

Monday, 20.10.2025; 4:15 - 5:45 pm CEST

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Gendered Dependence: Non-Binary Notions of Sexuality in Indian Art and Performance

Abstract:

Going beyond the usual concepts of dependency relationships located within a post-colonial state, this new research project examines in greater depth how Indian conceptions of the body (depicted in art, iconography and in performance) have been impacted by a moral, religious Western perspective imposed before, during and post-colonial rule. My recent focus on gay male dancer Ram Gopal, the subject of a recently published monograph (2024), investigates a fascinating man who worked his way through a complex tangle of critical contemporary problems as a gay Asian male dancer in London and Europe at a time when myriad and relevant cultural shifts were in progress. Tackling issues of gender and coloniality, the book is a critical beginning to the new research.

The 'moralising projects of colonial and post-colonial modernity', as Daves Soneji has termed them, remain part of the 'unfinished pasts' (2012: 3) of both the place and enactment of performative ritual and performance in India, from the roles of the female temple dancers, the *devadāsīs*, through to the itinerant folk dance and theatrical performers, and the 'third gender' or transgender performers – the *hirijas* and *kothis*. In these cases, there is what I call a 'double dependency' that emerges firstly from the all-powerful colonial project and secondly, in the India that develops in post-colonial times from the new, fervent nationalism that reinforces in part, a Victorian morality and disgust for bodily performance, recreating the dance forms through a prism of purity and respectability. In complex ways, these systems created cultures of dependency where aspects of inclusion and exclusion were normative ways of behaviour.

In terms of contemporary practice, a number of Indian dancers in India, in the UK and elsewhere are now attempting to re-inscribe and re-create artistic forms connected with traditional Indian forms of gender and sexuality (*devadāsīs*, *hijras*, etc.) in a radically different context, such as in performance research, in cross-disciplinary theatrical productions, and in film and creative work. Investigating iconography that depicts certain original philosophic concepts of a balance between male and female (*ardhanārīśvara*), and particular stories of gender transformation in mythological depictions such as in the epic *Mahābhārata* text as well as examples of deities worshipped by the trans community (*Bahuchara Mata*) expose layered understandings of the spectrum of human sexuality. These developments will form part of the new investigation. In this lecture I investigate aspects of 'asymmetrical relations of dependence' (Hegewald, 2023:8) and issues of empowerment as well as erasures of memory brought about by nationalistic agendas.

Bio:

Ann R. David is Professor Emerita of Dance and Cultural Engagement at the University of Roehampton, London. Her research focuses on dance anthropology and South Asian classical and popular dance, in which areas she has looked closely at the dance and ritual practices in UK Indian communities. This research includes issues of migration, identity and embodiment, and the gestural, narrative and ritual practices of *bharatanatyam*. She has published widely in this area, as well as on dance in Bollywood, and on the ritual dances of Tibetan Buddhist practice in Bhutan.