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Performing the Politics of Dissent in Indian Contemporary Dance

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Culture and Performance

by

Sanchita Sharma

2024

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Performing the Politics of Dissent in Indian Contemporary Dance

by

Sanchita Sharma

Doctor of Philosophy in Culture and Performance

University of California, Los Angeles

Professor Anusha L. Kedhar, Co-Chair

Professor David H. Gere, Co-Chair

In this dissertation, I study the politics of corporeal dissent and liberation in the work of three contemporary dance artists from India: Mandeep Raikhy (New Delhi), Padmini Chettur (Chennai), and Surjit Nongmeikapam (Imphal). I argue that, seen through the lens of dissent, their choreographic practices can be interpreted as a form of activism that questions, disagrees with, and resists an array of power structures—commercialized Indian classical dance, religious fundamentalism, western capitalism, and the ethnonationalist state.

Political dissent is what brings these three choreographers together, but how they choose to exercise it sets them apart. In chapter one, situated in New Delhi, Raikhy's focus on proposing the body as an agent of dissent to majoritarian ethnonationalism pushes viewers to question what secularism is, why we should value it, and what its limitations are in the Indian context. In chapter two, set in Chennai, Chettur's fracturing of the formal principles informing the Indian

classical dance bharatanatyam is an effort to structure a relational dialogue with the dance form, a process which I refer to as *liberatory deconstruction*. In chapter three, against the backdrop of Imphal in India's northeast, Nongmeikapam's *resistive hybridity*—both a strategy and a tactic to utilize the processes of assimilation and to disrupt it—allows for an empowering negotiation between national and regional culture in hopes of destabilizing the hierarchy between the two.

This dissertation contributes a new perspective on the interconnections between the global, (trans)national, and local politics of contemporaneity in India. In bringing together choreographers from distinct urban sectors in the country, this project, based on ethnographic field research in five major cities in India—the three mentioned earlier, along with Bangalore and Kolkata—gives a broad overview of shifting power dynamics within Indian contemporary dance, at the same time maintaining a microanalytical focus on cultural and regional influences. By doing so, this dissertation challenges any notions of a monolithic, homogeneous category of "Indian contemporary dance" and instead demonstrates the role dissent plays in the manifestation of contemporary dance aesthetics in India—enabling choreographers to articulate how bodies move through, question, and create culture.

The dissertation of Sanchita Sharma is approved.

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University of California, Los Angeles

2024

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Introduction

In this dissertation, I study the politics of corporeal dissent and liberation in the work of three contemporary dance artists from India—Mandeep Raikhy (New Delhi), Padmini Chettur (Chennai), and Surjit Nongmeikapam (Imphal). My dissertation, *Performing the Politics of Dissent in Indian Contemporary Dance*, asks how resistance to different power structures—commercialized Indian classical dance, religious fundamentalism, western capitalism, and the ethnonationalist state—necessitate different embodied modes by contemporary dancers in India. This dissertation suggests that by engaging with and being responsive to the physical, sensorial, and relational aspects of movement, we can comprehend the world beyond what is made visible and available to us for consumption.

I define *contemporary dance* in a way that focuses not on cultural syncretism, but instead on political dissent, which is why I have fixed on these three particular choreographers as the subject of my study. These are choreographers whose goal is to make the audience upset or even angry, motivating the spectator to take action and to envision specific changes we want to make in our world. Their version of contemporary dance is a form of activism.

The three choreographers I have chosen are a particularly interesting trio because they come from and therefore represent distinct regions of the country. On account of their diverse lived experiences, I pay close attention to the geopolitical environments within which they are working. In bringing together choreographers from three distinct urban sectors in the country—New Delhi (North), Chennai (South), and Imphal (North-East)—this project provides a broad overview of shifting power dynamics within Indian contemporary dance, at the same time maintaining a microanalytical focus on the cultural and regional influences that inform their somatic and choreographic approaches. This allows me to challenge any notions of a monolithic,

homogeneous category of "Indian contemporary dance" and to demonstrate what contemporary dance as political dissent looks like within specific regional contexts.

Considering how the politics of location shape the work of Indian contemporary dancers, I contextualize the strategic positioning of contemporary dancers in reference to other categories of dance in India—classical, folk, commercial, and western contemporary. This enables me to unpack the multiple layers that shape the ecosystems in which these three artists make work. I attend to how the artists in this study are both nestled within and resist the dominant order in their specific regions and emphasize the intersection between each artist's social location and the development of their contemporary aesthetic. In doing that, this dissertation contributes a new perspective on the interconnections between the global, (trans)national, and local politics of contemporaneity in India.

Parenthetically, it is notable that all three choreographers know each other, partly because they have participated in the Gati Dance Forum[1] in Delhi. Raikhy worked as the Managing Director for the organization and facilitated the Gati Summer Dance Residency for over a decade, while producing other crucial events that have been monumental in shaping the landscape of contemporary dance in India and South Asia. Chettur served as one of the mentors at the Gati Summer Dance Residency over the years. And Nongmeikapam participated as one of the residents in 2011. This is not to say that their work is replete with similarities. It isn't. But rather, they share certain fundamentals, including political analysis, clear movement statements that grow directly from that political analysis, and, ultimately, the expression of political dissent

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[1] Gati Dance Forum (GDF) was founded in 2007 as an independent arts organization. It was functional until 2018/2019 and during this time, it worked to support dancers and choreographers to create new choreographic works in the field of contemporary dance in India. Since 2013, the Inlaks Shivdasani Foundation has supported the Gati Summer Dance Residency, originally established in 2009, as one of the initiatives of GDF.

through choreography. The nature of that dissent and how it manifests in their choreography is a throughline that extends throughout the dissertation.

Political dissent is significant to a larger understanding of contemporary dance in India because India is, by far, the biggest democracy in the world, encompassing a population of 1.4 billion.[2] (The next biggest democracy belongs to the United States, with its population of 333.3 million.)[3] It should not therefore be surprising to find that Indian dance in this moment would necessarily address the particular features of Indian democracy in the first decades of the 21st century, including struggles over religious equality, the role of women in modern society, and the human rights of indigenous ethnic groups. These issues are particularly fraught at this moment because of the decade-long dominance of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which espouses a Hindu nationalist philosophy.

As a consequence, this dissertation is about three current choreographers, all working in a country tilting to fascism—in different parts of India, each with its own idiosyncratic concerns— with all three generating feisty choreographic images of the world in which they themselves want to live. To defy homogenization or standardization of a contemporary dance aesthetic, the three case studies in this dissertation provide robust examples of the ever-shifting landscape of contemporary dance in India. What brings them together is the role of corporeal dissent in their choreographic practice to question the existing social order and produce new forms of cultural and political knowledge. This then is a snapshot of contemporary dance in India.[4]

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[2] The Indian population was recorded as 1.4 billion. Source: https://www.census.gov/popclock/world/in#world-footer (accessed May 3, 2024).

[3] Population of the United States recorded on May 3, 2024. Source: https://www.census.gov/popclock/ (accessed May 3, 2024).

[4] I theorize the wider literature on contemporary dance in India, pertaining to the debates in the field, later in the introduction.

Why Indian Contemporary Dance?

I grew up dancing to Bollywood songs—at weddings, birthday parties, and every other place possible, just humming the songs and dancing to them as I would walk in my locality, Pitampura, a residential district in northwest Delhi. In April 2002, when I was eleven years old, my father made my elder brother (the middle child) and me (the youngest) join The Danceworx Performing Arts Academy, where we trained in jazz and modern dance styles.

This might seem like an unusual choice for my father, but in retrospect it reveals his interest in western literature and culture. He would occasionally mention how he was the only one in his friend circle back in Jalandhar, Punjab—where he grew up and went to college to get his diploma in Electrical Engineering in the 1970s—who would read English novels. Even as he grew up in a family of six brothers and sisters and started working at a clothing store in his early teens, he aspired to be more than what was expected of him. Reading western literature was a part of this dream. When he moved to Delhi in the 1980s, I think he carried with him his desire to be marked by western and "progressive" values, which shaped his decision to enroll his children (just the two of us, as my eldest brother was already away pursuing his bachelor's in information technology) in a dance academy where everyone spoke English and danced to only English language songs.

This was a difficult transition for me, especially because I was attending a partly Hindi medium school, was accustomed to Hindi and Punjabi language at home, and hesitated conversing in English. However, this made me a keen observer and an attentive listener. I enjoyed getting lost in the group, marking the steps to the beat, sometimes chasing to finish the phrase, but getting it done, in time, and with everybody. The sweat, the tiredness, the soreness in the muscles the next day made it all feel worthwhile.

When I turned seventeen and decided to pursue dance professionally, my brahminical household did not approve of my decision. Concerned that I would ruin my career by becoming an artist in India and that no one would marry a dancer trained in western dance forms, they insisted that I either switch to classical dance, if I *so* wished to continue dancing, or else get an MBA to secure my professional career. But I was determined and passionate about becoming a better dancer, so I resisted and continued. However, after having danced in The Danceworx professionally for six years, I hate to admit that I felt stagnant. I would train in the morning, teach in the evening, do administrative work, eat, sleep, and repeat, 24x7. I would always be tired. I had no holidays. No family time. No time to read the news. No time to think critically or self-reflexively.

Soon enough I realized that the jazz academy I worked for had positioned itself as elite and internationally acclaimed so that they could divert new students into their academy over Shiamak Davar's nearby studio, which was teaching Bollywood dance. The image of Bollywood as immoral and an amateur practice, and international dances, such as jazz and modern, as sophisticated and professional, was fed into my mind from a very early age. Meanwhile, Indian artists, in the "contemporary dance" world, were raising their voices and challenging oppressive training structures, commodification of the classical dances, and exoticization of the female dancing body.

For example, Chandralekha's choreography, *Sharira* (2001), which I watched for the first time while I was still at The Danceworx, challenged heteronormative codes of Indian sexuality. Just as Chandralekha was concerned with attending to the "sensuality, sexuality, spirituality in the body,"[5] including her sharp critique of heteronormativity, Mandeep Raikhy's *a male ant has*

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[5] Chandralekha shared about her philosophical explorations in dance in a film made by Ein Lall (2003), *Sharira: Chandralekha's Explorations in Dance*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vyXh_5dT0zw&t=1s.

a straight antennae (2013) questioned the performance of masculinity in public spaces. Dancers confronted the social codes of masculinity on stage—inverting them, tilting them, making them fluid, and reconstructing new ones. As I attended more performances, talks, and movement workshops at the "Ignite! Festival of Contemporary Arts," in 2015 and beyond, my perspective on dance, contemporary Indian dance, and how it can be used to frame urgent socio-political questions was shaped.

As a dancer, I already had former training in modern and contemporary dance styles with teachers such as Yuko Harada (Japan), Heidi Lynn Weiss (Germany), Sheila Ann Coleman and Maria Teresa Houar (USA), and Tino Sanchez (Spain), among others, who were visiting teaching artists at The Danceworx. These were mostly Euro-American artists and others who performed for western audiences. In 2013, upon the recommendation of former company dancer, Harada, I went to pursue a six-months professional development course for young dancers at Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company, Israel, where I trained in various dance techniques such as ballet, gaga, floor work, and learned and performed the company's repertoire. Until I watched *Sharira* and *a male ant has a straight antennae*, western concert dance styles were my reference points for contemporary dance, which were forever altered.

In 2014, I started taking movement classes and composition workshops at the Gati Dance Forum and sharing my solo-work at their platforms for emerging artists such as *6 Cube*. I enthusiastically attended classes by visiting artists and mentors at the Gati Summer Dance Residency (GSDR) in 2015 and 2016.[6] These experiences were formative in shaping my understanding of contemporary dance in India as I closely witnessed the process of creating it.

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[6] These sessions included "Choreographic Tools" with Preethi Athreya and Sankar Venkateswaran, "Choreography-Composition" with Mandeep Raikhy, anatomy-based technique classes with Padmini Chettur, and a "Body Conditioning and Choreography" intensive with UK-based choreographer Marina Collard.

This knowledge was enhanced and put to the test when I joined GSDR as a resident-choreographer in 2016.

At the time, as a freelance professional, I started presenting my choreographic work at dance gatherings such as *Lost and Found Festival: Invisible Cities, Inside/Outside Festival*, and *Contemporary Arts Week*, among others, take classes by contemporary dance teachers in different regions of the country, such as Nakula Somana, Deepak Kurki Shivaswamy, Diya Naidu, and Ronita Mookerji from Bangalore (2017), and later going on to perform in Preethi Athreya's *The Lost Wax Project* (2018) in Chennai, Kolkata, and Mumbai (Prakriti Excellence Contemporary Dance Awards, Pickle Factory Season 1, and G5A Foundation respectively). Between 2016 and 2018, I even performed in Raikhy's choreographic pieces, such as *Long Nights of Resistance* (2016) and *Pray* (2018), which were created as a direct response to the rising right-wing violence against the religious minorities in India. I also danced in Raikhy's diffused movement piece for the exhibition, *Saavdhaan*: Regimes of Truth, curated by Shaunak Mahbubani, which explored the politics of control through surveillance and censorship through a Foucauldian lens.

Through these diverse experiences in the field, the contemporary dance world lured me with its claims of freedom and liberation from oppressive training regimes, space for individual expression, and a deeper awareness of one's own anatomy and mobility. This is when I began to ask myself: Where is all of this information coming from? Where did people learn to dance or learn to talk about dance in this way? When did this shift occur in Indian dance? And where was I? These questions haunted me and were representative of my own aspiration to belong to this group of contemporary dance artists in India, and thus, became the starting point for this research project.

Interconnected Indian Dance Histories: Classical Dance, Folk Dance, and Contemporary Dance

Sarah Ahmed (2006) has written, "Histories shape what surfaces: they are behind the arrival of 'the what' that surfaces" (44). For Ahmed, "What passes through history is not only the work done by generations, but the 'sedimentation' of the work is the condition of arrival for future generations" (41). The situation of contemporary dance in India is similar to how Ahmed describes the "condition of arrival" in her work. What surfaces in terms of contemporary aesthetics in Indian dance today is shaped by and is in response to the history of nationalist reconstruction of Indian classical dances and displacement of folk performance traditions in contemporary India—which I discuss in detail below.

Arushi Singh (2019) has noted the "limits of the Indian state's dictum of nationalism and democracy, especially its ideas regarding the character of Indian identity and ideal citizenship" when it comes to aesthetic experimentations in Indian dance (24). Singh argues that the 1958 First All-India Dance Seminar, organized by Sangeet Natak Akademi (SNA), was crucial in the shaping of aesthetic categories such as "classical," "folk," and "innovative" (24). According to Singh, "within the discourse of state, the creation of new forms was only legitimate when it operated within and enhanced the framework of tradition and by association, assisted the consolidation of national identity" (25). Furthermore, Singh argues that the Indian state prioritized classical and folk dances, acknowledging their role in "preserving tradition and celebrating regional diversity, respectively" (24). This reveals how aesthetic experimentation in Indian dance has historically been perceived as a threat to national identity and citizenship, leading the Indian state to strictly regulate the boundaries and definitions of "innovation" and "experimentation" in Indian dance. The categorization of Indian dance forms, in this way,

demonstrates how the state viewed classical and folk dances as unchanging, allowing innovation to occur only outside the realms of these categories of Indian dance. In doing so, the state removed possibilities of critical engagement with the histories of marginalization in these dance forms and instead, obscured them for the postcolonial citizen.

In this section, I present a theoretical discussion around the function and meaning of contemporary dance in the Indian context—seen as a critique towards current politics as well as a practice that gate-keeps and limits who can critique and under what conditions. Mindful of the strategic positioning of contemporary dance in relation to commercial, folk, and classical dances in India, I first address the impact of the "reform-revival"[7] movement, which enabled the transfer of classical dances from hereditary castes to upper-caste female bodies—a history of caste-violence and appropriation which continues to impact the field of Indian dance today. Afterwards, I briefly discuss a similar history of displacement in folk performance traditions and how the marginalization of these traditions demonstrates inherent social hierarchies. Then, I layer arguments from scholars writing on contemporary dance to show the various perspectives through which we have come to understand contemporary dance in India. Upon discussing various theorizations of contemporary dance, I turn towards Doreen Massey's (2006) concept of "radical contemporaneity," which I believe is a promising analytical model to address and rethink the conditions of contemporaneity in India.

Dance scholars have critiqued the nationalist reconstruction of many Indian classical dances (bharatanatyam, kathak, kuchipudi), as this process involved the dispossession of

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[7] Dance scholars have analyzed the contested relationship between south Indian classical dances and the nation, especially in response to the reconstruction of twentieth century classical Indian dance (Allen 1997, 1998; Banerji 2019; Chakravorty 2008; Meduri 1988; Munsi 2011; O'Shea 2003, 2006, 2007, 2008; Srinivasan 1985). Scholars argue that the reform-revival movement during the nation-building project limited the social, economic, and sexual freedom of marginalized hereditary dancing women, who were outside the structures of marriage, and crafted a new image of the Indian female dancing body as moral, respectable, married, and upper-caste.

hereditary dancers from their dances and the subsequent appropriation of these dances by upper

caste communities[8] (Chakravorty 2008; Kedhar 2020a; Meduri 1988, 1996; Munsi and

Chakravorty 2018; O'Shea 2007; Pillai 2020; Srinivasan 1985; Thakore 2021). On the one hand,

the anti-nautch reform movement banned the hereditary dancers from performing their regional

dances by labelling them as "morally inferior," and on the other hand, the anti-colonial and

Hindu nationalist elites revived their dances as historical markers of Indian national identity and

transferred it to "morally superior" upper-caste women. Dancers and dance scholars, working

within Indian classical, folk, and contemporary dance forms, not only critique this history of

marginalization, but also challenge the casteist, regionalist, and gender-based violence that this

appropriation involved. As a hereditary caste performer, in her dance and her writing, Nrithya

Pillai (2020) questions the discourse around dance history where she argues that no attention has

been paid to the casteist violence and gatekeeping in bharatanatyam enacted through brahminical

hegemonic historical narratives.[9] Similarly, looking at the intersection of caste, gender,

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[8] Hereditary caste performers are usually described as the community of female dancers in South India, sometimes called *devadasis*, who would perform in temples and courts. This practice was eradicated under the anti-nautch movement during the independence struggles. Scholars, such as Amrit Srinivasan (1985), Avanthi Meduri (1988), Janet O'Shea (2007), and Davesh Soneji (2011), offer a nuanced understanding of this period as linked to the independence and anti-colonial movements. Amrit Srinivasan (1985) analyzes how the anti-nautch reform movement sought to eradicate the devadasi tradition in Tamil Nadu, by calling these hereditary dancers "prostitutes" and "impure," and their regional dance, *sadir*. Srinivasan (1985) shows that this occurred because the anti-nautch movement was associated with communal politics of the Dravidian movement, led and influenced by British regional party politics. At the same time, under the anti-colonial and Hindu nationalist projects led by the brahmin-dominated Theosophical movement and the Congress, the dance was largely transferred to upper-caste women who could practice and perform it. I discuss this briefly in Chapter 2 and how this history shapes and informs the practice of bharatanatyam today.

[9] In her article, Nrithya Pillai (2020) uses "'hereditary dance caste' or 'courtesan'" over *devadasi*, as she reminds us that *devadasi* is a derogatory term used by upper-caste brahmin women and white women to stigmatize and eradicate performers (e.g. "Isai Vellalar girl") based on their gender and caste (14). Pillai mentions that these South Indian women's communities include, "*Bahujan melakkarar* in Tamil Nadu and kalavantula in Andhra Pradesh, *Dalit jogati* and *matamma* communities in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh" (13).

patriarchy, and nationalism in Indian classical dance, Yashoda Thakore[10] reminds us of the

historical erasure of kalavantulu women who built the lexicon of classical dance in kuchipudi.

Developing on Avanthi Medhuri's work (1996), Thakore points out that through an inter-caste

alliance between men—brahmin and kalavantulu— kalavantulu women lost their status as

hereditary performers and their dance was appropriated by "pure" and "moral" middle- and

upper-caste brahmin women. Urmimala Sarkar Munsi, in conversation with Thakore (2021),

echoes this tension between the appropriation of lower caste, rural, and local dances by upper-

caste and -class, and urban bodies, and their representation on the global stage as national

emblems.[11]

Along with marginalization of hereditary and lower-caste communities in Indian classical

dance, dance scholars have critiqued the displacement of popular folk performance traditions

and, by extension, the cultural labor of performers from hereditary and lower-caste communities

(Prakash 2019; Rege [2002] 2021). In particular, Sharmila Rege [2002] (2021) analyzes the

construction of the "popular" lavani as a middle class-upper caste Marathi theatre practice. She

argues that "lower castes (were) displaced from their hereditary roles in the performing arts"

(110). Challenging the understanding of "folk" as a "homogenous category" (7), Brahma Prakash

(2019) "examines that which the performances of subaltern communities invest and produce in a

caste-based society," such as India (8). Prakash critiques the modern division between culture

and labor and proposes an affective relationship between the two. Developing on the work of

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[10] Yashoda Thakore, "Complicating Caste: Blood, Body, and Practice," accessed May 15, 2024,
https://www.academia.edu/49629454/Complicating_Caste_Blood_Body_and_Practice.

[11] As shared by Urmimala Sarkar Munsi in Yashoda Thakore's podcast, "6: Why Devadasi?" (March 10, 2021):
"The dance itself also moves away from the community, to be performed by a different set of new experts—the
urban performers, who then become the role models for the dispossessed locals, while representing the nation in the
global stage." https://www.sunoindia.in/her-story-of-dance/episode-6-why-devadasi.

Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai (2012), Prakash centralizes the importance of materiality of labor in cultural production that brings together "the subject who experiences, and the context and content of experience" (8).[12] For Prakash, "performance is a value-producing act, and thus, so is labour" (9). For Prakash, "what cultural labour produces is cultural and aesthetic values—taste, judgement, cultural status and social life" (15) and in the Indian context, this is representative of social hierarchies and caste-class relations.

As discussion on classical and folk-dance histories reveal caste-class hierarchies and "cultural ideologies of the Indian state" (Singh 2019, 24), I view contemporary dance in India as simultaneously responding to, entrenched within, and dissenting against these histories of marginalization in classical and folk dances. I also see Indian artists—living between heterogeneous cultures and artistic disciplines—strategically choreograph responses to orientalist readings of their work, their desires of globality, and their intercultural experiences of being postcolonial and neoliberal subjects. Thus, Indian contemporary dancers perform two key tasks as cultural producers: 1) they navigate the internal politics of categorization of Indian dances, 2) they skillfully negotiate the global discourse around contemporary dance that is primarily dominated by Euro-American frameworks. To that end, questioning the "classical" in Indian dance and objectification of the female body, many choreographers emerged in the 1980s who critiqued Indian dance history and marked the beginning of contemporary investigations in Indian dance. Mostly credited for her contribution to the field of contemporary dance in India, Chandralekha, and other postcolonial choreographers, predominantly from elite backgrounds, such as Kumudini Lakhia, Mrinalini Sarabhai, Narendra Sharma, Bharat Sharma, and Malika

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[12] With the premise that folk performances can destabilize the caste narratives in Indian dances, Brahma Prakash (2019) argues that the work of "cultural labour" is to "bring the materiality of manual labour and laboring bodies in aesthetic discourse" (8).

Sarabhai, among others, worked tirelessly to define a contemporary aesthetic in Indian dance. Many of them struggled and faced issues and questions while departing from and moving between cultural categories and dance/physical traditions which the discussion below briefly addresses.

In terms of contemporary dance in India, scholars have acknowledged how contemporary dance has functioned as a feminist critique of Euro-American frameworks of modernity and orientalism, and as an anti-colonial and anti-nationalist mechanism (Banerji 2009; Bharadwaj 2016; Bharucha 1995; Chandralekha 1984; Chatterjea 1998, 2004b, 2011; Purkayastha 2014). On the one hand, Indian contemporary dancers challenge Euro-American frameworks of modernity and the labels of innovation, excellence, and experimentation restricted to only western and white bodies (Chatterjea 2020; Purkayastha 2014). On the other hand, they resist, along with many classical performers and choreographers, the commercialization of Indian classical dances[13] during the reform-revival movement. For Geeta Kapur (2000), the processes of modernization and nationalism developed side by side to paint a "cultural self-image of a new nation" (272) and commodified tradition for the State's profit and extended representation on global markets. Scholars Kapila Vatsyayan (2003), Urmimala Sarkar Munsi (2011), and

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[13] By "commercialization of Indian classical dances," I am referring to the widespread adoption of classical dances, such as bharatanatyam, which is hinged upon the appropriation of these dance forms by upper-caste brahmin families during the independence movement. For me, the popularization of these forms marks the start of a history of caste and gender violence. By adding the term "commercialization," I point towards the transnational phenomenon of how the figure of the Indian classical dancer, mostly the bharatanatyam female dancer, has been "universalized" through its circulation via commercial advertisements, reality television shows, and films, and has come to represent the Indian/Hindu identity on the global stage. This has been illustrated in the recent work of dance scholar Rumya Sree Putcha (2023). At the same time, I am not arguing that commercialization hinders and pollutes the "preservation" and "purity" of the art form that one must "protect." Instead, I am directing the reader to the argument that commercialization further alienates Indian classical dance from its context and its indigenous practitioners, the hereditary dance communities, actually restricting who can participate in it, contrary to its image as an accessible international dance form.

Prarthana Purkayastha (2014)[14] demonstrate how the Indian modern dancing body became "a sign of positive impurity and mutability" (Purkayastha 2014, 20). [15] According to them, the Indian modern dancing body, on the one hand, resisted colonial and nationalist notions of gender, class, and caste within Indian classical dances and, on the other, Euro-American frameworks of modernity and orientalism.

To navigate the tension between the modernist and nationalist impulse and, thus, the friction between categories such as "classical/tradition" and "modern/western," some scholars have theorized contemporary dance as a place to "innovate" and create hybrid aesthetics through experiments between traditional Indian classical and western modern dances (Katrak 2011; Deboo 2017). Others theorize the contemporary as a form of rupture in this tradition/modern distinction, carving out a "vocabulary of inwardness" that is specific to South Asian embodied practices (Bharucha 1995). Alessandra Lopez y Royo (2003) proposes contemporary dance in India as a "continuum, marked by tension and rupture" (153). According to Royo (2003), the term "obscures the relationship with 'classicism' which […] remains the basis of Indian dance" (154), and rather, aligns itself with "western" modern and postmodern techniques. For Royo (2003), "this contemporary dance is about conservation, preservation, retrieval and painstaking reconstruction, but it is also tension, rupture, dynamism and subversion" (155). To separate oneself from this categorical divide, scholars like Ananya Chatterjea (2004b) argue that contemporary dance crafts a "space of alterity, agency, and articulation," producing context-specific, radical, and alternative postmodern aesthetics (131). Whereas for Meghna Bhardwaj

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[14] Examples of Indian Modern dancers and choreographers include Rabindranath Tagore, Uday Shankar, Shanti Bardhan, Manjusri Chaki Sircar, and Ranjabati Sircar in Purkayastha's (2014) research, Uday Shankar in Vatsyayan's (2003), and an analysis of Uday Shankar's film *Kalpana* in Sarkar Munsi's (2011) work.

[15] "The Indian modern dancing body becomes feminist resistance, a transnational vector, and a sign of positive impurity and mutability" (Purkayastha 2014, 20).

(2016), contemporary dance is a "process/lens," a *heterotopic* space which is created for and by itself" (19). For Bhardwaj, contemporary dance occupies a space in between defined categories and, thus, "opens up room for 'doubts,' 'confusions,' and 'inquisitiveness'" (19).

There are, however, other scholars of Indian dance who argue that the term "contemporary" remains too narrow to encapsulate the divergent expressions of contemporary Indian experience. Contesting the inability to capture the heterogenous practices in India under the category of the "contemporary," Anita E. Cherian (2016) proposes a shift in terminology to "dance ecologies." This new category, according to Cherian, gives space to "freely claim and hybridize concepts and practices that circulate in the ecosphere" (18). Moreover, for many dance practitioners, contemporary dance performs a social critique and self-reflexive engagement with the body and Indian dance to resist the transformation of the dancing body and the dance into a national spectacle and a commodity (Athreya 2017, 2019; Chandralekha 1984; Chettur 2017; Raikhy 2017; Sarabhai 2003; Sircar 1993). It becomes a place to craft a new mode of identity formation for a self-reflexive postcolonial subject.

Along with the arguments that support contemporary dance's function in Indian society to critique socio-political realities, scholars have argued that the imagination of a self-reflexive, radical, and alternative postcolonial subject is not only limited to the figure of the contemporary dancer but extends to the dancer in Indian cinema. These scholars argue that Indian commercial dancers reconfigure their corporeal representation in Indian films and visual culture as critical and self-reflexive artists, destabilizing the distinction between amateur and professional practice in Indian dance (Chakravorty 2017; Iyer 2020; Putcha 2022). Moreover, scholars have also critiqued the privileged status of contemporary dance in which it functions as a resistive agent only for upper-caste, upper-class, able, urban bodies, and reproduces class-caste hierarchies

(Chakravorty 2022; Prakash 2016; Nimjee 2019). In an article for *tiltpauseshift: Dance Ecologies India*, cultural theorist Brahma Prakash (2016) asks, "Are contemporary dance in particular, and contemporary art in general, ideological products and cultural articulations of the neoliberal regime?" (143) Analyzing contemporary dance from the lens of spectatorship, Prakash (2016) argues that because of contemporary dance's association with neoliberal market values of freedom, autonomy, and self-expression, it differentiates and marks people by their social class, instead of being a place for social change and equity. Therefore, for Prakash, contemporary dance is pseudo-resistive and does not offer an alternative to the capitalist and commoditized modes of production. For Ameera Nimjee (2019), contemporary dancers strategically mobilize their caste-class privilege to recontextualize the already present traditions—Indian classical, folk, martial arts, theater, and yoga forms (80)—in order to "innovate." Nimjee terms this flexibility as "kinesthetic mobility," that enables contemporary dancers to draw, modify, and re-signify "transnational and transregional practices" as sources of inspiration (61), [16] and both "othering" and dislocating these practices from the context of their origin.

Revisiting the origins of contemporary dance in India, Pallavi Chakravorty (2022) both credits and critiques Chandralekha's contribution to the field. Chakravorty (2022) argues that "Although Chandralekha foregrounded the urban body decayed by capitalism and industrialization […] [s]he [Chandralekha] claimed the 'body as mandala' to be the core of Indian aesthetic tradition, thereby eschewing other possibilities of imagining the body, especially as conceived in non-Sanskritic, vernacular, or Islamic sources" (10). Thus, Chakravorty makes evident the processes through which Chandralekha "Brahminized Indian dances" (10).

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[16] "Dancers move in and out of genres, traditions, and vocabularies, demonstrating their various mobilities in doing so. I emphasize that becoming contemporary includes modifying, resignifying, and drawing inspiration from 'other' movement-based forms" (Nimjee 2019, 61).

According to Chakravorty (2022), Chandralekha "universalized the bodies of contemporary Indian dancers who became unmarked as a category in Indian dance discourses despite their elite or upper-caste positions" (10). This is important to note because Chakravorty's reading of contemporary dance challenges its resistance to the Hinduization of the Indian classical dances; instead it proposes a body that remains "unmarked," and still claims a marginal status despite being predominantly an elite dance practice. It makes us wonder how contemporary dance, on the one hand, challenges these brahminized dances and, on the other, reinscribes it. This is also something that I discuss further in the second chapter of this dissertation.

My understanding of contemporary dance is informed by the strengths and limitations of the practice in the Indian context. My thinking around contemporary dance in India develops from arguments by scholars such as Chatterjea (2004b), who views contemporary dance as context-specific, radical, and alternative postmodern aesthetics, and extends arguments by Vatsyayan (2003), Munsi (2011), and Purkayastha (2014), who view the Indian modern dancing body as an agent of resistance to both colonial and nationalist notions of gender, class, and caste within Indian classical dances, and the Euro-American frameworks of modernity and orientalism. My work is also informed by Nimjee's (2019) and Prakash's (2016) critiques of contemporary dance's claim to freedom, expression, and mobility as rooted in caste and class privilege. Their thinking allows me to question the social location of the artists in my study. However, I trouble Nimjee's (2019) "origin" critique, where she argues that Indian contemporary dancers "recontextualize" the already present traditions in order to "innovate." By contrast, as Bharucha observed (1995), I believe that there is a rupture from the "tradition" and a move towards developing a contemporary language of the body rooted in their learned techniques. I show how dancers build on their training in classical, folk, and martial arts traditions, instead of

"borrowing" steps and phrases from "transnational and transregional practices" (Nimjee 2019, 61). Moreover, in my observation, the artist's training blends in and is informed by their lived and corporeal experiences that are representative of their social, cultural, and political environments in their respective regions. Building on Prakash's (2016) and Chakravorty's (2022) arguments, I remain mindful in my observation and analysis that contemporary dancers liberate the body from oppressive structures and initiate social change, but this liberation through contemporary dance often remains exclusive and restricted in its approach.

Developing on Prakash's analysis of cultural labor, I engage with social, political, and regional specificities and differences in which each choreographer in my study makes work. I then discuss how these factors collectively impact the development of their contemporary dance aesthetics. In this dissertation, I work to understand and destabilize the construction of the "universalized" body of the contemporary Indian dancer (Chakravorty 2022). Specifically in Chapter 2, I build on the work of dancers, scholars, and choreographers working within the Global South who contend with the neutral aesthetics associated with contemporary dance and acknowledge that concert dance is subject to these double binds, both referential and innovative (Chatterjea 2011, 2020; George 2020; Kedhar 2020c; Kwan 2017; Mitra 2015; O'Shea 2003, 2007; Savigliano 2009; Seetoo 2013). The work of these scholars enables me to acknowledge and integrate the racialized oppression within global contemporary dance which the artists in my study resist. It also provides a framework through which I attend to biases within contemporary dance in India.

When non-western dancers are forced to inhabit and delimit their mobility to the category of "world dance," how can they ever represent themselves as or come to be seen as "contemporary" on the global stage? This question of representation is central to Marta

Savigliano's (2009) critique of the category "world dance," which remains relevant in this research as well. Savigliano uncovers the inequalities embedded in the way choreography can authoritatively use and mobilize other cultures and bodies as material for its creative exploration, innovation, and nourishment. Instead of using non-western and non-white dancing bodies for their "exotic" capital, Savigliano argues that these dancers' presence and their lived experiences should be acknowledged as contemporary world-makers. For Savigliano, contemporaneity must be understood as a "permanent negotiation" (184) between neighbors—east and west, Global North and South, local and global—outside the bounds of approved "sameness."

Similarly, being critical of the claim of "neutrality" in contemporary dance, Ananya Chatterjea (2020) emphasizes that *where* we dance matters. Building on Sara Ahmed's (2014) notion of difference,[17] Chatterjea argues that our location—based on class, caste, gender, sexuality, race, and nationality as settler/indigenous—produces differences that are irreducible, colors our choreographic aesthetic, and is a contributing factor in creating one's alterity. Chatterjea recognizes the power hierarchies and inequities in global contemporary dance and brings our attention to the violence that is reinforced by the claim of "neutrality." As contemporary dance largely operates in accordance with the Euro-American framework of modernity, Chatterjea argues that it masks racial, gendered, and colonial differences. For Chatterjea, even as contemporary dancers from the Global North assert their resistance to consumer capitalism, they are unable to formulate "a critique of how class hierarchies intersect with race, nationality, gender, and other forms of cultural capital, [and] remain intact within the economy of global contemporary concert dance" (2). Both Savigliano's and Chatterjea's readings

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[17] Ananya Chatterjea (2020) builds on Sara Ahmed's (2014) notion of difference and her theorization of the "willful subject." Chatterjea (2020) explains "willful subjects" as those "who insist on belonging to particular categories that are simply given to others, and of how such insistence must be understood as agential, 'a form of political labor'" (Ahmed cited in Chatterjea 2020, 259).

of contemporary dance are useful to this dissertation as they help investigate the politics of neutrality in contemporary dance through which it delimits participation and representation of bodies other than urban, upper-caste, and upper-class mainland citizens. Their work pushes this research to uncover hierarchies in contemporary dance and look for an intersectional approach to making and analyzing Indian dances.

Throughout the dissertation, I turn towards Anusha Kedhar's (2020c) analysis of "flexibility," which makes visible the increased labor expected out of racialized bodies. Kedhar theorizes "flexibility" as "a range of corporeal maneuvers and bodily tactics" (4) that dancers use as a "tool" to "negotiate a range of racial, gender, national, and cultural identity positions amid vexed political and economic conditions" (17).[18] Flexibility helps address the demands and pressures on dancers and choreographers who work within South Asian performance traditions— to be diverse *and* innovative[19] and remain ethnically marked while producing aesthetics that are aligned with western techniques. To that end, in this dissertation, Kedhar's analysis of corporeal maneuvers of the dancers working within a neoliberal economy informs my reading of the Indian choreographers in my study who negotiate a range of identity positions while making contemporary work in a global market.

This dissertation also benefits from SanSan Kwan's thinking about the notion of contemporaneity, as a dance and performance scholar, specifically its contentious relationship with the present, and the demand it places on non-western dancers and choreographers to "catch up" with the west. In her article "When is Contemporary Dance?," Kwan (2017) looks at the

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[18] "*Flexible bodies* makes visible both the increasing flexibilization of racialized dance labor as well as the dancer-ly tactics deployed to manage that increasing racialization" (Kedhar 2020c, 4).

[19] Anusha Kedhar's (2020c) argues that South Asian Dance must be "both diverse (i.e., ethnically marked) and innovative (i.e., ethnically unmarked)" (33) to be legible, assimilable, and marketable in the British dance economy.

political, conceptual, aesthetic, and temporal dimensions associated with the term "contemporary

dance." Kwan argues that contemporary dance's relationship to "nowness" furthers colonial

legacies of exclusion that are as present but remain obscured in the projects of postcolonialism

and globalization (38).

   To theorize the conditions through which a dance is perceived and read as contemporary,

Kwan (2017) strings together different views on dance and temporality by scholars André

Lepecki (2012), Frédéric Pouillaude (2007), Elizabeth Freeman (2010), Giorgio Agamben

(2009), and Ramsay Burt (2004).[20] Kwan argues that Lepecki decenters contemporary dance's

claiming of the present, as for Lepecki (2012), all dances are innately contemporary as they

unfold in the present moment.[21] For Pouillaude, writing in the French contemporary dance

context, a dance becomes contemporary when it responds to its local context with a sense of

immediacy and urgency, i.e., in an "extra- or parahistorical sense" (41). Pouillaude makes a

critical distinction between "immediacy" and "nowness" in the context of contemporary dance.

Where for Pouillaude, "contemporaneity" is defined by "presence" and "contingency,"

Freeman's conception of "queer temporality" troubles the notion of linear time. "Queer

temporality" is an "anachronous, asynchronous crossing to and between other times," and thus is

resistive to a linear conception of time as propagated by heteronormative and capitalist systems

of power (44). Similarly, Agamben (2009) assures that one's contemporariness can be performed

at any time in history as long as it is a "reflective consciousness of the present" (44). For Burt

(2004), contemporary dance is a form of "practice-based research" through which artists engage

with historical practices as they reconstruct and reinvent their own movement vocabulary and

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[20] All quotes in this paragraph are from SanSan Kwan (2017).

[21] SanSan Kwan (2017) notes that André Lepecki (2012) perceives dance "as a practice of contemporaneity" (cited in Kwan 2017, 39).

system. As the present gets entangled with the past in such practice-based research, it is this "contemporary view,"[22] for Burt, which "strips away the 'presentist' pretensions of the terms modern, postmodern, and contemporary, refocusing dancers' and audiences' attention on dance as embodied knowledge and perception within the specificity of its social and cultural context" (Burt 2004 cited in Kwan 2017, 44).

By summing up these various arguments and viewpoints on the notion of the "contemporary" in dance and performance, Kwan (2017) brings our attention not only to the "aesthetic definitions and categories of dance," but also the dance's "relationship to time periods [and] cultural politics" that has been "historically vexed" (39). Critical of the temporal dimension embedded in the notion of the contemporary, Kwan warns us about the "yoking of the temporal and the aesthetic," as it makes "contemporaneity" a prerogative of the west (39). Here, Kwan not only recognizes the fraught relationship contemporaneity has with nowness, but also that it is constructed in a way to elevate certain stylistic and aesthetic trends more than the others. Like Chatterjea (2020), Kwan (2017) argues that all other forms of contemporaneity that do not conform to either the form, style, or visuality of the dance as set forth by western markers of "contemporary dance" are excluded from the category. In other words, alternative representations of contemporaneity, especially from non-western and non-white artists, run the risk of not being considered "coeval" (Fabian 1983) with their western counterparts, which is what I believe is usually the case with contemporary dance in India.

I understand that Indian contemporary dancers, in my study, situate themselves as outside the orientalist and nationalist frameworks of representation. They negotiate the racialization of their bodies with the whiteness associated with contemporary dance. They position their work in

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[22] I see the "contemporary view" for Ramsay Burt (2004) as a way of seeing and engaging with historical practices as alive in the present, rather than seeing them as fixed in the past.

opposition to the commercialized and Hinduized Indian classical dance. Instead, they partially align their choreographic aesthetics with neoliberal values such as innovation, creativity, and experimentation, among others—values that I critically engage with in each chapter. The impact of the neoliberal economy on Indian contemporary dance aesthetics is informed by the choreographer's experience of insularity and cosmopolitanism. This means that in comparison to the widespread practice of the classical, contemporary dancers in India feel a sense of isolation, disconnection, and marginalization in the performance industry, which roots their work in personal investigations of the dance's form and history. This marginal status is countered by their international and transnational alliances through their access to dance and performance communities across the world.

As a contemporary dancer and dance scholar from India, I perceive the strengths and weaknesses of contemporary dance to exist simultaneously. And in my analysis of the work of choreographers Mandeep Raikhy, Padmini Chettur, and Surjit Nongmeikapam, I address the extent to which contemporary dance becomes and remains a space for political dissent and liberation—concepts that I discuss in the next section. To situate my argument of the promise of dissent and liberation in contemporary dance, measured by contemporary dance's ability to initiate social change, I turn towards Doreen Massey's (2005) conceptualization of "radical contemporaneity." Feminist and cultural geographer, Massey (2005) reconceptualizes space as "the sphere of coevalness, of radical contemporaneity" (99). According to Massey, "space—here global space—is about contemporaneity (rather than temporal convening), it is about openness (rather than inevitability) and it is also about relations, fractures, discontinuities, practices of engagement" (85). Contemporary dance in India is often conceptualized as a moment in Indian dance that marks ruptures with tradition and, in that sense, disrupts and fractures an image of

linear progression of Indian culture and histories of dance from precolonial times. Building on Massey's work, I study contemporary dance as a place to explore "relations, fractures, discontinuities, practices of engagement" (Massey 2005, 85). I believe Massey's theorization of "radical contemporaneity" gives us a model capable of linking local, global, and transnational conceptions of contemporaneity, pointing to the issue of denial of coevalness that Kwan (2017) brings up in her article. Thinking of contemporary dance in India as a sphere of "radical contemporaneity" (Massey 2005) allows us to place contentious notions of contemporaneity into dialogue and to discuss, challenge, and rework the definition of the contemporary in India from different social locations. Massey's notion of "radical contemporaneity" helps us to rethink corporeal located-ness and connectivity as a precondition for postcolonial inquiry in Indian dance in two distinct ways: Firstly, it nudges us to identify the role of artist's social location in being able to propose a postcolonial intervention in Indian dance and secondly, it enables us to see their location as connected to other regional and transnational locations that impacts the development of their postcolonial inquiry and aesthetic in Indian dance. With the effort to ground the contemporary dancing body in socio-cultural and regional specificities, in the dissertation, it is my intention and hope that this effort helps destabilize, or at least uncover, the universalized notion of the contemporary dancing body in India, which as Chakravorty (2022) pointed out, remains "unmarked" today (10).

Politics of Dissent and Liberation

In this section, I discuss multiple theorizations of dissent that I build upon throughout this dissertation. Defining dissent in a global, transnational, and local context helps give an overview of its characteristics, uses, and limitations in this research.

In a democratic society, dissent is commonly theorized as disagreement towards a considerable matter. In his dissertation, Joonas Leppänen (2016) argues, "To dissent with something is to disagree with a specific feature in society and to articulate this disagreement [….] Dissent is a political and articulated disagreement directed towards a specific feature in society" (17). For Leppänen (2016), dissent hinges on participation. Building on Nancy Fraser's (2003) framework of "justice as participatory parity," Leppänen (2016) proposes a political theory of dissent (147). Leppänen argues that "The normative core of dissent, within democracy, lies in its ties to participatory democracy. This means that dissent is viewed as a way of participating in democratic society" (148). Making the connection between dissent, participation, and radical democracy, Leppänen attaches dissent to ideas of liberty and equality,[23] which is useful to my thinking in this dissertation. In each chapter, I address the societal issues that the individual artist is in disagreement with—religious, gender, and regional discrimination—and which eventually shapes the kinds of political dissent that emerges out of their choreographic practice. Throughout the dissertation, I discuss dissent in relation to their freedom to participate in a democratic society in hopes to attain equality and liberation.

While Leppänen (2016) describes dissent in relation to a democratic nation-state, Roland Bleiker (2000) defines dissent not only as a transnational but a "transversal phenomenon" (2). Bleiker (2000) has written,

> Dissent has become a significant transnational phenomenon, reflecting and shaping various aspects of global politics. In fact, dissent has become what could be called a transversal phenomenon—a political practice that not only transgresses national boundaries, but also questions the spatial logic through which these boundaries have come to constitute and frame the conduct of international relations. (2)

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[23] Joonas Leppänen (2016) writes that "A political theory of dissent is tied to the idea of liberty and equality through the idea of participatory parity" (149).

According to Bleiker, dissent is something that crosses geopolitical borders and boundaries of modern nation-states and best reflects the experience of our modern and contemporary life as informed by global transmissions of people, ideas, and capital. Thus, Bleiker argues that "to conceptualise global politics as a site of transversal struggles is to draw attention to the multiple and multi-layered interactions that make up contemporary life. It is to recognise the complex cross-border flow of people, goods, ideas, capital" (3).

Thinking of dissent as a "transversal phenomenon" (Bleiker 2000, 2) helps brings attention to how global and transnational politics of contemporary dance influence the discussion of contemporaneity in India. The three choreographers in my study have travelled and trained, witnessed, and performed at several international residencies, performance festivals, conferences, somatic laboratories, and workshops. This is not to say that they have borrowed western aesthetics and/or have been inspired by the west to search for contemporary aesthetics in Indian dance. Rather, they reject those arguments which paint the image of "Indian" contemporary dance as exotic and mystical and, instead, point towards those cultural shifts— within and between cultures—that drive the interrogation of contemporaneity in Indian dance. Political dissent, in this way, reveals how postcolonial and Global South choreographers articulate their disagreement with social, cultural, and political issues in the 21st century that are specific but not limited to their nation-state.

To the degree to which dissent promises liberation, scholars argue that dissent can also be defined as an action in support of rather than against hegemonic structures of power. Martin Bak Jørgensen and Óscar García Agustín (2015) theorize "the moments of dissent as moments of visibilisation" and nudge us "to assess whether the moments are challenging the existing social order or are adapted to the institutional order" (12). Jørgensen & Agustín (2015) alert us to

distinguish acts of dissent that favor the dominant order from the ones that oppose it. Building on John Holloway's (2005) idea about negativity, Jørgensen and Agustín (2015) "approach the idea of dissent as being based on singular experiences but sharing a common feeling of disagreement and rejection of the existing political order" (12). For them, "dissent refers to social and political questioning (not just to mere critique or a need for palliative reforms), to undoing consensus and rendering excluded actors and struggles visible" (12). Moreover, Jørgensen & Agustín (2015) perceive dissent as a "collective process seeking alternative conceptions or ways of living" (13). This framing of dissent as a collective and shared act of "social and political questioning" (12), as theorized by Jørgensen & Agustín (2015), stretches throughout the dissertation.

Building on Jacques Rancière's (2010) work on consensus and dissensus, Jørgensen & Agustín (2015) argue that "Dissent consists in the expression of oppositional voices and the manifestation of disagreement against the dominant order, but it must be taken into consideration that not all people are included in the political discourses since they are excluded through the politics of consensus" (14). In this way, Jorgensen and Agustin's work not only points to the limitation of dissent, but also urges us to consider situations where dissent serves the purpose of reaffirming hegemonic status quo and situations in which marginalized communities might not be included. Thus, Jørgensen & Agustín's work expands the understanding of dissent in this dissertation to assist my reading and analysis of choreographic works where dissent does not include the struggles of marginalized communities and thus, remains an incomplete project.

Discussing dissent in the Indian context, in her book *Voices of Dissent: An Essay* (2020), historian Romila Thapar (2020) reminds us that "Dissent, disagreement, difference of opinion have all not only been present in the Indian past but have also, through their interaction with existing ideas and practices, contributed to creating new idioms that have been crucial to the

making of what we today call Indian civilization, patterns of living, cultures, traditions" (141). Thus, Thapar shows us how dissent has always been at the center of Indian culture and has helped generate contemporary ideas and ways of living through its interaction with tradition—which makes it a perfect framework to examine the condition of contemporaneity in Indian dance and performance. Thapar (2021b) outlines three main characteristics of dissent, that it must a) be aimed at a substantial issue, b) that it must have an objective expressing disagreement or difference, and c) that it is non-violent.[24] Furthermore, Thapar (2020) argues that "In a true democracy, the right to dissent and the need to meet the demand for social justice are core concepts" (6). For her, dissent "insists on reminding us that human societies cannot survive without a code of ethics, a code that is agreed to both by those governing and those being governed" and thus, gives "people the strength to assert their humanity" (152). In this way, non-violent disagreement becomes crucial to the growth of a democratic society. Dissent not only protects citizens' rights to have a voice and an opinion in political and economic matters, but also helps establish a "code of ethics" between "those governing and those being governed" (Thapar 2020, 152). I build on Thapar's analysis of dissent and discuss it in-detail in relation to current majoritarian ethnonationalist politics in India in Chapter 1 of the dissertation.

As dissent is linked to ideas of liberty, equality, and freedom, it is essential to consider when certain forms of dissent do not culminate into opportunities for liberation of marginalized communities. Anti-caste and Dalit scholars have continually argued that liberation of any kind within Indian society is incomplete without the liberation of those most impacted by caste oppression, people from lower castes and classes, Bahujans, and those considered to be outcasts,

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[24] Mainly referring to this excerpt of Romila Thapar's talk, "Defining Dissent | Prof. Romila Thapar," May 16, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MdL5d0qAWos. To listen to her full talk, please see: "Karwaan Book Club | Voices of Dissent by Prof. Romila Thapar," March 2, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r3SXH0PjnlI.

such as Dalits. In writing about caste, brahminical patriarchy, and Dalit feminism, Sunaina Arya (2020) centers the question of caste difference or "Dalit difference," to extend the work of Sharmila Rege (1998). Arya argues that the work of Indian feminism or third-world feminists is incomplete without considering the discrimination that "Dalit women face at the intersection of their caste-class-gender deprivations" (224). Similarly, Pakistani scholar Shaista Patel (2016) urges us to rethink the position of the "subaltern" within the South Asian context. She argues that the "subaltern could also be implicated in upholding the casteist hierarchies even in her silence."[25] She highlights that the position of the postcolonial subject, even as resistive to colonial and racial violence, has been caste privileged. This is due to the disengagement of upper-caste postcolonial subjects with caste dynamics, violence, and its repercussions on the historically marginalized people from oppressed caste-class communities. The above discussion on caste-class shows how the discourse around difference, disagreement, and dissent in Indian and South Asian communities cannot be complete or liberatory without the inclusion of caste-oppressed and marginalized caste identities.

To this end, in this dissertation, I centralize the role of corporeal dissent in questioning existing social order and producing new forms of cultural and political knowledge. In Chapter 1, I extend ideas of dissent and its connection to corporeality as theorized by critical dance studies scholars. In subsequent chapters, I show how dissent, as performed by the dancing body, situates the body in a liberatory politics. Furthermore, I reflect on the limitations of dissent in each of the choreographic examples in the hopes of making dissent through dance a more inclusive political practice.

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[25] Shaista Patel, 2016, "Complicating the Tale of 'Two Indians:' Mapping 'South Asian' Complicity in White Settler Colonialism Along the Axis of Caste and Anti-Blackness," *Theory & Event* 19 (4), accessed May 1, 2024, https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/633278.

Overview of Methodology

As my research interrogates the influence of different dance histories—personal, regional, social, and transnational—on Indian contemporary dance and aesthetics, it is developed by utilizing interdisciplinary methodology and frameworks. I also consider my work to be auto-ethnographic. I combine methods from fields like anthropology and critical dance studies. I employ ethnographic research methods—participant-observation, "thick description," (Geertz 1973) and qualitative interviewing—with choreographic analysis to address the politics of representation in contemporary dance that manifests itself in rehearsal and performance spaces via the affective exchanges between the dancers, and between the dancers and audiences. I analyze published interviews of the artists in my study, along with their performance reviews and analysis of the choreographers' writings (both published and unpublished) about their own works. I examine rehearsal and process notes, program notes from performances, and promotional material on the artist's/festival's website and social media platforms such as Instagram. And I review news articles to stay informed about regional-national politics.

To conduct this dance (auto)ethnography, I build on the work of dance scholars who have theorized the relation between bodily kinetics and culture (Albright 1997; Foster 1986, 1995, 2011; Hammergren 1996; Martin 2008; Novack 1990; Sklar 1991). Building on Clifford Geertz's (1973) method of "thick description," both Cynthia Novack (1990) and Diedre Sklar (1991) define dance and movement as cultural knowledge. For Sklar (1991), "To examine dance from an ethnographic perspective, then, is to focus on dance as a kind of cultural knowledge. Dance ethnography depends upon the postulate that cultural knowledge is embodied in movement, especially the highly stylized and codified movement we call dance" (6). Similarly, conducting auto-ethnographic research on contact improvisation in 1960s America, Novack (1990) argues

that "culture is embodied" (8). According to her, "We perform movement, invent it, interpret it, and reinterpret it, on conscious and unconscious levels. In these actions, we participate in and reinforce culture, and we also create it" (8).

Since dance exists in "the contextual web of social relationships, environment, religion, aesthetics, politics, economics, and history" (Sklar 1991, 6), auto-ethnographic research method allows the researcher an opportunity to reflect on and assess the relation between self and culture (Chang 2008; Denshire 2014; Vionnet 2021, 2022). Other scholars extend this theorization to argue that the understanding of the relationship between self and others, through auto-ethnography, informs how the dancing body is conditioned by others. Claire Vionnet (2021) argues that "The interweaving of the intimate and the collective within autoethnographic narratives highlights the way a dancing body is shaped by others" (cited in Vionnet 2022, 80). Similarly, for Tami Spry (2001) autoethnographic performance methodology succeeds in "calling on the body as a site of scholarly awareness and corporeal literacy." Building on the work of these scholars, I assert that my use of auto-ethnographic and ethnographic research methods as a lens in this research not only allows me to see how Indian contemporary dance is immersed in local and transnational networks, but it also allows me to reflect on my positionality, underlining from *where* I view these connections.

As an active member of the contemporary dance community in India from 2014-2018, my "insider" knowledge enabled me, during my field research in 2022, to access distinct community spaces that might otherwise have been invisible to me. Furthermore, I use my experience of working in and witnessing the artists' choreographic processes from 2013 to 2022 to deepen my analysis. For example, as a dancer, I collaborated with Mandeep Raikhy on projects between 2016-2018, namely, *The Long Nights of Resistance* and *the extremities of a*

surface are lines. I attended courses and workshops with Padmini Chettur (Crawnimal 2015, Gati Summer Dance Residency GSDR 2015, Works and Thoughts 2020, Practice: Spine 2022) that gave me a closer understanding of her process. I watched Surjit Nongmeikapam perform an improvisation in collaboration with Takao Kawaguchi at the Japan Foundation, New Delhi, in 2015 and witnessed his piece *Nerves* and *Folktales* at the Prakriti Excellence for Dance Awards in Chennai in 2016, when I performed a duet with Meghna Bhardwaj in *Edges*. These diverse experiences have helped me develop intimate connections with the contemporary dance community in India, making me sensitive to internal conflicts and politics of power relations between dance styles, communities, institutions, and states. With my experience working in dance academies, commercial dance companies, and contemporary dance communities in India, I bring my knowledge of the institutionalized divisions yet complex inter-relations between popular and concert dance forms to this research.

As a "self-reflexive" ethnographer (Chakravorty 2008),[26] I visited performance and rehearsal venues, dance institutes and companies, arts organizations, and performance festivals in five different cities. During my fieldwork, I participated in self-observation and field journaling when I trained in studios, took part in movement workshops, watched rehearsals and performances, and interacted with other community members. Observing and moving with other dancers during the creation process of my chosen artists helped me analyze the transmission of bodily knowledge into choreographic tools, scores, and strategies. With physical proximity to their artistic process, I focused on the descriptive language used in training and rehearsals,

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[26] I see self-reflexivity as an element of the auto-ethnographic research method, which is what I'm reading in Pallabi Chakravorty's (2008) use of the "self-reflexive" in relation to her ethnographic project on Indian classical dance, kathak. As a kathak dancer and an anthropologist, Chakravorty positions herself as an "insider's insider" (13) in her research. Chakravorty claims her identity and of the subjects in her research to not be fixed or static, rather she imagines these identities as "self-reflexive and mobile" (13).

methods dancers employ to reflect on their experience in the studio, and training mechanisms that dancers engage with. While attending live performances in festivals such as Pickle Factory Season 3 (Kolkata) during my fieldwork, I took notes on the location and architecture of the venues, show programming, and the kind of audiences that had access to these experimental choreographic works. Observing training and rehearsal spaces, performance venues and arts organizations, such as Khuli Khirkee and Sangeet Natak Akademi (Delhi), Spaces and Alliance Française (Chennai), and Nachom Arts Foundation (Imphal), Behala Nutan Dol (Kolkata), Museum of Art and Photography (Bangalore), and other informal dance spaces, as ethnographic sites, I was able to unpack the multiple layers that shape the ecosystems in which these three artists make work.

As an "intimate" ethnographer (Banerji and Distante 2009; Banerji 2019), I conducted in-depth interviews with choreographers Mandeep Raikhy, Padmini Chettur, and Surjit Nongmeikapam, and their dancers, musicians, and other collaborators involved in their choreographic processes. Like Sklar (1991), who shares that "a dance ethnographer seeks to discover: why do people move the way they do, and how does the way they move relate to how they live, what they believe, and what they value?," I became interested in my subjects' values, decisions, and the choices behind their choreographic aesthetics, while also investigating how they were shaped by transnational, regional, political, personal, historical, and economic factors. During the interview process, I created space to allow for perspectives that might contradict my expectations. I remained open to the possibility that my interlocutors' responses might yield different reflections than my own. Over nineteen interviews with the artists and their collaborators in this research function as an additional testimony to my findings from participant-observation and choreographic analysis.

In this dissertation, I look closely at choreographic works made between 2011 and 2022, as they best exemplify new philosophical investments in these three artists' work in ways that epitomize contemporaneity in India. These choreographic pieces include *The Secular Project* (2021) by Mandeep Raikhy; *Varnam* (2016) and *Women Dance* (2022) by Padmini Chettur; and *One Voice* (2011) and *Meepao: Homage to the Departed* (2021) by Surjit Nongmeikapam. In my analysis, I look at dance videos—performance videos and works-in-progress recordings—and photographs. I source these from the artists' personal archives, their websites, video streaming platforms such as Vimeo and YouTube, social media platforms like Instagram, and UCLA's archive (alexanderstreet.com). Although limited by the edited visual experience these recordings provide, I use my own experience of watching *Meepao* and *Women Dance*, and participating in one edition of *The Secular Project*, during my fieldwork in India in 2022, and analyzing the photographs I took during this time.

In her book *Choreographic Empathy*, Susan L. Foster (2011) brings together different meanings of the term "kinesthesia" and how scholars have envisioned the term in reference to analyzing dance. Foster (2011) writes that "For Sklar kinesthetic analysis entails attending to the qualitative dimensions of movement, the kind of flow, tension, and timing of any given action as well as the ways in which any person's movement interacts and interrelates with objects, events, and other people" (8). Following Sklar's method of kinesthetic analysis, which allows "the dance researcher to perceive her own kinesthetic experience along with that of others," I attend to "qualitative dimensions of movement" to look at the "flow, tension and timing" of the dancer's movement and how it relates to other entities in space (2011, 8).

On a similar note, this dissertation also utilizes Hannah Kosstrin's (2020) method of "kinesthetic seeing" as a framework to analyze the choreography. Although Kosstrin's (2020)

"kinesthetic seeing" enables an ethnographic approach to archival research, this method proposes two possibilities that are useful in this research. Firstly, it enables the "researchers to think through a dance practice's kinesthetic logics to produce written analysis" and secondly, it provides "a manner of attention to evidence that examined positionality and power to center dancing in historical investigations" (Kosstrin 2020, 20). In witnessing recorded and live dance performances, I use "kinesthetic seeing" to analyze the bodily movement enacted by other dancers in the performance through my own somatic—anatomical and muscular—knowledge of having done the movement myself, making it an intimate form of choreographic analysis. Moreover, my descriptions of the dance projects resemble dance critic and author Deborah Jowitt's method of "deep description." Deep description, according to Jowitt, is a method of "trying to capture the hum [of a piece]…something deep about its structure, life, times."[27] Similar to her approach, my detailed description and interpretation of the dances in this dissertation reflect on the dance's structure, the process of how it came to take this shape, and the dance's connection to current politics.

Scope of Research

This dissertation contributes a new perspective on the interconnections between the global, (trans)national, and local politics of contemporaneity in India.

This research expands existing knowledge on contemporary dance in India through an overt focus on an interdisciplinary methodological approach to dance research. Usually, research on contemporary dance artists in India has focused on their choreographic process and aesthetics, and how they might resist the dominant modes of cultural production. In this project, I do

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[27] Alejandra Iannone, 2016, "Settling in And Opening Up: Excerpts Of An Interview With Deborah Jowitt," *{DIYdancer}*, November 18, 2016, https://diydancer.com/2016/11/18/settling-in-and-opening-up-excerpts-of-an-interview-with-deborah-jowitt/.

address and investigate the development of my chosen artists' aesthetics. However, I layer that with their personal history, dance lineage and trajectory, their current research interests and inquiry in dance, and how this informs their dance training mechanisms and choreographic decisions. An auto-ethnographic approach to research on contemporary dance in India helps me provide an intimate and insider perspective through methods such as participant-observation and qualitative interviewing.

In bringing together choreographers from three distinct urban sectors in the country— New Delhi (North), Chennai (South), and Imphal (North-East)—this project provides a broad overview of shifting power dynamics within Indian contemporary dance, at the same time maintaining a microanalytical focus on the cultural and regional influences in their somatic and choreographic approaches. Drawing from a critical dance studies framework, I take into consideration the impact of the artist's social location, in terms of their gender, class, caste, ethnicity, and region, on the construction of their contemporary aesthetic. Considering how the politics of location shape the work of Indian contemporary dancers, I contextualize the strategic positioning of contemporary dancers in reference to other categories of dance in India—classical, folk, commercial, and western contemporary. This enables me to unpack the multiple layers that shape the ecosystems in which these three artists make work.

This dissertation suggests that by engaging with and being responsive to the physical, sensorial, and relational aspects of movement, we can comprehend the world beyond what is made visible/available to us for consumption. Centralizing knowledge from my personal dance history and ethnographic field research in five major cities in India—New Delhi, Chennai, Imphal, Bangalore, and Kolkata—I bring attention to the disagreements in work of choreographers Raikhy, Chettur, and Nongmeikapam towards different power structures—

majoritarian nationalism, hegemonic nation-state, and Hinduization of Indian dances. Analyzing the conditions of presentation—location of their rehearsal and performances spaces and the kind of access available to both performers and audiences—and the discourse around their choreographic practices through (un)published articles, interviews, program notes, and promotional material on social media help me analyze the impact of their work in an authoritative environment. I theorize the strategies through which the contemporary dance artists in my research wish to free the State-regulated dancing body from imposed codified forms, stylistic movements, and religious undertones embedded in Indian classical dance, to produce a body that is adaptive, embodies resilience and endurance, and negotiates with failure, precarity, exhaustion of its physical and sensorial capacities, as some of its resistive qualities. Wherever applicable, I discuss the limitations in their approach; while addressing the tenets central to each choreographer's piece—secularism, female agency, and ethnic and regional autonomy—I examine the topics and communities that their practice of contemporaneity excludes.

Chapter Outline

This dissertation is divided into three core chapters that focus on processes of body constructions and the development of contemporary dance aesthetics in three regions in India (North, South, and North-East). In each chapter, I look at the choreographic practice of one of these dancers—Mandeep Raikhy (New Delhi), Padmini Chettur (Chennai), and Surjit Nongmeikapam (Imphal)—and argue that their intervention in Indian dance cannot be understood without comprehending their ties to the cultural landscape of their cities. Through case-studies over three distinct geographical locations, I disentangle the canon of "Indian" contemporary dance to draw emphasis on the development of contemporary aesthetic as informed by a unique intersection of each artist's class, caste, gender, religion, and regional

identity. Additionally, I contextualize the strategic positioning of their choreographic practice in relation to the hegemonic status of Indian classical dance, "amateurism" associated with Indian commercial dance, and racialization of their bodies with the Whiteness associated with (western) contemporary dance.

In each chapter, I focus on how specific histories—personal, regional, and social—influence the artists' contemporary dance aesthetics and their choreographic structure, design, strategy and/or score. And I attend to how the artists I study in this research are both nestled within and resist the dominant tropes in the region where they make work.

Chapter 1: "Politics of Secularism and Corporeal Dissent"

In this chapter, I address the choreographic practice of a Delhi-based queer and Sikh choreographer, Mandeep Raiky, focusing on his recent work, *The Secular Project* (2020). I critically reflect on the history and development of secularism in India as linked to the moment of independence in India. I build on the work of scholars Anusha Kedhar (2020b) and Nishant Upadhyay (2020) to show how tolerance propagates majoritarian nationalism. I address the significance of corporeal dissent in questionable existing social order and in producing new forms of cultural and political knowledge. Building on the work of several dance and cultural theorists, I show how dissent is tied to one's corporeality. Using *The Secular Project* as my case-study for this chapter, I argue that this project is an example of corporeal dissent in action, where Raikhy uses the dancing body as a mode of dissent against majoritarian nationalism.

Chapter 2: "Anatomical Freedom as Bodily Liberation"

In this chapter, I address the choreographic practice of a Chennai-based choreographer, Padmini Chettur, focusing on her anatomical research on the spine and two of her choreographic works, *Varnam* (2016) and *Women Dance* (2022). Through an analysis of Chettur's lineage—her

training in bharatanatyam and her work with choreographer Chandralekha—I address the relationship between the spine and female dancer's agency in Chettur's work. While reflecting on the role of the spine in (re)shaping her aesthetics, I take a closer look at the functionality of the word "neutral" and how it is mobilized in relation to contemporary dance, especially as theorized by dancers and dance scholars from the Global South. In my analysis of Chettur's choreographic works, I pay attention to her negotiation with bharatanatyam's history and repertoire, her critique of the dance's religious and patriarchal oppression, and the anti-feminist politics in bharatanatyam. I argue that Chettur creates a new physical, thematic, and representational language in dance that empowers and liberates the urban and upper-caste female dancer. However, by including a caste-critique of bharatanatyam in my analysis, I assert that this project of liberation, which I'm calling the *liberatory deconstruction*, remains incomplete without an intersectional approach.

Chapter 3: "Body, Land, and Belonging"

In this chapter, I address the choreographic practice of a Imphal-based choreographer Surjit Nongmeikapam, and the relationship he sets us between land, indigeneity, corporeal resistance, and the nation-state through two of his choreographic works, *One Voice* (2011) and *Meepao: Homage to the Departed* (2021). Providing a brief overview of Manipur's history and current conflict, I build on concepts such as "indigenous structural framework" (Premchand 2005) and "geobody" (Winichakul 1994), subsequently using these concepts as a theoretical framework to analyze Nongmeikapam's choreographic structure and his conception of the dancing body—as a result of negotiation between regional and national culture. As a participant-observer, I provide a close analysis of Nongmeikapam's movement practice, *Yangshak*, and two of his choreographic works. Through my analysis, I argue that Nongmeikapam's work builds on

regional and ethnic philosophy and movement practices, and fosters harmonious, equitable, and reciprocal relations. Furthermore, Nongmeikapam's choreographies function as a tool for liberation and dissent, for both Meiteis as well as Manipuris, offering a methodology of *resistive hybridity* to navigate mainland representation of the North-eastern region and its people.

Conclusion: Dissent, Liberation, and Contemporaneity

In the conclusion of this dissertation, I engage with the subject of dissent in dance that was raised in a conference in Kolkata, India, in 2018. In summarizing key arguments and findings in this dissertation, I revisit the reasons for bringing these three artists together in the first place. As dissent informs the theoretical framework of this dissertation, I pay attention to how these three choreographers, in their own distinct ways, exercise dissent through their choreography and, in doing so, respond to a specific regional issue which is at the heart of their dissent—fighting for religious freedom and equality, resisting the patriarchal oppression of urban Indian women, and reconciling with the State-sanctioned violence in the north-eastern region of India. Lastly, I end with a few questions that have been significant to this research and continue to shape my thinking on the topic of political dissent and contemporary dance in India.

Chapter 1 | Politics of Secularism and Corporeal Dissent: Mandeep Raikhy and Contemporary Dance in India

The Dance of Independence

It is 15th August 2022. I am going to the studio from Pitampura. A light drizzle is making the city smell fresh and vibrant. This is not a random day. It is the day that marks India's 75th year of Independence. A group of dancers have gathered here in Khuli Khirkee[28] to produce a video reel[29] for *The Secular Project*, led by Delhi-based choreographer Mandeep Raikhy.

I do not enter the studio as a neutral, objective, and distant observer. I have been here before. I have danced in this space and with some of the dancers. My old desires, resentments, and fears begin to surface and join in with my hopes to create new memories through this collaboration. Raikhy shares a score with us that I remember to be something like this: Hold the banner emblazoned with the words "Secular India" at all four corners and turn in circles. He wants the vibe of this video to be festive, colorful, bright, and highly energetic.

I and the other dancers begin to run in circles. We change positions, shifting our bodies between the inner and outer circle while keeping no distinction between the two. The banner in white, made of cotton, is in the center of the group. We dig our fingers into the fabric, grip it, and pull it towards us. We take turns holding the banner. The cloth, along with the words on it that say "Secular India," twists and folds, stretches and shrinks, and appears formless.

Akanksha, Aseng, Jasmine, and I swirl the cloth over our heads. Others pretzel below the banner. I press my waist into the banner and hop forward with my right foot. I shift my weight on the left foot, flick my right toe off the floor, and swing the right hip up, around, and down.

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[28] Arts collective in Khirkee Village, Saket, in New Delhi, India, previously known as the Gati dance forum.

[29] Link to the video (The Dance of Independence) on Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/p/ChSNBvsFXZv/.

Raikhy runs around us with a gimbal, to capture the stretching, the pulling, the leaning off of the banner. We trust each other to not let us fall. We circulate and move through different spatial locations in the studio while staying oriented towards the banner. The non-linear pathways in space—of both the camera lens and the dancers—evoke a sense of freedom and collectivity through our different locations that we believe to be embedded in the secularist values of our independent nation. In a diverse country such as India, where people from different caste, class, genders, linguistic and regional backgrounds live in close proximity to each other, we believe that our nation's secularist values help us find our sense of freedom and belonging.

Later that evening, I see myself tagged in a reel on Instagram (IG). The video is crisp and carefully edited. The best moments of the day are strung together to the tune of the song, Jai Ho, from *Slumdog Millionaire*. I continue to ponder on the ruptures that were imagined that evening in terms of both creating and sharing the performance work—how the dancers came together, how the video reel was made, where it was made, how it was made available to the audiences, and how all of that was a remarkable way of making dance. I witnessed a sense of doubt build within and I wondered: Who all will this performance reach and engage? How will it deliver the message of secularism through the limited attention spans of the IG users? Will it fill them with the same energy and intent that drove the dancers? As I continue to think through these questions and rewatch the reel, I realize that it was the ability to make choreography a shared social practice—between the choreographer and the dancers, and between the performers and social media users—that piques my interest in *The Secular Project*.

With the 2024 Indian general election results to be announced on June 4,[30] on January 22, 2024, India witnessed a state-sanctioned spectacle of majoritarian ethnonationalism performed

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[30] Indian 2024 general election are scheduled to run in multiphase, with voting starting from April 19 to continuing until June 1. The result of the elections will be announced on June 4, 2024. To read more about India's 2024 General

by its very own Prime Minister, Narendra Modi. Through the inauguration of the Ram Temple in

Ayodhya—a contested site considered to be the birthplace of Lord Ram by Hindus, the belief

which led to the demolition of the mosque, Babri Masjid,[31] by the right-wing Hindu mob in

1992—Modi's *pran prathista*[32] has challenged the foundation of the Indian nation-state as a

secular entity. Cautious of blurring the separation between state and religion by Modi, Mujib

Mashal writes for The New York Times, "The omnipresent leader, in mixing religion and politics

and tapping into the vast resources at his service, has achieved what his predecessors could not:

turning a diverse and argumentative Indian society into something resembling a monolith that

falls in line behind him. To question him is to question Hindu values. And that is akin to

blasphemy" (January 22, 2024). This performance of Hindu nationalism by the state's leader

causes a threat to the secularist values of the nation enshrined in the Indian constitution and

endangers dissent as a democratic right.

About the Chapter

More than ever, it has become urgent to study the politics of secularism and dissent in

India. To that end, in this chapter, I address the choreographic practice of a Delhi-based queer

and Sikh choreographer, Mandeep Raikhy, focusing on his recent work *The Secular Project*

Election, please read Mujib Mashal's (May 13, 2024) article for The New York Times:
https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/16/world/asia/india-2024-election.html.

[31] Read more about the demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992 here: "Demolition of Babri Masjid"
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demolition_of_the_Babri_Masjid; "Babri Masjid: The Timeline of Demolition" by
The Wire, December 6, 2021: https://thewire.in/communalism/babri-masjid-the-timeline-of-a-demolition.

Mujib Mashal writes for The New York Times, "The temple inaugurated by the prime minister is on the disputed site
of a centuries-old mosque destroyed in a Hindu mob attack that set a precedent of impunity in cases of violence
against Muslims" (January 22, 2024). Link: https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/22/world/asia/modi-india-ram-
temple.html.

[32] Read more about the Hindu ritual of *pran prathista* here:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consecration_of_the_Ram_Mandir; "What is the Pran Pratishtha ceremony, What is its
Origin and Where is it Celebrated?" by Calum Roche, January 22, 2024: https://en.as.com/latest_news/what-is-the-
pran-pratishtha-ceremony-what-is-its-origin-and-where-is-it-celebrated-n/.

(2020). Inspired by historic protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC), which I will discuss later in the chapter, in India's capital city, New Delhi, in 2020, this work aims to bring current authoritarian politics to the forefront. In the rising climate of Hindu nationalism and with it, an "othering" politics, the central question that Raikhy asks in *The Secular Project* asks is: "How do we negotiate, assert and experience the secular through our bodies in the times that we live in?" (@thesecularproject 2020)

The Secular Project is a performance work and an archive that exists as a series of short reels, posts, and story highlights on Instagram (@thesecularproject). It is a "public art initiative that consists of a series of performative interventions" that have been carried out across India and other parts of the world. [33] The initial explorations of this project began in December of 2020 during the anti-CAA and anti-NRC protests. However, the project took flight with a grant from Finding Sisterhood (Sweden) in 2021, which led Raikhy on a road trip across India between January to December with the "Secular India" banner. Since then, it has been performed over multiple locations across India and abroad, namely the UK and Europe, and has involved several participants in the role of performers and observers that Raikhy met along the way.

The Secular Project foregrounds the performative potential of the moving body to reinstate the secular in public and private spaces.[34] Each post on Instagram animates the "Secular India" banner in distinct ways, based on the performers involved—their training histories and lineages—and the spaces they interact with. The locations vary from urban, natural, and rural spaces where the secular has been brought to life through the moving bodies. The genre of dance

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[33] Mandeep Raikhy (2020). *The Secular Project*. https://mandeepraikhy.wordpress.com/thesecularproject/.

[34] Ibid.

styles performed in these embodied collaborations ranges from hip hop, breaking, and waacking to contemporary, every day, and contact-based movements that are site-responsive.

Before discussing *The Secular Project* in depth, in this chapter, I summarize the key arguments in the edited volume by Anuradha D. Needham and Rajeswari S. Rajan (2007) on secularism. I critically reflect on the notion of secularism in the Indian context and highlight how caste and (post)colonial strategies shape discriminatory politics in India. Developing further on the connection made between "tolerance" and secularism in the work of Anusha Kedhar (2020b) and Nishant Upadhyay (2020), I discuss how secularism privileges Hinduism over other religions and how tolerance propagates Hindu nationalism. In resistance to majoritarian nationalism, I focus on the role of dissent to fight oppression and injustice and devise alternative ways to uphold values of self-determination and nondiscrimination. Developing on the arguments of dance and cultural theorists, I show how dissent is always tied to one's corporeality.

I use *The Secular Project* as an example to show corporeal dissent in action—the dancing body as a mode of dissent against majoritarian nationalism. Based on an interview with the artist in 2022, I give an overview of Raikhy's choreographic practice as fueled by his own personal identity, lived experience, and social conditions, which guides him towards his search for a secular body in dance. In analyzing *The Secular Project*, I work with research questions such as: How is secularism embodied and enacted by its citizens, both in private and public spaces, in contemporary India? How does the dancing body intervene and/or help us understand the values of a democracy shifting into an authoritarian regime? In examining IG reels as choreographies of dissent, I investigate the interweaving of social, geographical, and digital locations that determines one's relationship with the secular. Through these choreographic examples, I show

how bodily acts of dissent and nation-state reconstitute each other and, in that process, generate alternative ways to reinstate the secular.

Why value the secular? For a democracy to function successfully, its citizens must be adept with or at least strive towards negotiating difference of opinion and difference along the lines of religion, gender, caste, class, and ability, among others. As describing the two opposing kinds of performances of the nation at the beginning of this chapter, where one focuses on the celebration of the secular and the other depicts the crisis of it, this chapter discusses the notion of secularism closely and critically to examine its strengths and limitations in the current Indian context. Here I am indebted to Needham and Rajan's (2007) thinking about secularism, which I discuss in detail in the next section. They argue that secularism provides "a more comprehensive and diffuse package of ideas, ideals, politics, and strategies than its representation solely as religion's Other would lead us to expect" (3). Building on their proposition, in this sense, secularism could help citizens navigate societal issues and concerns which comes with living in a diverse and heterogeneous country like India. Instead of sweeping differences—primarily, religious, economic, and regional—under the rug or hide it behind nationalist mottos such as "unity in diversity," an in-depth and critical understanding of the secular could equip citizens with ideas and strategies to stand against institutional oppression and practice non-discrimination, which is what I discuss through my choreographic analysis of *The Secular Project* in the second half of this chapter.

Secularism and Tolerance

In the Indian context, secularism has a very specific meaning, history, and development. It is linked to the moment of independence in India—wrestling with the British colonial past, the rise of religious nationalisms during Partition, and the question of caste over religion—to make

India a democratic nation. At the Round Table Conference in London in 1931-32, the Indian

constitution was being formulated for the future independent nation and the discussions around it

gave birth to secular nationalism or secularism.[35] However, the term "secularism" was included

in the constitution only in 1976 (Needham and Rajan 2007). Focusing on this historical

disjuncture, Shabnum Tejani (2007) argues that Indian Secularism is a "relational category" as it

is not distinct from but rather rose from the intersection between "categories of community and

caste, nationalism and communalism, liberalism and democracy" (47). Therefore, to understand

the role of secularism in India and where it stands in reference to the rising religious

fundamentalist politics in India today, it is essential to read the intersections between these

categories that deepened during the colonial period and Partition.

The fossilization of the Indian population into Hindu religious majority and Muslim,

Sikh, and Christian minority during the colonial period played an important role in the shaping of

secular nationalism. Editors Anuradha D. Needham and Rajeswari S. Rajan (2007) argue that

"colonial bureaucratic rationality was responsible for the creation of religious and caste identities

as political categories […] According to Gyanendra Pandey, communalism was deemed an

essential and unchanging feature of Indian society in the colonial understanding of the

subcontinent, which drew on Orientalist stereotypes about native people among whom religious

self-identification was considered a permanent and fundamental condition. ('Communalism' is a

specifically Indian usage describing conflict and dissension between religious communities,

particularly Hindus and Muslims.)" (12). This was used as the basis for Britishers' strategy of

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[35] This debate and discussion of the proposal of the Indian constitution happened at the Round Table Conferences in London. Shabnum Tejani (2007) writes, "In this essay, I focus on one historical moment, the Round Table Conferences that took place in London in 1931–32, the purpose of which was to draw up a constitution for a future independent India" (46).

"divide and rule" which furthered the communal tension and hatred between various religious communities.

The issue with the division and creation of majority and minority in India in this way was that the majority was considered and predetermined only along the lines of religion, and this denied the ability to inhabit heterogenous identitarian positions, central to Indian society. Romila Thapar (2007) writes that "the concept of majority and minority communities is also a refusal to concede that Indian society in the past had multiple identities—identities of caste and social hierarchy, of occupation, of language, of religious sect, and of region" (193). According to Thapar, this is a "denial of multiplicity" that forces the person to identity only through his/her/their religious affiliation and, thus, fixes their identity positions. She writes that such "predetermined majority distorts the notion of rule in accordance with the majority," (193) which means it makes democracy futile or non-functional.

This "denial of multiplicity" was not only practiced during the colonial period but also given a new orientation during the Indian Independence movement struggles. During the independence struggle, there were different forms of nationalism that were practiced: anti-colonial secular nationalism and religious nationalism. At the time of independence, secular nationalism was understood as one that promised equal rights for all in a democratic nation, whereas religious majoritarian nationalism gave preference to a specific religious or ethnic community (Islamic Pakistan and Hindu *Rashtra*). However, in many ways, both forms of nationalisms aimed at creating uniformity that privileged upper-caste Hindus and disregarded religious minorities, as I discuss below.

Being critical of the purpose of secularism in the Indian context, Needham and Rajan (2007) argue that "the justification of 'equal' citizenship can too easily pass into a demand for

uniformity, and secularism can move quickly from its basis in arguments about national

unification to legitimizing the state's regulation of 'difference'" (8). "Official nationalism"

practiced by Congress had secular values at the center of their campaign. However, with the

ideological divide between Jawahar Lal Nehru and Mohandas Karamchand (Mahatma) Gandhi,

secularism shifted from becoming a basis for "equal" citizenship to being "tolerant" towards the

minorities, "as a means of promoting the harmonious coexistence of different religions and

religious communities in the Indian polity" (Needham and Rajan 2007, 15).[36]

On the other hand, the right-wing Hindutva groups, like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak

Sangh (RSS) and Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP), aimed to popularize the vision for a Hindu Rashtra

(nation) during the Independence movement.[37] The Hindutva theory, as Sadanand Menon (2016)

has written, "to project India as a Hindu country and reclaim it exclusively for Hindus" (141). [38]

With the aim to popularize Hindutva theory, BJP called Congress's secularism as pseudo-

secularism and proposed their own version of "positive secularism" (Needham and Rajan 2007,

16). "Positive secularism" claimed to be inclusive of everyone and aimed at assimilation of

different religious groups, even Muslims and Christians who are considered "foreigners" in

Hindutva, as long as they are willing to give up their religious difference. BJP charted out a

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[36] Anuradha D. Needham and Rajeswari S. Rajan (2007), "Nehru's idea of secularism sought a strict separation between religion and politics, while Gandhi's religion-inflected idiom advocated "tolerance" and pluralism, as opposed to rationalist secularism, as a means of promoting the harmonious coexistence of different religions and religious communities in the Indian polity" (15).

[37] "With BJP's filiative links to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP)—the three are defined as the "political," the "organizational," and "social" parties of the Sangha parivar—"majority communalism," through its commitment to a Hindu Rashtra (or nation), became an ideological and intimate part of the state apparatus and a legal means through which conflict between groups was addressed. For at the heart of the RSS, which is the founding party of the RSS-VHP-BJP combine, is the belief in a homogeneous Hindu identity and culture as coterminous with the nation, India, in which Muslims and Christians remain foreigners and outsiders until such time as they give up their religious difference" (Needham and Rajan 2007, 16).

[38] Sadanand Menon (2016) writes that the central idea of Hindutva theory is "To project India as a Hindu country and reclaim it exclusively for Hindus, it has rewritten Indian history as essentially a history of Hindu civilization, and sees it as an essential prerequisite for establishing a grand Hindu vision of India" (141-142).

"majoritarian nationalism" based on religious majority to construct "a 'national identity' that transcends as well as nullifies the 'colonial or Islamic hybridity'" (Menon 2016, 137-139).

According to Ashish Nandy (1997), "Secularism always had a statist connection" (170). At the heart of both these projects—Congress's and BJP's—was the intention to create a Hindu majority, the only difference was that the former used secularism to *transcend* religious differences and the latter to both transcend as well as "nullify" colonial or Islamic influences for the nation-building project. Partition was the result of the illusion of communal solidarity that Congress/official nationalism tried to sketch[39] and the religious nationalism put forth in the Hindutva version.[40] It was the failure to address and deal with religious differences in which all religious groups suffered.

While growing up I heard many stories from both my parents about how their grandparents and parents escaped their homes and livelihoods in the Lahore and Lyallpur (now called Faisalabad) areas of Pakistan to come to this side of independent India. My mother told me many times about how my late grandmother, a young Hindu woman in Lahore, had to hide from Muslims who came raiding the locality with the aim to find and kill any Hindu on their side of the country. However, she was rescued by another Muslim family who took her undercover and thus, she survived. My maternal grandparents found shelter in a refugee camp at Purana Quila, Delhi, where my uncle and later, my mother was born in 1959. Such stories—of homelessness, of losing one's livelihood, and community members—from both sides of the

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[39] Along with the divisive politics of the British colonial leaders, G. Balachandran writes was "the confident assumption held by the majority of the Congress leadership that national solidarity was inherently a quality of India's [Hindu] cultural heritage" (Needham and Rajan 2007, 15), led to partition.

[40] Romila Thapar (2007) writes, "In the Hindutva version, the Hindu period is regarded as the golden age, the Muslim period the dark age of tyranny and oppression, and there is relative neutrality about the colonial period. This allows for a focus on the Hindu and Muslim periods, which as we will see, would become essential to the political projection of the religious nationalism" (Needham and Rajan 2007, 194).

country, as Ashish Nandy (1997) has written—made people "bitterly anti-Muslim, anti-Sikh, or

anti-Hindu" (160). However, like in my story where people from the other community helped my

grandmother, Nandy shares that in the accounts he heard about the Partition riots in his

childhood, "Despite the bitterness, however, virtually every account includes a story of someone

from the other community who helped the family" (160). The heart-wrenching reality and history

of Partition gave way to increased prejudices against the other religious communities.

The (almost) post-colonial state's focus on secularism became a way to alleviate people's

anxieties about the Partition and their religious difference. However, as both Tejani (2007) and

Joel Lee (2021) make us understand, the politics of secularism in India was as much linked to

caste as to religion. Reflecting on the Round Table Conference in the 1930s in London, Tejani

(2007) and Lee (2021) focus on Gandhi's role in the formulation of a forced majority in India's

fight for a democratic nation against colonial rule. Tejani (2007) writes that, "It was during the

course of these conferences that Gandhi went on his famous 'fast unto death' in protest at

Ambedkar's attempt to have untouchables recognized as a minority community along the same

lines as Muslims and Sikhs" (46). Gandhi argued with Ambedkar that the classification "will

create a division in Hinduism" (Lee 2021, 126). However, the inclusion of lower caste

communities into the fold of Hinduism was done to create a Hindu majority against other

religious communities.

Furthermore, Tejani (2007) argues that "the politics of secularism in India, structured by

the imperative of creating a democratic majority, was fundamentally reliant on the co-optation of

untouchables into an upper-caste Hindu identity" (S. Sarkar, Writing Social History, 358–90;

Ilaiah; Nigam cited in Needham and Rajan 2007, 47). Lee (2021) elaborates that this was a

political move led by the Hindu reformist group, Arya Samaj, and meant to incorporate the Dalit

communities into the Hindu fold to establish the majority status of the Hindus in electoral polls against Muslims and Christians. This led to the reconstitution of the democratic national culture as one belonging to the upper-caste Hindus. The merging of the Indian and the Hindu identity, as Nishant Upadhyay (2020) has argued, reeked of the intersection between brahmanical supremacy and colonial politics that continues to "shape the postcolonial state" (476).[41]

Scholars have identified the concept of "tolerance" to be problematic in practicing tenets of secularism, such as inclusivity and non-discrimination, in a diverse and heterogeneous society like India's (Kedhar 2020b; Prakash 2007; Upadhyay 2020). Even though tolerance might seem like a highly moral virtue to practice, scholars show how tolerance privileges the individual with already secure social position in terms of their race, caste, and religion. Thinking about the concept of tolerance in the Indian context, Gyan Prakash (2007) questions the usefulness of the term in reference to minoritized groups. Prakash asks, "Can the language of 'toleration' and 'protection' defend the minorities when it produces and recognizes the Muslims as 'minor' subjects of the nation?" (178)

Focusing on the capacity of the majority to be "tolerant" towards the minority groups, the development of secularism reveals its connection to brahmanical supremacy and colonialism. Paraphrasing Chinnaiah Jangam (2017), Upadhyay (2020) writes that it has become urgent more than ever to look at Dalit epistemologies now as they "rupture the ideas of an 'ideal' precolonial Hindu past" and "these critiques [Dalit epistemologies] destabilize the temporal and connect the postcolonial/modern/secular formation of the Indian state and brahmanical supremacy as interwoven and not solely as a consequence of colonialism" (476). For Upadhyay, these histories

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[41] According to Nishant Upadhyay (2020), "the intersections of caste and colonialism continue to shape the postcolonial state" (476).

decenter any fantasized decolonial moment in India post-independence as promised by

secularism.

Similarly, advancing Wendy Brown's (2006) argument on "tolerance,"[42] that presupposes

a "characterological superiority of the tolerant over the tolerated" (178), Anusha Kedhar (2020b)

shows how tolerance makes secularism a fraught concept in the Indian context. Kedhar (2020b)

argues,

> These ideas of liberal Hindu 'tolerance' are embedded in the founding of India as a
> secular state in 1947 [….] Indian secularism, that is, has been predicated on the supposed
> tolerance, liberalism, and openness of Hinduism to accommodate all religions. Seemingly
> contradictory, Indian secularism, in fact, privileges Hinduism over and above India's
> other religions, which are not seen to be as tolerant as Hinduism. (51)

Then, tolerance becomes a marker to exclude religions that resist being included into the fold of

Hinduism and therefore, are seen as "intolerant." Developing on the work of scholars Aavriti

Gautam and Julian Droogan (2018),[43] Kedhar shows how secularism, as based on the Hindu

values of tolerance, on the one hand, protects and enhances the "primacy of Hinduism" and, on

the other hand, silences those voices from religious minorities that are raised in opposition to

their oppression (51).[44]

Additionally, scholars talk about how religious nationalism conflates one's religious

identity with national identity and belonging. For Nandy (1997), "Hindu nationalism, like other

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[42] In her article, Anusha Kedhar (2020b) elaborates on Wendy Brown's (2006) concept of tolerance as, "Wendy Brown, in *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (2006), argues that in the modern West the liberal discourse of tolerance is integral to the constitution of the West and its Other; 'it distinguishes 'free' societies from 'fundamentalist' ones, 'civilized' from 'barbaric''(177). Within this binary discourse of tolerance, there is a 'characterological superiority of the tolerant over the tolerated'" (Brown 2006, 178 in Kedhar 2020b, 50-51).

[43] Aavriti Gautam and Julian Droogan (2018) write, "This formation of national self-identity established on Hindu-derived principles of tolerance not only reflects an effort to unite various Hindu groups but at the same time creates an opportunity to criticize the intolerance of those who disagree to integrate and label them as 'the other,' for instance, Muslim and Sikh communities" (Kedhar 2020b, 51).

[44] "Secularism, in other words, both strengthens the primacy of Hinduism and weakens the power of religious minorities to voice opposition in India" (Kedhar 2020b, 51).

such ethnonationalisms, is not an 'extreme' form of Hinduism but a modernist creed that seeks to retool Hinduism, on behalf of the global nation-state system, into a national ideology and the Hindus into a 'proper' nationality" (157). According to Menon (2016), "its (cultural nationalism) cunning agenda is to evacuate all ideas of political rights from the idea of a nation state and transplant in its place ideas of cultural rights, obviously weighted in favor of concepts of primogeniture, racial purity and genetic ancestry as contained in ideas like janmabhumi or birthland/homeland and other emotive aspects that touch upon shared language, food and consanguinity" (138). For him, cultural nationalism strategically rewrites Indian history to show a linear, never broken, continuous pre-colonial Hindu past, where Hindus are seen as native to this land while all other religions remain foreign.

How does tolerance help us think about the current authoritarian politics or rising climate of Hindu nationalism and, with it, an "othering" politics in India? Upadhyay (2020) outlines the project of Hindu Nationalism as "cisheteropatriarchal, brahminical, and Islamophobic" (467), that uses "tolerance" as a way to appear inclusive of all "others" who are not upper-caste Hindus. To reflect on the main purpose of the Hindutva project or Hindu Nationalism, Upadhyay (2020) writes,

> The main aim of the nationalist project is to create a unified Hindu rashtra, a nation which is Hindu majority/dominant. The Rashtra can be tolerant of all-Others as long as they assimilate within the Hindu fold. The project considers Hinduism as the main religion of India, and Christianity and Islam as 'foreign' religions; and Hindi is the national language. Hindu rashtra is also invested in the continued occupation of Kashmir and Adivasi, and Tribal territories in the North East and centre of India. Furthermore, Islamophobia is manifested through the continued oppression of Muslim communities across India, occupation of Kashmir, commitments to the 'War on Terror' and anti-Pakistan nationalism; targets of all are conflated into one another and rendered as 'terrorists,' while India remains the victim. (467)

As "tolerance" silences those dissenting voices that do not align with the Hindu Nationalist project, they are considered a threat to the nation and given names such as "anti-national" or

"terrorist." Similarly, Kedhar (2020b) reminds us that "under a Hindu nationalist government, tolerance becomes a weapon to silence opposition as antithetical to India's pluralist democracy" (52). By redirecting the public's focus on the tolerant values of Hinduism rather than the incursions made on secularism by Hindu Nationalists, tolerance not only helps silence those voices of dissent, but also label them as intolerant, barbaric, and foreign. Kedhar goes on to argue that they "are viewed not only as barbaric but also foreign, not truly belonging to the nation; they are the ones who the Hindu right believes should have been expunged or removed at the time of Partition, a reminder that the Hindu nationalist project is incomplete and must continually abject or absorb the Muslim Other" (51). According to Kedhar, tolerance, then, becomes a political tool to dismiss secularist values as part of the Hindu nationalist project.[45]

In the rising climate of Hindu nationalism and with it, an "othering" politics, how do citizens fight for secularist values of equality and non-discrimination? What role does dissent play in such an authoritarian regime? How do citizens exercise their constitutional right to dissent, even when they are faced with repercussions? In the following section, developing on Romila Thapar's (2020) work, I show how dissent is integral to societal growth.

Dissent

In her book talk on *Voices of Dissent: An Essay* (2020), historian Thapar (2021c) argues that "dissent is central to social and cultural change."[46] Studying the history of dissent in ancient India to modern and current times, in an exclusive talk for Karwaan: The Heritage Exploration Initiative, Thapar defines three main characteristics of dissent. She says that dissent is a) aimed at a substantial issue, b) must have an objective expressing disagreement or difference, and c) is

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[45] "Tolerance, a central tenet of the Hindu nationalist agenda, has been mobilized to sideline, distract from, and dismiss criticism of the government's incursions on secularism" (Kedhar 2020b, 48).

[46] "Voices of Dissent – Romila Thapar," October 9, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v803leLM0Kg.

non-violent.[47] According to Thapar, the difference of opinion which is expressed at a particular issue must provide "alternative ideas, both in thought and in practice," to register itself as dissent.[48] For her, "dissent can be a form of protest" but what distinguishes it from protest is that dissent is non-violent.[49] Dissent could evolve into a protest, according to her, which is usually more organized.

For Thapar, it is dissent which brings opposing parties into a dialogue and debate in hopes to find a solution. Seeing citizens right at the core of any dissent, Thapar (2020) argues that dissent must be "audible, distinct, opposed to injustice and supportive of democratic rights" (142). In discussing dissent in modern India, Thapar focuses on two main examples—Mohandas Karamchand (Mahatma) Gandhi's *Dharna*, hunger strike, and *Satyagraha,* "holding firmly to truth" or "truth force"—for the Indian independence movement. Some of the strategies in the *Satyagraha* movement included rejection of imported goods (*swadeshi* movement) and opting to weave and wear khadi. Through these forms of civil disobedience and non-violent resistance, Gandhi demanded freedom for the Indian people from British colonial rule with the aim to establish a democratic society. For Thapar, these forms of dissent were widely recognized and adopted by the Indian population because of their similarity with other modes of dissent present in many cultures in ancient India.

Thapar insists that dissent is central in questioning existing social order and producing new forms of cultural and political knowledge. For her, "Dissent encourages the questioning of the world in which we live, and in this process, alternatives are formulated. Any advance in

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[47] Mainly referring to this excerpt of Romila Thapar's talk, "Defining Dissent | Prof. Romila Thapar," May 16, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MdL5d0qAWos. To listen to her full talk, please see: "Karwaan Book Club | Voices of Dissent by Prof. Romila Thapar," March 2, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r3SXH0PjnlI.

[48] "Voices of Dissent – Romila Thapar," October 9, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v803leLM0Kg.

[49] Ibid.

knowledge requires questioning existing knowledge, existing explanations sometimes give way to newer and better ones. Otherwise, there is bound to be stagnation."[50] Thus, dissent allows for societal transformation and growth and, in its absence, culture and society endure the risk of their decline.

Moreover, dissent is always tied to one's corporeality. Critical dance studies scholars have argued for the body's potential to resist or reinforce dominant culture. As argued by dance scholars, the dancing body produces and contests the socio-cultural codes that classify it by gender, race, ability, sexuality, nationality, and age (Albright 1997; Banerji 2019; Daly 1995; Desmond 1997; Foster 1986; Lepecki 2004; Manning 1993; Novack 1990; and others). In her introduction to *Corporealities: Dancing Knowledge, Culture and Power*, Susan L. Foster (1996) has written about "a consideration of bodily reality, not as natural or absolute given but as a tangible and substantial category of cultural experience" (xi). Furthering these arguments by critical dance studies scholars, I believe that the dancing body efficiently captures and represents societal codes and cultural experiences which makes it an excellent model for the study of identity politics.

Developing on the works of Marcel Mauss (1973) and Pierre Bourdieu (1972), Foster (1995) argues that the body is not only inscribed upon but also writes and can generate knowledge. Bodies produce meaning by cultivating physical traits in response to their environmental conditions—social, cultural, and political. Foster establishes that bodily writing— the way that the body sits, stands, runs, etc.—reveals the relationship between physical actions and cultural codes. Jane Desmond (1997), sharing Foster's urge to include dance in/as the study

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[50] Ibid.

of "bodily texts," argues that "we can further our understandings of how social identities are signaled, formed, and negotiated through bodily movement" (29).

Writing on her practice of contact improvisation in the 1960s, Cynthia Jean Novack (1990) proposes that bodily kinetics produce cultural meaning. Novack argues that "culture is embodied" and we comprehend the world around us through "shared conceptions of our bodies and selves and through the movement experiences society offers us" (8). According to her, "We perform movement, invent it, interpret it, and reinterpret it, on conscious and unconscious levels. In these actions, we participate in and reinforce culture, and we also create it" (8). According to Novack, the moving body not only engages with and reflects the social and political values of a given culture but also actively (re)produces those cultural values and meaning.

An example of when the body reinforces dominant culture and becomes an instrument of hegemonic power is successfully illustrated in the work of scholar Joseph Alter (1994). Alter (1994) studies Indian physical practices such as wrestling and compares it to Physical Training (PT) in Indian schools and RSS's bodily training to show how Hindu nationalism manifests on a somatic level. He has written, "Discipline and obedience are regarded as organizing principles by which means individual character is subsumed by the national identity" (566). He identifies the role of discipline and obedience as central to (re)constructing a citizen's body that carries nationalist ideologies, thus calling this form of nationalism as "somatic nationalism."[51] According to Alter, "somatic nationalism" uses the body as an object for "the organization of a militant ideology" (559) and thus, making the body work in alliance with systems of oppression.

For the purpose of this chapter, I focus on ways in which the body resists dominant culture and registers its dissent through performative actions that are improvised and/or

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[51] Dance scholar Anusha Kedhar (2020b) shows how yoga is an example of a physical practice in India that is used by the RSS to create a form of somatic nationalism that propagates Hindu nationalist ideologies (48).

choreographed in public spaces. Theorizing the body "as an articulate signifying agent," Foster

(2003) brings our attention to the relationship between the body, choreography, and political

action in protests (396). According to Foster, protests make visible "the range of kinesthetic

responsiveness exercised by all bodies in response to one another" (412). Her focus on the

physical and corporeal responsiveness reveals how the kinesthetic responses of the protestors

construct a "physical interference" (412). Furthermore, for Foster, "the process of creating

political interference calls forth a perceptive and responsive physicality that, every where along

the way, deciphers the social and then choreographs an imagined alternative" (412). According

to Foster, political action not only requires the physical responsiveness of the bodies in

resistance, but also in doing that, the bodies in protest help perceive the existing social order and

design its alternative.

Influenced by the work of political philosopher, Hannah Arendt, both Judith Butler (2011,

2015) and André Lepecki (2013) investigate this intricate relationship between bodily dissent and

political action in public spaces. According to Butler (2011), "It is not that bodies are simply

mute life-forces that counter existing modalities of power. Rather, they are themselves modalities

of power, embodied interpretations, engaging in allied action."[52] For Butler (2015), when bodies

occupy a public space in resistance and "opposition to the legitimacy of the state," it is through

persisting and occupying that space repeatedly that their dissent is registered in corporeal terms

(83).[53] Butler argues that "When the body 'speaks' politically, it is not only in vocal or written

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[52] Judith Butler, 2011, "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street," accessed January 29, 2024, https://scalar.usc.edu/works/bodies/Judith%20Butler:%20Bodies%20in%20Alliance%20and%20the%20Politics%20 of%20the%20Street%20%7c%20eipcp.net_thumb.pdf.

[53] According to Judith Butler (2015), "Although the bodies on the street are vocalizing their opposition to the legitimacy of the state, they are also, by virtue of occupying and persisting in that space without protection, posing their challenge in corporeal terms…" (83).

language […] Both action and gesture signify and speak, both as action and claim; the one is not finally extricable from the other" (83).

Similarly, building on Arendt's definition of politics "*as a general orientation towards freedom*," Lepecki (2013) reframes the political as "the movement of freedom" (14). Furthering Gilles Deleuze's (1995) work on "control" societies, Lepecki clarifies that "control not only tracks, but also—and this is Deleuze's point—preconditions freedom from within by subtly providing pathways for circulation that are introjected as the only ones imaginable, the only ones deemed appropriate" (15). Developing on the definition of the police by political philosopher Jacques Rancière's (2010), Lepecki defines this constricted movement as "choreopoliced movement" which is largely "any movement incapable to breaking the endless reproduction of an imposed circulation of consensual subjectivity, where to be is to fit a prechoreographed pattern of circulation, corporeality, and belonging" (20).

In opposition to the "choreopoliced movement," Lepecki imagines the body as capable of breaking away from predetermined pathways of circulation. Describing the ability of the body to choregraph dissenting movement as "choreopolitics," Lepecki (2013) argues that "Choreopolitics requires a redistribution and reinvention of bodies, affects, and sense through which one may learn how to move politically, how to invent, activate, seek, or experiment with a movement whose only sense (meaning and direction) is the experimental exercise of freedom" (20). In this way, Lepecki regards bodily dissent as the movement of and towards freedom that resists, readjusts, and reinvents imposed forms of corporeal behaviors and the spaces they are confined to. Thus, through his concept of "choreopolitics," Lepecki roots dissent, as the political act of resistance, in the body and as materialized by the body. Furthermore, since Lepecki argues that to move is political, then the dancer becomes the ideal political subject.

Building on the work of scholars who have studied the politics of public assembly (Arendt 1958, 2005; Butler 2015; Foster 2003; Kedhar 2014; Lepecki 2013), dance scholar Sevi Bayraktar (2019) analyzes the role of public dissent in Turkey since 2016. With the declaration of state-of-emergency in 2016, Bayraktar notes a disruption in political public gatherings in Turkey. She focuses on public assemblies that form on a smaller scale in comparison to mass protests when dissenters are faced with State-restriction, brutality, and retaliation. She proposes the concept of "tactics of dispersal" to theorize "how bodies act to maintain the possibility of political interaction" in small gatherings (92). Centralizing the role of choreography in the act of dispersal, Bayraktar argues that against an authoritarian political regime, dissenters "innovatively choreograph the urban space and create ephemeral, mobile, and minor scale political assemblies as a mode of resistance" (90). For Bayraktar, these choreographies between dissenting bodies reveal "reveals political and kinetic resilience of dissenters who continue moving, circulating, interacting, conjoining, and performing through their temporary and immediate encounters in the urban space" (92). Thus, for Bayraktar, kinetic choices of the dissenters not only construct ephemeral and flexible political assemblies, but also make their resistance urgent, immediate, and visible in urban spaces.

As dissent is expressed on a corporeal level, in a state of dissidence, it is the body that questions hegemonic social order and proposes alternative ways of being, thinking, and engaging in the world and with each other. The body in dissent strives to provide an alternative to the existing practice of inequality, violence, and hatred, redeeming the crisis of "relationality" (Topolski 2015).[54] It stands up and fights for citizens' and democratic rights. The practice of non-

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[54] Anya Topolski (2015) argues that in liberal and late capitalist societies, an overt focus on autonomy and individualism replicates the strategies of the spectacle—commodification of experience and perception, feelings of alienation, and declined participation in politics.

violent resistance and civil disobedience occurs at a corporeal and somatic level that manifests itself in public and social spaces that are choreographed and are performative.

Developing on the arguments of dance and cultural scholars that see dance, choreography, and the dancing body producing, reinforcing, and resisting cultural meaning and histories, I see choreography as a dissident social practice and the dancing body as the primary mode for dissent, which I illustrate in my analysis of the choreographic work, *The Secular Project.*

The Secular Project (2020 to present)

In December 2019, the Indian Parliament passed a Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) that targeted Indian Muslims and other religious minorities. This new law asked for proof of citizenship and discriminated along the lines of religious identity. Teesta Setalvad (2022) writes, "[I]n defiance of the basic constitutional tenets of equality and non-discrimination, Parliament made religion a marker. Singling out the 'Islamic countries of Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan,' it fast-tracked processes for non-Muslims from there to enlist as Indian citizens."[55] They also built a national population register or the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and detention centers to detain those who fail to show citizenship documents, specifically those from Muslim communities. However, during this time, anti-CAA and anti-NRC protests broke out in the country with Shaheen Bagh becoming one of the historic sites in north-east Delhi where Muslim women came forward to dissent. Even as the BJP government had placed a ban on public protests, they remained on the site for over 100 days. They stood for and urged to reinstate

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[55] Teesta Setalvad, 2022, "CAA-NPR-NRC: The Law Is Being Weaponised Against the Constitution," *The Wire*, November 24, 2022, https://thewire.in/government/caa-npr-nrc-the-law-is-being-weaponised-against-the-constitution.

in the cultural psyche the constitutional values of non-discrimination and equality of a secular, liberal, democratic, and heterogeneous nation like India.

Inspired by such historic protests in India's capital city, New Delhi, Mandeep Raikhy devised *The Secular Project* in 2020 to resist the uprooting of secularist values in India's constitution. With an initial grant from the organization, Finding Sisterhood,[56] Raikhy traveled across many urban and rural regions in India with a "Secular India" banner (Figure 1). This banner was originally created during the protests against the CAA and the NRC in the beginning of 2020. As he traveled to several regions in India, he collaborated with local artists and citizens in a spontaneous and improvisatory manner, redefining established notions of artistry, production, and performance through the project. The intention of *The Secular Project* was to "build an archive of performative actions across India that reiterate the secular through embodied collaborations between artists, citizens, and spaces during a road trip across India between January to December 2021" (@thesecularproject July 10, 2021).

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[56] "Based in Sweden, Finding Sisterhood is a surface, a platform, a practice that both presents, makes and widely creates a language for artistic practices that instead of discussing whiteness draw inspiration from communities working with decolonisation." Source: https://fulkonst.se/Finding-Sisterhood (accessed January 27, 2024).

Figure 1. "Secular India" banner on Mall Road, Shimla. Screenshot taken from @thesecularproject on Instagram. Posted on August 30, 2021: https://www.instagram.com/p/CTNKjJrJHsH/ (accessed January 28, 2024).

The Secular Project exists as a performance and an archive on social media platform, Instagram (@thesecularproject). It aims to bring current authoritarian politics to the forefront. In the rising climate of Hindu nationalism and with it, an "othering" politics, the central question that The Secular Project asks is: "How do we negotiate, assert and experience the secular

through our bodies in the times that we live in?" (@thesecularproject 2020) This project

questions an Indian body's relationship to the term "secular," embedded in India's constitution. It

tries to make the secular "alive" in everyday life and to remind of its value as foundational to the

workings of a young, postcolonial, and heterogenous Indian nation. It begs us to

rethink/reconsider the relationship between the citizen body, the nation-state, and the secular

today and reflect on ways secularism could be reimagined that it reinstates the promise of equal

rights for all in a democratic and independent nation.

In analyzing *The Secular Project*, my research questions are: How is secularism

embodied and enacted by its citizens, both in private and public spaces, in contemporary India?

How does the dancing body intervene and/or help us understand the values of a democracy

shifting into an authoritarian regime? Based on my fieldwork in India in 2022, I employ

ethnographic research methods—participant-observation, "thick description" (Geertz 1973), and

qualitative interviewing—with choreographic analysis of the work on social media platforms

such as Instagram and WordPress to address the politics of secularism and corporeal dissent in

this work. I continue to examine the role of social location—specifically one's religion, caste,

and region—in reflecting on one's relationship with the secular.

Instead of "somatic nationalism," in which the body is used as an object for "the

organization of a militant ideology" (Alter 1994, 559), *The Secular Project* mobilizes the

dancing body as a mode of dissent against majoritarian nationalism. Contextualizing the role of

corporeal dissent in the work, I argue that Raikhy's *The Secular Project* not only brings activism

and dance together, but also this work exemplifies the connection between individual dissent and

desired collectivity for social change.

Performing One's Identity: Raikhy's Artistic Background and His Search for a Secular Body

Raikhy grew up in a Sikh family, Sikhism being a minority religion in India, listening to stories about the India-Pakistan partition. As a child, he witnessed lived realities of the pogrom against the Sikhs in the 1980s. An anti-Sikh riot happened in Delhi in 1984 where over three thousand Sikhs were killed over three days. It was his lived experience as a Sikh man that shaped his current choreographic interest in speaking against exclusionary and hate politics with the rise of Hindu nationalism in India.

Raikhy began dancing at the age of 19. While pursuing a commerce degree at the bachelors' level, he was looking for an outlet to engage creatively and to connect with queer communities in Delhi in the late nineties. He started twice-a-week jazz dance classes at The Danceworx Performing Arts Academy, and soon realized that dance was what he wanted to pursue. He became fascinated with how dance and choreography engage with "physicality as well as a kind of rationality [...] a thinking through of ideas."[57] Then, he moved to London to pursue a BA (Hons) in Dance Theatre at Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance. At Laban, his training in dance, dance making, dance science, costume making, lighting for dance, dance administration, and dance for community-building shaped his perspective about dance as a field. However, this experience also came with its own challenges.

After graduating from Laban, Raikhy recognized that he and a few other brown (international) students had been under the process of "whitewashing." Reflecting on his time at Laban, Raikhy (2022) shares, "Have we just been whitewashed? Are we now beginning to just

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[57] Interviewed by the author on July 29, 2022, at Vasant Kunj, Delhi, India.

move and think, and beginning to engage with the histories that are not our own?"[58] Learning dance under the large umbrella term "contemporary" dance where everyone moved alike, irrespective of their socio-cultural background and difference, Raikhy had the urge to look for Indian references in dance. He started working as a dancer with Shobhana Jeyasingh's dance company in 2005 where he engaged with bharatanatyam for the first time. Raikhy felt that Jeyasingh's choreographic work was "aggressively urban and simultaneously, aggressively Indian." Jeyasingh's treatment[59] of the classical dance form taught him a lot about how to work with the (classical dance) form as a "physical resource" or "resource material" (Raikhy 2022) to generate new material for choreography.[60]

At the same time, Raikhy struggled to prove/perform his "Indian-ness" for white audiences in the UK. Writing about British South Asian Dance, Anusha Kedhar (2020c) argues that South Asian Dance must be "both diverse (i.e., ethnically marked) *and* innovative (i.e., ethnically unmarked)" (33) to be legible, assimilable, and marketable in the British dance economy. The pressure to balance the market's need to be ethnically marked while producing aesthetics that are aligned with Western techniques, as Kedhar points out,[61] is what Raikhy experienced as a young Indian dancer in London.

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[58] Interviewed by the author on July 29, 2022, at Vasant Kunj, Delhi, India.

[59] There have been critiques of Shobhana Jeyasingh's portrayal of bharatanatyam on stage. Dance scholars and makers have critiqued her of taking the form out of its cultural context and presenting an oriental version of or orientalizing the dance form for the Western audiences. Read Janet O'Shea (2008).

[60] In the interview by the author on July 29, 2022, Raikhy mentioned the approach to bharatanatyam in rehearsals taught him to "learn the form as a kind of physical resource to be able to create new work."

[61] In Anusha Kedhar's (2020c) nuanced observation about the demand for "flexible labor" from British South Asian dancers, she shows the dual insistence for the dancers to be both diverse and innovative (33). They must be flexible enough to produce markers of ethnic and cultural specificity that are authentic and different by including, for example, rhythmic footwork, mudras, classical music, narratives from Indian mythology or philosophy (Kedhar 2020c, 34). At the same time, they must mark their Britishness by incorporating Western "techniques, aesthetic, choreographic approaches, and/or performance practices" (Kedhar 2020c, 33) into their classical technique to be read as innovative.

Kedhar (2020c) theorizes this demand from the cultural producer as a demand for their "flexibility" or "flexible labor." She defines "flexibility" as "a range of corporeal maneuvers and bodily tactics" (4) that enable British South Asian dancers to fulfill the demands of a neoliberal dance economy, making "flexible labor" a corporeal, embodied, as well as an economic phenomenon (18). According to her, "flexibility" makes visible the increased labor expected out of racialized bodies who, in turn, use it as a "tool" to "negotiate a range of racial, gender, national, and cultural identity positions amid vexed political and economic conditions" (17).[62]

With the kind of "flexibility" that British South Asian dance requires, especially to be "ethnically marked," as Kedhar theorizes, Raikhy shares his frustration as a dancer in the UK,

> Do I want to be engaging with this burning question of I am an Indian, I am an Indian, for the rest of my life? [….] I didn't want to be an Indian in the diaspora who needed to just amplify the Indianness in a sea of whiteness. [July 29, 2022]

Reflecting on his experience of working as a dancer in London, Raikhy realized that he did not want to be a diasporic Indian dancer in the UK. In this way, he felt that he had to defend his Indian-ness and he would much rather be in his home country, his home city, Delhi, and ask questions of "homemaking geographically as well as culturally as well as within the form" (Raikhy 2022).[63] In *Reading Dancing*, Foster (1986) asks, "And how can the choreography be separated from the changing historical and social circumstances that surround each choreographer's career?" (2) Similarly, as a queer Sikh man, Raikhy's interest began to grow in dealing with questions that spurred out of his identity and social location. He wished to engage

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[62] "*Flexible bodies* makes visible both the increasing flexibilization of racialized dance labor as well as the dancer-ly tactics deployed to manage that increasing racialization" (Kedhar 2020c, 4).

[63] Interviewed by the author on July 29, 2022, at Vasant Kunj, Delhi, India.

with the tensions of living in India and with the question of who has access to classical dance forms,[64] like bharatanatyam, rather than providing evidence of his India-ness to the West.

Therefore, after spending around seven years in the UK, Raikhy returned to India with the same question in mind that he had when he graduated from Laban, "What kind of dance do I want to be engaging with?" (Raikhy 2022) This led him to begin his choreographic practice, as he shares, "from looking at questions that emerged from my own body."[65] He started working as the Managing Director of the Gati Dance Forum (founded in 2007) in 2009 where he led multiple projects such as the Gati Summer Dance Residency and Ignite! Festival of Contemporary Dance, both of which have been monumental in shaping the landscape of contemporary dance in India and Southeast Asia, up until the forum dissolved in 2018. As a pedagogue, he led the curriculum development process for the first MA Performance Practice (dance) program at Ambedkar University, Delhi, from 2013 to 2016. During this time, he created many choreographic works that addressed questions of home, gender, queerness, and sexuality in pieces such as *Inhabited Geometry* (2010), *a male ant has straight antennae* (2013), and *Queen-size* (2016). Later, he focused his attention on asking questions about the rituals that the body performs in order to seek alliance with one's religious beliefs, nationhood, and secularism in his choreographic works such as *Anatomy of Belief* (2019), *The Secular Project* (2020), and *Hallucinations of an Artifact* (2023).

Taking up a project like *The Secular Project* meant that Raikhy not only had to speak from his position, as a Sikh queer dancer-choreographer, but also make space for his

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[64] From the interview with the author on July 29, 2022, at Vasant Kunj, Delhi, India, Raikhy shares: "When I moved back, I began to think that actually it's that I don't come from a history of bharatanatyam. I haven't learned the form from a guru. Do I then not have access to this form? Who has access to this form? Can I as somebody who was dabbled with the form still have the right to make work with the form? So that was the question that I had. Do I can I make it my home? What does homemaking actually entail?"

[65] Interviewed by the author on July 29, 2022, at Vasant Kunj, Delhi, India.

collaborators, from different social locations in terms of their age, caste, religion, and gender, to voice their critiques and suspicions about the secular. Regarding his collaborators in *The Secular Project*, Raikhy shared that in order to step out of the trap of rigidifying one's identity, he thought of social location as "lenses through which you look at the world." Thinking about identity as fluid and evolving, he imagined "social location as lenses because they bring certain specificity and the kind of cultural history that you bring to the questions, but then you're not attached to identities as an end game.[66]" In this way, you can embody and perform your identity in all its complexity instead of attaching yourself to one aspect of your identity (gender/class/caste) and obscuring the rest. You can be both privileged and marginalized at the same time.

Butler (2011) argues that "The body, defined politically, is precisely organized by a perspective that is not one's own and is, in that sense, already elsewhere, for another, and so in departure from oneself."[67] This speaks to the idea of plurality and difference that exists within an individual, even before they come in contact/relation with others. Understanding the body's innate relationality has a higher chance of making us open to difference, in oneself and others, instead of forcing others to comply with us or give up their different ideologies or ways of being in the world. This is what is brought forth with each rendition of *The Secular Project*.

How does the dancing body help us think of secularism differently? How does an attention to a secular body help us think about secularism and this moment of Hindu nationalism? Critical dance studies scholars remind us that it is possible to connect to the body's

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[66] Interviewed by the author on July 29, 2022, at Vasant Kunj, Delhi, India.

[67] Judith Butler, 2011, "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street," accessed January 29, 2024, https://scalar.usc.edu/works/bodies/Judith%20Butler:%20Bodies%20in%20Alliance%20and%20the%20Politics%20of%20the%20Street%20%7c%20eipcp.net_thumb.pdf.

resistive potential to oppose and dissent towards unconstitutional practices such as violating secularist values of a nation.

Writing on Indian modern dance, Prarthana Purkayastha (2014) argues that understanding the role of the dancing body in creating culture disrupts such institutionalized histories. She writes that "I began to realize how the dancing body complicates our understanding of Empire, Indian anti-colonial nationalism, transnationalism and 'the woman question' [….] How does dance, as an embodied form of resistance to political and cultural nationalism, offer a nuanced view of imperial hegemony and the recalcitrance of its subjects? What are the intricate and intimate links that exist between dancing bodies, nationalist politics, international modernism and feminism in twentieth-century Indian performance?" (1)

In search for a secular body in Contemporary Indian dance, Ananya Chatterjea (2004a) reaffirms that secular as a category is unstable. Following Rustom Bharucha's (1998) work, in which he suggests that "The sheer *instability* of the secular as a cultural and political category needs to be acknowledged as the new point of departure for interpreting secularism(s) in India today" (19), Chatterjea urges us to think about how the dancing body, with its "liveness and visual immediacy," unsettles the fraught relationship between religion and culture and "intervenes in state-supported religious iconography" (107). This is because, for her, reading the dancing bodies in their cultural specificity reveals influences from different religions and castes that were forcefully erased in the process of reconstruction of Indian neoclassical dances. According to Chatterjea (2004a), the presence of "other" elements "from tribal 'cults,' Islam, and other religions" (113) decenters the Hindu-centric narrative of the construction of Indian classical dances.

Writing about the "dominant caste anticolonial nationalism in colonial India, M.S.S

Pandian (2002, 736) critiques the conflated construction of Hinduness and Indianness"

(Upadhyay 2020, 467-468). Similarly, Raikhy questions the deliberate association between two

identitarian categories—Hindu and Indian (the religious and the national)—that are interwoven

to erase other histories in search of a secular body in dance. In the interview, Raikhy shares,

> There is a historical kind of association, forced association or deliberate association, that is being made between the Hindu and the Indian. You realize that all of these associations are political." [..] "There is the Constitution of India that has been formulated with an attention to the secular placing itself very strictly against religious discrimination. And at the same time, there's a re-formation/formulation of dance forms that is actually literally just amplifying the Hindu-ness of these cultural forms. You know, you're kind of deliberately constructing forms that are linked to a kind of previous ancient imagined Hindu history. You know, it's all imagined. [July 29, 2022]

Especially during the moment of independence, as many dance scholars have noted,[68] for

Raikhy, "dance became an embodied practice of the State" from which he wanted to

disassociate.[69] Working on *The Secular Project*, Raikhy wonders what if the Indian classical

dance forms were made secular? What if they were reconstructed without religious overtones?

> I'm curious, for example, if at the time that the Constitution has been formulated, you know, India being secular and a kind of thrust towards non-discrimination on the grounds of caste, class, religion. What if the dance forms were reconstructed or were declared secular by the state? What would have happened? To say that actually, you know, the cultural forms cannot have religious overtones because they are steeped in power. And that actually, we need to look at them differently. [Raikhy July 29, 2022]

In his choreographic practice, it became important for him to deconstruct the processes through

which the body is pulled into hegemonic frameworks of representation—religious, nationalist,

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[68] Dance scholars have analyzed the contested relationship between classical South Asian dances and the nation, especially in response to the reconstruction of twentieth century classical Indian dance (Allen 1997, 1998; Banerji 2019; Chakravorty 2008; Meduri 1988; Munsi 2011; O'Shea 2003, 2007, 2008; Srinivasan 1985).

[69] Annette Leday and Mandeep Raikhy, 2021, "Dance India Today: In conversation with Mandeep Raikhy," Narthaki Official, March 14, 2021. Available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LrJ-yKgSJd8&list=PLawHnKB4UjotvTtPFU7mD42FEq2ac_nDo&index=4.

and traditional—so he looked for and studied bodily rituals and gestures in detail.[70] This resulted in a series of performative actions in *The Secular Project* that question these frameworks that label them (bodily actions) as either acceptable and normative sexual, gendered, and citizen's behaviors or as non-normative, immoral, criminal, and anti-national ones.

Through a set of performative actions over several posts, *The Secular Project* tries to unsettle the deeply embedded religious content in Indian dance forms. Raikhy sensitively works through the overlaps and similarities between the two identitarian positions—secular and religious. The secular is not necessarily pitched against the religious even though the aspiration is to imagine a secular dance form and the body. Rather he looks at the Indian dancing body, choreographic aesthetics, and values, once reconstructed with religious undertones, in conjunction with the secular values embedded in the constitution. For him, secularism is as much a belief as a religion, and they are connected in a way that a set of rituals that are performed over time brings each of them into existence.

The secular body over the course of many renditions, iterations, and performative rituals proposes new meanings and values for secularism today. The secular body stands against majoritarian nationalism, navigates difference with respect, and intends to reestablish pluralist democratic values amidst a complex history of secularism (in dance) in India. The secular body does not amplify the Hindu-ness of cultural forms, such as Indian classical dance, and it unmasks the "neutrality" (Chatterjea 2020) embedded in contemporary dance through spontaneous collaborations between performers and performers and audiences. It is through engaging with,

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[70] I am using the term ritual as informed by my reading of Richard Schechner's (1994) essay, "Ritual and Performance." Schechner theorizes an affective relationship between the two socio-cultural processes: ritual and performance. He has argued that "Rituals are performative: they are acts done; and performances are ritualized: they are codified, repeatable actions" (613). Bodily rituals, then, become those codified actions that the body performs on a regular basis in service of establishing/maintaining a social identity, value, and ideology.

acknowledging, and highlighting social locations that challenge existing or proposed opposing ideologies on secularism that plurality and difference begin to have meaning in this discourse.

Mapping the Secular Body

Choreographic Disruptions:

Over the years, Raikhy's choreographic process has evolved into three distinct phases or parts. In the interview from 2022, he explained the steps which I have paraphrased as follows:

a. Germination: generating new material from various (re)sources,

b. Structuring: organizing the material to make a draft, and

c. Exchange: setting up relationships between performers, performers and audiences.

Having seen Raikhy's work since 2014, I believe the last stage is where the affect of the performance is realized. This is the stage where Raikhy introduces "disruptions" in his choreographic process. Not only does he make decisions about the relationship between the micro and the macro elements in his work—"think of detail in a way that it then sits within a larger structure" (Raikhy 2022)—but also the decisions about the kind of space where the particular dance belongs. In his previous choreographic works, the central theme dictated the quality of space being constructed in the piece. For example, Raikhy (2022) shares that "with *a male ant has straight antennae*, I kind of landed up thinking of it as a construction site. For example, with notions of gender, notions of masculinity could be constructed much like you construct things at a construction site and destroy them. While in *Queen-Size*, we began to think of it as like a really intimate bedroom, like a setting, like a simulated bedroom in a way."[71] The way he introduces disruptions in his work, then, becomes about setting up the relationship between the body and the space.

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[71] Interviewed by the author on July 29, 2022, at Vasant Kunj, Delhi, India.

In *The Secular Project*, the space of the nation becomes the space of the dance where relationships between the secular body, the citizen, and the nation-state are set up, tested, and evaluated. The red dots in this image (Figure 2) depict and trace the movement of the artist's body across the geographical boundaries of the Indian nation-state at the end of three-months of the project. The space of the dance is constructed through interactions between the performers and their geographical locations. Through the dancers' performative actions, space is constructed as a political and liberatory entity.

Figure 2. Screenshot taken from @thesecularproject on Instagram. Posted on April 8, 2021: https://www.instagram.com/p/CNadYHnpMEb/ (accessed January 28, 2024).

Scholars have argued about space's under-recognized potential of being a political and liberatory entity. In their conceptions of space, they have centralized the participation of the material body in construction of its social space (Bachelard 1994; Merleau-Ponty 1962; Gil 2009; Kwan 2013; Lefebvre 1991). Bringing attention to the social dimension of space, Henri Lefebvre (1991) argues that "*(social) space is a (social) product*" (26). As a post-Marxist theorist, Lefebvre concretizes space as "neither a 'subject' nor an 'object' but rather a social reality—that is to say, a set of relations and forms" (116). Lefebvre highlights that space is used to produce, control, and dominate social thought and action through networks of power. He argues that "each living body is space and has its space: it produces itself in space and it also produces that space" (170). For Lefebvre, it is the "spatial body" that actively produces space and space, in turn, embodies orientational qualities from the body's gestures, marks, and traces (195). Similarly, for Erin Manning (2007), "The body does not move into space and time, it creates space and time: there is no space and time before movement" (xiii). Even for Butler (2015), "space and location are created through plural action" (73). Based on my reading of these theorists' propositions, it becomes clear that physical actions not only *create* social space but also that the dissident actions of the performers are shaped by their interaction with distinct geographical regions in *The Secular Project*.

Through performative actions, the body and the space become interwoven—one constructs the other. The process of mapping the secular body involves learning "how to look, how to read, how to also inhabit spaces" (Raikhy 2022).[72] Raikhy shares in the interview that through this project, he began to think of "inhabiting spaces as a kind of process rather than

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[72] From the interview with the author on July 29, 2022, at Vasant Kunj, Delhi, India.

something that you do" (Raikhy 2022). Along with the body, the site one inhabits becomes crucial and entangled in this process through which dissent is registered.

Michel De Certeau's (1988) theorizations on space reveal how bodily acts of dissent and resistance alter space. Writing about the resistive potential of everyday actions, De Certeau shows how corporeal actions rearrange dominant urban spaces through a technique he calls "tactics." De Certeau focuses on those resistive corporeal actions and practices in space, those "'ways of operating' [that] constitute the innumerable practices by means of which users reappropriate the space organized by techniques of sociocultural production" (xiv). De Certeau calls these "makeshift" activities as "antidisciplinary tactics," (xv) which are time-bound and resistive to the dominant modes of sociocultural production and create "networks of antidiscipline" (xv).

Writing about the 2014 dissent against Hong Kong Occupation,[73] Ana Gabriela Medina (2021) writes that "Through a series of collective micro-events, a spatiality (space + time) is introduced, disturbing in a dissident way and in real time, the preestablished order of public spaces" (98). According to her, "This spatiality acts as a mediator of social dynamics and blurs the limits between the private and the public, the external and the internal, and the legal and the illegal (establishing the alegal)" (Gabriela Medina 2021, 98)." Spatiality, then, becomes another medium through which dissent is materialized that unsettles the hegemonic order of social spaces.

In each reel of *The Secular Project*, which I will describe in the next section, the performative action of the dancers become bodily acts of dissent that alter the social space. I see

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[73] In the abstract, Ana Gabriela Medina (2021) writes that "This article focuses on the Umbrella Movement, the 2014 Hong Kong occupation, and how protestors modify, on one hand, the architectural urban landscape of the city and generate, on the other, design techniques through the use of quotidian and daily-life objects in dissident means" (97).

The Secular Project as a series of choreographies of dissent that are developed via the affective exchange between performers. Performers come together to register their dissent towards majoritarian ethnonationalism. As dancers, performers, and artists, they use their body as an instrument to communicate their resistance towards communal hatred. Through inhabiting spaces that are usually not meant for dance and protest, performers in this project convert these social spaces into spaces of political action and dissent.

Performative Actions as Choreographies of Dissent in IG Reels/Posts

Over 160 posts on IG, *The Secular Project* exists both as a performance and an archive existing on social media today, circulating the message of secularism against discrimination. They are short and digitally available, which makes them highly accessible. The IG reels show landscapes and soundscapes of various cities, villages, old palaces, temples, historic monuments, and of mountains, oceans, and rivers where the term secular has been brought to life.[74] The documentation of these spaces with resistive performative action blurs the distinction between private and the public, real and virtual, and secular and religious spaces. Even in these short reels, there is an element of interaction that goes beyond the usual in-person events. Through its presence on the digital platform, it engages groups of people from across the world, commemorating and fighting for equality and nondiscrimination based on religion and caste.

In examining IG reels as choreographies of dissent, I investigate the interweaving of social, geographical, and digital locations that determines one's relationship with the secular. What follows below is an analysis of a few selected examples from IG posts that I read further

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[74] The places visited in Instagram highlights include, Chennai, Umiam, Shillong, Delhi, Ahmedabad, Coimbatore, London, Hamburg, Athens, Bangalore, Calcutta, Rome, Venice, Berlin, Spiti, Lahaul, Kinnaur, Waknaghat, Shimla, Badshahpur, Paradsinga, Sunabeda, Bhilai, Araku Valley, Bodabandla, Pudipalle, Gandikota, Pondicherry, Auroville, Kadamattom, Tanjore, Varkala, Kunnamkulam, Mysore, Goa, Bombay, Ellora, Melghat, Maheshwar, Ahmedabad, Kutch, Udaipur, Jodhpur, Pushkar, Jaipur, Agra, Khajuraho, Chitrakoot, Lucknow, Allahabad, and Banaras, among others.

into with the hopes that they provide an insight into the questions that this project aims to raise. I leave a few IG hashtags at the end of each short discussion to capture the main agenda of that particular post, expanding the range through which the work is engaged with on social media. Detailed caption about each post can be found in the footnote of the respective title.

1. The Ritual[75]

Vastly different geographies and temporalities seamlessly flow together on-screen. In places like Rann of Kutch[76] and Bhuj[77] in Gujarat, Ahmedabad, we see Raikhy performing the rituals of rest and stillness (like lying down on his back) before a dynamic movement is birthed from the ground up. The "Secular India" fabric is placed on the ground. Raikhy yields in and out of the banner using the force of his arms, wraps the fabric around his body, and suspends his body in an inversion. The larger than life landscapes, like the open blue sky and the glowing salt marsh, the sunset on the beach, the bird-eye view from the mountain-top, add a calming clarity to look at the body closely enough to understand which rituals could construct the secular. The performative potential of his bodily actions—of holding stillness, yielding in and out of the banner, and being sheltered by the banner—begins to activate an orientation towards secularism.

#insearchofaritual#betweenmovementandstillness

2. The Witness[78]

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[75] *The Secular Project* (February 9, 2021): In Search of a Ritual: "A belief only comes into existence because there are rituals that give it form and keep it alive. How then do we construct a ritual for the secular? What are the actions that constitute this ritual?" https://www.instagram.com/p/CLGD4HcJd7b/.

[76] "The Great Rann of Kutch (or Rann of Kutch seasonal salt marsh) is a salt marsh in the Thar Desert in the Kutch District of Gujarat, India." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rann_of_Kutch (accessed January 27, 2024).

[77] "Bhuj, city, northwestern Gujarat state, west-central India. It is situated in the lowlands between the Rann (marsh) and the Gulf of Kachchh (Kutch)." https://www.britannica.com/place/Bhuj (accessed January 27, 2024).

[78] *The Secular Project* (March 4, 2021): Unki Saans Chal Rahi Thi: "Can we locate the secular in our emotional memory? How do we unleash these deeply embedded memories through movements and sounds that our bodies produce? This collaboration with Mumbai-based theatre director Jyoti Dogra draws on the performers' emotional reservoir as witnesses of these times." https://www.instagram.com/p/CMBkqwkFyf4/.

This segment brings forth the question: How to be a witness in times where non-Hindu minority groups are increasingly being abused? Theater director Jyoti Dogra and Raikhy are wrapped in the "Secular India" fabric on the studio floor in Mumbai. Dogra wraps Raikhy's body with the cloth like a baby, cradles him, and comforts him at times, and at other times, covers the fabric over him like a dead body. As she does that, her voice in the soundscape is reflecting on incidents where targeted individuals from Muslim and other minority groups have been erased from history, locked up in prisons, and taken away by right-wing goons, murdered, or buried alive. She constantly repeats the words, "*Unko band kar diya*" (translation. they locked them up), until she reveals that the people were still breathing ("*Unki Saans Chal Rahi Thi*").

Dogra and Raikhy tap into their embodied pain and grief of being a witness to communal brutalities. The images that assist their storytelling are the ones where Raikhy's face is covered with the cloth as he sits next to Dogra and both of them sway from side to side. Dogra tries to hold on to him as he slides down her arms and her body towards the floor. She also tries to cease any motion in his body, shown by the fluttering of his legs, as we hear Raikhy's voice in the soundscape grunting and gasping for air to survive.

In this duet, caressing and choking the body happens almost at the same time. It seems like the one (nation-state) who is supposed to nurture (the citizen) has become an oppressor, a threat, and an unjust power. One wonders, where does the promise of secularism stand in comparison to such hate-crimes? In remembering and holding onto these memories of pain and suffering of discrimination and injustice, can the witness become a source to vouch for equality for the minoritized communities?

#theywerestillbreathing #emotionsandbreath

3. The March[79]

This particular video foregrounds Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's Constituent Assembly Speech on 17th December 1946 where he appealed for anti-partition and a vision for United India.[80] In the speech, he said, "Let us leave aside slogans, let us even make a concession to the prejudices of our opponents, bring them in, so that they may willingly join with us on marching upon that road, which as I said, if we walk long enough, must necessarily lead us to unity." In articulating his vision of United India, Ambedkar (1946) shares that "Our difficulty is how to make the heterogeneous mass that we have today take a decision in common and march on the co-operative way which leads us to unity." Inspired by Ambedkar's call to march towards equality for a united nation, Raikhy offers a proposition where performers cooperate with each other to "secure" the secular and keep it "afloat."

Three men and four women tuck themselves under the "Secular India" banner as they lie and slide down the Mount Mary Steps (Mumbai). They maneuver their bodies across the stairs, rub them on the concrete floor, their shoulders twist and hands press into the dirt on the concrete as they move down the stairs. Their feet and sometimes shoulders anchor their bodies to the ground to maintain balance and to know when to give, pull, and push their weight. The unease and the struggle to move their body in coordination with others, on an uneven surface of the stairs, depicts the need and the urgency to be in solidarity (more than unity) with others even through their differences. To this end, the dancers develop a non-verbal and kinesthetic mode of

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[79] *The Secular Project* (February 25, 2021): If We March Long Enough: "Some ideas need our bodies to labour in order to remain afloat. What if we all threw ourselves in there to keep the secular secure? What if we marched long enough to see it thrive?" https://www.instagram.com/p/CLvPoAeJP4r/.

[80] "Babasaheb Ambedkar: 'Why is the idea of Union completely affected from this Resolution?', Anti-Partition Speech to parliament on Constitution – 1949," accessed May 15, 2024, https://speakola.com/political/dr-b-r-ambedkar-speech-to-parliament-constitution-1949.

listening to each other through their bodily movement in hopes to bring them into a harmonious synchronicity.

4. The Touch[81]

On a grainy black surface, Raikhy and dancer Lalit Khatana lie wearing black shorts and holding the ends of the "Secular India" banner. As their bodies roll on the floor, they stretch the fabric from the edges, expressing the desire to be in constant connection. Raikhy wraps the banner on his waist. Sometimes, they wrap their face with the banner, soaking their entire head in the cloth. Their knees tuck in towards the belly and legs extend forward allowing the body to move under the banner. Their bare skin attracts attention. Their legs and chest uncovered, rub the floor's surface as they move. Can (queer) desire be a part of the secular as well?

Developing on Erin Manning's (2007) proposition that places "the senses *relationally* as expression of moving bodies" (xiii), Raikhy explores the ability to create a shared surface, an affective space between bodies, through touch. Raikhy asks: How can we assert the secular through the surface of our shared skin? Manning (2007) argues that "Skin extends beyond the 'body proper' giving us pause. Resting at the edge of our skins we cannot help but wonder what holds us together" (111). For her, "skin is both corporeal and incorporeal [….] Skin reminds us that the body moves all the time, composing and decomposing itself, sensing all the while" (114). Touch, with its immediacy and reciprocity, inevitably brings people in relation while destabilizing the dichotomous (subject-object) relation between the one who touches and the one who gets touched. If touch is relational and secular becomes a relational entity between those

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[81] *The Secular Project* (December 27, 2020): Secular as Shared Skin: "When we touch each other, we have a shared surface. A shared skin. When I touch you, I cannot affect you without affecting us. Can the secular become our shared skin—so that, when I move, I move you and experience the secular?" https://www.instagram.com/p/CJS6JKKpuP4/.

who touch, then can physical connection, through "a *sensing body in movement*" (Manning 2007, xiii), be a mode to reignite the values of the secular nation? Against a religious fundamentalist regime, can performers use their skin or tactile memory as a resource to assert the power of the collective/connected body in reinstating the secular? Can (shared) touch reform the body as secular?

#skin#intimacy#politicsoftouch

5. The Resilient[82]

Performed in collaboration with Gram Art Project[83] (@gramartproject) in Paradsinga Village, Madhya Pradesh, in this post, Raikhy tries to invoke a relationship between sustainable farming and the secular. In the video, the "Secular India" banner hangs between the two bulls tied to the wooden plank as they sow seeds into the field. The sound of the bell and the farmer's grunted voice directing the bulls enrich the sonic landscape. Seeds that are sown in the video: Sowing Pegion Pea (Tuar) along with Sesame (Tilli), Green Gram (Moong), Corn, Pearl Millet (Bajra) and Cowpea.

In a country, where farmer's suicide remains a big concern,[84] this collaboration proposes *plurality* as the solution for making soil both diverse and resilient for farming as well as for the country's growth. Displacing (Hindu) liberal and pluralistic values enveloped in the concept of

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[82] *The Secular Project* (July 10, 2021): Sowing Seeds for a Better Tomorrow: "What does sustainable farming have to say to the secular? Polyculture farming, by cultivating a diverse and balanced crop in a given area, helps ensure a more fertile and resilient soil in the future. Can we sow the idea of the plural into the very soil of this country?" https://www.instagram.com/p/CRJwnZgFwCI/.

[83] Gram Art Project is a "collective of farmers, artists, women and makers living and working in and around Paradsinga Village in M.and are concerned about it" (@gramartproject).

[84] To read more about the issue of farmers committing suicide in India, please read "Cultivating distress: cotton, caste and farmer suicides in India" by Nanda Kishore Kannuri and Sushrut Jadhav (2021) and "Average 30 Farmer Suicides Per Day in Modi Govt Years Points to a Systemic Apathy" by Anirban Bhattacharya, Pranay Raj, and Nancy Pathak, The Wire (December 18, 2023), https://thewire.in/agriculture/average-30-farmer-suicides-per-day-in-modi-govt-years-points-to-a-systemic-apathy, among others.

"tolerance," as Kedhar points out (2020b), here Raikhy proposes the value of resilience to strive for instead. In this sense, resilience appears to be a value which encourages the possibility for making space for diverse cultural experiences and for opposing and dissenting voices. Then, the value of resilience over tolerance does not become a false promise of inclusion and equity, rather a willingness to be in communion with each other.

#resilientindia #sowingseason

6. Delhi Breaking Culture[85]

In a tight *gully* (street) in Khirkee village, two boys are holding the "Secular India" banner. Most shops are closed; we see one open in the background. Shiny and colorful packets of chips and biscuits (in orange, yellow, blue, red, and green) from the shop enhance the landscape of the street. Bystanders lean on the shutter of the closed shops, some lean on the counter of the open shop, and others crouch in a low squat watching a young, lean, male dancer do a backflip.

When the camera angle flips, we see a crowded group of older men gathered in one corner of the street, witnessing the dancer with the banner in the background. An uneven and an informal sort of coda, the circle, begins to appear in this gathering, enclosing the boy doing the backflips in the middle. The slow-motion effect of the video tries to capture the joy and freedom in the suspension of the body mid-air. What affect does his moves have on the men gathered around him, if at all? Are they standing in solidarity with the boy who is risking his body (has perfected the performance of risk through his body) on the street? Are they in awe of his moves?

In this video, the relationship set-up between the break dancers and his immediate viewers makes me wonder, if one risks their life for secular values, what impact would it have on

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[85] *The Secular Project* (November 13, 2021): Breaking Culture: "Bouncing off some ideas on the street, yo." https://www.instagram.com/p/CWOP-3AFxFW/.

others witnessing them? Would the immediate and the virtual viewer join in solidarity, take risks, and put their bodies on the line as well? Or would they simply witness the event as distant observers, trying to not get too involved? Can risk and freedom, as displayed by the break dancer's body in this video, be woven into the new ideals of secularism?

#delhibreakingculture #khirkee #plural

7.   Not far from the Parliament[86]

A couple of days before Independence Day in 2021, a few dancers gather on a rainy day in Connaught place (CP) to dance against Islamophobia.

A female dancer in white shirt and black pants stands in front of a dark bluish shutter. Her upper body is covered and hidden under the banner. The camera zooms in on her face while it is tightly wrapped with the fabric. There is no rain here, rather a feeling of isolation and suffocation. On the contrary, Raikhy faces his back to the camera and kneels on the concrete road around the railing, getting drenched in the rain. He slowly lifts the banner of "Secular India" in his hands, as cars and auto-rickshaws pass him by on the other side of the road. A dancer in green reveals the tightly crinkled and wet banner from under her t-shirt. She presses into the fabric, her arm muscles clenching to hold onto the banner as close as possible to her chest. We see the effort put in by the dancer to keep the secular in proximity to her body.

In another scene, the banner is placed on the pavement in CP and it's getting soaked in the rain. One of the dancers steps onto the banner in a controlled and mindful way. Standing in the center of the fabric, she moves her feet slowly, one at a time, at 45-degree increments, which begins to turn her entire body in a clockwise direction. The fabric depicts the internal spiral that

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[86] *The Secular Project* (August 12, 2021): Down with Islamophobia: "While those in power support anti-Muslim rallies not far from the parliament and continue to propagate Islamophobia in the most aggressive manner, is there still space for the citizens of this country to uphold the constitution of India in the face of these times? Not far from the parliament, some performers met up on a rainy morning last month to dance with the secular—to assert it, embrace it, invoke it." https://www.instagram.com/p/CSeHg2TlUjg/.

the dancer is building to change her orientation. The cloth begins to gather at her feet, it shrinks, tightens, and crinkles under her feet, as she turns 180 degrees, and it reopens, and expands to its original dimensions as the dancer is brought back to her starting point through the reversal of the video clip.

Towards the end of the video, the camera pans back and forth a few times from the image of moving dancing bodies to the white pillar. Dancers perform gestures of praying—bowing with their upper body curved forward and firmly placed in a flat back position—in and out of the pillar. Two dancers hold the banner overhead. One of them sits into a mini lunge, tilting the banner on a diagonal. The way the camera sways between the dancing bodies and the pillar, zooming and leaning into its vastness is captivating here.

The quietness and the spaciousness in the video gives the feeling of a fresh start. The rain, the grey sky, and the early morning daylight feels like renewal—of new ideas, promises, vision for an equitable future, a future without communal hatred, without Islamophobia. One of the responses in the comment section reads as: "The pace of the shots and images make it so evocative" (Jyoti Dogra). Other comments sound reflective as well with words used to describe their feelings as, "redemptive," "evocative," "rejuvenated,", and "centered and attuned."[87]

#notfarfromtheparliament #downwithislamophobia

How do Performative Actions Reinstate the Secular?

The participation of dancers to create the above video and the engagement of the performance community worldwide with this post, brought me back to the memory of our collaboration in Khuli Khirkee studio on Independence Day in 2022, the description I started this chapter with. In practice, we were overjoyed to think about how our bodies possibly represented

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[87] Comments on this post (August 12, 2021) can be found here: https://www.instagram.com/p/CSeHg2TlUjg/.

the ideas of equality and non-discrimination that secularism entails. However, later when I leaned into the history of secularism in India, I realized how far it was from the ideas it promised. The Hindu values of tolerance and liberalism made secularism inept as it excluded religious communities that opposed the forced inclusion into the fold of Hinduism.

It also made me think of the privilege we held to claim a secularist positionality in India's political climate today. It made me wonder—Who gets to be secular? Who gets to be read as secular? Whose version of secularism gets to be dominant? While acknowledging my privilege as someone studying in western academia, I realized how important it is to continue to ask these questions and hold ourselves accountable. In engaging with this work, as a dancer, ethnographer, and a dance scholar, I became interested in the power of the dancing body to redefine what it means to be secular and uphold the values of secularism today. This work became an act of dissent—to speak up for ours' and others' constitutional and democratic right for fairness, justice, and equality through our bodies. Therefore, I believe that a project like *The Secular Project* becomes all the more urgent to imagine and rethink what secularism could look like in India.

The Secular Project, as choreographies of dissent, encourages an engaged politics from the citizens. As shown above, each reel foregrounds rituals of dissent that can range from being still to taking risks in the heights of Hindu nationalism. These social choreographies of dissent become political actions that lead the way for an alternative engagement with the world and politics. Some of the proposed actions through which this change is possible are: stay still or move from a point of stillness, become an embodied witness to incidents of discrimination, act in a way that privileges cooperation while leading towards the future, use tactile/skin memory to tap into body's capacity to be relational, cultivate resilience in social thought and allied action, practice risk to experience freedom, and visualize a new beginning free from communal hatred.

The Secular Project is a model to search for the secular in citizens' bodies and the nation. Spreading the message of non-discrimination through the short reels on social media, it asks: How could the new secularism not privilege one religion over the other? Each post generates a feeling of togetherness that can become a starting point to reinstate the secular. With the fear of sounding utopic, I believe that *The Secular Project*, as Raikhy imagined, helps us think of secularism differently—a belief that needs rituals to be performed over and over again for it to be accomplished. Moreover, each repetition of the performative action has the potential to mark a "different" (Phelan 1993, 146) relationship to the secular.[88] In this way, secularism could be detached from the control and supervision of the state, rather be owned by the citizens themselves, with the intent that it can be questioned, renewed, and redefined over time.

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[88] Peggy Phelan (1993) has argued that "Performance occurs over a time which will not be repeated. It can be performed again, but this repetition itself marks it as 'different'" (146).

Chapter 2 | Anatomical Freedom as Bodily Liberation: Padmini Chettur and Contemporary Dance in Chennai

> "The question isn't how far can we go to unlearn something. But at the end of unlearning, what is it that remains? What is it from bharatanatyam that I still have with me?"
> – Padmini Chettur[89]

Quest for Liberation

"Do you feel liberated?" Madhushree Basu, a Chennai-based dancer and writer, asked me when she came to meet me in Royapettah from the other end of the city in September 2022. We were sitting in the open area of a cafe under a partially shady tree. It was sunny. Both our faces were lit from the sunlight as we indulged in an hours-long conversation about contemporary dance in Chennai and in India. Basu had worked with two Chennai-based choreographers, Padmini Chettur and Preethi Athreya, for over (two) decades and had extensive experience as a dancer to speak from.

At the time, I didn't know how to answer Madhu's question. But I gave it a try. I stumbled upon different keywords—efficiency, precision, and clarity—that I felt might capture a sense of knowledge about various capacities of our bodies that contemporary dance helps shape and cultivate through its focus on somatic-based and non-codified forms and techniques. Madhu listened patiently and then, together, we arrived at the idea of anatomical freedom[90] that we loosely referred to as bodily liberation. As dancers, we understood anatomical freedom as our

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[89] Interviewed by the author on October 25, 2023, on Zoom.

[90] In reference to contemporary dance in India, cultural theorist, Brahma Prakash (2016) has noted the frequent use of the notion of anatomical freedom. Prakash (2016) has written that "A phrase that is often repeated in contemporary dance is 'freedom'—freedom to explore, to invent, to subvert, to dream, to move—in contrast to the prison-like confines of the classical and everydayness" (139). I will discuss Prakash's astute analysis and criticism of contemporary dance's relation to freedom later in this chapter.

ability to subvert rigid/imposed set of rules and explore new habits, patterns, and pathways of movement that served our individual bodily needs. In that sense, the *anatomical* sense, yes, we both felt liberated. But maybe anatomical freedom could be seen as a metaphor for other kinds of liberation too, bodily for starters, and maybe political too.

Later, I wondered if this definition was enough. Did it sufficiently capture the experience of dancers seeking a sense of liberation from oppressive training systems both physically and intellectually? What does this practice of liberation look like when performed or enacted by the body? Are there multiple versions of such bodily practice that one can engage in? This chapter came to fruition from the struggle to contend with and articulate the hybrid aesthetics—the undoing and redoing of training systems such as bharatanatyam, Iyengar yoga, and kalarippayattu—in the choreographic practice of Padmini Chettur. But it began with Madhu's question and the rivers of contemplation that ensued from it, about the nature of liberation.

About the Chapter

Padmini Chettur's contribution to the field of contemporary dance is beautifully captured in the words of the late writer Aveek Sen, who described Chettur's work as "a body of spirals [....] speaking to itself."[91] Born in 1970, Chettur trained in bharatanatyam under Pandanallur Subbaraiya Pillai in Chennai. She went on to dance with the iconic contemporary choreographer Chandralekha, with whom she performed in various group productions, such as *Lilavati*, *Prana*, *Angika*, *Sri*, *Bhinna Pravaha*, *Yantra*, *Mahakaal*, and *Sharira*, from 1991 to 2001. While working with Chandralekha in 1994, Chettur started creating her own choreography. But *Fragility* (2001)

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[91] Late writer Aveek Sen wrote and recited text for Padmini Chettur's choreography, Philosophical Enactment 1 (2018). In this piece, Sen described the dancing body that Chettur proposes as "a body of spirals [....] speaking to itself." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PLpkMG12cBo&t=2s (accessed April 1, 2024).

marked the beginning of her independent choreographic career, as co-produced by Schaubuehne am Lehniner Platz (Berlin), Theatre de la Ville (Paris), and Germany's largest international theatre festival Theater der Welt (Germany).

What makes this Chennai-based choreographer's practice unique is her focus on the body's architectural and temporal dimensions, developed from her training in bharatanatyam and her practice in Iyengar yoga and kalaripayattu, with Chandralekha as well as others. While working with Chandralekha, Chettur developed an ability to engage with and draw upon the geometry of the body and elongate time through her bodily movement—two key choreographic principles which now define Chettur's practice. Along with these choreographic interventions, in my analysis, I argue that it is Chettur's attention to and treatment of the spine that makes her intervention in dance influential transnationally. The hyper-extension of the lower spine was a political symbol of freedom in Chandralekha's practice. Dance scholars have noted the use of spine in Chandralekha's choreographies as a way to critique the impact of patriarchy, capitalism, and industrialization on the urban body, especially the female body (Banerji 2009; Chakravorty 2022; Chatterjea 1998, 2004b; Coorlawala 1999; Mitra 2014). Later in the chapter, I will discuss the different readings of the use of the spine in Chandralekha's work and how they have contributed to Chettur's understanding. But after Chandralekha's exaggeration of the spine damaged Chettur's and fellow dancers' posture, Chettur set out to find a "pain-free" dancing body. Being born to parents who were both doctors, she focused on the anatomical understanding of the spine to deal with pain, evoking the dancer's agency in the process.

Throughout her career, Chettur has challenged "embellishment" in dance. She made it her mission to occupy herself with movement detail, with the goal of creating "cautious movement"

(Holmes 2022).[92] It was this quest that led her to develop a movement practice and later a module titled "Spine." In this chapter, I provide an in-depth analysis of Chettur's movement practice, with a focus on the values she associated with the "neutral" dancing body—rotation, adjustment, and micromovements. While reflecting on the role of the spine in (re)shaping her values, I take a closer look at the functionality of the word "neutral" and how it is mobilized in relation to contemporary dance. I discuss the notion of "neutrality" as a complex and layered phenomenon that requires a strategic response from dancers and scholars, especially working with cultural forms in/from the Global South.

Reflecting on Chettur's negotiation of her relationship with bharatanatyam's training and history, I analyze her dance film, *Varnam* (2016). In this film, Chettur examines and critiques the particularities of the "Mohamana Varnam," which was composed in the nineteenth century by Ponniah of the Tanjore Quartet.[93] Chettur and the dancers intervene in the traditional repertoire of bharatanatyam and reinterpret the content and physical aesthetics of this *varnam*. In analyzing the movement and rhythmic patterns in the film, the dancing body reveals what remains in Chettur's training and her choreographic practice from bharatanatyam and how it is positioned in relation to the history of nationalist reconstruction of the dance. I theorize Chettur's aesthetics as rooted in bharatanatyam, but I see her process of departure and rupture from the dance form as *liberatory deconstruction*. *Liberatory deconstruction* refers to Chettur's fracturing and reassembling of the formal principles of bharatanatyam to initiate a relational dialogue with the dance form and, thus, the location of its generation and/or modernist reconstruction, the city of

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[92] "Q&A in conversation with Padmini Chettur and Brooke Holmes | Coming to Know," April 25, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ipfu9klIIVY.

[93] Excerpt of the curatorial text by exhibition maker and art writer, Zasha Colah: http://www.padminichettur.in/choreography_pad/varnam/ (accessed March 4, 2024).

Chennai. I delve into this concept in more detail later in the chapter. Furthermore, in my reading of *Varnam*, I include a caste-critique of bharatanatyam's contemporary practice, building on the work of hereditary caste performer Nrithya Pillai (2022) and cultural theorist Brahma Prakash (2016).

Thereafter, I look at Chettur's recent work, *Women Dance* (2022), created in response to the Museum of Art and Photography's (MAP) inaugural exhibition, "Visible/Invisible: Representation of Women in Art through the MAP Collection." The site-specific performance took place over three days in Bangalore, India, where Chettur derived the choreographic score and language through an interaction between visual art objects and the moving body. Through an ethno-choreographic analysis of this performance-installation, I argue that Chettur's and the dancers' presence in the museum space resists the female body becoming an object of representation. Dancers employ an "oppositional gaze" (hooks 1992) to confront the process of female invisibilization in art, as well as constructing the audience through their gaze and corporeal presence. The female dancing body links the historical and contemporary images together—her corporeality, I argue, becomes a site for contesting the relationship between representation and embodied techniques of being a woman in Indian art today. Through her training to inspire anatomical awareness, especially of the spine, and her work with deconstruction,[94] Chettur creates a new physical, thematic, and representational language that empowers the contemporary female dancer.

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[94] I'm using the term deconstruction to define Padmini Chettur's choreographic process based on two reasons: 1) Chettur herself uses deconstruction to discuss her choreographic method as she learnt and inherited from Chandralekha and 2) I am building on the work of scholars Janet O'Shea (2008) and Emily Claid (2006), who have used deconstruction as a lens to view choreographic projects and have drawn parallels from Jacques Derrida's (1978) notion of différance. In analyzing the work of British choreographer, Shobhana Jeyasingh, O'Shea (2008) has argued that Jeyasingh's choreography is "a deconstruction of a classical movement language" (43). This is because for O'Shea, like Derrida's concept of différance, Jeyasingh's classical movement language produces a multiplicity of meanings. In this regard, O'Shea (2008) has written, "Derrida's concept applies specifically to the ways in which words produce a multiplicity of meanings. In Jeyasingh's choreography, each unit of vocabulary or phrase, when

Padmini Chettur's Early Childhood and Career

In her recent book, *Flexible Bodies*, Anusha Kedhar (2020c) argues that pain can be understood "as a site of negotiation and agency" (154). Kedhar builds on the work of anthropologist Talal Asad (2000) and his call to look at "pain as action."[95] This, I believe, is exactly the role pain played in the choreographic journey of Padmini Chettur. Trained as a bharatanatyam dancer, Chettur went to dance with Chandralekha (commonly referred to as Chandra), the "mother" of contemporary dance in India, in the early 1990s. But her journey into contemporary dance wasn't as linear as one would imagine.

In her research on British South Asian dance, Kedhar noted an influx of South Asian immigrants to Britain between 1948 to 1981 (6).[96] According to Kedhar, this wave of South Asian migration to Britain was due to "Britain's postwar labor needs" (6). Needing to recover economically after the Second World War, the country found that it could extract cheap labor from former colonies, including South Asia. Kedhar (2020c) notes that after India's independence in 1947, "The 1948 British Nationality Act, which stated that anyone from the Commonwealth was a British subject, facilitated the free movement of labor from the former colonies to Britain" (6). In this wave of immigration, both of Chettur's parents migrated to

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broken apart, opens up to produce a multiplicity of new 'terms', that is, new units of movement" (42-43). Similarly, in Chettur's choreography, I see that she deconstructs her classical dance training in bharatanatyam. Using deconstruction as a choreographic methodology, Chettur breaks down the body into multiple zones and fragments which allows her to derive a range of possible movement from a given body part. Chettur treats these units of movement as grammar for her dances and arranges them into different combinations to build her dance phrases. I will discuss Chettur's method of deconstruction later in the chapter and demonstrate it in my analysis of Chettur's choreographic work *Varnam* (2016).

[95] "I ask whether pain is not simply a cause of action, but often itself a kind of action" (Asad 2000, 31).

[96] Anusha Kedhar writes (2020c), "From 1948 to 1981, migration from South Asia to Britain surpassed anything seen in the previous three hundred years, increasing from forty-three thousand in 1951 to approximately one million in 1981" (6).

London to pursue their Masters degrees as medical professionals, and were hired by the National Health Service (NHS) to work in the public health sector in the UK.

Chettur was born in England and recalled memories of being bullied at school (personal interview, October 25, 2023). In addition, she shared that her father, to help a colleague care for his newborn child, worked three consecutive shifts in the hospital, after which, on his ride home, he fell asleep and lost his life in a car accident. At the time, Chettur was six years old and her elder brother eight, and so their mother decided to move back to Chennai to live closer to her extended family, hoping to give better care to the children.

At the age of seven, Chettur's aunt, the famous dancer-choreographer Mrinalini Sarabhai, observed her watching Tamil movies and dancing to the songs on television. Sarabhai insisted that Chettur join bharatanatyam classes with her teacher's son, Subbarraiyya Pillai. At the age of twelve, Chettur completed her debut *arangetram,*[97] performing the Mohamana Varnam in Bhairavi ragam[98] (Figure 3). Instantly she knew that she did not want to be a professional bharatanatyam dancer. Learning Indian classical dance in this way felt like a practice of cultural indoctrination that Chettur wanted to escape. She resisted her transformation into a docile, disciplined, and obedient female subject that the classical dance training demanded. Instead, she went to pursue a degree in Chemistry at Birla Institute of Technology and Science (BITS), Pilani, Rajasthan.

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[97] Although historically an *arangetram* marked the beginning of a professional career more than the culmination of training, now *arangetram* is considered the debut performance of the bharatanatyam dancer, similar to a graduation ceremony.

[98] In an interview conducted by M.D. Muthukumaraswamy in Chennai on June 14, 2017, Padmini Chettur shares that she performed Mohamana Varnam in Bhairavi ragam for her arangetram. Published on March 14, 2018, https://www.sahapedia.org/padmini-chettur-contemporary-dance.

Figure 3. Padmini Chettur at the age of 12 during her *arangetram*. Image shared by Chettur from her personal archive.

In an article titled "The Body Laboratory," Chettur (2016a) reflects on her early training

years and shares that she felt extreme resistance to the "cultural stubbornness" in the teaching of

bharatanatyam, which pushed dancers to "imitate" the form rather than look at it inquisitively,

with curiosity, and with an intention to investigate the relationship between body, space, and time (157). Over the course of her bharatanatyam training, which lasted for ten years, Chettur developed resistance to multiple facets of the form. As hereditary caste performer Nrithya Pillai (2022) reminds us, "Bharatanatyam is permeated by a deeply affective and somatic form of Brahminism" (7), Chettur was critical of the embedded patriarchy and religiosity in the dance form that manifested through an unbalanced power relationship with the "master" or "guru." She felt utterly uncomfortable being in the role of an "entertainer on stage," delivering religious Hindu narratives she could not connect with, not to mention the false performativity that had become a part of the practice. She was enraged with the lack of focus on anatomy in the practice as well.

However, during her four-year degree at Birla Institute of Technology and Science, Pilani, without adequate parental supervision and care, Chettur felt her health deteriorate. Even though Chettur had no plans to return to dance, when she accidentally met Chandralekha during her visit back to Chennai—a fellow dancer, Krishna Devanandan invited Chettur to observe a rehearsal at Chandralekha's residence[99]—she finally felt seen for the first time. Chettur saw a guide in Chandralekha. In reflecting back on this moment, Chettur (2023b) shared in the interview, "In a way, Chandra rescued me."

As a dancer, as much as Chettur learned from Chandralekha's conception of the spine, which I discuss below, she developed a relationship of intense pain with Chandralekha's practice. In her article "The Honest Body: Remembering Chandralekha," Chettur (2014) has written that "from Yoga, she (Chandralekha) understood the spine and the ability to remain fluid in

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[99] In "The Honest Body," Padmini Chettur writes that "In 1990, during my final year of chemistry studies at BITS Pilani, fellow dancer Krishna Devanandan invited me to visit a rehearsal at no.1 Elliot's Beach, home and workplace of Chandralekha." http://www.padminichettur.in/the-honest-body/ (accessed May 14, 2024).

stillness."[100] The problem was not with Chandralekha's focus on the spine per se. Developing on her practice of yoga, according to Chettur (2014), Chandralekha asked her dancers "to look for initiation of all movement in the base of the spine." In the interview with Chettur (2023), she shares that Chandralekha focused on visualizing the extension of the spine from the base; she would say that "all movement starts from the base of the spine." From Chandralekha's conception of the spine, Chettur learnt to search for beginnings and endings of a movement in the base of the spine. As she mentions in her article, Chettur (2014) was encouraged to examine and implement this bodily knowledge to the *adavus*[101]—an inquiry that remains relevant for Chettur till today. All of this is to the good. However, as Chettur experienced, "the lengthening of the spine became very connected with this hyper-extending the lower back."[102]

The dancing body that Chandralekha's choreographic practice proposed became one with a protruding chest and a hyperextension of the lumbar spine. The notion of energy flowing from the spine that Chandralekha observed in Iyengar yoga translated into a metaphor in her practice.[103] The hyper-extension of the lower spine became a political symbol of freedom in Chandralekha's practice against patriarchal regimes.[104] Chettur shares that the curved spine

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[100] With no access to the article published in the book, I refer to the article, "The Honest Body," shared publicly on Padmini Chettur's website. http://www.padminichettur.in/the-honest-body/ (accessed May 14, 2024). However, I cite both sources in my reference list.

[101] Janet O'Shea (2008) explains *adavus* in bharatanatyam as "units of movement that operate as the building blocks of classical bharata natyam. They are both the vocabulary on which repertoire rests and the training exercises through which dancers attain technical mastery" (41).

[102] Interviewed by the author on October 25, 2023, on Zoom.

[103] In her article, Chandralekha (2003, [1997] 2022) has written about perceiving spine as a "metaphor for freedom." She writes (April 22, 2022), "I believe dance is a 'project' that would enable a recovery of the body, of our spine, which for me is a metaphor for freedom." https://thewire.in/the-arts/chandralekha-dance-east-west-body-spine.

[104] "This whole idea of retrieving the spine, spine as a metaphor for freedom and so that curved spine which she was proposing became actually a political symbol for her" (Chettur). Interviewed by the author on October 25, 2023, on Zoom.

"made a huge aesthetic departure from the kinds of spines we were seeing in Western modern dance, whether it was Cunningham, expressionism where everybody was doing this rounding, Chandra went absolutely in the opposite direction."[105]

Many dance scholars have proposed Chandralekha's idiosyncratic use of the spine as a choreographic strategy of feminist resistance and critique (Chatterjea 1998, 2004b; Coorlawala 1999; Mitra 2014). In analyzing Chandralekha's earlier work, *Sri*, choreographed in 1990, Ananya Chatterjea (1998) has written that "Women move with their backs 'broken,' creating the image of what happens to women under a patriarchal regime" (25). In an oppositional reading of women's bent spines in *Sri*, within the choreographic section referred to as "drag walk," Uttara Coorlawala (1999) has written, "Visually, the position suggests protest and resistance; kinesthetically, it involves dynamic tension and power to such an extent that the strength of the dancers seems awesome" (8). Studying two contrasting analyses of the spine in Chandralekha's *Sri* (Chatterjea 1998 and Coorlawala 1999), Royona Mitra (2014) theorizes that "the spine acts as a physiological fulcrum and a potent artistic and aesthetic medium through which Chandralekha's feminist critiques on Indian womanhood are communicated" (6). In her later work, *Butting Out*, Chatterjea (2004b) describes Chandralekha's choreographic intervention as "disrupting linear neatness and spinal containment, a personal take on resistive aesthetics, and pleasure in physicality" (19). Pallabi Chakravorty (2022) also notes Chandralekha's proposition that "the mechanization of modern life had weakened our spine which had to be reinvigorated through introspection of the body" (9-10). These theorizations of the spine in Chandralekha's work, however conflicting at times, highlight how Chandralekha mobilized the spine to depict the impact of patriarchy on urban Indian women.

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[105] Interviewed by the author on October 25, 2023, on Zoom.

However, as Chettur recalls in an interview with me, the disruption in spinal alignment caused distress in dancers' bodies. Dancers trained in bharatanatyam had an embodied memory of arching their lower backs in positions like *aramandi*, the deep "sitting" pose that dominates the physical training. This postural habit coupled with the hypermobility of the sacral and the lumbar spine, severely injured Chettur's and her fellow dancers' spines. Unfortunately, this became another instance in Chettur's life and dance history where a lack of attention paid to anatomy had a negative impact on her body.

Chettur had grown up as an asthmatic child, which drastically affected her posture. Due to her condition, she had a hunchback—her shoulders were rolled in and her upper back curved immensely. After experiencing a slipped disc during her undergraduate degree, she started swimming. However, that wasn't a quick fix. While working with Chandralekha and trying to deliver on her demand for a hyper-arched back, Chettur developed lordosis with a forward protrusion of the neck to overcompensate for her limited thoracic flexibility. Enduring pain for many decades, Chettur felt she had finally reached a dramatic breaking point.

Such a breaking point, Kedhar (2020c) argues, "can signal a loss of force but also a redirection of that force" (159). In Chettur's career, this breaking point led her towards a phase of "unlearning"—stripping away inefficient and unhealthy postural habits while focusing deeply on anatomy (Chettur 2016a, 161). In her phase of unlearning, in the early 2000s, she and her fellow dancer Devanandan began "looking for a new philosophy in order to build a system through which a dancer could get closer to her own 'neutral' body" (Chettur 2016a, p.161), a complex concept that I will seek to unpack later in this chapter. Being born to parents who were both

doctors, she focused on the anatomical understanding of the spine to find a "pain-free" body (Chettur 2023b),[106] which I argue required the dancer's agency in the process.

Writing about brahminical and patriarchal oppression that female dancers experience in south Indian classical dances such as bharatnatyam and kuchipudi, Rumya Sree Putcha (2023) makes a connection between structural oppression and gender. She argues that within "these structures of oppression, especially the aestheticized practices by which silent and compliant behavior translates into desirable dancerly affect," these structures reveal the "kinds of work gender performance does on- and offstage" (106). On the contrary, disassociating from such "structures of oppression," and focusing on spine, as a metaphor for strength, integrity, and clarity, Chettur's practice enables the dancer to speak her truth[107] and critiques anti-feminist politics in bharatanatyam.

The Spine Module

In 2022, upon an invitation from Anandam Dance Theatre in Canada to teach a module on the spine, Chettur finally decided to consolidate her two-decades-long research and practice on the subject. Chettur conducted her module on the spine on Zoom, spread over eight sessions between February and April 2022. I decided to take part. Drawing upon two different movement practices—Iyengar yoga and Pilates—the module focused on "alignment, mobility, length, strength, stability, and articulation," among other movement principles.[108] Developing on the practice of Iyengar yoga, Chettur taught us how to bring the spinal curves that project out of the

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[106] Interviewed by the author on October 25, 2023, on Zoom.

[107] In informal conversations and talks, Padmini Chettur have always talked about her aspiration of creating an "intelligent body" in dance.

[108] From the description of the module on Anandam's website: https://www.anandam.ca/news/padminichetturcourse (accessed February 1, 2024).

body inwards to achieve a single line (Figure 4). Developing on Thomas Hanna's somatics,[109]

she taught us to treat the spine with ease and care. For example, she informed us that the sacral

and thoracic spine are brought inwards, and lumbar and cervical curves are taken back, to

achieve a "neutral" spine. By which she urged us to understand the structure of the spine from an

internal perspective, not only how it appears from an external visual perspective, and to prevent

the lumbar from going into lordosis.
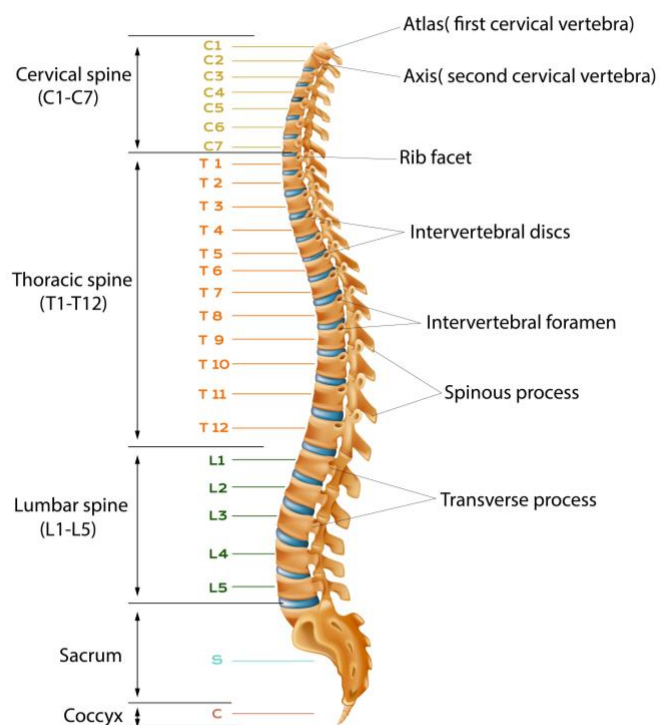
Figure 4. Anatomy of the Human Spine.

After attending the first class of Chettur's spine module in the small living area of my

university apartment at 6 am on a chilly and dark Thursday morning, I made a note of how

energized I felt in my body (below is an image of my field notes, Figure 5, from February 17,

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[109] Thomas Hanna (1928-1990), Ph.D., "was a philosopher and somatic educator, who founded the field of somatics in 1970 with the book *Bodies in Revolt: A Primer in Somatic Thinking*." https://somatics.org/training/about/hanna (accessed March 5, 2024).

2022). I felt the pain and distress in my sacral spine release. When I thought of the sacral going inwards, I felt a new sense of abdominal engagement that I hadn't felt before. This sensation was palpably different from when dancers are usually asked to "tuck in" their belly. When dancers are asked to "tuck in," this action usually involves a forceful posterior tilt of the pelvis and has an adverse effect on hips, knees, and lower back. Whereas in Chettur's class, when we were lying on our stomachs, she taught us to think of bringing the pubic bone and the hip bone closer to the floor while moving the abdomen and ribs towards the spine. This allowed the sacral spine to have enough room to move forwards and into the body without disturbing the curve in the lumbar spine. These personal realizations were special to me since they made me pay attention to my own body. My own spine. With its hypercurvature, hips tractioning up towards the back, crunching and congesting the lower back and causing unbearable pain as I sat for hours writing at my desk.

scoopy /blankety feeling active
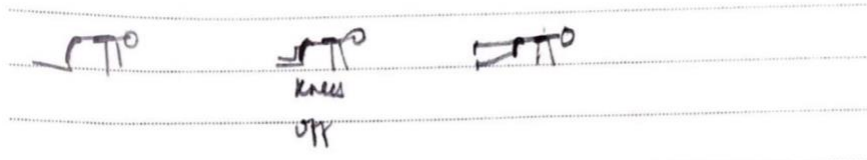
knees
off

engaging the lumbar than just
the hip flexor
↳blanket
both knees up or one in, one
extended
abdomen/core

pubic bone / front of the sacral
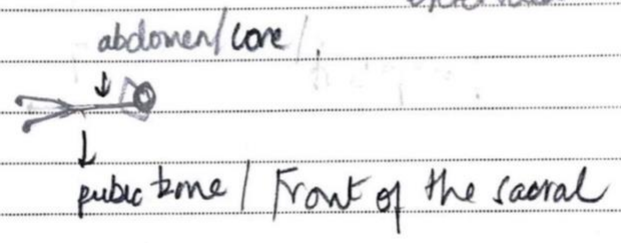
engagement through the spine without dropping
the butt into the lumbar spine

↳ rotar
↳ point extended in
knee/thigh up   air
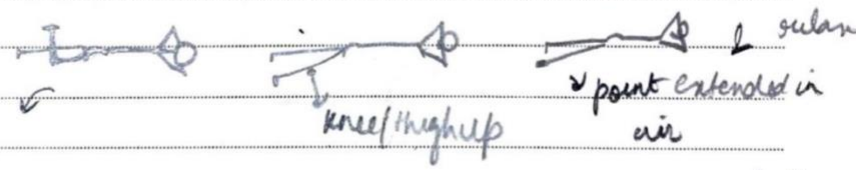
both
avoid butt crunchy the spine . pubic bone & pelvis
bone on the floor.   Abdomen engaged.

R leg up :   lift L thigh off
↓   slightly
press the R knee/thigh ⤴
into the floor
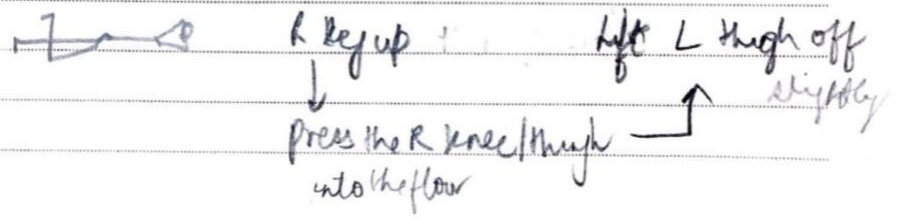
Figure 5. Notes from my diary: Mapping the lessons in the Spine Module (February 17, 2022).

As Chettur herself struggled with limited thoracic flexibility, in these classes she took extra care to work on expanding the range of the dorsal spine. As encased by the ribcage, Chettur asked us to visualize three spinal bands in the thoracic region that work together to keep an efficient alignment (described below in the direction of tailbone to head, from my notes, with quotes from Chettur's presentation embedded):

- First band is the adrenal/diaphragmatic band that separates the abdominal organs from the upper-body organs. This band has an opening for the breath to enter. It runs circumferentially around the body.
- Second band is below, lower than the shoulder blades. It is directly behind the breast level. It is activated through the "sucking-in of the skin that covers the back of the rib in the direction of the chest" (Chettur).[110]
- Third band is in the area between the upper shoulder blade and the armpit. The front part of the band is the clavicular chest.

Many times, as I wrote notes on Chettur's presentation, I thought of the three bands in the dorsal spine entering the body to widen the distance between my shoulder blades. After attending a few sessions and working with these technical principles, I went back to one of our class recordings and wrote down Chettur's directives, in her own words, from the class on March 10, 2022:

> Place your forehead on the fingertips, legs parallel.
> Let's travel from the base of the spine. Make sure your legs are not wider than hip distance. Think about the contact of the legs with the ground to begin with so that the groin softens. Make sure the buttock flesh is moving directionally away from the lumbar spine, not congesting. Pubic bone down. Gently hold the abdominal surface towards the lower back [….] Make sure you have a neutral spine, neutral spine. So, I don't want you to completely flatten the lower back. One last time that you're absolutely sure the pubic bone-lumbar action is secure.
> And place the forehead on the ground and just glide your arms so that your elbow comes closer to your ribs. Your forearms become parallel to your torso. Elbows on the ground. *Bhujangasana*. Elbows close to your body. Don't let the shoulder blade rise up. So give enough space so that the shoulder blades can widen.
> Now what we're going to do, we're going to do half cobra, which means we're going to lift the spine up to the lower third level, but listen to me. We're going to start by creating the length through the crown of the head. Then we're slowly going to raise the chin so that the cervical spine starts to lift. Then we're going to travel through the uppermost shoulder blade band, middle shoulder band, and the adrenal band, all coming up but not at the cost of the lower back scrunching.

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[110] Quotes from Padmini Chettur's Spine Module on March 10, 2022.

> Take a moment to make sure you have the sacrum inserted, abdomen ready to support the length of the lower back that you don't have to push down to the forearm [….] So first lengthen until you feel that the head is leaving the ground and then slowly start to look to the edge of your mat, not forward. [March 10, 2022]

Many anatomical ideas introduced in the passage above—for example, the pubic bone and lumbar connection, the hugging in of the three dorsal bands, the engagement of the cervical spine—point to the intention to achieve a "neutral" spine in *Bhujangasana* (cobra pose). This detailed articulation of how the spine works is essential to understanding the initiation point of each movement, to finding coherence and length through the body, and to learning to do so without causing excess or chronic pain over time. Directing her somatic pain towards teaching the art of "internal negotiation" (Chettur 2022) has been key to her practice.[111] However, as rooted in the search for a "neutral" body, I believe that Chettur's practice invites questions about the meaning, function, and usage of the term in reference to contemporary dance in India.

Question of Neutrality

Cultural phenomenologists have studied and argued for a reciprocal relationship between somatic and perceptual experience and the multitude of cultural meanings it produces. Quoting Thomas Csordas (1999), Philipa Rothfield (2020) has written,

> Cultural phenomenologists claim that cultural beliefs and values shape somatic, perceptual experience. There is no neutral body. Rather, the immediacy of experience is always already synthesized with the 'multiplicity of cultural meanings in which we are always and inevitably immersed' (Csordas 1999: 143) [….] The individual body thereby bears the traces of culture, through its manner of attention either towards itself or to others. (74)

In the same way that cultural phenomenologists attend to somatic and perceptual experience to understand cultural difference, as discussed in chapter 1, critical dance studies scholars have researched the body's potential to resist or reinforce dominant culture. Dancers, scholars, and

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[111] "Q&A in conversation with Padmini Chettur and Brooke Holmes | Coming to Know," April 25, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ipfu9klIIVY.

choreographers working within the Global South contend with the neutral aesthetics associated with contemporary dance and acknowledge that concert dance is subject to these double binds: referential and innovative. They argue that under the banner of "neutral" aesthetics, (western) contemporary dance reinforces colonial violence and settler oppression by its masking of the appropriation of racial, gendered, class, caste, and sexed differences (Chatterjea 2011, 2020; George 2020; Kedhar 2020c; Kwan 2017; Mitra 2015; O'Shea 2003, 2007; Savigliano 2009; Seetoo 2013). This notion of "neutrality" in contemporary dance, they argue, turns non-white and non-western bodies either into spectacle, commodities, and exotic objects, or marginalizes their bodies and aesthetics as "world" dancers (Savigliano 2009). To resist the orientalist and neocolonial framings of their bodies and works, scholars theorize how dancers of South Asian origin abstract their cultural and historical references and markers and produce hybrid aesthetics in order to negotiate the double-binds of being both referential and innovative.

SanSan Kwan (2017), for example, links the emergence of contemporary dance to the projects of colonialism, postcolonialism, modernity, postmodernity, and globalization. To support her argument, Kwan foregrounds the voices of Asian, South Asian, and African dance scholars such as Yutian Wong (2010), Ananya Chatterjea (2013), Yatin Lin (2014), Nicholas Rowe (2009), Nora Choupamire (cited in Lepecki 2012), Ketu Katrak (2011), and Royona Mitra (2015), among others, to analyze how they negotiate the term "contemporary" dance in their regional contexts—China, India, Africa, Palestine and Cambodia. Wong (2010) asks us to reconsider if an Asian body can be seen as both Asian and contemporary since it is always perceived as more traditional than contemporary. Chatterjea (2013) reminds us of the problem with Euro-American definitions of modern and postmodern, suggesting that they function as "neutral universal" from which all other forms of postmodernity are measured (cited in Kwan

2017, 45). Similarly, Rowe (2009) points out that the problem with referencing non-western practices as contemporary is that they are again interpellated in the same framework, etched out by Euro-American contemporary aesthetics, and are seen as either "resisting to or yielding to Western aesthetic values" (cited in Kwan 2017, 46).

Kwan highlights that innovating within the tradition, especially in the postcolonial context, raises questions of legitimacy. According to Kwan, the term "contemporary" creates tension between the (post)modernist impulse to create something "new," on the one hand, and, on the other, the nationalist drive to preserve the art in its "purest" form, threatening both the national and cultural identity of that particular geopolitical region. In navigating the double-binds of being referential and innovative as a postcolonial artist, Chettur refrains from being objectified and exoticized as the "other" and, instead, partially aligns her work with the values of a neoliberal dance economy, as Kedhar argues (2020c), such as risk, innovation, and experimentation. Two key choreographic ideas that Chettur inherited from Chandralekha were (1) deconstruction and (2) the reduction of pace. Using deconstruction, with every work, Chettur is "reversing and looking further and further into the grammar of the body and its possibility to articulate" (2023b).[112] From Chandralekha, Chettur learned the idea of extending time—"this whole idea of holding time, extending time, creating tension in the way that one does that comes from Chandra" (Chettur 2023b).[113] With the extension of time, Chettur aims to arrive at a point of radical stillness in the body—from where she can sense the beginning and ends of a movement. This somatic intervention allows Chettur to both draw from *and* push against the neoliberal dance economy.

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[112] Interviewed by the author on October 25, 2023, on Zoom.

[113] Ibid.

Contextualizing the development of these choreographic ideas and their relation to the

somatic and cultural conditions, Chettur shares that Chandra was only able to develop these two

key ideas—deconstruction and reduction of pace—in her choreographic practice as a "response"

to bharatanatyam. This disagreement with the existing dance form created a rupture, according to

Chettur.[114] She shares,

> Chandra would never have existed without bharatanatyam, we know that. And in the
> same very essential way, my work, then, extends another layer of response to
> bharatanatyam. Because that is my context. People often ask me, 'Why did you need to
> stay in Chennai? Why didn't you go somewhere else?' I feel I could never go somewhere
> else. [October 25, 2023]

Cultural theorist, Brahma Prakash (May 19, 2023) pays close attention to the emancipatory

nature of such rupture with the tradition, and he believes that it is essential to democratize Indian

art and culture. Prakash argues,

> For a new emancipatory dance to emerge, bharatnatyam in classical form has to die. A
> generation of contemporary dancers has to emerge from the training of bharatnatyam.
> Ruptures with the hereditary dance forms past marked the birth of bharatnatyam and
> ruptures will have to mark the departure from bharatnatyam. These new dancers and
> scholars will have to effect umbilical cuts.[115]

Chettur's disagreement with bharatanatyam forged her departure from the tradition. Even as

Chettur shares her frustration with Chennai's "nauseating attachment to tradition," she is aware

that her work is what it is because of her proximity to the bharatanatyam dance community in

Chennai.[116] On that note, Chettur shares,

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[114] "In some way see both Chandra and my work as being a departure, a response to something that already existed. Without that something, this other thing would never have occurred. Right? There's a disagreement" (Chettur 2023b). Interviewed by the author on October 25, 2023, on Zoom.

[115] Brahma Prakash, 2023, "To Truly Democratise Indian Art and Culture, the 'Classical' Must be Declared Dead," *Scroll.in*, March 19, 2023, https://scroll.in/article/1045681/opinion-to-truly-democratise-indian-art-and-culture-the-classical-must-be-done-away-with.

[116] In the interview, Padmini Chettur (2023) explains, "But to create a counter aesthetic [...] But to create the minimalist thing as a response to things which are happening here around me and knowing that, I mean to a large extent, that proposition derives out of my existence and out of my life and thought within this community and society."

It's the thing which I constantly am having to respond to and to react against and to push against […] I think it's that kind of resistance, it's a very critical component of my work. Without that, if I just had endless freedom, and if I lived in a community which celebrated everything I did, I don't know if it would have been any easier or nicer for me. [October 25, 2023]

Navigating the tension between the city's attachment to tradition and her own desire to develop a new choreographic language, which "refuses to be put into any kind of framework of Indianness,"[117] I see Chettur's intervention as an antiauthoritarian and anti-disciplinary response to her classical dance training and orientalist framings of her work. In fact, she responds to Indian classical dance with a "counter-aesthetic," as theorized by Sadananda Menon. [118] Building on these arguments, I search for corporeal ruptures in Chettur's work that shifted her vision of the dancing body from "neutral" to a spatial and temporal entity, reflecting on the embodied socio-cultural knowledge of being a female dancer in Chennai and, for that matter, in all of India.

Developing on Thomas Csordas's (1993) conceptualization of "Somatic Attention,"[119] Philipa Rothfield (2020) has written, "There are two salient features of somatic attention: first, we attend with or through the body, and second, such a body's mode of attention is culturally and socially informed" (74). Chettur employs somatic attention to tune into her anatomical understanding of the spine and to pay attention to the micromovements in the body. Chettur shifts attention from "aesthetics or the optics of movement" to perceiving movement as "a series

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[117] Interviewed by the author on October 25, 2023, on Zoom.

[118] In the interview with the author on October 25, 2023, via Zoom, Padmini Chettur shares "what Sadananda Menon once put it very well. He said, 'What you're doing is you're creating a counter-aesthetic.'"

[119] Thomas Csordas (1993) has written, "Somatic attention signifies those 'culturally elaborated ways of attending to and with one's body in surroundings that include the embodied presence of others" (Csordas 1993, 138) [….] In other words:
> neither attending to nor attending with the body can be taken for granted but must be formulated as culturally constituted somatic modes of attention" (Csordas 1993, 140 cited in Rothfield 2020, 74).

of adjustments in the body" (Chettur 2022).[120] As a dancer-choreographer, Chettur attends and

attunes to these micro-adjustments in the body to derive her choreographic language for each

work.

During my ethnographic research in Chennai, I met dancer-choreographer Anoushka

Kurien who, like Madhu, had been a long-time collaborator of Chettur's. Kurien told me that

each dancer has their own definition of "neutrality," depending on their anatomical structure. It

seemed to me that the dancer is encouraged to be in a state of receptivity over neutrality,

unlearning harmful postural and movement habits that troubled Chettur in her early career as a

dancer to focus on developing a sense of somatic attention rooted in the body and its

surroundings. There isn't a pre-determined image or understanding of the "neutral" that is

prescribed to the collaborator-dancer, but rather the term is used more as a suggestive alignment

where the dancer can find her initiation point—the point between the anterior and posterior

possibilities of the spine that individual dancers measure and analyze for themselves.

Searching for the answer to her question, "How does detailed articulation emerge in the

body?," Dana Caspersen (2011) has written, "I saw that the experience of fragmentation was a

form of the experience of unity; the apparent breakdown of continuity was actually a glimpse

into the interior workings of integration" (Spier 2011, 93). Analyzing Chettur's practice through

the lens of fragmentation allows for a closer look at the integration of the architectural, temporal,

and spatial dimensions of the body. In a conversation about her film, *A slightly Curving place*

(2022), with Brooke Holmes in New York in April 2022, Chettur shares that fragmentation

"gives density to the moving body."[121] She envisions the body moving through this density or as

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[120] "Q&A in conversation with Padmini Chettur and Brooke Holmes | Coming to Know," April 25, 2022,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ipfu9klIIVY.

[121] Ibid.

she calls it a "dense space," with a quality of resistance. For Chettur, it is the dancer's work to "generate a kind of resistive quality through the body's own strength" (2023b).[122] She shares that the way she introduces flow in and through her movement is delicately aligned with her body's potential to generate resistance—internally and externally in space.

In her talk with Holmes, Chettur further shares that "my flow is full of resistance [....] just enough resistance" (Chettur).[123] The resistive quality through which Chettur deconstructs bodily movement and stitches it back together reveals the interior workings of the body, similar to what Casperson (2011) notes about the relationship between fragmentation and unity. This is illustrated in Chettur's choreographic work as early as 2003. In *Paperdoll*, Chettur divided the body into three zones—torso (including the head), arms, and feet—and asked the dancers to create movement for each zone (Chettur 2016a, 162). By dividing the body in this way, she derived a range of possible movements from each body part which she later assembled into phrases of movement. This choreographic method enabled her to fracture the "aesthetical hierarchy" in bharatanatyam and devise an "entire language—detailed and ornate"—which was based on non-habitual patterns of movement (Chettur 2016a, 162). [124]

Thus, the detailed articulation of the body allows for two things to emerge. Firstly, in fracturing the body into zones and then linking them into novel units of movement, Chettur demonstrates how fragmentation reveals the interior unity of the body. Secondly, Emily Claid (2006) has pointed out, in "Letting go of fixed patterns of movement and expression" [....] it is

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[122] Interviewed by the author on October 25, 2023, on Zoom.

[123] "Q&A in conversation with Padmini Chettur and Brooke Holmes | Coming to Know," April 25, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ipfu9klIIVY.

[124] In her article, Padmini Chettur (2016a) has written that "Yet, by the time we collected and learnt "all the forty phrases that were formed out of the eight initial movements, entire language—detailed and ornate—was created" (162).

"the deconstruction of classicism" (143).[125] In this way, while Chettur critiques the aesthetic

hierarchy and fixity in classical material to explore the possibility of new grammar and/or new

choreographic structures to emerge, she deconstructs it.

Furthermore, fragmentation helps articulate the unity as well as the multiplicity of the

body and the contemporary subject constructed through various systems of knowledge—cultural,

social, and political. This multiplicity, experienced through the process of fragmentation, not

only counters the "neutrality" in contemporary dance, but also is "decolonial and liberatory," as

it creates space for difference (Chatterjea 2020, 257). In contrast to the "neutral-universal" body

(Chatterjea 2013) or the "universalized" body of the contemporary Indian dancer (Chakravorty

2022), multiplicity allows for emergence of a range of movement possibilities from a given body

part that can then be arranged into novel sequences of movement, interrogated, and analyzed.

This kind of anatomical freedom allows Chettur to deconstruct classicism, marking the

multiplicity of the body as potentially liberatory and decolonial.

Like for Claid (2006), "Letting go into the experience of something new requires the

lived knowledge and constant re-embodying of the thing that we wish to release," (143) I believe

that Chettur attempts a similar re-embodying of the classical form to create a new language of

the body in *Varnam* (2016). In my following analysis of Chettur's film *Varnam*, I show how

Chettur interrogates the history and traditional repertoire of bharatanatyam through a process that

could usefully be called *liberatory deconstruction*. As illustrated through the example of

Paperdoll (2003), Chettur fragments the classically trained body in a way that the body is pushed

to revisit and rework the internal physical connections and propose a novel movement. In doing

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[125] Emily Claid (2006) has written, "Letting go of fixed patterns of movement and expression is the deluxe element of dance training for contemporary performance. Letting go is the sophistication of knowledge, the deconstruction of classicism. Letting go into the experience of something new requires the lived knowledge and constant re-embodying of the thing that we wish to release" (143).

so, Chettur liberates the classically trained body from the expectation to move in a habitual pattern. Then, she rearranges these fractured units of movement, based in classical technique, into a new choreographic language. By putting these two terms together—liberatory and deconstruction—I assert that Chettur tunes into the capacities of the dancing body to articulate choreographic frameworks rather than the other way around. The body's authorial presence destabilizes the governing choreographic score, thus liberating the body through deconstruction of the classical material. By embodying a segment in the dance film, I demonstrate Chettur's method of *liberatory deconstruction* while arguing for the central role of the spine is assisting her in her choreographic vision. However, building on the caste critique pointed towards the practice of modern/contemporary bharatanatyam (Pillai 2022; Prakash 2016), I discuss the limitations in Chettur's approach. Overall, I argue that *Varnam* deconstructs, reimagines, and reinscribes bharatanatyam's classicism.

Varnam **(2016)**

In her presidential address at the Thirty-third Annual Conference of the Tamil Isai Sangam, Raja Annamalai Manram, Madras, internationally acclaimed bharatanatyam dancer Dr. T. Balasaraswati (1978) talks about the essential role of *sringara*, or erotic love, as well as the presence of the body in bharatanatyam and critiques attempts to purify the dance form and devalue the corporeal. She urges,

> I emphasize all this because some seek to "purify" Bharata Natyam by replacing the traditional lyrics which express *sringara* with devotional songs. I wish to respectfully submit to such protagonists that there is nothing in Bharata Natyam that can be purified afresh; it is divine as it is, and innately so. The *sringara* we experience in Bharata Natyam is never carnal—never, never. For those who have yielded themselves to its discipline with total dedication, dance, like music, is the practice of the Presence; it cannot be merely the body's rapture.
> Bharata Natyam is an art that consecrates the body, which is considered to be in itself of no value. The yogi, by controlling his breath and by modifying his body, acquires the halo of sanctity. Even so, the dancer who dissolves her identity in rhythm and music

makes her body an instrument, at least for the duration of the dance, for the experience and expression of the spirit. (110)

Here, Balasaraswati is seen referring to the reform-revival period, where bharatanatyam was "purified"—the erotic elements of the dance were erased and it was disassociated from the practice of *devadasis*, the "hereditary dancing caste" (Pillai 2020, 14). Scholars, such as Amrit Srinivasan (1985), Avanthi Meduri (1988), Janet O'Shea (2007), and Davesh Soneji (2011) offer a nuanced understanding of this period as linked to the independence and anti-colonial movements. Amrit Srinivasan (1985) analyzes how the anti-nautch reform movement sought to eradicate the *devadasi* tradition in Tamil Nadu, by calling these hereditary dancers "prostitutes" and "impure," and their regional dance, *sadir*. Srinivasan (1985) shows that this occurred because the anti-nautch movement was associated with communal politics of the Dravidian movement, led and influenced by British regional party politics. At the same time, under the anti-colonial and Hindu nationalist projects led by the brahmin-dominated Theosophical movement and the Congress, the dance was largely transferred to upper-caste women who could practice and perform it. Together, Srinivasan (1985) argues, the reform-revival movement limited the social, economic, and sexual freedom that hereditary dancing women experienced, remaining outside the structures of marriage and patriarchy, and crafted a new image of the Indian female dancing body as moral, respectable, and upper-caste.

The practice of gender and caste-based violence in bharatanatyam is not a thing of the past but manifests itself today on a transnational level as strongly linked to majoritarian cultural politics. Developing on Soneji's (2012) work on caste-based violence in bharatanatyam and interlacing it with her familial history, hereditary caste performer Nrithya Pillai (2022) argues that "Bharatanatyam is a modality for the propagation of Hindutva politics today precisely because since the 1930s, it has been mired in caste-based politics, deep forms of cultural

nationalism, and Brahminic stewardship" (4). Along with a history of violence associated with bharatanatyam, there have been efforts to "contemporarize" the dance form that critically looks at its structure.

O'Shea (2008) contributes to this discussion by establishing a distinction between traditional and classical in reference to bharatanatyam. O'Shea claims that "The term 'traditional' suggests an unbroken, handed-down heritage while 'classical' denotes an adherence to a set of defined principles" (41). This distinction is essential to understand because it helps read Chettur's interrogation of bharatanatyam's repertoire in *Varnam*. While Chettur attempts a rigorous engagement with the classical material in *Varnam*—critiquing the representation of the female dancer and reworking the dance's physical aesthetic—as I discuss below, the practice of this tradition in the contemporary moment is fraught with questions of its appropriation from hereditary dance communities.

Balasaraswati (1978) explains the structure of the dance form, bharatanatyam, and the relevance of its "centerpiece" (111), known as the *varnam*.

> The Bharata Natyam recital is structured like a great temple: We enter the outer tower of *alarippu*, cross the halfway hall of *jatis-waram*, then the great hall of *sabdam*, and enter the holy precinct of the deity in the *varnam*. This is the place, the space, that gives the most expansive scope to revel in the rhythm and moods and music of the dance. The *varnam* is the continuum that gives ever-expanding room to the dancer to delight in her self-fulfilment by providing the fullest scope to her own creativity as well as to the tradition of the art. (111)

Chettur's dance film *Varnam*[126] (2016b) revisits this essential component of bharatanatyam repertoire—its physical aesthetics, historical context, and extended duration—and reimagines it in contemporary terms. *Varnam's* synopsis, written by Chettur, reads as follows,

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[126] "*Varnam* was first a three-screened dance film commissioned by Steirische Herbst festival in Graz, Switzerland. It was then reconfigured to be a performance premiered last year [2016] at Kochi Muziris Biennale (India) as a durational piece that loops for three hours inside what I would imagine a closed-, intimate gallery space where audiences were free to come and go as they pleased. For Asia Focus at MMCA Seoul, the piece reincarnated into

> Varnam is a multi-layered deconstruction of a composition from the traditional Bharatanatyam repertoire. A weaving together of a narrative of an estranged lover with an abstract rhythmic poetry of syllables. This work, while retaining elements of the original, re-imagines the physical aesthetic of the classical, as well as drawing other texts of iconic women writers as a strategy to subvert the image of the tragic heroine that has become a problematic symbol of culture—traditional and popular.[127]

Varnam targets the popular representation of the female dancer as a "tragic heroine" in classical dance. It focuses on the complex and oftentimes contradictory emotions of love, longing, eroticism, and suffering that are experienced by the central figure, *virahotkanthita nayika*, the heroine known as the "one distressed by separation."[128] She is one of the eight types of main heroines, according to the classification of *nayikas* in the *ashtanayika* system.[129] Indonesian dance curator and scholar Helly Minarti (2017) has written that in *Varnam*, Chettur "has carefully selected the two key texts used—the original varnam titled *Mohamana* by Ponniah Pillai (early 19th century) and Ninnu Juda, a *Kshetraya* padam taken from Bharatanatyam repertoire—both newly translated by a contemporary poet Vivek Narayanan."[130] For Minarti, "the original text reveals the subversive trait of the original, South-Indian, pre-Bharatanatyam dance form which is called as *sadir/attam/kuttu* in its various regional names." By interlacing

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another version of gallery setting of the previous, but, instead of being performed in a boxed gallery, it took place at the main open hall connecting the galleries – a high-ceilinged space flooded by natural light where people pass by. At this high, open and in-between, transiting space, Padmini set *Varnam* to be an hour piece adapting the clear structure of the durational version but with omitting the loop. Audiences were seated either on square cushion on the floor or on the low stool" (Minarti 2017).

[127] Synopsis of *Varnam* (2016) from Padmini Chettur's website: http://www.padminichettur.in/choreography_pad/varnam/ (accessed March 4, 2024).

[128] José Martinez Luiz (2001, 288-95).

[129] "The Ashta-Nayika is a collective name for eight types of *nayikas* or heroines as classified by Bharata in his Sanskrit treatise on performing arts - *Natya Shastra*. The eight nayikas represent eight different states (avastha) in relationship to her hero or *nayaka*." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ashta_Nayika#cite_note-sahitya-1 (accessed March 4, 2024).

[130] Helly Minarti's (December 12, 2017) review of *Varnam*. http://www.padminichettur.in/varnam-return-to-the-silenced/.

personal narratives of the female dancers and the contemporary writings by women authors that center around the ideas of womanhood, body, and sexuality within these two classical texts, *Varnam* "subvert(s) the image of the tragic heroine." Dancers carefully analyze the codified aesthetic of this classical repertoire and "re-physicalize" it to understand the significance and subversive potential of the dance form.

In an excerpt of the curatorial text by exhibition-maker and art writer Zasha Colah,[131] Colah describes Chettur's choreographic intervention as follows,

> Chettur has created a contemporary choreographic performance especially for video, looking at the relevance of the mudra gestures—seeking out their contemporaneity. A 'varnam' is the central section of a Bharatanatyam dance performance, made up of two types of dance: one narrative, made up of sung words; the other—the 'jathi', an abstraction of voice and rhythm, for pure movement. The first is shot in colour, the dancers sing the words, in costumes made up of shades of dull red, the second is shot in black-and-white, and is the development of a particular body language created by Chettur's investigation of the 'inner distances and proximities' of time and body-points.[132]

When reflecting in the interview on what has remained from her training in bharatanatyam, Chettur talks about the idea of structured time, her work with gestures ("even if not with mudras"), and an aesthetic around precision, all of which are central to her work. Even in her article, Chettur (2016a) has written about the basic movement elements of bharatanatyam, like

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[131] "Zasha Colah practices exhibition-making and art writing. She is co-artistic director at Archive Milano/Berlin/Dakar (Milano, 2021–) and lecturer in the Visual Arts & Curatorial Studies Department, Nuova Accademia di Belle Arti Milan (2018–). She is on the editorial board of *Geoarchivi* (2021–), a series of books that reopen rebellious archives at different geopolitical latitudes; a collaboration between the department and the publisher Meltemi." https://dutchartinstitute.eu/page/17638/zasha-colah (accessed February 29, 2024). "Zasha Colah is interested in cultural sovereignty and projects that encourage collaborative art practice. She co-founded blackrice in 2008 in Nagaland, and the Clark House Initiative in Bombay in 2010, after studying art history at Oxford university and curatorial studies at the RCA, London. She was the curator of modern Indian art at the Jehangir Nicholson Art Foundation at the CSMVS museum (2008 to 2011), and was head of Public Programs at the National Gallery of Modern Art (2004-2005) in Mumbai." https://kadist.org/people/zasha-colah/ (accessed February 29, 2024).

[132] Excerpt of the curatorial text by Zasha Colah: http://www.padminichettur.in/choreography_pad/varnam/ (accessed March 4, 2024).

the *aramandi*,[133] that have "provided insights to the understanding of physical geometry within a particular aesthetic" (156). She believes that "time is firmly held by the *Bharatanatyam* body" and the precision through which the body moves in space and in rhythmic variation intrinsically links time to the "'lines' of the *advaus*"[134] (156). Deconstruction of these core principles— "space, time, and lines" (156)—from her early training in bharatanatyam (1977-1987) shapes her choreographic aesthetics, which we see here in *Varnam*.

In a 3-channel video projection, five women sit on chairs in deep, dusty, brick reds, burgundy, and purple sarees paired with black or white blouses. The shadow of their seated postures makes a lengthened impression on the gray cemented floor. They sing, "*ta, ta ta ri ta, ta tana ta, ta jhunu ta, ta dimi ta, ta tari ta....*" There is a single iteration, layering, and quickening of the abstract rhythmic poetry of the syllables, and then there is silence. In the center, two dancers sit on a chair in a white gown and a black dress. The empty chair, on the right channel, placed on the gray floor and with the white wall in the background, longs for companionship.

Right before the utterance of Mohamana, the dancer in the central channel plucks an invisible line with her right fingers from the tip of the clustered fingers of the left palm, stretches it overhead, leans to the side, and returns to the center. Her head drops forwards as she plucks the imaginary line and arches to look at her right fingertips—she maintains an opened chest and wide collar bones as the body leans towards the right. Another dancer on the left channel slices the space at the shoulder length with blade-like palms and traces the central axis of her body with three extended fingers and index finger and thumb touching. Her left elbow and wrist angle in a

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[133] In her article, Padmini Chettur (2016a) describes *aramandi* as "The fundamental posture in Bharatanatyam— symmetric, knees bent, hips, opened out, feet firmly grounded, spine erect and the distance of the head and the navel is same as that of the navel and the ground" (156).

[134] In her article, Padmini Chettur (2016a) describes *adavus* as "Basic exercises for the body in Bharatanatyam— building blocks for the *Nritta* in this form" (156).

direction that a stream of water could drift swiftly through and into the fingertips. The deconstruction of these gestures lays the groundwork for exploring the "physical geometry" in the second half of the film and creates a contemporary "body language," which is "far removed but not decontextualised from its traditional content" (Chettur 2016c).[135]

Watching *Varnam*, Embodying the Dance

Upon watching the *Varnam* film, I immediately felt the urge to move with the same precision as Aditi Bheda, the dancer on my screen. As an upper-caste woman, never trained in bharatanatyam, I asked myself: What value do I seek in being able to understand how a dancing body is moving in front of me on a kinesthetic level? What kinds of histories am I trying to embody here and, in this process, whose histories might I be displacing? Unsure of my own impulse to access this kinesthetic knowledge from the visual document of the work, I tried to embody these questions. Through practicing a short segment from *Varnam,* I felt that if, as a dancer, I am able to experience some of the movement principles and mechanics in this piece, it will bring me closer to Chettur's compositional process and help me understand the labor that goes into deconstructing, fragmenting, and reimagining the physical aesthetic of the work as rooted in bharatanatyam. This is also how I view Chettur's lifelong work in dance—practice-as-research. By embodying this methodology, even as distanced from the actual moment of knowledge production, through the rehearsal and the choreographic process with Chettur, I believed that it would still be an effective mode of engagement with the dance.

So it is that I begin this dialogue with the dancer in the video. I closely watch her movements. My index finger dances to the rhythm of the left clicks on my mouse that I use to play-pause-rewind the dance at different intervals. As I start "trying" the dance out or "imitating"

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[135] Email conversations with Zasha Colah. http://www.padminichettur.in/choreography_pad/varnam/ (accessed March 4, 2024).

the dancer in the video or rather "re-physicalizing" the dance through my body, I immediately realize that this is going to be one of the hardest tasks for me as a dancer-scholar—to write down the minute anatomical and qualitative changes that my body is experiencing at every moment. As I resume watching the video, rather than scrutinizing each movement that the dancer is doing. I make a decision to get up from my chair and do the movement myself, to understand how one movement connects to or rather flows to another. I repeat this sequence multiple times and barely get through another ten seconds of the choreography. Nonetheless, I get up and try.

Right leg in front of the left, parallel to each other as if standing on two railway tracks. Both feet plant themselves into the floor by pressing through the entire surface underneath them. Right hip pulls back and left hip forwards to square the hips. Pelvis is not sinking back, nor the tailbone is released but gently nudges forward. The inside of my legs feels actively engaged in maintaining this first posture. As I try to find/fight verticality here, I notice my weight falling frequently to my left side. To combat that, I imagine a line on the floor extending out of my right foot. I gently shift my weight from my heel to somewhere in between the middle and the front part of the foot. I think about the width, the distance between both my feet and the diagonal line that connects the front heel to the back foot. I feel as I stand in this wide-legged stance, my right hip presses more into the back space, pushing the flesh a little towards the edges of my body. My left hamstring feels a little hollow. I think about the sensation of sliding something down my right hip. With that, I feel a little more space open up under my right hamstring.

Standing in this opening position, my right heel presses into the floor as the left heel lifts up halfway. I experience a simultaneous lift in the right shoulder that becomes visible a moment after the left heel lifts, stretching slightly towards my ear and opening the space under my right armpit and the ribcage. The left heel turns outwards and toes inwards to rotate the hip internally.

Front knee (right) bends and straightens as the pelvis pulls back, it activates the left elbow to press inwards from the waist, energy flowing out through the fingertips. Left knee bends again (foot in forced arch) and the shoulder rolls towards the centerline of the body, mapping/drawing a curve from the tip of the shoulder to the front of the sternum. Rotating the triceps forwards, the right shoulder blade slides open and faces forwards. What is usually behind or out of the audience's vision or camera lens—the dancer's back—is foregrounded here. The left knee straightens again, leaving a little space between the base of the heel and the earth.

As I jot down these descriptions, I think about how the dancing body's agency to explore the spaces in and around itself in the dance and how it might be possible for me to enter and exit these spaces, shift, and maneuver them as needed. After all, as Chettur reminds us, dance for her is about "moving the visual space through the possibility of the dancing body" (2023a). After drifting into this parallel thought, I return to my task. I listen to the words accompanying Bheda's solo in the video, as recited by Chettur's collaborator, Gayatri Ramesh, and pay attention to how Bheda is extending her spine on a diagonal line.

> Stabilizing yourself on the right leg, make the largest diagonal length from the left toe to the right shoulder extreme tip in such a way that you're planting the toe of the left leg firmly down into the ground, thrusting it into the ground, kneading it into the ground on the left side.
> The right side of the shoulder blade will pick the whole diagonal length of the spine, plucking it away constantly on the rooting of the left toe [....] So, from the left toe via the inner line of the leg lengthen the whole vertebrae column up until a point where it reaches the topmost point of the right shoulder and continuously build that length…. (Gayatri Ramesh)

I press the right toes into the ground, transfer my weight in front, on the balls of my foot, and nudge my right shoulder to follow this forward thrust and lengthen the spine as I change the orientation of my shoulders from frontal to profile. I keep the right palm facing out and over the left. This front pull of the weight initiated by the turning of the shoulders not only elongates the

spine, but also invites the left hip to turn in as well. My upper ribs lift off the abdomen and this newly opened space within enables me to rotate the left arm in the shoulder socket. The left palm faces outside and glides towards the right arm in the front. As the chest melts down, the weight transfers to the back foot that anchors it down by bending the left knee. I feel the air vibrating between the backs of both my palms as I press into the space between them.

At this point, my upper back is rounded, and shoulder blades stretch away from each other. My arms extend from the top of the shoulder blades, as parallel lines reach towards the right leg, hovering on either side of the right thigh. My neck is held, and the chin is maintained at an angle parallel to the chest. Insides of my chest are hollow, pectoral muscles tightened to hold this posture. The edges of my elbows are pressing out.

I turn my right foot at ninety degrees and trace the lengthened left arm back to my body until fingers almost touch the waistline or are in line with the hip bones, breaking the length of the arm at the elbow. Right fingertips continue to reach out and into the floor. Pelvis turns towards the left, pulling and opening the right side towards the left to come into a lateral position. Chest is open and extends up and outwards from the sternum to engage the shoulder blades in the back. All of these micro-movements support this strong lateral bend of the spine and the body.

Finding a linear alignment of the spine and working with parallel position of the feet have been two key physical interventions by Chettur in this piece. Here, my utmost focus has been to embody and verbalize "the development of a particular body language created" by Chettur (Colah 2016).[136] The focus on linear alignment of the spine is a departure from the hyper-arched lower back in bharatanatyam. Her work with parallel position of the feet is an essential response

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[136] Excerpt of the curatorial text by Zasha Colah: http://www.padminichettur.in/choreography_pad/varnam/ (accessed March 4, 2024).

to the forced turned-out position of the feet in bharatanatyam. For her, linear alignment is important to achieve before rotating the spine on different planes—vertical, horizontal, and lateral. In her Grounding module with Anandam Dance Theatre, she instructs that "Rotation always happens upon alignment. Keep the alignment linear."[137]

In developing a new language of the body, Chettur focuses on achieving an "active standing position" (Chettur 2016a, 167). The dancer is asked to investigate the crown-tailbone connection, the awareness of three spinal bands, the placement of the pelvis, hip-to-feet connection, and the weight-bearing function of the legs accessed through the inner and the outer edges of the feet. The ability of the lower body to feel rooted is explored through the hip-to-feet connection. After the linear alignment is achieved, Chettur works on rotating the spine through the body's own resistance. She combines the action of external and internal rotation of the legs to assist with the rotation of the spine. The active and rooted body, in this way, stands as a liberated body in space—hyperaware of its anatomical workings, possibilities, and limitations—one that Basu and I aimed to articulate in our discussions.

In a talk organized by Indian Foundation for the Arts (IFA), Chettur (2023a) refers to *Varnam* as a work that creates a "dialogue between the body being fragmented and being whole again [....] creating distance and proximity inside the body itself." This exploration of space—distance and proximity—within the body is rooted in both Chettur's and Bheda's practice of Iyengar Yoga that helps articulate the resistive quality within the body. The journey of this dance depends on how the dancer rotates her spine, brings the extremities of her body closer to and away from the body's centerline, and attends to how her bodily alignment transforms when each movement passes through the body's central axis. Paying attention to the anatomical flow and

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[137] Padmini Chettur shared this in the Grounding Module organized by Anandam Dance Theatre: https://www.anandam.ca/news/padminigrounding (accessed March 5, 2024).

resistance generated by the dancing body in this way, I attempt to explore the beginnings and endings of the movement—a question Chettur inherited from Chandralekha and one that became central to her own choreographic research.

As a panelist on "Caste and Touch" at the Caste and Corporeality Conference,[138] Royona Mitra (May 10, 2024) argued that the *savarna*[139] spine is an "embodied choreo-power of brahmanism." Mitra went on to assert how the upright and vertical *savarna* spine is "violent" and provides a "fundamental architecture to control touch" between inter-caste communities. Mitra's arguments are critical to understand the rethinking of spine in Chettur's work. Chettur's focus on attaining a linear alignment of the spine over a hyperextended one points towards an anatomical investment in her bodily research. However, this becomes another limitation of the "neutral" spine that obscures the embedded "choreo-power" (Mitra 2024) of caste.

Varnam is a conscious interrogation of Chettur's movement lineage—on a somatic, choreographic, and cultural level. Creating choreographic works that were "unrecognizably linked to the past," until 2015, Chettur shares that she revisited *Varnam* and began working with the ideas of "time, structure, and rhythm" as rooted in bharatanatyam.[140] She wished to transition between the "abstract and the narrative" form of bharatanatyam and complicate it with "narrating the abstraction."[141] Instead of "storytelling or expressing the emotion of the song," she turned to

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[138] Caste and Corporeality Conference is organized by Anusha Kedhar and Sammitha Sreevathsa, and co-Sponsored by University of California Humanities Research Initiative, University of California, Riverside (UCR) Centre for Ideas and Society, UCR Department of Dance, Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. https://casteandcorporeality.wordpress.com/.

[139] *Savarna* is a term usually referred to upper-caste Hindus, including brahmins and non-brahmins.

[140] Padmini Chettur shared this in a talk held at The Center for Ballet and the Arts at NYU on April 27, 2023. "Unsettling Classical Bodies: Padmini Chettur in Conversation with Brooke Holmes and Anurima Banerji," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HgnnV4bTEyo.

[141] Ibid.

the song to look for anatomical references.[142] Chettur translated the *nayika's* distance from her

lover into an anatomical process of finding and closing space between the extremities of the

body and the spine.

In *Varnam*, Chettur revisits the *jati* as sketched in her "cultural memory" as a

bharatanatyam dancer and challenges herself to replace it with "alphabets" created through her

anatomical explorations.[143] Here, anatomical freedom—achieved through correcting the dis-

alignment of the spine and mapping its distance and proximity to the extremities of the body—

becomes a metaphor for navigating the dance's history on a somatic level. She disassociates

bharatanatyam from its "somatic form of Brahminism" (Pillai 2022, 7), by "removing the

meaning of the gesture."[144] Instead, Chettur connects with the dance on a formal level, in hopes

of finding potential moments of liberation.

As discussed earlier, *Varnam* returns to the ideas of womanhood, body, and sexuality in

two classical texts, "the original varnam titled *Mohamana* by Ponniah Pillai (early 19th century)

and Ninnu Juda, a *Kshetraya padam* taken from Bharatanatyam repertoire,"[145] with

contemporary intervention from women writers, dancers' lived experiences, and from Chettur's

social location with her access to transnational performance networks. Even as Chettur "undoes

the fixity of the classical through rigorous inquiry into the form and politics of dance and the

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[142] Ibid.

[143] Ibid.

[144] Ibid.

[145] Helly Minarti's (December 12, 2017) review of *Varnam*. http://www.padminichettur.in/varnam-return-to-the-silenced/.

body,"[146] it is not the *hereditary dancer* who dances the dance. According to Pillai (2022), modern Bharatanatyam is "a form of mimesis" and "the modern Bharatanatyam dancer will always be signalling a past occupied by the Bahujan woman's dancing body" (9). Thus, Pillai urges us to "pause dancing" and "to think about how today's Bharatanatyam is at its technical and conceptual core a vehicle for a corporeal Hindutva, for neo-conservative, Brahminic values and casteism, for anti-feminism, and for exclusionary politics at large" (10). Reading bharatanatyam as an instrument for "corporeal Hindutva," I pay close attention to Chettur's choreographic interventions where she disassociates from brahminic values and anti-feminist politics in bharatanatyam in her search to devise a new language of the body.

In distancing the dance from its association with religious majoritarian culture, *Varnam* reveals an urgency to listen to the female dancer's body and voice and deconstruct the traditional form to invite something new. As Balasaraswati pointed out that the essence of bharatanatyam is the "practice of the Presence" (110), in the film, Chettur brings us to the core of bharatanatyam—awakening and tuning into the presence of the body and its relationship to "space, time and lines" (2016a, 156)—that has contributed to Chettur's choreographic aesthetic. However, as Pillai (2022) reminds us, the modern bharatnatyam dancer will always signal and mimic "the female Bahujan courtesan performer of the past" (9). Even as *Varnam* neither signals nor mimics the courtesan, it still manages to erase her and make us feel her absence.

Moreover, Chettur's use of bharatanatyam as an abstract language for her contemporary aesthetic liberates the upper-caste and urban female dancing body from the oppressive training of the classical dance form, not the *hereditary dancer* who has been dispossessed of her art form.

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[146] Text from the description of Padmini Chettur's talk held at The Center for Ballet and the Arts at NYU on April 27, 2023. "Unsettling Classical Bodies: Padmini Chettur in Conversation with Brooke Holmes and Anurima Banerji," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HgnnV4bTEyo.

Abstraction runs the risk of masking bharatnatyam's erasure of hereditary dancing women and making it seem like a forgotten past, distanced from the dance in its current form and thus, may relieve the modern practitioner from any sense of responsibility towards the dance's history. Thus, abstraction could obscure and conceal the dance's history and furthermore, reinscribe caste-class hegemonies embedded in the dance form.

In critiquing the materialist reading of the dancing body in bharatanatyam, Brahma Prakash (2016) brings our attention to contemporary dance's relation to capitalism and neoliberal politics. Prakash (2016) has written,

> One can argue that dance's relation to capital is not about the sweating sari or about the labour of dance; rather it is about labouring bodies whose histories and memories have been constantly erased from the *choreos* of contemporary Bharatanatyam. Bharatanatyam is constituted of that erasure and the emptied materiality cannot become the basis of a materialist reading of the past, of the embodiment and labour experiences. It would be difficult to ascertain the history and experiences of lower-class *devadasis'* labouring bodies as the erasure of the *devadasi* body in Bharatanatyam. The materiality of the *devadasi* no longer exists in contemporary Bharatanatyam and this kind of reading can be seen as imposing experiences from outside. (139-140)

According to Prakash, it is a difficult task to grapple with the histories and experiences of the hereditary dancer since their "laboring bodies" have been erased from contemporary bharatanatyam's repertoire and choreography. Thus, for Prakash, with the erasure and the continued absence of the body of the hereditary dancer from contemporary Bharatanatyam, any questioning, interrogation, and reading of the past remains an unfulfilled project.

Applying Prakash's critique to my analysis of *Varnam*, I believe that *Varnam* both marks significant ruptures from the traditional repertoire of bharatanatyam as well as reinscribes the erasure of the hereditary dancer. Chettur's use of abstraction as a choreographic strategy reconceptualizes the physical aesthetic of the classical. Her re-embodiment of the classical repertoire allows her to fragment it, question it, and revise it into a new aesthetic language that is

abstract and anatomical rather than religious and anti-feminist. It helps her reclaim a sense of

autonomy and freedom for an urban and upper-caste female dancer. However, as Prakash (2016)

has pointed out, "Embedded in the liberal market idea of freedom and autonomy, they function

as compensation for the pathologies of capitalist displacement and destruction, rather than

providing an alternative" (138). Which is to say that notions of anatomical freedom and

autonomy in contemporary dance scarcely reject authoritarian and oppressive structures for all.

As trained in bharatanatyam, Chettur remains determined to create a new language of the

body, one that is rooted in the spine's potential to teach the dancer how to stand firmly on one's

ground. Continuing to investigate the development of Chettur's new physical, thematic, and

representational language and its strengths and limitations, in the following section, I discuss

Chettur's interpretation of the representation of Indian women in art through an ethnographic and

choreographic analysis of the performance-installation *Women Dance* (2022).

***Women Dance* (2022): Challenging Representation of Women in Art**

9th December 2022: Museum of Art and Photography (MAP), Bangalore (India)

*When I arrived on the 4th floor, I had two doors to choose from. I entered the one on the right.
Krishna was sitting on a bench looking at the two photos in front of her* (named after the two
girls, Rampyari and Maina, from Gauri Gill's Balika Mela Series, 2003-2010). *After observing
her for a few minutes, I tried to search for other dancers through the narrow passage in the
gallery space. I saw Padmini through the translucent white curtains dropping from the ceiling*
(Figure 6). *The silhouette of her arms in a V, cutting the space above her head, tapped in and out
as her metatarsal pressed into the floor and changed positions.*

In her solo, I saw a resemblance of the wooden artwork (daiva, meaning spirits, statue of the
Mother Goddess, Bhagavati)[147] *on the same line as her location. She stood next to a large red
painting* (entitled "Devi" by Bhupen Khakhar: 1965)[148] *in a deep blue dress. Like a painting or a*

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[147] "This wooden, life-size female *daiva* statue of the Mother Goddess (Bhagavati) dates from the eighteenth-nineteenth century. Her neck is laced with a snake, and she holds a *damru/damaru* (drum) in her right hand, both attributes of Shiva/Shakti. The deity has four arms, she is crowned and pulls her tongue out" (Sawhney et al. 2022, 57).

[148] "Khakhar's *Devi* stands fierce, brandishing her four arms against a background of blood-red paint. The painting is unlike conventional representations of goddesses, and more like an assembled trans-human. Khakhar subverts

synopsis is lit under the light, she stood between the "visible/invisible" blurb and the red painting.

Palms looking outwards and placed on the small of her back (like in a bharatanatyam stance, I think). Wrist as the anchor of this gesture, both elbows point laterally outwards in space. In another gesture, Padmini tilted forward with a lengthened spine and in a wide and low turned-out position (of the legs and feet), arms extended behind and above with a break in the wrists. Clawed hands/fingers climbing the (not so)"empty" space in front of Padmini's face.

Figure 6. Padmini Chettur in Museum of Art and Photography's (MAP) Inaugural Exhibition, "Visible/Invisible: Representation of Women in Art through the MAP Collection." Photo by the author. December 9, 2022.

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religious imagery in composing the Goddess' body through a collage of painted elements and anatomical parts--cut from an educational chart and pasted as her body parts" (Sawhney et al. 2022, 52).

As I sit back in my office chair in Austin, Texas, and flip through the pages of the book based on the Museum of Art and Photography's (MAP) inaugural exhibition, *Visible/ Invisible: Representation of Women in Art through the MAP Collection* (2022), I search for the images of the artworks I saw in the gallery that resonated with me, images that permeated the movement exploration of the dancers' process, images that came alive through the visual-kinesthetic language of the moving body in the museum space. As I do that, I am reminded of the memory of walking into the museum on its opening day in Bangalore.

I had gone there with the intention of watching Chettur's interpretation of the artworks she had been working with in the past few months with dancers Krishna Devanandan, Ramya Shanmugam, and Madhushree Basu. Since her days of working with Chandralekha, Chettur has been occupied with the question: "How to give life to an image?"[149] What interested me in this project was the fact that she took this inquiry a few steps further to not only investigate how to give life to the images in the exhibition but also how to make them move. From December 9-11, 2022, this performance-installation was staged in a museum space—the intention was to respond to the representation of Indian women in art over the centuries, starting as early as the 10th century.

I remember that the foyer and the corridor were occupied by the artsy circle of Bangalore. I saw women in their best handcrafted sarees, blow-dried hair, stunning neck pieces, and glamorous make-up. I wondered if I was in the right place since I had come to see contemporary dance "stripped" of classical Indian dance performativity. As I took the stairs and stepped onto the second floor, a familiar smell took over my senses and displaced me. I was not in this sharp-angular-perfect-clean-edgy glass building anymore, but suddenly, I was thinking of the beach in

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[149] Padmini Chettur shared that in an event "A Conversation with Padmini Chettur: Body Laboratory," hosted by Indian Foundation for the Arts on June 29, 2023.

Chennai where the women sell *gajra* (garland) which I bought a few months ago during my field-trip. I turned my head to find a bunch of *chameli*, or *mallikai* in Tamil, (jasmine) flower buds beautifully placed on a round gold end table.

After that nostalgic flashback, I made my way to the fourth floor to witness the *Women Dance*. The question of representation of Indian women feels familiar to me but also alienating. I am not a goddess, and I am not made of wood or stone, but these are the forms where I find maximum representation of my kind. Then, I saw the dancing bodies in space, in dark indigo/navy-blue dresses, and I felt settled.

Assemblage of Anatomical Parts: Deconstruction of the Indian Goddess

In an indigo dress, hair tied in a bun, Chettur cups her palms and traces the center line of her body as it is drawn from behind her neck to the front of her face. The cupped palms transform into a mudra with the index finger firmly pressing into the thumb. Her eyes trace the mudra as her elbow, bent and perpendicular to the floor, moves from side to the front of her body. This motion brings her spine into a rotation.

Chettur stands in profile, her left hand grabs and holds the right elbow as the right arm extends towards the floor on the side of her body. The right palm faces outwards, the fingers are joined as in *pataka*. The tension in her arm and the resistance built in her body in this moment are captured in the tensing of her tricep muscles and the impression or the sculpting of the back muscles behind her right shoulder.

Palms are placed behind her head, the contact between the back of her head and the fingers are lengthening the top of the spine. Tips of her elbows pointing to the side draw open the body on the lateral plane. The front space of the body widens. Clavicular chest is wide. Shoulder

blades are inserted into the body. When either of the elbows come forward, the opposite shoulder pulls back, bringing the body again in rotation.

In this beginning solo, we view Chettur's assemblage of anatomical parts housed in an exhibition where we see a similar construction of the Goddess' body in Bhupen Khakhar's[150] painting "Devi," juxtaposed with the "wooden, life-size female *daiva* statue of the Mother Goddess (Bhagavati)" (Sawhney et al. 2022, 57). My first response was to wonder, just like Chettur imagined in first choreographic work *Fragility* (2001),[151] can we move away from Indian women's representation as a Goddess to something else? Can we perceive Indian women to be anything other than the object of worship and thus, held up to the benchmarks of being sacred, pure, and divine? Therefore, I felt attracted to Khakhar's interpretation of the Goddess.

Sawhney et al. (2022) have written that "The painting [Devi] is unlike conventional representations of goddesses and more like an assembled trans-human. Khakhar subverts religious imagery in composing the Goddess' body through a collage of painted elements and anatomical parts…" (52). Like the collage of anatomical parts that Khakhar assembles in his work, Chettur assembles gestures from the visual representation of women in the exhibition. For this work, Chettur's focus was on constructing "a whole language that derives from the pictorial performance of the images themselves."[152] She further shared that in *Women Dance*, "I'm just

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[150] Bhupen Khakhar was a self-taught Indian artist, born in Bombay in 1934. "Renowned for his unique figurative style and incisive observations of class and sexuality, Bhupen Khakhar (1934-2003) played a central role in modern Indian art and was a key international figure in 20th century painting." https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/bhupen-khakhar. More about Khakhar can be found here: http://bhupen-khakhar.com (accessed May 15, 2024).

[151] In the first work that Chettur created as an independent choreographer in 2001, her synopsis read:
> 'Fragility' seeks to break the myth of the 'strong, beautiful' dancer, an impenetrable creature that we idolize. That body which is eventually objectified. Instead we explore the 'human' aspect of physicality [….] It is time to demystify. To decodify. To speak a physical language that needs no tradition simply to create those moments of recognition.

[152] Interview with the artist on September 14, 2022.

minutely deconstructing all of the visual language of the artwork [….] putting it onto my body and making it into something else."[153]

Chettur believes that "The way of arriving at vocabulary has its own value as a system."[154] For this, she experiments with "rotational work, whether it's micro movement, just the idea of adjustment," and asks "What does it mean to lengthen your (spine), to find the center? What does it mean to shift weight? And how does one do it repetitively until it becomes a language of sorts?"[155] In *Women Dance*, she deconstructed the images, worked on temporality, embodied them, and altered their size/range and phrasing by adding her kinesthetic insights into them.[156] She linked the images together through her dancing body—her corporeality became a site for contesting the relation between representation and embodied techniques of being a woman in art today. These embodied images further interacted with Chettur's own movement history—her training in bharatanatyam, Iyengar yoga, kalaripayattu, and pilates, among others. In this way, in her choreographic process, the somatic and the cultural intertwined to counter the dominance of the normative representation of the female body.

Power and Violence: Women's Subjectivity in Contemporary Times

In this section, I analyze the relationship between Arpita Singh's painting, *Shadow of a Chair* (1986), and Chettur's solo to address women's experience of the world.

"Placed in a seemingly mundane setting, Singh makes the female subject a witness to contemporary realities, centering her experience of the world in the work" (Sawhney et al. 2022,

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[153] Ibid.

[154] Ibid.

[155] Ibid.

[156] In her usual choreographic process, Chettur "starts with just playing with [those] phrases, like deconstructing them, working with temporality on them, making the movements bigger, making the movement smaller, making different clusters, working on the space" (Interview with the artist, September 14, 2022).

167). In Singh's painting (Figure 7), we see a chair, a woman in flowery-leafy shirt, a few cutouts of her face on the brick wall, a visual representation that captures the feeling of dreaming in a cage. A gun is drawn at the edge of the painting pointed inwards. The woman in a floral dress, leans back on to a white couch/bed, her palm is open as she places it next to her ear to support her head in the lean. The opened palm with all fingers visible makes me want to wonder what she is perceiving through the sounds in her space with reference to the violence depicted in the painting.

Figure 7. Arpita Singh's painting, *Shadow of a Chair* (1986), in MAP's Inaugural Exhibition, "Visible/Invisible: Representation of Women in Art through the MAP Collection." Photo by the author. December 10, 2022.

I saw the presence, trace, and reflection of this woman from the painting who is "a witness to contemporary realities" in Chettur's solo. There was a sense of waiting in her body. In Chettur's gestures of rumination here, the moment where her palm is resting on her chest and her body leans into the bench sideways, she appears to almost mirror the wait and the melancholy of the woman in Singh's painting.

Sitting on the bench with her feet and knees together, Chettur rests a palm into the surface on the bench (Figure 8). She leans into the bench, bending her elbow. Spine glides into a diagonal position where her head and tailbone are in one line. Then, she leans over the other side, away from the bench. Her left palm touches the back of the left heel. She sits facing the wall filled with paintings, her fists rest under the chin. Elbow bends to rest the frame of her upper body on the thigh, leaning forwards in space. Fingers reach the front of the bench. She leans on her side over the bench. Head rests on the fist, elbow on the bench, legs and knees bend and join into a resting position on the bench as well. After a moment, she sits up, cross-legged. She sits facing the large red painting (entitled, *At the Graveyard of my Childhood* by Rekha Rodwittiya, 1994).[157] Knees open, legs are wide and turned out.

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[157] "In *At the Graveyard of my Childhood*, the artist draws equivalence between patriarchy and industrialisation in how they consume women and environments, respectively [….] In keeping with the artist's exploration of Shakti (the indestructible agent of power in Hindu philosophy), the painting points towards the capacity of female endurance as it holds the weight of stories about human actions" (Sawhney et al. 2022, 173).

Figure 8. Padmini Chettur in MAP's Inaugural Exhibition, "Visible/Invisible: Representation of Women in Art through the MAP Collection." Photo by the author. December 11, 2022.

As a viewer, I wonder about the dancer's inner world—everything that she is processing inside as she makes these decisions to move from one posture to another. How her body gives in and, at the same time, resists the surface of the bench. In this careful negotiation of giving into and resisting the weight of her body, we see the different vantage points through which she views, interprets, and responds to the world around her. This becomes even more visible as the museum audience stands around her. I wonder if they become the object of her inquiry and attention as they land in her field of perception and introspection.

In this solo, as Chettur (Figure 9) sits facing Rekha Rodwittiya's painting (1994) and Jayashree Chakravarty's painting, *Untitled* (1985), their depiction of women as "life-giving force" and "life-bearing forces" heightens the relevance of a live female presence in the museum space. In Rodwittiya's painting, she "draws equivalence between patriarchy and industrialisation in how they consume women and environments, respectively" (Sawhney et al. 2022, 173). Chettur sits watching them, like watching other women in the room as her, present and alive with her body in motion. In her pausing and reflecting on her experience of the contemporary world, as a woman, we see a "life-giving force," a potential power, an act of resistance to systems of oppression that consumes women and environments.

Figure 9. Padmini Chettur in MAP's Inaugural Exhibition, "Visible/Invisible: Representation of Women in Art through the MAP Collection." Photo by the author. December 9, 2022.

Balika Mela Series: Countering Patriarchal Representation of Women

Madhu and Ramya sit facing the images of two young, teenage girls posing in front of a camera to get their photo taken. One on the left, Rampyari, is looking straight at the camera while resting her chin or lifting her chin with the support of the back of the fingers (not smiling), while the one on the right, Maina, has her palms on the side of her waist, a relaxed, sway-y posture, and her eyes closed. The images of these young girls are from Gauri Gill's *Balika Mela* series that challenges a patriarchal representation of women and instead "provides a counterpoint with how images could be made for women, by women" (Sawhney 2022, 4).

As Ramya and Madhu sit facing the photographs of these two girls, I observe how the dancers' gestures, in some places, are an extension of the women's gestures in the photographs. Their chins resting on their cupped fingers and knuckles of the other hand around their waist. Their right elbows point laterally exposing the triangular space between the side body and the elbow. Sitting with elbows jutting out to the right, their left leg rests on the right thigh. As Madhu and Ramya enact similar gestures as the girls, it seems as if they are longing to understand their point of view.

Dancers appear to be held in a moment. Suspended in time, they wait for an organic and kinesthetic interaction to emerge, between them and the girls. Ramya dives in, throwing her arms and wrists behind her body. Her breath sort of held. Her knees appear to roll inwards towards each other. The fabric of her dress suspends under the bench and hovers just above and over the floor. Madhu sits and waits indifferently. Her left foot and ankle rests on her right thigh. Sometimes Madhu leans in and reads and whispers words from the blue notebook tucked underneath the bench when Ramya sits next to her with her head dropped to the side supported by her fingers.

Figure 10. Dancers Ramya (Left) and Madhu (Right) sit facing the images of two young, teenage girls—Rampyari and Maina in MAP's Inaugural Exhibition, "Visible/Invisible: Representation of Women in Art through the MAP Collection." Photo by the author. December 10, 2022.

Gill's *Balika Mela* series radicalizes the relationship between the camera lens and the female subject by giving her "the space and agency to create their own representation" (Sawhney et al. 2022, 206).[158] This project took place between 2003-2010 in the town of Lunkaransar in Rajasthan, which has a high rate of female infanticide. This photo series was focused on encouraging young girls to create their representations on their own terms. This project "became an exercise in self-assertion through a series of spontaneous choreographies" (Sawhney et al. 2022, 206) that "allows them to tell their story, the way they would like to convey it" (Sawhney 2022, 4).

Here with the ability to highlight this photo series and interact with the female subjects of these series, dancers foreground the social conditioning that shapes everyday life where it is difficult for a woman to cast her own representation. In *Varnam* (2016), Chettur questioned, "Can the performer actually equally look back?"[159] Moreover, "How do we construct the audience as we look back?" (in a conversation with Brooke Holmes)[160] Here, as performing bodies confront the normative, hegemonic, and patriarchal representation of women in India, they look back at the audience and claim their agency to take space in the contemporary world.

"Oppositional gaze" & the Spine: Challenging Representation in *Women Dance*

Writing in the context of black female subjectivity and spectatorship, bell hooks (1992) defines the action of looking back and contest-confront one's representation "a rebellious desire,

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[158] "Softening the barrier between the photographer and the subject, the portraits refigure the power dynamics of the relationship by providing young girls the space and agency to create their own representation, in image. In a village with high rates of female infanticide, this became an exercise in self-assertion through a series of spontaneous choreographies" (Sawhney et al. 2022, 206).

[159] "Artist Talk with Padmini Chettur on 'A Temporal Body' | Coming to Know," April 25, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=asTL15I2crU.

[160] "Q&A in conversation with Padmini Chettur and Brooke Holmes | Coming to Know," April 25, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ipfu9klIIVY.

an oppositional gaze" [161] (116). According to hooks, "the 'gaze' has been and is a site of resistance for colonized black people globally" and "the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency" (116). Building on Michel Foucault's (1975) analysis of domination as "relations of powers," hooks links agency to a bodily act of resistance that is performed in spite of and within oppressive structures. She argues that through the "oppositional gaze," black female spectators "created a space where the binary opposition Mulvey posits of 'women as image, man as bearer of the look' was continually deconstructed" (122-123). Moreover, according to hooks, "Looking and looking back, black women involve ourselves in a process whereby we see our history as counter-memory, using it as a way to know the present and invent the future" (131).

Like hooks who imagines the gaze as a site of agency and finds the action of looking back empowering for black female subjects, I see the spine as a similar site of agency for the female dancer in Chettur's work and argue that her action of mobilizing the body through the spine is an act of empowerment. Like reversing the gaze is as a bodily act of resistance towards hegemonic structures, foregrounding the *back*bone is an act of confrontation and gives agency to the dancer. Similar to the "oppositional gaze," spine, as a symbol for grit and resilience, unleashes the "rebellious desire" of the dancer (hooks 1992, 116).[162] In *Women Dance*, through embodiment of the artworks in the exhibition, female dancers unlock them—from their

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[161] I first read the use of bell hooks's (1992) concept of "oppositional gaze" in Rumya Sree Putcha's (2023) chapter on "Womanhood" in her recent book, *The Dancer's Voice*. In this chapter, Putcha analyzes Telugu films made during the 1930s and 1940s and use "oppositional gaze" to show the connection between *bhogam* identities and Brahmin dance cultures (24).

[162] Here, I am extending the anatomical understanding of the spine to frame spine as a metaphor for grit, resilience, and strength. However, it is not to argue that an upright use of the spine is inherently superior rather than a curved or tilted spine. The act of energizing and mobilizing the spine, like the gaze, appears to be an act of resistance in Chettur's work. In the case of dancers here, I am pointing more towards an internal perception of the spine than an outward shape.

representational forms and historical contexts—and transform them into moving and living images in the present. In *Women Dance*, through the process of looking and looking back at the historical representation of Indian women in art, dancers set up a dialogue between presence and absence of the female body, between then and now, and between public and private spaces.

In this piece, Chettur wanted to set up a "transaction between the two-dimensional representative idea of the female body [depicted in the exhibition] and the actual female body."[163] For her, the idea was to challenge the representation of the female body by introducing its presence and vitality in the museum space. She wanted to subvert any "kind of performativity or declaration" in her work, instead place the alive and breathing female body in space. This was an interesting juxtaposition as the two forms ("real" and "represented") appeared to merge through their synched visual and choreographic composition but differed in the way the audience reacted/responded to them.

The museum audience appeared comfortable while looking at the representation of Indian female bodies in images, paintings, and sculptures, depicting their use as a nationalistic token (Mother India), as docile royal women to the everyday oppressed women, and the women who spoke back to the patriarchal and, scarcely visible, caste-based oppression. But when it came to engaging with a real, physical form, the presence of the female dancing body in space, the audience seemed significantly uncomfortable, as often is the case with performances in public spaces. Most of the museum visitors ignored them, their eyes never met the dancers' eyes, their eyes never hovered over the dancing bodies as they scanned the space to look at different paintings and sculptures. They couldn't seem to register the dancers' presence in the museum space and stumbled to carry themselves around the dancers. It was as if the observers made these

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[163] Interview with the artist on September 14, 2022.

female dancing bodies invisible to them while trying to search for the traces of women's history in the visual artifacts displayed on the floor. I wondered if they robbed the dancers from their chance to "equally look back" at the audience, rendering their bodily presence as absence.

Moreover, since Chettur wanted to subvert any "kind of performativity or declaration" in the work, this revealed the question that Chettur (2022b) shared with me in the interview: "When does the performative begin, you know, in what moment and how?" Being in the museum for three days, I wondered about the impact of the audience's gaze on the performativity or the performative ability of these female dancing bodies from Chennai. Apart from being made invisible by the museum audience, they also danced in "isolation" many times. Dancing for three hours in varied intervals, dancers found themselves in situations where they had to face the inevitable invisibility of their performance when there wasn't a viewer in sight. But they continued with the score. At the top of the hour, the dancers would walk from the green room on the second floor and climb two floors to get to the fourth floor where they would either sit on a bench or stand in the corner right at the entrance for their performance to "begin." After observing their actions over three days, I realized that it was not so much about the audience's ability to validate or negate their presence in the museum space, but the dancers' resistance to participate in the social construction of their (female) subjectivity. As spectators to the exhibition themselves, as well as being performers in it, dancers take back audiences' power to initiate the performance, rather they focus on the artistic choice to present their real selves as their performative selves.

Like Chettur has written about her previous ensemble work, *Pushed* (2006), that the body is "Always in transition, often on the edge, always moving" (ed. Cherian 2016, 60), Chettur's choreography captures her resistance for the body to fall into rigid dichotomies and "fixed

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identifications." This is essential because hooks (1992) reminds us that "The concept 'Woman' effaces the difference between women in specific socio-historical contexts, between women defined precisely as historical subjects rather than a psychic subject (or non-subject)" (124).

Furthermore, hooks (1992) warns us of "…a totalizing narrative of woman as object whose image functions solely to reaffirm and reinscribe patriarchy" (123). Therefore, by repeatedly partaking in choreographic processes that create conditions for constructing and deconstructing female identity, representation, and subjectivity through performance, Chettur resists the female body to become an object of representation.

However, recognizing the dominant caste-class positions the dancers inhabit, this analysis runs the risk of representing female subjectivity of only those (south) "Indian woman" who identify as upper-caste and class. Just like finding their own version of the "neutral" spine, dancers here stay rooted in their own socio-historical particularities. This is not to say that their performance becomes inclusive of all kinds of expressions of the female body and female identities. However, it continues the work of critiquing the commoditization and commercialization of the female dancer. Moreover, the piece conceptualizes the female subject in flesh and bone who is made visible in the public space.

While responding to the artworks in the exhibition, dancers create yet another movement vocabulary for *Women Dance* based on the artworks in the exhibition. Looking deeply into the composition and anatomical references in the images themselves, Chettur and the dancers devise movement motifs and create a vocabulary for the dance that they further challenge in terms of its spatial and temporal composition. Making dances in this way—taking inspiration from the form and devising new methods of arranging the body parts—then, produces a multiplicity of aesthetic

choices that destabilizes "the fixity of the classical"[164] to move the body in a prescribed way. However, as discussed earlier, these methods of interrogation, experimentation, and deconstruction remain incomplete projects and promises of liberation without an intersectional approach.

Conclusion

While reflecting on this performance almost a year later, during the interview on October 25, 2023, Chettur recalls, "People have asked me like, 'What does it mean to be a woman artist or woman maker? Have I ever felt disadvantaged?'" In response to these questions, she feels that "The deeply entrenched patriarchy is about rendering someone or somebody's work invisible." Chettur's response speaks directly to the history of casteist, regionalist, and gendered discrimination against the dancers from hereditary castes and lower castes during the "reform-revival" of bharatanatyam, history that reverberates in the technique and the scholarship of the dance form today. She further mentions, "trace it back to the devadasi figure, right, who also was shut down a lot of it through the fear, male fear that the female was becoming powerful through the presence in public spaces."[165]

Through her work, Chettur decided to respond head-on to the society's "fear of the female body."[166] By continually making female dancing bodies present in the public space, the female body unsettles, disbalances, and decenters structures of power that objectify her presence. Reflecting on her initial conversations with Chandralekha, Chettur shared,

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[164] Text from the description of Padmini Chettur's talk held at The Center for Ballet and the Arts at NYU on April 27, 2023. "Unsettling Classical Bodies: Padmini Chettur in Conversation with Brooke Holmes and Anurima Banerji," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HgnnV4bTEyo.

[165] Interview with the author on October 25, 2023, via Zoom.

[166] Ibid.

Chandra's work, as in her whole kind of practice as an artist, was somehow about making herself present. And this is something I've always thought about and questioned And I was like, Oh! I feel the work should speak for itself [….] But now, actually, I'm 53, still not reached the age that she was when I met her, but I really start to think a lot more about this. I'm understanding only now things she would say, like, 'How do you want to live as a woman?' [October 25, 2023]

Along with her gendered identity that has (sub)consciously informed her questions, there is an intrinsic link between her bharatanatyam training and her work with Chandralekha that informs her thinking and research on dance. Chettur responds to the gendered construction of the dancing body in bharatanatyam. From hating the imitation involved in bharatanatyam to devising a system of perceiving the body from within, Chettur's somatic interventions have been remarkable. She moved away from a distorted understanding of the spinal to arrive at an alignment which felt healthy and pain-free for herself and other dancers in Chennai. Through her work with the spine, Chettur not only spoke her own truth, but also tapped into her bodily strength, integrity, clarity, and precision.

Extending compositional ideas, such as deconstruction and reduction of pace, that Chettur inherited from Chandralekha, Chettur went on to create choreographic works that proposed a new language of the body while staying rooted in bharatanatyam. Like Chandralekha, Chettur used bharatanatyam as "grammar" and zoomed into the principles of the form—relating to "space, time, and lines" (Chettur 2016a, 156)—to devise the framework for her choreographies through a process that could usefully be called *liberatory deconstruction*. Focusing on Mohamana Varnam, which she also performed in her childhood debut, *arangetram*, in her film and choreographic work, *Varnam* (2016), Chettur revisited the traditional bharatanatyam repertoire in hopes of registering an alternative response to the narrative of the "tragic heroine." *Women Dance* became another contemporary response to the historical

representation of women in India, which called out the history of societal and patriarchal discrimination towards women.

Overall, Chettur's choreographic work has generated a new physical, thematic, and representational language that empowers the female dancer. Chettur's work addresses the gender-based violence in a male-dominated patriarchal society and critiques the orientalist framings of her work on a global stage. Through her recent works, Chettur comes back to what remains important to her in all these years of making dance—working with the presence of the body. She says that "the way that body stands on stage that is where the politics is" (2023b). However, the promise of bodily liberation in Chettur's work is only a beginning. Moreover, Chettur's use of bharatanatyam as an abstract language for her contemporary aesthetic liberates the modern female dancing body from the oppressive training of the classical dance form, not the *hereditary dancer's*. To make sense of the past fully, we need an intersectional approach to making and studying Indian dance that combines the feminist critique with a critical caste method.

Chapter 3 | Body, Land, and Belonging: Surjit Nongmeikapam and Contemporary Dance in Manipur

When I arrived in Imphal, Manipur, for the first time on 16th August 2022, I was asked to fill a form termed "Inner Line Permit."[167] The ILP (Figure 11) allows non-residents of Manipur a legal stay for up to fifteen days from the time of their arrival. This felt quite strange to me—taking a permit to visit a place in my own country and being called a "non-resident." I am used to being categorized as a "non-resident alien" in the United States and being asked to take timely visa permits to (re)enter the country, but I felt displaced when I was assigned a similar status in my home country.

Generally speaking, I am skeptical of permits. I see them as modes of surveillance, and that makes me afraid. Yes, they are required to keep us "safe," but they are usually used as modes of discrimination, segregation, and oppression. Artist Tania El Khoury (2021) urges us to "address borders as violence, which connects the right to movement with the responsibility and positionality of people who are border privileged, those who are not criminalized for crossing borders" (19). Likewise, how might we see this kind of border control as a right to self-preservation for the indigenous communities of Manipur?

Originally instituted "by the British under the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulations Act, 1873," writes Sumir Karmakar (23 June 2022) for the Deccan Herald, the ILP was re-introduced in December 2019 to distinguish "native residents" from "illegal migrants" in the state of Manipur. Later, I learnt that ILP was implemented after tensions and violence between the Meitei

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[167] Regarding Inner Line Permit (ILP), Sumir Karmakar (June 23, 2022) writes for Deccan Herald, "The BJP government in Manipur has decided to adopt 1961 as the 'base year' to determine the state's 'native residents' for implementation of the Inner Line Permit (ILP) system in the state."
Read more at: https://www.deccanherald.com/india/manipur-adopts-1961-as-base-year-to-determine-native-residents-for-ilp-implementation-1120454.html.

community and the Naga tribes, with the Naga-nationalist demand for "a greater Nagalim—the idea of a common homeland for people from various Naga tribes to be carved out of Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, and Myanmar, in addition to the territory of the real state of Nagaland."[168] I began to understand Manipur's need to establish its regional autonomy as a border state between India and Myanmar, along with the three other states in the Northeast that implemented ILP before Manipur—Mizoram, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh. I also started paying attention to the terms of agreement between Manipur's three main ethnic tribes—Meitei, Kuki, and Naga. However, I constantly wondered how India's forceful measures for "national unity" impacted Manipur's need for regional independence and contributed to the ethnic conflict in Manipur.

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[168] Quoted from photo-journalist Nikhil Roshan's unpublished essay that he shared with me during my field-trip in Imphal, India in 2022.

Figure 11. Photo of the first Inner Line Permit I received at Imphal Airport on August 16, 2022.

About the Chapter

Surjit Nongmeikapam is a contemporary choreographer, and he is a member of the Meitei community, one of the predominant indigenous communities and ethnic groups in Manipur, India. Nongmeikapam's choreographies address the conflict between the nation-state and the north-eastern region, and the psychophysical impacts State oppression has had on the indigenous people, especially the youth. His choreographic work is built on the bodily movement's potential to heal embodied trauma, cultivate hope, and encourage resilience for Manipuri performers. Nongmeikapam's use of contemporary dance not only empowers and foregrounds a regional identity that is culturally embodied but also is an agent of global indigenous resistivity.

In this chapter, I begin with a brief overview of the region's history and current conflict, which continues to shape its geo-political landscape. I develop on concepts such as "indigenous structural framework" (Premchand 2005) and "geobody" (Winichakul 1994), subsequently using them as a theoretical framework to analyze Nongmeikapam's choreographic structure and his conception of the dancing body. Nongthomban Premchand's (2005) "indigenous structural framework" lays the groundwork for reading Nongmeikapam's work as a result of strategic negotiation between regional and (trans)national culture. I perceive Nongmeikapam's notion of the "natural body" as linked to Lokendra Arambam's concept of the "anthropomorphic geobody" and I build on this association to show how it creates a "national consciousness" for the Meitei people, as one directly linked to the land and Meitei culture opposing their forced inclusion in the modern nation-state (India). By taking a closer look, as a participant-observer, at Nongmeikapam's movement practice, called the *Yangshak* Movement, I show how Nongmeikapam's work fosters harmonious, equitable, and reciprocal relations between the body and the land, building on regional philosophy and movement practices.

Through choreographic analysis of two of Nongmeikapam's works, *One Voice* (2011) and *Meepao* (2021), I show how his choreographies function as a tool for liberation and dissent to undo the stereotypical representation of Manipuris as primitive, mystical, and "foreign" in the eyes of mainland Indians. Reading the use of diverse movement vocabularies and regional philosophies in his work, I argue that his choreographies, an example of "hybrid cultural expressions" (Kedhar 2020c), reveal the artist's double identity as being both local and global at the same time. Through my ethnographic observations and "thick descriptions" (Geertz 1973) in this chapter, I suggest that Nongmeikapam's choreographic practice is an offering, a methodology for deep resistance towards the forced Hinduization and Indianization of the region. Nongmeikapam's choreographic practice not only reclaims regional representation but also regional and ethnic autonomy and freedom through a process that could usefully be called *resistive hybridity*, because of the way it resists the exoticization of the north-eastern body in performance. Nongmeikapam's *resistive hybridity* integrates physical techniques from a diverse range of movement traditions, both local and global, to create corporeal, sonic, and spatial landscapes that are rooted in local Manipuri sensibilities, yet are abstract and ritualistic in nature. I will delve into this concept in more detail later in the chapter.

Manipur's Regional History and Current Political Climate

Manipur has been the site of political and social unrest for over decades, especially since the King of Manipur, Bodhachandra, signed the Merger agreement with the Indian Government in 1949.[169] Vibha Arora and Ngamjahao Kipgen (2012) define Manipur as "a multi-ethnic society inhabited by three main ethnic groups—namely, the Nagas, the Kukis, and the Meiteis—who occupy distinct territories and topographies" (431- 432). As a multicultural and multiethnic state,

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[169] Refer to "Identity and Violence in Manipur, India" by Noor Anand Chawla, October 31, 2023, for *JSTOR Daily*. https://daily.jstor.org/identity-and-violence-in-manipur-india/.

Manipur's unrest is linked to the failure to address the different relationship between various ethnicities, religions, and their ancestral territories in the state of Manipur and its neighboring regions.[170] Manipur inherited its ethnic conflict from precolonial times where the British maintained a strategic divide between the ethnic communities of Manipur through their colonial administrative policies. Upon Manipur's forced merger into the Indian nation-state, the Government of India furthered these ethnic tensions that magnified the conflict between the hill tribes, Kuki-Zo, Nagas, and the valley-residing Meitei community in Manipur. From 1993 to 1995, Manipur witnessed heightened ethnic tensions between the Kuki and Naga tribes, where Meiteis were the ones to bring peace between them, however, since May 2023, the conflict has been escalating between the Meitei and the Kuki tribes, as I will discuss later.

With the rise of Bengali Vaishnavism in the region, Meitei people were forcefully converted into Hinduism under King Garib Nawaz in the eighteenth century. In this process of detribalizing the state, pre-Hindu Meitei community and culture was destroyed. Highlighting the ways in which this mission was actualized, Rustom Bharucha (1992) provides a detailed unfolding of the event. Bengali Vaishnavism was established in the region through the "destruction of the traditional lai (gods), the burning of ancient manuscripts, the banning of the Meithei script and its replacement by the Bengali script, the introduction of the Hindu calendar and system of gotras…" (Bharucha 1992, 15).

After India received its independence from the British colonial power in 1947, it aimed to include all princely states into the Indian Union. As I visited the Imphal Peace Museum during my field research in India, I read about this merger closely. The white text on the blue wall in

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[170] Noor Anand Chawla (2023) summarizes the work Oinam Jitendra Singh (2011) where he addresses three main factors for the conflict between the three tribes—Naga, Kuki, and Meitei—in Manipur, namely political, economic, and social which led to the Armed Forces Special Powers Act of 1958. Read more about Singh's (2011) work here: https://www.jstor.org/stable/41856535.

front of me read, "On September 21, 1949, Manipur King was again made to sign the Merger agreement under house arrest at his Shillong residence, where he had gone on some business."[171] Even after the forced merger of Manipur within the Indian state on 21st September 1949, Manipur became a Union Territory in 1956 and received its full statehood in 1972. This marked a two-decade period of heightened political unrest in the region, potently termed an "insurgency" by the Indian government.

According to theatre director and scholar Dr. Lokendra Arambam (2018), "To India, the Northeast as a region was a development frontier in the Nehruvian imagery" (135). Later during the years when Prime Minister Manmohan Singh was in power, Arambam writes, "the Northeast became an economic bridgehead, where predatory capitalism would have a field day" (135). As for Arambam, India's inclusion of the Northeast region fulfilled India's "drive toward global economic integration via the Northeast" (135). Rohan D'Souza (2007-08, 2018) reminds us that the "'economic assimilation' of the Northeast within the 'mainstream' India [happened] through 'dispossession, enclosure and displacement'" (2018, 436).

Building on Sanjib Baruah's (2017) work, D'Souza (2018) argues that "India's Northeast is discursively imagined and re-imagined time and again by Indian policy makers and the political officialdom as a geographical space rather than as a historically created place" (438). Arambam (2018) shows how the Government of India strategically enhanced the conflict between tribal and Meitei communities by playing a pivotal role in "militarization of ethnicity in the Northeast" (133).[172] He asserts that the Indian State fueled the "armed

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[171] I read this at the Imphal Peace Museum during my field visit on 11th September 2022. "The Imphal Peace Museum is a World War II Museum at the foothills of the Red Hills in Manipur, India. It is a living memory of the Battle of Imphal (Anglo Japanese War) and other World War II battles (March-July 1044) fought in Manipur." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imphal_Peace_Museum.

[172] To read more about the ethnic militancy in Manipur, please read "Ethnic Mobilization and Militancy in Northeast India" by Ch. Sekholal Kom (2010), https://www.jstor.org/stable/42748416.

movements in the Northeast" to make the ethnic groups believe that they had to protect and

defend themselves from the "violent aggressions from the ethnic 'other'" (133). Furthermore,

the different ethnic communities, Kukis, Nagas, and Meiteis, were pitted against each other to

receive resources and gain political advantage through their allyship with the Indian State

(Arambam 2018, 132). The Indian State's counter-insurgency operations in response to the

Meitei non-state armed opposition groups heightened ethnic conflict and destroyed the existing

"ethnic brotherhood," explains Arambam (2018, 137). He claims that the Indian State was

successful in rewriting the narrative of the relations in the region, wherein "the highland ethnic

psyche was thus aroused to see the lowlander valley people as oppressive others" (137).

During my time in Imphal, community members shared with me how, for the longest

time, Manipuri kids could not witness more than 100 days of schooling a year due to bombing,

curfews, ceased mobility, and power cuts by the State. Due to the Armed Forces Special Powers

Act (AFSPA) of 1958,[173] the Indian Army would search their houses without warrants, arrest and

torture young men, and rape women.[174] Oinam Jitendra Singh (2011) writes that the Armed

Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) of 1958 was "derived from the Armed Forces (Special

Power) ordinance of 1942, which used by the British colonial government in 1942 to crack down

on the India nationalist movement" (997). These counter-insurgency attacks by the armed forces

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[173] Oinam Jitendra Singh (2011) writes that due to the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) of 1958, "gross human rights violations including torture, extra-judicial execution, rape and enforced disappearances have become endemic" (1000).

[174] Lawyer, anthropologist, and human right activist, Babloo Loitongbam writes (December 13, 2016), "The rule of thumb in the state of Manipur, in the northeast of India, is that the powerful can get away with anything–from arresting people and searching their homes without a warrant to killing people.
That's because six decades ago, the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) granted the paramilitary forces and armed state police with special powers to combat insurgency and ensure security in this 'disturbed area,' mostly inhabited by indigenous peoples of Tibetan-Burman and Sino-Tibetan descent."
https://www.omct.org/en/resources/statements/babloo-loitongbam-fighting-deep-rooted-impunity-and-ethnically-discriminatory-laws.

in late 1970s was marked as the period of "secondary violence" in Manipur, where innocent

civilians were targeted and used as "human shields while attacking insurgent camps and as

human mine sweepers" (Singh 2011, 1000).

Amidst such brutal violations of human rights, when the Meitei people lost their status as

a scheduled tribe, this loss reinforced the need to preserve their community, "and save the

ancestral land, tradition, culture and language" of the Meitei's.[175] Meanwhile, the Manipur

Cultural Preservation Group, consisting of radicals and intellectuals, took it upon themselves to

surveil the cultural landscape and "discipline," in the Foucauldian sense, those "cultural

laborers" (Prakash 2019) who dared to transgress the boundaries of Manipuri culture. Women

were forced at gunpoint to wear the cultural dress of Manipur, the *phanek* (skirt), because it was

assumed that women wearing these outfits would preserve Manipuri culture.

The detribalization of Manipur had repercussions on the relations between the tribal

communities as well. In May 2023, the Meitei's demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status,

followed by the Manipur High Court's order to grant the ST status, led to ethnic violence

between the Kuki-Zo and Meitei tribal communities. On May 3, 2023, the All Tribal Students'

Union of Manipur (ATSUM) held a "Tribal Solidarity March" to oppose the Meitei community's

demand to be included in the list of the state's Scheduled Tribes (ST).[176] During the march, things

went out of control with counter-protests. The Meitei community, in their need to protect

themselves from the "ethnic 'other,'" as Arambam reminds (2018, 133), things rapidly escalated

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[175] Jimmy Levion, 2023, "Protest against ST demand turns violent in Manipur, curfew imposed in entire state," *The Indian Express*, May 4, 2023, https://indianexpress.com/article/north-east-india/manipur/curfew-internet-curbs-after-manipur-protest-against-meiteis-st-tag-demand-turns-violent-8590104/lite/.

[176] On May 3, 2023, with the rising tension between the hill and valley tribes, Sukrita Baurah at the Indian Express (May 5, 2023) reported that "Violent clashes broke out at various places in Manipur during the course of a 'Tribal Solidarity March' called on Wednesday (May 3) by the All Tribal Students' Union of Manipur (ATSUM)." https://indianexpress.com/article/north-east-india/manipur/curfew-internet-curbs-after-manipur-protest-against-meiteis-st-tag-demand-turns-violent-8590104/lite/.

into brutal violence. To contain the disturbance in the region, the Indian government issued shoot-at-sight orders for the month of May, put the entire state under curfew, and promulgated an internet ban for over six months, ending roughly in November 2023.

Arora and Kipgen (2012) remind us that "Identity is a contestable construction and ethnic groups are constantly created and transformed by the elites" (430). Since the beginning of this latest ethnic clash, there have been different readings of the event. According to Thongkholal Haokip, assistant professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University's (JNU) Centre for the Study of Law and Governance, this demand for ST status, "To the hill tribal people of Manipur […] is a ploy to attenuate the fervent political demands of the Kukis and Nagas, as well as a tacit strategy of the dominant valley dwellers to make inroads into the hill areas of the state."[177] In contrast to Professor Haokip's argument, Ram Wangkheirakpam,[178] an environmental activist and member of the Meitei community, argues that the Meitei are in no way trying to take over the forests, and the hills, and the minerals that are present there. He decries viewpoints that promote the current "political conflict from a majority Hindu Meitei resource grab perspective," and that overlook the deeper problem at hand.[179] According to him, "As part of their imagined homeland, it is the 'Kuki' elites who have imagined a viable Kuki State by dreaming to usurp these resources."[180]

In my interview with him, Wangkheirakpam mentioned that there is a need to protect their community as there is no such legal protection offered by the Government of India. He

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[177] Jimmy Levion, 2023, "Protest against ST demand turns violent in Manipur, curfew imposed in entire state," *The Indian Express*, May 4, 2023, https://indianexpress.com/article/north-east-india/manipur/curfew-internet-curbs-after-manipur-protest-against-meiteis-st-tag-demand-turns-violent-8590104/lite/.

[178] Owner of the homestay, Hearth of Imphal, with his wife Nandini in Chingmeirong, Imphal, Manipur, activist Ram Wangkheirakpam is a member of the Meitei community.

[179] Ram Wangkheirakpam, n.d., "Economic Viability of a Kuki State," accessed March 17, 2024, https://manipurmatters.com/economic-viability-of-a-kuki-state-by-ram-wangkheirakpam/.

[180] Ibid.

shared, "We do not have the right to protect ourselves. There's no legal mechanism where we can say that nobody can buy land in the valley, for example. Because this is the only ancestral land for the Meiteis, we do not have a place to run."[181] Furthermore, Wangkheirakpam shared that Kukis have started renaming, claiming, and settling in areas from which the Meitei people believe they come.[182]

Analyzing the Meitei's anxieties towards their land, Ben Cohen (2023) has written, "The insecurity of the Meitei community is hinged around the fear of losing their land in the Imphal area if they are not granted the Scheduled Tribe status." However, the matter becomes complicated because with Meitei's demand for protection of their land, the chief minister of Manipur asked the members of the Kuki community to evict their ancestral forested land in April 2023. The state government accused the Kuki-Zomi tribe of "illegally encroaching upon forest land and providing shelter to Chin refugees who have fled Myanmar following the military takeover."[183] Therefore, according to Cohen, a massive eviction campaign was carried out to wipe out Kuki villages.

In this current conflict, there is a clear ethnic line being drawn between the Meities and Kukis, says Wangkheirakpam. In the interview, he shares, "So, the Kuki Christians also attacked

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[181] Interviewed by the author on November 15, 2023, via Zoom.

[182] In the interview, Ram Wangkheirakpam shared that "We believe we come from like directional kind of sacred sites. Ritual, you know, cultural spiritual sites where we think we come from, which has been recorded for a long time, which now which the Kukis started renaming them, and started claiming them, and started settling in there." (November 15, 2023)

[183] Ben Cohen (May 19, 2023) has written, "In April, chief minister of Manipur ordered a major eviction drive of Kuki from their ancestral forested land, causing uproar. The minister said the move was to curb illegal poppy cultivation in the hills of Manipur. The state government also sees these villages as harbouring Myanmar immigrants, mainly from the Chin communities who have ties with the Kukis. The government says the influx of Chin refugees has led to more deforestation, poppy cultivation and drug menace within the state. In response the government carried out a massive eviction campaign, driving out several Kuki villages." https://www.premierchristianity.com/world/why-are-hundreds-of-churches-being-destroyed-in-manipur-india/15566.article.

anything which is Meitei—whether it's a church, whether it's a temple, whether it's a house, whether it's a business center. Meiteis also destroyed whatever is Kuki, whether it's a worshiping place. Nothing is spared." However, upon looking closely, one can see that this conflict is also being fueled by religious fundamentalist propaganda in the state, adversely affecting non-Hindu communities in the region.

Places of worship have been destroyed, especially those of Christians. Cohen quotes an interview with human rights lawyer Nandita Haksar, in which Haksar reports that "Tribal communities feel the Bharatiya Janata Party that is in power in the state is playing a dangerous communal politics by backing the Meiteis as 'Hindus,' as against the tribal peoples who are predominantly Christian.[184] Hindu nationalism has allowed the burning of churches and growing religious fundamentalism in the valley."[185] Manipuri human right activist Babloo Loitongbam has shared publicly that a far-right ideology is being instilled in the Meitei community by groups such as Meitei Leepun which have led to these attacks against the Kukis. As reported by the Scroll staff on October 5, 2023, "In the interview, the activist alleged that the Meitei Leepun and

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[184] In writing about the ethnoreligious hostilities between the two communities in Odisha, Hindu Kandhas (considered Adivasis, original settlers) and Christian Panas (primarily Dalit converts), Pinky Hota (2024) analyzes the role of Hindu ethnonationalism and political economy. She argues that "Hindu ethnonationalism uses the exceptional and exclusionary recognition of Adivasi indigeneity to mobilize violence against Dalits, showing the centrality of caste in ethnonationalist animus toward proselytizing religions such as Christianity" (5). In this case, according to Hota, "Ethnonationalism prompts violence against Dalits, since their growing political visibility threatens Hindu caste majoritarianism and reveals how Hindu ethnonationalism is a shadow of the Indian nation-state as a 'republic of caste,' to use Anand Teltumbde's words" (5-6). Building on Hota's analyses, I see Hindu ethnonationalism play a similar role in the context of Manipur, escalating violence between Hindu Meiteis and Kuki Christians. Like Hota pointed out, I understand that the presence of Christian community in the north-east region of India and their "visibility" through their places of worships such as churches, "threatens Hindu caste majoritarianism" and show "how Hindu ethnonationalism is a shadow of the Indian nation-state" (Hota 2024, 6). Furthermore, Hota (2024) points out that "Religion, here, is both event and process, structuring majoritarian hierarchies of recognition while allowing for a recapture and resignification of caste and race in economic precarity" (6). Thus, militarizing religion in the state of Manipur, Indian nation-state and Hindu ethnonationalists maintain "majoritarian hierarchies" and reinscribe caste and racial difference (Hota 2024, 6).

[185] Ben Cohen, 2023, "Why are hundreds of churches being destroyed in Manipur, India?," *Premier Christianity*, May 19, 2023, https://www.premierchristianity.com/world/why-are-hundreds-of-churches-being-destroyed-in-manipur-india/15566.article.

the Aarambai Tenggol have 'injected' militancy into the minds of people."[186] As early as 2014,

when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won the national elections, Arambam (2018) pointed out

that, under the disguise of "national integration," their corresponding Hindutva campaign could

dangerously "transform the indigenous identities into a greater inclusive Hindutva consciousness

which could absorb religion and ethnicities" (137). This becomes evident in the current ethnic

clash in Manipur.

Reflecting on how the nexus of national, postcolonial, and global forces provoke the

current crisis in Manipur, Jawaharlal Nehru University professor Bimol Akoijam (May 10, 2023)

said that the violence is an indicator of "manufactured mistrust," or, to put it more strongly,

"manufactured hatred."[187] According to him, these issues between the tribal communities have

existed before India's independence. In this interview, Akoijam explains that "competitive

democratic politics have exploited" [….] and "nationalist politics have used this division."[188]

According to Akoijam, the "postcolonial state deepened that schism," furthering the divide in

order to establish their power in the region. At the same time, for him, this conflict continues to

be manipulated by the global forces that have been seeking alliance with this border state. He

adds that global capital and external forces dictate which community does what, because by

offering political support and resources, they ask them to "align with us."

This brings me to D'Souza's (2018) astute argument about the positionality of India's

Northeast region and the agency of Northeastern people. He argues that "the Northeast does

not act but is acted upon and the terrain for manoeuvre for the people in Northeast is reduced

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[186] Scroll Staff, 2023, "Manipur activist Babloo Loitongbam's home attacked in Imphal," *Scroll.in*, October 5, 2023. https://amp.scroll.in/latest/1057160/manipur-activist-babloo-loitongbams-home-attacked-in-imphal.
[187] "#IGPPExpertTalks (Episode 19, (Part 2) - Conversation with Prof. A. Bimol Akoijam)," May 10, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yPT3HZUnmTQ.

[188] Ibid.

to one of compliance, negotiation or subversion" (439). Manipur remains only an area of geopolitical interest and advantageous border-state in transnational politics for the State. As for Wangkheirakpam, "There is no one narrative," about Manipur's ethnic, political, and regional history, there is no one truth to be found in this history filled with ethnic conflict and State violence, and how it continues to affect the lives of the people of Manipur.

In a conversation with Manipuri dancer and dance scholar Babina Chabungbam,[189] she told me about a few comments she received on social media regarding her dance practice. One of them said, "How can you dance during these times?" Chabungbam also mentioned her friends asking a very similar question. They said, "If we all die, where will your dance be? Will your dance remain?" In our conversation, she calmly responded with a counter-question. She asked, "If not for this, what are we fighting for?" She continued to articulate her thoughts and said, "Dance is situated in history and contemporary politics." Through her question, I believe that Chabungbam reminds us that if not for culture and the processes that build culture—rituals, community, and gathering, among others—there isn't much left to defend, fight for, and worth celebrating. That is where the politics of performance and dance lies. Inspired by Chabungbam's words and spirit, I turn towards a close reading of a dancer's journey and his choreographic practice to redeem his indigenous and regional consciousness through the dancing body.

Dancing in Imphal, Manipur

Born in March 1986, Surjit Nongmeikapam dreamt as a kid of becoming a martial artist. He grew up watching Bollywood movies like *Sholay* (1975) and was mesmerized by the spectacle of fighting scenes performed by actors Amitabh Bachchan (Jai) and Dharmendra

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[189] Interviewed by the author on December 10, 2023, via Whatsapp.

(Veeru) in the film. He particularly loved the philosophy behind martial arts. He says, "Because most of the Chinese martial arts, it's all about poetry,"[190] he felt an instant connection with the practice.

Since Nongmeikapam wasn't very successful in academics, evaluating financial prospects of a profession was essential in deciding a career path, where his father played a crucial role. Nongmeikapam's father decided that he would take up sports, so he could at least get a job as a coach and make some money. However, from being a badminton player, Nongmeikapam switched to a certificate course in hotel management in Dehradun, a hill station 240 kilometers from Delhi.[191] While in Dehradun, he read an article by the late modern dancer and choreographer Astad Deboo (1947 – 2020), who is considered to be a pioneer of modern dance in India. At that time, it seemed inconsequential to his artistic journey, but Nongmeikapam kept that article and continued to ponder over Deboo's use of Manipuri martial arts, specifically *thang-ta*, in his choreographic work. After completing the course in hotel management, when he returned home, he stood up to his father and told him that he cannot work indoors all day and that he wanted to be a fashion designer. But his father didn't allow him to pursue that profession (presumably because it was considered feminine). Then, he wanted to be an actor but could not muster the courage to speak up to his dad about pursuing his thespian dream.

Finally, Nongmeikapam desired to be a Bollywood dancer, but his family started to look for a career option considered more sophisticated, practical, and tangible, like a bachelor's degree or a certification course in choreography. At the time, Nongmeikapam's sister, who was in Bangalore, found a bachelor's degree in choreography at the Natya Institute of Kathak and

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[190] Interviewed by the author on August 24, 2022, in Imphal, Manipur.

[191] Surjit Nongmeikapam completed a 1 Year Certificate in Hotel Management from IFCT Ram Institute of Hotel Management and Catering Technology, Dehradun from 2003-2004.

Choreography.[192] His father said that this is the "last option for your career."[193] At the age of 24, Nongmeikapam joined the Natya Institute in Bangalore in 2005. Early on in the program, he was shocked to learn that the institute wasn't teaching dance at all, and that the curriculum was purely theoretical. Furthermore, he had to now learn Sanskrit, computer science, and art history. He wanted to run away. He wanted to learn Bollywood dance. But he had to follow his father's plan—get a BA, then an MA in dance, in order to become a teacher and earn money.

Nongmeikapam faced other challenges as well, in the form of microaggressions at the Natya Institute. He was repeatedly told that he had no idea about dance and that he should leave the program. This was the time when he decided, as he recalls in the interview, "Let me prove who I will be." After the first semester, Nongmeikapam was determined to learn Manipuri dance and Manipuri martial arts, as he mentioned, "before going to experimental workshop or contemporary dance," because he realized the "need to learn my own roots."[194] He visited Manipur to begin his training in Manipuri traditional and folk dances and Manipuri martial arts, *thang-ta*. At the same time, 2005-07, he started working with choreographer Madhu Nataraj of the Natya Stem Dance Kampni in Bangalore,[195] where he received training in kalaripayattu (martial arts from Kerala) and Mayurbhanj chhau (dance from Odissa with martial and folk traditions).

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[192] More information about the program can be found here: https://www.natyainstitute.com/courses (accessed May 15, 2024).

[193] Surjit Nongmeikapam shared in the interview conducted by the author on August 24, 2022, in Imphal, Manipur.

[194] Interviewed by the author on August 24, 2022, in Imphal, Manipur.

[195] STEM stands for Space, Time, Energy, Movement, led by director and choreographer Madhu Nataraj.

After working with Nataraj's style of "Indian" contemporary dance,[196] Nongmeikapam recalls that he was interested in learning more. Since Google was recently introduced in India, he started researching contemporary dance online and watching dance videos on YouTube. He was particularly inspired by Cloud Gate, the Taiwan-based contemporary dance company, and was in awe of their theatricality and poetic movement style. In 2008, Nongmeikapam started his organization, Nachom Arts Foundation (NAF), to create a space for the local community in Manipur where they can make and experiment with contemporary ideas and art forms. By this time Nongmeikapam had accumulated a range of different movement practices—Manipuri dance, kathak, *thang-ta*, kalari, and Odissi, among others.

Nongmeikapam's friend, who is also an Odissi dancer, said to him, "If you're doing contemporary dance, just do contemporary dance. So, if you're not a master of Odissi dance, don't do Odissi dance in contemporary also. Because it feels like disrespect."[197] Through such conversations with his friend, Nongmeikapam realized that he needed to devote another ten years to achieve mastery in either of these classical dances and/or martial art forms. This was something that he couldn't afford to do anymore, since he had already spent a lot of time figuring out what he wanted to do in his professional life and started his dance career later than usual. Hence, he began creating his own choreographic practice rooted in improvisational techniques. Nongmeikapam pivoted his choreographic approach to thinking and using more about the philosophy behind, for example, Manipuri dance, instead of using the actual movement material from that form. Additionally, in 2010, Nongmeikapam completed a three-months long certificate

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[196] Surjit Nongmeikapam shared in the interview that Madhu Nataraj's style of "Indian" contemporary dance focused on Hindu philosophical ideas and on the geometry of the Mandala. The company works with Indian physical traditions like kalaripayattu and Mayurbhanj chhau. Interviewed by the author on August 24, 2022, in Imphal, Manipur.

[197] Interviewed by the author on August 24, 2022, in Imphal, Manipur.

course in Dance Movement Therapy from Kolkata Sanved and started working with people who were HIV+ and people who were suffering from mental health disorders. While working with various NGOs where he used movement to communicate with people experiencing trauma, Nongmeikapam learnt to perceive movement in a therapeutic way.

As Manipur's cultural identity seems to be burdened by the legacy of iconic theatre artists, like Kanhaiya Lal and Ratan Thiyam, as a Manipuri artist, Nongmeikapam's experiments in contemporary dance still remained on the fringes. However, through his community building practices, such as opening NAF and hosting movement workshops, he continued to bring the work of many other like-minded contemporary artists to the lime-light.

As Nongmeikapam was searching for more avenues to expand his understanding of contemporary dance and stakes of creating and presenting contemporary dance in India, he came across the Gati Summer Dance Residency (GSDR) hosted by the Gati Dance Forum in Delhi. In 2011, he applied to the residency and got in. However, he was the only artist out of the selected residents who had not trained in contemporary dance from abroad, for example, the Laban School of Contemporary Dance, London. There was no looking back.

During the Gati residency, Nongmeikapam created a solo entitled *One Voice* (2011), based on his previous work with trauma survivors as a dance movement therapist.[198] From then on, Nongmeikapam went on to create a number of contemporary dance works as a solo artist and in collaboration with various international artists. He won prestigious awards in contemporary dance, including the Prakriti Excellence in Contemporary Dance Awards (PECDA), for two consecutive seasons (2014 and 2016). His choreographic work received funding from reputed organizations and festivals like Japan Foundation and Pro Helvetia (New Delhi), Attakkalari

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[198] Surjit Nongmeikapam completed a 3 months-long certificate course in Dance Movement Therapy from Kolkata Sanved from March-May in 2010 and continued to work with trauma survivors.

Centre for Movement Arts (Bangalore), Kobalt Works (Belgium), and Dance Umbrella (UK), among others. Nongmeikapam not only gained international exposure and visibility through his artistic career, but also used it to advance the landscape of contemporary dance in Manipur.

Theoretical Framework of the Chapter

In laying out the theoretical framework for this chapter, I discuss two key concepts—"indigenous structural framework" (Premchand 2005) and "geo-body" (Winichakul 1994). In doing that, I aim to show the history of development of cultural art forms, like theatre and dance, in Manipur as an act of negotiation between regional and national culture. In contrast to the mainland's customs and rituals which are primarily Hindu, Manipuri cultural art forms foreground a local and indigenous understanding of their customs, rituals, and movement practices that connected to their land. Seeing the resultant art form as a hybridized product,[199] in this section, "indigenous structural framework" (Premchand 2005) allows us to trace the exchange between the local and non-religious practices in conversation with myths and themes from Hinduism. The discussion on "geo-body" (Winichakul 1994), on the one hand, destabilizes the colonial notion of nation and territory and, on the other, shows how the performance culture of Manipur is rooted in its understanding of and connection to the land. Overall, these two key ideas help me critically examine Nongmeikapam's choreographic framework—his performance strategies and the spatial politics in his work—in the second half of the chapter.

In *Rituals and Performances: Studies in Traditional Theatres of Manipur*, Nongthomban Premchand (2005) argues for indigenous rituals and performance traditions of Manipur to be considered as theatre. Keeping in mind the social, cultural, and political factors specific to Manipur and how it has shaped theatre over the years, he draws a relationship between the

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[199] I will discuss this further in relation to Surjit Nongmeikapam's work, building on the work of Anusha Kedhar (2022c) and May Joseph (1999).

changes in ritualistic performances and the dominating religion in the region. In doing so, Nongthombon writes, "The history of development or changes from *Lai Haroba* to *Shumang Lila* has been dictated by the changes which have taken place in the life of Manipuris, starting from the days of pre-Hindu indigenous religion continuing [to] the days of Hinduism and finally to the era of secularism" (3). In mapping these shifts in ritualistic performances from historical to the present moment, Premchand outlines the "indigenous structural framework" (4) as the base for traditional Manipuri theatre.

> This non-religious indigenous structure, which is composed of the elements of music, song, dance, body movements, costume, space, and even the relationship between the performance and audience, is the backbone or the central nervous system, which has transcended barriers of culture or religion, and which has drawn all the foreign materials into a process of interaction and final fusion with local Manipuri conditions and sensibilities. (4-5)

The unique usage of these elements in performance—"music, song, dance, body movements, costume, space, and even the relationship between the performance and audience"— reflects the process of merging of "foreign" and "indigenous" practices. By foreign materials, Premchand refers to topics or themes from Hinduism that have merged with "local and indigenous materials and sensibilities" (4). The "fusion" between these two cultures has transformed the ways in which Manipuri theatre exists today. According to Premchand, "indigenous structural framework" is non-religious and has "transcended barriers of religion and culture" (4).

This process of interaction and fusion of Hindu and indigenous sensibilities in ritualistic performances can be further understood through the formulation of Manipuri Vaishnavism,[200] the synthesis of Bengali Vaishnavism and pre-Hindu Meitei religion. In his article "Sacred

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[200] "Manipur Hinduism gradually became a synthesis of the old Methei religion with its Gods and Goddesses and Myths, its Legends and Traditions, its Social Customs and Usages and its Priests and Ceremonials, and of Brahminical Hinduism with its special worship of Radha and Krishna" (Parratt 1980, x).

Geography,"[201] journalist and photographer Nikhil Roshan analyzes two major festivals of Manipur—*Lai Haroba*[202] and *Yaoshang*—to argue that their current forms are a result of "The unique cross pollination of belief systems that is Manipuri Vaishnavism." Roshan foregrounds theatre director and scholar Dr. Lokendra Arambam's astute analysis and argument to look at these ritualistic performances as possibly "the Meteisation of Hinduism,"[203] which is similar to the process of "fusion" that Premchand refers to in the formulation of "indigenous structural framework."

Looking closer at these ritualistic performances, one can see the fusion between these two distinct religious and cultural philosophies and worldviews. According to Premchand, "indigenous structural framework" can be identified by studying "the use of the existing non-Hindu performance structures, which are abstract, non-realistic and ritualistic in character" (5). In these ritualistic performances, for example in *Lai Haroba*, their performance structures echo "a regional cosmology and worldview, in contradistinction to a 'mainland' world view, and a reminder about what is at stake in debates over regional and national culture" (Mee 2011, 122-123). In other performances, for example *Maha Raas* or *Rasleela*, Manipuris (Meiteis) kept their rituals, customs, and movement patterns and accommodated the themes of Hinduism, including

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[201] Photo-journalist Nikhil Roshan shared his unpublished photo-essay with me during my field research in India in 2022.

[202] "Lai haraoba is a ritual celebrating the 'cosmic union between male and female deities' and an enactment of the creation of the universe, including the 'stars, sky, sun, moon, and the creation of men'. There are four versions; the one performed in and around Imphal is 'regarded as the core ritual [of the Meiteis], reflecting the Meitei belief systems and philosophy'. Lai haraoba was banned during the forced adoption of Hinduism, but in the second half of the twentieth century it has been performed more often as 'a means to remind the Meiteis of [the] origin of their distinct cultural and political unity' and as a challenge to Hinduism. As one scholar put it: 'Lai Haraoba mirrors the entire culture of the Manipur people'. Clearly this is an embodiment, display, and reminder of a regional cosmology and world view, in contradistinction to a 'mainland' world view, and a reminder about what is at stake in debates over regional and national culture" (Mee 2011, 122-123).

[203] In an interview with Rodney Sebastian on September 10, 2011, at Imphal, Manipur, for his PhD dissertation (2019), Lokendra Arambam "referred to this phenomenon as 'Meeteziation (sic) of Hinduism' instead of 'Hinduization of Meitei'" (176).

only the storyline worshiping Hindu Gods, Radha and Krishna. In this way, *Rasleela* became "a hybrid genre designed to bring about cultural reconciliation" (Mee 2011, 124-125). Looking through the "indigenous structural framework," one can see the process of synthesis and negotiation between Hindu and Meitei belief systems to form a contemporary regional culture. Therefore, using "indigenous structural framework" to study Nongmeikapam's work, I analyze his strategic use of different belief systems and movement practices to create his choreographic structure and concept of the body that has regional origin.

As Nongmeikapam identifies as an indigenous member of the Meitei community, his work also embodies a politics of space and belonging. In the case of Manipur, modern geographical discourse of space and nationhood stands in contradiction to indigenous conceptions of space and sovereignty. This could be seen through the difference in the understanding of territoriality and boundary in modern and indigenous realms expressed through the notion of the "geo-body."

According to Thongchai Winichakul (1994), "geo-body" "describes the operations of the technology of territoriality which created nationhood spatially" (16). The modern concept of territoriality, according to Winichakul, "involves three basic human behaviours: a form of classification by area, a form of communication by boundary and an attempt at enforcing" (16). Through classifying an area and enforcing a boundary over it, the geo-body introduced the concept of bounded territories and altered the relationship between the space and the body. This was in contrast to the indigenous understanding of non-boundedness of human geography. The map became an "active mediator" between the body and the space instead of being a "transparent medium" (Winichakul 1994, 130). Through the technology of mapping, according to

Winichakul, nations were created and people were transformed into "agents" that actualized the space being mapped (130).

In the context of Manipur, Arora and Kipgen (2012) reminds us that "The physical boundary of Manipur has been fluctuating with historical changes in political power and intra-state and the inter-state boundaries" (430).[204] In contrast to these shifting borders, the Meitei people's pre-colonial notion of territoriality is based on the relationship between human body and geography of the land. According to Lokendra Arambam, the Manipuri people believe that the land forms an "anthropomorphic geobody" (Roshan). In his article, "Land and Ethnicity: A study of Manipur and its neighbourhood," Arambam (2018) writes,

> The Meitei concept of territoriality was also of a different cultural vintage. The hills and valleys, which constituted the geo-body of the pre-colonial nation state, were homologous with the body of a human organism. When the Meitei developed its polity in the eighteenth century, they had incorporated all the hills and plains as vital limbs of the human body that symbolized the geography of the land. Mythic beliefs were incorporated into their visions of land, people and cultures as an organic, moving national consciousness. The Meitei believed the hills of Koubru in the Northwestern sector as the head of the organism. The Lamphel marshes in the valley were regarded as the breasts. The Kangla (Imphal the Capital) was the navel of the organism, which gave intelligence and nourishment to the body. Loktak Lake in the Southwestern plains was regarded as the bowels and pelvic zone of the geo-body. The Imphal River at its rear-end and before it fell into the Chindwin in Myanmar was regarded as the rectum. The hills were the arms and legs of the organism. (130)

Indigenous spatiality is described in the ways in which indigenous people of Manipur imagine the land as a human body. Imagining the land or geography as one having human-like physiology and characteristics challenges the hegemonic and modern notion of space (and its division

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[204] "Historically, Manipur was an independent kingdom ruled by the Meitei dynasty. The physical boundary of Manipur has been fluctuating with historical changes in political power and intra-state and the inter-state boundaries. At one time in history, the river Chindwin in Myanmar formed Manipur's natural eastern frontier. The boundary line between Burma (Myanmar) and Manipur was fixed by the provision of the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 (Sanajaoba 1995: 1; N.J. Singh 2002: 17; Phanjou bam 2003: 220). The Kabaw valley remained the disputed territory of two countries - Manipur and Burma (Myanmar) - until Manipur joined India (Sanajaoba 1995: 2). Manipur formally joined India as a 'C' state in 1949 and was administered by the President of India through the Chief Commissioner. In 1956, it became a Union Territory and, in 1972, it was given statehood (O.B. Singh 2007-08: i)" (Arora and Kipgen 2012, 430).

through boundaries and organization into territories) produced through the geo-body. For the people of Manipur, it also creates a "national consciousness" directly linked to the land rather than their forced inclusion in the modern nation-state (India).

Thinking through the indigenous concept of the geo-body helps me foreground the concept of the "natural body" in Nongmeikapam's work "as an organic, moving national consciousness" (Arambam 2018, 130). As I discuss later, the "natural body"—as a source of regional consciousness and ethnic autonomy—is depicted through Nongmeikapam's use of the spine. The spine maps and traces the movement pattern of *Pakhangba*, the God-king of the Meitei people and symbol of Manipuri nationalism, which in turn, links the "natural body" directly to the land and Meitei culture.

The Natural Body

What is the relationship between borders, territoriality, and mobility, and how does the concept of the "natural body" help us understand this relationship?

According to Winichakul, "a frontier or border is a zone which lies along *each side* of the boundary or interfaces a neighboring country—that is, a boundary is *in between* two sides of borders" (77). Contrary to the modern definition of boundary, in indigenous understanding of spatial relations, borders, margins, and frontiers are conceived as "shared" or "overlapping" (101). The boundary is not neatly placed between the two sides of the borders but rather converges and blurs these borders. It is through taking in consideration the bodily movement or body's mobility across these borders that borders can be perceived as overlapping between different nation-states (instead of dividing them in the modern understanding of the border/boundary).

Similarly for Noel B. Salazar & Alan Smart (2011), "Mobilities and borders are not antithetical" (iv). Borders prioritize mobility (Chalfin 2008, 525) and they also "promote immobility, exclusion, and disconnection" (Alvarz 1995; Tsing 2005 cited in Salazar and Smart 2011, iv). Salazar and Smart (2011) argue that "To assess the extent or nature of movement, or, indeed, even 'observe' it sometimes, one needs to spend a lot of time studying things that stand still: the borders, institutions, and territories of nation-states, and the sedimented 'home' cultures of those that do not move" (iv-v). Taking into consideration the stillness and motion across borders and territories, the "natural body" studies the relationship between mobility and immobility, deepening into the physical sensations of (the body in) flux vs. (the body in) stillness. In doing so, it blurs the distinction between the two—finding stillness and motion in both these physical states: flux and fixity.

A study on the concept of the natural body has been done by Doran George (2020) in reference to late twentieth-century contemporary dancers in the United States. George analyzes the development of Somatics from its emergence in the 1950s to the late twentieth-century in resistance to ballet and modern dance's oppressive training regime in the US. They argue that the concept of the "'natural' as a posture, a way of moving, and a way of being in the world" is what "enabled Somatics to both liberate and exclude, to encompass local and transnational social conditions, and to embed itself in movement and in artists' perceptions about aesthetic development" (11). George develops on Susan Manning's (2004), Ananya Chatterjea's (2004b), and Brenda Dixon Gottschild's (1996) anti-racist frameworks to argue how whiteness functions and/or is embodied in the construction of the "natural body." Although Somatics claimed itself to be an inclusive practice, liberatory for many white practitioners, George highlights that it

marked, marginalized, and excluded people of color, non-western, transgender, and differently abled bodies and their ways of movement from Somatics' universal purview.

Where Somatics created a universal vision of the body that excluded minoritized communities, in the context of Manipuri artist Nongmeikapam, the label of the "natural" signifies an understanding of the local culture, knowledge, and sensibilities about the body and the land that guides his choreographic process. Nongmeikapam shares that he "learns from nature" and that the "human body is nature too."[205] The natural body embodies indigenous and regional cosmology and world views, the anthropomorphic understanding of the land, geography, and region. It counters the modern understanding of borders and territoriality, and how the body negotiates the rules of sanctioned mobility. Thus, the "natural body" becomes an agent of indigenous resistivity to undo the oppressive colonial and post-colonial conceptions of body, space, and sovereignty that forcefully includes and "others" the region and the people of Manipur. This is the body that can survive, push through, and transform even though experiencing oppression from the authoritarian nation-state that racially discriminates against it.

Instead of using the "natural" to re-invoke a "pre-cultural body," like in the case of Somatic practitioners in the 1970s America (George 2020), Nongmeikapam uses it to empower and foreground a culturally embodied regional identity (Manipuri) that is contemporary. Through cultivating a hopeful future, Nongmeikapam believes that as indigenous people, "we cannot forget our history" but we can configure how "we can start a new life" together.[206]

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[205] Annette Leday and Surjit Nongmeikapam, 2021, "Dance India Today: In conversation with Surjit Nongmeikapam," Narthaki Official, March 21, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4MGFqy7JrPI&list=PLawHnKB4UjotvTtPFU7mD42FEq2ac_nDo&index=5.

[206] Ibid.

Thang-ta **to** ***Yangshak*****: Construction of Bodily Awareness through Regional Philosophy and Movement to signify "Regional Autonomy"**

Nongmeikapam significantly draws on the symbol of *Pakhangba* in creating his performances. *Pakhangba*,[207] the serpentine dragon, is one of Meitei's deities. He was Sanamahi's brother who was worshiped by the Meitei community before they were forced to adopt Hinduism. Sanamahism is the pre-Hindu religion that the Meitei community practiced, which is "a mix of shamanism, with female shamans in the forefront of the ritual proceedings; and animism, which holds all of earth, and especially the waters, sacred."[208] There is currently a youth movement in Manipur to revive Sanamahism.

The image of *Pakhangba* has become the image of the Manipuri nationalist movement. According to Erin B. Mee (2011), the image of the deity was "first used by the underground (those fighting for independence) and is now part of the state's emblem" (111). Nongmeikapam is inspired by the infinite continuity represented by the symbol of Meitei's deity, *Pakhangba*. The visual pattern of the snake swallowing its tail represents for him the concept of reincarnation where the journey of life (and in his practice, the journey of movement) has no clear beginning or end (blurring). The relevance of referencing *Pakhangba* in performance is a way to revive pre-Hindu Meitei religion and its cosmology and worldview. It is also a tactic to resist the forced Hinduization and Indianization of the region.

Another one of Nongmeikapam's strategies is to engage with one of Manipur's oldest martial arts forms, *thang-ta*. *Thang-ta* is a Manipuri martial arts form which was practiced in

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[207] "Pakhangba was the first ruler of Manipur, and is revered as kind, ancestors of the royal family the Meitei clan, and deity" (Mee 2011, 111).

[208] "Sacred Space, the Maibis of Manipur," July 19, 2019, https://dharma-documentaries.net/sacred-space-the-maibis-of-manipur.

warfare before it was outlawed by the British. It means the "art of the sword and the spear" (Mee 2011, 120). According to Mee (2011), *thang-ta* "is embedded in a larger cultural context: it embodies and expresses ways of thinking and teaches an in-body understanding of Meitei culture" (120). As a movement practice, *thang-ta* foregrounds Meitei's way of thinking through the body. It theorizes and teaches bodily awareness as rooted in a somatic-based understanding of Meitei culture.

These are the physical principles that I learned from *thang-ta* during my field research in 2022—connecting with the body's center of gravity, grounded footwork, ability to switch spatial location, quick weight-shifts or weight-transfers, ability to take space, and rhythmic movements, from arm movements to footwork. These physical principles, attributes or qualities, are learned from deconstructing anatomical structure and studying the range of movement. According to Mee (2011), *thang-ta* exercises "teach control over the flow of energy in the body, coordination of inner and outer awareness, activation and coordination of all body parts, focus and concentration, opposition in the body, and kinesthetic response" (120). I saw the initial glimpse of the presence or influence of *thang-ta* in Nongmeikapam's somatic-choreographic practice during an improvisation session where he taught Bicky and me a movement phrase (Figure 12).

23rd August

phrase.

like a wave, the body propels forward circling
the wrists at the chest. Then the arm & the knee
draw an S. begins activation of the side body. grab
right center. now the left arm & knee comes to the
chest. both arms up. facing right, & bend. very spongy
knee, hips to the earth. extend the arms & contact.
Swivel of the right hand over the head. stomp the right
foot. parallel feet. arms/hands don't stop. Continue
crossing. one over the other around the pelvis, over
the head, to the right side lunge. step left hand,
spiral & pivot. feet parallel. the stomp activates
the pelvis & the upper chest into a circular motion.

Figure 12. Phrase: Excerpt from my field notes, written on August 23, 2022.

The phrase that this excerpt refers to combines movement principles from *thang-ta* and the curves and shapes etched by the symbol of *Pakhangba* shown in the image above. Feet are grounded, drawing up earth's energy through the soles. The spine is soaking up that energy to hint the head to move on a curvature (S) and arms join in and externalize these shapes (the s's and the infinity) through their movement—leading the rising, falling, and change of bodily orientation.

With *thang-ta*'s close and inevitable association and reading as a "symbol of Manipuri culture," (Mee 2011, 122), Nongmeikapam's usage of the practice strengthens his connection to his Manipuri roots. The use of *thang-ta* and *Pakhangba* creates a somatic and felt sense of his regional identity and autonomy. However, Nongmeikapam skillfully transitions from his regional philosophical and movement traditions to create his movement practice, *Yangshak*. In his physical practice, *Yangshak*, the somatic and sensory knowledge that *thang-ta* imparts is still available and embodied by the dancers and so is the knowledge of incarnation from the symbol

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of Meitei's deity, *Pakhangba*. However, on a choreographic level, both the form and the symbol are abstracted to extend beyond a visual representation of traditional Manipuri culture.

To clarify how this transition has happened on a corporeal level, in the following section, I present an analysis of Nongmeikpam's movement practice, *Yangshak*, and show how it helps him create values of deep resistance and resilience in his practice.

Yangshak Movement

The description of the *Yangshak* Movement to promote the workshop on Instagram reads as follows:

> *Yangshak* movement is an exploration of the philosophy of 'Lairen Mathek' of the Manipuri martial arts forms, Thang-ta (Khuthek Lal Thek), and Dance (Jagoi). The workshop will focus on building an in-depth understanding of our body with the help of our imagination, resonance, impulse, and objects.[209]

I encountered Nongmeikapam's movement practice during a week-long workshop he organized in Imphal in September 2022. During the workshop, Nongmeikapam shared that he is interested in bringing the inner form and the outer shape together, instead of creating a bodily shape that is fully comprehensible and hence, capturable. According to him, "Yang means Spine (internal) and Shak means image (external)."[210] In his practice, he focuses on developing a relationship between the external image (what we see) and the internal form (what we feel).

The questions Nongmeikapam is concerned with in this practice is: How to observe the body? How to cultivate awareness of the internal form? To discover answers to these questions, he has developed a two-way approach (inside-out and outside-in). Since *Yangshak* for him is the coming together of the internal and external, it is important to cultivate awareness inside-out on one hand (through training and warm-up exercises) and outside-in on the other hand (through

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[209] Instagram post (August 20, 2022): https://www.instagram.com/p/ChflCWQh8Fk/.

[210] Interviewed by the author on August 24, 2022, in Imphal, Manipur.

working with an external object). In both these approaches, he focuses on improvisation as a tool to develop an anti-representational aesthetic and employs embodiment-sensitive (centered) language.

Nongmeikapam's motto is to make unseen work visible.[211] He connects with impulses and sensations within the body to awaken (the natural) body's way of thinking. He rotates and breathes into every joint to show his "appreciation of each joint."[212] While learning to play with speed, slow and fast tempo, momentum, and quick weight-shifts, the dancing body becomes aware of its extremities, limitations, and movement possibilities in space. It learns to be responsive and care-ful to internal and external impulses and triggers, tapping into a sense of readiness and a willingness to change.

In the interview, Nongmeikapam (2022b) shared with me, "Movement is body expression. It's a universal way. It is not about beauty. Every movement, simple movement, is so bold."[213] He focuses on "simplifying the movement" (2022b), breaking a movement down to the smallest of its parts and bringing attention, energy, and aliveness to those parts. In this way, he moves away from a beautiful and perfected representation of a movement to enhancing the dancers' ability to sense and feel the movement from within. Improvisational methods that help generate this awareness:

(Un)balancing

This practice tests one's knowledge of alignment. It involves learning to balance and build focus by imposing a physical restriction or challenge.

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[211] In an informal conversation with the author on August 30, 2022, Surjit Nongmeikapam mentioned that he wishes to focus on "unseen culture."

[212] Interviewed by the author on August 24, 2022, in Imphal, Manipur.

[213] Ibid.

Tracing the right arm with our eyes, we pick up the right leg up and bring the knee to the chest. Focusing on a moving limb, balance is tested; the connection between the two—focus and balance—is ignited. On relevé, arms are raised overhead. We focus on a point in front and close our eyes, still keeping an unwavering focus on that point. This strengthens the internal-external connection.

Later, with grounded and earthy feet, we tip our bodily weight to the edges of our feet. Experiencing the sensation of falling and then (re)organizing our internal systems to bring back alignment and stability, a new form is achieved. This form is not attained by a firm/rigid outward instruction or by following a codified technique. It is inspired by the concept of reincarnation, the continual and connected change in bodily form. It builds on the resonance of the previous movement and connects with the occurring impulses in the body to move into a novel direction/alignment.

This process is constant and repetitive.

Visualization

In this exploration, we connect with physical sensations and geometric shapes that are imagined to move through our bodies.

During an improvisational practice in the studio prior to the workshop, Nongmeikapam asks us not only to focus on our breaths but also to "Think of each part of our body as if they were our lungs."[214] The shoulder breathes, the ribcage and the pelvis, and so does the calves, the back, the elbows, and the forehead. The entire body is expanding and contracting, like the lungs, filling itself with air one moment and emptying air out the next moment. Through this constant

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[214] Interviewed by the author on August 24, 2022, in Imphal, Manipur.

cycle of inhalation and exhalation, the movement feels continuous, like the movement of the serpent-God.

Then, we are asked to embody the geometrical shape of number eight (8), similar to the infinity symbol which is the base for Manipuri indigenous religious beliefs and martial arts, Thang-ta. We envision it to move through our bodies and evolve into different shapes—from two inter-connected circles to a rectangle, triangle, and so on. Nongmeikapam encourages us to trace the infinity symbol using the mobility of our spines while keeping the head and tailbone connection intact. Drawing different ranges of the number 8—small, large, growing out of our bodies—the design spills and integrates in the space around us, the room reverberates with our movement patterns.

Internalizing with the Object

To test our bodily awareness, towards the end of the *Yangshak* workshop, Nongmeikapam brings bamboo in the studio. For him, the act of holding an external object can help us connect with or become conscious of our alignment, internal feelings, and sensations, and bring us closer to the present moment.[215] Being born and raised in New Delhi and its chaos, I remember thinking, do I belong in the same space as the bamboo? Isn't it supposed to be in a faraway land, somewhere in a serene forest? I was just amazed to see how overpowering this object was and how, casually and unapologetically, it demanded, commanded, occupied, and divided space.

A breath later, I feel my anxiety rise as we begin to work with the bamboo—as it forces us to be present, attentive, and mobile in ways that we weren't accustomed to. The workshop

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[215] "Since the bamboo is the external and the movement, the philosophy, is the internal. So external and coming together like that. Like, if I hold this is external thing, I'm connecting with my internal, inside the feelings. Then, you know, I'm moving, and I have the connection, the presence, the times, and conscious is here. I'm into the times and into the moment. The presence is very important" (Nongmeikapam, Interviewed by the author on August 24, 2022).

participants stand on either side of the bamboo. One dancer in the center holds the bamboo and turns on his axis slowly. Nongmeikapam asks us to enter the circle one by one and exchange the bamboo.

First things first, we think about how to handle the bamboo's weight, form, and momentum. I quickly observe and learn that when I go in to receive the bamboo, I need to tune into the momentum of the bamboo—this meant assessing not only the pace of the other person holding/turning the bamboo but also making simultaneous micro-adjustments in my own stride to move as close as possible to the bamboo holder. Then, make firm contact with the bamboo—grasp/clutch the bamboo with both hands—and continue to move on my central axis (avoid stopping/pausing) and keep the flow going to make the transfer as smooth as possible.

So now, as it is my turn to hold the bamboo in the center, I begin to turn on my axis, I feel disconnected, I feel disjointed; I feel as if my hands were turning the bamboo, and my feet are turning my body. Nongmeikapam reminds us that it is the spine that moves everything together. This helps me stay in center and not let the bamboo waver in space. My feet and the bamboo begin to move in coordination. I exit. The next time I run in, I run towards the edge of the bamboo, and it quickly catches up with my stride. It scares me, it suddenly becomes harder to catch up, especially when I start walking backwards and I can see it catching up with me rather quickly. I feel the panic sensations rise in my body. This realization that there is a real obstruction/obstacle moving my way and I need to do something about it immediately, otherwise I will get hit, changes something within me. I freeze for a moment. Then, I take more risks even if I am afraid. I try harder to further understand my bodily rhythm and that too of the bamboo and my co-dancers in space.

From this experience in the studio, I learn that there is deep resistance and potential for cultivating hope and resilience, in being vulnerable, in facing danger, which is what I believe Nongmeikapam's choreographic practice aims to do.

Choreographic Examples from Nongmeikapam's Practice

In this final section, I analyze two choreographic works by Nongmeikapam—*One Voice* (2011) and *Meepao* (2021)—mapping his choreographic journey before and after his glory at PECDA. *One Voice* (2011) is one of Nongmeikapam's earlier works made during his Gati Summer Dance Residency (GSDR) at the Gati Dance Forum and premiered at Shri Ram Center at Mandi House, Delhi. The other work, *Meepao* (2021), is his latest choreographic work, created during the pandemic. The first work is his solo work and the other one an ensemble work. Though the two choreographies were created a decade apart, they address similar concerns of State-oppression and the need for regional expression and freedom but from a drastically different perspective, utilizing distinct techniques and methods. Overall, he incorporates philosophy from Meitei religion, Sanamahism, and a range of physical practices like Manipuri martial arts, thang-ta, Manipuri classical dance, kathak, improvisation, and butoh in his work.

One Voice addresses the experience of torture, as a material and tangible sensation, that has shaped the everyday reality of the people of Manipur for a long time. *Meepao* becomes a roadmap to cultivate hope and resilience amidst such chaos and troubled times. Through both these distinct approaches to catastrophe, I argue that Nongmeikapam's work performs an act of deep resistance that opens up the potential for healing, connectivity, and relationality. Using "indigenous structural framework," his choreographic work creates an alternative representation of Manipur and Manipuri culture that slips through or escapes the processes of exoticization and

"auto-exoticism." It refrains from being categorized as "authentic" indigenous art or museumized as "primitive" art.

One Voice: Processing Cultural Trauma and Resisting State Violence

As a dance movement therapist, after completing his certificate course from Kolkata Sanved in 2010, Nongmeikapam worked with various NGOs to help people who were HIV+ and people with mental health disorders. Through this experience—using movement to communicate with people experiencing trauma—Nongmeikapam learnt to work with movement in a therapeutic way and it inspired him to create a new choreography, *One Voice* (2011).

One Voice (2011) is a reflection on the experience of torture. Nongmeikapam choreographs various ways in which torture constricts and challenges body's mobility through manipulation, submission, and resistance. He invites the audience to view the dynamic between the oppressor and the oppressed as one that is linked. He believes that the victim and the torturer "merge together into one body"[216] and have a shared experience of their trauma.

Witnessing *One Voice*

Nongmeikapam, the Chair, and the Lamp (Figure 13):

He moves back to the chair, drags it to the center, the lamp drops down from the ceiling. He takes off his shirt stylistically, rotates it around and behind his body and clumps it into a tight ball in front of his face and then lifts it overhead. Eyes closed, he crunches the cloth with full force and exerts a loud cry, arching his back and then returning it to the center. He opens the creases in his shirt and places it on the back of the chair.

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[216] Nongmeikapam, Interviewed by the author on August 24, 2022, in Imphal, Manipur.
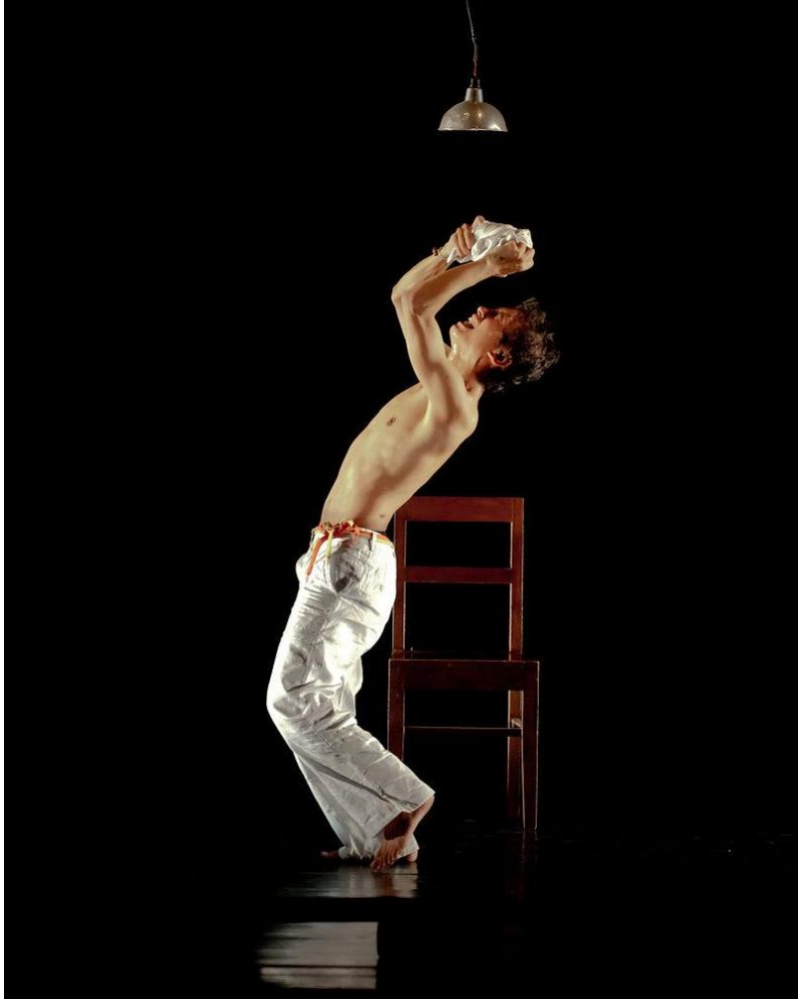
Figure 13. Surjit Nongmeikapam performing *One Voice* at Sri Ram Center, Mandi House, Delhi in 2011. Picture Credit: Soumita and Soumit.

Nongmeikapam establishes a clear relationship with the chair as the piece progresses. Chair represents the place, position, and source of power, and at the same time, place of confinement. The piece begins with Nongmeikapam sitting on an empty wooden chair placed on the left downstage corner. He takes out a piece of paper, perhaps a passport-sized photograph, from the pocket of his pants. The audience does not see the photograph. The piece comes full circle, when in the end, he walks towards the center aisle in the auditorium and turns to sit facing the chair on the stage. Once again, he takes the photograph out of his trousers. He extends his hand, outwards and at an arm-length distance in front of his chest, his eyes staring at the chair on

the stage. In doing so, he reverses the look of the victimized (performer) and returns it as the gaze of the oppressor (sitting in the audience).

Both these chairs where he takes turns and sits are placed in one line. The positioning of these chairs strengthens the connection between the oppressor and the oppressed. Power fluctuates when Nongmeikapam moves from one chair to the other. He embodies the identity of the one who watches and the one who is being watched, being surveilled. Through this action, he ties privilege/power and oppression together.

In terms of his movement aesthetics in this piece, Nongmeikapam's choreographic approach swings between his use and renunciation of stylistic movements from Manipuri and kathak dance styles. Inherent in this choreography is a somatics-based approach to play with the architecture of the dance form, its lines and the geometry, and its embodied physical and cultural resonances. For example, Nongmeikapam explores turning as a geometric principle deconstructed from the circular wrist and arm movements in both kathak and Manipuri dance styles. Leading with the elbows, his arm comes in and out of his center line, one hand always on top of the other. His wrist circles, the back of the palm faces forwards and turns to activate fingers. He picks something with his thumb and index finger, brings it close to his nose and smells, and releases the gesture a few times. Wrists dance in coordination with the opposite knee as it elevates up to the chest/belly. The other knee of the standing leg is deeply bent to ground his posture. He performs the wrist circles with the opposite knee lift one at a time and turns around himself while performing the hand gestures. This is where he performs a *chali*, a stylistic walk characteristic of Manipuri dance style, where his hips are low, one knee is bent and the other one lifts and touches the ground in front and side, as he travels in front and sideways. This gentle mobility, indicating moments of recovery, is contradicted with intense pressure on the body.

The association between socio-cultural influence on psychophysical states of the traumatized becomes stronger with this bodily movement. With his eyes closed, as his body shakes, Nongmeikapam unbuttons his shirt revealing the murmuring of the flesh underneath. Keeping his eyes shut, he points his index finger towards the audience and brings it back to place it on his lips. The one who silences and the one who is silenced are brought together in this moment. They are also entangled in this transaction. The shaking transitions into various modulations of his voice. As his entire body shakes from feet up, his voice begins to sound distressed until it reaches a point that his scream transitions into a folk rhythm associated with Manipuri classical dance (Nongmeikapam is singing *haiyaah-hey*). Through forced muting of sensations of touch, sight, smell, and kinesthesia, he shows how these capacities to hear, speak, and move are withdrawn or silenced in the experience of trauma, torture, and oppression. Here, his body is hyper mobile as every cell in his body is moving with intense rigor yet immobile as he is fixed to one location.

Trained in butoh, Nongmeikapam is inspired by its "philosophy of openness."[217] He stays attentive to impulses, sensations, sounds, and vibrations both within his body and space that lead him to make contradictory—impulsive and non-linear— movement choices. Researching the politics of kinesthetics in contemporary dance in Taiwan post 1980s, Chia Yi Seetoo analyzes the kinesthetic principles of butoh. Seetoo argues, quoting Hijikata, that the form is in "constant disintegration," and the muscle "shivers" and "cries" as the body is "on the edge of crisis" (ix). This constant disintegration of form is kinesthetically experienced and made hypervisible in Nongmeikapam's piece.

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[217] Annette Leday and Surjit Nongmeikapam, 2021, "Dance India Today: In conversation with Surjit Nongmeikapam," Narthaki Official, March 21, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4MGFqy7JrPI&list=PLawHnKB4UjotvTtPFU7mD42FEq2ac_nDo&index=5.

Miya Shaffer (2024) presents an enticing perspective on the relationship between butoh, the body, and the natural world, which is useful in the context of Nongmeikapam's use of the practice. Building on scholar Sondra Fraleigh's (2020) analysis of butoh,[218] Shaffer (2024) writes, "The human body in *butoh* temporarily performs as ecological matter and non-human animals, establishing an intimacy with the natural world through this process" (8). The process of generating movement in butoh requires the body to become "nature as inhering in nature" (Fraleigh 2020, 467 cited in Shaffer 2024, 8). Thus, transforming into or "'becoming' different environments, minerals, and non-human animals" through movement (Shaffer 2024, 8), the body in *One Voice* transitions almost instantly from one physical and mental state to another.

Furthermore, Nongmeikapam's training in *thang-ta* lends him a grounded physicality as well as an agility to contort spine in non-neutral alignment and switch spatial location, inspired by the movement of *Lairen Mathek,*[219] the spine of the python. There are moments where the body is in pain and is collapsing, back is arching and spine is spiraling/twisting beyond comfort, to moments where the body is grounded (e.g., deep lunges), is balanced (e.g., one leg balances) and is light (e.g., Manipuri classical style dancing with light plies and curvilinear pathways of the arms).

In this piece, the dancing body is represented as the site for contesting trauma, as the site for healing. The body is the site for dissent and for reclaiming regional freedom and autonomy. It

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[218] Miya Shaffer (2024) has written, "Scholar Sondra Fraleigh (2020) has written about *butoh* as an "eco-somatic" practice, wherein movement initiates a process of "becoming" different environments, minerals, and non-human animals. Fraleigh and other scholars characterize *butoh* as an embodied philosophy, fundamentally concerned with generating movement, as opposed to performing codified dance steps (Baird and Candelario 2019; Candelario 2016; Fraleigh 2020, 2022; Sakamoto 2022). Some of the conceptual processes involved in creating butoh movement entail the "metaphoric matter of becoming creature, becoming other animals and objects, becoming elements of earth or atmosphere, and becoming nature as inhering in nature" (Fraleigh 2020, 467). The human body in *butoh* temporarily performs as ecological matter and non-human animals, establishing an intimacy with the natural world through this process" (8).

[219] Central to Manipuri language, dance (*Jagoi*), and martial arts form (*Thang-ta*).

is the target where both oppressor's strategies and protestor's tactics come together. It is where mainland vs regional cultural politics are negotiated. Thus, for Nongmeikapam, it is through working with the "natural" body and understanding how it experiences and processes trauma in its flesh, bones, and nerves that liberation is possible.

Moreover, the use and deconstruction of different dance styles like Manipuri martial arts, *thang-ta*, Manipuri classical dance, kathak, improvisation, and butoh in this piece, as Anusha Kedhar (2020c) points out, speaks to the idea of "flexible accumulation" under neoliberalism (1). This "flexibility," as Kedhar argues, "renders visible the bodily labor involved in the production of hybrid cultural expressions" (2020c, 21). In being grounded in his religious philosophy and fluid in his treatment of different regional, transnational, and global movement practices and vocabularies, Nongmeikapam produces "hybrid cultural expressions" (Kedhar 2020c, 21). Unlike contemporary South Asian dancers in the UK who use hybridity as an assimilatory strategy (Kedhar 2020c, 21), Nongmeikapam employs hybridity in two distinct ways—as an assimilatory and anti-assimilatory strategy.

In Nongmeikapam's work, there is a double-impulse of being both local and global, being internally rooted and reaching outwards simultaneously. He assimilates movement techniques that represent regional, national, and global cultures and, in doing so, he constructs a local aesthetic that is legible as contemporary in both form and content. He attends to the architecture of the dance form, its lines and the geometry, and its embodied physical and cultural resonances. He embodies the kinesthetic principles of the different physical practices that he draws upon in his work. For example, in *One Voice*, Nongmeikapam performs curvilinear pathways of the wrist and arms as representative of kathak and Manipuri dance, moves into deep lunges and one leg balances representative of his martial arts training in *thang-ta* while staying attentive to impulses,

sensations, sounds, and vibrations, as influenced by his training in butoh, that lead him to make impulsive and non-linear movement choices. All these choreographic decisions allow him to foreground the philosophy that is at the core of his work—embodying the spine of the python as a symbol of Manipuri nationalism and resisting the forced Hinduization and Indianization of the region.

Kedhar (2020c) describes hybridity as "the creation of new transcultural forms that emerged out of colonial encounters between the colonizer and the colonized" (21). Similarly, May Joseph (1999) has argued that "the modern move to deploy hybridity as a disruptive democratic discourse of cultural citizenship is a distinctly anti-imperial and antiauthoritarian development" (1). In using hybridity as an "assimilatory strategy" (Kedhar 2020c, 21), Nongmeikapam not only sets up a transaction between regional, national, and global cultures, but also in doing that, he transforms hybridity into an anti-authoritarian and anti-assimilatory strategy to resist being enveloped into mainstream Indian (Hindu) culture. In this way, Nongmeikapam's synthesis of different dance styles to generate his choreographic language that is rooted in local Manipuri sensibilities could usefully be called *resistive hybridity*. Nongmeikapam's *resistive hybridity* is both a strategy and a tactic to utilize the processes of assimilation and to disrupt them.

In the following example of Nongmeikapam's choreographic work, *Meepao* (2021), I focus intently on this specific double-impulse, while attending to the nuanced experiences of regional resistance I witnessed during my field research in Imphal, Manipur in 2022.

Meepao: Homage to the Departed (2021)

During my ethnographic field research in Imphal in 2022, I asked Nongmeikapam what *Meepao* meant. He answered, "Mee means human and Pao means news or words. Meepao is

talking about the human [….] Through the body, we share the news with the people."[220] He told me that he has constructed this word, it doesn't exist in the Meitei script. Through his piece, he wished to "celebrate those who are not celebrated by the nation."[221] This work was created during the Covid-19 pandemic, and it attempted to explore the power in everyday-ness—in the everyday actions, things, people, and scenarios, etc., especially at a time when many of us no longer could participate in everyday activities.

At this point, he pulled out his phone and showed me the Meitei script written with the Pakhangba symbol (Figure 14). He emphasized that the concept of reincarnation, as symbolized by the serpentine dragon, has inspired him to represent a unison between the living and the departed souls through the dancers' bodies. Nongmeikapam shares,

> *Meepao* is a tribute to all the known and unknown departed souls, who made extraordinary and ordinary yet exceptional contributions. They gifted, the lived world a reason to appreciate life, find joy in the simplest of things and feel hope in chaos. We imagine our performing bodies to transcend the lived-world and dance with the spirits in unison to celebrate the liminal spaces that separate us. We dance in their memory, whispering to them that our memories are their new homes.[222]

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[220] Interviewed by the author on September 7, 2022, in Imphal, Manipur.

[221] Surjit Nongmeikapam shared this in a post-performance discussion called *adda* at the Pickle Factory Season 3, Kolkata on November 12, 2022.

[222] The synopsis of *Meepao* can be accessed on Nachom Art Foundation-Manipur's Facebook page, September 18, 2021, https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=2616910185121237&set=a.1868611926617737.
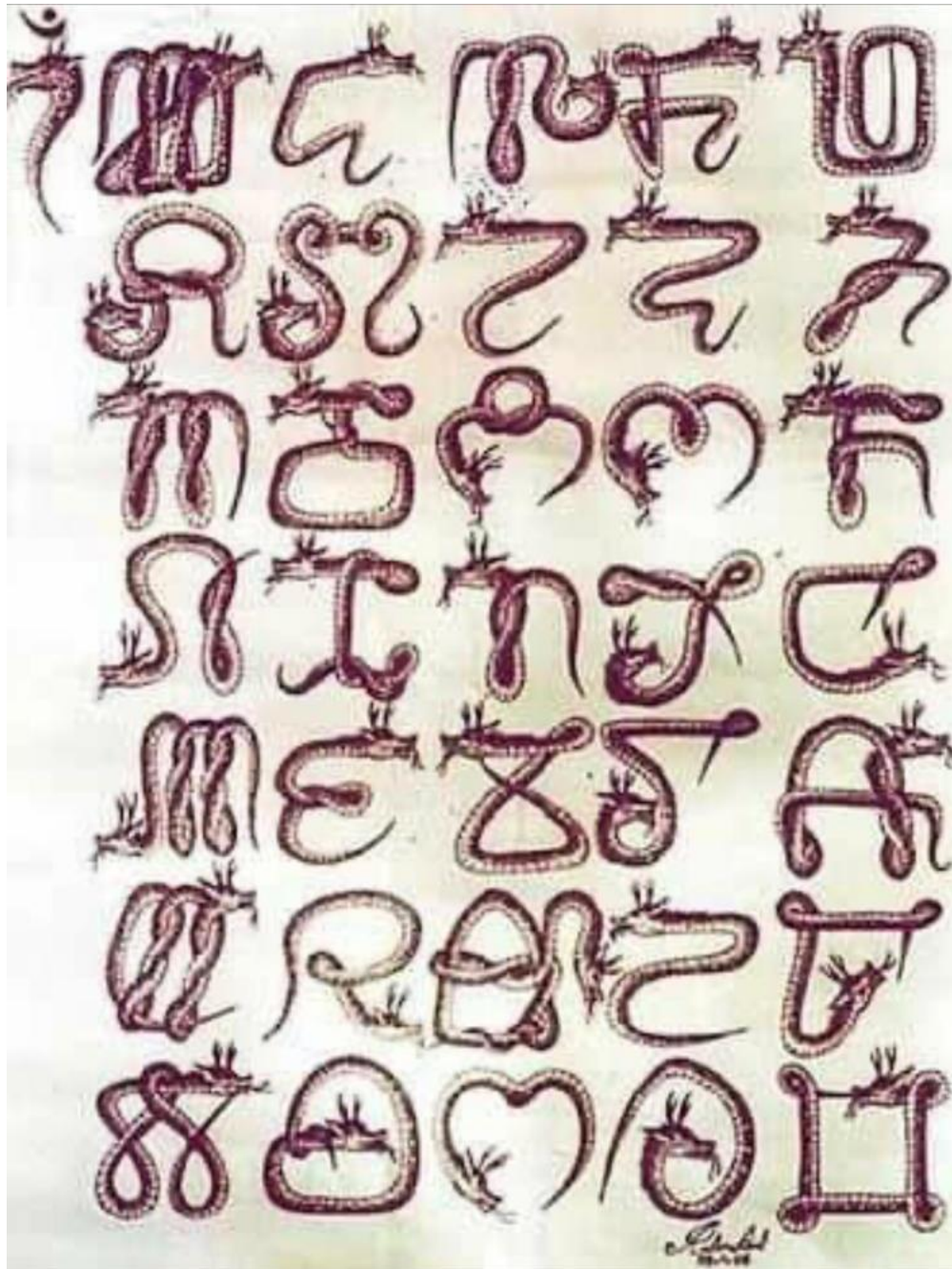
Figure 14. Meitei Script in *Pakhangba*. Photo shared by the choreographer.

Presenting this work at Behala Nutan Dol in November 2022, at the Pickle Factory

Festival (Kolkata) organized by Vikram Iyengar,[223] Nongmeikapam shared that he explored

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[223] Vikram Iyengar is a dancer and choreographer from Kolkata, India. He is the director of Pickle Factory Dance Foundation which aims to "to build a diverse dance-curious community, connecting to larger conversations of arts and society." https://picklefactory.in (accessed March 22, 2024).

tiredness as a physical state can take a performative life of its own that drives the choreographic arc.[224] It was both his vision and his process to actualize "non-stop dancing" (Nongmeikapam) in this piece. He imagined the dancers as one body committed to move in a continuous fashion.

Nongmeikapam's motto for this piece was: One movement for all. He sees this piece more as a community dance, grown from and practiced by everyone in the community, than one removed from it as in the case of most concert dances. He wants the movement to be shared and passed down to a large number of people so that they can experience a collective sense of moving that he feels is therapeutic.

Nongmeikapam used repetition to exhaust the body and allow it to go beyond tiredness, into a state where the transformation of the consciousness is possible, much like the shamanic culture his ancestors practiced. Like the (Meitei) priest or the shaman, maibi (female) and maiba (male), connects and channels the spirit through their bodies and brings God's words to humans, similarly, *Meepao* intends the dancers to bathe in this ancestral knowledge—enter a state of trance and channel the spirits through their dancing bodies. Like the Meitei script written with Pakhangba and the continuity it represents, Nongmeikapam intended to have that kind of continuity through the non-stop swirl of the bamboo and the continuous movement of the dancers in the piece. And the movement that links this piece was the bounce.

While explaining this movement of the bounce in the *Yangshak* workshop, Nongmeikapam stomps his 1-liter round water bottle (3/4 full) on the studio floor. He asks us (the workshop participants) to observe the flow of water (energy) inside the bottle (form). Just like the water that swirls and moves in a non-linear fashion inside the boundary of the bottle,

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[224] Surjit Nongmeikapam shared this in a post-performance discussion called *adda* at the Pickle Factory Season 3, Kolkata on November 12, 2022.

Nongmeikapam asked us to imagine the earth's energy flowing in this way inside our bodies as we switch the contact of our metatarsals with the floor from one foot to the other. The body weight is released towards the earth, the shoulders are softened, so are the arms and the neck. As the feet hop, the vibration from the floor travels up. The arms and the shoulders begin to pulse and bounce up and down landing on the chest, with the air moving through the entire body ("lungs"). Elbows fly with the movement. Spine is alive and melts towards the earth, slowly and eventually. Everything is allowed to soften, like the body is dropping everything off its skeletal structure, only the bounce of the feet and the ripple upwards remains constant, emphasizing the spine's connection with the earth's energy.

In the following section, I look at *Meepao* through the lens of "indigenous structural framework" honing on the use of space, sound, object (bamboo), spinal movements, and audience-performer relationship to argue that Nongmeikapam utilizes this framework to generate bodily, sound, and spatial landscapes that are abstract and ritualistic in nature and bring both the performers and audiences in transformative states.

Witnessing *Meepao*

When I (and my Uber driver) finally find the Behala Nuton Dol, as we arrive in a petite *gully* (street) leading up to the entrance of the *pandal*[225] (Figure 15), I am surprised to see that the atmosphere is delicate, colorful, thoughtful, comfortable, warm, and welcoming, and it keeps me curious. Originally known as the Durga Puja *pandal*, the converted performance space stands tall in front of me with the support of the bamboo sticks. A couple of banners, like #pickle factory, #takethecityofKolkata, #communityspace, in black and pink colors are attached to the

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[225] "Pandals are large tent like structures that are recreations of popular buildings, usually temples, built in wood and cloth over a bamboo super-structure. Traditionally they are built for Durga Puja, a festival in the month of October in parts of Eastern India. Today these structures have become expressions of a broader popular culture where themes both religious and non-religious are played out" (Oza 2000).

entrance wall of the performance space. The wall, as built by bamboo, is covered with long and flowy green and grey fabric. A statue of *Nataraja* hangs from the top of the *pandal* and another statue, of goddess *Durga*'s face, is placed in the center of the *pandal* (Figure 16).

Figure 15. Pickle Factory Season 3 Festival Entry, Kolkata. Photo by the author. November 11, 2022.

Figure 16. Entry to the Performance Area. Pickle Factory Season 3, Kolkata. Photo by the author. November 11, 2022.

Outside the main performance area, a community space is set up. There is a platform stage where

local artists present their dance and music pieces for an hour before the scheduled performance

of the night begins (Figure 17). There are snacks—*chaat, fuchka, and chai*—that you can eat

while you watch the performance and interact with fellow event attendees. In this festival gathering, art is conceived as a form of social action and we are encouraged to engage with all our senses—visual, auditory, smell, taste, and kinesthetic. The Pickle Factory organization seeks to raise awareness about the East Kolkata Wetlands[226] and celebrate the art and culture of the city through the festival's emphasis on dance, music, and food. The Pickle Factory team makes an attempt to centralize Bangla in their communication, as Bangla, not English, is the primary language of the Behala community. This, as the festival director Iyengar mentions to me in our informal conversation, has been an attempt to change the culture of the organization that is mostly English-speaking and to deepen their connection with the current community.

After participating in this gathering, I go back-stage to give my best wishes to the dancers. In preparation for their performance, dancers gather in a huddle with the choreographer and the musician (Figure 18). Nongmeikapam leads a little prayer thanking the ancestors of the land they are about to dance on. I sit on the outside witnessing them pray and think about the traces left behind by the dancing and singing bodies gathered here just a month before at the Durga Puja event. Then, the curtains open. As I walk to my seat and watch other people take theirs, I feel the energy of the community gathering moving into the performance of the night.

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[226] There was information about Disappearing Dialogues Collective's (dD) exhibition entitled, "Wetlands Stories," that aimed to raise awareness about the efforts of East Kolkata Wetlands' farmers and fishermen in conjunction with the natural ecosystem to protect the wetlands and in extension, the whole of Kolkata.

Figure 17. A local artist performing bharatanatyam at the platform stage. Pickle Factory Season 3, Kolkata. Photo by the author. November 11, 2022.

Figure 18. Dancers in a huddle before the opening of the show at Behala Nuton Dal, Kolkata. Photo by the author. November 12, 2022.

Under the center light, dancer and martial artist, Tombi (Hemjit) begins his duet with the bamboo. It mesmerizes me. Tombi swirls the bamboo with his hands, balances on his neck, shoulder, and back, shifting contact points with ease. It takes me by surprise.

Tombi senses the bamboo through the pores of his skin. His movement is controlled yet fluid as he changes levels—kneels, sits, rolls on and off the floor. When Tombi rotates his wrist overhead, the giant bamboo just swiftly follows and twirls. It glides in space. The bamboo appears weightless and moves like a feather.

The inter-action between his body and the bamboo not only creates the continuous and looped movement of the bamboo, as of the Pakhangba, but also activates the space. As I watch him spin the bamboo, I feel the bamboo move itself—the bamboo keeps turning, rotating, and churning the space. The body-bamboo action sets up and marks a sacred and protective space around itself. This also reminds of the defense strategies of the thang-ta warrior.

Tombi's body begins to disappear from view, but it is also firmly present. The fast spinning of the bamboo begins to blur its material form as well. It is as if both the forms, human and non-human, become permeable and spill beyond their borders into a "liminal" space (Turner 1969). Their forms overlap, merge, and co-join to evoke the transformative potential of movement.

In the middle of the performance, one audience member sitting in the front row turns back, leans towards another member, and asks: "What is happening? What is the meaning of this dance?" As the audience is sitting on three sides of the space and I am sitting right in the center, I can move my head and almost see everyone in the audience. As people are walking into the *pandal* and looking for the best seats to sit at, I continue to look at the kind of audience there is. I see kids, mothers, couples and the old lady sitting in the corner next to the music console. During

the piece, I observe many audience members having a full discussion about the piece. For example, I see these two women on the left corner (front row) covering their mouths and talking to each other while looking at the piece. Many others, like them, are comprehending the dance together, putting in a collective/community effort to "read" the dance as they watch it. Live performance and the discourse around performance is happening hand in hand. As I continue to watch the dance, I notice that for me, the meaning becomes embedded in the reverberations of the dancers' spines.

Four dancers on the corner of the performance space walk towards the center. Musician joins them too from the console. Tombi lowers the bamboo towards his hips and begins to turn on his central axis. All dressed in loose green t-shirts and khaki pants begin to walk around the bamboo. Coordinating the motion of two to three bodies on either side of the bamboo, they constantly adjust their orientation, pace, and trajectory of their movement. Their eyes/gaze trace the movement of the bamboo and occasionally retire when they gently crouch their bodies under the bamboo and touch the earth allowing the bamboo to swivel over their heads. The curving of their spines under the bamboo after a period of negotiation with its stride brings a calming and serene effect to the viewer. Their spines begin to activate.

In the left downstage corner, four dancers kneel on all fours position and begin to pulse their chest region. Their arms and knees press into the ground. As a reaction to this press, they bring their frontal spine into a vigorous shake. Spine is articulated to the point that it seems to grow into a creature of its own. It shivers as the muscles around the spine clench and release rapidly. It is like the facial skin is molded into an expression to look like the texture of a ruffled bed sheet. The quick-paced metallic sound to which they improvise this section intensifies the affect of their movement. Like *Yang* for Nongmeikapam is the spine that can "transform your

bodily shape," this section—with the coming together of the movement and the music—is about tuning into that ability of the spine (internal) to transform the external shape. It is felt as a hard-hitting moment of letting the body be out of control (in a traditional sense) and letting the spine take over as if the movement of the spine of the python (*Lairen Mathek*).

On the other side, Tombi swirls the bamboo as close as possible to the dancers without making contact with them. As an audience member, I am on the edge watching this moment—the bamboo is held diagonally, and it appears to be slipping from Tombi's grip and almost hitting the floor. But it does not. It is balanced in a way that it is saved from falling out of Tombi's grip, testing and testifying the range and strength of his focus and balance.

Following the arc of the spinal shake and the dizziness that follows, dancers carry the resonance of this movement into the next section. The sound of the drums kick in. Dancers begin to co-choreograph the proximity between their bodies in real time. They carefully sculpt the space around their bodies as each one of them changes their spatial location by making non-linear and impulsive movement choices. A line appears, then a triangle, a quartet, and every shape in-between. As soon as the shape or the topography is perceptually organized and recognized, it dissolves, it disintegrates. It moves into something new and unexpected. Dancers reconfigure these spatial structures around them while performing the side-step with a hop. Their shoulders exhale up and down with the bounce of the feet as they keep one fist on their chest and the other on the belly. This feels like the border-crossing mobility of the body that unfixes the space. Using the "natural" body to cross imaginative spatial borders in dance (*Meepao*) evokes its ability to morph spatial configurations, its potential to mark indigenous territory, and its relationship to the movement or the pathway of *Pakhangba*.

I connect with the drumbeats that they are dancing on. I feel the percussion move through my body as I see the dancers undulate their spines, allowing their shoulders to fall up and down on to their chest area. As they move towards the downstage right corner on a diagonal, they use their hands in between to throw this built-up energy in their bodies in various directions—side to side, downwards, to the diagonal—with their bodies slightly crouched forwards and closer to the earth. Haphazardness of their movement and palpable shake in their bodies invoke a visual of trance-like ritualistic and ceremonial movement that function as a portal between the living and the spirit world (Figure 19).

Figure 19. Dancers in the Technical Rehearsal at Pickle Factory Season 3, Kolkata. Photo by the author. November 12, 2022.

Another special thing to observe here is how Shantanu, the musician, is vibing with the dancers. He is on his feet at the open console to the right and he is bouncing and mixing the music in real time as the dancers are moving. I see and sense them as communicating and composing with each other through embodied rhythm and movement. This escalates and accelerates their breath and our heartbeat as viewers, making us view them as one interconnected body.

Here, the soundscape helps "transcend the barriers of religion and culture" (Premchand 2005) as it merges sounds from different religions and cultures. I experienced this connection between the indigenous-Hindu movements and sounds when I went to see *Maha Raas*, Manipuri classical dance, at Govinda Jee temple with dancer and scholar, Babina on November 8, 2022. We entered the temple and walked around the ritual and performance space barefoot on a cold night. The performance space was open from all four sides, its ceiling held tall by the four pillars in the corners, from where the white curtains were partly drawn in. The priests were getting the deities—*Radha* and *Krishna*—ready before the aarti. We found a place to sit facing the deities in the front on the right corner. For the opening rituals, the priests wore their traditional dress—white dhotis, pagri, and a shawl around their neck—holding the metal instrument (manjira) with dark grape tassels hanging from their hands and stood in a semi-circle facing the deities. They stepped side to side playing the instrument in their hands. The sound of instrument along with their minimal side-step movement during the ritual brought me right back to *Meepao's* rehearsal.

Like *Maha Raas* represents the interweaving of Meitei and Hindu belief systems and movement patterns, *Meepao* abstracts these local Manipuri sensibilities to create a universal and humanist appeal. Ritualistic instruments, such as *dhol* and *manjira* (clash cymbals), are used to produce earthy and high-pitched percussion sounds. Minimal movement of the side-step is

enlarged to create the sensation of the bounce through the spine. Through these methods, Nongmeikapam intends to develop an alternative contemporary aesthetic associated with Manipuri dance that has global appeal and is still grounded in its regional specificities—making this work highly influential.

Conclusion

Belonging to a marginalized state in India, Nongmeikapam's choreographic work and how he conceptualizes the body in his practice, the "natural body," is a resistive tactic to uplift and foreground Meitei philosophy and knowledge of the body as tied to land, culture, and nature. It is a form of dissent to show how young, contemporary Manipuris deal with such undermining stereotypes and "othering" politics meant to keep them in their "place." Choreography functions as a tool for liberation and thus, political action which aims to fulfill the promise of the revival of Meitei religion, Meiteism or Sanamahism, and establish an independent regional identity and autonomy, and freedom for ethnic representation, especially during the current ethnic conflict in Manipur.

As much as choreography is used as an equivalent to a political action, it reads as a complicated one when it is seen through the lens of the marginalized communities within Manipur, the tribal communities Kukis and Nagas, and their disputes with the predominantly Hindu community, Meiteis. Being a dominant community in the valley, Meitei's fight for their ethnic preservation is seen as a threat to the freedom and autonomy of the hill tribes, Kukis-Zo. This ethnic conflict within Manipur does not undermine the fight for regional freedom from their historical oppression from the Indian nation-state, but it gives an insight into the ethnic tensions within the community and the necessity for representation and self-determination for each community.

Amidst such political climate, Nongmeikapam work speaks to different way of conceptualizing land, the body, belonging as antithetical to dominant forms of nationalism, primarily Hindu nationalism. Among contemporary forms of nationalism, following Manipuri nationalism's aims to protect their religion and culture (mostly Meitei), Nongmeikapam's *Yangshak* movement explores the philosophy of *Lairen Mathek* of the Manipuri martial arts forms, *thang-ta*. Subjectivity often fractured by ongoing conflict in the region, Nongmeikapam's movement practice aims to bring closer the perception and experience of an event. The "natural" body that he proposes is *retrained* in indigenous and regional knowledge to be responsive and careful to internal and external impulses and triggers, tapping into a sense of readiness and a willingness to change. It learns to build focus and balance itself by exposing itself to a physical restriction or challenge. It connects with physical sensations and spatial patterns, most importantly as guided by regional, indigenous, and ethnic cosmology and worldview.

In response to authoritarian governance in the region, Nongmeikapam's *One voice* (2011) is crafted as a solo-dance piece that studies the experience of torture. In this piece, Nongmeikapam imagines the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed as one that is linked. This proposition pushes the audience to reframe and shift their perspective from seeing his body as a compliant "victim" to an "agent" navigating oppression. In the making of this work, Nongmeikapam synthesizes knowledge from a range of physical practices that he is trained in, for example, Manipuri martial arts, *thang-ta*, Manipuri classical dance, kathak, improvisation, and butoh, to generate a unique local and contemporary movement language through a process that could usefully be called *resistive hybridity*. *Resistive hybridity* reflects Nongmeikapam's resistance to being engulfed in the category of "folk" dance, only to be

recognized for the "diversity" he brings to Indian dance, without being credited for the innovation and originality that he brings to the field of Indian contemporary dance.

Based on a similar method, Nongmeikapam's *Meepao* (2021), created in the middle of Covid-19 pandemic, explores the power in everyday-ness. Taking inspiration from the *Pakhangba* symbol, and the concept of reincarnation, the piece proposes a unison between the living and the departed souls channeled through the dancers' bodies. This piece, I believe, wonderfully reflects the use of the "indigenous structural framework" (Premchand 2005) and creates corporeal, sonic, and spatial landscapes that are rooted in local Manipuri sensibilities and are abstract and ritualistic in nature.

Through my analysis of in this chapter of Nongmeikapam's movement (*Yangshak*) and choreographic practice, I have tried to capture the making of his contemporary language rooted in his indigenous and regional identity. For me, Nongmeikapam's choreographic practice offers values of deep resistance, hope, and resilience in a region with ongoing conflict. In Nongmeikapam's work, dance becomes a voice, a weapon, and a place for community gathering, where transformation and relational bonding—of the self, other, and the land—is possible.

Conclusion | Dissent, Liberation, and Contemporaneity

In 2018, choreographer Mandeep Raikhy participated in a conference in Kolkata, India titled "Samabhavana: Celebrating New Directions in Indian Dance," sitting on a panel with Surjit Nongmeikapam, Maya Krishna Rao, Daminee Basu, and Sudarshan Chakravorty. The subject of dissent in dance was raised, leading Raikhy to respond: "Where does one read dissent in performance—is it in the body or in contexts that frame the body?"[227] I engage with Raikhy's question now, at the conclusion of my dissertation, realizing that this question has been the driving force of this research project. In this dissertation, I've looked for dissent in the artist's choreographic decisions, performance aesthetics, training mechanisms, and the distinct aspects of Indian culture and politics that their work critiques. I've come to understand dissent in performance as a way of interrogating cultural histories from multiple standpoints/social locations. Dissent intertwines the body and the context, the individual and the collective, public and private space, never seeing them as separate, making corporeal dissent as always context-specific and -responsive.

In this dissertation, I have provided three case studies of contemporary dance artists in India—Mandeep Raikhy, Padmini Chettur, and Surjit Nongmeikapam—looking at their choreographic works made between 2010 and 2022. I have suggested that through the lens of dissent, their choreographic practices can be interpreted as a form of activism which questions, disagrees with, and resists an array of power structures—commercialized Indian classical dance, religious fundamentalism, western capitalism, and the ethnonationalist state. I have also asserted that this form of resistance requires a certain embodied mode which is cultivated through an

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[227] From a report of the conference by Dr. Sunil Kothari (March 14, 2018), https://narthaki.com/info/gtsk/gtsk177.html.

interrogation of the dance techniques they are trained in and an attention to the interior workings of the dancing body. Building on the work of several critical dance studies and performance scholars (Bayraktar 2019; Butler 2015; Foster 2003; Lepecki 2013), I have argued that in questioning the existing social order, the body in dissent produces new forms of cultural and political knowledge.

Why these three? During my research, I have often been asked why I chose to study and write about these three Indian artists in my dissertation. In the introduction, I briefly mentioned how mesmerized and perplexed I felt when I first interacted with the community of contemporary dance in Delhi. In 2014, I watched Raikhy's *a male ant has a straight antennae* at Kamani Auditorium. And a year later, in 2015, I participated in Chettur's movement workshop "Crawnimal," during the "Ignite! Festival of Contemporary Arts" at Max Mueller Bhawan and went to watch Nongmeikapam's improvisation-based performance with Takao Kawaguchi at the Japan Foundation.

When I first witnessed each of their works, I was in a transitional phase of my own career as a dancer. I had left The Danceworx in 2013 and participated as a contestant in a reality TV show, *India's Dancing Superstar,* on Star Plus. In 2014, I decided to pursue dance as a freelance professional. I started collaborating with dancers and musicians outside of the dance academy that I had been a part of for eleven years. I taught at another dance studio that a friend had opened up in Pitampura. I performed in small-scale dance festivals that wished to feature and promote emerging contemporary dance artists, such as those organized by Natya Ballet Center and Gati Dance Forum, among others. In 2014, I had a chance to travel to Edinburgh to perform a group dance to Bollywood tunes at the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo. That year, I also did a few performance gigs with Mayuri Upadhyay's dance company, Nritarutya, in Bangalore. In

2015, I found my way into a master's degree program in Performance Studies at Ambedkar University, Delhi. I started learning Indian classical dance, Odissi, on the side, and dancing and creating as an artist-in-residence and a community member at the Gati Dance Forum.

I believe that these life events—new and diverse experiences that I accumulated as a freelance dancer—were fueled by an urge to know more about dance and dancers in other parts of India and to move differently than I was accustomed to until then. These opportunities also required the kind of "kinesthetic mobility" (Nimjee 2019) or "flexibility" (Kedhar 2020c) that is asked of dancers working in a neoliberal dance economy.[228] During this transition phase, when I came across the work of choreographers Mandeep Raikhy, Padmini Chettur, and Surjit Nongmeikapam, I felt an energetic pull towards them. There was a sense of improvisation, clarity, and rigor in each of their dances that I had not seen before. The dancing body was as intentional in its execution of the choreographic scores as it was to draw the audience's attention towards the politics embedded in those scores. Their work impacted my perception of contemporary dance very early on in my academic career.

The bodies that these choreographers were proposing, each in their own distinct ways, didn't abide by the rules that I was taught in my training as a jazz and modern dancer or what I was accustomed to seeing in Indian classical/commercial dance styles—there were no predetermined steps to the beat, no facial expressions, no religious narratives. Instead, these choreographers focused on two things in particular: (1) attending to the body, and (2) drawing

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[228] I am using "flexibility" as Anusha Kedhar (2020c) has proposed in her work where she defines it as "a range of corporeal maneuvers and bodily tactics" (4) that dancers use to negotiate the demands of a neoliberal dance economy. I also see this adaptability of dancers in moving between different movement styles as similar to what Ameera Nimjee's (2019) describes as "kinesthetic mobility." According to Nimjee (2019), "Dancers move in and out of genres, traditions, and vocabularies, demonstrating their various mobilities in doing so" (61). However, Nimjee emphasizes that this mobility enables [contemporary] dancers to draw, modify, and re-signify "transnational and transregional practices" as sources of inspiration (61), and both "othering" and dislocating these practices from the context of their origin.

attention to the political ideas engendered by the body. This was the contemporary dance I had become interested to watch. Over time, as I studied their works closely and participated as a dancer and/or a dance ethnographer, I began to pay attention to certain fundamentals, including political analysis, clear movement statements that grow directly from that political analysis, and, ultimately, the expression of political dissent. These themes, while expressed differently, were common in their choreographic works. Their work was responsive towards and continually addressed the particular features of Indian democracy in the first decades of the 21st Century, including the fight for religious freedom and equality, struggles over the legalization of homosexuality, working towards a feminist dance practice and gender equality, reconsidering women's position in urban Indian society, and reflecting on the violent history of inclusion of north-eastern states in the geographical boundaries of Indian nation-state.

Dissent, thus, informs the theoretical framework of this dissertation. Focusing on dissent that begins at the corporeal level and then becomes political has helped me draw attention to somatic modes of resistance in rehearsal, training, and performance spaces. I theorize the strategies through which the contemporary dance artists in my research wish to free the State-regulated dancing body from imposed codified forms, stylistic movements, and religious undertones embedded in Indian classical dance, to produce a body that is adaptive, embodies resilience and endurance, and which negotiates with failure, precarity, and exhaustion of its physical and sensorial capacities as some of its resistive qualities. I've layered this discussion by bringing in each artist's personal and regional history that informs and shapes how their particular corporeal dissent is materialized in the public space.

I understand dissent and have aimed to describe it in this dissertation as disagreement that is exercised towards a considerable matter in a democratic society. I've utilized dissent as a

"transversal phenomenon" (Bleiker 2000, 2), which has allowed me to show how global and transnational politics of contemporary dance influence the discussion of contemporaneity in India. In this dissertation, dissent is demonstrated as a collective act of "social and political questioning" (Jørgensen & Agustín 2015, 12), where dissent is theorized as an "expression of oppositional voices" against the dominant order (Jørgensen & Agustín 2015, 14). It has also been noted where a certain form of dissent does not represent or encapsulate the voices of marginalized communities, pointing to the limitations of dissent.

Indian historian Romila Thapar's work on dissent has helped shape the relevance of dissent in the Indian context in this dissertation. Thapar's (2020) work alludes to the productive quality of dissent and disagreement. As she has written, "through their interaction with existing ideas and practices, [they] contributed to creating new idioms that have been crucial to the making of what we today call Indian civilization, patterns of living, cultures, traditions" (141). Thapar's framing of dissent as integral to cultural growth and change has been crucial to understanding the role dissent plays in the manifestation of contemporary dance aesthetics in India—helping choreographers negotiate between different movement cultures and traditions, past and present, and thus, deepening the relationship between how bodies move through, question, and create culture.

Political dissent is what brings these three choreographers together, but how they choose to exercise it sets them apart. In the first chapter, Raikhy's focus on proposing the body as an agent of dissent to majoritarian ethnonationalism makes us want to question and know more about what secularism is, why we should value it, and what its limitations are in the Indian context. The choreographic reels in *The Secular Project* (2020) extend the idea of dissent in public space to include dissent in digital spaces that are public. Dissent here destabilizes the

distinction between public, private, and digital space and reveals how all of these spaces function according to a pre-established order that the bodies in dissent disrupt. The choreographic work intends to resist communal hatred and the State's privileging of Hinduism and speak against the discrimination of other minority religions. Expressing diversity and range in terms of geographical regions and political issues, *The Secular Project* focuses on citizens' right to register dissent. Raikhy visualizes dissent as a collective action which is sparked by his individual decision to *orient*[229] the body towards others in hopes of engaging in a meaningful disagreement with current religious fundamentalist politics.

In the second chapter, dissent functions on the anatomical level. Dissent towards the hyperextended spine. Dissenting against the religiosity in Indian classical dance, bharatanatyam. Dissent towards the patriarchal oppression of Indian women. The techniques and the processes that Chettur develops over her career are what I am referring to as *liberatory deconstruction*. *Liberatory deconstruction* allows for a critical engagement with the repertoire of Indian classical dance, bharatanatyam, which is the main dance style Chettur is trained in. *Liberatory deconstruction* is a process through which Chettur interrogates her embodied movement history with the intention of proposing a new language of the body—commonly referred to as "minimalistic" (Kothari 2018). This language, which Chettur develops not only from her engagement but also questioning and fracturing of formal principles of Bharatanatyam, is an effort to structure a relational dialogue/conversation with the dance form, and thus, the context and location of its generation and/or modernist reconstruction, the city of Chennai.

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[229] I am using Sarah Ahmed's (2006) thinking on orientation, where Ahmed argues that orientation "involves aligning body and space" (7). According to Ahmed, orientations are societally organized and the way they are organized determine how bodies take up time and space (5). She writes that when we turn and face a direction, we invite the objects in our vision into contact. The body's orientation dictates the ways in which it inhabits the world; the body folds and takes shape in the direction it faces responding to the particular objects and people in reach, and not others.

Chettur's anatomical dissent endures the promise of freedom and liberation from brahminical narratives and anti-feminist politics in bharatanatyam and, instead, proposes compositional strategies that are based on anatomical awareness and abstraction. As highly applauded for her abstractionist treatment of bharatanatyam's basic movements and choreographic structures along with how she has "visually translated philosophical concepts of time and space as they relate to contemporary experience" (Kothari 2018), I've argued that abstraction can decontextualize and conceal the dance's history of caste-discrimination, thus pointing towards the limitations of her dissent. Furthermore, I have pointed out how Chettur's efforts to look back as a performer invoke bell hooks's (1992) concept of "oppositional gaze." I've argued that just as reversing the gaze is a bodily act of resistance towards hegemonic structures, foregrounding the backbone is an act of confrontation that yields the dancer's agency.

In the third chapter, dissent emerges at philosophical, anatomical, and regional levels. Nongmeikapam, as a member of the indigenous Meitei people of Manipur, employs dissent through joy and celebration of his ethnic culture. In his choreographic works, Nongmeikapam turns towards Meitei's philosophy of the body and the land which interferes with the State regulation of the region's border and ethnic politics. Nongmeikapam's *resistive hybridity* allows for a conversation and an empowering negotiation between national and regional culture in hopes of destabilizing the hierarchy between the two. *Resistive* hybridity allows Nongmeikapam's choreographic work to not be pulled into mainland Indian (Hindu) culture but marks its own identity as a regional aesthetic that is contemporary in both form and content. Nongmeikapam synthesizes different dance styles to create his choreographic language that is rooted in local Manipuri sensibilities. It is both a strategy and a tactic to utilize the processes of assimilation and to disrupt them.

Another thing that brings these three artists together is their focus on the spine in their bodily research. Raikhy, as I observed in the rehearsal for his latest work, *Hallucinations of an Artifact* (2023), nudges his dancers to visualize and move as if their "whole body is a spine" and to articulate the "feelings in the depth of your joints."[230] This attention to the dancer's spine breaks the linearity and rigidity of the form—the body and the classical dance style. For Chettur, the anatomical awareness of the spine is crucial to proposing a pain-free body. Focusing on spine, as a metaphor for strength, integrity, and clarity, Chettur's practice enables the dancer to speak her truth and critiques anti-feminist politics in bharatanatyam. For Nongmeikapam, the agility of the spine as it mirrors the Meitei deity, the serpentine dragon, *pakhangba*, is key to registering his regional resistance. Articulation of spinal joints has been central to each of their practices and departs from ideas of "neutral" alignment in contemporary dance and somatics. It helps find ways to stretch the bodily movement onto pathways and directions where the classically structured unit of movement won't necessarily allow the dancing body to reach.

Each of these artists' work responds to a specific regional issue that is at the center of their dissent. Based in the capital of India, New Delhi, Raikhy's choreography head-on addresses the state of national politics. As a performance-maker, Raikhy has been invested in the relationship between dissent and performance since his choreographic work, *Queen Size* (2016), that addressed and critiqued Section 377 of the Indian penal code which criminalized homosexuality.[231] In the choreographic projects that he developed in Delhi and then, later in his geographically expansive *The Secular Project*, where he traveled across India, Raikhy has been

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[230] Mandeep Raikhy's directives to dancers in rehearsal for *Tribhanga*, later known as *Hallucinations of an Artifact*, on August 14, 2022, at Khuli Khirkee, Delhi, India.

[231] *Queen-Size* is a choreographic exploration in response to Section 377 of the Indian penal code. The law, established under the British rule, criminalizes homosexuality and was decriminalized by the Indian Supreme Court on the 6th of September 2018 to legalize gay sex between consenting adults.

sensitive about his shifting location and his relationship to decision-making institutions in the center. Chettur, based in Chennai, with its fraught history of representation and position of women in society in precolonial and postcolonial India, responds with urgency in her work to the complex history of bharatanatyam and the role of urban Indian women in a patriarchal society. Upon studying closely, especially through the perspective of hereditary caste communities, the practice of bharatanatyam surfaces issues of overt brahminical religiosity, oppression of hereditary caste women, and caste-discrimination embedded in the form, which Chettur's work only partially addresses. Nongmeikapam's choreography foregrounds the politics of the north-eastern region of India. Focusing specifically on Manipur's history—British colonial politics, advent of Bengali Vaishnavism, forced merger with India, and ethnic tensions within the three tribes in Manipur—Nongmeikapam's choreographic work represents the complexity of dissent in the region that is addressed to various modes of oppression.

Returning to the question, "Why these three artists?," I started looking for examples where the artists in my study have been linked together before. I was curious to know how others have viewed what they have in common and where they depart from each other. It was then that I stumbled upon an article by Dr. Sunil Kothari who summarized the two-day dance conference at ICCR's Nandalal Gallery entitled, "Samabhavana: Celebrating New Directions in Indian Dance."[232] As organized by Sapphire Creations Dance Company, Kolkata, this conference brought many thinkers and performers in the field of Indian contemporary dance on March 3 and 4, 2018. Kothari (2018) writes that the conference was held "under four segments—Provocations, Explorations, Transformations and Negotiations—at Abanindranath Gallery and performances at Satyajit Ray Auditorium." Under "Exploration 3," Raikhy and Nongmeikapam

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[232] Sunil Kothari (2018). All quotes in this paragraph are from Dr. Kothari's (2018) article, "Footloose and Fancy Free," March 14, 2018, https://narthaki.com/info/gtsk/gtsk177.html.

engaged in a discussion on dissent and the performing body along with performance makers, Maya Krishna Rao, Daminee Basu and Sudarshan Chakravorty. Under "Negotiation 2," Chettur performed her choreographic work, *Beautiful Things 2* (2011), supported by and as part of the first season of Pickle Factory Festival at Gem Cinema, Kolkata. In Kothari's words, Chettur's choreographic intervention was referred to as "highly abstract in nature." He pointed out that while "Chandra's (Chandraledkha's) work primarily engaged itself with deconstructing the form of Bharatanatyam, Padmini (Chettur) formed a practice that shifted the choreographic tradition to a minimalistic language."

Although sharing space with each other for a moment in this conference, Raikhy, Chettur, and Nongmeikapam are seen addressing questions of dissent and departure from previous choreographic traditions in Indian dance. Their choreographic interventions have furthered a new language of the Indian dancing body. Discussions on dissent through performance in this conference point to the fact that the questions I have raised in this dissertation are timely and relevant to the field of contemporary dance in India. In this dissertation, it has been my intention to work with the question that frames this conclusion—How does one *read* dissent in performance? In this dissertation, I've attempted to look closely at the relationship between the body and the context in which it exists. I do not represent the body existing in isolation of its context, i.e., the geographical, regional, social, cultural, and political environments it lives in, rather I view and theorize the body as shaping and being shaped by its environment.[233] To extend this logic, the dancing body is shaped by the training it participates in and, in return, shapes it,

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[233] Scholars working with/within applied phenomenology such as Iris Marion Young (1990), Janet O'Shea (2019), Greg Downey (2005) and Vivian Sobchack (2005), among others, have analyzed the relation between experience, subjectivity, and social conditions and how it impacts one's mobility. Like O'Shea (2019), Downey (2005) argues that physical training shapes experience and subjectivity (x). Building on the work of these scholars, I see the dancing body as shaped by the training it participates in.

shifts it, and transforms it into something new each time, thus refraining from arriving at a fixed definition of contemporary dance.

Furthermore, in this research, I've proposed that dissent promises a sense of freedom and liberation for those who participate in it. I've mostly referred to religious freedom, anatomical freedom, and regional-ethnic freedom in response to authoritarian institutions. However, what I haven't articulated yet is how difficult it is to engage in dissent under the current circumstances in India. Like the "control" societies Gilles Deleuze (1995) referred to in his work,[234] not only State surveillance and policing, but also the State's agents, such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), determine what kinds of political actions are deemed permissible in public (and oftentimes, in private) spaces. This has cultivated and maintained a culture of fear in India, where those who speak up and against the State are met with real repercussions, such as arrests, forced displacement, even death.

To that end, I address the act of political dissent in the work of three choreographers who have been able to utilize it, while acknowledging the efforts of others who haven't had the privilege to dissent publicly for various reasons, due to their marginalized caste, class, and gender identities, thus their minoritized social location. The choreographers in my study have worked with the body in a way that it becomes an agent of dissent to processes of majoritarian nationalism, racialization, gender discrimination, objectification, patriarchal abuse, and religious fundamentalism. They have been successful in creating an ecosystem of dancers and choreographers in their own respective cities—Delhi, Chennai, and Imphal. Indian contemporary dancers create anti-conservative images of and experiences for Indian dancing bodies that

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[234] Furthering Gilles Deleuze's (1995) work on "control" societies, André Lepecki (2013) clarifies that "control not only tracks, but also—and this is Deleuze's point—preconditions freedom from within by subtly providing pathways for circulation that are introjected as the only ones imaginable, the only ones deemed appropriate" (15).

"elevate" their work to labels such as abstract, experimental, radical, and avant-garde. However, it is urgent to consider who gets access to these experimental spaces—who is invited, who views the work, and who comprehends the codes of the intervention. Furthermore, based on contemporary dance's claims of freedom, expression, and enhanced mobility, whose bodies are represented and, thus, seen as liberated in this effort?

I assert that who is able to navigate these spaces effectively and communicate the social and political relevance of their work and stay "authentic" to cultivating a contemporary aesthetic in Indian dance is vexed with questions of privilege, access, and visibility. Who can resist the spectacularized politics of hatred, hegemony, and oppression, and whose bodies can be liberated in the process raises another set of questions about limitations of public dissent for future research. Although I haven't been able to include the work of many respected colleagues and friends—both dancers and choreographers—from Bangalore, Bombay, and Kolkata, among other regions, it has been my hope that through this project we begin to disentangle the canon of "Indian" contemporary dance and begin to view it in its regional and historical specificity, and to ask questions that reflect an intersectional analysis of our choreographic impulses. With Doreen Massey's (2005) proposition of "radical contemporaneity," I hope to rethink corporeal located-ness and connectivity as a precondition for postcolonial inquiry in Indian dance.

Holding on to my identity as a "contemporary dancer" in/from India, while I conducted the research for this dissertation, required me to overcome many barriers—cultural and physical—encountered along the way. When I started the fieldwork for this research in New Delhi in 2022, I felt excited and nervous. I had lived all my life in Delhi and only moved to Los Angeles to pursue my PhD in 2018, but I felt like I had to re-introduce myself to everyone in the community—old and new members. When I went to the studio for the first time to observe

rehearsals, I was already over-stimulated from the previous night—engaging in deep conversations with my interlocutor and then driving back to my Airbnb in Delhi's rain. Roads were jam-packed with cars pushing through the heavy rain like a ship moving through a storm in the middle of the sea. This is something I felt was similar to my experience as a dance ethnographer.

As I entered the studio to observe the rehearsal for the very first time in Khuli Khirkee, I felt like such an outsider and kind of an imposter. Something bothered me throughout the rehearsal which I only began to understand and articulate towards the end—What am I doing here? What am I trying to capture? What is it that is slipping out in the moment as I am watching, observing, and feeling the dance?

The body moves so fast and proposes so many ideas and thoughts in a single phrase that I felt like I wanted to hold onto each one of them, but I couldn't. I wrote what I heard, making notes on the quality and timing of the dancers' movements. As I wrote my reflections during and after the rehearsals, I dealt with, battled, and struggled with my internal confusion. Eventually, I learned to see this ethnographic research as a process—I'm doing this for the first time and no one else can really tell me what to think, what to ask, what to pay attention to when I'm in the "field."

I experienced this as the challenge of ethnographic research and of the subject of this research—contemporary dance. Listening to the body of the contemporary dancer, I learned to read signs that reveal ways in which our dance histories have been and are reconfigured. The contemporary dancer, as a dissident cultural agent, demonstrates and directs us towards questions that ask: What are the conditions in which dancing bodies reconfigure performance traditions and dance histories? *Whose* histories and traditions do they deconstruct/reconstruct? How are "new"

dance aesthetics made? What, *specifically*, makes them new? How does the process of assembling dance aesthetics signal a departure from or a disruption in a particular choreographic tradition? These are some of the questions that directed this research and have stayed with me at the end of this dissertation.

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