

Kathak's dance into a modern-day idiom

Meghna Mukerjee

ASHISH CHAKROBORTY

Is it possible for a person who has practised dance for over two decades to distance herself from her art form and draw conclusions that clash with historical facts? Kathak exponent and visual anthropologist Pallavi Chakravorty's book, *Bells of Change: Kathak Dance, Women and Modernity in India*, claims that in capturing the emotional essence of the topic, being objective for the sake of research is not tough.

"Though I'm involved in dance, I stepped back to look at it with detachment for this discourse. My writing includes both the experiences," said Chakravorty at the launch of the book at the Seagull Arts and Media Resource Centre on Saturday evening. Being the founder of a contemporary dance ensemble, Courtyard Dancers in Philadelphia, Chakravorty has authored papers reflecting her immersion in Kathak, ethnographic methods and social theory. "This is my first book. It has an interwoven narrative culled from inputs of various people," she said.

Chakravorty's guru, Kathak exponent Bandana Sen, has had a role to play in *Bells of Change*... "The book starts with my recollections of the room in Bhawanipore where we got our first lessons from Sen. I learnt everything there, met people and saw the varied levels of commitment that the different students had. The book touches upon every-day women who cook for their families, pretend to go for fitness walks, slip into *salwar* suits, turn up for Kathak lessons and return home to cook some more," she said.

"It's a critical study tracing Kathak's development over two centuries — the first nautch show, classical Kathak in the light of nationalism and post-colonialism and innovation under transnationalism. It blends anthropology, ethnomusicology and performance, media and gender studies to track Kathak's movement from a *baiji's kotha* to the global stage," she said.



THE BOOK POINTS OUT HOW THE LIBERALISATION OF DANCE HAS LED TO THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

PALLAVI CHAKRAVORTY

A short dance performance and video piece by Chakravorty was followed by a "*sawaal jawab*" (question-and-answer) session where the democratisation of the dance form and the concept of *riyaaz* were discussed.

"The theory of *riyaaz* is interesting because in the West there are mirrored studios where people rehearse. But in India people dance everywhere — backyards of their homes, dining rooms... It is for the teacher to point out mistakes to the student. There's a big difference in the learning styles in the two cultures," explained Chakravorty.

People who're used to practising before mirrors are visually perfect but also self-conscious, she said. "The joy of letting go and trusting the guru is an enriching experience. You're shaped in a mythi-

cal space. There are good and bad sides to both," she felt.

Some members of the audience pointed out how it was dangerous rewriting parts of history through *Bells of Change*... but Chakravorty had a different perspective. "It's about questioning what's known. Misconceptions exist. For instance we think *gharanas* are ancient but they came into existence only in the 19th century. If you trace the emergence of Kathak from the Kathakars, you perceive certain gaps. I've tried to fill them in and traced the dance's journey to the form that it now is. Most importantly, the book points out how the liberalisation of dance has inevitably led to the empowerment of women," said Chakravorty.

meghna.mukerjee@hindustantimes.com