

I am a performer, a practitioner, and I engage in plural practices: namely yoga, dance-theatre (my training being in Bharatanatyam), and urban activism. As a rule, I am not interested in concentrating on only the 'vertically ascending practice' of any one of these alone (by 'vertically ascending' I mean an insulated practice of any one discipline in pursuit of its mastery and perfection), but am drawn to the horizontal connections, sometimes deliberate, but most often random, between these varied practices. I rely upon these random cross-connections, which can be very real, insightful, at times revelatory, and also gentle due to their casual nature. Today, I locate 'beauty' in these chance connections, which are ordinary yet real. I think we are entering an age of ordinariness; being special, being an expert, being a star, being an authority, being in control all seem to be losing credence.

The common denominator in my three seemingly varied practices is the body. The body as a medium of inner-reconfiguration and generating deep experience and insight through yoga; the body as a means of creating sharable experiences through dance; and finally the body in the city, in this case an Indian city. I live, practice and teach in New Delhi. I live there by choice, in fact I live in India because I love living there, even though India confronts me with realities that I strongly disagree with and which jar me on a daily basis, such as the condition of our cities and the power inequalities that visibly pertain between the rich and the poor to a point that even our public places are not exactly democratic. It is one thing that our cities look disorderly, dirty and chaotic, that is a superficial matter, but what is disturbing is that our cities are disrespectful to the body and completely overlook the needs, convenience and even safety of the pedestrians, who mostly come from the less privileged strata, as the richer classes who also happen to be more influential in terms of policy making, planning and design of these cities mostly navigate them encased in cars.

I live in the more urbane part of New Delhi, in South Delhi, where I run a dance and yoga studio by the name of Studio Abhyas (*abhyasa* meaning practice in Sanskrit). I derive this name from Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, which happen to be a primary source of inspiration and guidance for me and my work. In *sutra* 1:12, Patanjali states that the yogic state of mind, i.e. when the fluctuations and the fickleness of the mind are absorbed and stilled, is a result of a practice or *abhyasa*, which necessarily involves the

material of the body. But in the same sutra, which is to say in the same breath, he also adds that this practice is to be done with *vairagya*, a sense of detachment or in other words un-ambitiously, from a distance of one-remove. He implies that it is consistent and committed practice that has been rendered ordinary or casual by its un-ambitiousness that will offer yogic-anchorage. I personally find great meaning and beauty in this ordinariness.

The two disciplines that I have devoted my life to, i.e. yoga and Bharatanatyam, were in some form re-imagined and re-constructed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as a direct result of the colonial as well as the colonized imagination. Within the reconstruction of both of these lies a 'shift in premise' in order to fit into the new, drastically changed historical context. I locate this shift in the stances of two highly influential personalities, Swami Vivekananda, who was perhaps the most pivotal person to bring Hinduism to the West, and Dr. Annie Besant, a prominent British socialist turned theosophist who made India her spiritual home, actively campaigned for its self-rule and became president of not only the Theosophical Society but also of the Indian National Congress. Both of them respectively assumed a dismissive stance against two Indian traditions that both involved the body and were paradoxical in nature, namely *hatha yoga* and the dance practice of the *devadasis*, (the sacred/profane dancers and musicians attached to temple service in Southern India).

As a result of a critical stance and severe admonishments by the British against many Hindu practices, a Hindu reform movement was initiated by the Hindu elite in the latter half of the nineteenth century. This movement targeted all 'unexplainable' practices, and particularly those that conflated sexuality with the sacred, such as that of the sacred/erotic *devadasis* and the 'perverse' *hatha yogis*. These liminal categories came to be seen as obscure, obscene, immoral, decadent, repulsive and most of all irrational and thus both emblematic and responsible for India's moral and spiritual backwardness. A new Hinduism was therefore to be imagined, adapted and propagated, a Hinduism that would be rational and uni-dimensionally spiritual. Political and spiritual leaders of very high international stature, such as Swami Vivekananda, Shri Aurobindo, Dr. Annie Besant, and even Mahatma Gandhi, became the advocates of this modern project that was committed to the disabling of paradox in Hinduism. In

1896, Vivekananda wrote in *Raja Yoga*, an instrumental book that concerns itself with the disciplining of the mind, that '[a]nything that is secret and mysterious in these systems of yoga should be at once rejected' on the grounds that 'mystery mongering weakens the brain.' That is how the disenfranchisement of the mysterious and mystic traditions of India began.

### Brief History of Re-construction of Yoga and Bharatanatyam

Traditionally, the practice of *hatha yoga* was seen as an obscure, mostly male subculture that was outside of the social norm and at variance with the life and aspirations of a householder. The *hatha yogi* was seen as this mysterious being, who experimented with his body and even sexuality, was dirty, often walked naked, inhabited an altered state of mind, was unpredictable and therefore to be feared. It was in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that yoga as we see it today was fashioned as a form of physical culture, cleansed of its obscure and secretive practices.<sup>1</sup> This re-visioning and reconstruction of yoga was directly influenced by the wave of 'Muscular Christianity' that connected physique and spirituality and resulted in the radical reform of athletics and sports throughout the public schools in Britain during the second half of the nineteenth century. This new vision aimed at spiritualizing athleticism equated 'physical strength' with 'moral strength,' which thereby ensured good citizenry of noble gentlemen. Influenced by this project of 'man making,' the Maharaja Krishnaraja Wodiyar IV of Mysore, who, after suffering a stroke, had been nursed back to health through the 'scientific yogic therapy' of Prof K.V. Iyer, commissioned the opening of, first, a *vyayamshala* or a gymnasium for the physical training of the royal princes, and then in 1933 added to it a *yogashala* or a yoga academy. This academy was to be headed by T. Krishnamacharya, who followed and advocated the more cerebral teachings of Patanjali's Yoga Sutras as opposed to *hatha yoga*, which is more forceful, aggressive and wilfully demonstrative of odd social behavior. Krishnamacharya is today recognized as the 'father of modern yoga,' being the teacher of B.K.S. Iyengar, Pattabhi Jois (founder of the Ashtanga Yoga school), Indira Devi (a Russian noblewoman who later took yoga to South America), and of his son, T.K.V. Desikachar, who founded the Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram, in Chennai, that happens to be my alma mater.

Incidentally, the *yogashala* opened in the precincts of the Mysore palace two years before Kalakshetra, the school of Bharatanatyam – which singularly shaped the new face of Indian dance – was started on the grounds of the Theosophical Society, in Madras, by Rukmini Devi Arundale, a prime protégé of Dr. Annie Besant. Like the *hatha yogis*, the *devadasis* too were scorned and seen as 'a blot on Hindu civilization.' They were viewed as the immoral agents of corruption, the succubi who through the seductions of their song, dance and their wayward, immoral ways would suck the moral, spiritual and physical strength out of the young men of the nation. And so they came under long and severe attack from the reformists in the form of a fierce anti-*nautch* campaign (*nautch* meaning dance). Attributing an imaginary, untainted and un-paradoxical past to the *devadasis*, in 1917, Besant wrote:

There was a band of pure virgin devotees attached to the ancient Hindu temple. ... In those days they were held in very high esteem and very well looked after. They would spend their time in doing religious service to the Gods, and the devotees of the temple, as the word *dasi* itself signifies. They would follow the procession of the gods dressed in the simplest sanyasi garbs and singing pious hymns suitable to the occasion. This is the history of the *devadasi* class.<sup>2</sup>

Alluding to Besant's rather sweeping statement, which had great import due to her status of being both a celebrated Indo-phile and an esteemed head of the Indian nationalist movement, Devesh Sonji rightly points out that,

[t]his narrative of the 'fall' of the *devadasis* from a Hindu golden age – premised on little more than fantasy – has an enduring, systematic presence in the structures of the state and enabled twentieth-century reformers to justify 'rescue' of women from these communities.<sup>3</sup>

While the social reformists tried to save women from the immoral clutches of a tradition 'gone wrong,' Rukmini Devi took it upon herself to 'rescue' the art of dancing from this traditional community that was fast losing both patronage and social standing. In her own words she called it 'not throwing out the

baby with the bathwater.’ And to save and nurture this ‘baby’ she set up Kalakshetra, that was devoted to the traditions of dance and Carnatic music from Southern India, in 1935.

So the new form of yoga was cleansed of the odd and obscure practices of the *hatha yogis* and was beginning to get defined now within the more cerebral and distilled framework of Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras* in the *yogashala* at the royal palace in Mysore. At the same time, a new form of dance practice, cleansed of its immoral associations with the questionable lifestyle of the *devadasis*, was beginning to get redefined within the textual framework of the *Natya Shastra* (the ancient treatise of dramaturgy, dating back to approximately the same time as the *Yoga Sutras*, i.e. about 2000 years ago), at the Kalakshetra, under the umbrella of the Theosophical Society. In this way, both practices were being cleansed of their murkiness, their socially odd and lewd mannerisms, which were now considered as shocking and vulgar within the emerging sensibilities of the modern context, and were being secured again by aligning them to ancient canons. Bringing the practice under the umbrella of authoritative canons would help both safeguard and propagate ‘cultural heritage’ and help in giving a much needed cultural facelift to India, more precisely India’s spirituality that had by then recognizably become its ‘unique selling point.’ So these facilitated reconstructions of ancient traditions were in a way engaged in creating cultural capital by smoothening out the edges of these practices so that they would become internationally palatable. In a very short time, both yoga and dance became very prominent displays in India’s cultural menagerie, and while yoga became *the* item of cultural-spiritual export from India, Indian classical dance not only became its prime object of cultural exhibitionism but integral to the construction of the national narrative, representational of a golden past, unquestionably pure, chaste and seamlessly spiritual.

It would not be wrong to say that T. Krishnamacharya and Rukmini Devi Arundale, respectively, made yoga and Bharatanatyam available to the world. I in particular am completely indebted to these two figures as I happened to study yoga at the Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram, and trained in Bharatanatyam at the Kalakshetra, both in Chennai, between 1980 and 1985. So for me, a direct disciple, they remain unparalleled giants, fiercely radical<sup>4</sup>, courageous, committed, deeply insightful and sensitive, who more than succeeded in fulfilling their promise of

‘reviving’ these traditions. I stand in awe, deep respect and obeisance to both of them. To me they will remain very dear *periyavar*, or respected elder as Krishnamacharya was addressed, and *athai*, paternal aunt, as Rukmini Devi was endearingly called by all. But then within a larger frame their very sincere attempts to save and reconstruct these forms becomes problematic because they fall within a larger frame of the nation that orchestrated disenfranchisement of these paradoxical traditions of sacred-erotic dancing and mind-altering practice of yoga, and this orchestration is not innocent. It stems out of middle class India’s secret compliance with the hostile discriminations of the colonizer against agents of paradox that is on the one hand intrinsic to Indian spirituality and on the other hand is so intolerably incompatible with the dream of modernity. It is in this ‘compliance,’ due to a growing identification with the aggressor, the seduction of ‘progress,’ and the emerging dream of a nation, that I locate the problematic shift in premise, from which India has yet to recover. So, I stand between deep respect of my teachers, while at the same time questioning this orchestration.

The narrative of the nation thrived on the dream of a golden past, of an ‘imagined community,’ a concept so succinctly and aptly coined by Benedict Anderson to define this sentimental and euphoric prescribing of an imagined past, illustrious, untouched and untainted. Both yoga and dance had not only to be reinstated within this glorified past but also funneled into current times, bypassing the gone-astray traditional practitioners and grafted on to more ‘favorable’ bodies that would not only be more aligned to but also complimentary to this emerging dream of a nation, i.e. the bodies would have to qualitatively match this dream. This process of the rechristening of these physical traditions would then require a) a space, almost like a laboratory space within the safety of which this transference could be conducted, and b) model Indian bodies upon which this imagined, reified form could be inscribed. Both Kalakshetra and the *yogashala* provided controlled spaces within which to effectively conduct this transference. And once this transference of inscribing the favored body is complete, the dream has germinated and then there is no stopping it from spreading like wildfire. For instance, although Krishnamacharya never left the shores of India, as that would be a violation of the sacred vows of a Brahmin, he effectively spawned an interna-

tional yoga movement that quite literally took the world by storm through the outreach of two of his most popular students, BKS Iyengar and Pattabhi Joyce, who both trained under him at the *yogashala*. Similarly, once the dance had been effectively wrested out of the hands of the *devadasis*, re-formatted and inscribed into the body of middle-class girls, there was no stopping it. Today, Bharatanatyam is recognized all over the world and in some places even losing its ethnic definition.

The two experiments were highly successful, then. Whereas the revised form of yoga taught at the *yogashala* in the Mysore Palace focused on fostering the connection between physical rigor and moral character in the young men, the new Indian dance celebrated not the eroticism but the spirituality of this dance. Under the new vision of an emerging nation, the model man had to be upright and moral, and the woman proper and virtuous. The man had to be athletic and strong and the woman refined and educated, but demure. And this project of modeling proper Indian ladies and gentlemen would be fulfilled through the means of indigenous but reformed practices of yoga and dance. In this way, both traditions would be saved from the clutches of the terribly gone-astray, mystery-mongering traditional practitioners, and preserved in the more 'favorable' and domesticated bodies of the middle classes, and be put to new use in the construction of good and proper citizenry. It was a win-win situation that spawned a win-win narrative for the modern India of which I am a part. As a practitioner of both these physical reified disciplines, I am viscerally implicated into this win-win narrative. I clearly see that poetic and artistic autonomy lies in stepping out of this win-win narrative, but stepping out is not an easy task as it is heavily policed by the self-styled cultural custodians. For a very long time my dance work remained self-referential, i.e. it made comment upon the dance itself, questioning, challenging and always resisting this win-win narrative. However, things are shifting now, I can dream of autonomy without resisting this narrative, which in effect meant getting caught in it again. And this is becoming possible for me by shifting the focus from the form of the dance to the materiality of the body, or in other words entering dance through the door of yoga. Being fully aware of the problematic history but at the same time getting deeper into exploring the experience-generating capacities of the body.

### The Dance Training Project

Today, there are many classical Indian dancers who love the form but are getting more and more restless and uncomfortable with the idea of dance being part of a nationalistic agenda. Keeping this in mind, a colleague of mine, Justin McCarthy, an American turned Indian, a concert pianist and a Bharatanatyam dancer/choreographer, and I started a dance training project at Studio Abhyas. We purposely called it a 'project' as opposed to a training school, as we propose to observe it like an experiment of dance education. The DTP (dance training project), as it is currently called, has seven dancers, all of whom have been trained in Bharatanatyam to some degree. The idea of the project is to find ways of transmitting the technique of this dance in all its grammatical complexity and fullness, but not only challenging but even attempting to undo the mannerisms, attitudes and imagination that uphold dance as a 'precious' and an 'authentic' artifact from a golden past. The project aims at both training and rigorous unlearning in order to free dance from the pressures of cultural representation. To begin with, this rigorous course, which uses Bharatanatyam as the primary technique of dance instruction, does not presuppose that the students will eventually become Bharatanatyam dancers or even dancers at all.

The DTP places the training of the technique of Bharatanatyam within a cross-section of several other enquiries and physical practices. For one, it aims to locate dance within a political, social and cultural history as opposed to a mythologized past. We very soon realized that most dancers don't make good readers. Most of them don't have a very strong education base and are little inclined to read, therefore, we thought it better to introduce history through lectures by visiting historians or by showing films and historical documentaries. The cultural practices of India are to a large extent tied to paradoxical principles, and our aim of introducing cultural history of modern India in the DTP is to identify sets of polarities that have been artificially orchestrated around these practices, almost all of them aiming at the disabling, or obliteration of the paradoxical dialectic that pertains at the heart of these practices. For example, the primary polarity that has beseeched Bharatanatyam since the end of the nineteenth century revolves around the issue of the *devadasi's* morality. Then, in the 1950s, their concern shifted to the intent of the sacred/erotic texts that are interpreted in the dance; whether they are

supposed to be express *bhakti*, i.e. devotion or the erotic sentiment of *sringara*; over the last few decades the burning question has revolved around tradition or modernity; and now I see a new polarity emerging: whether classical dance ought to showcase culture or be used to strengthen the Indian identity in the diaspora. The very nature of these polarities has been to obsessively preoccupy if not trap the practitioners in a bind, forcing them to take sides, throttling the possibility of paradox or liminality that lies at the heart of such traditional practices. In turn this also robs the dancers of their artistic autonomy, because since its reconstruction, dance has been used to uphold a cause or prove a point. It is with this aim to realize the forced agendas of these very powerful and compelling polarizations that we have included cultural modern history in the DTP.

The other activities of the DTP include voice classes, appreciation of Carnatic music (traditional music of Southern India); interaction with visual artists with the view of understanding their practice of art-making, mainly because the visual artists have been relatively free from the agendas of culture and the nation and have been able to express themselves in very strong and autonomous ways; a lot of improvisation sessions aimed at prompting the process of free association and creation of imagery; choreographic assignments based on a variety of tasks; viewing and critiquing of performance work that the students get to see in live performance or on video, and also what they themselves make and share with each other; maintaining a methodical documentation of the processes that they are engaging in with mandatory reviewing of these documentations from time to time with the aim of a) keeping track, and b) discovering 'stray' and pertinent connections between what they are putting themselves through physically, what they hear, read, observe, and what they then begin to see, imagine and produce.

Apart from a rigorous and regular training in the technique of Bharatnatyam and the various activities mentioned above, the one non-dance practice that is integral to DTP and is viewed not as auxiliary but as equal to dance is yoga. All the participants do not only have to mandatorily practice yoga, they are also trained to become yoga teachers. Apart from yoga being central to the vision of the project, it also serves a pragmatic purpose. Dance in India is still an un-paying proposition, there is very little funding and support for it, performance opportunities are few and often

don't pay enough to cover even the expenses incurred for the performance; whereas yoga teaching can not only provide an income, it can even be lucrative. Out of the seven participants involved in DTP, four of them are now certified yoga teachers and are able to maintain a decent and comfortable lifestyle through yoga teaching.

The yoga that we practice at Studio Abhyas is in the style of T. Krishnamacharya, as further developed by his son and disciple, T.K.V. Desikachar. According to this system yoga is a practice which necessarily involves the 'body, mind and breath to work in tandem.' This school also includes the use of sound, imagery, visualization, mantra, mudra and nyasa or the very subtle technique of mindful-self-touch as means to develop sensitivity and body awareness. We notice that paying such detailed and sensitive attention to the body can help erode acquired mannerisms and stances associated with the 'idea' of dance. The aim is to approach and (re)examine the classical form from an informed position of knowing, enjoying and respecting one's body through this 'sensually enriching' practice of yoga. (I use the term 'sensual' deliberately because this technique of yoga can be described as flowing and 'juicy,' as it is enjoyable at a sensual level). By making the dancer's body aware and responsive at a very subtle level, we hope to counter the more conventional way of teaching/learning classical dance, where the form is often imposed upon the body as a cultural monolith.

### The Practice and Experience of Yoga

Yoga is the physical practice of influencing the mind so that it may stop its automotive, compulsive fluctuations and become more attentive and mindful. The target of the physical practice of yoga is the mind, which can be reached through the material of the body. To understand the inner dynamics of yoga, it is important to understand the specific way in which the body is viewed within the Indian systems of yoga, Ayurveda as well as philosophical thought. For almost three millennia, these systems have viewed the body as a conglomerate of the five elements, and the individual constitution as a unique configuration predominated by three of these elements, namely air, fire and water, respectively called *vata*, *pitta* and *kapha*. This configuration is unique to each individual and can be compared to the DNA. It is a given, and will predispose the body to certain kinds of tendencies that may lead

to aptitudes and attitudes or predispose it to certain disorders and disease. Therefore these are the inherent 'faults' in the makeup of body and for that reason they are called *dosha*, literally meaning fault. However, these faults can be countered and overcome by *gunas*, which denote 'positive' qualities. They are considered positive because their property is fluid, i.e. they can move and therefore can bring about change. *Gunas* are again three in number: *tamas*, the slothful, *rajas* the aggressive or enthusiastic, and *sattva*, which is considered pure and unbiased. Like many other practices, yoga is designed to temper these *gunas* in order to bring about desired change and balance in the body/mind. Out of the three, *tamas* and *rajas* are conflicting, reactionary, and compulsive, while the third, *sattva*, is non-compulsive, free of entanglements, and autonomous. Whereas the conflicting two have drives and ambitions, *sattva* only has a buoyancy plus it is unambitious and can be easily overwhelmed by the conflict between the sluggish and the aggressive. The practice of yoga is therefore geared towards the simultaneous tempering of the two conflicting tendencies, i.e. the sluggish is to be energized and the aggressive to be exhausted so as to arrive at a state of energized/exhausted equipoise where the third state, that of a more conscious *sattva*, may be allowed to surface.

Almost all yoga practice in any style, comprised of a carefully designed sequence of challenging *asanas* interspersed with gentle counter-poses, involves the mandatory *shavasana*, or the corpse pose, at the end of the session. This is the 'after' period of a practice, a period of repose and rest, when after going through a dynamic and physically challenging routine of mindful *asana* and *pranayama*, the practitioner lies down in a still pose, not only to recover but also to allow the body to re-assimilate and re-absorb the fruits of its own effortful practice. This lying down in a state of 'non-doing' at the end of a rigorous session of 'doing' is the most important part, if not the very purpose of the practice. In my classes I describe this moment of repose as follows: if we shake a blanket or a rug it gives rise to little dust particles that fly out of it into the air, and if then we lay the same rug down upon the floor these dust particles slowly resettle back upon the rug, but they settle down in a new configuration. *Shavasana* is then the passive state of an energized/exhausted body that is being re-patterned through the re-absorption of energy dust, one grain at a time. This condition of repose and re-absorption can be deeply satisfying, comforting, stabilizing and even empowering. What is

important to note is that this condition results not due to any exoteric practice but simply through a practice of yoga that uses the body, breath and mind in tandem. It is precisely this dynamics of tangible, physical practices that use the material of the body but in effect can alter the state of mind that the DTP attempts to incorporate into the process of dance making.

#### Urban Activism – Interventions by School Children

In my practice and my work, I value this possibility of self-generating a deeply satisfying, comforting, stabilizing and empowering experience. And I am particularly fascinated by how the manipulation of the tangible material of the body can actually affect and condition this life-altering, deep inner-experience. This makes me view the body with an added respect and appreciation. But ironically, when I look around I notice that Indian cities do not seem to consider the body as a central point of reference in their design, making or maintenance. Our cities and public facilities are not necessarily body-friendly and often lack attention-to-detail. I am talking here of the curb that is too high and difficult to step upon especially for the elderly or disabled; the random encroachments on pavements forcing the pedestrians to walk beside the running traffic on the carriage way; missing manhole and drain covers; I am talking of haphazard repair work and shoddy workmanship of the kind we would never accept in our homes; the unthought-through signage which can confuse and rattle the mind; I am talking of the absence of allocated spaces for the street vendors who are integral to Indian living and add so much to the liveliness on Indian streets and yet they are harassed by the police all the time as they have no legal space in the city; I am talking of no dignity of labor for the poor unskilled workers who work on our streets; I am talking of the privilege of vehicles over pedestrians who are generally the poor. It is this jarring divide between the deeply comforting experience that the body can afford itself on the one hand and a callous if not contemptuous disregard of the body on the other that made me want to re-envision my city and led to my urban activism.

Before I describe the methods of intervention, I'd like to give a short background to what prompted me to take on this project. I lived abroad between 1985 and 1992, and when I came back to India after a stretch of seven plus years, I found that our cities were just as haphazard and chaotic as I had left them; they

continued to overlook the concerns and safety of pedestrians and lacked attention-to-detail. But another more despairing realization came when I watched the behavior of the young adults, whom I had left as little children a few years ago, behaving pretty much in the same callous, unmindful and disrespectful ways as generations before them had. And this was an eye opener for me, because I realized that if this is how behaviors and attitudes are replicated, one generation after another, then there was very little scope for change. So, the first realization was to recognize that this chain of transmitted behavior required to be broken and that the catalysts would necessarily have to be the children. The second incident that shook me into action was a tragedy that occurred very close to where I lived, in Green Park, New Delhi. In 1997, a cinema hall, filled to over-capacity by adding extra seats that blocked exits, caught fire due to a faulty transformer in the basement, resulting in the death of 59 moviegoers. The cinema is still closed and under litigation for having blatantly flouted safety laws. For all practical purposes, this was a man-made tragedy, a mix of greed, negligence and slack in governance. It was while standing on my balcony, watching the black smoke rise and seeing people running and crying in the streets whose family members had been trapped inside, that I made a resolve to finally act on what had been brewing in my mind to make proactive interventions into our public spaces.

It took a few years for the course of intervention to be formulated. It was already decided that I would work with children, school children; the next step was to choose the mode of intervention. It could not be dance or yoga. Though I attribute my sensitivity to body and space to both these disciplines, neither would be effective mediums to make the hands-on interventions that I had in mind. It was not until 2006 that the project was defined and launched as a design initiative. By then I had gathered a small group of like-minded people to form a team and had registered my studio as a non-profit organization that was committed to community interventions. We called the project of urban intervention, *The Power of Seeing*. Most middle-class Indians keep very good homes, well organized, highly functional, even beautiful, but then turn a blind eye to the unacceptable conditions on the streets. There is a huge lack of identification with the outside which glaringly reflects in the divide between our homes and the dysfunctional outside. It is not that people don't care or are apathetic —

there are many who are deeply concerned — it is that they don't know what to do or more precisely where to begin, because a) the dysfunction is so widespread and therefore overwhelming, and b) the processes of building and repairing the city are so haphazard that they become difficult to decipher, pinpoint or observe, and c) the concerned municipal agencies remain opaque and in most cases unavailable. The project then pivots on stopping to take stock of both the dysfunction that surrounds us as well as our paralyzed attitude that supports it. It necessarily requires taking a fresh look and opening our eyes to see! Our vision is not to turn the city around, but to bring about a shift in our attitudes, and this requires arresting the eye in a sustained act of active-seeing, seeing in a way that may lead to identification. Our belief being that once identification is established the divide between inside and outside is potentially bridged.

The Power of Seeing Project works through a number of steps over a long period of time and these steps are divided into three stages, namely seeing, documenting and organizing. In fact, the formula that we work by is: see + document + organize = change. And this formula has evolved over years of trying and testing the project. The working of these steps and stages remains flexible and overlapping, going along with the inclination of the child or a group of children. Children surprise us again and again with their enthusiasm, creativity and genius. So, it is the 'unexpected' and the 'unplanned' element that actually spearheads this project, and it is exactly in this that we hope to find creative solutions that could effectively address the issue of urban dysfunction in Indian cities. Therefore, as much as we facilitate, design a course and methodologies, we hope not to control this exercise too much. Because we have faith in the unthought-of!

The project is introduced to the children first in the form of a presentation (most often a power-point presentation with videos, images, graphs etc.) and then followed up with a field trip to some part of the city where design interventions have been successful. After which each child is invited to choose and adopt one street element from his or her immediate environment; we stress that the element should be close to their home or school so that it is easy for them to keep an eye on it. They are then helped with basic mapping skills to map the area in which the element exists. The element can vary from being a sign post, a curb stone, a portion of a pavement, a tree, a lamp, a traffic light, a man-

hole, or even a wire or piece of metal dangerously poking out of a wall, etc. They are then provided with an observation card that has a column to briefly describe the adopted element, the materials used, the tools they imagine would have been used to make it, its placement and adjustment in regard to the space and other elements, its maintenance, its function, if it is useful, perfunctory, cosmetic, or an obstruction; the reverse of the card is a grid over which to draw a map exactly locating the element, plus a space to stick a photograph. The edge of this card has a little lip which can be later glued to another panel of photographs that the child may take of the same element over regular intervals. So, no more than six months later, each child has a concise and very telling photo document of his/her chosen element. In fact they are equipped with a case history. And this is very empowering for the child.

Each month the children are offered a workshop or a field trip led by some expert or NGO dealing with either design or environmental issues. They can be product designers, architects, town planners, traffic engineers, journalists, facilitators, or activists dealing with issues such as water, garbage disposal, sustainability, traffic safety, trees, street animals etc. We also have a team of facilitators who assist us in this project, and some of the DTP dancers have today become facilitators. Exposure through each workshop adds a new perspective for the child from which to view his or her adopted element. And so, through concentrated and sustained attention on and identification with one street element, the child's world begins to radiate and grow one layer at a time, ushering him or her into understanding the cross-connections between objects, functions, attitudes, policies, and finally human experience. Many children begin to augment the case histories of their element by adding other sources, such as videos, personal narratives collected through interviews, news clippings, data, statistics, etc., and even begin reading it from sociological perspectives of class and gender in particular. An exercise that started as a passive act of seeing develops into pro-action, positioning the child as a central seeing-agent within a larger web of multilayered connections.

One group of children (from Fr. Agnel School) decided to focus on the issue of garbage disposal. A presentation by an NGO, Chintan, that works on the issues of garbage disposal and garbage toxicity had both disturbed and inspired them to take on the issue. They made a field trip to a garbage disposal site, met

with and made video interviews with garbage pickers, investigated into the levels of toxicity different types of garbage can produce, identified that wet organic waste from their kitchens could contribute to both toxicity and contamination of ground water. They realized the critical importance of garbage segregation and with the help of designers cum facilitators Eena Basur and Sucharita Jain created a board game called *Dump it Right*, which involves, like the carrom board, striking different types of pellets signifying different types of garbage, i.e. wet, recyclable, toxic, etc. into their respective holes.

The next and current phase that is being developed now is to let these children from different schools connect through social media and start talking to each other. The idea is to have these children organize themselves around issues of their choice, pool in their resources and findings, compare, index and analyze their material in order to identify 'patterns' of governance as well as public usage and attitude. The schools that we are currently working with have scheduled public meetings with their local MLAs (members of the legislative assembly responsible for the municipal governance of their respective constituencies), as well as local RWA's (resident welfare associations). In the meanwhile, the children are also planning on making public interventions, through public art on their school boundary walls and school buses, street-performance, and flash mobs. One of our current projects with St Mary's School is to use the boundary wall of the school to publicize hotline numbers that people can call if they need to report a dangerous or dysfunctional element in their streets. And so, a simple exercise of seeing is slowly showing promise of growing into a campaign as our partnerships grow across schools to include teachers, families, school and local authorities, in other words, the community. One of our underlying mottos has been that this is not a project about pointing fingers, but instead about squarely situating ourselves as first responsible and then pivotal agents of change. We hope to revision our city and our environment, by observing and attending upon one street element at a time. Our slogan is, one street element at a time, we can change our city!

### Conclusion

So, there are three dimensions that we intermittently juggle or traverse through at Studio Abhyas: the deeply comforting and embodying experience of yoga; a facilitated 'physical' disengage-

ment with the ‘idea’ of India in order to gain artistic autonomy over dance-making; and then simple but proactive participation with the city. All three involve the body as well as a process of re-envisioning at a physical level. As I said earlier, I find meaning in cross-connecting or mindfully traversing through multiple dimensions of life today, not becoming obsessed or overly committed to a single pursuit, in fact I find single-minded pursuits or sentiments like ‘married to the art’ not only old-school but even suspect today. It is in the gentle inter-transference between various dimensions, some real, others imagined, some tangible, others intangible, some expressible, others inexpressible, that I locate the scope of meaning and beauty today. Today, meaning for me does not lie in building up or even upholding values, but rather in shedding, in exposing the cracks, in taking inventory, and in letting go of stances and ideas of selfhood that we may have orchestrated to bolster identity. And one effective means to do that might be to bring back the focus upon the material, the body, the sensation within the body, as opposed to the emotion, idea or thought. And this includes looking equally mindfully and insightfully at both the body and the brick in the pavement. It might be in the material that the treasures that we search lie buried, buried under the conditioning of our ‘unseeing’ eyes. The letting go so integral to this process also requires letting go of judgment, of pointing fingers and fault finding in others, so it is an exercise in *vairagya*, or non-reaction, while at the same time persistently practicing *abhyasa*, the pro-action of putting one small step in front of the other within these multiple dimensions. At the core of the multiple projects at Studio Abhyas is not just the body, but a dreaming body that is awake to its innate capacity for, deep comfort and stability, and dreaming of finding similar comfort and stability in the sound resolve of its history as well as within the humane correspondence of its environment.

## Notes

- 1 The re-construction of yoga has been very well documented in Singleton, 2010.
- 2 Reddy, 1927, p. 5.
- 3 Soneji, 2012, p. 123.
- 4 Krishnamacharya is singularly responsible for making not only yoga but also Vedic chanting (a codified system of liturgical chanting of the sacred Hindu texts) that was so far strictly the prerogative of men, available to the women of not only India, but the world, one of his prime disciples being Indira Devi, a noblewoman of Russian descent; while Rukmini Devi threw open the doors of Indian dance to anyone who wished to dance, be it woman, man, Indian or foreigner.

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