

# In Search of a Secular in Contemporary Indian Dance: A Continuing Journey

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This essay is the result of a long and tortured preoccupation stemming from my personal history of growing up in Kolkata, India, with a strong tradition of leftist cultural forums; the current escalation of religious fundamentalisms globally; and my questions about the signifying potential of performing bodies in this context. While I have tried to untangle and understand the complicated issues in this search for the secular dancing body in the context of Indian performance, I have been able to arrive only at a series of questions, which, in riotous recoiling, have constantly spun new questions and interjections. I offer my journey through these questions as considerations in thinking through one of the directions of contemporary Indian dance.

While I had been trying to understand the secular traditions in Indian dance for a while, questions around it grew especially urgent with the growing power of Hindu fundamentalism in India, and in particular with the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya on December 6, 1992, by an angry mob of “Hindus” on the grounds that the mosque had been built by Muslim ruler Babar in the sixteenth century, supposedly after destroying a Hindu temple dedicated to Rama which preexisted in that spot. This incident, followed by the Hindutva claim that a new temple dedicated to Rama be built on that spot, sparked off a horrifying spate of communal violence. That the Babri had been one of the last vestiges of the *shaqri* style of architecture in India was hardly raised. But the overwhelming of cultural icons by religious ideology as mobilized by fundamentalists was indubitable. What was also obvious—particularly in the images of the *karsevaks*, as the Hindutva activists identify themselves, wearing saffron turbans and armed with

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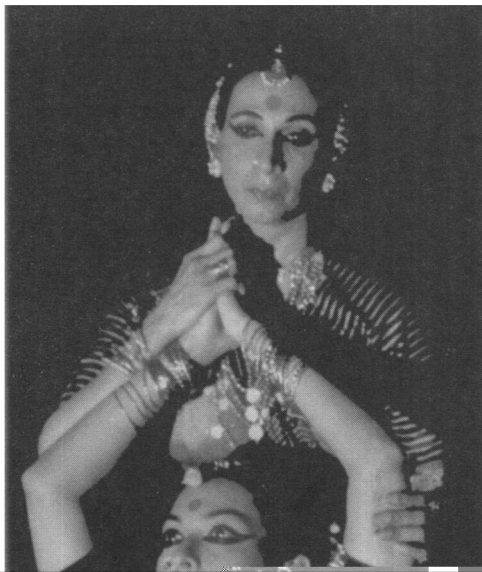
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tridents, the emblem of Shiva, and of women leaders such as Sadhvi Rithambara and Uma Bharti, powerful orators for the Hindutva cause and the anti-Muslim initiative, in their saffron saris, female *sannyasins*—is that bodies were being powerfully performed as sites of staging and familiarizing a certain iconography. It marked the launching of that ultimately successful strategy of selectively foregrounding specific recognizable aspects of cultural practice or “tradition,” as in the highlighting of saffron, and renegotiating them—saffron was no longer the color of renunciation but of aggressive assertion—as symbols of a political party whose election rhetoric was strongly based on a religious-cultural identification, through an embodied iconography, to which emotional attachment and political valence could steadily accrue.



*Figure 1. Mallika Sarabhai on Ahmedabad street. Used with permission.*



*Figure 2. Mrinalini Sarabhai and her daughter Mallika Sarabhai. Used with permission.*

While I had been endeavoring, in my own creative work, to choreograph dances that resisted the fundamentalist forces throughout this time, I arrived at a much more urgent questioning about the position of performing artists and their ability to work through bodily metaphors in an atmosphere of increasing censorship, with the alarming legal charges filed against dancer-choreographer Mallika Sarabhai in late 2003 (Figs. 1, 3). Sarabhai, accomplished artist and thinker, is co-director with her mother, celebrated choreographer-dancer Mrinalini Sarabhai, of Darpana Academy of Performing Arts established in 1949 in Ahmedabad, Gujarat (Fig. 2). Her father, Vikram Sarabhai, had been a pioneering scientist, educationist, and industrialist, highly respected in diverse circles. As is obvious from the wide sphere of influence of their work, the Sarabhais are a family where the pursuit of art and science are related to issues of civic and social well-being. In the tradition of her family, Mallika Sarabhai, apart

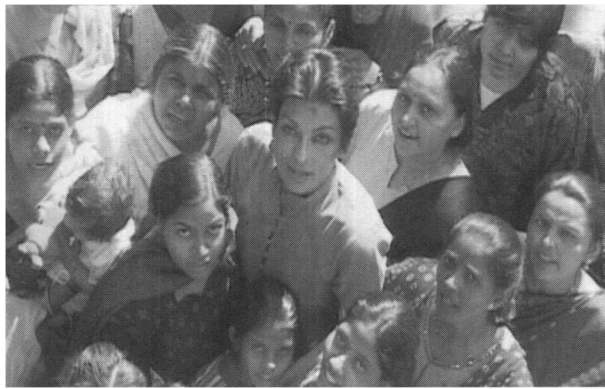


Figure 3. Mallika Sarabhai on Ahmedabad street. Used with permission.

from being a dancer, choreographer, and actor, is also a thinker and social activist. In her works such as *Daughters of Sita* (1990) and *V is for . . .* (Fig. 4, 1996), Sarabhai has continuously performed critiques of patriarchal politics and repressive state action. Interestingly, she is also internationally known for her outstanding performance in Peter Brooks's epic theater production *Mahabharata*, in the role of Draupadi (Fig. 5). Incidentally, this female figure of Hindu legend and literature, married to the five Pandava

brothers and clearly a testament to the possibility of polyandry within Hinduism, has been somewhat difficult for the Hindu fundamentalists to handle. At any rate, like many others in Gujarat, Sarabhai too was shocked by the excesses of the Gujarat government led by ultra-fundamentalist Narendra Modi and was an outspoken critic of it. Moreover, she took an active stance condemning the state-sponsored violence on Muslims during the Hindu-Muslim riots incited by the Godhra carnage on February 27, 2002. Details about this incident are well known, so I will report only briefly on it in order to highlight the context of this conversation.

On that day, a train carrying a group of Hindu militants back from Ayodhya stopped in the town of Godhra, and a clash with the Muslim stall-owners at the station ensued. Ultimately, the train was set ablaze, killing fifty-eight people, including women and children, supposedly by the Muslims. This led to an unprecedented level of violence—systematic attacks on Muslim homes and Muslim-owned businesses across Gujarat—characterized by looting, rape, arson, torture, and murder, leaving

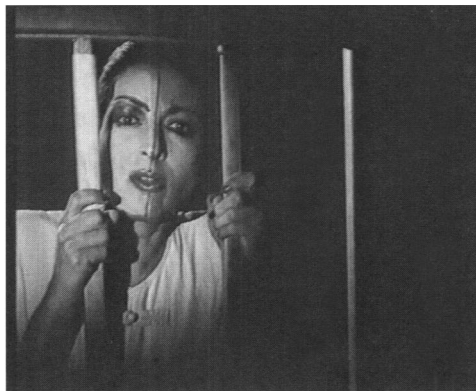


Figure 4. Mallika Sarabhai in "V is for . . ." Used with permission.

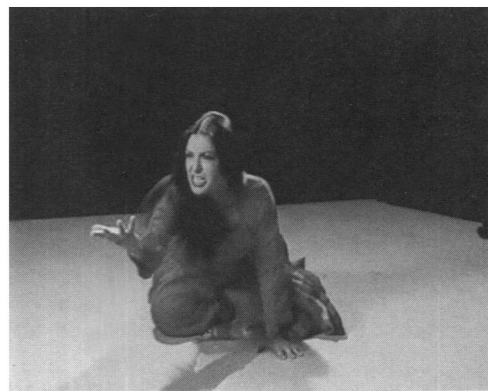


Figure 5. Mallika Sarabhai as Draupadi in Peter Brook's production of the Mahabharata. Used with permission.

thousands dead and homeless. No protection was offered by the police to the few Muslims who begged them for protection, and the government proved its complicity with this well-organized attack by the different ways in which the police ostensibly and silently orchestrated the assault. The violence spread like wildfire, spurring itself on continually.

Among other well-known activists, intellectuals, and citizens of Gujarat, Mallika Sarabhai strongly criticized the governmental collusion and sent out her television crews to document the violence on the streets. She also filed a Public Interest Litigation suit (PIL) in the Indian Supreme Court against the state government of Gujarat, charging it with violation of human rights, and demanded the resignation of Chief Minister, Narendra Modi. She also worked with other Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) to call for a meeting to begin a peace process at the Gandhian Sabarmati Ashram. By this time, she had been issued severe threats by the Bajrang Dal, the militant youth wing of the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) which is the philosophical mouthpiece of the fundamentalist front. At the meeting, the police once more rehearsed the alarming complicity, and attacked the media and several other leaders, such as Medha Patkar. Sarabhai faced much harassment constantly on several trumped-up charges, and finally, probably in an effort to seal her continued efforts to resist the hijacking of pluralism (and no doubt her popularity and visibility as a stage persona was an important consideration) the police registered a complaint against her, filed apparently by a dancer in her company, Manushi Shah, in October 2003. Shah alleged that Sarabhai had defrauded her of a sum apparently repayable due to cancellation of a performance tour to the United States, a sum that dancers apparently gave Darpana for processing of visas. The spokesperson for the Shah family was, suspiciously enough, S. C. Saxena, a strong supporter of the government and a leader of a NGO opposing the environmental rights movement led by progressives. Sarabhai points out that the First Information Report (FIR) was lodged in time to coincide with the hearing of the complaint she had filed earlier and offered several clarifications of the procedure publicly. Nonetheless, her plea for modification of anticipatory bail was rejected and Gujarati language dailies with the largest circulation, such as the *Gujarat Samachar* and *Sandesb*, launched a regular vilification and defamation campaign against her. Since she had to surrender her passport and was ordered not to leave the state, her personal touring and career were severely disrupted—aside from the constant harassment she faced.<sup>1</sup>

In an e-mail letter sent to friends and colleagues on November 11, 2003, Sarabhai urged the ongoing resistance to censorship even as she thanked those who stood in support of her.

The frequency of what is happening to me, in different parts of the country, is growing at an alarming rate. We cannot just sit back and let the law take its course. This is the time to step up the pressure, to keep the issue in the minds of



the people and of national and international institutions seeking a more just and humane world order. For this, I depend on all of you.  
Thank you all from the bottom of my heart.  
Mallika

Clearly, several artists and citizens had stood by Sarabhai at this time, but what troubled several among them was that many colleagues and friends, once outspoken critics of fundamentalism, had slowly slid into silence. The attack on Sarabhai was not an isolated case of attacks against artists: Hindutva gangs attacked Shabnam Hashmi, one of the leaders of Act Now for Harmony and Democracy (ANHAD), as she led an initiative using theater as a tool of community-building with youth in Gujarat in early 2004. Singer-composer Shubha Mudgal, well known for her commitment to progressive politics, talks about the anonymous letters she regularly receives criticizing her bitterly for her “support” of Muslims (Mudgal 2003–2004). At any rate, the way the attack on Sarabhai was planned and executed seems to have a particular significance: her body was encoded with antipatriarchal statements, articulated repeatedly through her performances, through her defiance of conventional sexual norms through the role of Draupadi, and through her repeated positioning as “feminist” in the media.

Moreover, Sarabhai, initially trained in classical Indian dance, is an exponent of the Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi styles, and therefore has access to the great “traditions” of Indian, specifically Hindu, cultural practices. However, even as she has practiced the classical forms, she has used this vocabulary to create performance/movement-theater pieces to critique the rhetoric of tradition. She has staged stories about lives of women, both from myth and legend, and from contemporary life, causing a fissure in the seemingly inevitable relationship between the forms and movement aesthetic, and the ways in which they have been mobilized in the choreography of a neoclassical repertory. Also, the excellence of her artistry and production ensures that she has a large and diverse audience following, and this popularity is greatly enhanced by her cachet as a personality in the entertainment world, in international theater, on television, and her glamorous presence in the media generally. The large moderate base of any electoral community—constituting a considerable vote bank—is an audience she had access to, and her performances might have provoked questions in the minds of these audiences. Finally, she was a dancer based in India, but with an international touring schedule and often referred to as a “cultural ambassador” for India. Her dancing body on the stages of New York, Brazil, and Delhi signaled a particular image of Indian women, one directly contradictory to the image preferred by the fundamentalist camp. Naturally, clamping down on her touring schedule was an important and additional result of the measures taken against her.

It is in the context of this atmosphere of censorship that I intensified my search for the location of a secular in Indian dance. I was also at the same time choreographing a piece as a response to the Gujarat carnage. I had a series of performances coming up—in India and elsewhere—and I felt I could not look away from this devastation to make

new work. Yet, what was there to dance about? I could neither articulate rage nor search for hope: all there was, was a deafening silence. But still, I tried to wonder what the everyday person in Gujarat might be thinking—you, me, the man on the street corner, those of us who live our lives often despite a political process, who had grown up remembering Gandhian ideals, or those who were too busy trying to survive every day and did not see the point of politicians' games, and those who had lost a lot, but not their lives, in the violence. Images of survivors from the violence, squatting by their dead family members and friends, their eyes full of a terrible despair, filled my mind and stultified my choreographic ability. Ultimately, from deep inside this silence, I finally found a way to reach outside to ask for peace, and as my arms moved outward in an extended stretch, I arrived at one of my most difficult questions: how do I secularize my body? Clearly, even in reaching out to ask something of some force outside oneself, communicable perhaps through a gesture of the arms and the back, a certain identity was indicated. A Hindu body in prayer looks different from a Muslim body in prayer, hands folded, hands open and held out. Even as I removed my work from any direct realistic "representation," it was important to recognize that the materiality of the body and the symbolic value of gestures, reinforced through daily usage, meant that movement practices "establish their own lexicons of meaning, their own syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes of signification, their own capacity to reflect critically on themselves and on related practices" (Foster 1996, 15–16). And while gestures and movement can signify differently in different situations, we were now stuck in an overdetermined situation, where meaning-systems seemed to be reified into binaries, positioned in direct opposition to each other.

There are of course other performance artists who have struggled with these questions. In his memorable research into this question in his book *In the Name of the Secular*, Rustom Bharucha traces the muddled journeys of contemporary artists to reach a secular performative mode in India and points to the different ways in which the notion of the secular practice can be conceptualized. Working through various kinds of positional possibilities, Bharucha indicates the different complicated histories and ideological formations that have coalesced to create a complex, but ultimately unclear and un-uniform, notion of secular practice in India. Yet, in the face of the current religious overdetermination of sociocultural formations, it is vital to work toward the ways in which secular practices might be understood, and Bharucha points to the particular emergent needs of this fundamentalist crisis as a point of departure: "The sheer *instability* of the secular as a cultural and political category needs to be acknowledged as the new point of departure for interpreting secularism(s) in India today" (Bharucha 1998, 19).

Bharucha's arguments and readings of cultural practices in the realm of the secular are important, but even while thinking through his arguments, I need to extend them to address the area where my most urgent questions are: the dancing body, marked by liveness and visual immediacy, where I am not working through the intervention of language, or media, or still images. Specifically, as a choreographer interested in making work that intervenes into state-supported religious iconography as it is mapped

onto bodies, I am searching for a movement idiom that undoes the seemingly inevitable connection between religious and culturally specific shapings of bodies. Thus my questions, different from ones about censorship generally for artists, emerge from material signifiers that are mapped onto and performed by bodies, and the specificity of location that can be read from bodies. And while the signifying performance of dancing bodies can be enhanced through relationships of juxtaposition or contradiction with other elements of staging, such as costume, scenography, lighting, I do believe that the eloquence of moving bodies and the readings they can invite merit detailed attention here. Moreover, without positing any mythical notion of an unquestioned tolerant past, my questions are also located in this particular critical moment, which I believe foregrounds a particular emergent set of questions. Hence I am focusing on the particular dilemmas that are faced by the performing artist who, having grown up in post-1940s India, has been trained in movement practices that have been revived and inserted into a fabric of tradition, whether these are “classical” dance forms such as Kathak or Odissi, or “folk” dance forms such as the Ghumar or the Giddha, or dance/martial art forms such as Kalaripayattu or Chhau.

A latent principle in the restructuring of the neoclassical dance forms, one we learned to recite early on in our training, is the statement that inaugurates the *Abhinaya Darpana*, that revered performance text of Nandikeshvara, *Angikam Bhuvanam Yasya*, your body is your world.<sup>2</sup> Here, even when the repertory delineates an abstract aesthetic framework as in *nrtta*, or pure dance pieces, the reference to a specific worldview, which in turn often immediately indicates a philosophical-religious orientation, is inevitable. Moreover, there is much research about the insertion of the devotional thematic and a consequent rechoreographing of the repertory in postcolonial cultural revivalism.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the *abhinaya*, or expressional pieces, working primarily through mythological characters or poetic metaphors that refer to myth and folklore, can often be couched in a religious, primarily Hindu, framework. The Lucknow *gharana* or school of Kathak, which was performed in and nurtured by the courts of the Muslim rulers of India, is a form that absorbed several Persian influences and is rooted largely in Islamic cultural, aesthetic, and religious frameworks, and marks an important difference. While this kind of cultural and contextual specificity is obvious in any form of cultural production anywhere, dancers of different faiths and racial and cultural backgrounds have continually learned and performed these neoclassical dance forms. In fact, I believe that the tradition of nonliteralism—reflected both in the abstract aesthetic of pure dance pieces resonant with ideas of harmony and beauty, as well as the symbolic and metaphoric imaginary of the *abhinaya* repertory, where one dancer often switches between the many different characters in a situation, asking not for a direct relationship of “being” between performer and performance in a manner of identity politics, but for one of momentary becoming through performance—allows for such elasticity.

Thus, some of Guru Deba Prasad Das’s most beautiful Odissi compositions, both *nrtta* and *abhinaya* pieces, are preserved lovingly by his Malaysian Muslim disciple, Kuala Lumpur-based Ramli Ibrahim, whose performances are highly popular in India as

well as Malaysia. I have regularly encountered Bangladeshi Muslim students studying with Manipuri gurus Bipin Singh and Kalavati Devi in Kolkata. Again, one of my guru Sanjukta Panigrahi's favorite pieces was an *abhinaya* composed to the Muslim poet Salabeg's plea to Lord Jagannath, *Abe neelo soilo . . .* Salabeg, a Muslim, could not enter Lord Jagannath's temple and offer his salutations as he so ardently desired, so he asks the god to crush his soul as a mad elephant, rampaging through a forest, stamps upon and tears apart lotus flowers under its feet. Beginning with this reference to a phenomenon from the natural and animal world—one that indicates a specific familiarity with an Indian, but not necessarily Hindu, context—Salabeg then goes on to refer to the times Lord Jagannath has come to the aid of his devotees, including a reference to the dice game in the Hindu epic, the *Mahabharata*. Guru Kelucharan Mahapatra's choreography works through the idiom of the *abhinaya* in this piece delineating Salabeg's devotional fervor, still creating a dance that is unique in the Odissi repertory. For even though the form works through the dominant gestural language, marked as Hindu, the repeated enunciation of Salabeg's name in the accompanying song, ". . . kahe Salabeg . . ." (so says Salabeg), causes a rich tension in the Oriya language and in the Odissi aesthetic as the dancer works through different movements to invoke the poet. The popularity of *Abe neelo soilo* and the way it exists—without exclamation—in the Odissi repertory suggests that in fact there is evidence of much interculturalism in the cultural fabric of the Indian performing arts, as is natural when different groups of people have co-existed for years side by side, even when not in perfect harmony, even though the forms and aesthetic emerge from a predominantly Hindu worldview. The potential hybridity of an *abhinaya*-based system is also obvious in Father Barboza's choreographies about specifically Christian themes, using the idiom of bharatanatyam, where he creates and uses specific *hastas* (hand gestures) to evolve a Christian symbology.

The folk or vernacular dance forms, marked by geocultural specificity, present a somewhat different scenario. Specific dances are associated with the location and people of origin, sometimes suggesting a religious affiliation: the bhangra, originally a folk dance from Punjab, was associated at least through the costumes of the dancers, with the Sikhs of that region. And while many of these dances are inspired by patterns of collective labor—celebrations of harvest, for example—some others reimagine these work songs through metaphors that are again culturally and religiously located. For example, movements from the martial art/dance form chhau can offer various possibilities. Many of the movements here are drawn from work and cultural practices. A balance movement from the Mayurbhanj style of chhau, with the raised leg moving forward and backward as in the movement of making a paste on the rolling stone, is named with specific reference to that practice, *batona bata*. On the other hand, a quick flick of a raised leg to the forehead refers to the custom of specifically Hindu women marking the parting in their hair with the red powder *sindur* to indicate marriage, *sindur pindba*.

Again, in working with folk dance choreographer Shambhu Bhattacharya, who innovated upon his deep research into the folk dance traditions of Bengal to create his work, I learned several movements he created based on the lived experiences of walking



barefoot through the jungle to collect firewood, getting pricked by thorns on the way, darting aside to avoid a snake sliding through the forest, bending over for hours to sow rice seedlings. I also learned other pieces that were choreographed to the songs written and composed by folk vocalist Hemanga Biswas, and based upon the stories of a charismatic figure of Bengali folklore, Behula. The stories of Behula's trials, however, are based on the folklore surrounding the goddess of snakes, Manasha, who is not part of the greater Hindu pantheon but is certainly a Hindu goddess. Manasha, like Sitala, goddess of smallpox, and several other figures emerge from a rural imaginary, where villagers, eking out ways to survive several menaces that surround their lives, deify natural forces in order to appease them. Interestingly, another such goddess is Olabibi, created from a syncretic Hindu-Muslim culture and worshipped by devotees from both communities and through rituals that derive from both cultural forms.

However, for contemporary choreographers looking to work with an aesthetic that does not immediately speak of a religious identification, the choices are befuddled. While some of the vernacular dances based on work songs can offer a movement vocabulary that cuts across religious references, these speak specifically of rural work patterns and often, tribal identities. Outside of more extensive organized aesthetics like yoga, Kalarippayattu, and Chhau, which offer interesting possibilities, there is seldom a sustained movement vocabulary that choreographers can then expand in their work. Danced by "the people," these dances are a compilation of steps and floor patterns that often derive their power through group repetition. Moreover, Bharucha has pointed out that there are several contradictions in the "appropriation of the folk" phenomenon in the attempt to secularize performance traditions. He refers to the arguments put forth by street-theater director Safdar Hashmi, celebrated for his strong critiques of governmental policy and of communalism through his theater work:

Hashmi himself differentiated between "secular traditional theater" as represented by forms like "the *Bhand-Pathar* of Kashmir, the *Naqal* of Punjab, the *Swang* of Haryana, *Nautanki* of Uttar Pradesh, and *Jatra* of Bengal," and what he describes as "the essentially religious theater of ritual" in traditional forms like Ramlila, Krishnalila, Yakshagana, and Kathakali. . . . This distinction between the "secular-traditional" is far from absolute insofar as there could be many cross-overs between the two categories, and at times they would be perceptible within the same form. (Bharucha 1998, 42)

Bharucha goes on to discuss how, despite these obvious problems, interesting working models were arrived at by Hashmi and by the Indian People's Theater Association (IPTA) group.

However, Bharucha is talking about theatrical structure, while my questions are about the specificity of movement idiom, working not through the manipulable elements of dialogue and character-portrayal, but with the metaphoric signifying possibilities of the dancing body. My dilemmas of course arise from the particular bind that artists are placed in through the manipulation of cultural identities by politicians in the service of constrictive ideologies like religious fundamentalisms. As a choreographer, I

might be able to refer to the very powerful iconography of *shakti*, or goddess-worship, that is part of my Bengali upbringing, not at all in any direct celebration of Hinduism and perhaps even as a critique of more mainstream notions of it, but specifically as a way of celebrating, for example, different powerful conceptualizations of the feminine creative spirit. However, at this point, I need to consider that despite my admittedly left positioning, I am part of a religious majority, and that this choice might be interpreted by some as staging an allegiance to Hindutva, which might cause discomfort to Muslim dancers and other audience members. Moreover, the larger question here is about how to deploy certain forms that exist in a context of cooptation by dominant forces to signal a resistive or interventionary practice. Interestingly, similar questions might be asked about the usage of the neoclassical forms to perform critiques of class-based hierarchies (e.g., *Abe Neelo soilo*)

At any rate, because the cultural and religious are so closely intertwined in this context, it often seems that voiding out any religious association calls for a cancellation of any movement that is culturally specific, that has clear roots in Indian cultural practice. Importantly, this kind of locatedness has become increasingly problematic in the context of fundamentalist hostility, where the taking on of one set of signs seems necessarily to signal the cancellation of the other side. The other side of this coin is presented by the looming neocolonial Western presence through the phenomena of multinational corporatization and capitalist consumerism, attempting to replicate vestiges of the mainstream United States culture across the world: Operation McDonaldization, hijacking the notion of secularism through that unshaken focus on this-worldliness.<sup>4</sup> In this context, moving out of the specificity of Indian performance-based movement vocabulary and reaching toward an urban, religious-neutral aesthetic might often suggest an echoing of, or invite readings about the ubiquitous influence of, modern or post-modern dance in Euro-America.

Of course the concept of the secular originates in Western history, in the mid-seventeenth century to indicate the separation of church and state, specifically to refer to the transfer of church properties to the exclusive control of the monarchy. Currently, the most widely used description of secularism is Peter Berger's, suggesting the removal of "sectors of society and culture" from "the domination of religious institutions and symbols" (Berger 1973, 113). Clearly India is a multireligious state and how the idea of secularism might be translated in terms of this specific society has been debated over the years, especially in terms of protecting the rights of religious minorities. Several political theorists have suggested that secularism in India has to work through religious pluralism, not the negation of religion:

India is a secular state in the sense that tolerance and respect for religious pluralism are encouraged by the state because different faiths represent different paths to the same absolute and universal truth. . . . The secular state encourages tolerance and religious pluralism not because of its neutrality on matters of religious nature but because of an assumed religious orientation toward truth and equality. (Allan 1991, 11)

However, as Ashish Nandy points out, India has had a tradition of religious diversity and tolerance, with Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism co-existing with Hinduism for several centuries, and that modern India needs to reassert those traditional principles (Nandy 1998). While this idea of state support of religious pluralism—which was completely routed in the fundamentalist regime—is an important consideration in the field of politics, it does not necessarily answer any questions in the field of cultural production, or address the specific questions about choreographic choices and the staging of particular bodies. Specifically, while bodies can perform ambiguity, suggesting several possible interpretations, they can also be deployed, as in the case of the *karsevaks*, to overdetermine and severely limit the signifying possibilities.

Obviously, choreographers in India are working through such foreclosure of choreographic and inspirational choices. Bharucha has pointed out how in the case of theater, “an image drawn from a religio-cultural tradition can be effectively secularized with the necessary ideological intervention and the use of particular materials” (1998, 111). Contemporary choreographer Chandralekha, for example, referred to the goddess *dashabhujā* (ten-armed) Durga in her piece *Sri* (1990) to create a vision of the future woman who has fully realized her potential. Note, however, that this goddess-spirit is imaged only through a community of women who collectively empower the concept, positioned in a long vertical line, their arms reaching out from different sides as if to indicate the different weapons and symbols Durga holds in each of her hands. The image is evoked through abstraction, through the bodies of many dancers, and with no attempt at iconographic verisimilitude. Moreover, even as the goddess image appears, it is deconstructed as, one by one, each of the five women center their hands before their chests and, with a jump, come to stand in a deep, turned-out *mandala*, their feet wide apart. As they jump, they reach their arms out on each side at shoulder level, the hands holding the *shikhara mudra*, signifying power. Still in a tight group, still in a deeply grounded *mandala*, maneuvering a continuous weight shift, the women surge forward like mobilized life-force. Energy radiates out in all directions as the bodies move ahead, through their outstretched arms, their turned out feet, their upward-pointing thumbs, their strongly grounded stance, their flashing eyes. Here, the image is invoked, embodied more or less abstractly, and its ultimate deconstruction is also urged by the rest of the piece, as it is juxtaposed with images of women’s work, women with broken spines, the introductory invocation of the herb-nourishing spirit, Shakambari, performed again through a metaphoric dance of the upturned legs.

Chandralekha approaches the problematic differently in *Bhinna Pravaha* (different flows), choreographed in 1993, urging tolerance for difference. Here, she used some lines from an old literary text, the *Raghuvamsa* of Kalidasa (Canto XIII), for inspiration. These lines describe a real “confluence of differences” through an aerial view of the meeting of the waters of the rivers Ganga and Yamuna. This very real phenomenon of the entwining of the waters, one light and luminous, like sandal paste, one dark like black amber, “flowing together in their separate colors, in their separate currents,” which can indeed be seen near the town of Allahabad in Northern India, is evoked to encourage a celebration of individuality and diversity among the Hindu and Muslim

peoples (Chandralekha 1993). Moving away from her typically seamless choreographic structure, she used two dancers with two distinct training and movement styles, one chhau (Ileana Citaristi) and one bharatanatyam (Shangita Namashivayam), to create images of complementarity and collage. Working with counterpoint and juxtaposition, she weaves an aesthetic that disallows the dominance of any one style. No doubt the inspiration here is also a Sanskrit Hindu text, but the image itself is from descriptions of nature, specifically rivers, of equal importance to the lives of all communities who live in that region. Moreover, in disembedding Kalidasa's image from its specific context and deploying it in the context of current religious dissensions, the piece, through implication, inserts an inalienable and always already-present "other" into this canonical text of Hindu Indian literature. Here the dancing bodies are choreographed in a way that causes a confrontation of the form with itself, an internal double-take that also questions notions of the uniform Hindu-ness of cultural practices that claim to be so. This idea of deconstructing the supposed Hindu-ness of the neoclassical forms, demystifying and defamiliarizing them from the perspective of a specific politics, intersecting the classical vocabulary with those from other forms and with pedestrian gestures, has been one way in which several choreographers like Chandralekha, Manjushri Chaki Sircar, Astad Deboo, and Daksha Seth have worked. A reach toward the secular here can be traced primarily in the dismantling and resituating of a movement aesthetic, and perhaps, often, in the contamination of a supposedly Hindu aesthetic, which always is already touched and altered by elements from tribal "cults," Islam, and other religions.

In my hometown Kolkata, in particular, I was struck with the work of Priti Patel, who was initially known as an exponent of Manipuri. At present, she choreographs her own works, but interestingly, in several of her pieces she has worked through a juxtaposition of the several Manipuri dance traditions: forms that developed in Manipur prior to the coming of organized Hinduism through the cult of Vaishnavism, the pre-Vaishnavite ritualistic form, the *Lai Haraoba*, and the martial art form, Thang-ta, and the later Vaishnavite repertory of the *Ras Leela*. Living and training in Manipur for long stretches of time, Patel has also experienced the seething discontent that scars the current Manipuri landscape, where youth regularly clash with the government authorities and are, more often than not, killed through police violence. In 2001 she created *Khuman* (The Black Sun), a work steeped in the tragic loss of life that has become a huge part of contemporary Manipuri society. She says that this piece, which was produced by her artistic and training institution, Anjika, and premiered at Kolkata's Uday Shankar Dance Festival, earned her the displeasure of some government authorities. At any rate, in several of her works, she weaves in a thematic focus on nature, the sun and the earth, very much in keeping with the sociocultural ethos of the Manipuri people, where rural and tribal forms dominate in the organization of society. Manipuri is a form that has received fewer resources and much less attention than the other classical forms and, despite the later reformulation of the aesthetic via Vaishnavism, still is different from other forms. Moreover, in highlighting the pre-Vaishnavite forms, tribal forms that developed prior to the emergence of organized religion and that are based on a unique worldview, even as she juxtaposes them with the *Ras Leela* form to make

work that often indirectly reflects contemporary political and economic crises, Patel's work offers a different way to think both about the dismantling of the Hindu face of many classical dance forms and the accessing of a secular movement aesthetic based on life-work patterns.<sup>5</sup>

In 2000 I met a young dancer from Pakistan, whose poignant comments stirred a central discomfort in me, and whose words echo in my ears as I try to think through the issues. Why do these Indian—Hindu—choreographers think that they can create “feminist” pieces when they are still using imagery from a Hindu framework, however deconstructed, using Hindu or Sanskrit names for their pieces? (Sanskrit is strongly associated with the articulation of Hinduism.) Which women are they speaking to? Her questions sat in my mind for several years and have spurred this search in important ways. Yet, at the beginning of this ongoing journey, I was filled with a sense of hopelessness at the amnesia that I saw in so many dancers and choreographers all across India: it was so much business as usual, as if Ayodhya or Godhra had not happened. Artists were pursuing their personal notions of excellence in classicism through their work without necessarily acknowledging that their performances on the proscenium stage, as evolution of their artistic career, had made the practice of classical dance a quasi-secular practice. The spirituality could have been an idea in the original choreography for sure, but the system of ticketed performances and tours, the jockeying for power and for government and corporate support, the strategizing for publicity and media relations had made of the actual performance quite another thing. This, even as the trappings of a classical dance form that originated in the temple—the beginning invocation and ending *pranam* or salutation, the presence of a deity-symbol on stage—remain in circulation.

That the context of performance, and of cultural production in general, in India has been inalienably altered is undeniable, and I am reminded of Rajni Kothari's apprehensions:

December 6 symbolized the end of the age of complacency based on a vision predicated on the triumphs of modern science and technology, a positivist state, a historical dialectic based on class consciousness and its associated model of economic development. . . . It underscored a vacuum in both basic thinking about goals and policy and institutional parameters. New visions are being offered to fill this vacuum—globalization, Hindutva, an ethnic redrawing of the world map, a new version of the American endgame—but they all seem to have little to offer to long-suffering humanity which is, if anything, being driven further to the wall. (2002, 62)

While the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP), the electoral wing of Hindutva, has just been defeated in the 2004 elections, there is no doubt that this ideology will remain in the cultural and political spheres for a while. Artists, working to give voice to that which is yet outside material realization, reminding of the ideals of beauty and pleasure and of unseen pain, have a charge, I believe. And while this search for a secular is my own, and possibly has limited currency, I do want to urge dancers and choreographers to re-



member the power of dancing bodies to signify and sound their claim for an uncensored creative environment. Finally, in thinking through the work of the above-mentioned artists with great care, I have come to appreciate deeply how they have grappled with embedded notions of religion, gender, and sexuality in the neoclassical forms, and have chosen to intersect these with forms like Chhau, Kalaripayattu, and Thang-ta, forms that do not emerge from this history of the Sanskritization process that dominated the restructuring and “revival” process of the neoclassical forms, even though this does not necessarily resolve the issues here, and sometimes creates a different set of problems. Through their work, I have also come to realize that the neat anti-fundamentalist, committed-to-progressivism aesthetic that I was looking for is in process, for these responses always emerge in relationship to changing historical contexts. And if I never found a point of arrival in this search, or never reached clarity of understanding, it perhaps signals the complex issues and messy histories that the cultural scene is riddled with. For continuing to make artistic work and for refusing to allow a fundamentalist overwhelming of their art I thank these artists deeply.

## Notes

1. Sarabhai published a hard-hitting opinion piece in the *Times of India* during the violence on March 10, 2002, “I Accuse . . . We are guilty, each one of us: Notes from a wounded city rising from the dead,” in which she urges action by all citizens against the governmental violation of human rights.

2. *Abhinaya Darpana*, written by Nandikeshvara between the fourth and sixth centuries, details much of the expressive language of classical performance. I am referring to Ananda Coomaraswamy’s famous translation of the text, *The Mirror of Gesture, being the Abhinaya Darpana of Nandike-vara* (Cambridge, MA, 1917).

3. The overlaying of the dance repertory in terms of *bhakti*, or the devotional mood, replacing *sringara*, the mood of erotic love, in bharatanatyam in the 1940s is described in the work of scholars like Avanthi Meduri, Amrit Srinivasan, Saskia Kersenboom-Story, and others.

4. Secularism is also traditionally associated with a focus on this world, as opposed to the supernatural or otherworldly.

5. Most of my information about Patel’s work is from interviews with her conducted in Kolkata in 2003–2004. It is important to mention that the *Lai Haraoba* form is based on a creation story that is unique, and delineated specifically in relationship to the earth, nature, and developing work patterns, as opposed to a Hindu mythical version. Vaishnavism became prominent as a state religion in Manipur in the eighteenth century and the *Ras Leela* dance form, greatly influenced by the *Bhagavad Gita*, developed at this time with royal patronage. Also, Patel is not the only choreographer to work with Thang-ta, but her work is different in the way the several traditions of Manipur, with their varying associations, are brought into conversation with each other, once again dislodging hegemonic notions of Hinduism.

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