

and its dissociations, the pivots and the torques of this dance and how they all give onto a style of tango that can belong to a distinct era. It also presents an innovative motion capture experiment with professional dance teachers such as Homer and Cristina Ladas. This gives the researcher the ability to compare and contrast walking to walking with music, and to refine details to heel speed, hip movement (lateral pelvic tilt), hip-shoulder dissociation angles, knee angle, gait cycle, acceleration and deceleration points in the dancing. Stepputat neatly links this technical detail with an evocative account of dance learning: the use of the free leg to mark out the beat, the passing of weight through the body with its mechanics, the confidence of the heel strike. This sophistication became standard dance research, one day, and will allow other dance scholars such as Brenda Gottschild (2003) to comment more assertively as to the pelvic roots of dance forms—broken in African models, and straight in European ballroom (and Traditional Irish Dancing) manuals.

This is a book that is a useful read and guide to the dance, as well as its music and how the two interact. It will help the tango DJ to identify the roots of their unconscious practice. It will also be a continual reference book on the music(-ality) and the dance(-ability) of tango. If there is a drawback it is the technical detail that one can become lost in, feeling less engaged and engrossed in the read than the other passionate studies of the dance. Is Stepputat too clinical in her explication of this magical musicality and mystical danceability? Each chapter, also, has extensive notes and References when they could have been deferred to the end of the book. These are quibbles, however, for a most exceptional tango study.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Davis, Kathy. 2015. *Dancing Tango: Passionate Encounters in a Globalizing World*. New York: NYU Press.
- Gotschild, Brenda. 2003. *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography From Coon to Cool*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Savigliano, Marta. 1995. *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion*. Boulder: Westview.
- Taylor, Julie. 1998. *Paper Tangos*. Durham and London: Public Planet Books.
- Thompson, Robert. 2005. *Tango: The Art History of Love*. New York: Pantheon Books.



## Debarshi Prasad Nath, Ralph Buck, and Barbara Snook, eds. 2024. *Reflections of Dance along the Brahmaputra: Celebrating Dance in North East India*. London and New York: Routledge. 290 pages.

#### Reviewed by Debanjali Biswas

Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, United Kingdom  
ORCID: 0000-0002-3653-8924

Correspondence: [debanjali.biswas@gmail.com](mailto:debanjali.biswas@gmail.com)

Biswas, Debanjali. "Debarshi Prasad Nath, Ralph Buck, and Barbara Snook, eds. 2024. *Reflections of Dance along the Brahmaputra: Celebrating Dance in North East India*. London and New York: Routledge. 290 pages." *Martor* 30, 192-95. [DOI: 10.57225/Martor.2025.13]

**R**eflections of Dance along the Brahmaputra is a refreshing account on dances of India's easternmost states. An earnest effort to treat a wide range of movement traditions, this collection of essays expounds how community-led embodied practices draw on ancestral legacies and resources to give shape to dance in the twenty-first century. Interwoven throughout the text is the idea that community engagement is integral for the sustenance of dance not only in

*Martor* 30|2025 - Bodies in Motion: Dance, Movement, Gesture

rituals, but also in spaces regulated by state and national institutions of culture and higher education. The book is an output of a coalition between Tezpur University (Assam, India) and the University of Auckland (New Zealand) fostering collaborative research partnerships. Editors Debarshi Prasad Nath, Barbara Snook and Ralph Buck thread the relationships between artistic practice and lived experience across various communities while drawing out the place of dance in society.

In the introductory chapter, Parasmoni Dutta begins with the geocolonial framework in order to develop a more adequate understanding of the gap in the knowledge on cultural forms and practices of the eight states in the Indian northeast – Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura. It is rightly stated, that dance practices “testify to this liminal characteristic of the region in relation to the cultural practices of the Indian mainland” (p. 8), and indicates that dance engenders a collective well-being. Alongside “assemblage of representative descriptions” (p. 9), the chapter outlines the contexts under which many community dances are thriving. The sweeping overview falls short in engaging with the complexities of dance in the region, including the inevitability that with time, culture *will* change, and experimentation in creative practices will bring its inherent ability to cultivate collaboration outside community. It is equally important to mention the conditions under which cultures are disappearing in Brahmaputra valley.

Pradip Jyoti Mahanta writes a short historiography of Sattriya dance and Anwesa Mahanta pens the “nuances of embodiment” through her insight as a Sattriya practitioner (p. 34). Building on literary, oral and kinaesthetic practices fulfilling “ritual pursuits in support of religious services” (p. 26), movement traditions blossomed under the care of Sattri, the monastic establishments that function as socio-religious and cultural centres in Assam. Amidst rekindling of the state’s cultural heritage, one of the most significant turns in staging Sattriya emerged in late 20<sup>th</sup> century, when female performers were trained to dance what was up till then, a monastic tradition (pp. 29-30), and when Sattriya was given the recognition as a classical dance at a wider national level. Over the last decades, intellectual enquiry on the distinctions between ritual dance and staged dance, has further expanded the repertoire of Sattriya.

Incorporating objects at dance and ritual sites could bring about symbolic extensions of cultural identity, in a process which elevates expressive possibilities and push creative boundaries. In stating the link between dance and material culture which Anwesa Mahanta defines as “tangible dimensions,” the author draws upon literary descriptions of objects and how they are expressed by the practitioner’s gestures and physicality. She outlines how place-making of Assam is connected with dance, or how the objects assimilated to embellish the dancer, are hand-crafted in various places of the state. She draws out how her dance brings together the symbolic, the material, and the experiential. Both chapters offer overview on how exponents of Sattriya drew on collective memory in the process of transmission, rearranging each of the dances by decorating them with frills of rhythmic feats, movements, and gestures.

Alison East and Barbara Snook’s chapters discuss the essence of reciprocity in fostering an even understanding on community dances in Assam through ethnographic fieldwork and movement workshops. East’s reflective account seeks to understand the “relationship of dance to community life” in Assam (p. 46). Braided with experiences of students of the University of Otago and artists of KALPA, Assam, the exchange of knowledge of dance, society and culture is conceptualised as *Sannidhi* or confluence. Interspersed with field reports and teachable moments, the chapter captures various points of encounter between the visitors from New Zealand and their hosts. Snook engages with facets of pedagogy that encourage creative and cultural thinking. Central to the chapter are five case studies that introduce unknown ways of moving with intent and purpose of learning creatively inside classrooms. Removed from society or rituals, the curriculum embraces spontaneity, intuitiveness and joy. Facilitated by Snook and her team, the participants “generated their own rules and responses to accommodate new understandings” (p. 155).



Noting a lacuna in the gendered and feminist discourse of local dances, Moushumi Kandali studies the women who dance Bihu, Sattriya, and participate in the Bodo ritual of Kherai. Kandali makes some pertinent points about the erotic “gaze” on *Bihuwoti* dancers in stage performances, VCDs and music videos. A more compelling narrative arises from the analysis of gaze on the *Doudini*, the dancer-priestess of the Bodo Kherai Puza. She observes, despite being venerated as an empowered deity, beneath the gaze of the public—the undressing and adorning of the dancing body—is an exploitation of labouring, vulnerable women (p. 146). A comparativist approach to analyse dancers across sacred traditions provides copious information on form, practice and spectatorship, and the chapter does not shy away from asserting a paradigm beyond the cultural hierarchisation as normally seen in “tribal” and “non-tribal” peoples.

Kherai’s dance world is further mapped with great attention by Madhurima Goswami, who situates dance within customary performing contexts. The figure of the *Doudini* is evoked as a mediator between the community and divinities. Goswami observes how the ritual is organised through kinship and village networks, but the female dancer-priests perform by themselves, and often live in isolation as they carry the knowledge and stigma of the role as well as the contempt of the community. As some of the *Doudini* dances are no longer performed, they have been erased from public memory. She also hints at erasure and restructuring of Bodo culture when it was noted that a tree worshipped by ancestors of the Bodo was chopped to make a prayer hall (p. 63). Otherwise, the community in each of the villages eagerly participates in the Kherai Puza even though some of the movements seem abstract to them. On a long-term basis, community members are constructing movements for inter-generational transmission, which Goswami frames as “restored behaviour” (p. 75).

Women from Koch Rajbangshi, a trans-border ethnic community of the region, pray to the divinity *Hudum Deo*, by dancing around *Hudum Khuti*, which is an erect plantain pole and a symbol of fertility. The ritual seeks rain for agriculture and fulfilment of desires. The dance movements mimic everyday agricultural activities. Free from the male gaze, movements, lyrics and the context from which the dance emerges are erotically charged. Preetinicha Barman likens the nude dancing women with parched soil, “left arid and fallow for lack of rain” (p. 80). If the author addressed a few of the conditions under which local forms of feminism flourish amidst a heteropatriarchal system, and not rely entirely upon the premise that women sustain procreation in every aspect of agrarian as well as conjugal life, then sensuality and power—which she only mentions in passing—could have lent a more nuanced insight on embodiment in dancing for the *Hudum*.

Dances of indigenous communities amplify the connection between them and nature. Their dances also accrue social significance when they are performed as choreographies in formal ceremonies. Mousumi Mahanta searches for meanings the tribes of Assam have ascribed to their folk dances (p. 94), and she gathers that through performing the “folk,” the tribes “strengthen their ethnic identity” (p. 101), which are further “given a platform by local governments for the purpose of supporting tourism” (p. 102). Although it is mentioned in the methodology that participant and expert interviews from the Rabha, Mishing, Karbi, Tiwa, and Deori ethnic groups have been conducted through ethnographic research, the readers are given fairly concise summaries of the significant dances of each tribe. This strips an opportunity to dip into the lexicon of meanings that can indicate how the communities’ connection with nature is threatened during calamities, or trace matters pertaining to communicability and power in performance where both government and the peoples rely on dances to ground matters of ethnic identity.

Co-authors Parash Jyoti Moran and Hashik N.K. research culture of the Morans, a patriarchal community with over hundred clans who dance during the festival of Bohag or Rongali Bihu. The chapter discusses in detail the various socio-ritualistic aspects of the festival, including the gendered segregation in dance and lyrics of the invocatory and narrative songs. However, it foregoes analysing

the danced segments, as well as why the annual collective re-embodiment during seeding of the paddies during Bihu, its history and memory are important.

Exploring social media and the politics of dance, Jayanta Vishnu Das's chapter aims to refresh the new knowledge on the contemporary practices and circulation of dance. Framed around transitions in media practices after economic liberalisation in India, the author reviews traditional dance and community festivals within spaces that generate commerce and visibility, such as the Assamese television and video content sharing platforms. While enquiring if media prejudices slip into representation of dance, Das asks if indigenous dance can be framed independently of these representations. He does not answer the question. He makes an important point, which is on global platforms and on social media, "difference is used as a tool for attracting audience and tourists, and dance creates a visual metaphor. What was once captured through the lens of the colonial ethnographer, is today staged for the world to see" (p. 132). A few examples from the state sponsored festivals he cites, such as the Hornbill, Dambuk, Sanagi, Majuli, would have enriched the chapter.

The book has two major oversights that loses the authors' appeals to readers about recognising marginality. Firstly, the authors of the publication do not engage with critical dance writings on historical, archival or ethnographic perspectives on the region. In the past decade, the discursive landscape of dance in India's northeast region have been framed in the works of Rehanna L. Ksheshgi (*Crowning the Bihu Queen*, 2022; *Queering Assamese Bihu Festival Performance*, 2023), Debanjali Biswas (*Dance Cultures*, 2022), Georgie Pope (*Mobilising Assamese Vaishnavite performance practices*, 2020), Meenaxi Barkataki-Ruscheweyh (*Dancing to the State*, 2017) and Erik de Maaker (*Performing the Garo Nation*, 2013). Engagement with works such as these, could have deepened the sense of varied creative practices in the face of "threat of globalisation-induced cultural homogeneity" where "every dance is a conscious political expression of a culture" (p.5). While the focus on indigenous society and rituals is commendable, the structure of the book lacks the space to allow for serious contemplation on dance itself.

Secondly, the fluvial land along one of the world's largest braided waterways—the mighty Brahmaputra and its neighbouring regions, has borne witness to fierce climate change, intense authoritarianism, political disenfranchisement, disparate accounts of state-making, and self-determination movements in postcolonial India. These processes continue to have ramifications and repercussions within dance and its expressions, histories, legacies as well—the absence of which is deeply felt in the writings. To believe simply in the restorative aspect of performing arts is being naïve as it simplifies the cost at which performing arts is sustained, funded and allowed to represent the communities of the region. To really speak on the greater diversity of the arts in northeast India—*margi* or *desi*—i.e., structured or spontaneous, classical or vernacular—entails tapping into the embodied memories of many of the dances that have not been documented, or are running the risk of becoming extinct as the communities themselves struggle to keep up with the old ways of moving with shifting spaces, observed more tangibly through the loss of forests, agricultural and mineral-rich lands.

In the last part of the book, the readers meet impassioned educators and performers. The chapters by Juri Gogoi Konwar, Gaurav Rajkhowa, Mandakini Baruah, and Mayuri Bordoloi succeed in narrating individual perspectives on "doing" dance and dance-related research, and in many cases, these activities are inter-related. The biographical profiles reveal how arts are nurtured in spite of dwindling patronage, public perception, expectations from rituals and performing arts, and the mobility that is granted to those who are involved in creative pursuits. Despite dedicating five chapters to artist sketches, there are passing mentions of practices and practitioners from the neighbouring states of Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Manipur, and Tripura. The edited volume predominantly discusses performance-makers of Assam, as clearly mentioned in the introductory chapter (p.2). For the publication, *Celebrating Dance in Assam* would have been a more fitting title.