

# **CONTEMPORARY DANCE IN INDIA TODAY**

## **A SURVEY**

**Annette Leday**

**With the support of the Centre National de la Danse, Paris**  
*(Aide à la recherche et au patrimoine en danse)*



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**Anita Ratnam** (Chennai): *"In India the word 'contemporary' applies to anyone who wants to move away from their guru or from the tradition they have learned, to experiment and explore."*

**Mandeep Raikhy** (Delhi): *"We have rejected the term 'contemporary' and we are still looking for an alternative term."*

**Vikram Iyengar** (Kolkata): *"I think the various layers of what constitutes 'contemporary' in Indian dance have not yet been defined."*



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## PREFACE

After a decade immersed in the *Kathakali* of Kerala, I engaged in a dynamic of contemporary choreography inspired by this great performing tradition. From the end of the 1980s, my dance company created a dozen productions that involved dancers, musicians and visual artistes from India and France. In addition to our performances in Europe, we had the privilege of visiting many parts of the Indian subcontinent during several tours organised by the Alliance Française network. It gave me the opportunity to meet many artistes and to grasp local circumstances.

Busy with my own studies and creative journey, I have only recently started looking into the present realities of the stagecrafts in India. At first, I had considered Indian artistic life through the classical forms and the very conservative social milieu that supported them. Little by little I realised that, however dominant, they were only a part of the cultural diversity of the country. I also realised that the French public had only been in contact with those traditional forms of theatre and dance. Its point of view was often blurred or 'fascinated' by the mystic aura attributed to Indian artistes, supposedly ever-connected to the legendary spirituality of the country. This image seemed partial and I realised that it often fostered identity and aesthetic stagnation. I often wondered about this phenomenon and that led me to inquire into today's reality in order to offer a different and demystified approach.

In 2010 I started researching contemporary theatre in India, almost unknown in France. I drew on the many encounters I had during festivals and at theatre schools. In charge of the Indian committee of the Paris-based Maison Antoine Vitez, I initiated the translation into French of several plays written by young playwrights and by several established figures. Some of these were read publicly as part of the events, **India Scene 1** (2015) and **India Scene 2** (2016) at **Arta**<sup>1</sup> in Paris. I also took part in the editing of a special issue of the **Théâtre Public** magazine (2016) dedicated to contemporary performing arts in India. Amongst other things, I wrote a brief article on the state of contemporary dance in India. Once that was published, I decided to conduct a fuller study of the subject whose results are presented in the present survey.

*Mithuna*, one of our company's productions was premiered in New Delhi in 2015 as part of the **IGNITE! Contemporary Dance Festival**. On this occasion, I met with choreographers and dancers from different regions of India and attended their performances. It was also a chance to hear interesting discussions during the symposium organised by the festival. This allowed me to draw the first lines of a dance geography of the subcontinent.

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<sup>1</sup> Association de recherche des traditions de l'acteur

Thanks to CN D<sup>2</sup> research support, I travelled to India in 2017 and 2018. I visited Delhi, Imphal, Chennai (Madras), Ahmedabad, Bangalore, Trivandrum, Kolkata (Calcutta) and Mumbai (Bombay), where I met the most important figures of the present trends of choreographic creation. Our discussions helped me consolidate the categories that constitute the structure of the document and address the specific characteristics and problems of dance today in India. To illustrate each of those categories I have transcribed the most relevant passages of our conversations.

The aim of this study is to give a broad vision of the landscape of dance in its most innovative aspects. However, the huge size of the country and of its population will result in inevitable shortcomings.

I hope this study will help promote a better knowledge of a world I have had the pleasure of visiting for several decades. Indian dancers and choreographers have embarked upon creative processes that must be recognised in their diversity. They are open to dialogue and to encounters that should be conducted in a spirit of mutual understanding and respect. Deep and long-term exchanges should seek to promote new vocabularies 'of today' which are independent from Western artistic criteria.

A video made in collaboration with Cyrille Larrieu illustrates this study and gives direct voice to the creators involved. Excerpts of interviews alternate with images of work and teaching as well as extracts of their creations. The film takes us to emblematic places in the huge subcontinent where movement and dance are questioned. We discover some of the faces engaged in a renewal of the traditions and artistes of the new generation open to the world and to its techniques. We meet creators concerned with engaging in an evolving Indian society of which they are special witnesses and privileged actors through their bodies, their practices and their exchanges.

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<sup>2</sup> Centre national de la danse in Paris

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*My thanks, finally, to all the choreographers and dancers who participated in this survey.*

### **Annette Leday**

For many years, choreographer, director and translator Annette Leday has been developing an original approach to contemporary inter-cultural creation based on the traditions of dance and theatre in India and France. She went to India in 1978 to study *Kathakali* dance-theatre in Kerala at the Sadanam and Kalamandalam institutions. She took part in the performances of the two troupes in India and abroad. A graduate of the Paris Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilisations, she is fluent in Malayalam. Since 1989, she has directed the Annette Leday/Keli company for Indian and Western dancers, actors, musicians and visual artists.

As part of the India Committee of the Maison Antoine Vitez in Paris, she recently initiated and participated in the French translation of seven contemporary Indian plays.

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### **Cyrille Larrieu**

Cyrille Larrieu is a French director, cameraman and globe-trotter. After his studies in the humanities (history and ethnology) at Paris University, Cyrille Larrieu went to India in order to further his research field and to study filmmaking at the Indian National Film Institute, the FTII.

He spent six years in the subcontinent making a number of documentary and fictional films, before returning to France in 2013.

Cyrille Larrieu then realised several feature documentaries for television in Siberia, Quebec, Peru and Egypt.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

An integral part of the social, cultural and ritual practices since time immemorial, dance in India presents the most varied forms. It sometimes blends with the divine, mixes with theatre practices, with politics, spreads in the streets of towns and villages, takes place in temple enclosures, in large luxury hotels and in more or less sophisticated urban proscenium theatres.

Dance in India today is caught between the injunction to refer to the omnipotent domain of the 'classicism' of endogenous performing traditions and the recurring issue of links with exogenous 'modernist' influences from the West. The two poles are often referred to in attempts to define the territory of current dance creations. Some dance-makers are increasingly annoyed by these questions, which many consider irrelevant. The younger artistes claim their independence and their emerging stylistic identities. We will see what these issues are and how they create an original situation of dance in this immense country where new generations of dancers and choreographers representative of the richness and diversity of today's India shake the established codes.

When I started this study I thought I would focus on the most radical choreographers, the most contemporary in Western terms, the ones who 'look like us'. Little by little I felt this could not account for the real situation. India imposes a broader look. We have a tendency in France to welcome only the exotic side of Indian dance; when we do open to contemporary dance, we only retain that which corresponds to our Western aesthetic tastes. There is a whole area in-between, a creative field that has been engaged for many years and is trying to define itself. I soon wondered whether to integrate innovations in the classical and Bollywood dances, which are in fact the most well-known references of Indian dance. In the end, it seemed impossible to leave them aside.

There is much debate in India concerning terms for non-traditional dance, with a range of proposals such as *creative and experimental dance*, *indo-contemporary*, *indo-modern*, *neo-bharatam*, *classical based modern-ish dance*, *movement-based performance*, etc.

For convenience I will use the term 'contemporary' to refer to all forms of non-traditional dance, thus in a rather broader sense than its current acceptance in Western countries.

## 2. SOME HISTORICAL MARKERS

### a) *Mystifications*

The history of dance in India has long been linked to religious practices in villages and temples and to the entertainment of princes in their palaces. The techniques of those times were based on oral traditions passed from teacher to disciple. Dance belonged to well-defined spheres established in local traditions for generations. At the beginning of the twentieth century during the struggles for Independence, the need arose to rethink artistic forms as areas of affirmation of a strong national identity, of a reviving nationalism. In the big cities, dance gradually moved from princely salons and temple courtyards to Western-type stages. In the states with strong dance traditions, almost abandoned forms were nurtured in newly-created institutions such as the **Viswa Bharati University** founded by the poet Tagore in **Shantiniketan** in Bengal (1919), the **Kalamandalam** founded by the poet Vallathol in Kerala (1930), **Kalakshetra** founded by Rukmini Devi Arundale in Madras (1936). Eventually, the authorities of the **Sangeet Natak Akademi** (SNA), the national academy for music, dance and theatre established in 1952, acknowledged an official list of eight “classical” styles: *Bharatanatyam* of Tamil Nadu, *Kathak* of North and West India, *Kathakali* and *Mohiniyattam* of Kerala, *Kuchipudi* of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, *Odissi* of Odisha, the *Sattriya* of Assam and *Manipuri* of Manipur.

The common basis of these different styles is their roots in the mythological and religious narratives of the Indian sacred texts such as the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*, the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavat-Gita* and their more or less direct links to the *Nāṭya Śāstra*<sup>3</sup> treatise. Another striking feature is the importance given to costumes, which embody precise aesthetic codes. Each style has its own costumes, specific ornaments and make-up. Through these costumes, each style is immediately recognisable. Bells around the ankles of dancers are part of these conventions and are found in virtually all traditional dance forms.

In 1922, during a visit to India, Anna Pavlova, who became a partner of Indian dancer Uday Shankar when she returned to London, lamented, “*There is no trace of India’s famous dances... All we could see were excerpts from Nautch*<sup>4</sup>. *The temple dances were just a memory.*” (The Mohan Khokar Dance Collection).

In 1926 Ted Shawn and Ruth StDenis travelled to India for five months: “*At that time, because of the long anti-Nautch campaign of the English and the Indians who were trying to secure their favours, there was not much to see in dance.*” Letter from Ted Shawn to Mohan Khokar of April 11, 1961 (The Mohan Khokar Dance Collection).

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<sup>3</sup> *Nāṭya Śāstra*: sanskrit treatise on performing arts. From sanskrit *nāṭya*: drama, and *śāstra*: treatise .

<sup>4</sup> *Nautch* was the name given to young girls dancing in the princely palaces of Northern India. The word was sometimes used to speak of the *Devadasis* who danced 'for the Gods' inside the temples.

Often neglected or forbidden, sometimes almost forgotten during the colonial period, the great dance styles that are now often defined as 'millennial' and 'immutable', were in fact built or rebuilt at the beginning of the twentieth century during the period of socio-political upheavals linked to the movements for Independence. With the creation of cultural institutions in the 1930s, the old forms were enriched and structured according to complex codifications. As India gained Independence in 1947, the main dance styles were well established by these institutions. It was sometimes by questionable methods of 'purification' that they were reshaped to match the moral criteria of emerging cultural elites. One of the most striking examples of this purification is the fate reserved to the Devadasis<sup>5</sup> and their art:

**Rukmini Devi**, founder of Kalakshetra (Madras): "*It is a matter of passing on to young people the true spirit of art, free of its vulgarity and mercantilism.*"

It was in fact a matter of eliminating the Devadasis, an entire ancestral community of temple dancers. Their form of *Sadir* dance was appropriated to be 'sanitised' and transformed into a 'classical' style, the *Bharatanatyam* long reserved to the highest ruling castes. Devotion was to replace the erotic spirituality of dance. Stories surrounding this disappearance were set aside and the mytho-story of flamboyant *Bharatanatyam* erased for a long time any trace of the former *Sadir* dancers who were relegated to the rank of prostitutes and banned from performing. It is only in recent decades that scholars<sup>6</sup> have uncovered this formidable deception around this revisionist history. In India itself, and still very recently, controversy rages around these updates.

Similar mystification processes are found for other forms. One example of this is the Sanskrit *Kutiyattam* dance-theatre, once contained within the temple's walls and reserved for the *Chakyar* caste. This theatre is sometimes considered unchanged for centuries. However, in 1965 *Kutiyattam* came out of the temple, when the master Painkulam Rama Chakyar (1904-1980) was invited to teach at the **Kerala Kalamandalam** institution. From the elements still practiced by the *Chakyars*, the master elaborated the magnificent style we can admire today. The same is true of the *Nangyar Kuttu*, the female counterpart of the *Kutiyattam* form. In the 1980s there were only a handful of practitioners. It is thanks to American researchers such as Diane Daugherty that interest around the *Nangyars* was rekindled. Having accompanied her I could see that only a few steps and some gestures remained in the memory of these old *Nangyar* women. Since then, a form has been built drawing from these remaining elements and *Kutiyattam* techniques. Today a considerable number of young women study and perform *Nangyar Kuttu* and *Kutiyattam*. The restrictions of castes have vanished and in 2001, UNESCO inscribed these forms as part of the intangible heritage of humanity. Discreetly but regularly, new pieces from the Sanskrit repertoire are put together by young generations of artistes totally dedicated to their art despite the accelerating changes in the world around them.

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<sup>5</sup> *Devadasis*: *deva*, 'divinity', *dāsīs*, 'servants', 'Gods' servants'.

<sup>6</sup> Saskia Kersenboom, "*Nityasumaṅgalī: Devadasi Tradition in South India*" Motilal Banarsidass, 1987 - 226 pages

Davesh Soneji, "*Unfinished Gestures. Devadāsīs, Memory, and Modernity in South India*", Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2012, 313 p.

Tiziana Leucci, "*Davesh Soneji, Unfinished Gestures. Devadāsīs, Memory, and Modernity in South India*", Clio. Femmes, Genre, Histoire.

Developed around the 17th century, *Kathakali*, one of India's most famous dance-theatres, has itself benefited from many transformations. Shri Pattikkamthodi Ravunni Menon (1880-1948), tireless researcher and great pedagogue in charge of teaching *Kathakali* from the creation of **Kerala Kalamandalam** in 1930, played an essential role in the evolution of the form. It is he who established the technical and choreographic rules of the *Kalluvazhi* style and played a crucial role in the introduction of a systematic practice of the *navarasas*<sup>7</sup>, which considerably enriched the expressive palette of the dancers, until then limited to three or four emotions. Ravunni Menon trained a whole generation of demanding masters who continued his work until their recent demise. Formerly presented on the occasion of religious feasts in the rural context of Kerala, *Kathakali* has become more urbanised over time and continues to undergo many transformations.

Thus even the most ancestral forms evolve and obey the injunctions of a modernity often in contrast with former practices. It is particularly interesting to note that in its 2019 issue of *Republic Day Special*, *Outlook*<sup>8</sup> magazine devoted several feature articles to the history of Indian dance, and more specifically to the questions posed by the policies carried out since the beginning of the 20th century.

### ***b) The pioneers of modern dance***

In parallel with the reconstruction movements of the classical styles, from the 1920s to 1930s some Indian dancers proposed new modernist forms, some of which influenced Western choreographers, thus contributing to the development of modern Western dance.

#### ***Uday Shankar*** (1900 – 1977)



Uday Shankar is the most famous pioneer of modern dance in India. Upon meeting the dancer Anna Pavlova in London, he strayed from his art studies and created his own style. Apparently not having had any formal classical training, he drew his inspiration from Indian traditional, folkloric and tribal dance techniques as well as Western theatre techniques. His unorthodox 'oriental dances' travelled the world in the 1920s and 1930s.

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<sup>7</sup> navarasas: the nine basic emotional expressions.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.outlookindia.com/magazine/issue/1160>

### **Ram Gopal (1911-2003)**



Following Uday Shankar, Ram Gopal defended a modernistic vision of Indian dance by combining elements of Indian styles and Western ballet in his choreographies. Curious about all styles, he learned *Kathakali*, *Bharatanatyam*, *Kathak* and *Manipuri* dance with the best masters of the time. Unlike Uday Shankar, he remained faithful to initial forms. He thus presented some key extracts of the classical repertoires, making them his, using more personalised costumes and musics. He travelled the world with his company or solo. During his journeys in the 1950s and 1960s, he met several French female dancers and integrated them in his works.

### **Mrinalini Sarabhai (1918-2016)**



Born in Kerala, Mrinalini Sarabhai lived in Ahmedabad where she founded the **Darpana** institution now run by her daughter Mallika Sarabhai. While remaining faithful to the classical *Bharatanatyam*, Mrinalini's style opened up to several other forms of dance. She also trained in *Kathakali*. Visionary, she composed a number of pieces dealing with social issues relating to women's rights, ecology and human rights in general.

### **Chandralekha (1928-2006)**

The most emblematic figure of a radical questioning of the so-called classical canons of *Bharatanatyam* was Chandralekha in Madras. Trained by Smt Balasaraswati and Ellappa Mudaliar, the greatest masters of the time, she disappeared from the traditional stage for nearly twenty years after a fine career as a soloist. In the 1970s, she returned to choreography, challenging the religiosity and dogmas imposed by the high Brahmin castes. Wanting to dust off the form and rejecting the decorative aspects of *Bharatanatyam*, she composed choreographies based on various techniques such as *Kalarippayat*, the martial art of Kerala, and yoga. A strong feminist, she invoked the ancient Devadasis and the spiritual eroticisation of bodies inspired by tantrism. Her choreographies asserted the power and sexuality of women through explicit and daring postures - to the great displeasure of purists.



**Sunil Kothari** writes: "Chandra's analysis of certain negative features against which she asked us to guard were: spectacular mindlessness, archaic social values, faked religiosity, idealisation leading to mortification of the form, numbing sentimentality, literalism, verbalism, dependence on *sahitya*, mystification and dollification, perpetuation of anti-women values, quantitativensness, easy assimilation into government designs for propagating a false image of India, cynicism within the solo dance situation and its senseless competitiveness." Samabhavana: Celebrating New Directions in Indian Dance, March 14, 2018<sup>9</sup>.

### ***Kumudini Lakhya*** (1930-)



Kumudini Lakhya became a professional dancer at the age of 18 and joined Ram Gopal's company in London. She then studied *Kathak* with the great masters of the period from whom she said she received "a format, a technique, a grammar" to reproduce. It is a questioning of this transmission and of the omnipresence of mythological themes that committed her to "descend on earth" and lead a path towards creativity. She relied on the rhythmic and percussive qualities of *Kathak* to develop an abstract approach to the form, claiming an autonomy of the dance away from any narrative. Her innovations made her a rebel that the very closed world of *Kathak* still finds difficult to accept.

### ***Astad Deboo*** (1947-)



Astad Deboo, who had been trained in *Kathak* from childhood, discovered modern American dance in 1967 while attending a performance of the Murray Louis Dance Company in Bombay. In 1969, he embarked 3rd class on a cargo ship with his backpack. Arriving in the Gulf he hitchhiked for more than two months to reach Europe. He then spent about ten years between London and the United States where he studied the Martha Graham technique. He continued traveling for more than seven years all over the world, including Japan where he discovered *Buto*. Returning to India in 1977, he studied *Kathakali* with a Kerala master. Considered in India as an icon of modern dance, Deboo has just received the *Yagnaraman Living Legend Award* from **Sri Krishna Gana Sabha** of Chennai for the ensemble of his work - remarkable recognition from one of the most conservative *Sabhas*<sup>10</sup> of India's most conservative city.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.narthaki.com/info/gtsk/gtsk177.html>

<sup>10</sup> *Sabha* : cultural organisation promoting traditional performing art forms.

### 3. SOME GEOGRAPHIC MARKERS

India is a huge country made up of 29 states. There are 31 official languages and nearly 900 regional, local or tribal languages still spoken. Federated by Delhi's central government, each state has its own elected government.

The Republic of India has become or will soon become the most populated country in the world with about 1,350,000,000 inhabitants. In this multitude, the emerging territories of new dance are mainly distributed in the large urban centres.

It is in the heart of these big cities that I visited dancers, choreographers and dance critics. There were also unexpected discoveries in some more remote parts of the country.

#### *DELHI*

Capital city of India.

This megalopolis is the seat of the Central Government of India and its Parliament. It is the centre of political power of India. It has a population of more than 22 million. A large number of different languages are spoken, with *Hindi* and *English* as the main ones. The most influential government cultural institutions can be found in Delhi: the **Sangeet Natak Akademi** (SNA), national academy for music, dance and theatre founded in 1952, the **National School of Drama** founded by the SNA in 1959, the **Indian Council for Cultural Relations** (ICCR), an organism founded in 1950, promoting international cultural exchanges. All international missions have their seat in Delhi and their cultural centres play an important role for dance.

In addition to the teaching of the 'classical' forms, no less than 500 courses of 'contemporary' styles from hip hop to Bollywood, from ballet to salsa, from zumba to marriage choreographies can be found in Delhi.

In Delhi, I will interview Mandeep Raikhy, Virkein Dhar, Ranjana Dave, Deepak Kurki Shivaswamy, Navtej Johar, Maya Krishna Rao, Anita Cherian, Ashish Khokar.

#### *IMPHAL*

Capital city of the State of Manipur. Official languages: *Meitei*, *Manipuri* and other *Tibetan-Burmese* languages.

Manipur became a fully-fledged state of the Indian Union in 1972 but was never really resolved to this 'annexation'. The political and social chaos of the region - despite the softness of its landscapes - often influences the leading choreographer of the region whom we will meet several times in this text. Manipur has maintained an intense artistic life often linked to local religious festivals. *Manipuri* dance, *Thang Ta* martial art and drum group dances are all spectacular techniques of great stylistic richness.

In Imphal there are important institutions that maintain and teach these disciplines: **Jawaharlal Nehru Dance Academy**, **Government Dance College** for all traditional dance styles, **Huyen Lanlong Manipur Thang Ta Cultural Association**, Irilbung for martial arts and ancient folk dances. There is also the **Chorus Repertory Theatre**, directed by the famous director Ratan Thiyam whose works have toured the world.

In Imphal, I will meet Surjit (Bonbon) Nongmeikapam, Angom Tombi Meitei.

## **CHENNAI**

Capital city of the State of Tamil Nadu. Official language: *Tamil*.

Considered the cradle of Dravidian<sup>11</sup> culture, Chennai (formerly Madras) distinguishes itself by its strong attachment to *carnatic*<sup>12</sup> traditions. Each year the city hosts the famous December Season, where the greatest talents of *carnatic*<sup>13</sup> and sometimes *hindustani*<sup>14</sup> music and dance from all over India are performed with a predominance of the local *Bharatanatyam* style. The many *sabhas* (local cultural associations) compete in the programming, and halls are often full when the most celebrated performers perform there. **Kalakshetra**, founded in 1936, is the birthplace of the revived *Bharatanatyam*.

In Chennai, I will meet Ranvir Shah, Meera Krishnan, Sadanand Menon and the dancers and choreographers Anita Ratnam, Padmini Chettur, Preethi Athreya, Anoushka Kurien.

## **AHMEDABAD**

Capital city of the State of Gujarat. Official language: *Gujarati*.

Ahmedabad distinguishes itself by the historical aura of the emblematic figure Mahatma Gandhi, the iconic leader of the movements for independence originating in this city. In his ashram of Sabarmati, today a museum, one can feel the simplicity and frugality of those past times. Another famous Gujarati is the current Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi, former Chief Minister of the state. In Ahmedabad two key institutions symbolise the journey from classicism to a questioning of traditions: the **Kadamb** and **Darpana** institutions.

In Ahmedabad, I will meet Kumudini Lakhya and Mallika Sarabhai, the founders of these institutions.

## **BANGALORE**

Capital city of the State of Karnataka. Official language: *Kannada*.

Formerly a haven of freshness and calm enjoyed by the elites of southern India, the capital of Karnataka has become one of the most modern and polluted cities in the country. Often described as India's *Silicon Valley*, the city is a centre of advanced technologies. The middle classes enjoy a high standard of living. With the city's economic progress, the population has tripled in 30 years. Transportation has become a nightmare and residents are reluctant to move about beyond professional requirements. However, there remains a young and dynamic elite curious of novelties and culture.

In Bangalore, I will meet Jayachandran Pallazhy, Hemabharaty Palani, Madhuri Upadhyaya.

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<sup>11</sup> From the sanskrit word "*drâvida*", which designs the people living in the south part of India.

<sup>12</sup> Carnatic: related to the Southern regions close to the state of Karnataka.

<sup>13</sup> Carnatic music: musical style of South India

<sup>14</sup> Hindoustani music: musical style of North India



## **TRIVANDRUM**

Capital city of the State of Kerala. Official language: *Malayalam*.

The state of Kerala at the south-Western tip of India occupies a special position in the country, enjoying a unique tropical climate that makes it one of the greenest and most humid states. Unfortunately, this unique situation led to the catastrophic floods in 2018 and 2019, from which the state is having trouble recovering. The density of the population and the level of education are the highest in the country. In this region an impressive number of theatrical and dance forms survive, both folkloric or ritual as well as scholarly and extremely elaborate. Institutions such as the **Kerala Kalamandalam**, **Gandhi Seva Sadanam**, **Margi** and **Kottaikal Natya Sangham** are keeping these arts alive. In this very traditionalist context it is not easy to break new ground. However, some choreographers attempt to do so, as we will see.

In Trivandrum, I will meet Daksha Sheth and Devissaroo and I will mention my works as well as those of the **Sadanam** institution where I studied *Kathakali*.

## **KOLKATA (CALCUTTA)**

Capital city of the State of West Bengal. Official language: *Bengali*.

Kolkata is the largest city in eastern India. A port city, it served as the capital for British rulers until 1911. A spearhead for the independence struggle, the cradle of Indian-style communism, the city has enjoyed an exceptional political and avant-garde aura. Long considered the cultural and intellectual capital of the country, Calcutta has long rested on the laurels of Rabindranath Tagore<sup>15</sup> and Satyajit Ray<sup>16</sup>. Today young choreographers are eager to make up for lost time. Unlike many places in India, the Kolkata region does not have a specific dance tradition. Many *Manipuri*, *Odissi* and *Kathak* dancers have settled in the city, as well as masters of *Chhau*, the danced martial art of Seraikela and Purulia. Kolkata is the hometown of the famous dancer Uday Shankar. All these influences have formed a curious and open-minded audience that young creators are working to regain.

In Kolkata, I will meet Vanessa Mirza and Vikram Iyengar.

## **MUMBAI (BOMBAY)**

Capital city of the State of Maharashtra. Official language: *Marathi*.

India's second most populated city, Mumbai is the economic and financial centre of the country. Famous for its film industry, Mumbai is the place where the unique Bollywood style of dance has developed. At the same time, new initiatives are emerging as a counterpoint to Bollywoodian enthusiasm.

In Mumbai, I will meet Sanjukta Wagh, Avantika Bahl, Ravinder Singh and Marukh Dumasiasia.

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<sup>15</sup> Rabindranath Tagore: Bengali composer, writer, playwright, painter and philosopher. (1861-1941)

<sup>16</sup> Satyajit Ray: world-renowned Bengali film director, writer and composer. (1921-1992)

## 4. A TYPOLOGY OF CONTEMPORARY DANCE IN INDIA

In this chapter, I will suggest a rough classification of contemporary dance in India.

### a) *The 'Neo-Classics'*

Anita Cherian, Associate Professor at the School of Culture and Creative Expression, Ambedkar University in Delhi: *"Neo-Classics' are difficult to characterise in one way or another. It is an intermediate space that becomes aesthetically cosmetic. Their work is often well funded. These are very tight networks. Success depends very much on the presentation of their shows, which pay particular attention to lighting and costumes."*

As will be seen throughout this study, classical and traditional forms continue to occupy the most prominent position in the dance landscape. New models of representation and storytelling have emerged in different styles. Without straying too far from the established codes, neo-classical choreographers boast a contemporary spirit that manifests itself both in questioning the format of the show and the narrative content of the works. Some of these choreographers enjoy an impressive success on major Indian and international stages.



Dancer and co-founder of **the Other Festival** in Chennai, founder of the nartaki.com portal<sup>17</sup>, **Anita Ratnam** is a choreographer, artiste, researcher, author, programmer and 'fashionista'. She studied *Bharatanatyam*, *Mohiniyattam* and *Kathakali*. In her works, she draws on the fundamental aspects of these techniques blending them with many other forms she studied over the years, such as therapeutic *yoga*, *Tai Chi* and *Chi Qong* or *Kalarippayyat*. In 2017 she received the prestigious Puraskar Prize of the **Sangeet Natak Kala Akademi** for contemporary dance.



In Chennai, the dancer **Malavika Sarukai** has for several years embodied a concern for creativity which takes her away from the traditional recital, '*Margam*', while maintaining fidelity to the *Bharatanatyam* style. *"Personalise tradition and then question it while keeping the core essence."* *The Hindu* January 05, 2017.

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.narthaki.com>



In Ahmedabad, **Kumudini Lakhya** is one of the first *Kathak* dancers to question the content and the form of her art and to push it beyond the usual limits of the solo performance. She created group choreographies in *Kathak* for the first time in the 1960s, abandoning the themes of traditional narratives. The **Kadamb** institution she founded in Ahmedabad trained many dancers some of whom followed her creative path. Aditi Mangaldas, Daksha Sheth, Vaishali Trivedi, Sanjukta Wagh, Prasanth Shah, Sanjukta Sinha, Parul Shah are among the most famous.



In Ahmedabad too, **Mallika Sarabhai** influenced by her mother Mrinalini Sarabhai's artistic and political choices has moved well beyond the usual traditional norms. After five years spent in Paris with Peter Brook's theatre group where she played the part of *Draupadi* in the *Mahabharata* production, she came back to India to manage **Darpana** where she has recently reconstructed the Natarani auditorium. She keeps creating politically-engaged shows where she uses *Bharatanatyam* and some elements of *Kathakali*.



A former disciple of Kumudini Lakhya, **Aditi Mangaldas** is one the foremost choreographers of the young neo-classical generation. Though she defines herself as a classical dancer she was offered - and has refused - the prestigious **Sangeet Natak Kala Akademi Puraskar** in the contemporary dance category. Her company has travelled widely abroad.

The choreographer Deepak Kurki Shivaswamy who regularly gives contemporary dance classes to the dancers of the Aditi Mangaldas Dance Company: *"Aditi has a very open mind. She takes part in all the contemporary classes I give in her dance company. Aditi clearly distinguishes between her classical and experimental works. And her experiments remain within the form for which she has absolute respect. She seeks to push limits in terms of space, music and lighting."*



Kerala based **Daksha Sheth** studied *Kathak* in Ahmedabad with Kumudini Lakhya. She was the main dancer in the Kadamb troupe for 18 years. As a soloist she felt the need for a different approach to the body and movement. For this she went to Delhi to study the *Chhau* martial art. There she met the Australian musician **Devissaroo** who became her husband. In 1986, as a guest to the *Kathak* festival in Delhi's Kamani auditorium, the couple surprised organisers and public by presenting an experimental piece on Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*.



This marked for them the end of the *Kathak* festivals. However the audience was enthralled and three hundred people climbed on the stage with enthusiasm. Later, Daksha decided to study the *Kalarippayat* martial art to strengthen her technique, and the couple moved to Trivandrum in Kerala with their two children. They created about thirty productions with their group of dancers, and their daughter Isha Sharvani became one of the main dancers in the company. Isha then chose Bollywood where she had a brilliant career as a specialist of aerial dance. She then moved to Australia to pursue her work.

Born in Mumbai **Sanjukta Wagh** studied *Kathak* dance. After several years learning and performing she questioned the classical format of the traditional show. In order not to stagnate in this comfort zone she decided against becoming a solo dancer. In 2009, she received a scholarship to study at the Laban Centre in London. Learning contemporary Western techniques led her to deeply question the body in *Kathak* dance. She also discovered improvisation that has marked her work ever since.



In Kolkata **Vikram Iyengar** is a choreographer and researcher trained in *Kathak*. He designs his compositions drawing from this form. He is the co-founder and artistic director of the **Ranan Performance Collective** and the initiator of **The Pickle Factory**, a centre for practice and reflection on dance and movement. He holds an MA from Aberystwyth University in Wales. Vikram has taught Asian and inter-cultural theatre at BA and MA levels in the UK. He writes numerous articles on dance for various publications and frequently participates in international seminars. In December 2015, he received the **Sangeeth Natak Kala Akademi** Puraskar Prize for Contemporary Dance.

In the neighbouring countryside of the city of Bangalore, **Surupa Sen** and **Bijayini Satpathy** continue tirelessly to keep alive the **Nrityagram Gurukula** created by the late dancer Protima Bedi, where the two dancers teach *Odissi* and promote a "*creative interpretation of tradition*". They sometimes host Western and Indian dancers and researchers for meetings and exchange residencies. They practice a very rigorous and demanding training program that uses the techniques of *yoga*, *Kalarippayat* and fitness exercises.



In Kerala, *Kathakali*'s repertoire, long confined to the founding texts written by the Rajas in the 17th and 18th centuries, has opened up to new authors while remaining essentially linked to the great episodes of the epics and mythologies. Today new texts are renewing the repertoire of a form that has become the emblem of the state.

Note here the importance of the *Kathakali-King Lear* production, an adaptation of Shakespeare's work by the **Annette Leday/Keli** company in 1989, re-created in 2018. The success of the piece has probably influenced the surge of various adaptations in Kerala in recent years. Among the new creators, **Sadanam Hari Kumar** is the most prolific. In his many plays, he endeavours to renew the narratives as well as the costumes and choreographic phrases of the style, making sure to maintain it in its classical codifications and in epic or mythological registers.



## ***b) Towards radicality***

In the 1980s and 1990s, accelerating globalisation encouraged innovation, essentially in urban centres and among artistic elites in contact with international networks.

In Chennai, following Chandralekha, several dancers questioned the repetition of immutable forms and themes of *Bharatanatyam*, and began to explore new possibilities. Traditional costume - a strong marker of form and its social implications - was only very gradually rethought. Even today, those I call the *neo-classics* for the most part have still not forsaken the traditional conventions of costume. Some ornaments disappear or change slightly, the bells sometimes remain silent but it is still quite rare. The dancer Chandralekha had earlier launched a movement of visual simplification in order to erase the flashy image of the *doll dancer*. Despite her radicalism, she had never given up on the traditional sari, although the liberated movements in her choreographies often allowed decent undergarment to be seen.

One had to wait for the works of Padmini Chettur and Preethi Athreya to see minimalist contemporary clothes appear on stage where one could see the dancers' naked legs.



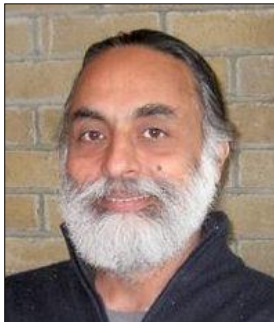
**Padmini Chettur** (Chennai): *"After learning Bharatanatyam as a child, I went to university for scientific studies without thinking too much about dance. For me, rational education was more important than a possible career as a dancer. It was when I was preparing my thesis in 1990 that I met one of the Chandralekha's dancers. I went to a rehearsal. It was a revelation and I felt that Chandra brought all the answers I needed. So I joined the company. It was really Chandra who attracted me as an artiste with her political vision of the liberation of Indian women, which still seems terribly present today.*

*I stayed in the company for ten years. Then I developed my own short pieces that I presented once or twice. At that time it was not a matter of building careers but rather of seeing how one could contribute to the movement towards the contemporary."*



**Preethi Athreya** (Chennai) grew up in Madras in a traditional high-caste Brahmin family. She too followed the usual cursus of young girls from good families who learn *Bharatanatyam* until their first public appearance on stage, *arangetram*, then go for higher studies before getting married or looking for a job.

Preethi Athreya: *"We were educated with the notion that our mission was to promote an ethic and a culture that had been unchanging for centuries. When I realised that this was not quite true, that the form had passed through many waves, ruptures, modifications, some of which had brought some magnificent evolutions, it made me question what I was doing. I liked the formality of the practice. But I had grown up in an extremely conservative environment and I had learned an art essentially related to a content that was 'divine' for the most part and that forced you to make public your relationship with 'God' or 'godliness'. By the time I was 17, this did not sit very well with me, both in my body and in my mind. During this period I also found the general atmosphere of Madras rather claustrophobic where the dance was increasingly restricted to Brahmanic circles. I left in 2000 for a year with a scholarship to the Laban Centre in London to prepare a master's degree. This allowed me to take some distance and learn to observe from another environment and continue questioning my personal references."*



Trained in *Bharatanatyam* at the **Kalakshetra** institution in Madras, **Navtej Johar**<sup>18</sup> (Delhi) also worked for a time with Chandralekha. He considers *Bharatanatyam* a fabrication which at its beginnings still enjoyed a mystical aura. The mystic has now disappeared and dance has become a tool for Hindu government political propaganda. Today he has put all this behind and no longer wants to talk about it. He says he has broken with all the radical, traditional and nationalist ideas surrounding dance.

*"I'm tired of dance being drowned in ideas. Dance is the body."*

For many years, the Devadasi figure has been at the centre of his choreographic work.

*"The phenomenon of the Devadasi has always appeared to me as paradoxical and terribly human, and I have also been scandalised by her fate. It was a mixture of anger, identification and fascination. The Devadasi was also a victim of ideas. Ideas of identity, morality, purity, rationalism and a new national image of India. What interested me in her was her beauty, her imagination. Anger and fascination have now vanished. I'm done with the Devadasi, for whom I've finally exhausted myself. Today I'm terribly bored with dance. I don't go to shows anymore. I feel that both classical and contemporary dancers lend themselves to the systematic injunctions of demonstration, of change, of rupture. It bores me."*

However, Navtej continues to practice daily, to create choreographies and perform them in public.

*"In the presence of a spectator I can go much deeper into my body than in private. This is what is beautiful for me."*

Navtej Johar teaches yoga and somatic techniques in the United States and in India at the Department of Performing Arts of Ashoka University in the state of Aryana.

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.outlookindia.com/magazine/story/entertainment-news-the-expired-lightness-of-being/301100>

### **c) A suspended space**

At the crossroad between neo-classic and the radicality of Chandralekha's followers, several artistes use the roots of their culture as well as contemporary techniques for their choreographic works.

**Jayachandran Pallazhi** (Bangalore): *"A number of us today are working between contemporary and Indian traditions. I would say that we are in a suspended space that oscillates between tradition and contemporary and may define what will happen in the future."*



Dancer and choreographer **Jayachandran Pallazhi** is the director of the **Attakkalari Centre** in Bangalore and of the **Biennale of Contemporary Dance**. Fascinated by dance from a young age, he began to study *Bharatanatyam* in a quasi-clandestine way since it was then only practiced by girls. At that time the town of Trichur in Kerala where he lived was prominent in the fields of film, music, dance and theatre with the recent creation of the **School of Drama**. Jayachandran was thus in contact with an entire milieu which provided the foundations of a rich national and international artistic culture. He also used to practice intensively sports such as cricket and running. In the 1980s, under the pretext of going to study multimedia science in Madras, he spent several years learning *Bharatanatyam* and folk dances with the Dhananjayans, and *Kathakali* at **Kalakshetra**. While remaining fascinated by the body language of these forms he soon questioned their content:

*"Why portray these stories of Krishna stealing butter or the girl waiting for her husband... It has nothing to do with my life... I met many theatre practitioners who, like me, were looking for new languages based on the roots of their traditions. Gradually I realised that for them it was really just a matter of extracting some traditional elements and injecting them into their narrative. There was no movement processing."*

Even his passage in the **Chandralakha Dance Company**, where he took part in the first production left him doubtful as to the questioning of the body vocabulary itself. He therefore decided to join the Contemporary Dance School of London to seek answers to his quest.

**Annette Leday** (Paris/Kerala): Deep in the country of Kerala, I started a process of choreographic creation with *Kathakali* dancers in the 1980s. The work fed on *Kathakali* body techniques but distinguished itself from the original form. I also questioned other forms of the region such as *Krishnanattam*, *Kalarippayat* and *Theyyam*. At that time, there were no social media networks and communications were difficult from one place to another. We heard only a few echoes of the experiments done by Chandralekha in Chennai, by Kumudini Lakhya and Mrinalini Sarabhai in Ahmedabad, and by Daksha Sheth who had settled in Kerala.







Another figure of this intermediate space, **Mandeep Raikhy** (Delhi) began by studying modern jazz techniques in Delhi before turning to the contemporary in a desire to stand out from the entertainment aspect of jazz and to move towards a more artistic and academic approach to movement. He went to London to study at the Laban Centre where he graduated. He realised that the techniques taught there were gradually undermining his original cultural context.

*"There were about 20 students from different parts of the world in my classroom and we all moved in exactly the same way. I was missing something. It was probably the only time in my career that I ever asked myself the question of Indianness."*

He joined the **Shobana Jaysingh Dance Company** in London for four years. It was there that he learned the techniques of classical Indian dances before returning to India in 2009. Upon his return he continued reflecting on his identity as an Indian dancer.

*"Should my dance take an Indian form to be a contemporary expression in my country? Or is this question of Indianness now obsolete in light of the many cultural influences that India has adopted over time? "*



Choreographer **Surjit Nongmeikapam** (Imphal) has not studied any contemporary dance techniques in the Western sense of the term. He moved to dance around the age of 24. He studied *Kathak* and choreography at the **Natya Stem Academy** in Bangalore with the dancer Maya Rao. He also participated in the shows of the **Stem Dance Company** directed by Maya Rao's daughter. After one year he completed his BA in choreography. He then returned to Manipur and devoted himself to the study of *Thang Ta*, the martial art of the region, of *Odissi* and of the folkloric forms of local dances.

*"I don't care if I'm doing contemporary dance or something. What interests me is the freedom to experiment with my body to create new proposals in new directions that may come from theatre or music or cinema. I sometimes say that I perform with body movements."*

A former student at **Attakkalari** , choreographer **Hemabharaty Palani** (Bangalore) teaches there and leads the company's rehearsals.

*"I started dancing by studying Kuchipudi to obey my mother. Dance was not my first love at all. I was a tomboy, rather interested in sports. I joined Attakkalari in 2000 at my father's insistence. I didn't like dance, much less contemporary. But little by little, dance has taught me to know my identity, to know myself and to discover my hidden secrets. Classic shapes are gilded frames with limited edges. We have to play in a clearly defined territory. The contemporary is more like a map that we can explore."*



#### **d) Shunning the classics**

Some in the younger generation insist today on shunning the heritage of classical or traditional forms. They trained in other techniques and chose to research apart from any reference to established models.

**Avantika Bahl** (Mumbai): *"My passion for body language started in school and then in college. At first I learned modern jazz and ballet in the **DanceworX Company** in Delhi. Visiting professors regularly came to give us lessons. Then I started making my own creations and teaching children and teenagers. Later I went to London to the Laban Centre for a year before moving to Bombay. It was in London that I really discovered what it meant to create choreography and to search for new vocabulary."*



**Anoushka Kurien** (Chennai): *"We are obsessed with the supposed antiquity of forms and the fact that this seniority would give them more value than any other thought. Even in new proposals references to the old are immediately sought. It's as if we have to be in that time frame all the time. For my part, I don't come from this classical world and yet I live here and I have been working there since 2003! How much longer are we going to ask the question of the link to the classic and the traditional? Chandralekha began her work in the 80's, more than fifty years ago! It is high time we stopped seeing the work done here as only Indian in reference to the classic or in reference to what the Western mind defines as Indian."*



**Deepak Kurki Shivaswamy** (Delhi/Bangalore): *"Classical forms come from a very particular place. A nationalist place where I wouldn't want to be. I prefer to keep all my freedom to create. I love classical forms. There is a lot of wisdom there in the treatment of the narrative, in the bodies, in the pedagogy, in the beauty of forms. I have total respect for those who dedicate their lives to these practices. It is true that they receive more support than we do. But we don't complain. India is huge. There's room for everyone."*



**Vanessa Mirza** (Kolkata): studied modern jazz and ballet at the Calcutta School of Music. In 2006 she decided to become a professional dancer. She went to Taiwan to study modern, post-modern and Graham and contemporary techniques. Back in India, she strengthened her international network and started a new contemporary dance festival the **Dance Bridges Festival**.

### ***e) Between dance and theatre***

It has always been difficult to separate theatre and dance in India. Those fields are often entwined and more and more theatrical propositions call on dance or movement to enliven the creations. Slightly aside purely choreographic works, I will here mention several strong personalities who fight the a priori and engage in the singular dynamics of creations often marked by feminist causes.

**Maya Krishna Rao** (Delhi) is a distinct phenomenon in the contemporary performing arts landscape. She is a one-woman performer unique in her genre. Engaged in feminist and socio-political causes, she creates solo performances in reaction to events. Trained in *Kathakali* in her youth, she remains strongly marked by the power of this style which she adapts freely for her creations. Her work is at the crossroads of theatre, cabaret and dance.



*Walk*, one of her latest creations, responded to the horrific rape of a young girl on a Delhi bus. This physical and vocal protest performance was given on the occasion of several demonstrations against the recurrent violence in Indian society. Deeply involved in the transmission of live performance techniques, she has been a professor at the National School of Drama in Delhi, and teaches at the Shiv Nadar University since 2013.

**Mallika Taneja** (Delhi) describes herself as a choreographer and an actor. In one of her shows, *Thoda Dhyaan Se (Be careful)*, she offers another powerful response to the collective rapes and sexist discourses that are multiplying in India. She first appears completely naked on stage and stares at the audience for long, silent minutes. Then, while ironically evoking the official injunctions to dress 'prudently' expressed by many political figures on the occasion of these rapes, she covers herself with clothes that gradually make her body fully disappear.



**Purnima Yengkokpam** (Imphal) studied theatre at the National School of Drama in Delhi (NSD). She now lives in her native Imphal and is involved in most of choreographer Surjit Nongmeikapam's creations.

*“At NSD we used to have classes in contemporary dance and I was already very interested in the work of body and movement. For me it was quite natural to join Surjit in his creative work. There are girls in the Surjit classes, but for his creations I am the only professional woman in the company. This is not a problem for my family. The only restrictions come from more traditional dance environments here in Manipur where dancers don't understand how I can work with boys and wear such costumes!”*



South of Chennai, in Pondichery, I will mention two interesting theatrical companies strongly marked by bodily disciplines.

Established in 2000 in its beautiful Auroville campus near Pondichery, **Adishakti Theatre, Dance, Music and Puppetry Repertory Company** was first founded in 1981 by Veenapani Chawla. Feeding on ancient techniques such as *Kathakali*, *Kalarippayat*, *Kutiyattam*, and *Chhau*, Veenapani developed a singular method of acting inseparable from body commitment. The company is a research centre that produced many shows, and has taken part in numerous festivals in India and abroad. Since Veenapani Chawla's demise in 2014, the company's members continue her work and her policy of openness and exchanges with artistes from all over the world.

In the heart of Pondichery, **Indianostrum** is a theatre collective directed by Koumarane Valavane. This actor spent several years at the Paris Théâtre du Soleil directed by Ariane Mnouchkine. Indianostrum is a group of artistes with a variety of backgrounds. Here again the body vocabulary is strongly marked by traditional techniques such as regional *Therukootu* and the *Kalarippayat* martial art; however the more current influences of hip hop dances and of Indian cinema are also present in the work of the group.

### ***f) The Bollywood phenomenon***

Along with *Bharatanatyam*, Bollywood dance is one of the main markers of Indian culture and Indian identity around the world. It is the other major pole of reference for dance in India. It appeared with the emergence of the film industry which took a prominent place in Indian culture and beyond. Famous the world over, the Bollywood dance style has evolved over time and under various influences.

The notion of the hero is deeply embedded in popular culture in India. Mythological heroes of the great epics forged the regional imaginations in most performative traditions. They were gradually replaced by the mythical actors of the silver screen. And these new heroes danced! Their dances are less complex than those of the great classical forms, they are joyful and cathartic and can easily be imitated. They respond to a widespread need to project oneself away from daily concerns.

Close to Bollywood's most famous actors and Bombay's media spheres, choreographer **Terence Lewis** is himself a real phenomenon. He travels through continents and dance techniques and moves with ease from Indian classical to modern jazz and Bollywood styles. He was introduced to contemporary dance while participating in workshops in Vienna during the ImPulsTanz Festival. His main collaborators also join refresher courses there as soon as they can. In Germany he regularly gives Bollywood dance master-classes that meet with extraordinary success. From 2009 to 2012 he created **Dance India Dance**, a television show and competition dedicated to the discovery of dance talents from all origins. He was the first dancer to popularise the idea of contemporary dance for the general public on television. Subsequently many other shows were created in India where he is often called as a judge. He is increasingly advocating a contemporary approach to dance and to the arts in general.

The **TERENCE LEWIS INC**, a major enterprise, consists of several branches.

- The TLCDC Terence Lewis Contemporary Dance Company.
- The TLPTI Terence Lewis Professional Training Institute Dance.
- The small Para.dox group dedicated to purely contemporary work.
- The TLDFST Terence Lewis Dance Foundation Scholarship Trust.



**Ravinder Singh** (Mumbai), dancer, choreographer and head of studies with the Terence Lewis Contemporary Dance Company (TLCDC):

*"After having been defined by borrowings from the classical techniques of Kathak, Bharatanatyam and Indian folk dances, Bollywood dance is now much more influenced by the Western contributions of the American variety, modern jazz and hip hop. Even its music is now modelled on Western hip hop and rap. For the past five or six years, choreographers have not been interested in matching the story line as they once were, but rather in creating a visual impact. The world of Bollywood is a world of monopolies where everything is competitive and controlled. Dancers must correspond to specific physical criteria according to the stylistic choices of the film. Their artistic participation usually consists of repeating the same few gestures or movements that are filmed again and again over a period of four or five days for the shooting of a single song. Being a professional dancer is still very problematic in India, especially for girls who must brave many taboos. Dancers employed in Bollywood films often have received no serious training. Most watch items on TV or increasingly on YouTube. They learn by mimicking. As soon as they feel ready, they apply*



*for a professional membership card in one of the associations that coordinate auditions for film producers. An inexpensive membership card is combined with a mandatory donation of around 3,500€ (3,800US\$), which is a considerable sum for a young artiste. Dancers' associations compete mercilessly to drag this resource, which mainly benefits producers. For some years Bollywood choreographers have employed European dancers. Their cost is higher, but the directors choose them for their technique, for their white skin and for the songs to be richer, more sumptuous, and so they get viewed more on YouTube..."*

With a fame comparable to that of Terence Lewis, the choreographer **Ashley Lobo** (Mumbai, Delhi) is the artistic director of **Navdhara India Dance Theatre** (NIDT). The work of the company includes Western body techniques with the spiritual philosophies of India and its dances. Ashley Lobo is an Indo-Australian dancer trained in classical ballet, modern jazz and contemporary techniques in Australia. Based on these influences, he has been teaching at **DanceworX Academy** for some 30 years in his studios in Mumbai and Delhi. He has developed a training method called *Prana Paint & Flow™*, which explores movement through yoga, breathing and contact. He has directed some 20 choreographies for the cinema as well as some 20 contemporary compositions strongly influenced by his cinematic experiences.



### ***g) Commercial contemporaries***

A number of large dance companies choose to go commercial for a part of their operations in order to finance their more contemporary endeavours.

In Mumbai, Terence Lewis controls the artistic part of his group as well as the commercial projects. He has recently received a young entrepreneurs award for his management and for the *Best Business Dance Model*.

**Marukh Dumasia**, choreographer and co-founder of the Terence Lewis Contemporary Dance Company: *"Bollywood, contemporary, kathak, folk, classic, we can adapt any style according to market demand. Orders can come from the Bollywood film industry - which is not really our passion. More often we intervene at the invitation of large business companies or for events such as weddings or engagement ceremonies which are a huge market in India. For corporate marketing events we can offer pieces combining hip hop and contemporary to give them a modern touch. For films we don't really have the freedom to create. That's why we founded the Para.Dox unit, which allows us to do much more research into the contemporary. Our latest creation is the Kamshet Project which has been programmed in festivals in India and at the ImPulsTanz Festival in Vienna."*

In Kolkata, the **Sapphire Creations Dance Company** combines numerous international tours with performances commissioned by private corporations. The artistic director and choreographer **Sudarshan Chakravorty** trained in *Bharatanatyam, Kathakali* and *Thang Ta* as well as modern dance and modern jazz in Europe and the USA.

<http://sapphirecreations.org/sapphireco.html>: *"Sapphire's work approaches issues of gender, art, relationships, society, polity, consumerism and HIV through a global perspective, South Asian sensitivity and an experimental body stylistic. The Sapphire experiment imbibes ancient Indian body history to relevant modern contact and improvisatory solo and group work methods presenting itself as proscenium, site-specific, improvisatory, installations, multimedia work."*

Born in Bengal the **Madhuri** and **Mayuri Upadhyay** sisters founded the **Nrityarutya Dance Company** in Bangalore in 2000. It produces performances of various formats. Some answer commissions and stage up to a hundred dancers. Madhuri was for example the choreographer for the *Make in India* event commissioned by Narendra Modi PM. With her sister Mayuri, she has also directed *Mughal-E-Azam*, one of the first big musicals made in India. The company hosts a team of permanent dancers. Its creations are developed in its own studio. The works in the company include contemporary dancers and musicians from other more folkloric forms.

## 5. THEMES

Current dance compositions are often dictated by the questioning of the forms, techniques and themes of ancient Indian performing traditions. The most radical choreographers are rising against the aesthetic and moral dictates imposed by the conservative specialists of the old forms. However, these questionings do not impose a specific Indian contemporary vocabulary which could encompass new initiatives. This chapter will describe how choreographers nurture and build their work and the discourse behind it and how they fit into the unique artistic context of India.

**Mallika Sarabhai** (Ahmedabad): *"We have a very varied 5,000-year-old cultural history. In India, time is never unidimensional. We are living the 6th century and the 22nd century at the same time. The classical/contemporary division does not exist for me. The definition of contemporary can have many colours. My roots are Indian. They are in the classical dances Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi, but also in the tribal dances that exist everywhere. These are the cells that make me. But when I choreograph I move certain elements. For example, in one of my recent plays, five female dancers used percussions normally reserved for men. This is contemporary. If in Bharatanatyam I do everything with one arm, or if I fragment, this is contemporary. For me dance is just one of many languages I use."*

**Vikram Iyengar** (Kolkata): *"My work has often come up against the barrier of label, both in India and abroad. Is it traditional, is it contemporary? If it's experimental, what does it experiment with? What does it propose, to whom? As artistes working in an Indian context, these are questions that are constantly asked of us since the criteria used to evaluate us often have little to do with our origin."*

**Avantika Bahl** (Mumbai): *"For me, the contemporary is an alternative expression, a socio-political commentary. What really binds me to the idiom is the individual experience it allows. I also appreciate the freedom to develop a mechanism of movement to understand body and mind. It is not an art of dissent, it is a movement of redefinition."*

**Jayachandran Palazhi** (Bangalore): *"Contemporary dance truly represents today's globalised ethos that fosters cultural exchange. It breaks down language barriers while highlighting the unique culture of a region on the world stage. Contemporary forms of expression have been strengthened since the beginning of the 20th century in Europe and the United States and have subsequently spread to all regions of the world. In India too, it is a form of expression that is finding more and more support and audiences."*

**Sanjukta Wagh** (Mumbai): *"One can be classical in form and contemporary in approach, or contemporary in form and classical in approach, or contemporary in form and approach. I think the permutation between these different models is present in a lot of dancers today. I don't see any contradiction. For me, the classical domain carries a particular strength. All mudras contain a part of the history of dance and when I use them I always feel the richness of what generations of dancers and performers have inscribed in them."*

### **a) The nurturing techniques**

Dancers and choreographers look for inspiration and body language in Indian classical techniques as well as in other contemporary practices. Whatever their kind of dance, most dancers and choreographers interviewed for this study remain attached to the Indian aesthetics of dance, either to question them, or to feed on their energies and their movements. The most commonly drawn upon techniques are *yoga*, the martial arts *Kalarippayat* (Kerala) and *Thang Ta* (Manipur), *Kathakali* dance-theatre, the classical dances *Kathak*, *Bharatanatyam*, *Odissi*, the *Chhau* martial dances of Orissa, the folk dances of all regions.

**Mandeep Raikhy:** *"If we look more broadly at the places of physical practice outside dance, martial arts and sport are obvious. There's physicality, practice, regular training, and these are events where you put yourself in front of an audience. The choreography is very close to all this."*

Choreographers turn increasingly to techniques such as Western classical ballet, Western contemporary dance, Tai chi, Capoeira, African dances, hip hop and urban dances.

New technological tools are also being used to support today's compositions. Jayachandran Palazhi frequently uses new technologies in his shows. He explains this choice by making a parallel between the visual techniques of *Kathakali* and the possibilities offered by the new technologies. For him, modern interactive techniques are similar to the practices of ancient folk forms where artistes performed within and in constant contact with their audience.

This attachment to Indian aesthetic forms grants certain companies a public success in India as well as in some foreign countries (United States, Germany, South America, Asia). However, these influences create unique aesthetics that are sometimes difficult to grasp for a Western eye. This raises the question of criteria of appreciation. Many company directors express their need to claim their aesthetic as specific to the Indian cultural context. They suffer from the lack of recognition by Western programmers who often seek either the old forms that remain the most exotic, or the contemporary creations closest to the Western techniques.



## ***b) The issue of Indian identity***

As in many parts of the world, the issues of identity and nationalism are extremely acute in all domains in India today. Dance is not foreign to this phenomenon and the discourse around it is frequently involves this issue. As we have seen, the renaissance of the classical theatre and dance forms accompanied the struggle for the independence of India. Since then they have been considered the best representative of Indian identity throughout the world. With the governing BJP<sup>19</sup> advocating the affirmation of Hindu identity, support for the classical forms is very strong. Still rooted in the great mythological and epic themes of ancient India, they are considered the best possible vehicles of the values of hinduism<sup>20</sup>. Artistes and institutions teaching these traditional forms are encouraged by grants and travel abroad financed by the state. Choreographers are often faced with the question of their 'Indianness' in India as well as abroad where this criterion is also put forward in the programming selections.

**Mandeep Raikhy** (Delhi): *"When I was in London, I was in a dance company strongly marked by the Indian origins of choreographer Shobana Jay Singh. The issue of identity was always present. After four years, I felt that I was not in the right place. So I decided to go back to India, and I'm very happy about that. When I came back, the question of form came up for me. Was it absolutely necessary to define an Indian style? What is to be an Indian today? After the colonial past of the country, after so many foreign invasions, can we really define what is Indian? My early creations explored what Indianness is and what it means."*

**Preethi Athreya** (Chennai): *"After a year in London I realised that if I stayed I would only become another 'exotic' dancer. It would be impossible for me to be seen as anything other than a 'brown skin with mudras'. And I wasn't interested in that. I am an Indian and I feel no need to refer to this fact or to emphasise it in my work. We are becoming a self conscious nation where we must follow what the state expects from us. There is also the look of the outside world which wants to impose this necessary Indianness on us."*

**Anoushka Kurien** (Chennai): *"What I am trying to do is something that is both from here and also questions what it means. What is Indianness, what is identity in dance. I always ask and I am always asked this question. What matters to me is working in the local context, understanding it in depth without having to prove my Indianness by adding a mudra or facial expression here or there."*

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<sup>19</sup> Bharatiya Janata Party

<sup>20</sup> *Hinduism*: It is ironic that this word, probably coined by the colonisers to try unify the multitudes of religious practices whose extraordinary and mysterious diversity they failed to grasp, now refers to the identity and fundamentalist claims of the most conservative and anti-Western political parties in the country.

### **c) Themes of yesterday and of today**

**Sadanand Menon** (Chennai) *The Hindu*, 28 April 2018: "This is one of the issues facing contemporary Indian dance - what does it mean? What is it trying to say? Conventional forms of dance survive on a clearer mandate - their job is to worship those in power, divine or secular. That's the essence of their story. All beauty, all grace and all artistic conception are factors that contribute to worshipping the Lord, the lover, the king. Contemporary dance breaks this comfort zone of elitist, casteist and sexist stories. Devoid of a cannon and endowed with a demystified and desecrated semantics, what is his narrative intention? Is it a post-modern art form that makes fun of meaning and prefers the self-sufficient language of form, space and time? Or is it so complacent in its subjectivity that it seems to become as narcissistic as the classic genre it criticises? Or is it so dry and formalistic that it prevents a sensual response and leaves the public with abstract images devoid of references and movements detached of any social content?"

**Kumudini Lakhya, Chandralekha, Mrinalini Sarabhai, Anita Ratnam, Malavika Sarukai** and **Mallika Sarabhai** have long been established choreographers within a neo-classical creative process. Early on, they endeavoured to leave behind the purely religious themes of the classical repertoires. They made a point of advocating feminist issues, and, more recently, environmental and socio-political questions.

**Kumudini Lakhya** (Ahmedabad): "The dancer owns the space. He must be able to place his personal ideas with his own technique. He has to use his technique, but the ideas, the mind, the soul and what he has to say belong to him. You have to have something to say. With the former masters we were always with the Gods. Always in Paradise! Always mythological stories. I decided to move towards abstraction. Should dance always be based on stories? Can't dance be self-sufficient?"

In her neo-classicist compositions, **Anita Ratnam** (Chennai) invites powerful feminine characters from the mythological texts and questions them in the context of present society. Holding a PHD in Women's Studies she is often invited to give talks where she urges young *Bharatanatyam* dancers to shed the old conventions and face present day social issues.

More radically contemporary choreographers, are primarily inspired by the theme of the body. Today we see these themes being combined with more political and social issues.

**Padmini Chettur** (Chennai): "I am interested in the definition of the body, in searching in depth for the source of movement to create a vocabulary. Dig up what the body really is away from stylistic codes. Look for vulnerabilities in the body. In my "site-specific" projects, I try to situate the body in the chosen environment and explore time and space. I like to choreograph for large groups of dancers, create large organic shapes by connecting body chains. I'm looking for the metaphysical dimension of related bodies."

**Preethi Athreya** (Chennai): "Redefine the body of the Indian dancer. Redefine the body. What I'm looking for is a body delivered from its virtuosity and from a technique that hides the person. I'm interested in people through dance."

**Hemabharaty Palani** (Bangalore): *"The content of my work focuses on what I am, that is, an Indian woman. And if I were to give a general banner it would be my 'Unfinished hidden secrets'. I start from autobiographical situations. Things I never do in my daily life as an Indian woman. I feel free to express them on stage."*

**Navtej Johar** (Delhi): *"I think one of the reasons why classical dance bores me is that I suspect there is a will to demonstrate, to explain, to make sense and even to be politically correct. This has multiplied and in a way I think dance regresses. The body and its dance are replaced by concepts or ideas. This is also the case for contemporary dance."*

**Surjit Nongmeikapam** (Imphal): *"I begin my research with the body. I have a starting point, of course, but it's the physical research that moves me forward. It's not predetermined. I have never learned any contemporary techniques. So I base myself on my inner bodily curiosity. Secondly, it is the observation of nature and of my human environment that nourishes me."*

#### ***d) Dance and politics***

In recent years, as India has been shaken by acts of horror, threats of deprivation of liberty and repeated ecological disasters, Indian dancers and choreographers are increasingly concerned with the country's social, political and ecological issues. Without necessarily claiming a precise commitment, some choreographic proposals address current themes. The cause of women has been present for a long time. Gender violence and social injustices are often condemned more or less openly. Regardless of the style of the companies, virtually all of them address these issues. The most classical ones look into mythological texts for characters or situations to actualise in a progressive and liberating perspective. Others go through the observation of reality and its physical rewriting. Others try to express their commitment in an abstract questioning of the body and movement.

**Deepak Kurki Shivaswamy** (Delhi): *"I started to create shows in 2003 when I was a dancer at Attakalari. I quickly realised that my concerns differed from those of the company. I was interested in working on the human condition. My first duo dealt with the call centres phenomenon. The second addressed the notions of hierarchy in Indian society. Then the issue of borders and how they separate. Then capitalism, conflict in Kashmir. All these creations were immediate reactions to what is happening in society."*

**Maya Krishna Rao** (Delhi): *"It is because I am a politically conscious woman that sometimes political themes and causes impose themselves to me. I don't plan to do a feminist show or anything like that. I don't make that kind of decision. My only decision is to make a show. But more and more often I am called upon to intervene in protests and sometimes I am only told the day before. And it's always very interesting to think that I have to perform among those who will make committed speeches while I am myself content to improvise with just my body and my theatre. I don't start with an idea of protest, but by questioning what affects me. And it's not necessarily the political cause itself."*

In Ahmedabad, Mallika Sarabhai's political stance led to numerous enmities. As mentioned earlier, the city has long been the stronghold of Narendra Modi, India's Prime Minister. Mallika openly denounces his conservative and fundamentalist positions that are contrary to her convictions. Local leaders and some journalists frequently avoid her but she is somehow protected by the extraordinary aura of the Sarabhai family<sup>21</sup>.

**Mallika Sarabhai** (Ahmedabad): *"When I use songs that talk about the division between castes in India, or the mistreatment of women, the destruction of the environment, and the violence of the world, this is contemporary. In one of my shows I enter into conversation with Mahatma Gandhi to ask him what he would do today..."*

In Imphal, Surjit Nongmeikapam, while not claiming to be a political artiste, questions life in the tense atmosphere of Manipur - a state which often sees itself as under occupation. One of his first pieces addressed the issue of torture. More recently, his creation Nerves refers to the recurrent violence in the state of Manipur where the military presence is one of the strongest in the country.

**Surjit Nongmeikapam** (Imphal): *"Observing life in circumstances where freedom is limited prompts an artist to think more deeply and create with more tenacity."*

**Mandeep Raikhy** (Delhi): *"I think the very act of performing in a show is in itself a political gesture. It is a bit like a demonstration where it is with the presence of your body that you express your point of view. For me protest and presentation of a show are close to each other. I'm particularly interested in how the body is shaped by society and environment. And also how the body is received and perceived in performance as well as in life. It is with this questioning that I always start my creations. This is how I approached the issue of gender, sexuality, how to represent intimacy, differences in sexual intimacy, intimacy between people of the same sex in a closed environment."*

*Queen Size*, one of his latest productions, takes a graphic look at physical relationships between men.

**Mandeep Raikhy** (Delhi): *"I have not encountered any significant opposition to Queen Size. We played it 50 times in different places in India and we still have at least 10 performances planned. This is a surprise but it is reassuring to see that there is an audience for this kind of theme and that there are organisers ready to program it. This is very new. Ten to fifteen years ago it would not have been possible to support such a project."*

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<sup>21</sup> The Sarabhai family is one of the most influential industrial families in India. Mallika's father Vikram Sarabhai was a great scientist at the origin of India's space program.

Asked about the reason for this astonishing tolerance at a time when the tentacles of moral censorship are increasingly felt in the country despite the recent abolition of the Law Section 377 IPC criminalising homosexuality, Anita Cherian offers a rather disturbing answer:

**Anita Cherian** (Delhi): *"Male homosexuality does not really pose a problem to the state. Man can keep all freedom of choice. On the other hand, feminist movements and the liberation of women in all its forms are under scrutiny of conservatives and moralists who advocate a return of women to their home duties and stricter rules to control young girls."*

### ***Me Too***

In India, physical contact is almost always absent from the ancient forms of dance and most performing arts. This has slightly changed in recent decades with the appearance of more contemporary forms where the notion of trust and intimacy are among the components of creative process.

On 27 October 2018, a part of the city's art community gathered in Delhi to create a committee around the *Me Too* phenomenon and the issue of harassment in performing arts. Artistes from several generations were present, as were representatives of classical and contemporary styles, actors and directors, university professors, lawyers and administrators of structures and companies. The idea was to create a kind of platform association where complaints could be expressed, and also to direct the complainants towards legal modes of action when appropriate. The meeting aimed to define a basic framework for this committee and also to draw up broad lines of reflection and action. Some examples of issues related to harassment were mentioned without going into too much detail. The artistes present at the meeting expressed their concern that the notions of contact and trust were being challenged in their teaching and research work. Teaching can be affected by the problem of harassment. Since the emergence of the *Me Too* movement long-established attitudes have been questioned. Yoga teachers, contemporary dance and theatre teachers face a dilemma about familiarity and body intimacy needed to help students understand certain movements. In the field of classical dances several speakers strongly denounced the *Guru-Shishya Parampara*<sup>22</sup> system which for ages has allowed dance masters to demand what they wanted from their disciples in terms of sexual intimacy as well as psychological hold. Will it be necessary to envisage some kind of consent protocol before starting any work? The group's conversations continue.

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<sup>22</sup> Traditional transmission (*parampara*) between teacher (*guru*) and student (*shishya*).

## 6. THE CREATIVE PROCESS

To compose their works, choreographers use creative processes that vary according to individuals and issues. The testimonies below give an idea of the variety of their approaches.

**Mandeep Raikhy** (Delhi): *"It was by working with the deconstructed vocabulary of Bharatanatyam that I started my research. By studying kinetics, the movements of walking and the distribution of energies in the bodies of Bharatanatyam I reflected on the notion of form as a principle. I think this principle still accompanies me today even though what I create has no more any connection to Bharatanatyam. I try to work with the same dancers from project to project. For me it's important to have shared values that we define together and to have a relationship that works on the long term. Sometimes during work I don't necessarily have very specific ideas or perfect directions. It is important that my dancers accept these uncertainties, that they trust me. I usually prepare a kind of structure for a project. The dancers react by proposing sequences. Then I erase and correct to reach a quality of movement that suits me. I then become a sort of editor. I am very interested in this role. It is the best way for me to view my work. For the piece A Male Ant has Straight Antennae I wanted to address the issue of masculinity. Of the idea of the masculine. One of the exercises was to go out into the streets and look at men as if they were aliens and distance ourselves from what is usually known about the male body. The idea was to observe the body in all its attitudes, in its approach, in what it does, what its supports are, its imbalances, a kind of anatomical study as the male body. Then we got into the studio and shared our observations, focusing on what they were telling about the issue of gender. The most important part of the creative process is the attention given to the body. Take time and space to discover what the body tells us."*

**Surjit Nongmeikapam** (Imphal): *"In Kolkata I conducted dance movement therapy workshops in torture victims associations. I gathered a lot of testimony and impressions in the stories of the victims. One Voice, my first truly contemporary creation, drew from these testimonies from which I improvised to transcribe them into body movements. For the creation of Nerves, the first thing that came to my mind was to invite the youth of Manipur, dancers, non-dancers, musicians to perform. Rather than focusing on the technique of dance, the idea was to shed light on the disturbed sense of the inner self. I work by improvisation with my interpreters. They are not necessarily dancers. I'm interested in having people ready to be on stage. After improvisation we work on the quality of movements in order to become as organic as possible."*

**Anoushka Kurien** (Chennai): *"Currently I only work solo. In future I want to work with several dancers but I prefer to go through this phase of solitary research to define my project. For the play To Be Danced, I was inspired by the classes I give to children. I asked myself: why do I dance? And if I dance do I use pre-established movement codes, or do I look for a vocabulary by myself? This is an interrogation imposed by solo work. How to think the body differently? What is my connection to movement and my need for dance movement in this city that has so many references to dance that you don't know where to start?... A recurrent issue!"*

**Preethi Athreya** (Chennai): *"It is no longer possible today to conduct regular group practice year round. I work punctually with many dancers. I choreographed a duet with a Sri Lankan dancer, then a solo for a Kathak dancer, a technique that is foreign to me. This forced me out of my own body which was very new to me. Then I did the Jumping Project for a group of ten people of all backgrounds and ages, from Bombay, Calcutta, Jaipur, Delhi, Sri Lanka. My solo Sweet Sorrow was created for an audience accustomed to watching Bharatanatyam. I wanted to denounce the clichés generally carried by the classical recital where everything must be meaningful and where the dancer explains to the public the meaning of each gesture. It's something I've done myself in my traditional shows, and this has allowed me to make fun of myself. The process was to differentiate between the speed of the text and the speed of the gestures. It reversed the usual sense of things. Gestures have meaning outside of what they refer to. The body is more than a medium of meaning. It makes sense in itself and cannot be limited to words. Right now I'm preparing a piece that considers the body melting in the process of movement. Bodies that cannot lend themselves to theories of description or identity (citizen, woman, man, poor, rich). A moving body resists all these descriptions. The constantly changing body has a certain quality of wax permanently melting, never fixed. The process is to find deep force lines in the body and try to see how they can melt."*

**Deepak Kurki Shivaswamy** (Delhi): *"My aesthetics are usually based on the people I work with. I do not impose any criteria. I got interested in working outdoors very early on. I started with improvisations in public places. Either in reaction to the place itself or sometimes in reaction to a political situation. I don't really see these as shows, but they have allowed us to work with different people."*

**Avantika Bahl** (Mumbai): *"Say What is a duet with Vishal Sarvaaya, a young, hearing-impaired dancer. We use sign language in a very different way from deaf-mute people. The conversation at the end of the show between the performers and the audience is as important as the piece itself. This is the moment people can reflect on the notions of inclusion and disability. For many spectators this is their first contact with sign language and with disability on stage. During the creative process we opened our workshops to small groups of spectators. Vishal studied the Bollywood style for ten years. It took a lot of work to get him to do away with certain automatisms. In the Bollywood style every movement is dramatised. We had to go back to a more natural body. But I was also careful not to estrange him entirely from his style. For example in the improvised moments during the show the origins of his formation surface again. At times I had to convince him not to be satisfied with the first results but to push them further to be more exacting. It was sometimes difficult but now he seems to take real pleasure in the process."*

**Maya Krishna Rao** (Delhi): *"Most of the time I start in an empty space with no preconceived ideas. I let things come and I build brick by brick. I work without an outside eye. I have to stimulate myself. Sometimes I draw on the memory of a story I read, or on a music that inspires me. Sometimes I invite a videographer, an artist or a musician and we improvise together. The problem is I don't have a good memory, so I have to film everything I do. I then watch the videos and try to remember my thoughts and my feelings. Then I select passages that seem to me the most interesting and I put them together to construct the show. I do not start from an idea but from what improvisations reveal."*

**Sanjukta Wagh** (Mumbai): *"I try to get away from some kind of stagnation I feel in conventional performances. The Kathak style remains my vocabulary but I try to make the form breathe, to make it dance. I always use text and work on my dance so that it is not an illustration but brings another level of meaning and enters into conversation with the text."*

## 7. PRESS, CRITIQUE AND FORUMS

During and sometimes outside festival periods, numerous forums, symposiums and seminars on dance are organised with the participation of choreographers, dancers, researchers and critics. Many journalists and commentators have worked in the field for a long time, and some still adhere to the aesthetics of classical forms. Indian contemporary dance critique is still searching for its marks. Following are the most well known experts who write articles or books on the subject.

**Leela Venkataraman** (Delhi) has been a commentator and dance historian for almost 40 years. A radio and television journalist at first, she became a dance critic by chance although she did not belong to the dance milieu. This allowed her to adopt a detached and often harsh tone in her judgments. She takes a critical look at the criticism of dance in India and denounces the too frequent closeness between dancers and commentators that favours the existence of 'sacred cows'. She has written several books on dance.

**Urmimala Sarkar** (Delhi) first studied the Uday Shankar's dance style. Later, she specialised in dance anthropology with a particular focus on the politics and poetry of gender incarnation. She has also done much work documenting representation in marginalised communities. She is currently a professor of theatre and performance studies at the School of Arts and Aesthetics, JNU University in Delhi. She has several books to her credit. She is also president of the **World Dance Alliance** and is interested in university studies in contemporary dance.

**Anita Ratnam** (Chennai), a dancer and choreographer holding a PHD in Women's Studies, has created the nartaki.com portal which provides an impressive amount of information on dance in India and internationally. Mostly dedicated to information about classical and neo-classical Indian forms, the portal also relays more innovative initiatives. Anita writes regularly in her column '*Anita says*' and opens her pages to many commentators from India and the world.

**Anita E. Cherian** (Delhi), a cultural policy specialist is Associate Professor at the School of Culture and Creative Expressions Ambedkar University Delhi. In 2016, she was the editor of *Tilt pause shift Dance Ecologies in India* in partnership with the Gati Dance Forum. The book gathers a significant number of articles on dance in India written by artistes and observers as well as very beautiful photographs.

**Ranjana Dave** (Delhi) is a dancer and a journalist. She often writes in the press and in online publications. She is a cofounder of *Dance Dialogues*, an initiative to connect all dance practitioners and creators. She also coordinated two conferences at the **IGNITE! festival** in Delhi in 2015 and 2016.



**Ashish Mohan Khokar** (Bangalore, Delhi, Chennai) is an Indian classical dance critic and historian. He is the son of Mohan Khokar former director of the **Sangeet Natak Akademi** and of the dancer M.K. Saroja. He manages his father's extraordinary photographic, sound and visual collection recently donated by his mother to the **Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts** in Delhi. Ashish oversees the museum installation of this unique collection of 4,000 books on dance, 100,000 photographs and 200,000 press clips covering the entire history of Indian dance in the 20th century. For the last 20 years he has been the editor of the magazine '**attendance The dance Annual of India**' published by his wife Elisabeth Hall. Recommended by the International Dance Council of UNESCO<sup>23</sup>, the magazine covers the news of the year, reports new developments and publishes valuable images of the *Mohan Khokar Dance Collection*. Ashish takes part in numerous debates all over the world and regularly hosts the *Dance DISCourse* sessions at the Alliance Française in Bangalore.

**Sunil Kothari** (Delhi) is also a dance historian and critic. He has written several books and frequently participates in symposiums and round tables in India and abroad. A specialist of classical forms he also follows closely the evolution of new propositions in dance.

**Sadanand Menon** (Chennai) is a journalist specialising in the arts of India. He is also a teacher of cultural journalism, a photographer and a stage light designer. He has lectured extensively on politics, ecology and the arts. He has taught at the Asian College of Journalism and IIT Madras. He is now the director of the **Space Centre**, a place dedicated to dance created by Chandralekha.

Among the many symposiums and other forums on dance we can mention the *Samabhavana Conference* held in Kolkata in March 2017. Organised by the **Sapphire Creations Dance Company** to celebrate its 25th anniversary, the event took place over two days and aimed to bring together a generation of thinkers and dance makers to consider the future of dance in India. The conference brought together most of the personalities mentioned in this study and was entitled *Celebrating New Directions in Indian Dance*.

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<sup>23</sup> <http://www.cid-portal.org/site/index.php>

## 8. TEACHING AND TRANSMISSION

In recent years, 'contemporary' dance classes have multiplied in major cities in India. All styles are represented, from modern jazz to ballet, hip hop, zumba and capoeira. Here I will focus on the well-established structures affirming the need for recognised curricula that can offer some future prospects for dance students.

### *IN BANGALORE*

Prefigured in Alwaye/Cochin from 1992 with yearly workshops, the **Attakkalari Centre**<sup>24</sup> moved to Bangalore in 2001 to create a professional company of dancers. Jayachandran Palazhi, a tireless researcher, studied an impressive number of techniques, both Indian and Western. His early goal was to establish a dance centre in India that could implement an original training programme drawing on all these influences while maintaining a deep connection with Indian roots. Since its creation, Attakkalari is the dance centre that produces every year the largest number of contemporary dancers in India. At first located in a refurbished garage, Attakkalari has several well-equipped studios. About thirty students follow the two-year course in preparation for the diploma offered by the centre since 2006. Recently, Attakkalari acquired new and larger premises.

Classes are given by Hemabharathy Palani and by several other teachers as well as by Jayachandran himself when he is in Bangalore. Students receive regular instruction in contemporary techniques, in *Bharatanatyam* and in *Kalarippayat*, the martial art of Kerala. They also practice Gyrokenesis and Feldenkrais techniques. Apart from the diploma course, Attakkalari offers year-round training programmes for students and for experienced professional dancers. *Essence International* thus offers an annual series of master classes given by dancers from Europe and Australia.

### *IN DELHI*

Founded in 2007 in response to the lack of structure for independent dance in India, Delhi based **Gati Dance Forum** systematically seeks sustainable solutions for the development of contemporary dance practice in the country. Designed and facilitated by professional dancers, Gati is a collective initiative. The main founders and animators are Mandeep Raikhy, Usha Lal, Ranjana Dave and Virkein Dhar. Interested in both pedagogy and creation, its activities include a monthly workshop and accompanying innovative projects.

**Manju Sharma** (Delhi) dancer: *"Gati strongly supports professional dancers wherever they come from. I participate as often as possible in the workshops and meetings they organise. They often lend their studios to practice and create. It is also possible to make public presentations there. I myself have danced in many of Mandeep Raikhy's creations."*

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<sup>24</sup> <http://www.attakkalari.org/index.php?page=contemporary-danc>

Since 2013 Gati has been working on the establishment and definition of a two-year university degree. The MA in critical dance practice at Ambedkar University was developed by Mandeep Rhaiky as part of an *Arts management fellowship* programme supported by the Max Muller Bhavan and the British Council. Mandeep travelled to Germany and England to observe existing university programmes. He also organised a series of round tables at Gati where various proposals were collected from dance personalities to define the lines of the curriculum.

**Virkein Dhar** (Delhi): *"This Master will not necessarily be related to a particular style or theory. The idea is to start from the experiences at Gati since its creation and to assemble all that we have learned in a curriculum. We felt that the younger generations found it difficult to refer to and to understand the context in which our journey took place."*

In July 2018, the School of Culture and Creative Expressions at Ambedkar University in Delhi opened registration for its MA in critical dance practice programme. The programme started with 19 students who already had some background in dance. Some came from classical forms, others came from modern jazz or even belly dancing, hip hop and Bollywood. Supported by a grant from Tata Trusts, classes are held on the grounds of the historic Gati studio in the Khirki district where it started in 2012. They are given by Mandeep Rhaiky and Ranjana Dave with the support of visiting professors. The Gati Dance Forum team left its premises to make way for this new College of Dance, unique of its kind in India and South Asia.

A Facebook post from Gati on July 13, 2018: *"To new adventures! After six wonderful, enriching years in its studios in Khirki, Gati Dance Forum is moving out. Our future plans do not include running a studio space at the moment, but we have lots of exciting projects coming up, including IGNITE! Dance Festival, residencies, and a new annual journal that populates a discourse around the body and the performative."*

The founding members of Gati do not see this transition as an end. They are aware that the place has a history to which many dancers are attached. But they struggled with the costs of managing the site and the team, and they see this new beginning as an opportunity to question their policy. They continue to work with the Goethe Institute and the Swiss Arts Council for their symposiums and other projects.

In Delhi there are three other important institutions:

The **Bhoomika Creative Dance Centre** founded by Narendra Sharma, a former dancer with Uday Shankar, is a contemporary dance school and company now run by Narendra's son, Bharat Sharma.

The company **Sadya** created by Santosh Nair, former student of Narendra Sharma trained in *Chhau* techniques of *Mayurbanj* and *Kathakali*.

The **DanceworX Academy** directed by Ashley Lobo.

## ***IN IMPHAL***

Initiated by choreographer Surjit Nongmeikapam, the **Nachom Arts Foundation** (NAF), founded in May 2009 focuses on contemporary artistic practices of all kinds. NAF is a team of friends interested in the interaction between dance and various domains such as thought systems, ecology, science and technology, health and somatic practices.

**Surjit Nongmeikapam:** *"In Imphal there are places for learning and performing classical forms. There is no comparable structure for modern research here. I hope that NAF will provide this necessary space for research and reflection, studios to work and so on. We hope to one day open up a public space where we can present works regularly, welcome foreign researchers or creators, enable to hem meet our traditional artistes, and encourage collaborative projects to open minds to different artistic approaches."*

**A.R.DA.C the Sayon**<sup>25</sup> was formed in 2005. Today more than thirty boys and girls participate. It is open to various contemporary urban techniques such as hip hop and Bboy, and to local traditional forms such as *Meitei Jagoi* or *Thang Ta*. Most of the dancers in the group are very athletic and versatile. As comfortable in the delicate gestures of tradition as in the ancestral martial techniques, they also take part in professional breakdance battles, in urban competitions or stunts for the Indian cinema as well as in religious ceremonies during temple festivals. The group also has a professional Parkour<sup>26</sup> team. Today, they involve themselves with the same enthusiasm in the contemporary under the direction of Surjit Nongmeikapam who helps them discover a different approach to the body - more interior, more open and more creative.

**Angom Tombi Meitei:** *"I am the founder of A.R.DA.C the Sayon, hip hop dance group in Manipur. The group is composed of young boys and girls who are mostly students. Some also participate in the creations of Surjit. The work with Surjit is very different from my other techniques. With Surjit we express ourselves more personally. He guides us to improvise and to the express our personality. This is the big difference with other forms. Surjit's work is very new here. Most people don't understand this art form. It is only gradually that this work will be accepted."*

## ***IN AHMEDABAD***

Kumudini Lakhya has trained many *Kathak* dancers at her **Kadamb Dance Centre**. A major impetus was her desire to replace traditional teaching that required dancing without asking questions. She adapted her teaching to each individual in order to allow them develop their own imagination.

Founded 70 years ago by Mrinalini Sarabhai on the Sabarmati River, **Darpana** is now directed by her daughter Mallika Sarabhai. It is a dance school where *Bharatanatyam* and *Kuchipudi* as well as other techniques from India are taught.

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<sup>25</sup>A.R.DA.C: All Round Dance Crew; *Sayon*: manipuri word meaning *Avatar*

<sup>26</sup>*Parkour*: physical discipline aiming to get from one point to another in a complex environment, without assistive equipment and in the fastest and most efficient way possible.

## *IN MUMBAI*

**The Terence Lewis Contemporary Dance Institute** offers *foundation course* one year cycles. Ravinder Singh who is one of the leading instructors began by learning break-dance then received most of his training in contemporary techniques in Vienna during intensive workshops at **ImPulsTanz**.

**Ravinder Singh:** *"Students come to our institute quite late at age 18. They are already determined about their future. They cannot spend several years on their apprenticeship to have a chance to position themselves quickly on the professional circuit. They are selected on their potential and not on their technical quality on arrival. What interests us is their attitude and their determination."*

## *IN CHENNAI*

Surprisingly, while Chennai hosts the famous **Kalakshetra**, one of the most prestigious academies of classical dance in India, the city has no real structure to transmit contemporary trends. There is no place comparable to the Delhi Gati Dance Forum or to the Attakkalari Centre in Bangalore where diplomas in contemporary dance can be obtained. Choreographers in Chennai tend to remain independent and do not conduct classes where they could pass on their research methods. Dancers Padmini Chettur and Anita Ratnam sometimes serve as mentors for young artistes.

**Preethi Athreya:** *"For parents, sending their girls to learn Bharatanatyam was equivalent to teaching them culture and its traditional values. It is hard to imagine that today they would send their children to learn contemporary dance where one questions issues like gender, capitalism, politics and what makes status quo in the society we live in."*

## 9. VENUES AND FUNDING

With the institutionalisation of classical forms at the beginning of the twentieth century, new places of representation began to appear. The main dance institutions have acquired their own auditorium. In big cities proscenium auditoriums were built on the Western model. This chapter will present an inventory of the most important venues dedicated to dance and the material conditions underlying their operating.

### *a) Places of performance*

In a country of more than a billion inhabitants, it is clear that the number of professionally equipped stages is surprisingly small.

#### *IN DELHI*

Performing venues aggregate around **Mandi House**, one of the city's most prestigious and culturally active areas. The main theatres are **Kamani Auditorium**, **Shri Ram Centre for Performing Arts**, **FICCI auditorium**<sup>27</sup>, **Triveni Kala Sangam**, the few stages of the **National School of Drama**, as well as the theatres of the **Sangeet Natak Akademi**.

#### *IN MUMBAI*

There are three main venues for live performances in Mumbai: the **NCPA**<sup>28</sup>, the **Prithvi Theatre** and the **Royal Opera House**.

#### *IN BANGALORE*

The most famous venue is the **Ranga Shankara Theatre**, a place with a well-equipped professional stage. The **Jagriti Theatre** is a small intimate stage especially dedicated to theatre and sometimes to dance.

#### *IN CHENNAI*

The **Museum Theatre**, the prestigious **Music Akademi**, the **Rukmini Auditorium** in **Kalakshetra** are the most prominent venues for dance in Chennai. We may also mention the small scene of **Spaces**, created by Chandralekha, as well as the important role of some *sabhas* particularly active during the *December Season*.

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<sup>27</sup> Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry

<sup>28</sup> National Centre for Performing Arts

## **IN AHMEDABAD**

Attached to Darpana's teaching spaces and the café restaurant, the **Natarani** amphitheatre directed by Mallika Sarabhai, has been presenting works from all over the world. The venue is often loaned to local artistes to encourage their creativity. The open-air amphitheatre has been completely rebuilt recently and offers technical facilities unique in the country.

**Mallika Sarabhai:** *"The idea was to create a unique space in Ahmedabad that could celebrate the arts of the world. I also wanted to show that one can be environmentally friendly in construction while being technologically advanced."*

Here and there new places appear that renew the landscape and seek to mobilise new audiences. In Delhi, **OddBird Theatre and Foundation** is a private experimental venue created in a trendy neighbourhood of the city. In Mumbai the **G5-A Foundation for Contemporary Culture** has invested an old warehouse in the centre of the city.

In large cities, foreign cultural centres sometimes host festivals or the work of contemporary choreographers. The Goethe Institut/Max Muller Bhavan, the Swiss Arts Council/Pro Helvetia, the Alliances Françaises or the British Councils often own small auditorium that allow artistes to show their work. Theatres on some university campus often have good facilities to host various performances (in Chandigarh, in Pune, for example).

Due to the lack of infrastructure, artistes are increasingly turning to alternative venues to present their creations and place them in unusual contexts in order to open their works to new audiences. For example, Mandeep Raikhy's *Queen Size* was performed in a college of architecture, on a rooftop cinema, in a courthouse, in private houses. More than 3,000 people could thus see the piece in eight cities in India.

**Padmini Chettur** (Chennai): *"Until five years ago, I only danced on theatre stages or for festivals. When it became more and more difficult to find production budgets I started to perform in alternative places like museums or galleries. After this experience it was difficult to return to closed theatre."*

**Anoushka Kurian** (Chennai): *"My piece To Be Danced can be performed anywhere. Now I carry my own projector, my own sound equipment. But you always have to ask yourself if it's a compromise or if it's a choice."*

**Surjit Nongmeikapam** (Imphal): *"If I want to show my work in Imphal I have to finance it myself. There is no place, no festivals and no funding."*

**Avantika Bhal** (Mumbai): *"Actually Say What is not meant to be shown on stage. It is made to be shown in large rooms that can accommodate different audiences little accustomed to this kind of proposal. We often go to schools or universities. It is very important for us to speak to these young generations as they start wondering about normalcy. The youngest spectators we had were 9 or 10 years old and it was one of our best experiences!"*

## **b) Festivals**

For the past 20 years or so, several annual or bi-annual festivals have been following the evolution of dance today in India and elsewhere. Some, like the **Parks New Festival** in Chennai, **IGNITE!** in Delhi or the **Serendipity Festival** of Goa are more specifically dedicated to the proposals of Indian choreographers. Others such as the **Attakkalari Biennale** in Bangalore or **Dance Bridges** in Kolkata are mainly focused on the presentation of international companies with only a few Indian performances.

### **IN CHENNAI**

From 1998 to 2006, **The Other Festival**, organised by Anita Ratnam and Ranvir Shah as part of the Prakriti Foundation, is one of the first platforms for contemporary dance in India. Created by Ranvir Shah, the Prakriti Foundation is dedicated to the presentation of new forms of artistic expression in the fields of music, dance, cinema and poetry.

**Ranvir Shah** (Chennai): *"We believe that contemporary dance is the emerging form of expression that weaves its own language and grammar in India. This needs to be recognised and supported to enable artistes to achieve high levels of excellence."*

From 2007 onwards, the **Park's New Festival** replaces the **Other Festival**. Ranvir is inspired by the new dynamic of the country as it strives to become the *New India* in the world of business. Each year, the festival is held in six cities: New Delhi, Kolkata, Hyderabad, Mumbai, Bangalore and Chennai.

**Ranvir Shah:** *"We looked for those who today reflect on the new problems in the performing arts. In our festival we present music, dance, and theatre made by Indian artistes living in India or abroad."*

Conceptualised by Ranvir Shah, **PECDA**<sup>29</sup> is a competition curated by Kartika Nair. Involved in contemporary dance in Europe, Karthika has worked with choreographers such as Akram Khan, Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui and Rachid Oumramdane. The competition is based on the model of the **Danse Élargie** programme of the Théâtre de la Ville in Paris and similar events in Italy and Great Britain. It is open to artistes who are not necessarily Indian but necessarily resident in India, without age limit. It is an opportunity for the selected choreographers to show an excerpt from a work in progress to foreign programmers and a jury composed of half Western professionals and of half Indian personalities. The winner of the contest receive Rs 5 lakh (about 6,000€) as a prize. She/he is tutored by an international company and presents her/his full work the following year in six cities in India as part of the Park's New Festival of the Prakriti Foundation.

The first editions of the contest revealed promising talents: Deepak Kurki Shivaswamy who won in 2012, Surjit Nongmeikapam, who won the contest in 2014 and 2016, Abhilash Ningappa, Diya Naidu and Virieno Parth Bharadwaj, finalists in 2016. The winners of the contest benefitted by tutoring with Akram Khan for the first two years and Rachid Oumramdane for the third edition.

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<sup>29</sup> Prakriti Excellence in Contemporary Dance Awards



For some of Chennai's choreographers, the PECDA competition is not necessarily a welcome initiative.

**Padmini Chettur:** *"In my opinion this competition is a very bad idea. Yet another imposition from the West, trying to tell us what to do and how to do it. It is a kind of new imperialism all over again that we welcome with open arms."*

Basement 21 collective, founded in 2011 by Padmini Chettur, Preethi Athreya, K. Pravin and Marteen Visser, organises the **March Dance festival** in partnership with the Goethe-Institut/ Max Mueller Bhavan of Chennai since 2017.

### **IN BANGALORE**

Created by Jayachandran Pallazhi and his team in 2000, the **Attakkalari India Biennale** has become the most important dance event in Southeast Asia. In 2017, the festival curated international companies from South Korea, South Africa, France, Spain, Poland, India, Germany, the Netherlands, Finland, Canada and Switzerland. In addition to the shows the festival offers a wide variety of workshops, debates and symposiums around the theme chosen for the Biennale. In addition to this major bi-annual event, Attakkalari has just launched a new event called **Body Matters - Move to Transform**.

**<http://www.attakkalari.org/>:** *"The festival will highlight creativity, innovation and the production of knowledge as motors of the transformation of individuals and society in general. The focus will be on education strategies for the overall development of the individual by doing dance, movement arts and cultural skills an integral part of a student-centred, creative approach to education."*

### **IN DELHI**

The **IGNITE! Contemporary Dance Festival**, a biennial organised by the Gati Dance Forum since 2010, is one of the most important contemporary dance festivals in India. It focuses on contemporary Indian productions or productions in direct connection with India.

**Virkein Dar**, director of the festival: *"The idea was to create a space to share proposals from all over India as well as some from outside but meeting the same criteria of connection with India. It was also about creating an audience for contemporary dance that absolutely did not exist. Until then the works of young choreographers were seen only by circles of friends and families. The festival project has evolved over the years. First imagined as a simple platform it became a motor to implement new ideas. The idea today is that the festival will be the place to Ignite new initiatives that can sustain themselves afterwards. The first three editions took place in Delhi. We're trying to take it to other cities because the audience is there and is pushing us to find new territories."*

The 2016 edition moved to Jaipur where public reactions were very encouraging. Today Virkein is working to develop a network of several festivals for the organisation across India with local partners.

## ***IN KOLKATA***

The **Dance Bridges Festival** has been directed by Vanessa Mirza since 2015. The team in charge of the organisation is made of personalities from all over the world. The festival takes place every two years in August. It spans a week and presents contemporary works by a few Indian choreographers and a majority of foreign choreographers. The selected companies have free accommodation but have to meet transportation and other costs. The 2017 edition of the Biennale featured 70 artistes from 17 countries for 18 shows. It was programmed on a dozen different venues and was accompanied by workshops, artiste residencies and meetings around dance.

In Kolkata too, **The Pickle Factory** is a new project imagined by dancer Vikram Iyengar. The first edition of the festival took place in February/March 2018. The festival announced two weeks of training, 15 days of various exhibitions related to movement and 10 days of shows including those of Padmini Chettur and Preethi Athreya. It was spread in various parts of the city.

## ***IN GOA***

The **Serendipity Arts Festival** is a multi-disciplinary festival now in its third edition. The festival offers an impressive programme covering many artistic forms. Dance is curated by Ranjana Dave and dancer Leela Samson. In 2018, they selected Mandeep Raikhy, Avantika Bahl, Preethi Athreya, Anoushka Kurien and Deepak Kurki Shivaswami for the most contemporary, Maya Krishna Rao and Navtej Johar for the most unclassifiable and a number of representatives of classical forms of dance.

### ***c) Working places***

The studios of established choreographers such as Kumudini Lakhya and Mallika Sarabhai in Ahmedabad, Daksha Sheth in Trivandrum, and The Terence Lewis Dance Company in Mumbai are sometimes lent to young emerging choreographers. However they are usually reserved for the work of the permanent companies.

It is difficult for young independent dancers and choreographers to find a place for rehearsal or research. It is sometimes possible to obtain a studio for practice at the European cultural centres, which are among the structures to welcome research in dance.

Choreographers in Chennai manage as they can to find places for work. None of them seem to have had the possibility to create a specific place dedicated to regular practice. They rehearse in unoccupied apartments, on the terrace of a building, at home. **Spaces**, the place created by Chandralekha sometimes hosts company works but it is irregular and decisions are often made at the last moment.

**Preethi Athreya** (Chennai): *"I am here in an environment of total isolation. There is no structure to support or encourage new projects. The only motor is to know why we want to do this or that project. If I want to start a project tomorrow I first have to find a space. It's as basic as that."*

Interviewed in Chennai in the empty apartment of one of her friends where she was conducting her research work, **Anoushka Kurien** says:

*"There are only two possibilities for residency in India. Formerly it was at Gati in Delhi. The other is Attakalari in Bangalore where I've been before. For me, residencies are useful when the work is already half-started. It's often hard to predict when ideas will get organised. Sometimes you miss the application dates..."*

In Imphal, the multi-disciplinary nature of the dancers of A.R.D.A.C. allows the group to finance its operation. Here artistes have taken matters into their own hands and built their own spaces. Activities revolve around the large **Yupham Studio** above Surjit's house and the A.R.D.A.C. teaching studio in the city centre.

The city of Bangalore is a model where several workspaces have been created in recent years. They can be rented for creative residencies.

### **Play Practice Residency :**

<https://www.playpractice.in/copy-of-home/>: *"Play Practice is an artist's residency program. It started in 2014 as a project from Bangalore Dance Collective, a nonprofit organisation initiated by Abhilash Ningappa and various artists collaborators working together with a firm belief in contemporary performing and movement art projects."*

The place has well-equipped work studios. It offers numerous workshops and other activities and can be rented by small teams of artistes in a creation process.

### **Shoonya - Centre for art and somatic practices:**

<http://shoonyaspace.com/about-us/>: founded in 2014, *"Shoonya is a nonprofit, multi-arts centre in the heart of Bangalore. Shoonya is envisioned to be a platform for art and somatic practices. It has been thoughtfully designed for people of different artistic disciplines and somatic practices to create, connect and collaborate. We offer a space for artists and the community to engage; an open and nourishing environment for people from diverse cultures and ages to impart knowledge and share experiences around creativity, performance, holistic health and education."*

Place of teaching and research Shoonya has good spaces for practice and good accommodation.

#### **d) Funding**

Initiatives in the field of contemporary dance creation have little support from government authorities. Private foundations such as the **India Foundation for the Arts** or the **TATA Trusts** sometimes provide individual support to artistes. Most festivals and creative venues are also punctually supported by Western structures such as the **Ford Foundation for the Arts**, **Max Müller Bhavan/Goethe Institute**, **British Council**, **Pro Helvetia** and **Institut Français/Alliances Françaises**. Festivals can sometimes coordinate part of their international programming with those cultural centres, thus benefitting from ad hoc support for foreign companies. These supports frequently provoke debates on the possibility of developing modernity without Western control.

**Mandeep Raikhy** (Delhi): *"Unlike in other parts of the world, supporting contemporary dance does not seem to be part of the Indian government agenda. As to private funding, it goes mostly to reality shows or online media. We often have to call on friends or other close sponsors. However, some small grants slowly start being given for what is called experimental dance in quotation marks."*

Most of the government's financial support goes to the classic and neo-classic forms of dance, with the big institutions receiving important operating grants for the preservation of performative traditions. Independent artistes in the classical field usually must rely on personal networks to obtain aid.

**Virkein Dhar** (Delhi): *"It is not necessarily the classical dances themselves that benefit from state financial support. It's more a certain group of people. There are actually many classical dancers who don't get any help. What is really lacking is a policy to help independent artistes, regardless of their technique. It's not really a competition between classical and contemporary. I think now is the time to find our own ways of financing projects without waiting for the support of the State or other organisations. Time to turn to the public and accustom them to pay to see our shows. This is very new in India. A way to get them more involved in the process."*

Most contemporary choreographers acknowledge the lack of recognition and funding from government authorities, but they also sometimes rejoice because it is for them a guarantee of their freedom. All of them work towards finding independent solutions to finance projects.

The **Terence Lewis Contemporary Dance Company** in Mumbai, for example, relies on the commercial wing of its activities. The company has frequent commissions for events of all kinds. These may include advertising spots, brand launches, company parties, awards ceremonies as well as engagement and wedding ceremonies for very rich Mumbai families. Orders are often made overnight. Sometimes the company is asked to reproduce the choreography of a song from a Bollywood film, at times even in live accompaniment to the stars of the film. Other times the choreographer may be asked to stage the families of the bride and groom; the group of uncles, the group of grandmothers, the sisters' group or others will each be assigned a piece of the choreography that they will perform together on the wedding day... He may be asked to provide a grand entrance for a corporate director for the inauguration of his general assembly. Events often involve recycling Bollywood songs, but sponsors now frequently turn to the more contemporary and more artistic proposals of the company. Sometimes it's a mixture of both. It is an extremely important source of income that allows the troupe to pursue its more artistic projects and its education programmes.

### ***e) Opportunities***

After their year of *foundation training*, the dancers at the Terence Lewis Professional Training Institute can pursue a variety of careers. A few will join the company. Some will try their luck in the film industry, but the new generation of dancers are more interested in a possible participation in the many reality shows and the opportunities offered by YouTube. The competition is tough and few are selected. Some become assistant choreographers in the film industry, some move towards production and administration. Others go back to their hometowns to set up their own academies. A few go abroad to complete their training.

Dancers trained at Attakkalari in Bangalore finish their course with a degree. Some of them go into teaching. Many schools and university colleges now offer a course in contemporary dance for which dance teachers are properly paid. Attakkalari dancers are often employed in other cities in India. They sometimes teach in art or theatre schools such as the National School of Drama in Delhi. Other dancers can eventually join the Attakkalari Dance Company or other companies after audition. Some also form their own company to create their own choreographies. Attakkalari used to employ artistes on a monthly basis for a period of time, but for the past year the model has been questioned both because it was becoming difficult to finance a permanent company and also in the interest of freeing up artistes for other commitments. Today the company operates on a project basis.

Created more than 60 years ago to celebrate and commemorate the birth anniversary of Swamy Vivekananda (1863-1902), an iconic Indian philosopher, the **Youth Festivals** have become a huge phenomenon in some parts of India. These are inter-school competitions where the winners receive prestigious prizes, gold trophies, considerable sums of money, as well as marks towards their degree. These festivals are organised nationally or regionally. In some regions, such as Kerala, the phenomenon has taken on dizzying proportions and gives rise each year to heated debates and resounding challenges that often end up before the courts! The financial interests are enormous. More and more families present candidates and they often spend considerable amounts of money hiring the best private coaches who will teach their children a few items. Until recently the most represented disciplines in these competitions were classical or folk dances in all forms, music, imitation sketches, etc. For the past two or three years, contemporary dance has been included in the list of disciplines. This opens a lucrative opportunity for the best contemporary dance teachers.

## 10. INTERNATIONAL CONTACTS

**Padmini Chettur** (Chennai): *"For Westerners it is much more comfortable to consider India as a place where one can find ancient traditions. It is as if it were necessary and deliberate to prevent innovation here. I'm trying to understand the origin of the Westerners' attraction to traditional forms. Maybe it's the appeal for exoticism, post-orientalism. For me the main problem is that the discourse around contemporary dance is always eurocentric. So is the curating policy."*

**Mandeep Raikhy** (Delhi): *"The history of Western dance is intimately linked to the dance forms of our Asian world. The pioneers of contemporary dance in the West have been nourished by these images and practices. This is not always recognised as a historical factor. It is often erased in the dance narrative."*

In the 1970s, the main classical forms of Indian dance were widely presented at festivals in Western countries. The 1980s marked the climax of this movement with many festivals and bilateral cultural events worldwide, notably in the USA, USSR, UK and France. The 'fascination' that they exerted there strongly impressed the Indian authorities who continue to use them as symbols of the country's cultural identity.

The **East-West Encounter** festival initiated in Bombay in 1984 by Georg Lechner, then director of the Max Muller Bhavan, established bridges between Indian dancers and contemporary Western choreographers. Other editions followed in 1984 and 1993 in Delhi under the title *New Directions in Indian Dance*. In 1989 the Sangeet Natak Akademi began to take an interest in the phenomenon and organised the **Nava Nritya Samaroh**. The East-West Encounters offered performances and discussions between performers and critics representing different theories and practices of dance. Guest Indian dancers included Mrinalini Sarabhai, Kumudini Lakhia, Chandralekha, Yamini Krishnamurty, Bharat Sharma, Uttara Asha Coorlawala, Astad Deboo. The invited European choreographers were Susanne Linke and Gerhard Bohner from Germany, Dominique Bagouet from France, Stephen Long from England, Ann Marie Gaston from Canada, and Carmen de Lavallade from the USA. In 1994, Pina Bausch made a memorable tour with her show *Carnations* in Delhi, Bombay, Madras and Calcutta. From 1988 onwards Chandralekha and Pina Bausch shared an intense artistic friendship that lasted until Chandra's death.

Many of today's choreographers in India have received scholarships to go to the London Laban Centre or other foreign teaching institutions for one or two years. They include Jayachandran Palazhi, Mandeep Raikhy, Padmini Chettur, Preethi Athreya, Anoushka Kurien, Avantika Bahl, Sanjukta Wahl. While some minimise or relativise the influence of this part of their artistic journey, others acknowledge the benefit they acquired, in particular through learning improvisation techniques that are almost non-existent in Indian dance.

Jayachandran Palazhi (Bangalore) used his stay in London and Europe to discover what was going on in contemporary dance. He attended many shows and took numerous classes. He created his own company in London composed of dancers from different countries. All this allowed him to reflect deeply on the issues of transmission and helped him develop his educational project for Attakkalari.

Many dancers and directors of structures and festivals cultivate regular relations with networks around the world by participating in quite common colloquia and forums of international discussions.

Vikram Iyengar (Kolkata) is a member of many international cultural organisations, **ARThink South Asia Management Fellow** in 2013-2014, **International Society for the Performing Arts** (ISPA) in 2017 and 2019, and **Creative Tracks**, an international platform linking arts entrepreneurs. He is one of five Asia-Pacific delegates to the **International Arts Leaders Program** of the Arts Council of Australia 2017-2018.

Vanessa Mirza (Kolkata) has built an important network of international contacts during her studies in Taiwan, her many travels abroad and through her contacts with the **World Dance Alliance**. She regrets that though in the 1990s it was frequent to see foreign companies in Kolkata, it has now become a rare event.

In Kolkata too, the Rythmosaic Dance Institute led by Ronnie Shambik Ghose is affiliated with the French Nice OffJazz Dance Academy. The institute teaches *Kathak*, modern jazz, ballet, contemporary dance and tap dancing. The **Sengupta Dance Company**, a section of Rythmosaic co-directed by Ronnie Shambik Ghose and Mittul Sengupta, has an impressive record of international touring. The company regularly participates in collaborative projects in Europe and today increasingly in Asia and both dancers give workshops throughout India and abroad.

Contacts with Western artistes still much depend on international cultural centres and diplomatic missions. The influence of these organisations fluctuates according to the funding and the cultural policies of the concerned countries. They sometimes promote exchanges between Indian and Western artistes and fund projects of selected Indian choreographers and festivals. After strong participation by the British Council, Alliances Françaises and French Institute at certain periods, today it is the Swiss Arts Council Pro Helvetia and the German Goethe Institut/Max Mueller Bhavan which mostly support and influence contemporary dance in India. However, funding from these organisations has declined in recent years and choreographers struggle to find new partners. Some are looking towards Asia, where South Korea and Japan are more prominent in their trade policies and cultural relations with India.

**Mandeep Raikhy** (Delhi): *"Today choreographic productions created in the West are rarely scheduled in India. The only choreographers presented in recent years are Akram Khan and Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui. It is now YouTube that allows us to stay in touch with the new proposals of dance in the world."*

Because of the inevitable opening to the world and of the need to find new forms of production and funding, Indian choreographers and dancers are increasingly taking part in international collaborative projects. These collaborations are usually ephemeral and superficial, but they allow Indian dancers to practice Western techniques and Western dancers to learn Indian techniques that could eventually colour their own projects.

**Preethi Athreya** (Chennai): *"In some collaborative projects there are aesthetic and political choices that sometimes force you to betray your own concerns. However I think it is absolutely necessary to travel when one is in the business of making art. Otherwise you end up being blind and focused only on yourself."*

**Anoushka Kurien** (Chennai): *"I took part in a political collaborative project in Johannesburg with dancers from different countries under the aegis of the BRICS<sup>30</sup>. We worked for two months. I don't know if the organisers were satisfied, but we did not just stick representative passages of our different styles into a kind of patchwork as was expected from us. Instead, we asked the question: how does dance become an export product at the service of a diplomatic vision of a cultural project?"*

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<sup>30</sup> BRICS: Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa.



**Surjit Nongmeikapam** (Imphal) sometimes participates in this type of collaborative exchange, dancing, for example in the *Softmachine* show directed by Choy Ka Fai, an artist from Singapore. Created in India the piece is regularly programmed on many international stages. Surjit also works with European and Japanese dancers.

Like Surjit, other dancers and choreographers increasingly turn to Asia, a territory they feel close to and perceive as more open to their work than the West.

**Vikram Iyengar** (Kolkata): *"The Pickle Factory is an attempt to develop a local discourse and by local, I am thinking not only of Calcutta or India but of this whole Asian region. A discourse that would contradict the Western modes of production and perception of art that currently prevail. That's why we're very interested in the Asia-Pacific region."*

Here are some other examples of collaborations:

In Mumbai, in partnership with the Alliance Française and the Institut Français Inde, Ali Salmi, director of the Osmosis Cie in France, lead in 2018-2019 the programme **Dance With The City**. It was an original dance performance in public spaces in which he included dancers of the Terence Lewis Dance Company during classes and site specific experiments. He renewed this experience in Bangalore in collaboration with dancers of the Attakkalari centre, in Trivandrum with practitioners of the *Kalarippayat* martial art, at the National School of Drama in Delhi and also in Ahmedabad around the architecture of Le Corbusier.

In Goa, the **Goa Dance Residency** proposes paying workshops of one to three months with international teachers coming from the Laban Centre or Shobhana Jaysingh and Akram Khan companies. A bursary scheme allows young Indian dancers to participate in these workshops.

In Goa again, **The Sanskar India 2020** International Dance Festival announces a *"two-weeks training for 60 professional dancers and movement-based performers from all over the planet. A unique fusion of contemporary movement techniques and traditional Indian dance language in workshops, lectures, and performances by eight of the most respected teachers of the world's dance scene."* Teachers: David Zambrano; Wim Vandekeybus; Roberto Olivan; Sanjukta Sinha; Francisco Cordova; Vittoria De Ferrari; Pradeep Sattwamaya; Usha Nangiar.

In Kerala, contemporary dancers Saju Hari (London) and Sreejith K.P., both originally trained in Attakkalari Bangalore, created the **Disha** programme in Cochin. Dancers from all walks of life and nationalities gather for a two week intensive course in contemporary dance and also learn about local artistic forms.

In Bangalore, Attakkalari students are often exposed to foreign dancers passing through for short residencies. Recently, Colombian Lina Gomez and Spaniard Dan Lourenço held regular classes for a few weeks. These residencies are financed by the Centre, which houses the teachers and provides them with a minimum income.

In Kolkata, an interesting programme is jointly organised by the Alliance Française du Bengale, The Goethe-Institut/Max Mueller Bhavan and the British Council, in collaboration with gallery CIMA and Kala Bhavana, VisvaBharati University, Santiniketan, West Bengal: the inter-disciplinary **Indo-European Residency Project** for four artists (from Germany, France, United Kingdom and India) practicing different art forms (visual arts, performative arts, writing, films, music/sound, new media). The aim of this residency is the creation of an individual or collective art project during the stay in India.

Abhilash Ningappa, one of the finalists of the PECDA Contest in 2016, founder of the Play Practice Artists Residency Centre in Bangalore, works with many structures abroad. He gives classes and workshops in major cities of India but also frequently in Europe. He composes choreographies for and with Indian dancers as well as for and with European dancers.

## 11. PERSPECTIVES

The PECDA contest in Chennai is perhaps an indicator of the future evolution of contemporary dance creation in India. In 2018, 21 proposals were in competition. Some of the participants came from previously poorly represented areas like Nagpur, Ranchi, Kerala and North East India. Aseng Borang won this last edition. Originally from Arunachal Pradesh in north-eastern India, she is based in Delhi where she follows the new curriculum of Ambedkar University. With rare exceptions, PECDA 2018 seemed to move away from the traditional roots of Indian dances and to lend itself to free writing without particular stylistic references. The works were often manifesto-like, reflecting an astonishing uniformity of themes and narrative symbols clearly focused on ecological or stressful social issues. The few 'abstract' proposals were limited to rather academic exercises built on simplistic bases.

**Preethi Athreya** (Chennai): *"It would not be amiss to say that contemporary dance seems to be emerging from a culture of dance labs, camps, workshops and competitions, where, in effect, the context for creation is pre-decided. The subversive body that (dancer) Chandralekha proposed is under threat of extinction from a generation's own surge for finding its practice, and an endorsement of it. We need the radicals and we need ecosystems that will enable a longer and more rigorous relationship with the practice."* (*The Hindu*, September 7, 2018).

**Deepak Kurki Shivaswamy** (Delhi): *"Over the past five years there have been many more places to study dance. Today there are a lot of possibilities from classical ballet to hip hop, Graham, contact, Feldenkreis, Limon, capoeira etc. So we have more information about the different techniques. What we lack is a critical thinking on creative process to find our own way. Often the techniques are transformed into products. In the contemporary field it gives very academic results. There should be a place where young dancers can reflect deeply on what they can do to go beyond reproduction. In my classes I stress the need to question everything. Question the techniques learned and question the creation. In fact, it is surprising to see that there is a real dynamic among young dancers while government gives so little encouragement. Collectives are being created, small companies are emerging. So I'm very positive about the possibilities for the future."*

**Preethi Athreya** (Chennai): *"We are becoming a nation of clerks trained in various techniques that we have imported. It's great to learn these techniques, but if you're not aware of why you're learning them, then you become a kind of a technician with tools, but that's it. Does it tell you what your body should be and more specifically what your body should be in the context of this country."*

**Manju Sharma** (Delhi): *"For the Indian public, dance is only associated with the notion of movement, rhythm and music. People are not used to exploring ideas and mental states in dance. It's very exciting to see them today getting interested in what choreographers and dancers bring to a show from their own lives."*

**Padmini Chettur** (Chennai): *"Times are changing. The sense of rigour no longer exists today. We used to work five days a week, five hours a day. Today two days are the maximum. I find more enthusiasm and virtuosity in chinese dancers. When I worked with Chandra, she attracted an extraordinary public in terms of numbers and quality. She attracted people who had never been to a dance show before. Since then, there are probably more festivals and platforms, but I don't think the audience has become more 'critical' or more specific. For contemporary dance an audience in India is still in the making. What they want is flashy, like Akram Khan. Everything is measured in terms of careers and products. We have lost an important dimension of critical research over time. The young people create pieces very quickly and their goal is to tour them in Europe once or twice before moving on to the next project."*

**Sadanand Menon** (Chennai): *"Young dancers should not completely ignore traditions; they should stay open, learn these forms, not to parasitise them or use them, but to understand their roots. To understand how bodies resist in a society and in space. This is what dance must carry. The new approaches will have to take contemporary policies and intellectual policies into account, for example the impact of governments and their colour on the notions of the body and relations between men and women. Without these approaches we will miss the historic moment, we can make 'beautiful' proposals but they will not resonate with the public."*

**Navtej Johar** (Delhi): *"I work with very young dancers and they give me a lot of hope. I think India - and perhaps the rest of the world - is getting rid of the oppression of ideas and at the end of the process we can go back to what is still essential, that is the body."*

## **12. CONCLUSION**

Taking into account the size and population of India, contemporary dance seems to occupy only a tiny part of the country's cultural landscape. It is still a nascent movement that struggles to mobilise crowds and remains limited to narrow circles. Over the past thirty years or so only a dozen names have emerged in the most 'contemporary' field of dance in India. Most public programmations regularly include Anoushka Kurien, Astad Deboo, Avantika Bahl, Deepak Kurki Shivaswami, Mandeep Raikhy, Maya Krishna Rao, Navtej Johar, Padmini Chettur, Preethi Athreya and Surjit Nongmeikapam.

Innovative proposals linked to the traditional forms are still the more successful. Choreographers Kumudini Lakhya, Mallika Sarabhai, Anita Ratnam, Aditi Mangaldas, Malavika Sarukai, Daksha Sheth and some others have succeeded in imposing and establishing their experiments while maintaining a kind of legitimacy through a claim of fidelity to the classical spirit of ancient performing forms. Their success often lies on strong personalities engaged in humanistic or cultural causes and belonging to rather affluent social strata. Some of them have created places for teaching and performing, or else have set up sustainable company work.

Other groups concentrating on Bollywood and modern jazz techniques work at rediscovering Indian roots by introducing their dancers to the country's classical techniques. Here again the links to the old forms are claimed as a strong affirmation of the need to define a dance of today still rooted in local aesthetics.

As everywhere, artistes are curious and in search of new experiences and exchanges, but there is an almost universal feeling of being torn between a desire to remain firmly anchored in their original culture and an imperative need to draw on liberating techniques from other cultures. Indian dance is still trying to define its contemporaneity. New choreographers are looking for the possibilities of creative compositions that would open the way to a modernity different from the simple mimicry of the West.

This is a critical moment for India and its creators. Creativity and novelty are areas of suspicion for state authorities and traditional conservative circles. This is specially the case where body freedom is concerned in a country where it has been for centuries under control by strict and codified rules to which the puritan diktats of colonial influences were added. Doing away with these codes can be a danger where social behaviour is today in a state of upheaval, and where moralistic leagues and identity claims by the dominant religion are coming back in force. Because it touches the body, because it visits an abstraction other than the religious abstraction familiar to the Indian people, contemporary choreographic creation in India may be seen as subversive and may become seriously targeted.

### **Paris 2019**

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