its 'roots' - variously sought in more popular forms of dancing, including ritual dancing. New forms and contents may be derived from alternative readings of the very same textual material which was earlier used for the 'classicising' modernist project or drawn from an engagement with other indigenous systems of body training, such as yoga and martial arts. Another source for this work of research is the sculptural heritage of Indian temples, rich in representations of dancers and dance scenes, which can be explored to re-embody fragments of movement.

These genres of contemporary dance in India today - there are several and there is much stylistic differentiation - can be better understood if one goes back to the 1930s and looks at Rabindranath Tagore's vision of a synthesis of dance from the Indian subcontinent and the Southeast Asian countries to create a new dance language. This was a modernist vision close to that of Rukmini Devi in its effort to be global and transnational, albeit more specifically focused on the notion of Greater India, with India as the beacon of the Asian nations.¹⁰ Through this new language he would express modernist contents. Later Uday Shankar established the Almora School, encouraging innovative choreographic work (Khokar 1983; Erdman 1996). Sachin Shankar, Prabhat Ganguly and Narendra Sharma continued in this direction, and created works which through their themes conveyed the angst of pre-independence India (Bisen 2001). Soon after independence, the classical styles became central to the modernist discourse and received financial support and patronage. Creative dancers - as the non-classical dancers were then called - did not enjoy the same level of acclaim as classical dancers. The underlying proposition was that, unlike the classical artists, creative dancers indulged in fusion work and this fusion carried a shade of negativity, for fusion and hybridity were seen to be at odds with 'authenticity of tradition' which the classical dancers were perceived to embody.

In the late 1960s and 1970s there was an explosion of boundary-breaking work which continued in the 1980s and 1990s (and today) with people such as Kumudini Lakhia, Mrinalini and Mallika Sarabhai, Chandralekha, Daksha Seth, Uttara Asha Coorlawala and the late Manjushri Chaki Sircar and her late daughter Ranjabati, to name but a few. Here one moves from dance which is choreographed within the formal parameters of the classical forms and uses new themes and different contents to bridge the gap left by a narrower interpretation of classicism, to work which revolutionises the form as well as the content. The work of such choreographers has indeed contributed very substantially

¹⁰ Tagore's revivalism of the arts cannot be seen as dissociated from the orientalist and nationalist project; on the contrary, it was a major force in Bengali renaissance (Chowdhury 1998).

to the shifts in the post-1960s Indian dance landscape and has opened up a space for dance other than the 'classical' as a mainstream genre, hence worthy of funding and exposure.

The two Sircars, for example, created Navanritya or New Dance which they saw as a training methodology, not a style, and founded the Dancers' Guild in Calcutta (now Kolkata), a choreographic laboratory for dancers to engage in research and experimentation. Later, however, the Guild became more formalised as a training centre and a school. Ranjabati Sircar (1992) explains Navanritya as a training method which helps dancers to deconstruct traditional movements, so that they can be used in new contexts, and which continues to draw on *abhinaya*, the representational technique of Indian dance, as a source for motivation.¹¹

Movements are, in Navanritya, classified under eight categories beginning with floor-touching movements and ending with clustered movements. These movements grouped under categories are not theorised as fixed in number, they can increase, provided the basic classificatory principle is observed. It is important to be aware here that both Manjushri Chaki Sircar and Ranjabati Sircar fully questioned "the ability of ancient tools to express modern concerns", thus they did not try to maximise the potential of the classical forms for contemporary expression. But, as they repeatedly claimed, when describing their project, they "went back to the roots" to create a new a dance language. The roots, sought in a variety of forms and in the textual tradition, were there to give "grounding and grammar" (Wade 2001: 197; Sircar 1992). In this sense, Padma Subrahmanyam's reconstruction of the *karanas* and exploration of a pedagogy inspired by the treatment of the body found in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* - divided, fragmented even, into *angas* and *upāngas*, major and minor limbs - does not, in practice, differ much from the Navanritya project even though ideologically the two methodologies could not be further apart.

Padma Subrahmanyam was initially reluctant to endorse a separate style, but preferred instead to refer to her work as a methodology and a pedagogy. It was because of the opposition she encountered from the Bharatanatyam world that she renamed it Bharatanrityam and developed it as a genre with its own specificity.¹² The way Padma Subrahmanyam's Bharatanrityam and the Sircars' Navanritya diverge - and this constitutes an irreconcilable ideological difference - is that Subrahmanyam reinscribes in classical dance her research into what she regards as the roots of movement. She refers to classical dance as *mārgī*, rejecting the modern term classical and describes forms such as bharatanatyam, Odissi etc. as *deśī*, regional variants of the *mārgī*. In practice, she works with the given structure of Bharatanatyam (*adavus* and *tirmanas*) and Carnatic music,

¹¹ A number of people, on learning that Manjushri Chaki Sircar was in New York in the 1960s and saw the work of Martha Graham, immediately understand *navanritya* to be an attempt to bring modern/contemporary western theatre dance techniques into Indian dance. It is worth reminding ourselves here that quite a number of developments in western theatre dance were actually inspired by choreographers' experience of dance forms other than western ballet. Graham herself trained in a number of 'ethnic dances' with Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn. What I am trying to say is that whereas some convergence can perhaps be expected, one should be careful not to make assumptions about western borrowings by the Sircars, no more than one should when discussing Rukmini Devi and Kalakshetra.

¹² Padma Subrahmanyam's work was seen by her immediate contemporaries as destabilising the newly recreated Bharatanatyam canon, which sought to establish a direct link with the *Nāṭyaśāstra*.

which constitute the basis upon which she builds her choreographic edifice, comprising *adavus* and *karanas* in a classical *margam* format.¹³ Any ‘non-classical’ (in her definition, work that does not draw on Indian classical literatures and Hindu stories) non-*bhakti* oriented content (the religious and spiritual dimension of a dance work is regarded by her as paramount) is inadmissible.

Manjushri Chaki Sircar and Ranjabati Sircar, on the other hand, use their research into the form of movement and their reinterpretations of Hindu classics (simultaneously drawing on secular as also non-classical literary works) to combat notions of socio-political conservatism, evident in their work focused on women and their commentary on issues such as caste, communalism and ecological destruction, explored in a number of their joint choreographies.

In the entanglement of an Indian religious and secular identity in Indian dance discourses, the major issue to be foregrounded is that of women in the dominant Hindu discourse (Wade 2001). Although in India, officially a secular country,¹⁴ there is a separation of Indian social and Indian religious identity - reflecting the religious diversity and pluralism of the country - in practice Hindus are an overwhelming majority and the Hindu discourse is all pervasive (Inden 2000: xi-xiii). The Hindu right is vociferous and tends to be intolerant. The Hindu discourse unquestionably dominates dance, which has been reconstituted as a quintessentially Hindu art - although it must be pointed out that in modern India non-Hindus have never been barred from learning to dance. In Nehruvian secular India, the ‘Indian’ rather than Hindu identity, was emphasised throughout, albeit with an implicit and subtle conflation of the two. Learning Indian ‘classical dance’ in post-independence India was an affirmation of Indianness and of participating in the cultural discourse of a cosmopolitan elite.

But even if the dancer is not herself a Hindu, a Hindu identity as performer is perforce given to her by the dominant Hindu discourse.¹⁵ Wade argues that female artists like Chandralekha, Daksha Seth, Manjushri and Ranjabati Sircar have dared to ask the question: how can one be Hindu and female in today’s India and not subscribe to a conservative ideology which silences women into submission (Wade 2001: 35)? These artists have attempted to find an answer through their choreography, establishing alternative models of freedom and independence, subverting the status quo, and reaching women outside the restricted academic and intellectual circles, where Indian feminism is to be found (Wade 2001: 327-337).

¹³ A *margam* is what constitutes the Bharatanatyam repertoire presented during a recital, from *alarippu* to *tillana*, with a *varnam* as the main piece.

¹⁴ It should be understood - and is often overlooked - that the Indian form of secularism means not a division of religion from other areas of life, but equal respect for all religions. In view of demographics, that is a solemn promise on the part of the Hindu majority, which minorities have to be concerned about all the time.

¹⁵ The Hindu identity is evident among other things in the dance costume - the bharatanatyam costume for example is modelled on that of a Tamil Hindu bride. Introduced by Rukmini Devi in the 1930s to signify her breaking away from the temple tradition of the devadasis, the meaning of the bridal attire has shifted over the years to become a quasi-religious marker. It is interesting to note here that the dance form Kathak is always presented as being a comfortable mix of Hindu and Muslim elements, thus emphasising a message of cultural unity in religious diversity, but on closer scrutiny the partial Hinduisation of the form is evident in its reconstituted repertoire (Chakravorty 2002). The Kathak costume is differentiated as Hindu or Muslim, and the presence or absence of the *tilaka* mark on the forehead depends on the religious affiliation of the dancer’s *gharana*, which ultimately gives an identity to the dancer.

Post-classicism in Indian dance: the work of Ranjabati Sircar

In order to delve into the issue of ‘post-classical’ dancers’ and choreographers’ engagement with their socio-political reality, it is worth looking at specific examples. The literature on known and (now) established choreographers and performers such as Chandralekha, the Sarabhais, Kumudini Lakhia, Daksha Seth and Uttara Asha Coorlawala has grown considerably and could not be added upon adequately in the context of this essay. The work of the two Sircars, conversely, has received relatively little attention in scholarly writings (but see Wade 2001). It is to be seen as an instantiation of ‘post-classicism’, especially if we consider the work of Ranjabati Sircar. Manjushri Chaki Sircar and Ranjabati Sircar, being mother and daughter, worked together; nevertheless their approach was rather different. Ranjabati’s efforts, unlike those of her mother, have not yet been considered beyond reviews of specific performances and her own writing about herself.

Ranjabati Sircar moved between Britain and India where her base was firmly established, the US and the rest of the world. She worked internationally and belonged to an international cosmopolitan culture. This in itself should be taken into account in order to gain a deeper understanding of the different strands which make up ‘post-classical’ attitudes in Indian dance. We do not know what her full trajectory as an artist could have been, as she died when she was still in her mid-thirties, trying to make a name for herself as a choreographer, as distinct from being a performer. Among all the ‘post-classical’ dancers, Ranjabati Sircar was the one who had the closest ties with Britain and attempted to establish a British connection, working on and off since 1992, with British South Asian dancers and the Yuva Dance Company founded by the now defunct South Asian dance organisation ADiTi, in Bradford.

Ranjabati Sircar had an ongoing connection with Sampad, the Birmingham-based dance organisation, directed by Piali Ray, whose work has been significant in terms of establishing a sustained programme of ‘choreographic laboratories’ and sharings in the Midlands, in which Ranjabati Sircar took part. Whether this experience and intimate knowledge of the British South Asian dance diaspora had any specific impact on her choreographic work is hard to tell at this stage and will remain a matter of conjecture. Her difference in training and outlook from British South Asian dancers and choreographers was markedly evident throughout, even though, figuratively speaking, they understood ‘her language’. A number of South Asian and non-South Asian performers in today’s Britain have worked with Ranjabati Sircar and Yuva, too many to mention here, but Liz Lea stands out among them for the way she has been able to bring Navanritya into western contemporary dance practice.

Ranjabati Sircar was more radically feminist than Manjushri and at times full of contradictions. In the world she created on stage there were usually no men, there were many unresolved tensions and great emotional pain. “My reason for being in Contemporary dance is political” she said in 1998 to Sangeeta Datta, who interviewed her for *ADiTi News*, “I come from a political background - marxist, feminist ... For me the question in dance is whether the spiritual can be political” (Datta 1998: 8). She was very concerned with what she called ‘the body’s politic’ and the gendered body. Sircar (1993:

7) bluntly challenged the Indian dance establishment in an article published in *Economic and Political Weekly* in 1993:

The relationship between the traditional training system as it exists today and the body under training is strictly patriarchal: the system is authority, the body is the object. The gender dichotomy, without regard to the sexes involved, is clear: the disciple is female, the guru is male; the body feminine-receptive, the system masculine-penetrative. Is such a pattern of training still the best way to develop creativity?

After giving an analysis of the changes that took place within dance forms, from the point of view of the dancer's body, proposing that the dancer's body and the embodiment process reflects the relationship of the form to the society contemporaneous with the body, Sircar (1993: 9) turns confrontational:

We may look at the Bharatanatyam of Kalakshetra. The revivalist movement had a particular socio-political agenda which dictated the parameters of revivalist culture. In this case, there was an outstanding need to dissociate the form from its social history...In denouncing traditional dancers while appropriating their tradition the revivalist movement dealt a severe blow to the original integral link of the dance with human physicality, reduced from *sensuality* through historical circumstances to *sexuality*. Thus for example the geometry of the Kalakshetra technique is meticulous, but at the cost of separation of the upper and lower body. This is evident in the pulled-up abdominal muscles and backward sway of the pelvis - as if negating the openness of the *mandala* position. Linear clarity recalls the sculptural blueprint, but the two dimensional, staccato quality characteristic of Kalakshetra calls for extraordinary muscular tension denying the body's fluidity.

Ranjabati Sircar (1993: 11) then concludes, after a further review of the recent history of Indian dance:

There has been some ado about the loss of the guru-shishya parampara and how this will cause a second major period of decline in the classical forms. There have been attempts at various times to revive the ancient system...The inherited systems must undergo reappraisal...We have nothing to compare with what today we know as parampara.... The desire to glorify tradition in this way as something ancient and timeless is linked to the need to authenticate culture which stems from the Orientalist agenda, reflecting the insecurity about one's own heritage of a colonised people.

Writing such a piece marked her as a rebel. In addition to collaborating with her mother she embarked on a very personal journey, creating solo work for herself which thematically reflected her own ambiguities and restlessness. Her sudden death (she hanged herself from a ceiling fan in October 1999 after a performance in Mumbai) occurred when she was in the middle of exploring the Indian female dancer as object of the male gaze. She had begun writing about the reification of women's bodies in film and in dance and exploring the concept in her choreography, particularly in the work *Oblique*, which toured Britain in 1997. Created on a group of British South Asian and non-South

Asian dancers, one of whom was Liz Lea, the piece explored such an objectification (Datta 1998: 9). But it is in the work 'She said' that these concerns, partially addressed in *Oblique* came together. Choreographed by her in 1999 it was never performed while she was still alive, but was premiered by the Dancers' Guild in 2001. It was conceived as a group choreography, involving eight dancers, all members of the Dancers' Guild. It was a work in which, significantly, Ranjabati Sircar gave great freedom to her dancers to choreograph their own solos within the piece. She was however actively involved in framing the group choreography which sustains the eight solos. The work shows a female world, with each of the dancers presenting a specific moment in the life of a woman. All the solos are a continuum, they are about the same woman, though danced by different dancers, dressed in a simple, colourful *shalwar kameez*. The soloists can be distinguished by the different colours of their *shalwar*. As the soloists dance, the other dancers move together on the stage and either echo the movements of the soloists or they provide a counterpoint, sometimes clapping and providing a rhythmic accompaniment with their voices and their light stamping, sometimes dancing around the soloists, sometimes more directly interacting with the soloists. Having different dancers engaging with varied moments of a woman's life and aspects of her personality brings out the fragmentation of the female experience in a man's world, an experience that can be very painful and may cause a woman to tread a fine line between sanity and madness, as the eighth solo shows. The motif of fragmentation continues in the repetition of sentences all beginning with the words 'She said', spoken throughout the piece. They are remarks that belong to the everyday experience of an Indian woman of today, spoken in Bengali and in English. Some refer to moods, some are rebuffs, some are fragments of conversations and internal monologues. The soloists react to the spoken words in their representation of a woman's state of mind. There are objects on the stage: stools, scarves, chiffon cloths, colourful umbrellas, but the dancers interact and play with them, rather than use them as conventional props. The solos explore dreams, emotional states, desires. The 'She said' sentences alternate with a song cycle composed by a contemporary Bengali pop band producing simple, catchy tunes, yet full of melancholy, whose refrain is the word '*ipshita*', a reference to the sense of longing, and the unfulfilled desires of the woman we see on stage. We see exclusion, loneliness, anguish but also tenderness, playfulness and vulnerability.

The work is informed by Navanritya which here we see used as a method, in the true spirit in which it was conceived, thus extending its movement range. The movements are less soft than in Majushri Chaki Sircar's work. The dancers use, for example, several *thang-tha* (Manipuri martial art) jumps and floor touching movements, including rolling.

Conclusion

Ranjabati Sircar's choreographic work departs from that of her mother's, though it is informed by the use of the Navanritya methodology. At present the Dancers' Guild, after suffering the loss of both Ranjabati and Manjushri Sircar within months of each other,¹⁶ have been concentrating on reviving the group choreographies. Thus 'She said' has been restaged but not Ranjabati's solo work, of which there are only a few videos as records

¹⁶ Manjushri Chaki Sircar died in hospital of kidney failure in June 2000.

and not necessarily at the Guild's premises in Kolkata. Much of her solo material was created during her residencies in the UK and other countries and it is very difficult to find any documentation of it.

Even though she worked extensively with British-based dancers, Ranjabati Sircar's training set her apart from them. She had studied Kathakali and learnt *abhinaya* from the legendary Kalanidhi Narayanan. Thus she had received a most thorough classical training which ensured she could really work on Navanritya in a 'post-classical' mode. In the already mentioned interview with Sangeeta Datta she bemoaned the lack of good training in British-based South Asian dancers and how restrictive this was for her for realising her choreography on their bodies (Datta 1998: 10). The theatricality of Ranjabati Sircar's work has left a mark on the dancers who worked with her, now pursuing their dancing with other companies or working on their own solo career, such as British-based Australian choreographer Liz Lea, who has been able to bring Navanritya methods to her (western) contemporary dance work, which has a quality that sets her apart from other western contemporary choreographers.

This essay has looked at the idea of dance classicism in contemporary Indian dance and its interpretations, focusing more specifically on the work of Ranjabati Sircar as a manifestation of the 'post-classical' mode. Further research needs to address the issue of cross-cultural fertilisation and in particular how specific dance and movement ideas might become Indianised, i.e. classicism and neo-classicism, or westernised, as in Liz Lea's work with Navanritya methods in a western contemporary mode. Within the 'post-classical' movement of contemporary India, Ranjabati Sircar's contribution has only just begun to be considered. A more thorough scrutiny of her work will enable a greater understanding of the cosmopolitanism of 'post-classical' Indian choreographers. It would be important to know more about how this has had an impact on the 'post-classical' dance discourse in India and more broadly, in the countries where 'post-classical' artists have travelled and worked.

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