

**CONFIGURING THE ‘CONTEMPORARY’:  
CHOREOGRAPHIC PROCESSES OF NAVTEJ JOHAR, PADMINI  
CHETTUR, AND JAYACHANDRAN PALAZHY**

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**INTRODUCTION**

Peter Osborne argues, *The root idea of ‘Contemporary’ as a living, existing, or occurring together in time...is derived from the medieval Latin ‘Contemporaneous’, the English ‘Contemporary’ dates from around mid-seventeenth century* (Osborne, 2013: pp 15). He points out a sense of *up-to-datenss* (Osborne, 2013: pp 16) that is demanded of this term in its popular usage, and characterizes ‘contemporaneity’ with *transnationality* and *coming together of different times* (Osborne, 2013: pp 17).

In the light of Osborne’s understanding of the term ‘Contemporary’, and also with Andy Horwitz’s reference to Contemporary performance as *time-based art with its origins in dance and theatre* (Horwitz, 2011), the attempt here is to pinpoint the central concern of the ‘Contemporary’ in dance/performance which is embodiment of ‘multiplicity’ and ‘interactivity’ of the current times. In a context of growing interconnections between bodies and spaces, the paper intends to read a sense of *Heterotopia* in the ‘Contemporary’ performance spaces. Michel Foucault, in one of his lectures in 1967, defined *Heterotopia* as a space of *otherness*. It is neither here nor there, and creates *mixed experience*. For example, a conversation over a phone call or the moment when one looks at oneself in the mirror (translated by Jay Miskowiec, 1984). The *heterotopic* performance spaces may exhibit the ability to question the terms

and order of 'centre' and 'periphery'. By attributing such conceptualization to 'Contemporary', one observes the value in the instability of form, structure, and spectatorship that characterizes the 'Contemporary' in dance/performance.

'Contemporary dance' as a term was first used in Europe to connote dance that emerged after the Second World War, when a historian Georges Arout published a book titled, *The Contemporary Dance*, in 1955. But what he only meant was to refer to the dance of his times, and not as a specific category or style of dancing. It is only towards the end of the 80's that the term 'Contemporary' began to be attributed to certain dance styles in order to signify departure from Modern dance, which had functioned as a critique of both traditional structures and vagaries of modern life. It must be noted that it was around the same time that 'aesthetic populism' was on rise, as what was termed as 'post-modern movement'. Pallabi Chakravorty draws from Fredric Jameson's argument that *postmodernism is nothing but the cultural logic of late capitalism where cultural production has become synonymous with commodity production*. (Chakravorty, 2008: pp 64). In my observation, 'Contemporary', when thought of as a genre, is often alternatively used for post-modern dance in the west, which is both high art and commercially viable. For the same reason, in the non-western contexts, very often the term is identified with imitations of western technique and choreographic methods.

The problem which then arises is how to identify and evaluate dance/performance that surpasses the periodic, ideological, structural limitations of modern and post-modern or other categories, and is devoted to criticality in performance. In other words, how does one classify danceworks and artworks that can

instigate dialogues about what Ben Highmore understands as *fissures of urban fabric*, and refer to *spaces of different temporalities, outmoded spaces with distinct cultural characteristics, thus interrupting the homogenizing and hypnotizing effects of capitalist standardization* (Highmore, 2002: pp 141). It is at this point that I configure 'Contemporary' as a lens with which one can study works that urge to find relationship with different times, break through the nationalist and ethnic moulds, and are important from the point of view of how they comprise physical and mental capacities to challenge existing patterns of sociability, perception, and ethics<sup>1</sup> (Burt in ed. Briginshaw, 2009: pp 206-207).

The term 'Contemporary' in dance in the Indian context appears in academic documentations of dance, amidst stated categories in dance festivals and performances, in popular realms such as TV shows and internet feeding the local imagination, also day-to-day conversations referring variedly to abstract danceworks, dances that outdo creative and aesthetic limitations of a form, and simplistic imitations of western methods and techniques of dance. Such constant employment of this term is my starting point towards bringing attention to the political and aesthetic reasoning associated to this term in dance. I am interested in looking at the artists who refer to this term to denote dance as a research-based critical practice and in that process, effectively dismantle binaries. These artists pre-occupy the 'niche' or the 'fringe' spaces of performance as they constantly challenge dominant perspectives and commercialism in dance. I choose three artists from the Indian context, namely Navtej Johar, Padmini Chettur, and Jayachandran Palazhy, who in my view, can be seen to be operating in the

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<sup>1</sup> Ramsay Burt studies Spinoza's theory on 'Affect', and how change in 'Affect' can influence individual's feelings qualitatively.

contemporary dance-scapes<sup>2</sup>, posing some fundamental questions to the existing principles of dance. The term is employed by these artists in order to denote 'relevance' of their practice, and comprehend their time and space through their dance.

Studying these artists as choreographers/dancers/performers entails studying their individual processes of reading and writing of dance<sup>3</sup> (Foster, in ed. Bennahum, 2005: pp 29) wherein one is looking at how the relationship between their larger cultural *habitus*<sup>4</sup>, and artistic practice lends to their imagination and experience, and gets manifested in their works. Drawing from Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1991), the relationship between art and artist is being understood here in the ways that they produce each other<sup>5</sup> to constitute the artist's 'present-ness'. The objective of the paper is to trouble the idea of a defined 'Contemporary' in dance and performance and configure it as something which is 'subjective' by identifying the creative impulses and choices of each artist.

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<sup>2</sup> Appadurai, in his theories on 'Globalisation' gives the concept of 'ethno-scapes' (Appadurai, 1996), which may refer to, "changing social, territorial, and cultural reproduction of group identity...As the groups migrate, regroup in new locations, and reconstruct their histories...". Paula Saukko extends the list of Appadurai's '-scapes' and uses the notion of 'bodyscapes' (Hammergren in ed. Foster, 2009) to understand the intercultural flow of corporeal practices like dance, in her accounts of the reception of Ram Gopal Verma's Indian dance in Sweden.

<sup>3</sup> Choreography has been conflated with dance composition, as in Bharatnatyam within the Indian dance. Susan Foster studies 'choreography' as a way of contextualizing the 'corporeal' dancing bodies, on the part of the choreographer, dancer, and the audience.

<sup>4</sup> Pierre Bourdieu in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984) and *The Logic of Practice* (1990) has sufficiently examined the concept of "habitus" to explain the basis of production of cultural knowledge in society. It relates to dispositions i.e. enduring and acquired schemes of perception, thought and action of an individual agent who responds to the objective social conditions it encounters, which simultaneously trains her/his the body, mind and emotion.

<sup>5</sup> In the light of Lefebvre's argument, wherein he says, "it is by means of body that space is perceived, lived,- and produced" (Lefebvre, 1992: 162), Valerie Briginshaw explores, "how spaces are constructed to have particular associations, how performers in them are also constructed, and how each contributes to the construction of the other" (Briginshaw, 2001: pp4). Borrowing from Briginshaw's explorations, the paper reads artists as 'subjects' and their practice as 'spaces, mutually informing each other.

## **'CONTEMPORARY' IN INDIAN DANCE SCHOLARSHIP**

To begin with, one has to acknowledge that in the Indian context, the term 'Contemporary' cannot be conceived as a genre or a classification with partially pre-determined parameters, as is in the west. For example, as Susan Foster (2009) outlines the historical approaches to dance composition, the term 'Contemporary' in her account, appears as a 'tenser' and not as a 'tense'. She attributes it to the current dance practitioners, who are examined through *modern dance paradigms* (Foster, 1986). The term is also used in reference to the choreological systems of dance formulated by artists such as Rudolf Laban and William Forsythe, or to the *tanztheater* emerging out of a synthesis of various art forms conceptualized by Pina Bausch. While, unlike 'modern' and 'post-modern', 'Contemporary dance' is not so much framed in time, yet in the west, it does refer to certain clearly recognizable aesthetic choices, and is often read through references found in modern and post-modern dance.

Most Indian dance scholars conflate the term 'contemporary' with innovation and newness. Uttara Asha Coorlawala brings together on the same plane, various Indian dancers/choreographers, beginning with Uday Shankar, Narendra Sharma, Chandralekha, Astad Deboo, Kumudini Lakhia, and many others on the basis of their common awareness that, *they are in some sense transgressing the traditional expectations and attitudes which their training postulated as ideal.* (Coorlawala, 1994: pp 272). She undertakes a study of the images, postures, and sources of their movement, and labels them as individualistic expressions of *contemporary Indian experience* (Coorlawala, 1994: pp 272). Alessandra Royo, suggests, *There is, only*

*contemporary dance, which continues to be sustained, in a variety of modes, by 'classicism'. This contemporary dance is about conservation, preservation, retrieval and painstaking reconstruction, but it is also about tension, rupture, dynamism and subversion* (Royo, 2003: pp 155). Such positions clearly condemn a generic application of the western scholarly understandings of 'contemporary' to dance in India, and encourage a more context-specific examination.

Observably, 'Contemporary' is viewed with reference to existing systems of dance; modern in the Euro-American context, and traditional in the Indian context. Though there are no consolidated modern dance techniques in Indian dance, artists like Rabindranath Tagore, Uday Shankar, Rukmini Devi Arundale, and Chandralekha, have been regarded as the 'modernists' in many historical accounts within Indian dance scholarship<sup>6</sup>. These artists have been documented by dance historians as nodes in the past to which the present-day artists can be traced in a way to achieve a sense of historical continuity of 'modern' in the Indian context. Yet there remains an ideological disparity in their endeavours which forces one to ask what does 'modern' in the Indian dance discourse really mean. While Arundale and Shankar's efforts reflected their revivalist and nationalist sensibilities, in the ways that they both were, though in different degrees and with varying forms, devoted to finding a 'representation' of India in the west, Tagore was inspired to find a modern dance that would truly express freedom of human thought and expression, and not the ambitions to essentialise itself in time (Bharucha, 2006).

Chandralekha, who began choreographing around the 60's, had the philosophy of her experiments closer to Tagore's. Ananya Chatterjea points out *a revisioning of*

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<sup>6</sup> Meduri, 2005; Vatsyayan in ed. Kothari, 2003; Ed. Chakravorty, 2008; Sarkar Munsri, 2008

*traditional cultural practices* in Chandra's works, which *were instrumental in the global recognition of a 'contemporary' genre of Indian dance*, must be read as a critique of an *unadulterated past* than *revivalism* (Chatterjea, 2004: pp 10). Such an understanding also holds true for Tagore's liberal and feminist politics that his dance had embodied. Hence, it is important to acknowledge the problematics of 'modern', that is to point out, how the Euro-American appropriation of the term to cast a primitive 'other' prevents a vital distinction between revivalist tendencies in dance on the one hand, and cultural rooted-ness and resistance on the other. Given the politics of the terms 'modern' and 'post-modern', the term 'Contemporary' may then be theorised to analyse and grasp those experiments which are really devoted to 'radicality' and 'transnationality' in dance.

A befitting definition of 'Contemporary' could be found in Michel De Certeau's (1988: 117) argument about space as *situated as the act of a present (or of a time), and modified by the transformations caused by successive contexts* (Jarvinen in ed. Ravn and Rouhiainen, 2012: pp 57). Thus, 'Contemporary' may be evaluated as that which embodies the 'present' with an equal possibility and value for mediation and change. It is with such understanding that I wish to study the following Indian artists as 'Contemporary', to suggest differing ways in which they are responding to their times. By shifting focus to their 'process' of creation over form, structure, and repertoire, the idea is to demonstrate how these artists are devoted to an 'inquiry' in dance and intertwining their individual politics with their artistic practice.

### **NAVTEJ JOHAR: What brings him in this discussion on 'contemporary'?**

In one of his interviews, Johar shares, what he is seeking in his practice *is a relationship between mood of Bharatnatyam and contemporary movement*. His website,

Abyastrust.org, recognizes him as a *Bharatnatyam exponent and a choreographer*, whose work freely traverses between the traditional and the avante-garde, with his works including both *classical Bharatnatyam* and *contemporary performance pieces*. An important piece of information in this regard is that Johar is also a recipient of Sangeet Natak Akademi award 2014 for his dance theatre and works of ‘contemporary’ choreography’. Yet in many conversations, Johar refrains from being identified with a particular category, and banks on terms such as *non-traditional* to suggest his departure from being a ‘pure’ Bharatnatyam dancer, thus suggesting a dichotomous relationship that he shares with the term ‘Contemporary’.

### **Finding his own Bharatnatyam through Yoga**

Trained in Bharatnatyam at Rukmini Devi Arundale’s Kalakshetra in Chennai, with Leela Samson at the Shriram Bhartiya Kala Kendra, New Delhi, and having worked in modern dance with many companies for nine years in Michigan, what Johar claims is an *ownership* of his classical form in most of his conversations. He refrains from calling himself a *mainstream Bharatnatyam dancer*, and seeks *freedom* in ‘Contemporary’ which, according to him, Bharatnatyam, given its *current reality* and *commercialization* fails to provide. He finds the decorative nature of Indian dance as highly problematic, and its norm and form, tyrannical and oppressive. By conflating Bharatnatyam technique with Yoga, he intends to experience the *somatic* and devotes himself to achieving a cohesion of body, mind, and soul in dance.

### **Process**

The starting point for Johar in his choreographic process is Yoga, with which he intends to work on isolated muscles, and activate his imagination and that he terms as the

*magnetic spaces* in his body. He devotes himself to finding physical possibilities of locating *subtle pressure points in the body from where we exert and assert the identity of Bharatnatyam*. The movements are created using a combination of pure Bharatnatyam technique along with theatre games, which construct his *repertoire of rehearsed experiences*. Johar argues, *I believe the structure is meant to be surpassed at some point in any artistic endeavor but there is absolutely no telling if and how the magical moment happens on stage*. What this clearly conveys is Johar's evocation of 'immediacy' and 'experience' in his dance. Employing Abhinaya and Rasa as choreographic tools to generate movements, Johar is often seen swirling, making deep lunges, and long arm-lines, while using interactive face and hand gestures, in most of his danceworks. He emphasizes on *not mixing Bharatnatyam technique with any other form* for the sake of 'fusions' demanded by the market. His creations are rather propelled by *inner desire and feelings* to move. The impulse is to defy the difference of *proper and improper* and reach a state of deep contentment or *sukha*, through movement.

### **Paradox central to his practice**

By responding to his impulses, Johar attempts to distance himself from hierarchies, and value 'paradox' in his practice. With his works such as *Dravya Kaya*, *Fanaa*, *Mango Cherry*, *Never Failed Me Yet*, and others, he creates 'spaces' oscillating between traditional and non-traditional, structure and non-structure, and interacts through these binaries as a subject. One can observe paradoxes in Johar's own cultural identity; a Sikh male who dances Bharatnatyam, plays 'feminine' characters such as *Devadasi*, and have studied in an institution like University of Michigan, which reflects in

his politics and performance. His questioning of Bharatnatyam's sanctity as a Hindu tradition emerges from his such paradoxical social reality and comes to shape his choreographic intentions of inhabiting the in-between and embodying the *somatic*<sup>7</sup>.

### **PADMINI CHETTUR: What brings her to this discussion?**

Chettur calls her dance *Contemporary dance* and rejects the notion of *Contemporary Indian dance*. *Contemporary for me is in that moment when we begin to question/give away what we already know, to situate ourselves in our current times. It is about constantly re-inventing oneself*, says Chettur, for whom, 'Contemporary' symbolizes both *departure* and *radicality*. She claims to not concern herself with *breaking of tradition*, but with *knowing as much as she can about body* and continuing to keep her dance *creative*. This is what constitutes for her the *central logic of contemporarisation of dance in India*.

### **Finding a neutral body**

Having Bharatnatyam as her entry point into dance, and having worked for several years with Chandralekha, what Chettur seeks is a body that is *strong, centred*, has *surpassed* particular techniques and training systems, and can be reduced to its own *pure lines*. For her an integral part of her signature style includes a *search within those aspects of movement which have nothing to do with form*. Her pursuit is to arrive at a *neutral body*, and translate one's concerns into *bodyness*, with an understanding that using one's body is itself a political choice. This is what informs her pre-occupation with the spine, the parallel, and the axis of the body, as she observes the *being* of an un-marked body in space.

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<sup>7</sup> Excerpts from lecture in Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, 10-04-2015. Interview excerpts from [www.abhyastrust.org](http://www.abhyastrust.org), ed. Munsi and Burridge, 2011, Katrak, 2012, interview with Lalitha Venkat on [www.narthaki.com](http://www.narthaki.com)

## Process

Her search to define *where does body begin and end* is what motivates Chettur's inquiry. She shares, *My starting point as I begin my creative process is always a physical proposition and never a theme or a concept. For example, 'Pushed' is an exploration of what does 'anger' look like?* Employing 'space' and 'gaze' as her choreographic tools, Chettur comes up with movements that are geometrical and minimal in nature. In most of her works such as *Pushed, Fragility, Wall Dancing* and others, one can see dancers performing movements such making triangles with their bodies by going on all fours, or creating flat lines with the arms, as they evoke a sense of symmetry into the visual that they create. For her, *It is important to wait till the body begins to feel the movement, and can articulate every moment of the movement*, as she aims at understanding, *how to execute every movement as if we are doing it for the first time*. Clearly, her guiding impulse is to resist doing what one knows, to repeat and sustain the movement to its full potential, and be provoked by space.

## Resistance and Abstraction

Having begun to dance at an early age of 3, Chettur seems to have been initiated into her social milieu through dance, which also clearly reflects in her statement when she says, *My practice is about bringing dance consciousness to every action we do*. Yet she accepts being resistant to her rigorous training in Bharatnatyam, which *codified* not only her physicality and movement, but also *inserted her into Tamil Brahmin culture*. Rejecting vehemently, the beautified movements of dance, strung around a nation/religion bound identity, Chettur's pursuit is to bring *sensuality and sexuality* to body in dance. She evokes 'abstraction' in her practice. *Abstraction for me is anti-*

*sentiment. It can lead to transformation and new aesthetics. It has the ability to tell a story other than itself. It is like proposing discomfort, challenging form so that it develops,* explains Chettur. What lies at the base of her abstraction is her motivation to create *simple and basic* movements with which she can say what she cannot using language or discourse<sup>8</sup>.

### **JAYACHANDRAN PALAZHY: What brings him to this discussion?**

*As dancers if we want to make sense of our lives, we need new languages... Old traditions have come out of memories of a different time, now we need to find contemporary art of expression to authenticate our daily experiences and process them,* argues Palazhy, who talks as the artistic director of Attakalari Centre of Movement Arts, a leading dance institution regularly involved in organizing and supporting contemporary art and dance festivals in India. With an intention to conflate *Traditional Physical Wisdom, Innovation, and Technology* into dance, what Palazhy is devoted towards is not contemporary 'dance', but *contemporary movement* interacting with all other contemporary art forms like films, visual arts, and others.

### **Deconstruction of languages**

With a diverse training background in Indian traditions such as Bharatnatyam, Kathakali, Kalaripayattu, and having trained at London School of Contemporary dance in forms such as Classical Ballet, Tai Chi, Capoeira, Palazhy is motivated towards a *deconstruction of languages* while working from *within the forms*. What constitutes his practice is his intention to create *Indian movement expressions of contemporary reality*,

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<sup>8</sup> Quotes from personal interview with Padmini Chettur, at Gati Summer Dance Residency, 2015, [www.padminichettur.com](http://www.padminichettur.com), ed. Munsri and Burr ridge, 2011, Katrak, 2012

and *extend the reach of contemporary movement arts*. For Palazhy, the *vocabulary, structure, and scientific body movements of the Indian classical dances are beautiful*, but what is important to him is that dance must also benefit present context. Hence, with his bank of knowledge of varied dance vocabularies, he is interested in *finding movement principles of Indian physical traditions*, which he comprehends as the enabling force towards the *progress* of dance in India.

### **Process**

Palazhy's choreographic process involves engaging with *one's memories of the events that one may have lived through*, discovering *the residues one's landscapes leaves in one's body*, and digging through the already known techniques through improvisation to create *innovative movements* which may interact and in some way situate itself in the mover's socio-political environment. For example, in one of his works *Chronotopia*, Palazhy claims to have *explored the concept of Tinai from the Tamil poetics, where landscapes reflect the internal feelings of the characters...through digital productions that keep shifting across dance movements and postures in an interactive scenography*. In his works such as *Transavatar*, *Meidhwani*, *Purushartha*, *City Maps*, etc. Palazhy responds to his impulse to know *Who am I? Where am I?*, arrive at a *neuro-centric style of movement*, and a *contemporary expression* facilitated not just by dance but also by other artistic media.

### **Mediatisation and dance**

The hybridity that Palazhy seems to have experienced in his socio-cultural construction, that is the leap from staying in a small village of Kerala, witnessing dance (Kathakali, Mohiniattam, Kuchipudi, and Bharatnatyam) as communitarian/religious

theatre, to being initiated into an empirical training in Physics and living as a dancer/choreographer for fifteen years in London, is also the hybridity that is easily readable in Palazhy's choreographic choices. Visible in Palazhy's employment of extensive technology to create multi-media productions is his need to create a *new language* which he can situate in his *current psycho-physical system* and which can hold his response to *myriad mental journeys one makes in the modern age*. By engaging himself with 'performance arts', he not only outdoes 'body' as his medium of contemporary expression, but also attempts to progress from his *village past* into the *international*<sup>9</sup>.

### **CONFIGURING THE 'CONTEMPORARY'**

With 'Contemporary choreography' being recognized as a category for grants by organizations such as Indian Council for Cultural Relations and Sangeet Natak Akademi, and several contemporary dance festivals being held in India, asking what is this 'expression' and why and how is it being framed becomes extremely required and fruitful. The study of the above artists clearly suggests that it is not simplistically, an *expression and idiom of Indian dance...distinct entity different from our traditional styles of classical dances*<sup>10</sup>, but highlights the spaces the artists are creating to realize their visions and aspirations for a *transnational mobility*<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Quotes from Ed. Muni and Burrige, 2011, attakalari.org, Interview with Janani Ganesan on archive.tehelka.org, interview with Harshini Vakalanka on thehindu.com Reference unclear – needs retrieval dates

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.sangeetnatak.gov.in/sna/sup-composer.htm>, retrieved on October 10, 2015

<sup>11</sup> Aihwa Ong notes that "[t]ransnational mobility and maneuvers mean that there is a new mode of constructing identity, as well as new modes of subjectification that cut across political borders" (Njaradi, 2014: pp 258).

## Contemporary Performance

The artists chosen traverse through common dance-scapes; all three have been associated to two important hallmarks of dance in India, namely, Rukmini Devi Arundale, and Chandralekha, and are constantly interacting with organizations working towards new and experimental dance in India. What is clear in their experiments is their intention of being rooted in their social and cultural reality, while being critical of nationalistic and market-oriented labels. Each of the three artists' relationship to the tradition of Bharatnatyam differs. Johar re-defines 'tradition' for himself by dissociating it to its religious and communal linkages. Chettur finds a disconnect with her past in the pursuit of her individual vocabulary, while Palazhy reviews traditions from the point of view of being an 'urban' citizen and the dynamics of rural-urban mobility. Yet all three reject the construction of dance into a representative form. By challenging the 'decorative-ness' of dance, what they bring into question is performativity of dance itself. Hence, their extensive engagement with artistic media other than just dance and spaces other than proscenium dismantles the idea of 'Contemporary Dance' as a coherent category, and is suggestive of the development of a more inclusive 'Contemporary Performance', wherein the utmost faculty lies with the body in performance, regardless of the forms, media, and structures. What matters to them is not the 'symbolic' as is the case in the traditional dances, but the physical wisdom in a movement. Their focus is on 'what' to say, and 'how' to say; in the 'moment' understood in a heterotopic sense when the rupture happens. It is never always entrusted in the 'final' performance, but could happen anytime.

## Spectatorship

With respect to the spectatorship, they all raise different expectations through their works. Johar attempts to create a 'spiritual experience' which is also provocative in the ways that it troubles the division of right and wrong by disturbing the gendered and disciplinarian codes of dance. Palazhy constantly insists on a body in a digitalized world and evokes a 'spectacle' with an intention to transcend everyday mundanity while also suggesting the hovering dominance of technology in contemporary lives. Chettur constructs those images and spaces which are yet unsymbolised and unquantifiable, to make sense of which one cannot resort to one's past memories, and hence challenges both the audience and dancers with movements that evoke un-spectacle and are extremely detailed. Given the varied experiences they seem to call for from their varied works, their spectator must be regarded as a 'speculator' attempting his/her own 'reading' of their work. This speculator *co-imagines*<sup>12</sup> the work as much as the choreographers and performers do. Susan Foster (1986: pp 41) comprehends such *co-imagination* on the part of the viewer as she points out, *each viewer's experience is unique, not simply because each person has a different heritage of associations to the dance but because each viewer has literally made a different dance* (Hamalainen in ed. Wildschut and Butterworth, 2009: pp 113). Hence, it is important to suggest that Contemporary performance, such as conceived by the artists under-study exhibits the ability to trouble the observer-observed relationship between the performers and the audience, and re-evaluate the outlines of authorship in dance.

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<sup>12</sup> (Lepicki, in conversation with Crunteanu, <http://revistaarta.ro/en/the-power-of-co-in-contemporary-dance/>, 2016)

## Patronage, funding, sponsorship

One of the much known dance forums in India, Gati Dance Forum, has recently launched a Masters course in dance and performance at Ambedkar University, Delhi. What is worth noting is what the artistic director of the course, Mandeep Raikhy, had to say about the title of the course, *We dismissed the term 'Contemporary' for the title, for the expectations it might raise of the course to deal with the either/or between Indian classical based Contemporary or a Contemporary that imitates the western styles of dancing. Instead Dance as Critical Practice was suggested*<sup>13</sup>.

It is clear that the formlessness that those aligning with the term 'Contemporary' often seek due to the problem of museumisation in case of traditional, and commodification in case of a westernised 'contemporary dance', brings them in a fix pertaining to issues of funding. Historically, the patrons have been the British or the Gurus in case of classical dances. As Sharon Lowen argues, *As the Indian Independence brought an end to royal patronage, support for art and artists has developed onto the government and wealthy individuals and business families such as the Tatas, Birlas, Bharat Rams, and Charat Rams* (Lowen in ed. Erdman, 1992: pp 231). With respect to the said artists, since they have been performing for years, nationally and internationally, they have been able to acquire 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1986) in terms of personal and friendship based contacts. There is also availability of government funding, from organisations such as ICCR, and Sangeet Natak Academi. Yet that is not without its own political conflicts. For example, one of the three artists confessed to facing pressures of creating contemporary work around themes of nationalistic tones, from the government organisers. In the absence of genre-

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<sup>13</sup> In a personal interview with Mandeep Raikhy, at Gati Dance Forum, Delhi, on 24<sup>th</sup> April, 2016

specified 'structuring' of the body and performance, the patrons and funders sometimes acquire the capacity to influence the creative decision-making for these artists, and effectively operate as 'collaborators'. State's discomfort with the uncertainty embedded in the 'contemporary' may also sometimes limit the level of abstraction in the work and influence the artist to withdraw from social critique.

Other than State, the neo-liberal market owns resources to generate sponsorships for the contemporary performance artists. As Horwitz suggests, while the market remains remunerative for contemporary visual artists for their object-based works, it is not so much the case with contemporary performance artists which create works that are more experience-based (Horwitz, 2011). Worth noting here is that it is exactly this difference that has to be perceived between contemporary dance/performance that evokes critique, experience, and research, and those performances that 'objectify' dance as either commercial or traditional. One possible solution to accommodate the contemporary performance artists into the arts world so they can procure support from the market is when arts infrastructure develops strategies for creating value around *experience design*, and values *craft and discipline* over the simplified and *authentic* (Horwitz, 2011).

## **CONCLUSION**

It is for these reasons that sorting out labels such as contemporary, modern, experimental etc. assumes importance. It is extremely crucial that the expectations and responsibilities pertaining to usage of labels be outlined. The key expectation is to outdo what exists and break patterns and formative tendencies, to question and discomfort. This paper is an attempt to suggest how social critique in performance can be mobilized

in a framework that can be developed through a theorization of the 'Contemporary'. Considering that both the artists and the spectators instigate meaning-making based on their individual interactive and socio-cultural networks in which they operate, 'Contemporary' has to be allocated to a *heterotopic* space which is created for and by itself. Henceforth, it can be defined as a 'process/lens' to accessing and comprehending the 'here' and the 'now', contextualizing and lending oneself into new networks and relationships. Sustaining on the in-between-ness of defined categories, 'Contemporary' in dance/performance in the Indian context, opens up room for 'doubts', 'confusions', and 'inquisitiveness'. Its value lies in suggesting a constant negotiation of both the artists and the spectators with their 'multiple subjectivities' (Briginshaw, 2001) borne out of their desire to carve 'global' connections.

It is noteworthy that there are considerable number of organizations across India which are involved in building support systems for such artists, such as Sangeet Natak Akademi, ICCR, Goethe Institute, and Japan Foundation to name a few. With various renowned universities like Jawaharlal Nehru University, Ambedkar University and Shiv Nadar University having institutionalized Performing Arts studies, and many schools introducing Performing Arts into their curriculum, 'Contemporary' performance clearly holds a strong future in India. Navtej Johar, Padmini Chettur, and Jayachandran Palazhy, among many artists in India today, have not only commendably made a place for themselves amidst the dominance of Hinduised traditions in the Indian society, but have successfully entered the international domain without assuming any ethnic ambassadorship. Their endeavors may be translated into a spirit directed at

acknowledging the differences of opinions, thoughts, and ideologies, characteristic of a pluralistic society like India, and evolving arts into spaces for dialogue and discourse.

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