



Book Review

***The Devadasi Dance (Nati Nach) of Assam: Memory, Reimagination, and Continuity*, edited by Dr Upala Barua and Dipika Pegu, Purbayon Publication, Pan Bazar, Guwahati, 2025, p. 256, Price 590**

In his profoundly influential essay, "Is There an Indian Way of Thinking? An Informal Essay," published in *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (1989), the renowned Indian poet, scholar, and linguist A.K. Ramanujan observed: "There is no single Indian way of thinking; there are Great and Little Traditions, ancient and modern, rural and urban, classical and folk. Each language, caste, and region has its special world view." Building on this insight, Ramanujan proposed a twin paradigm distinguishing between "context-sensitive" and "context-free" modes of thinking, the former being the characteristic of the Indian way of thinking.

An illustrative example of this dynamic is the evolution of the *Devadasi* or temple dance tradition of India under two different historic contexts in India – a pre-Independence and a post-Independence. Once denounced and legislatively banned by moralists and social reformers as a social vice during the 1930s and 1940s, the *Devadasi* practice underwent significant rehabilitation during the post-Independence era, a period marked by cultural revivalism and a renewed commitment to preserving India's indigenous heritage. In this spirit, temple dances were revalorised, with classical dance forms such as *Odissi* and *Bharatanatyam* emerging as celebrated embodiments of India's artistic legacy.

In continuation of this revivalist momentum, Assam Down Town University in Guwahati has taken commendable steps to support scholarly efforts aimed at reviving and reinterpreting local cultural traditions. Notably, Professor Upala Barua and Ms Dipika Pegu have been encouraged to conduct pioneering research on *Nati Nach*, the *Devadasi* dance tradition of Assam. Their work has culminated in the publication of the volume

currently under review, marking a significant contribution to the ongoing project of cultural reclamation and scholarly engagement with indigenous knowledge systems.

The volume under review is organised into six chapters, in addition to an introduction and a conclusion. Thematically, the chapters offer a comprehensive overview of dance traditions in India, with a particular focus on classical dance forms in Assam, the historical and cultural dimensions of the *Devadasi* tradition, and the specific manifestation of *Nati Nach* in Assam. The volume further delves into the complex and often challenging process of reviving these dance forms within the contemporary Assamese context, as well as the sociocultural and institutional obstacles currently confronting this revival. Importantly, the volume not only documents the place of *Devadasi* dances within the broader spectrum of Indian dance traditions but also contributes original empirical insights. Field-based observations presented in the text shed light on the lived realities and struggles of practitioners and cultural advocates working to sustain this tradition in Assam. It is in this critical engagement with local context and grounded ethnographic evidence that the volume makes its most significant scholarly contribution.

The authors effectively delineate the unique characteristics of *Nati Nach* in Assam, distinguishing it from other prominent regional dance forms such as *Deodhani*, *Ojapali*, and *Sattriya*. While *Nati Nach* was historically performed in temple contexts—most notably at the 17th-century Parihareswar Temple (commonly known as Dubi Devalaya) near Pathsala town in Bajali district—it has since ceased to function as a temple dance, due to a range of socio-cultural and historical factors. Nevertheless, akin to the revival and reconstitution of *Odissi* and *Bharatanatyam* in other parts of India, *Nati Nach* is now undergoing a phase of cultural resurgence. In its reimagined form, it is being performed both within Assam and beyond, gaining renewed recognition as a traditional dance form. This revival owes much to the dedicated efforts of dance exponents such as the late Ratna Kanta Talukdar and others, who have worked to preserve and promote *Nati Nach* through adaptive reinterpretation and performance.

Despite efforts toward its revival, *Nati Nach* remains precariously positioned, facing the looming threat of cultural extinction. As the authors

poignantly observe, "... it faces an existential threat as it teeters on the brink of extinction" (p. 227). A number of interrelated factors contribute to this decline. Chief among them is the absence of sustained and credible patronage, along with the centralisation of expertise and key resources in the town of Pathsala—limiting wider access and dissemination.

Additional challenges include the scarcity of trained practitioners and inadequate pedagogical infrastructure in other regions of Assam, as well as difficulties in adapting the tradition to contemporary digital platforms, such as pre-recorded music. The dwindling availability of essential accompanists, notably those skilled in traditional instruments like the *khol* (percussion) and *taal* (cymbals), further exacerbates the issue. Compounding these barriers is a noticeable lack of interest among younger generations, who may be dissuaded by the absence of formalised training materials, given the tradition's reliance on the oral *guru-shishya parampara* (master-disciple lineage). The restriction of participation primarily to female performers—coupled with the social constraints they face—adds yet another layer of complexity to the struggle for preservation.

India officially recognises seven major classical dance forms: *Bharatanatyam*, *Kathak*, *Kathakali*, *Odissi*, *Kuchipudi*, *Manipuri*, and *Mohiniattam*. Several other regional dance traditions remain on the periphery, aspiring to attain classical status. Each of the established classical forms is characterised by the integration of three foundational elements—*Natya* (dramatic expression), *Nritta* (pure dance), and *Nritya* (a synthesis of movement and emotion). The *Nati Nach* tradition of Assam also embodies these core elements, aligning it structurally and aesthetically with India's classical dance canon.

Historically, like many other classical traditions that intertwined devotional intent with lyrical grace, *Nati Nach* emerged within the sacred space of temple courtyards, where it was performed as an offering to deities. In light of these parallels, the present volume under review serves not only as a scholarly contribution but also as a significant step toward the cultural recognition and potential classical elevation of *Nati Nach*. It reaffirms Assam's vibrant and diverse heritage, reinforcing the importance of preserving and promoting indigenous performing arts within the broader national narrative.

Despite being a landmark contribution to the historiography of Indian dance traditions in general—and *Nati Nach* of Assam in particular—the volume under review would have been further enriched by the inclusion of more primary, first-hand data. Direct narratives and perspectives from Assamese performing artists, as well as public opinion regarding the cultural positioning of *Nati Nach* within the broader spectrum of India's classical and folk-dance heritage, would have provided deeper insight. Such qualitative input could have significantly benefited scholars and researchers focusing on the diverse and evolving landscape of India's performing arts.

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