

# THE CENTRALITY OF CASTE

Dance and the Making of  
a National Indian Identity

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**C**ulture and hegemony are easily exchangeable in the post-independence Indian context. That which we claim as culture and tradition is a construct—in fact, a construct that is drawn strictly from an upper-class, Brahmanical perspective. In the latter half of the 19th century, the Indian elite started to orchestrate a deliberate shift from lived histories to imagined pasts (Anderson, 1983) that led to the formation of a national identity as well as Indian nationalism. This shift, which was brought about through the redefinition of the embodied practices that India today boasts of, viz., yoga and bharatanatyam, systematically disenfranchised the paradox and mystery that informed many of our practices, and made puritanical morality a pivotal determinate of Indian culture.

I build my case on the ground-breaking scholarship of a number of historians, such as Elizabeth De Michelis, Mark Singleton, Devesh Soneji, Lakshmi Subramanian and others, who, over the last three decades, have been committed to the investigation of lived and imagined histories of yoga and bharatanatyam. It is they who first drove a wedge between lived and imagined pasts, a dexterous separation between the two being critical to a clearer understanding of what we call Indian tradition and culture, and which, in turn, determines our sense of national identity. The reconstructive strategies applied to both these embodied practices were similar, if not exactly the same. Here, I focus on the history of dance pertaining to the reconstruction of bharatanatyam, and discuss the redefinition of Indian culture or tradition as having been an upper-caste/class prerogative. (For a detailed account of the history of modern yoga I highly recommend the works of De Michelis and Singleton.)

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## THE ORCHESTRATION AND DEFLECTION OF MORAL SHAME

The embodied practices of the songstress/dancer *devadasi*—a pleasure woman who was central to temple ritual—and the *hatha yogi*—whose practices focused precisely on the transmutation of sexual energy—were permitted the social sanction to freely traverse between, and simultaneously capitalise upon, and capitulate to, the anxieties of sexual desire and spiritual quest. Both the power and the resonant nuance of these embodied practices were rooted in this free, associative, fluid play between moral binaries that were considered mutually exclusive within the modern, civilised context. At the advent of India's modernisation, there were no defenders of this paradoxical, non-discriminative play between the sacred and the profane; however, the Hindu intelligentsia were all too willing to join hands with the admonishing coloniser and decry this sacred/profane mix as blasphemous under the revised vision of Hindu religiosity. Emerging through the readings of these social and political histories of yoga and dance were the fanciful imaginings of self-proclaimed reformists, who were eager to trade paradox in favour of reason, rationality, and most important, unambiguous morality. The reconstruction of an innate morality was integral to the construction of the modern Indian identity and was in direct response to the attack on Hindu customs by the Europeans, both missionaries and colonisers alike.

During the Victorian period, towards the second half of the 19th century, the fascination with, and the patronage of, the dancing girl by the British gave way to scorn and disdain for the natives and their immoral ways. This was prompted by the zealous attack on the belief systems of the Hindus, and was in accordance with the proscribed stance of the British as being economically, technologically and, more so, morally superior to the heathen natives. As part of the subjugating process, the Hindu was unequivocally shamed for harbouring the profane within the precincts of the sacred. At the end of the 19th century, Abbe Dubois wrote a notoriously colourful account of the *devadasi*.

Next to the Sacrificers, the most important persons about the temples are the dancing girls, who call themselves *Devadasis*, *servants or slaves of the gods*; but they are known to the public by the coarser name of strumpets... as soon as their public business is over,

they open their cells of infamy, and frequently convert the temple itself into a stew....A religion more shameful or indecent has never existed among a civilized people.<sup>1</sup>

Such shaming was directly received and felt more acutely by the educated elite or the upper-caste intelligentsia, who not only constituted the primary interface with the Europeans but were also eager to strike a fruitful equation with the 'progressive' and powerful coloniser. The dishonour was received by them at various levels: first, as a general disgrace for belonging to a culture that was being branded morally degenerate; then, due to feeling tongue-tied at not being able to reasonably defend the ambiguity, paradox and liminality that seemed so central to their embodied practices; and, on a more personal level, for patronising such 'immoral' practices. In my view, it was the last that hurt the most, because it implicated them personally and brought into question both the weakness of their moral character for patronising 'prostitutes', and their intellectual insufficiency in upholding the superstitious belief in the sacredness and auspiciousness of the temple dancers.

It became an imperative for the Brahmanical elite at that time in history to, first and foremost, distance themselves from the devadasi. As early as 1892, the 'Hindu Social Reforms Association' staged a grand stance of outraged modesty. It made an appeal to both the Governor Generals of India and Madras, and started a signature campaign against *nautch* and the patronising of the devadasi. The movement, though started in the Madras Presidency, also spread to north India and prompted the head of the Brahmo Samaj of India, Keshub Chandra Sen, to describe the nautch girl thus:

A hideous woman... with hell in her eyes. In her breast is a vast ocean of poison. Round her comely waist dwell the furies of hell. Her hands are brandishing unseen daggers ever ready to strike unwary or wilful victims that fall in her way. Her blandishments are India's ruin. Alas! her smile is India's death (Purkayastha, 2013: 100).

Scathing contempt and staged acrimony against the devadasi became the call of the day. At the beginning of the 20th century, India was, quite literally, caught in a passionate furore over the person of the

dancing girl, who had suddenly become the wretched reminder of a misguided religiosity that could no longer be tolerated. There was a virulent drive to stamp the devadasi not only out of existence, but even out of history. In 1917, Annie Besant, the prominent British socialist turned theosophist, who then became the president of not only the Theosophical Society but also the Indian National Congress, succeeded in doing just that with one sweeping statement. She decreed that,

There was a band of pure virgin devotees attached to the ancient Hindu temple. They used to preach religion like other religious teachers to the common people that resort[ed] to the temple for daily worship. In those days they were held in high esteem and were 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 and the origin of the devadasi class (Soneji, 2012: 122).

Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy, women's activist and the first woman legislator in British India, who engineered the abolition of the devadasi system, further cloistered the devadasi by comparing her with a Catholic nun. By doing so she struck an affinity with both Christian and Hindu piety, and clearly mandated chastity as the identifying characteristic of the devadasi. Reddy targeted the devadasi on the chastity issue, and, having lost, argued for the rightful ouster of the devadasi from both the Hindu temple and society.

### **DANCE AND THE MAKING OF A NATIONAL INDIAN IDENTITY**

Classical dance is often viewed as a peripheral activity, an extra-curricular, luxury activity for the elite. But it must be recognised that, historically, dance—mainly *bharatanatyam* or *sadir* as it was called till the beginning of the 20th century—has played a central role in defining post-colonial Indian identity, and particularly so in defining India as a spiritually superior culture. As we get to see at a later stage in post-independence Indian history, culture becomes, and to this day remains, India's USP (unique selling point), the

exotic dance being at the forefront. But before it is able to do that, India has to work internally to spiritualise and rid the dance of the stigma of immorality, and, simultaneously, externally project and re-interpret India more in keeping with the West's criteria of spirituality. The shift of the West's perception from fascination-cum-abhorrence to deference towards India and its position as the spiritual destination of the world pivots critically and singularly on the fixing of the devadasi's dance. In order to achieve that, India had to, with an iron fist, control, censor, suppress, erase and eradicate the morally slippery elements like the devadasi and the hatha yogi, as well as liberally conjure, over-embellish and profess the unambiguously moral and categorically spiritual version of Hinduism. The Theosophical Society (Madras) and the Brahma Samaj (Bengal) played a very important role in achieving this end, and making Hinduism acceptable and attractive to the West. Incidentally, both these organisations were invited to the famed Chicago World Religion Conference in 1893 to represent Hinduism. It was at this conference that the charismatic Vivekananda, a long-time associate of the Brahma Samaj, emerged as the dynamic and modern missionary of Hinduism. The assertion of innate piety and spirituality of the Hindu remains a leitmotif through the span of this period when India and Hinduism are being liberally re-imagined. In 1901, Keshubchandra Sen, the founder of the Brahma Samaj of India, declared that:

The subtle Hindu mind has always been distinguished for its spirituality. It penetrates the hard surface of dogmatic theology, and evolves and deals with the deeper realities of faith. It loves communion with the Spirit, and abhors matter [and thereby sensual pleasure] as an unreality...The idea of perceiving the Indwelling Spirit, far from being foreign, is eminently native to the primitive Hindu mind (De Michelis, 2004: 86).

The self-defining twin thrust of this statement that professes the matter-abhorring, spiritual sophistication of the 'primitive' Hindu mind is rather ingenious: in effect, it flawlessly tunes the Hindu mind, though technologically primitive but spiritually superior, into the puritanical religiosity of the Victorian coloniser that valorises self-denial of the body and its sensual desires.

De Michelis, in her ground-breaking work, *The History of Modern Yoga*, very succinctly writes about how the Brahma Samaj synthesised enlightenment, universalism, radical philanthropy, and the

esoteric creed of Unitarianism, and attempted to give them a Hindu form. From [Raja Rammohan] Roy through to [Keshubchandra] Sen and Vivekananda, the Brahmans would shape....New-Vedanta, and attempt to defuse the perceived threat of Christianity by absorbing numerous Christian themes and forms into it. These ideological developments were in good part based on the Neo-Vedantic appropriation of the Western esoteric motif of India's spiritual superiority....Neo-Hindu forms could easily be presented and interpreted as a moving away from the 'superstitions' and 'idolatry' of classical Hinduism towards a more promising (from a Christian missionary and colonial point of view) 'theism'.... [and] read as a turning away from 'heathenism' and a rapprochement toward Christianity in the Indian context. Given enough time, Hindu theists would hopefully turn into Christian converts. From the point of view of a budding Indian nationalism, on the other hand, these discourses could be seen as themes of a renascent Hinduism, a 'scientific religion' purified of its outdated traditions through eager acquisition and adaption of modern approaches to knowledge (ibid.: 70–71).

In 1874, Balwant Rao Trimbak started a society of music lovers, the Gayan Samaj, in Poona, to instil 'a taste for our musical science amongst the brethren of the upper class and to raise it up in their estimation' (Subramanian, 2012: 55). In Madras, Rukmini Devi Arundale, a prime protégé of Besant, took it upon herself to purify the outdated tradition of the devadasi, and by not 'throwing the baby out with the bath water', to extricate the dance from the corrupt environment and immoral influence of the devadasi, who was being rendered destitute at that point. She issued a clarion call to the nation to reinstate the lost glory of India by evoking its golden past. In 1935, she founded Kalakshetra, a school of dance and music on the grounds of the Theosophical Society, to realign the misguided art of the devadasi to its pure, authentic and original source, i.e., the *Natya Shastra*. Ironically, the Shastra was rediscovered by the

British in the early 19th century under their Asiatic Society project of studying ancient Indian texts in order to subjugate the native more effectively and convert them to Christianity more convincingly. The underlying project of the new school of dance was to impart the training to girls from good families as per the rules laid out in the Shastra, and replace the carnality of the *sringara bhava* (erotic sentiment) with the piety of bhakti (devotion). After the initial success of her new establishment, Rukmini Devi is said to have remarked,

they [the devadasis] used to think that...no one else would be able to dance. Now there are so many girls from good families who are excellent dancers....I am happy that on Vijayadashmi day I was able to prove that we could do without them (Sarada, 1985: 50).

Within this new, true-to-the-book bhakti aesthetic, which was closely informed by Western esotericism and Neo-Vedanta, the devadasi stood vanquished; chastity was victoriously instated as the hallmark of our dance, and presented to the world as the pious and pure expression of the ever-moral Hindus. Here, I must emphasise while I proceed with my argument that I am not finding fault with, or being disrespectful of, these reformers—not at all. For one, I would most likely have not become a dancer had Athai, i.e., Rukmini Devi as we addressed her at Kalakshetra of which I am a product, not intervened; but it is the larger premise that was presumed that we can no longer leave unquestioned.

The ramifications of this highly romantic, smooth manoeuvre by well meaning and earnest reformers, fully supported by the multiple idealisations of national unity, cultural purity and moralistic histories, are deep and abiding, and thus require reiteration. Clearly, the qualification of dance as an emblem of national pride, culture and identity is based on the following factors: (i) the organised and zealous obliteration of lived histories, and their simultaneous overwriting by the grand narratives of an imagined ideal past; (ii) the divorce of embodied practices from their living environments; (iii) the hostile extraditions of traditional embodied practitioners; (iv) the appropriation and bestowal of the practice to the care of girls from 'good' families; (v) the alignment of embodied practices to a randomly discovered singular 'original' text; (vi) the proposition

and construction of an 'unambiguously moral' dance, and; (vii) the categorical ridding of the embodied practice of any paradox, mystery or awe.

In effect, it was the 'declawing', taming and domesticating of our paradoxical practices that freely mixed sexuality with spirituality, which made them presentable and ready for exhibition on the world stage. The ambition and earnestness of the upper castes and the identify-with-the-aggressor reformers, eager to make India culturally and spiritually superior according to Victorian moral parameters, had walked us right into the psychic trap of colonisation for all time to come. The coloniser had physically left, but the devadasi and her paradox still remain expunged, and we continue to remain colonised in our heads because of the primitive/sophisticated game our protectors chose to play over a century-and-a-half ago.

Evident from this ingenious manoeuvre of historic falsifications and claims of authenticity is not just the devadasi in the garb of a sanyasi, as fancied by Besant, but in effect is India that steps into history attired in untarnished morality and eternal spirituality. The idea of India that we uphold today lies securely locked in the theatrics of that staged 'indecipherability', between the erasure of the lived history of sadir and the imaginings of the mythical purity of bharatanatyam. Although the cultural image that India chooses to present to the world maybe one of a seamless continuum that flows eternally from antiquity unto the present, there is nothing simple, natural or, for that matter, seamless about it. The feigned effortlessness of this continuum is a highly self-conscious construct, arbitrarily crafted by the upper castes, heavy-handedly censored as a result of many a rupture, adjustment and self-correction, the moral palate and norms of the Victorian coloniser, and, later, the culture-consuming West.

## **CULTURE AND HEGEMONY**

Today, we may have to stop to examine if our definition of culture or tradition may well be our albatross—in fact, I fear that we are being trapped in it. We may be well advised to consider the smooth crafting and the simultaneous camouflaging of the historical twist with which the shame of the devadasi was turned into Indian glory, where a falsification of history was read as cultural authenticity—a grand trick that worked at the time. However, I locate the trap very

squarely in the smooth efficacy of this tricky twist; a twist within which lies locked the historically momentous point when India is able to assume a morally stable ground to build its new cultural and nationalistic identity.

I use the word lock here most deliberately, because it is a binary lock that not only effortlessly morphs and renders indecipherable this smooth manoeuvre, but also invests it with a sentimentality that automatically deflects attention from it. The indecipherability with which un-lived histories suddenly became India's eternal 'histories' was historically momentous: for one, it harboured within it a decision to go ahistorical, and to let the hegemony of text take over and overrule lived histories that spanned centuries as if these histories were an aberration, a mistake, an accident. But what is more marvellous is to see how easy it was for those at the helm of affairs to presume that it was absolutely acceptable to dismiss history, to deny it validity, to not acknowledge and, thus, not even feel accountable for it. Not being accountable for what we decree as invalid history has become a matter of national honour. Any attempt to refer to or assert the validity of 'invalid' history and all that it stands for runs the delicate risk of hurting the sentiments of traditionalists; it may be considered anti-traditional, anti-Hindu or, in today's terms, even anti-national. It is precisely the delicacy of such historically fragile sentiments that binds the binary lock mentioned.

Indian culture and tradition, as we know and advertise it today, thus has nothing to do with our lived past but is singularly invested in upholding, and focused upon policing, this binary lock. Our cultural education actually arms us with ways to continuously deflect the critical examination of this lock, making historical and intellectual investigation anti-nationalistic. The cultural and educational programmes that we are so anxious for our children to engage with are designed to further precipitate the cultural myopia which eclipses this tricky twist. Our faculty of smoothness, with which we effortlessly spout truisms and fluidly mingle history with myth, has become our trap. And we dance, sing, practice yoga, preach, show off and trade our cultural uniqueness and spiritual superiority from, and within, this trap.

The coloniser most effectively used the ploy of morality to subjugate us and we, in turn, willingly and eagerly, entered into their

game and participated in our loss of power. We had been shamed and rejected on the basis of a Christian morality that could not tolerate paradox, mystery or awe. The recourse our reformers took was not to challenge, ignore or see through the underlying colonising ploy—the lure of modernity, on the one hand, and, on the other, a simultaneous rejection on the grounds of their Christian morality. Instead, these reformers chose to eagerly embrace this Christian morality and proclaimed it as our original pan-Indian morality. In doing so, we have internalised the morality of the coloniser into our psyches for all time to come. We chose—yes, chose—to lose face within the moral parameters of the coloniser, and therefore it is exactly within the same parameters that it must be reclaimed. This indecipherable shift from rejection to acceptance, this loss of face to its reclaim, and the turning of shame into pride then takes place on the pivot of crafted morality—a foreign morality as defined and fixed by the puritanical coloniser and coopted as authentic selfhood by upper-caste elite Hindus. This makes our morality, our spiritually superior culture and our Neo-Hinduism essentially and fundamentally Christian-pleasing. Control, morality and culture all thus freely feed into each other within the post-colonial Indian context, making our revised and moralised culture and hegemony interchangeable. Indian culture, as we know and advertise it today, is hegemonic—in fact, doubly hegemonic—as inscribed into it is the hegemony of upper-caste Brahmins as well as Christian colonisers.

### **CULTURE AND CASTE**

This highly self-conscious definition of tradition and culture that we entertain in India has so far been very exclusive and standoffishly dismissive of many other realities and pluralities. For instance, it has been dismissive of voices that speak for the lived histories of the devadasi and challenges the cleansing of tradition or its alignment to ‘original’ texts. These voices have been shrugged off by many a modern practitioner, too, such as the cultural aficionados, according to whom the ouster of the devadasi was inevitable, and the only, and perhaps the best, choice available to Indians at the time. However, the argument is not necessarily over the ousting of the devadasi, but the double play of falsification/authentication that was adapted and has, henceforth, become ensconced in the psyche of the nation for

time to come. A decision that is glaringly fraudulent, outrageously duplicitous, and shamelessly opportunistic from the unprivileged end of the devadasi appears highly legitimate, unanimously pragmatic, gloriously authentic, and truly emblematic of an eternally pure past from the idealist perspective of the upper caste. So far, the upper caste/class version of India has been privileged in post-independence India.

Anybody who has tried to raise the caste issue with reference to culture has been scoffed at, or at best humoured, as being a misguided radical. Changes are in the process, however. With the recent, unfortunate suicide of Rohith Vemula or the Kanhaiya Kumar-led resistance at JNU, along with the emergence of the informed and insightful voices of Dalit writers such as Kancha Ilaiah and Braj Ranjan Mani, the subaltern has come alive. It now has multiple voices—as opposed to the lone voice of Ambedkar in the past—that are astute and informed, and carry within themselves the power of having lived and known first-hand the material reality of subaltern India which fits nowhere within the pan-Indian design, the re-visions and representations of India.

These voices force the caste question, and have placed it squarely on the table. In *Debrahmanising History*, Mani (2013) summarises this scenario rather succinctly, and from an even-closer-to-the-ground perspective. I choose to quote him at length:

...it was the European Indologists who first constructed the myth of the splendour of the ancient Aryans, which was re-echoed and relayed with gusts in the works of elite Indian scholars.... Orientalism vis-à-vis India was oriented and favourably included towards the indigenous elites because in its framework, Indian culture was to be studied in the linguistic and religious aspects of Aryan-Brahmanism, detached from the reality of actual social evolution....

In Orientalist scholarship there was no effort to corroborate the Shastras with the non-Brahmanical, Buddhist and shamanic texts, more empirical historical sources and archaeology. There was no effort to juxtapose the self-serving Brahmanical texts to the vastly different social and cultural reality of India's past as encapsulated

in alternative cultural and material sources. In other words, the Orientalist construction of ancient India was semi-historical at best. It was the same Orientalist scholarship which was later made the basis of the discovery of India's past by the Indian elites in the name of nationalism.

It was in the process of the imaginative construction of India's past that a new type of Hinduism, erected on the edifice of the Brahmanical texts and interpretation, and nurtured by colonial policies and polity came into existence. The Brahmans have always tried to monopolise knowledge; they have always controlled information, and have never hesitated to use and manipulate information to suit their interests. It was they who had provided selective information to the British on indigenous tradition and institutions on an unprecedented scale, at an all-India level, particularly in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. This gradually generated the consciousness and dynamics for a new religion 'the likes which India had perhaps never known before'.

The searing clarity of these perspectives in the first-person singular, informed voice of an educated Dalit immediately and automatically defrocks the Brahmanical construct. An 'educated Dalit' bears reiteration because it is an oxymoron upon which the Brahmanical construct stands firmly. So, when an educated and informed Dalit speaks out, her voice does not require any confirmation or qualification; it has the directness and weight of lived life that is totally untouched by, and completely crushed by, a mere idea.

### **THE PLOY OF POLARISATIONS**

This binary lock of falsification/authentication that is passed on as tradition-unto-antiquity has a life and regeneration mechanism of its own. It is kept alive by the reinvention of polarisations after regular intervals in historical time. Over the last century, there have been many polarising debates that have gripped bharatnatyam. The early decades of the 20th century were caught in the virulent debate over the chastity issue—whether the devadasi was meant to be strumpet or sanyasi. In the 1950s, this debate grew more abstract and refined, and entered the more sophisticated realms of literature to rage over

the bhakti versus sringara question. The debate on whether the import of the lyrics accompanying the dance was originally meant to be amorous and erotic, or devotional, renewed the commitment of most reformed dancers to be authentically pious in their dance and song. The 1970s ushered in the controversy of tradition versus modernity, when some dancers desperately tried to make their classical dance more socially relevant by performances on issues such as bride burning, while the other set became even more focused on the purity of religious intent. This culminated in the battle for the preservation of the purity of the style, and to protect it from dilution and corruption by untrained and self-styled modern dancers.

Over the last couple of decades, the dark cloud of growing disinterest in the classical arts has begun to loom large. A silent lament has arisen in the culturally anxious middle classes over the erosion of Indian values they so hope to foster in their children through the Sunday schools of classical dance. And, now, staring us in the face is the tidal wave of nationalism versus anti-nationalism. The decibel level of each debate is nothing less than shrill and it succeeds in eclipsing the mind and thinking processes of an entire generation. The acute polarisation of such debates forces us to take sides and to hold opinions, but what it actually does is to once again deflect attention from that binary lock, thus allowing the indecipherability of the 'tricky shift' that passes as tradition to remain undetected and, hence, indecipherable for one more generation.

I have maintained for a while now that we have been had! As an embodied practitioner of these materialist practices of yoga and bharatanatyam, my primary commitment is to the phenomenology of this practice; and my secondary commitment is to resist being caught in the flux of the fashionable polarities of the time. And I might hastily add that resisting polarities does not require grit and resolve, but information and education in order to be able to see through them. The materiality that I am talking about does not pertain to phenomenon alone, but also to lived time and history, i. e., a historical fact or memory, too, is material that may be incorporated into the material calibrations of an embodied practice. Embodied practice is not an idea or some divine gift; it is intrinsically tied to the sheer materiality of the body as well as lived history, memory and the physical transmission of this practice over time.

When recently I shared my views about resisting polarisations, a well meaning and culturally anxious friend lamented once more the dwindling audiences and the younger generation's lack of interest in our culture and classical dance. My answer to such anxieties is that dance is a highly exclusive and individualistic enterprise; it is rather special in that it is not for all and sundry. Good dancers are, and will remain, very few. Even if we had a handful of beautiful dancers in the country that I could periodically watch to drench myself in nuance and *rasa*—that would be enough for me. In fact, I dearly long for that. But a moving or soul-stirring dance performance has become a rarity today. A glance at *Narthaki*, the directory of dancers worldwide, reveals that there are far more dancers today than we have ever had; there is an enormous population of classical Indian dancers all over the globe, *bharatanatyam* being in the rising majority. Many of them are technically more able than previous generations, augmenting their training with modern fitness routines and training. And yet, Indian dance has never been more unwatchable than today. If audiences do not watch dance today it is not because of the indifference to culture or tradition; it is because dance has become hollow, vapid, devoid of insight and resonance, harping on an idea that becomes more empty and regressive with every passing generation.

Dancing an idea is not the point of dance; and although it became fashionable to do just that for a period of time, it is outdated and uninteresting today. It is not an accident that dance today feels as though it is spiritually and poetically bankrupt, the direct outcome of basing an embodied practice on a concocted and opportunistic idea that is historically false and, by extension, materially unyielding. If dancing does not yield *rasa* anymore—which it does not—it is because the idea has been wrung dry; it has run its course and stopped yielding all the pseudo-*rasa* that it possibly could at some point. We must learn that culture cannot be reflexive and exhibitionistic at the same time; what we have lost is reflexivity—the possibility of looking inward and calibrating its essence or *rasa*-yielding materiality. We have not so much lost it as forsaken it with much nationalistic aplomb because of cultural opportunism. Till such time that we force critical attention upon the binary lock that passes for tradition and not engage with the sheer

materiality of the body, we will continue to run the risk of even more desperately (if not violently) clinging to the unyielding truisms that abound in our ideas of culture, tradition and the nation.



#### NOTE

1. See Frederique (1985: 3–4). Cited from the accounts of J. A. Dubois, *Description of the Character, Manners and Customs of the People of India*. Originally published in 1817.

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