

SPOTLIGHT DANCE

Can the contemporary artist negotiate between classical dance and popular culture?



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It's time to turn Indian dance on its head

In 1993, I attended the New Directions in Indian **Dance** symposium in New Delhi. The event left a vivid montage of memories in its wake.

I remember the gasp in the audience when Canadian-Indian dancer Roger Sinha doused himself in a bucketful of scalding water at the end of his riveting production on racism. I remember Chandalekha declaring with aphoristic panache, as she unhurriedly completed the cyclical movement of her arm at her lec dem, "The journey is as important as the destination." I remember Maya Krishna Rao's passionate Kathakali-suffused **modern dance** theatre and a young Aditi Mangaldas talking of the need to be "free and fearless" as she spoke of her efforts to infuse new content into Kathak.

It was a remarkable symposium and an important successor to the historic East West Dance Encounter of 1984. It was here that I realised the multiplicity of directions contemporary dance in India was itching to explore. Whether it was Astad Deboo's multidisciplinary exploration, Chandralekha's experiments in abstraction, Mangaldas' quest for alternatives to the Radha-Krishna trope in Kathak, Daksha Sheth's quest for a 'mother tongue' of movement, Navtej Singh Johar's need to be exploratory without decrying the beauty of the varnam, the ferment was visible.

Above all, it was clear that a new breed of Indian dancer was here to stay. There would always be dancers who found their nourishment within the parameters of classical forms. But this was a breed that sought alternative sources of creative freedom. The line of enquiry was at times vaguely articulated, the aspiration unclear. But what was palpable was a restlessness and authenticity of impulse. And a refusal to fit into the cubby-holes and badges doled out by the **classical dance** establishment.

The recent Dance Townhall in Chennai around contemporary dance marked 20 years of the indefatigable Prakriti Foundation creator Ranvir Shah's engagement with the field. It was a reminder that while much has changed, much has also clearly stayed the same.



Snapshots from Prakriti Excellence in Contemporary Dance Awards (2018). | Photo Credit: **Special Arrangement**

The primary challenge for the contemporary dancer seems unchanged: how to negotiate a space between the two behemoths of Classical Dance and Popular Culture. How is one taken seriously in a context that still sees the classical dancer as the sole emissary of India's cultural heritage? And how does one get noticed at all in a world where contemporary means Katrina Kaif and dance means Davar?

While the aesthetic differences among the choreographers were apparent, a moment of true camaraderie emerged when they shared personal strategies to stay afloat. Choreographer Padmini Chettur (who remained proudly unapologetic for authoring what she wryly termed "audience-unfriendly" work) spoke of years of teaching Pilates to bored housewives to earn a livelihood, while popular dance choreographer Terence Lewis talked of conducting women's fitness classes until television gave him a break.

What has clearly changed is dance education. Contemporary dance pedagogy is growing increasingly formalised, as choreographer Deepak Kurki Shivaswamy pointed out, with Gati and Attakalari turning from dance companies into dance schools. For those who yearn for the legitimacy offered by a degree, or who have been stifled by more feudal and authoritarian pedagogical processes, such formalisation is probably not entirely unwelcome. However, Chettur offered a thoughtful counterpoint when she spoke of working for 10 years with a 'tyrant' (a frank allusion to her formative years with Chandralekha) and how it provoked and challenged her to emerge into her own as an artist. Was it necessary for dance education to always be a 'cosy' and 'comfortable' process, she wondered.

An increasingly formalised environment raised another set of aesthetic questions as well: what of standardisation? Is there the risk of ironing out idiosyncrasy? Will a formal system produce what choreographer Preeti Athreya pithily called 'technician dancers' rather than artists? Will it manufacture competent clones rather than imperfect originals? The questions lingered.

The country's indifferent approach to dance history poses yet another challenge. How does a young dancer understand her genealogy in the absence of documentation? How does a formal education impart a sense of heritage in the absence of any credible dance archive? Senior dancer Deboo spoke movingly of spending 50 years as a solitary professional with little or no attempt to document his incredibly diverse and significant creative journey.



Snapshots from Prakriti Excellence in Contemporary Dance Awards (2018). | Photo Credit: [Special Arrangement](#)

A recurrent concern at the Townhall was, not surprisingly, viewership. How do contemporary dancers find discerning audiences? How do they move beyond what arts consultant Rashmi Dhanwani succinctly called ‘bums on seats’ towards a more organic cultural ecology? The unease remained. While there was a cautious agreement that marketing and public relations weren’t necessarily dirty words, most dancers retained justifiable suspicions of being co-opted by market demands. Athreya spoke of a newspaper that recently ran an article on ‘How to Learn Contemporary Dance in Eight Easy Steps’. Public perception couldn’t possibly get more disparaging.

There were other concerns. How do dancers find multidimensional spaces where they can explore, rehearse, dialogue across the arts and share work-in-progress? How do they find a space to “feel free” (as Shivaswamy put it) “to fail”?

The day-long conversations left me convinced that the need of the hour is not just sponsorship, but thoughtful curatorial practice, capable of framing contemporary dance meaningfully, inviting audiences to view it with renewed attention and respect. The right combination of funder, curator and producer – elusive, but not impossible – could do much to invigorate the scene. The literature festival is proof it can be done. It took curatorial insight and financial foresight to see the creative and marketing possibilities of literature. It proved that book-talk can be chic. And that writers can fill halls and look passable in selfies!

But there are questions for the artists too. Can they build, as the vibrant choreographer, Diya Naidu, put it, more bridges than barriers? Between stereotypic notions of artistic arrogance and a market’s cultural illiteracy, can we evolve an ecosystem that is less distrustful and less hierarchical? One in which artist, sponsor, curator, manager and audience begin to see themselves as partners and co-creators?

Perhaps it is time for the listening to deepen.

The writer is a poet and author.



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