

“Tribal Dance” in India: A concept, a Category and an Ethnographic reality

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Abstract: Definition of “tribe” in the Indian context is a highly complicated process or is made complicated because of various reasons. However, its application to the various ethnic groups in India is no less reflected in the artistic sphere involving the interest of the whole country. Distinction between “tribe” / “non-tribe” as reflected in today’s Indian social outlook has many conditions and dimensions, such as political, economic, linguistic, cultural. “Belonging” or “not belonging” to a particular group or a community in the form of a tribe sometimes depends on the outcome of a long process of negotiation, which may create contradictions at certain level. At the same time the *clieche* “tribal dance” is well known in the social and cultural world and is widely in use, though often in an extremely unclear way. The paper is focused on what it actually stays for a “tribal dance” in today’s India, what are its characteristics, what is its content. It examines the concept of “tribal dance” in India in opposition to “folk”, “classical” and similar such connotations, as well as in the context of its increasing use in the recent phenomenon of “neo-rural” and “neo-tribal”. Few cases (Santali, Kalbelia dances) show highly conditional, uncertain and loose character of the schemes adopted to classify dancing practice as an ethnographic reality in today’s India.

Key words : tribal dance, classification, performance, Santali dance, Kalbelia dance

INTRODUCTION: TRIBAL AND OTHERWISE

Highly complicated and diverse implications of the definition of “tribe” to the various ethnic groups in India are also reflected in the artistic sphere representing sometimes the whole country. Distinction between “tribe” and “non-tribe” in today’s Indian social outlook is intricately related with diverse conditions and involves different political, economic, linguistic, cultural dimensions. “Belonging” or “not belonging” to a particular group or a community like tribe and eventually applying or not applying the reservation practice to that group sometimes creates contradictions and can even led to political instability and violence. It is notable, that several authors and editors (Devy *et al.*, 2009) just avoid the usage of the terms “tribe”, “tribal” and the like in their writings on the groups, which in other publications are addressed to

as exactly manifesting the tribal ones. Another problem is the commercial usage of the tribal identity as a resource; the scandal of “human safaris” organized in 2012 for tourists in Andaman Islands when Jarawa women were forced to dance¹ became viral worldwide and got a lot of negative reactions. On the other side, presentation of “tribal” as well as folk and classical dances for various purposes like welcoming guests, providing entertainment, advertising, etc. is a widely known practice in India, and few communities, Kalbelia for example, are even benefited from that.

The *clieche* “tribal dance” has a wide usage in India. Its value or purpose, its characteristics, its basic content or composition are still open questions. Authors of many popular books on “tribal” and “folk” dances address to the different segments of the performing reality in India (see Tribhuvan Robin D. and Tribhuvan Preeti R. 1999). In the process they bring together *Chhau* of Seraikela and Purulia, *Raslika* of different types, ritualistic performances of *Kola* of South Kannada and *Teyyam* of North Malabar, Punjabi *Bhangra* and Assamese calendar harvest festivity coinciding with Bihu dance, *Kalbeliya* dance of Rajasthan almost in the same category, creating a highly eclectic picture². Other authors (Massey, 2004) avoid the term “tribal” in their general description of the dance forms in India.

Dance today is undoubtedly a cultural brand of India and “Indianness”. At both arrival and departure halls of Indira Gandhi International airport in Delhi the very first thing and the last thing one can see are the symbols of dance and music: huge bas-reliefs of hand positions (*hasta-mudras*), dancer’s figures, musical instruments. No official events – starting from a tiny local conference to a regional and up to a national government meeting – could take place without dance and music program at the end. Dancers and musicians of all levels are eligible for National awards. Yet, until quite recently, as it is well known, dance and dancers used to represent a marginalized category and majority of the traditional dancing communities used to enjoy a low or very low social status.

Admittedly, the caste system of India created the condition for reserving skills, crafts and jobs – including music, theatre and dance – to the particular communities. As is the case with any other job, particular types of dancing used to be inherited, installed in the frame of exchange system (*jajmānī*) between patrons and their *kāmin* – each assigned with doing a particular job. Musicians and dancers (along with many artisans) were quite often unwelcome inside houses of some middle and high caste families. At the same time, dancing along with shaving and many more manipulations with body was and is still an important element of some rituals and festivities like marriages, cremation.

Relation of “dance” to the lowest strata of the Hindu society was in opposition to the ideal ethnographic picture of the “tribal world” of India, created jointly by the romantic imagination of the writers and poets, Western

and sometimes Indian observers, which is used in cultural events, recognizing dance as a common form of expression with a distinctive style of its own. To British colonial anthropology, dancing and music making, along with the consuming of locally made alcohol, were distinctive features of “tribes” as compared to other social groups of non-tribal categories. The reflection of this romantic attitude is visible in speeches and writings of Jawaharlal Nehru as well, as can be understood from his “empathy for a people who sing and dance” or “the call of the jungle and mountains”. Empathy for such groups of people was “always strong” in him -to one who was “a dweller of the cities” (cited in Biswas and Sunklabaidya, 2008). His romantic interest in tribes was expressed in his speech delivered at the Opening Session of the Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Areas Conference in New Delhi in June 1952: “I am quite sure that the tribal folk, with their civilization of songs and dance, will last until long after stock exchanges have ceased to exist” (Nehru, 1960; Singh, 1989: 3).

But dance quite often represents only a part of the broader performing reality, which combines festivity, social and political events, sport and religious practices of all communities in India. The co-existence of various performative practices (dance, music, storytelling, as well as a broad class of rituals with strong theatrical elements), which lie between religious activity and entertainment value, is still one of the most significant features of Indian society in general.³ Performances have many local variations and stratifications — from tiny village customs to today’s huge mass-media events, TV shows, national festivals with strong political agendas, and many more. Enactment of myths and legends occur during local agricultural and domestic festivals and are tightly connected to various rituals, such as Navaratri and *Ramayana*. The invocation of various gods and the narration of numerous divine stories found in the epic texts are parts of the customs and ritual patterns characterising Indian society and culture in general. Divine stories and epic narratives intertwined with the community life are known in almost all Indian traditional folk theatres. The spectre of their cultural functions is large; it could be a religious event, an act of donation, the exchange of gifts, pleasure and entertainment, a degree of social interaction and integration and could also function as a channel for encouraging individual creativity.

To study the performances holistically we need a special methodology, where both anthropology (with a participant observation and functional analysis) and folkloristic techniques (textual and contextual studies) could be meaningfully combined. Multidimensional outlook can integrate *emic* and *etic* approaches. This is especially true in the case of ritual and performance studies. These are quite often tightly connected with religion, day-to-day life and politics (see Friedman, 1987).

Performance itself is a category as indicated in quite a few definitions and depiction of outlooks (Carlson, 2007: 70-75; Schechner, 1991; Schechner, 2002). I argue here that the most important aspect of performance is a synchronic

communicative function. According to Cremona, although a performance has texts, plots and a set of codified actions (rehearsal is an important element in the performance studies), its real core lies in the phenomenon of the presentation itself, which is an event for all practical purposes (Cremona, 2004: 5-13). A certain “performance contract”, where a number of conditions aimed at mutual understanding between performers and their immediate audience meet, makes the entire performance possible (Foster, 2011).

In this paper I first try to look into the categorization of the indigenous and highly varied practices followed at the broader level, based on the application of the denotations such as “classical”, “folk” and “tribal” to the fluid reality. After that the problem of “tribal dance” as a concept, a category and a reality has been analyzed. To me, all such categories are parts of “heritage making”⁴, which signify processes of codification, unified representations of changing reality and sometimes of commercial product-making. The frozen patterns and images could be seen in almost any Indian dance style today, which along with pre-recorded music easily travel and traverse the borders of the schools and genres, and also become a part of a global culture.

I further argue that despite the “order” which was created in Indian dance space in the middle of the 20th century in the frame of cultural nationalism, the inner life of dancing reality could never completely fit into this order. That creates many confusions and clashes of interest in evaluation and interpretation of actual dance practices.

DANCE IN INDIA: NATIONAL, CLASSICAL, MODERN AND OTHER

Today it is merely the market – both domestic and international – which dictates the rules of a transformation of the performing arts. But if one pays attention to the short time period between the 1920-s and the 1950-s, it could be revealed that certain crucial changes occurred during this period both in status and outlook of all art forms in India. That actually marked the beginning of the process of making dance acceptable and respectful in the eyes of the public (along with the creation of public itself) as also making dance both national and modern.

Here one can observe a clash of few trends, the most general being something named as the “*battle for dance*” – as it was expressed by the famous danseuse Mrinalini Sarabhai, a creator of “Darpana academy” in Ahmedabad, in one of our talks in 2011. Actually, it was a complex process of an appropriation (Soneji, 2012) of various local indigenous dancing practices by members of high castes, rich classes and urban elite, including educated ladies like Rukmini Devi Arundale, Mrinalini Sarabhai, Sitara Devi, Yamini Krishnamurti and many others. At the same time dance had gone through the process of elevation of its social and cultural status – something similar to what had happened to music in India at the very beginning of the 20th century. It could be explained through the process of “Sanskritisation”, a well-known

term invented by M.N. Srinivas. Rabindranath Tagore with his creativity in forms of music, dance-dramas, visual art along with poetry played a huge role into it; the changing attitude of the contemporary society in India towards the art is shown by Rimli Bhattacharya (2019) in her book “The Dancing Poet Rabindranath Tagore and Choreographies of Participation”. Dance became a symbolical heritage within the frame of cultural nationalism of the mid-20th century.

In the 1930-s and the 1940-s the idea of pan-Indian unity in all cultural forms, including dance, was more important than realizing cultural diversity of the country as such. Partly it was very similar to a formation of nation-states in the Western world of the same time, but due to the large territory and extremely diverse character of India it turned into an exercise of reconfiguration of British Raj and princely states all over South Asia. Since the late 1940s the situation of so to say, formation of a “nation of nations” emerged. Cultural politic of a “new but old” country was expressed in the early 1950-s. The whole idea was to shift the patronage from rajas and landlords to the state. Now the state became a patron for the arts, and – as in a democratic country – the “people of India” claimed themselves to be the custodians of cultural heritage. As was stated by Maulana Azad, “the most beautiful task of the state was to support art”.

Indian cultural politics has played a crucial role in the definition and classification of the dance heritage in almost all of the newly established States of the Republic of India since early 1950s. Several scholars were involved into the reformation of the cultural institutes and institutions of India (see: Vasyayan (Malik), 1972). The aim of this policy was to promote social acknowledgment of performing arts as a noble, respected activity and at the same time to reform the content of certain dance styles, to make them more suitable and acceptable to a very broad, pan-Indian contemporary audience.

A number of institutions were created for that purpose (see: Vatsyayan, 1998), including the Ministry of Education and Youth affairs, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Ministry of Culture (1961) and Zonal Cultural Centers, ICCR, Lalit Kala Academy, Sahitya Academy. All-India Radio and Doordarshan also contributed a lot to the popularization of and research on music and dance culture. The Sangeet Natak Akademi (SNA) – India’s national academy for music, dance and drama – is the first National Academy of the set-up by the Republic of India, specifically for the development of the arts. It was created on the 31st of May 1952. As the apex body specializing in the performing arts of the country, the Akademy also renders advice and assistance to the Government of India in the task of formulating and implementing policies and programmers in this field. Additionally, SNA carries a part of the responsibilities of the state of fostering cultural contacts between various regions in India, and between India and the world. All types of artistic representation are supposed to become a subject of research and the best of

culturally and socially important forms are supposed to be protected and appreciated at regional and national levels.

An outstanding role in creating a holistic, pan-Indian vision was played by Late Kapila (Malik) Vatsyayan, the former student of Achchan Maharaj in *kathak* dance. A scholar and former Deputy Educational Adviser at the Ministry of Education and Youth and the author of several fundamental books on Indian art including dance, she explores the common features and connects various local dance forms to Sanskrit literature, temple sculpture and philosophical thoughts (see: Vatsyayan, 1974; 2015).

Almost at the same time, the pan-Indian national orientation slightly shifted to parochial considerations or ethnocentric frame of mind. Already in early 1950s regionalism and even “separatist” tendencies became obvious, the expressions of which sometimes followed regional styles like *Odissi* of Orissa (now Odisha), *Kuchipudi* of Andhra Pradesh, *Sattriya* of Assam, all being regional branding. It was an asymmetrical process: while some states like Kerala “bear” few master-dances of high status (*Kathakali* and *Mohini-attam*), others (Kashmir, West Bengal, Maharashtra) did not “have” any. Some cases were quite controversial. *Yakshagana*, for example, “became” a “brand” of Karnataka, but despite its similarity with *Kathakali* it has never been regarded as a dance or theater of “classical” form. On the other hand, *Kathak* could never be “privatized” by a single state; obviously it “belongs” to the whole of northern part of India. Symptomatically, the recently created States of Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand with substantial tribal population as well as hilly Uttarkhand, whose basic cultural identity is different from others, are not engaged in constructing any specific regional “classical dance style” for themselves.

Politics of Indian dance expressed one very general idea, popular between the 1950s and 1970s, when dance was regarded as an important nationalistic symbol. Dance was tightly connected to the concept of “Indian Antiquity”⁵, and even more: it was alive, an animated “Antiquity”. Technically, it is now expressed through the highly political idea of classical dance being ancient in origin and carrying a prolonged, almost uninterrupted tradition, connected to temples rituals and religious activities. A common place in today’s popular writings is the idea of “past glory”; according to the majority of texts produced for dance programs, the art is regarded as an “ancient heritage”, reduced in the colonial time to certain entertainment, prohibited by the British authorities and recovered later by Indian activists. Exported abroad, dance represented Indian culture, was presented as timeless and universal creation by the cultural officialdom and by many dancers themselves. But critical studies conducted by some scholars in the last 20 years (Dalmia, 2006; Sarkar-Munshi, 2010; Soneji, 2012) showed an exactly opposite situation: all “classical” dance styles, as well as some non-classical ones, were invented quite recently, and Western dancers, choreographers, patrons (Tedh Shown, Madam Menaka, Ragini Devi – just to name a few) took an important part in

shaping its current outlook. Classical dance in India⁶, as well as in Europe, happened to be a certain kind of a *reflection on the past* – on its utopian image, vision and re-construction. It was the product of the new Indian elitist thinking.

The political idea of “classical dance” resulted in the social elevation of the dance or at least of the several dance traditions. It turned into a quasi-colonial situation with a certain “list of styles”, acknowledged by the governmental bodies as “classical” and resulted in scholarships and stages. Differentiation in terms of resources (financial and otherwise,) and spaces (stages and festivals) as well as prestigious status attributed to “classical” dances over “folk” ones created a situation for another “battle for dance”, but now it was a battle for putting one’s own style in the “classical list”. Today *Sattriya*, *Chhau* and some other traditions have also come under further scrutiny.. The “battle” is going on, though in a different sense and in a different context.

The “national” and “classical” agendas of dance in India, as conceptualized in the 1920-s, soon have passed through a phase of engagement with a newly found modernity. Historically, it strongly corresponded with the deconstruction of a feudal system, emergence of a bourgeois society, emancipation of women and secularization. This trend towards a modernization and emancipation has not altogether disappeared later, despite all codifications and politics of art. While many dancers represented “pure” styles (as Birju Maharaj in *Kathak* or Rahul Acharya in *Odissi*), many others cross the boundaries profoundly. Just to name a few: Astad Deboo , who being from a Parsi family from Jamshedpur, got his first dance education in *Kathak*. Later he explored *Kalarippayattu* and *Thang-ta*, but eventually created his own style; he also used his dance practice in the field of social work of helping the homeless children). Others of the same category include Aditi Mangaldas (a Gujarati disciple of Kumudini Lakhya, performing *Kathak* with a lot of innovations) and Anita Ratnam (a Tamil “contemporary classicist” as she calls herself in *Bharatanāmyam* with her own vision of presentation). All of them never wanted their art and approach to be marked and classified once and for ever. They were rooted in traditions, but transcended the boundaries. In some sense they are not just or only “Indian dancers”; they are dancers of a global scale, bearing many Indian flavors and features.

Within a short time period between the 1920-s and 1950-s, dance in India went through the crucial transformation: from predominantly low and dependant character (dance as a service, dance associated with the prostitutes, etc.) it was raised to the status of high art, comparable to the status of music, *yoga* and in religious path, *sadhana*. Dance became a part of a secular society, a form of secularized Hinduism. Due to crucial changes in patronage and the emergence of the government institutions as the main patrons, traditional

dancing families were replaced by other forms of social organization of dance; for example, in *Kathak* many dancers (originally from villages of Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh) settled down in Delhi. As a result, crucial changes in the educational paradigm occurred, the traditional system of *guru-shishya parampara* was replaced by formal college education. Still it is an extremely disputable and problematic issue whether both can coexist or which one is – or could be – more meaningful. “I do not think in today’s context a student can be expected to clean the room and wash the floor of the teacher’s house to be trained in the skill” – states Mallika Sarabhai in an interview with me in February 2015. Voices for and against traditional *parampara* are being raised from time to time.

TRIBAL DANCE: CONCEPT AND REALITY

The concept of “tribal dance” in India needs to be specially scrutinized and critically observed. It is well known that the very term “tribe” traditionally opposed caste, Hindu society or “peoples of plain”⁷. Many ethnographers (Risley, 1901; O’Malley, 1911; Elwin, 1952; Ghurye, 1963), however, observed their assimilation with the Hindus and explained it from the different theoretical positions. Initial denotation of the very concept of “tribe” was related to “hill” and “forest” areas, to the “primitive” inhabitants, whose characteristic features were “dancing”- cum -”playing”- cum- “music making”. Also, in contrast to the caste society, a tribal group was traditionally described as a self-contained system, technologically and economically “primitive” but endowed with a complex social structure and a rich folklore. Ethnographical descriptions give us an impression that all aspects of a culture of a particular tribe could be observed holistically. In relation to dance it may be said that while the culture of high caste dominated Hindu society ascribes dance to particular communities, in tribal groups dance is supposed to be a part of common knowledge and skill that could be shared by all. However, in reality not all tribals or groups regarded as tribes practice dance and music equally.

According to my observation, no adequate and unified *etic* classification of the dance reality was invented by the researches. Particular dancing patterns got the names of the community (“Santali dance”, “Kalbeliya dance” and many more), or a festival (“Bihu dance”), or a ceremony (“Gharia dance” of Twipra, “Wangala” dance of Garo, etc.). The term “tribal dance” appears to signify a certain degree of ‘generalization’, encompassing ‘very different’ phenomena of the social and ritualistic motions and activities.

One view was expressed by the dancer and dance historian Mohan Khokar in his book “Dancing for Themselves” (Khokar, 1987). His idea was to differentiate “dancing for the others” (pre-choreographed, staged, professional performances) and “dancing for themselves” (performances without a separation of the audience from the dancers, where dance is an all-embracing, encompassing tool). But what he describes in his beautifully illustrated album

apparently points to a highly diverse range of performance traditions, explained with the help of different models. Mohan Khokar has brought together *Teratali* of Rajasthan, *Teyyam* of Kerala, *Lavni* of Maharashtra, *Lai haraoba* of Manipur, *Dandia raas* of Gujarat, *Bhangra* of Punjab, *Terukuttu* of Tamil Nadu and dozens of other ritualistic and secular kinesthetic traditions under one platform. Quite a few of them – *Lavni* may be the extreme case – cannot be identified as the “dances for themselves”; they actually signify “dance for others”. In other cases, the denotation “tribal” has been loosely applied to *Chhau* of Seraikela and Purulia, *Raslila* of different types, to the ritualistic performance of *Teyyam*, to Panjabi *Bhangra* and Assamese *Bihu* dance, to *Kalbeliya* dance of Rajasthan, all pointing to a highly eclectic picture.

Kummi (female group dance with claps holding the beats), *kolattam* (where danseuses strike two sticks, while dancing) and *pinnal kolattam*⁸ of Tamilnadu have often been identified either as “tribal” or “folk”. It seems likely that differentiation with “folk” was done to denote a large peasant population in opposition to “tribal” which carries the notion of a small and nomadic group of hunters-gatherers, forests’ and hills’ dwellers, though in the reality tribal groups may have a different life style. Tribes, in any case, were supposed to be closer to nature and the concept of a “Natural man” may still be applicable to them, or at least to some of them.

In South India a distinction is made between *atta* or *attam* (“performance”, “presentation”) and *kunita* (in Kannada, “dancing”), which are not easy to be classified into “classical” or “folk” / “tribal”. Both *atta* and *kunita* could be ritualistic and secular, “high” and “low”, gorgeous and simple, group and solo. Apart from *Kudiyattam* (a sophisticated Sanskrit dance drama) and *Mohini-attam* (a secular female centered highly romantic dance) in Kerala, there are many more “attams” in the South India, including *Pulli-attam* of Muslim communities in Tamil Nadu, which can be classified as a folk dance, where men folk dress ornately like a stripped carnivore with the tail, claws, whiskers and dance in the streets. *Yakshagana*, a highly developed theater of Karnataka, is supposed to be one type of “attam”, the term *Bayalattam* is applicable to the open-area performance of *Yakshagana*. However, some dance segments in it have often been called as *Kunita* in daily speech. *Kunita*, is, strictly speaking, either an ecstatic or a ritualistic dance performance of Karnataka, executed by the people of various castes and tribal communities. In the *Punja kunita*, for instance, a wooden structure is balanced on the head with a deity within it. *Dollu kunita* is a drum beating dance: men play with large drums decorated with colored cloths slung around their necks. As they dance together, they beat on the drums.

It is rather difficult to differentiate between “tribal”, “folk”, “traditional” dance delinking them from the domain of dance itself – its patterns, movements and outlook. It is rather a question of definitions, the way we see “tribe” and “folk” theoretically. *Ghumar*, a circular dance of the female group, is performed

by the various communities of Rajasthan, starting from the royal Rajput families to the nomadic Naths. The outlook of *Ghumar* is roughly the same, but the movement and performing style of the each social strata appear to be quite different. “Tribal” “Santali dance”, *Bagurumba* dance of Bodo girls⁹, *Cheraw* dance of Mizo¹⁰, *Gharia* dance of Twipra¹¹, *Hozagiri*, dance of Reang in Tripura¹² and many more resonate with what we call “folk dances” of other parts of India, such as *Garba* of Gujarat and *Ghumar* of Rajasthan, which are performed by all sections of the society on the special occasions. Both “folk” or / and “tribal” dances have rhythmic patterns, which may seem to be relatively simple, but the performers need to undergo some training before they could pick up the rhythms and movements. The expression is spontaneous because the main idea is to create mutual consensus, common rhythm and feeling of togetherness.

The classification of the tribal dances and bringing them into three classes of “war and hunt dances”, “sacred dances” and “social dances”, as we find in the studies of Krishna Iyer and Bala Ratnam (1961: 210) and L.P. Vidyarthi and B.K. Rai (1976: 334), are highly disputable. This distinction is based not on the dance structure as such, but on the context of the expression; it is rather the differentiation of the **situations** of dance and music. Again, it is rather difficult to claim that “head-hunting dances”, “sacred dance round the tree”, dance during marriage and funeral dance belong to different “types”, as it has been stated by L.P. Vidyarthi and B.K. Rai (1976: 335-336). Social and ritualistic situations describing the contexts of all these dances are the same. They carry almost the same inner meaning.

Now I propose to focus on the two very different dance traditions, which could serve as the two extreme cases of change in the actual practice, in the ways of the development, evolution, invention and commercial usage of what has been regarded as “tribal dance” of India.

Santali group dance by both men and women is still very much in practice by many Santal groups in West Bengal, Chhattisgarh and Odisha. Mainly this dance is performed after a successful harvest and on the ritual occasion that coincides with it. It is purely a “dance for themselves”: a drummer, a leader of the whole team, stays in front of the dancers and beats the drum, simultaneously moving in usually anti-clockwise direction. Dancers embrace each other, making a line or a semi-circle; they execute simple, monotonous steps and movement, following a rhythm. Combination of the rhythmic pulsation by drums, sometimes flutes, and human bodies, sometimes added by brass plates beats gives pleasure to the performers and other participants. While performing, the upper parts of the body are kept quite loose and relaxed, slightly bent in front, but the leg movements follow a definite order creating a rhythmic pattern. *Thangal* of the Meitheis of Manipur, dances of Gonds of Bastar have a very similar outlook, but the “Santali dance” is the best known among all “tribal dances” of India because of its wide publicity. It has become an

enigma, a leading visual symbol of the “tribe-ness” itself, a theme used in fine art and in cinema. It has been used by professional filmmakers, including the famous film “Aranyer din ratri” directed by Satyajit Ray in 1972.

As if to prove its popularity, Santali dance has been used in the project “Theatre of Night” in Borotalpada village in West Bengal. From 2008 a French philosopher and theater director Jean-Frédéric Chevallier, based in Kolkata, and his wife and colleague Shukla Bar started with a slowly growing team an artistic experiment “Trimukhi Platform”¹³ in association with *Alliance Française* in Kolkata. The main idea was integration of the villagers into contemporary open-air all-night theatrical performance with few fixed scenes and many open demonstrations. I visited this event in 2015. According to Jean-Frédéric Chevallier, “Trimukhi” is a platform that gives space and the possibility to bring people of different background, age and country together. “Theatres of Night” are largely “free from aim, free from frame of work, so that they can be more open to contemporary and unexpected lively movements in art practices”. Shukla says, “We have no plan but we have a place” to invite various urban guests to spend an evening and night in the Santal village.” Yet, as Jean-Frédéric says, the idea is “to produce high-quality art”. “Theatre of Night” is a paid event for the guests. Actually, the organizers make an arrangement of transportation (train and car), some simple food, tea, as well as performances with a very specific outlook, not very much of acting, but with a lot of multimedia and presentation of the raw materials, not finished, work-in-progress sketches. The strongest and the most interesting aspect of the show for the spectators refer to the stories of the local people, presented on both screen, as a result of research already done and reflections on that. In the whole show not only the artistic value, but its social outcome has been taken into consideration. It is a certain “doc-theater” in a sense.

No doubt, it is a very noble and hard job, executed by “Trimukhi Platform” for years. However, certain gap between the artistic efforts of Jean-Frédéric Chevallier and the response of the Santali villagers was quite visible to me. In the event of 2015 I witnessed some irritation or even negative reactions of few people, when small group of us, guests, went for a walk. The positive outcome of this collaboration of highly educated urban people and the villagers, and of the annual performance with the random audience arriving from Kolkata, including foreigners, I believe, is still have to be thoroughly analyzed and evaluated for future direction. According to Shukla Bar, it was not easy to get the benevolence of many of the locals, but “Trimukhi” did their best, trying to establish the prolonged, deep and friendly contacts, and helping people in various ways. The whole project is about “to be together”, to explore the possibility of non-profitable relations, where only art making has been the main purpose.

The long and lazy evening with few performances, walks, talks and tea drinking was ended with Santali dance, initially by Santal people, who started

it in the form of a presentation, which was later joined by all, guests and some villagers. This kind of dance still carries certain rigidity and cannot be easily transformed to suit the demand of a modern theatre. It seems to be a separate activity, not intricately linked with the theatre. Reality and artistic expressions of that night appeared to me as a fragmented, probably a conscious choice of the organizers. Each guest could find a reflection of his or her own taste with what he came across. Santali dance, the longest item of the “Theater of Night” was started in the late evening and went on till early morning; it became a “dance for themselves”, which was probably the most inclusive part of the whole event. But the show which was executed by a group of urban people, including foreign guests, tended to lose its “exotic” character and looked not so “Santali” or “tribal” any more, turning a certain kind of common dance into “disco party” with the main social aim of “being together”. But togetherness here carried an altogether different meaning.

Another case that I want to point to is an example carrying the opposite function of “tribal dance”, that is, “for the others”. It is the ‘Kalbelia dance’ from Rajasthan, which is a recently created performing dance style combining the elements of acrobatics, various local dance genres, as well as of *Kathak*, flamenco and many more. Kalbelia dance was originally invented by the joint efforts of now famous danseuse Gulabi Sapera, see (Thierry and Guillien, 2000) and her advisors and helpers from the Rajasthan Tourist Department, Government of Rajasthan, and first and foremost, Tripti Pandey and Himmat Singh in 1980s. Gulabi was awarded with “Padma shri” in 2016. Since that time, this mode of dancing for public was taken over by numerous groups all over Rajasthan. Many groups of musicians, singers and dancers emerged, representing Kalbelia community. Kalbelia have the status of a Scheduled Tribe, though their social identity is not clearly expressed in one term. They represent a religious sect of Jogi Nath, who are by profession the snake-charmers or “Sapera”. An eye catching and easily recognizable black or colored costume with swirling skirt, blouse, sleeveless jacket and veil used to be created for this purpose. Today it symbolizes the role of one of the “tribal”, “traditional” and “folk” dances of India; almost no Indian festival abroad happens without the performance of Kalbelia with full energy and high speed movements. There has been a boom of “Kalbelia” dance all over Rajasthan and worldwide, attracting the interest of the observers, including filmmakers, both national and international. It has changed the economic condition, social mobility and outlook and gender roles of the Kalbelia community, in the process bringing traditional housewives, veiled womenfolk to the public stage and among all earners. Kalbeliya dance, already with a tradition of learners and performers abroad even by foreign girls, may be the only case of recently invented and yet carrying a hybrid tradition to become possibly a full-fledged, so to say, “classical tribal dance style” of India. Possibly, Kalbelia dance could become a style in its own right, with a certain “dance grammar” to be learned

in the colleges and from academies, following a teaching curriculum and from a select group of personalities. Its future possibilities have earned it a place of importance, which may have far reaching implications for dance forms of this nature.

CONCLUSION

Despite the timeless image of eternal “Indian dance”, its historical context and changes are very obvious. The denotations such as “national”, “classical,” “folk”, “tribal” in dance, all emerged and developed simultaneously in India in quite a short time period, between 1920-1950s. The borders separating these categories may be drawn, but their content remains fluid. While certain segments of dance practice in each tradition were codified and even became frozen, making a peculiar “museums of dance”, or creating a cultural heritage, other parts of dance practice continue to merge, develop and are still under perpetual transformation.

“Tribal” and other types of dances of India demonstrate different classes of representative reality of various festivals of India. All dance styles are the results of correlation and sometimes clashes between the local and the global. All of them have taken shape due to the gaze, an interest and an attention from the outside – both geographically and socially.

Popularization of Indian dance began simultaneously with the formation of the very idea of “Indian dance” in the end of 19th and beginning of 20th century. Since 1950s, along with the increase of the numbers of the dance programs by Indian artists abroad, foreign students started studying these forms. With the financial and organizational help of ICCR (Indian Council for Cultural Relations) it became a mass-movement. *Bharatanāmyam* and *Odissi* – the two classical styles - have become most popular all over the world, then comes *Kathak* and *Kuchipudi*. Many non-Indian dancers perform Indian dances just as perfectly as many Indians do. Sharon Lowen is one of them. She learned several dance styles like *Manipuri*, *Odissi*, *Chhau* and her interest in *Chhau* has gone a long way in developing public interest in this phenomenon on a larger scale since 1970-s. From its early and debatable classification as a “tribal dance” of Chhota Nagpur area, *Chhau* has become diversified and very attractive kinesthetic tradition, which includes stage presentation of battle, martial art, elements related to hunting along with highly sophisticated romantic choreographies. *Chhau* looks like “tribal” sometimes, but actually it was produced and shaped in a tight collaboration between local rulers, rajas and their subjects drawn from various communities of Seraikela, Kharsawan, Mayurbhanj, etc.

Two contemporary processes, namely “heritagization” and an “exotisation”, have already frozen and fixed many elements of culture including “tribal dances”, which are normally fluid. The main tool for that is the increasing festival activity all over India and abroad: creation of hundreds

of artistic representational annual events (like the famous “Hornbill festival” of Nagaland) have encouraged growth of the particular “styles” inside “tribal” and “folk” dancing reality and re-configuration of the actual musical and artistic culture.

A very new phenomenon is Tribal Fusion dance – a relatively new reality, closely connected to the development of the electronic and world music genre and at the same time exploring the tribal dance “heritage”. Early Bay Area DJs who contributed to the development of this form, focused on the music produced specifically for the belly dance (or “Oriental dance”). Another element of this new genre was the set of movements and steps, borrowed from the tribal dancing pattern. Attempts have been made however to strongly re-interpret and re-arrange them in a modern way accompanied with the new musical agenda. It is a part of a stage belly dance today and it does not correspond with the ethnographic reality of the villages. Eventually, the very term “tribal” in the wide usage today also refers to this performing modern and popular phenomenon.

While some “tribal dances” of India today are the part of artistic imagination – in a cinema, in fine arts, in pop music and dance, in contemporary theatre - others are still alive where actors perform taking dance as a tool for social communication. Santali dance, for instance, can play and are playing, as I witnessed, both the roles. One can possibly call it a “neo-rural” and / or “neo-tribal” phenomenon, when rustic or original production is being created by the urban citizens, usually artistic groups, sometimes in close collaboration with *adivasis*, and are performed on the national and international stages often as a part of “World music” and as representations of contemporary and global art.

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END NOTES

- 1 See, for instance: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Frw3O8R6-vg> [access 18.08.2020].
- 2 See for instance: <https://ru.thetouriosity.com/post/8-tribal-adivasi-dances-of-india> [access 18.11.2020].
- 3 The connections between theatre, medicine practices, religious cults and martial arts are the best example (see: Zarrilli 1998).
- 4 The term “a museum of dance” came to my mind in Imphal, the capital of Manipur (extreme eastern state of India with a very specific social and cultural outlook, which includes peculiar synthesis of Hinduism and local religious traditions). In 2014 in

- “Manipuri Dance Academy” I was watching a variety dance programs in Manipuri dance style. Dancers performed *raslila* – the most important item of the style, which is a long fixed composition, set many years before. It could be seen in different stages, with almost no change in the mode of presentation. *Raslila* is a pan-Indian, Hindu phenomenon of Krishna cult; it is a vibrant ritualistic dance- cum- theatre (enactment of daily life and festivity) focusing on milk maiden’s association with God. The best and the most elaborate *raslila* I’ve seen was in the holy city of Vrindavan, which is performed every year, according to religious festival calendar. The sacred cults performed at the local level have now assumed the role of globalizing and integrating various regions of “India” with the help of performance.
- 5 The concept was used in XIX century; it encompassed the several spheres of culture like architecture, religion, law, social set-up, ritual, medicine and fine art. It was summarized in few books (Barnert 1913).
 - 6 The idea of “Indian classical dance” emerged in the 1930-s and 40s, in the writings of Ananda Coomaraswamy, Mohan Khokar, Anand Mulk Raj, and was aimed at upgrading the social and cultural status of dance and dancers. Of course, the Renaissance term “classical” was borrowed from the West and related to the idea of “Antiquity” with the master-languages – Greek and Latin. Next to the languages the term classical was applicable to the visual arts – architecture and sculpture. Music and dance came later. The term “classical” acquired the meanings “ideal, best, formed, settled”. The Western term “classical” needed to be translated into Indian languages. In Sanskrit texts few terms were discovered, which seem to be relevant for the classification of dancing practices. Dance by rules, expressed in Sanskrit treaties, is *œastra nritya* or “scientific dance”. *Margi nritya* a “dance of the Path”, sacred dance, dedication. Also *Desi nritya* was mentioned referring to “local”, regional dance. *Margi* and *desi* today are supposed to be equivalent to “classic” and “folk” respectively. But I believe it was not and is not a proper classification in the sense dances are shown as types. In India almost each dance practice has some rules, grammar and meaning applied, but also each has a more or less strong regional identity. I would rather like to see in it metaphors describing some aspects of real dancing. What is important to remember is that any dancing practice could create a grammar to become more sophisticated, but at the same time could never lose some of its basic local characteristics.
 - 7 The typical statement is as follows: “Tribals are the original forest dwellers and are found in every regions of India. Tribes of the northern part of India, stretched over Himalayas, practice from nomadic shepherd to primitive cultivation, tribes of the North-east, the tribes from the dense forests of Bastar and Chota Nagpur and the tribes from South India, have a common dance form based on the activities of hunting, fishing, food gathering and animal husbandry”. The main function of folk and tribal dance is supposed to be the source of “happiness and recreation to their simple communal life”.
 - 8 In *pinnal-kolattam* some divisions of the dancing group create a visual pattern, lacing colored ropes together, hung from a peg in the ceiling, synchronous with music. In course of the dance, the *pinnal* or the plate is also slowly disentangled and the ropes are back to their single-strand shape, precisely when the dance and the music stop.
 - 9 It looks like the movement of a butterfly as reflected in the traditional Bodo scarf, *aronai*.
 - 10 Here two men sitting face- to- face open and close two elongated bamboos by sitting on the ground; they do it with the beats and the girls jump and swerve in and out with the rhythm of the tune ; usually, drums and gongs are played to create the music.

- 11 It relates to the local Garia puja, a seven-day harvest festival in April.
- 12 It is a dance of balance, performed by the girls by standing on a pitcher and balancing a bottle and a lighted lamp on their heads.
- 13 See the official site: <http://trimukhiplatform.org/committee> [access 18.08.2020].

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