

PULSE

DANCE

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No-one walks on these waters

Figuring process in dance making

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Gauri Sharma
Photo courtesy of Raam Tarat
Dance Intense
Photo: Praveen Rao
Hiten Mistry
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Amina Khayyam
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PULSE

dance

South Asian Dance in the UK
Spring 2007 ■ Issue 16 ■ £4
ISSN 1476-6019

Publisher

Kadam Asian Dance & Music Ltd
c/o The Hat Factory, 65 - 67 Bute Street
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kikuchi
www.kikuchi-online.com

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Annual subscription

£12 for three issues – Spring, Summer
and Autumn

Cheques payable to

Kadam Asian Dance and Music Ltd

Mail to:

Kadam Asian Dance & Music Ltd
c/o The Hat Factory, 65 - 67 Bute Street
Luton LU1 2EY

Please include your name, mailing
address, telephone number, email
address. (NUS number required for
student discount.)

PULSEdance is also available at
selected bookstores and arts centres.

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THIS OR THAT

THE UNBEARABLE BURDEN OF BINARIES

Does it always have to be Tradition or Innovation? East or West? One thing or the other? This kind of binary thinking is placing pernicious limits on Indian dance asserts **Aparna Keshaviah**, taking to task a prominent Chicago dance conference.

"Our theories determine what we measure." Albert Einstein

It is widely recognized that bharatanatyam exists today as variations upon a theme—a result of so-called 'stylistic differences.' These differences are believed to be minor departures in the execution of a movement: the turn of an extended palm, the lift of a leg in pivot, or the cocked posture of a hip. And perhaps because such departures are common, they are considered to be within bharatanatyam's "tradition". But angle that same palm forward, alter leg or hip positioning, and labels of "innovation" rapidly categorize the dance as outside the accepted "tradition".

On what basis do we distinguish or measure what are small stylistic differences and what are more structural departures? Or, how do we separate "tradition" from "innovation"? In order to answer these questions, we must use the proper framework of thought and language to approach them. Else, as Einstein insightfully warned, we will not see what we are not prepared to see.

Dance India: Choreographing Traditions was a conference organized in 2006 by Hema Rajagopalan's Natya Dance Theater (Chicago) to address these persistent, contemporary dance dilemmas by exploring "what defines tradition". Yet despite ambitious planning, the conference fell short of its goal because it lacked the conceptual structure to tackle such difficult questions. Through performance, workshop, and discussion formats, the weekend's events offered a smattering of features associated with tradition and innovation. But rarely was the audience graced with a nuanced translation of these semantically contentious labels.

We must use the proper framework of thought and language, else, we will not see what we are not prepared to see

Complex questioning was side-stepped through the use of simple, binary categories, relegating tradition and innovation to their comfortably opposing corners.

An examination of two performances contrasted in their titles (*Bharatanatyam with Priyadarshini Govind* and *Innovations in Dance / Departures from Tradition*) will serve to document this antiquated and hidden parting of the waters into "traditional" and "innovative".

Govind's main stage performance was compiled as a *margam*. Within this conventional format, the popular soloist re-worked recognizable elements of the form, including motif, tempo, and the assumed, relative roles of carnatic music and bharatanatyam. Her nrmta vocabulary teemed with *hasta*-s typically reserved for abhinaya. Glides and slides rapidly focused attention forward

from one *adavu* to the next. Poses strategically harnessed rhythmic intensity, and purposeful transitioning relaxed a waning movement while animating the next. Yet, perhaps because her creative impulses operated primarily between movements—in the infrastructure that animates the dance flow—while only minimally altering the components themselves, her performance was neatly tagged "traditional" by audience, panelists, and conference organizers alike. Such a verdict reveals the predetermined elements open to the label of "innovation" and those which are not. The interplay remains ignored, and an excellently nuanced performance is packaged within the labels sustained by the conference's structure.

Innovations in Dance/Departures from Tradition spread a mélange of choreographic creations by artists from the US and Canada, ranging from 'Gandhi's Inspiration' to 'Flamenco Natyam'. In six of seven featured constructions, innovation was signposted through juxtaposition or incorporation of other dance and music styles with bharatanatyam. The seventh performance infused the canonical *padam* with some hindustani musical elements and spoken English verse. Multi-media devices were employed in two pieces, both as atmospheric plays rather than as structural dialogues with the actual dance. In five pieces, customary costuming was altered towards simplicity and transparency, removing the distinctively Indian ornamentation of bells, pleats, and gold. Thus, the salient elements of "innovation" were largely importations of cultural signifiers and/or reduction of bharatanatyam's conventional ones. Notably, the choreographer of the *padam* dubbed her own work

as "traditional" in conversation with the author, despite its musical and thematic alterations.

East v West and other simple-mindedness

Such performance labels, and the reactionary conversations that ensue, reinforce the current polarized structure: innovation involves external, non-Indian elements (generally Western) over Indian (or generally Eastern) influences. This structure likely finds its origins within the discourse of Orientalism—that complex set of dual associations that plague so much of intercultural work. Commenting on how modernity is coded within these associations, David Morley writes:

"Modernity is usually equated... with the history of the societies

of the industrial West. The correlative of that, of course, is that the societies of the Orient are then equated with the realm of tradition, and of the past."

The common separation into 'India' versus Other (usually 'West') is a dichotomization of the complex, interwoven threads of cultural exchange that have textured India's colonial past. During the 19th century, colonized India gave bharatanatyam some of its definitive contemporary aspects, including the codification of *adavu* and *margam*, and the addition of the violin. In the "Innovations" performance, a few of the choreographers sought contemporaneity by reframing these modern traditions. Parul Shah contrasted kathak's signature flicks with relaxed postures, producing a kind of syncopated gait and pace. Natya Dance Theatre's *Genesis* demanded questioning of what we consider traditional by translating, rather than replacing, older movements into looser versions. But the power of these more structural explorations was overshadowed. Creations like Hari Krishnan's hybridized bharatanatyam and Balinese movement, or Rajika Puri's flamenco-backed dance garnered greater public engagement because they could be more easily distinguished as "innovative".

In actuality, we cannot understand tradition and innovation in isolation; they can only be comprehended in reference to each other; they are eternally intertwined. Dichotomization—that peeling apart of all things into two, opposing categories—is fruitless, and stifling Indian dance. Conference panelists continually fell back on binary labels: Tradition v Innovation, India v West, Classical v Folk, *Nrta* v *Abhinaya*, Guru v Student. During the Choreographing Indian Dance Traditions panel discussion, *abhinaya* guru Kalanidhi Narayanan summarily dismissed the expressive power of abstract movement within bharatanatyam, reserving the emotive capacity for *abhinaya* only: "Anybody can do *nrta*... [but] *nrta* can never touch your heart... [Abhinaya] has to touch the heart." In an impromptu panel, Kalakshetra director Leela Samson, cautious yet deliberate with her speech, limited the scope of learning by demarcating a divide between guru and student: "Complete mental justification of everything, I don't think it's necessary... In a place like Kalakshetra, we never question the guru." Admitting that this authority was often "misused," she nonetheless remained resolute that the guru's

conference discouraged difficult discussions that directly tackled the innumerable assumptions embedded in them. Though panelists readily declared that tradition is "fluid" and "alive," their positioning of tradition against innovation negated these avowals. Hence, rather than exploring Indian dance's grand, globalized spectrum, the conference fortified its identity as an unchanging tradition to which one must add/subtract to innovate. By-passed were the hybridities, inter-relations, and constructed / false ideologies so common in globalized culture. But since humans and their cultural productions are infinitely more complex than

the binaries they so often engender, insistence on such categories confuses and leaves content unexplored. Also, for binaries to operate in a graded world, the labels applied must take on additional, stratified values. "Innovative" gets spoken with a twisted face that spells out "sub-par"; "Traditional" stands politely in place of "boring".

Had the conference switched labels in the performance titles, with the "Innovations" section labeled as "traditional," and Govind's labeled as "innovative," perhaps the discussions would have been catapulted into the arena that defies such labels and populates the full spectrum. Oscillating between two, unquestioned values blocks comprehension

and transmission of more complex expressions. Without careful deliberation on the categorization used to address themes like Tradition and Innovation, the future of Indian dance will too easily devolve into a dead history, clinging to a simplistic polarity of un-lived tradition and fleeting innovation. The unique power of dance is its ability to create a dimension of its own, summoning traditions into live action and grounding innovations in proven formulas. That dynamism will continue to flow freely when we stop feeding Indian dance through dichotomous channels. Only



Photo: www.natya.com

Through such repetition, the overly simplistic dichotomies recycle from performer to audience and back, prompting too few questions and too many assumptions.

way was the way. In the New Stages for India's Performing Arts panel, Phil Reynolds, executive director of the Columbia College Dance Center, reinforced the American/European 'ghettoization' of bharatanatyam (under labels like 'ethnic dance') that he himself has lamented, by confining the scope of bharatanatyam expression: "Our audiences don't necessarily have the depth of understanding [for bharatanatyam]... particularly when our audiences are used to seeing contemporary [dance]." Because dancers and event organizers insist that the mimed stories in Indian dance communicate only within India, performers feel they must rely on narrative preambles to communicate their work. Through such repetition, the overly simplistic dichotomies recycle from performer to audience and back, prompting too few questions and too many assumptions.

The comfortable use of the above labels during the Chicago

then will the multifaceted, complex form stimulate our minds and enliven our performances. ■

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Aparna Keshaviah is a Bharatanatyam performer/teacher with a Master's in Biostatistics from Harvard University. Her work integrates art and science to explore relationships between music and dance, tradition and innovation, and stylistic paradigms. She is currently in India on a Fulbright grant, employing statistics to characterize the diversity in Bharatanatyam.