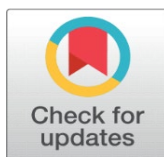
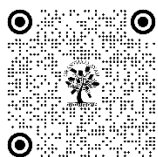


# RE-STATING BREATH, BODY, AND BEING: THE TRANSFORMATIVE SYNCRETIC OF DANCE AND YOGA IN CHANDRALEKHA'S PRANA

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## ABSTRACT

*Prana* choreographed in 1990 was a work that brought to the fore the inherent potency of breath and movement through a synergy of adavus and asanas. It was Chandralekha's second major work that worked on extending the body language closely connecting the seams between various physical forms like Bharatanatyam, Kalarippayattu and yoga. This study has interpreted *Prana's* body dynamics by positioning the work in tandem with the immediate and larger context. It has studied the elements that create a transformative synergy using yoga and dance. By drawing from an interpretive approach, this research has used critical analysis of the specific dance work by placing it against her writings, dance reviews, research works in this area and theoretical standpoints. The paper reveals how the choreographer's ideas of portraying the body's inherent power for exerting its presence as a source of self-renewal is made through abstract visualization of her concepts like "spine," "bindu," "mandala," and others which were formed and internalized in an effective continuum in her dances. In *Prana*, this was correlated to the characteristics of each graha shown through yoga and dance. It illustrates how Chandralekha used these ideas and elements in *Prana* to depict the role of breath, asanas, and the Bharatanatyam technique as a communication link for revitalizing the body. The study tells us how *Prana* brought an empirical focus to what dance and body gained from the corporeal practice of physical arts like yoga and kalarippayattu, with which she primarily meant to strengthen the form and power in them. Considering the recent efforts at the reconstruction of Chandralekha's works as part of a project that plans to help relive her thoughts amongst the present generation of dancers starting with *Prana*, this research is pertinent in locating the movement ideology and the concepts of body language that she created in the realm of Indian contemporary dance, to relook at her idea of renewing and revitalizing the body in today's times.

**Keywords:** Prana, Dance Analysis, Interpretive Approach, Yoga, Bharatanatyam, Body Language, Kalarippayattu, Chandralekha



## 1. INTRODUCTION

Bharatanatyam's aesthetics has embodied meanings and values embedded throughout its history. The boundaries of its performance traditions have been extended by dancer-choreographers like Chandralekha who incorporated new perspectives reflective of the changing times and functions in its form and content. Chandralekha was one of the early pioneers who chose to explore the scope of artistic expression through Bharatanatyam and yet took liberties to explore the limits of its existent grammar and tradition. Chandralekha's choreographies have been known to be bold, minimalistic, non-narrative, non-linear abstract,

deconstructed, and contemporary. Her dance productions were worked out in the pure dance or nritta sans the expressional aspect of dance that presented abstract themes and sometimes questioned or subverted the status quo of the themes of traditional Bharatanatyam through modern choreographic techniques. Although based on Bharatanatyam, its modernity lay in the fact that it explored the form's close interactions with the martial form of Kalarippayattu and the physical discipline of Yoga in a way that helped her enlarge the scope of the body language of dancers and bring to fore her ideas and questions on the body and its interactions in the contemporary society. All of her works had music that was either classical Carnatic or Hindustani with close collaborations with classical vocalists and nattuvangam gurus who ranged from Udipi Lakshmi Narayana for *Angika*, *Lilavati* and *Prana*, to Carnatic vocalist Aruna Sayeeram for *Bhinna Pravaha* and *Yantra*, the Violin maestro V.V. Subrahmanyam and Madurai G.S. Mani for Sri and T.H. Subhash Chandran to the Hindustani Drupad vocalists, Gundecha brothers for *Raga* and *Sharira*. The textual inspirations for her works were sourced and inspired from Bhaskaracharya's *Lilavati* or Muthuswami Dikshitar's Navagraha Kritis, Sankaracharya's *Soundaryalahiri* or, *Lingashtakam* to mention a few. In terms of technical style, she was a modernist who broke away from the classical format of presentation with its traditional repertoire, brocaded costumery, mythological narratives, nayaka-nayika themes, mimetic facial expressions, and the principles of classical dance composition. Her artistic creativity was postmodern as she self-consciously made use of earlier conventions and styles though to be presented in unconventional ways. These included addressing selective traditional Indian concepts through alternate means of portrayal, independent and innovative ideas of choreography, the usage of other traditional physical disciplines and styles, familiar but unconventional and simple costuming and added importance to bodily expression. The technique that resulted could not be called a fusion of forms nor was it representative of a hybrid nature. It was sometimes both but also much more as the body language of each successive dance work that Chandralekha created, gained from the lessons that the body had learned and embodied from the previous ones.

"Bharatanatyam is moving away from me", Chandralekha remarked in reverie as I enquired about the nature of her upcoming works <sup>1</sup>. She did not conform to the mimetic mukhaja abhinaya of Bharatanatyam from her very first production. And in her final works like *Raga* and *Sharira*, pure Bharatanatyam technique or nritta was scarcely present as it began to jump the borders of form or style. The journey of the body in her works has to be marked and studied as an important indicator in the development of Indian contemporary dance and with respect to the positioning of the body in post-colonial Indian society. The recent reconstruction of *Prana* at Chandralekha's centre as part of a curated set of dance workshops called "March Dance", was performed by a group of sixteen artists from around the globe who underwent two weeks of training. The dance was reconstructed to re-live the idea amongst the bodies of the young dancers, as Padmini states, which helped to "re-imagining" <sup>2</sup> this dance in a fresh context and frame. Chandralekha's works demand study as they are considered "radical at being unconventional and individualistic with a strong and bold body language" and as those that "questioned the tenets of the mainstream and suffused its alternate existence by 'redefining' cultural codes" Puthenedam (2014). This analytical study of choreographic patterns and body language in *Prana* is important in order to have a relook at the new dimensions in the Indian dance scene that Chandralekha's works pioneered in a space that was

<sup>1</sup> Personal communication with Chandralekha and Sadanand Menon, Feb 13, 2006, at Chandralekha's residence

<sup>2</sup> See Chitra Swaminathan, 2023.

largely held by the revivalists of classical dance forms. The objectives of this paper have been to explore through close analysis, the interconnectedness of yoga and dance in the choreographic portrayal of *Prana* to see how the work uses the synergy of these physical disciplines to visualize through creative motifs, the choreographer's concepts of power in the body. It deals with body language that according to Chandralekha becomes an essential part of the revitalizing and enlivening experience in the present times of external incursions to its existence.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Chandralekha's works have been studied and written about majorly since the 'East-west encounter' at NCPA, Bombay in 1984 which was a conglomerative platform for dance works of Indian and Western choreographers. Here, 'Thillana', an excerpt from her earlier work, created ripples in the Indian dance scene for its choreographic tenor. Writing on the work of Chandralekha amongst a number of other innovative Indian choreographers Coorlawala in her research thesis on the contemporary Indian Dance, critically evaluated the vocabulary of *Angika* against its available assumptions and referred to Navagraha and Prana as consisting of "elements of religious ritual abstracted in geometrical representations of planets" Coorlawala (1994). Though being the first work that has commented on Chandralekha's dances, the study gives only a descriptive reference and does not focus on analyzing these two dances. Hence, the major literature that has been a source of both providing a biographical account and documentation of her life and works has been Rustom Bharucha's book, 'Chandralekha: Woman, Dance and Resistance' of 1995. It studies the sources of the growth of her artistic sensibilities with an insider's view of one who has travelled with the choreographer and witnessed the performances and audience reactions at various locations from Devadasi (1960) to Yantra (1994). The book provides information on her formative years including incidents, events, ideas, and ideologies as the many facets of the dancer, her work and life. Not just documentation of her life, he provides a rich context for her works, her interactions, her life at different times, people whom she met, her creative works in design, and poetry, and her 'primary experiences' which he interprets and correlates with parts and instances of her works. Apart from the biographical context and analytical review of the works like *Devadasi*, *Angika*, *Navagraha*, *Primal energy*, *Angamandala*, *Namaskar*, *Lilavati*, *Prana*, *Request concert*, *Sri* and *Yantra*, the information on sequentially detailed descriptions of *Prana*, of that of an informed insider, with its constituent elements of music, yoga asanas, and Navagraha is of particular interest in this research as an important secondary reference point. The body language adopted in *Prana* has been looked at as an embodied attitude with relevance to breath and yoga for dance in Puthenedam (2014). Chatterjea (1998) looked at Chandralekha's *Sri* as an exploration of the contextual location of the female body that seeks to release from the shackles of socio-cultural conditioning (1998). Her book *Butting Out* Chatterjea (2004), involved interpretive readings and meaning-making of Chandralekha's works *Angika*, *Yantra*, *Sri*, *Raga* and *Sloka*. As she says, "recalling history and reflecting context creates circuits of meaning", the works are analysed with a post-structuralist perspective. They are posited as post-modernist cultural productions which are radical in deconstructing the power of the 'classical' body. Another work in the same realm is Royona Mitra's feminist reading of *Sharira* (2001) which talked about how Chandralekha has portrayed the Indian female body to confront the abstentious nature of the Indian *nari* and her sexuality and Radhika Puthenedam's close analysis of the same work showed how it tried to erase its disjunctions

between the corporeal and conceptual divisions of the body in its interactivity between the male and female [Mitra \(2014\)](#), [Puthenedam \(2014\)](#).

Chandralekha's views and thoughts detailing her modernist philosophy and minimalistic aesthetics have been explicated in her own writings, her introductory prologues before the presentation of each work, the choreographer's notes on productions and her interviews that have been the primary source of literature. Audio-video recordings of her productions have provided the larger primary data required for this research. The work undertaken in this research takes from Bharucha's and other primary and secondary resources to present a dancer's and researcher's perspective with respect to the technical explorations that Chandralekha did to find and illustrate the body as a potential powerhouse of transformational energy both physical and psychical through the syncretic language of yoga and Bharatanatyam.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

Analytical and scholarly studies bring a great richness of understanding of dances and their changing contexts of performance reflected in their form and content. This is especially so in the case of dance works that had moved from the classical repertoire and attempted innovations in group and solo choreographies since the late 1930s. Chandralekha, the dancer- choreographer's unique contribution to dance has been documented in various forms- writings, photographs, and videos. It is also present as Parker and Mock state, "in the bodies of the dancers who performed with her company; in memories of those who witnessed her body dancing and those who have seen her company perform, as well as the subsequent documentation of these bodies and memories" [Parker-Starbuck & Mock \(2011\)](#). This research has majorly utilized qualitative research with content analysis of empirical data available in the form of archival documentation of Chandralekha's performances mostly available at NCPA, Mumbai and SNA, New Delhi that contributed to developing a movement-based performance analysis that was necessary for interpretation. Visits and meetings with the choreographer and her dancers during the years 2004-06 garnered primary data obtained through observation at rehearsals, and from interviews and oral testimony with the choreographer and her students respectively. My own corporeal experiences with prior knowledge of the physical forms like yoga and additional movement training in Kalaripayattu apart from practice and understanding of some basic techniques and styles of contemporary dance have allowed me to form kinesthetic understandings of the involvement of these physical arts and concepts in her practice along with providing a critical outlook about their usage.

The research follows two steps of analysis- first, the work is located in its historical and artistic context and second, the focus is directed to the materials of the choreographies themselves and looking at how the context informs the different possibilities in content analysis with a post-structuralist perspective. "Making sense of a dance requires that an interpretation is made derived from a rigorous description of the movement and supported by additional knowledge of the context in which the dance exists" [Adshead \(1988\)](#), 13. Adshead et al's model of dance analysis (1980) identified four stages: identifying and describing the components, discerning the form, interpreting, and evaluating the dance. The content analysis of the dance as a text reveals its meanings and contexts- sub-textual, symbolic, assumptive and the ideas it portrays. A structuralist awareness of the technique along with a post-structuralist understanding of its contextual features adds to the critical discursiveness presented by the dancing body.

The body is a “site of power”, as quoted by Foucault, or a “site of discursive struggle”, as remarked by Weedon [Punday \(2000\)](#). Deconstruction and de-canonization tools used by the choreographer herself to subvert and re-define the many ideas of the ‘classical’ Bharatanatyam’s content in her choreographies thereby defines the dance as a discursive text. Her exploration of principles of physical forms of the pre-natyashastraic times and her claim on their relevance <sup>3</sup> can be explained in Bakhtin’s terms as the ‘heteroglossia’ of the dance language that would have provided an inter-textual dialogue. The methodology of analysis has thus looked at her presentation of Bharatanatyam as ‘dialogic’, a discourse and a means for subverting its dominant idealogues through the presence of layers of the vocabulary of different physical arts. As this research has involved a close reading of a single work, it has limited itself to look at it in terms of its dance content to locate its relevance both to body’s language in dance and its importance in every day.

#### 4. INTERCEPTING THE BODY WITH A NEW LANGUAGE- CONTEXTUALISING PRANA.

Prana is popularly known by the term Pranayama, the conscious awareness of breath. It is the fourth stage in yoga that involves control of prana and pranic vitality in a human accomplished through different ways of breathing. The dance work, though, does not have anything to do with the actual processes of doing Pranayama rather it has conceptual affinities worked out through means of dance, asanas, music, and choreography. In Chandralekha’s words, *Prana* is a concept that relates to the ‘sun and the moon in our bodies, their rhythm and movement’ and that which is a ‘vital significance for self-renewal’ [Chandralekha \(1990a\)](#). This finds resonance from the yogic texts according to which, the Sun and Moon in the human body are signified through the pingala and ida naadis, the energy pathways which can be controlled by the various actions of Pranayama. These psychic pathways through which the prana flows help to awaken in oneself, the higher states of consciousness [Saraswati \(1974\)](#). The dance, its relation with breath and the metaphorical analogy that presents an ulterior goal were finely explained by the choreographer thus: “It explores the relatedness of breath and movement of the inward and outward flow of space, the inward and outward flow of spine, of distances in the body that need to be covered, that need to be discovered” [Chandralekha \(1990\)](#). The interconnectedness of ‘breath’ and ‘movement’ was projected here through the performance of asanas and adavus which intersperse *Prana*. To what extent does this juxtaposing of asanas and adavus create an awareness of the vital breath, its purpose and how?

Let us look at the major constituents of this work: it has breath as its important feature exercised or controlled through the practice of asanas; different adavus performed to different speeds; images of shapes attributed to Navagraha and their placement; usage of Navagraha kritis and sollukattus. What is it that connects the Navagrahas or the Navagraha kritis to the asanas and adavus performed? The shapes of respective yantras of the Navagraha are evoked by the dancers by their positioning on the stage and a resemblance to the shape of asanas. This seems to be fine at the visual-aesthetic level. But what goes beyond this is the concept that different planets and their placements and transitions in the solar system determine and control the life of each human being. As Ida and Pingala naadis represent the Moon and Sun in the body in the practice of pranayama, the other grahas too are believed to control the functions of the human body in various ways. The

<sup>3</sup> A profile and interview of Chandralekha by UK TV. Date unknown.



significance of the presence of planetary positions in palmistry and horoscopes are a case in point. When Chandralekha states that Prana is a "journey towards the recovery of breath, towards the reclamation of our inner space, our core, our centre, towards renewal of energies for dance and for life", it pointed towards finding our centre, ourselves, understanding our body and our dance, and our lives more closely relating to our inner and external space more honestly and meaningfully.

Chandralekha created dances like *Devadasi* in 1959 and *Navagraha* much later, in the early 1970s followed by the ones which emphasized various facets of the body that both explored its potency and resisted its status quo in the Indian socio-cultural context. Her detention during the aftermath of the national emergency in 1982<sup>4</sup>, its effect and incursions on the mind and body and how the body responded by regaining through the principle of the spine and energizing through dance, and how she began to look at principles of dance and arts as means for self-renewal, to combat the aggression of external forces on one's senses and to regain one's spine-as a metaphor of freedom are values that have permeated her creations in dance since then. [Coorlawala \(2016\)](#) The East-West encounter in 1984 in Bombay was a testing ground for her. It gave her scope, a green signal, out of which she came in full force with *Angika* (1985) where she explored the principles of dance -spine, control, balance, and flow, the concepts that she felt would strengthen the body through dance and Kalaripayattu, a martial art of Kerala. With *Prana* (1990), yogic asanas and the power of breath were presented to explore a renewed understanding of the potential of the body relative to its surroundings both immediate and far. Chandralekha's works extending from *Angika* (1985) to *Sharira* (2001) show three areas of focus based on the dance vocabulary and themes developed in her choreographies at different points in time. One of these is where the thrust was on exploring the form of Bharatanatyam in close contact with other physical disciplines. She had worked with the yogic Suryanamaskar in *Navagraha* (1972) later followed by *Angika* (1985) where Kalaripayattu was used for the first time and furthermore with yoga asanas in *Prana* (1990). In this phase, the form was used to investigate and strengthen the structure/ form of the dance and the power in the dancing body, glimpses of which are discussed here. It would not be out of place to remark metaphorically that as *Angika* had given strength to the dance and body so did Prana to infuse breath and life. The form had also been used to convey new thematic ventures as well like the history of Bharatanatyam in *Devadasi* (1959) or the solving of mathematical riddles in *Leelavati* (1989). During the second phase, women became the theme of her works and the centre of focus with dance becoming a language to convey the subject. These could be seen in works like *Sri* (1991) and *Yantra* (1994). The third phase is one in which femininity in the physical body had been the focus where the visual depiction of femininity used dance as an appendage to convey the thought. This could be seen in the works- *Raga* (1998), *Sloka* (1999) and *Sharira* (2001) [Puthenedam \(2014\)](#).

## 5. CORPorealizing BREATH AND ENERGY

In Chandralekha's words *Prana* 'explores the relatedness of breath and movement'<sup>5</sup>. As the actions of yoga use breath and movement as companions that are to be purposefully harmonized, a mind-body correlation is attained. Conceptually, in yogic terms, *prana* is understood as life, breath, vital cosmic energy or in other terms as the essence of the whole universe in which breath is a strong

<sup>4</sup> It was when Chandralekha and Sadanand Menon were charged with sedition for anti-governmental activities during the Emergency days. She has discussed how it she recovered from that incident with the help of dance in [Bharucha \(1995\)](#) [Mccarty \(1992\)](#), [Lakshmi \(2003\)](#).

<sup>5</sup> Programme notes of Prana. 1980.

and constant reminder of the reality of life. Yoga and breath have been seen to be intrinsically linked as it stimulates transformation in body and mind and is known to connect with subtle energy through conscious breathing. *Prana* was a visual metaphor based on abstract ideas on the potential of breath and energy in the human body. Chandralekha termed it as a “renewal of energies,” the “recovery of breath” and as an “attempt to return the breath to dance to our beleaguered lives” through dance and yoga [Chandralekha. \(1990a\)](#). A similar effort had been undertaken by Uttara Asha Coorlawala in 1983 in her work *Asana* <sup>6</sup> where a series of purely hatha yoga postures were danced to *Devi stotram* that depicted the awakening of the Devi within.

### 5.1. NAVAGRAHA: THE BEGINNING OF ABSTRACT

The concept of *Navagraha* was an important constituent of *Prana*. It was according to Chandralekha something that had struck and remained with her for quite some time before she began exploring the possibilities of new content for dance to move out of the ‘mechanical repetitiveness of the dance’ <sup>7</sup>. To explain in brief about the main motif used in this choreography, the nine *Navagraha* deities are usually found in a small, special, square enclosure in every temple. *Navagrahas* refer to the nine celestial bodies in the cosmos which according to Indian astrology are said to influence the life of people on earth. They are Ravi (Sun), Chandra (Moon), Kuja (Mars), Budha (Mercury), Guru (Jupiter), Sukra (Venus), Sani (Saturn), Rahu and Ketu. The planetary movements and human affairs present remarkable coincidences and concurrences within repetitive cyclic patterns that make them predictable, and this is something that the Indian science of Jyothisha is based on. All the imagery and symbolism associated with the *Navagrahas* like colour, song, qualities, and relationship with nature are indicators of how, in the Indian mind, these *Navagrahas* are not just distant planets, but a living presence that influences our everyday lives and which show how integrated human life is with the cosmic laws of cause and effect.

The *Navagraha* deities are usually positioned in a square and each one’s direction of placement is relatively different. Each of these *grahas* seems to convey and project an imaginary sense of a simultaneous rotation and revolution, which Chandralekha refers to as ‘a movement-in-the-round’ when one starts circumambulating the deities. Apparently, the act of circumambulating itself propels a multi-centric motion involving the individual, each *graha* and all the nine *grahas* both independently and with respect to each other. This action also helps one comprehend the relative position and potential of the human element with regard to the larger cosmo-dynamics. According to Chandralekha, the *Navagrahas* reflected a ‘highly organized, harmonious’ <sup>8</sup> concept of space. She explored this concept in almost all her choreographic works as she looked at the different possibilities of shaping, charging, acting, and reacting to space by making it active and alive.

Various events surrounding an artist influence the creation of an artwork. In Chandralekha’s case, her ideas on the concept of the *Navagraha* seemed to have got reinforced by other sources through which she could relate to it, for example, the Indian temple tank architecture or the *Homage to the Square* series paintings of Josef Albers <sup>9</sup>. She had also begun exploring the scope of its graphic geometry through

<sup>6</sup> *Asana* by Uttara Asha Coorlawala presented at National Centre for Performing Arts on 8 Sep 1983. NCPA video archives. Accessed 20.06.2006.

<sup>7</sup> In interview with Gopalakrishnan, K.K.2003.

<sup>8</sup> In interview with Sai Prashanti. 1985. qtd in Bharucha, Rustom. 1995. p- 86

<sup>9</sup> In this series begun in 1949, Albers explored chromatic interactions with flat colored squares arranged concentrically on the canvas.

*kolams*, and posters<sup>10</sup>. During this time, she spent a year abroad when she travelled across Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Greece, London, France, and America meeting and collaborating with artists, film directors, and activist groups, visiting museums, art galleries and theatre plays<sup>11</sup>. It can be understood that her stay, and travel was replete not only with American films, Shakespeare, or the Royal Ballet but also with Merce Cunningham, Museum of Modern Art, experimenting with art and technology and other creative activities which sustained and kindled her proactive mind. The active moon missions of 1966 by the Soviet Union and the US when spacecraft Luna 9 and Surveyor 1 of the respective countries landed on the moon and transmitted thousands of images of the terrain followed by the manned mission with Neil Armstrong who first stepped out on the Moon in 1969, would have possibly created a strong impression about the relative constructs of space and time. This, she had explored in the second half of *Navagraha* (1972) and later in *Prana* (1990). This period also witnessed the Vietnam War and active radical movements like the feminist movement and the beginning of the civil rights movement which had rewritten the history and politics of the world. Amongst these, she found all the artists expressing themselves in a strong way. A pronounced receptiveness to the free flow of innumerable ideas propelled her to proceed with a revitalized energy to pursue practising and choreographing once she was back in India.

*Navagraha*, the dance work, had an adaptation of the yogic *Surya Namaskar* as the first section that she performed to the lines of Muthuswami Dikshitar's *Suryamurthe*, a hymn on the Sun god in which Chandralekha had "restated the yogic suryanamaskar at a different pace/beat and different tension"<sup>12</sup>. [Bharucha \(1995\), 90-91](#) saw it as an "almost infinitesimal transformation of yoga into dance" which was "more like an inner passage of movement, a yogic flow of energy". Describing her moves thus, he said, she performed this at the far end of the stage, almost at a vanishing point.

"...with a slow, hieratic movement of the hands, the body rotates through half-circles and quarter-circles. The relentlessly slow 'flow' of the movement is punctuated with micro-rhythms, so that each turn of the body seems somewhat fragmented. It is through a series of tiny jerks that the rotation is completed."

Such an experiment of performing yoga to the strains of '*Suryamurthe*', a hymn to the sun god, showed the beginnings of a change in Chandralekha's outlook towards dance and its concepts both with regard to an exploration of a different space-time configuration and in interlinking concepts of physical arts and dance. The duet, which followed this solo, was performed by Chandralekha and another male dancer, Kamdev to jathis composed by her guru, Ellappa Pillai. Bharucha viewed them as representations of human and cosmic elements and their interplay that interacted, met, and separated. Referring to this piece, Chandralekha recounted a sense of "unpredictability" in her interaction with Kamdev. that happened as she approached Kama with a tremendous speed "almost going into him" and then finding her "own bearings" [Bharucha \(1995\), 89](#). Her abstract notions on space, time, energy, rhythm, or bodies within performing space seemed to have got formulated and visualized from this stage onwards. In her search for a new form and new content, she found yoga. This turned out to be the initial step in Chandralekha's exploration of linkages between physical arts starting with yoga and dance. The concepts which emerged from these linkages were what Chandralekha carried throughout all her choreographic works. Her experiments aimed at embodying and

<sup>10</sup> Chandralekha's poster on time based on the Navagraha concept was printed as calendar by Air India.

<sup>11</sup> Chandralekha mentions about the places she visited during this trip in her interview with C.S. Lakshmi. 2003. p116-122.

<sup>12</sup> In interview with Gopalakrishnan, K.K. 2003.

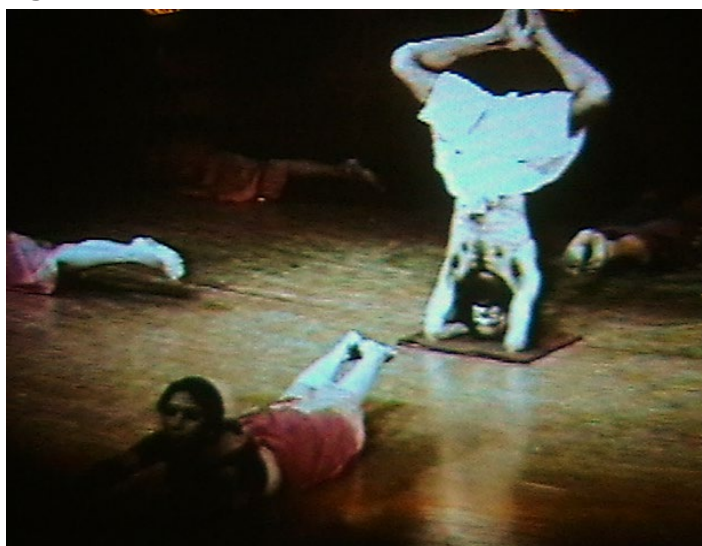


inscribing these concepts in the dancers and viewers through the dance. It evolved as an internalizing process which tried developing a different body language.

## 6. ANALYSING PRANA

The performance begins in complete silence. As the spotlight falls on the centre stage, a dancer is seen positioned in *Sirsasana* (headstand), eight dancers come in and lie supine around the central dancer facing different directions as per the Navagraha iconography of Indian temple architecture. As they all gradually move to *Shalabhasana* (locust pose) and slowly move their arms forward to an extended *Anjali*, a welcoming gesture, the dancer in the centre, still in *Sirsasana*, does an *Anjali* with his legs <sup>13</sup> (Figure 1) The eight other dancers may be seen as representative of different planets and dancer in the centre understandably, Surya. However, with a bit of contextual analysis, it may be surmised that he represents the Man/ human who is introduced thus in many of Chandralekha's later productions like *Mahakaal*, *Raga* and *Sharira*. The motif of Man here reflects the microcosmic reality of the macrocosmic nature around. Those around him are thus the other human bodies represented as those who have just begun to feel the potential of life force and have risen from slumber and are seen picking up the nuances by moving hands and feet above the ground visualized through *shalabasana*. The choreography thus begins as a salutation to the Sun, Moon and various other cosmic elements and their energies within and around us. With this *Anjali* begins the journey which interprets the seamless synergy of dance, yoga, and choreography and the irrevocable presence and vitality of life force as an important human element. This is the opening scene of *Prana*, the dance work of dancer-choreographer, Chandralekha, that premiered in September 1990 at her own Mandala/ Spaces theatre cultural centre in Chennai, a practice space within her garden (more of a grove) that gets transformed into a performance arena for the premiere of her dance productions.

**Figure 1**



**Figure 1** Anjali

**Source** NCPA archives

<sup>13</sup> Prana by Chandralekha presented at Tata Theatre, National Centre for Performing Arts on 8th Oct 1990. Accessed between 20-23.06.2006, NCPA video archives.

Figure 2



Figure 2 Depiction of Triangle Yantra of Mars

*Prana* was performed by eight Bharatanatyam dancers and one yoga exponent. The constituents of this choreographic work include i) images of shapes or *yantras* attributed to *navagrahas*, the nine planetary bodies depicted through certain yogic asanas; ii) *Adavus* (basic units of Bharatanatyam) and its *Korvai* (phrases) performed to varying speeds and combinations; iii) Music in the form of Navagraha kritis of Carnatic composer, Muthuswami Dikshitar coupled with *sollukattus* (pneumonic syllables). The Navagrahas and their corresponding geometric form shapes depicted in *Prana* are - Sun (*Surya*)- circle; Moon (*Soma*)- crescent; Mars (*Angaraka*) - triangle; Mercury (*Budha*)- droplet; Jupiter (*Brhaspati*)- straight line; Venus (*Sukra*)- a five-pointed star; Saturn (*Sani*)- ring; Eclipses (*Rahu and Ketu*)- arrow and arrowhead. The shapes, though, are slightly different in different sources, they seem to fulfil the requirement of denoting each graha.

Following this is the depiction of “Surya racing across the skies in his seven-horse chariot” [Kothari \(1993\)](#). The dancer in the centre takes up *Veerabhadrasana* with folded palms and arms extended forward creating an image akin to the sun piercing through the darkness at the break of dawn. He is closely followed by seven dancers who slowly advance from backstage with *preritha saranam*. (Creeping feet move) forming a picture of the Sun as the powerhouse of life’s creation that is relied upon by other entities for survival and sustenance. As the dancer at the centre goes to a *Hanumanasana*, he opens his extended Anjali arms evoking the image of a rising sun upon the horizon spreading his resplendent rays. With an opening up of arms positioned perpendicular to an extended split of the legs on the floor, the visual becomes metaphorically suggestive of the opening of the body, the hidden energy points, and its interstices, on a journey that tries to visualize the power and potency of Prana-life breath <sup>14</sup>, in the human body. Chandralekha saw Surya as the “centre of both human and planetary time space having an authority on our body, a claim on our breath” (1990). The primacy Chandralekha gives to the depiction of the spine in dance can be prominently visualized in the next sequence which is performed to a rendering of “*Suryamurthenamosthute....*” (*Saurashtra raga; chaturashra dhruvatalam*) sans any accompaniment by a solo dancer. The dancer has legs

<sup>14</sup> Chandralekha refers to Prana as life- breath in [Sarma \(1994\)](#)

extended sideways but firmly placed on the ground which she brings back to *sama* only at the end of the song. The image of the circularity of the sun of the *navagrahayantra* gets superscribed through the spatial movement of the limbs. The viewer would be able to feel the centrality of the spine with the spine acting as an axle supporting the movement of the radials- head, hands, and legs. The navel becomes the axis point wherefrom movements originate and end. In totality, there is a sense of rootedness with the unchanging position of the feet but at the same time, a radiating force from the centre of the body expressed through the stretch and expansion of the spine, torso, and arms all visibly expressed through this simple movement. It subscribes to the idea of the body as a *mandala* which Chandralekha so strongly believed in and incorporated into her works. She conceived the concept of the *Mandala* mentioned in texts like *Natyasastra* or *Abhinayadarpana* as one where she stated, the “body itself becomes the *mandala*, the tense centre of an expanding cosmos”, “a dynamic principle linking inner space with outer space” Chandralekha (1990b). The rootedness of the positions held here was a “capacity for stillness without rigour-mortis, with a constantly moving dynamic centre even if still”, a concept that she illustrates in dance as ‘body as a bindu’ in which the body is a dot radiating in every direction that became an important constituent of conceiving it as a Mandala Chandralekha (1990b). The body as a mandala expressed in *Prana* is a sort of microcosm trying to express itself effectively in a larger macrocosm. Chandralekha considered the spine as an especially important concept that a dancer had to work with. This principle, as Padmini recounted was based on “the idea of a never-ending spiralling up of energy from the spine, with all the movements whether arm movement, head movement, everything started from the base of the spine”. The spine for Chandralekha was the “centre of the body holding the ground and when being truthful to the spine, it provided an energy circuit which will be created in the audience as well” (Chettur, P. personal communication, 2006, March 16).

The *solkattu* that follows this is sung in three speeds like a *trikaala theermanam* with dancers entering and performing different *nattadavus*. If one dancer started with the third *nattadavu*, then the fifth *nattadavu*, followed by the sixth, the other dancer started with the sixth and then the seventh and the eighth. So, we found eight dancers doing five different *adavus* (three, five, six, seven and eight) at eight different positions at all times. Chandralekha’s choreography and principles of dance were minimalistic, and these moves were in her words, “sculpting space, of a specific mass in relation to specific volume” that utilized the formal elegance of Bharatanatyam Chandralekha (1990c). The *adavus* are performed to the linear progressing speed of the *sollukattu*. A sense of harmony prevailed throughout as there are neither multi-rhythmic phrases with different dancers taking different speeds at the same moment nor cross-rhythms with *gati bhedam*. The *sollu* and *adavus* are clean and simple as they proceed with a nonchalant *chaturashra* rhythm throughout. Though they appear randomly placed, every dancer follows a predetermined specific path that is straight, cuts only at right angles to change direction and traverses across the positions of Navagraha iconography. Each dancer seemed to proclaim an empowering individuality through their markedly different positions though they never took oppositional paths with forceful or conflicting overtones. This movement across the stage is metaphorical of the cosmic movement of planets orbiting in a galaxy, each traversing their orbits with a harmonious blend.

Soma or Moon is depicted by the crescent-shaped Yantra. The two dancers sit facing each other and come down to *Bhujangasana* (cobra stretch) from where they perform an adaptation of *Vasishtasana* (side plank pose) The transition is extremely slow-paced based on exhalation and inhalation which is smooth and controlled in

*vilambit Kala* (first speed). The dancers who balance the entire line of their body from head-torso resting on toes and palm placed perpendicular and firmly on the ground with the other arm extended in the same line convey a heightened sense of balance and control required not only to perform the asana but also as qualities necessary for any Bharatanatyam dancer. As Padmini Chettur remarked, Chandralekha had worked with "slowness but with the flow" and explored the possibility of yoga and kalarippayattu within which she found "certain ways of developing strength, to work with breath and to understand the idea of flow" (Chettur, P. personal communication, 2006, March 16). The semicircle of the yantra depicting the moon is created through the curve of *Bhujangasana*, shaped as a crescent which forms along the angle between the raised arm and toes of *Vasishtasana*. The phrase of *adavus* that follows the depiction of the moon yantra has all three *Thateiteitha* which come next in the order of Bharatanatyam *adavus*. Here too the *sollukattu* and *adavus* are sung and performed to gradually progressing speeds from first to third. Some of them start with first, some with second *thateiteitha* and others with the third. As in the previous *sollukattu*, there are no multi-rhythms or cross-rhythms and the *adavu* progression is smooth. The only difference is that the dancers totaling nine, start from the *navagraha* positions, and take a circular path around the same position thrice before joining a larger circle. This whole exercise which is repeated twice can be compared to the rotation and revolution of the planets in their orbit. There is no professed linearity or right-angle cuts in the *adavus* as found in the previous *sollukattu* which followed the depiction of Surya. The contrast from linearity to roundedness is evident. It can be understood that the angular sharpness of the lines across the stage for the *sollukattus* of Surya evoked the sharp piercing rays of the sun whereas the curves, semicircles of *thateiteitha* (*paraval/spreading-out adavu*), the flex of the torso and parabolic feet patterns in the next *sollukattu* which follows Soma was meant to have a more soothing and gentle countenance reflecting coolness generally associated with the moon. But it should be noted that this feeling is not brought out by making the *adavus* more curvaceous or relaxed. The energy flow of a steady spine or the radiating strength through the *aramandi* (half-sitting position) and circularly precise movement of the arms and feet pattern all bring out the power of forces exerted by the moon. Each *sollukattu*, as we have seen in the earlier two cases, conveys a different idea and projects a distinctness in terms of stage dynamics and energy distribution between bodies, visualizing concepts of control, balance and flow as latent vital capacities of the body that need to be exploited and finally, connecting to the depiction of *graha* by providing the intended body language for the dancers.

The depiction of *Angaraka* or Mars, the red planet of the solar system is represented by a *trikona* or triangle yantra. Three dancers are revealed as a spotlight falls on the stage centre. Positioned with two dancers facing back and the frontal dancer representing the apex of the triangle, they slowly start moving out their *sama* feet till a triangle is formed with their lower bodies. Now the song begins: "aHNgArakam AshrayAmy ahaM...." sung in ragam surati and talam Rupakam. In this sequence, arms are gradually brought close to the chest and then extended forward when simultaneously the torso is also bent forward. As the bent torso reaches a position parallel to the floor, the neck is extended to bring the face forward and arms are bent in an Anjali formed below the face (Figure 2). The symmetry of the triangles that seem to grow on the stage with each move throws upon the audience the splendour of the inherent geometric integrity of the human body expressed with a subtle force. The profusion of triangles with its brimming energy quotient seems to scatter the performance's serene *vilambit Kala*, creating a feel of



2D and 3D triangles across space. *Budha* or Mercury depicted by its Yantra is shaped by the arms of the dancers in *Vrikshasana* (tree pose) to resemble the shape of a droplet, as is the case with every other asana that is used to depict the grahas, there seems to be no connection between the asana and the *graha*. It is just the shape of Yantra denoting a *graha* that is evoked through the similarly shaped body line of an asana. So, the usage of specific asanas is at the most only denotative. Importance is, given to asanas and *adavus* at their conceptual and corporeal levels that by performance is embodied by the dancer's bodies. The concepts are, more experiential and less theoretical or literal. The same is the case with the number of dancers depicting each *graha*. This too is denotative of the day of the week that the *graha* represents. As *Vrikshasana* is a one-leg stand, the mere doing of the asana requires the dancer to have a perfect spinal posture, a good balance and control over the breath, movement of limbs without jerks and the smooth flow of energy to sustain the movement for some time. It is a two-way action as it requires a good amount of concentration to hold this asana and at the same time enables one to achieve concentration with continuous practice of the asana. Though performing *Vrikshasana* for the depiction of *Budha* and linking it with the *Navagraha* concept serves the purpose of representing the concept choreographically on stage, it is also meant to serve the choreographer's purpose of finding effective concepts of body language from the usage of other physical arts like Yoga in performing and understanding Bharatanatyam. Ultimately, for Chandralekha, what mattered was exploring the power of dance to help us "remain whole to hold ourselves together and make the body a medium between the earth and the sky" Chandralekha. (1990),<sup>95</sup> at times suggested through images like *Vrikshasana* with the arms reaching out towards the sky and legs firmly placed on the earth. The focus was on developing a body language for which different themes of performance served as a basic framework. Chandralekha, as Padmini said, "had a much more holistic kind of approach to the body. She was really interested in the body to understand something and not just the body commenting or mindlessly imitating something."<sup>15</sup> Chandralekha was, 'not trying to entertain anybody or provide a compendium of information'. She was, 'working with a tremendously controlled slowness of movement and a deep meditative mood' which as she says Chandralekha (1991), 28-29 'generates from a need to know intimately the comprehensive principle of breath, of breathing, which holds all movement together.'

Jupiter or *Brhaspati*, is represented as a straight line in its Yantra imagery. Five girls enter the stage and occupy their positions where four of them sit cross-legged in *Gomukhasana* (cow-face pose) with their backs to the audience. One girl comes a little forward and sits facing the audience. She then does an *Ardhahalasana* (half-hoe) with arms slowly taken to the sides appearing perpendicular to her bent torso. She gradually opens out her legs horizontally to bring each toe near the extended arms (Figure 3). The dancers with their legs in *Gomukha* and backs to the audience do not show any other movement till the end of the song. Their faces are turned back and are not visible, but this does not mean they are inactive and faceless. The erect and taut spine is enough to suggest a steady, resounding vibration emanating from a still pose. It is their spine that appears to speak instead of their faces. The final picture which comes across is not simply about five dancers attempting to do asanas, some *Gomukhasana* and others, an adaptation of *Halasana* (*hoe pose*). The final picture which can be visualized has more to do about the metaphor of the spine which Chandralekha saw as a 'metaphor of freedom'. She had held the "search for the spine" as analogous to the struggle for personal freedom Lakshmi (2003). The

<sup>15</sup> Personal communication with Padmini Chettur, 16th March 2006



strong perpendicularity of the spine to the stage or to the earth, implies the inherent capacity of the dancer's body to remain erect, un-flattened, un-wavered by the social conditioning of an inherited past. It represents the uniqueness of every individual among the faceless millions, to charge the space around, to become agents of change in society, to revive the energy of the spine and not remain faceless. The aesthetics of a body, she said were not separate from the form or the dance [Basak \(1997\)](#). She considered the body and spine as the "source of many energies, not merely of mechanics, but involving consciousness, how you live, live your interests, how you feel, etc". [Maheshwari \(1997\)](#).

**Figure 3**



**Figure 3** A Pattern in Showing Jupiter  
Source NCPA archives

**Figure 4**



**Figure 4** Formation to Represent Venus

The Sollukattu following Brihaspathi comprises the Nattadavus that comes next in the order in Bharatanatyam lessons- the Tha tei tam series. All four Tha tei tams are performed by five dancers. The line of Brihaspathi as represented by its Yantra can be perceived by the horizontal lines created across the stage by bodies with

perpendicular torsos which hold an erect spine. They move across the stage from left to right and right to left standing one behind the other and performing to the same rhythm with ascending tempo is first speed and then second speed. The horizontal parallel lines formed by bodies placed at equidistance and moving across the stage resemble the overhead power lines. In this case, it does not just remain visual imagery but expresses the flow of energy emanating from bodies moving end to end across the performance space to form simple horizontal lines. It is a sequence which suggests charging up the potential latent energy of the body, gaining momentum to express its kinetic power through movements and then extending this flow to charge up the space around. Padmini says about charging space, "Chandralekha was not only looking at bodies. The whole idea was of charging space within the bodies, charging the choreographic space. Charging space meant that all the time, with every movement one, was concerned with pushing this space" (2006). One can come across the line of Brihaspathi as represented by its Yantra in the horizontal lines created across the stage by bodies with perpendicular torsos holding an erect spine.

All through Prana, various concepts of the body have been seen to emerge and gain prominence. These have included: the rooted and radiating body as *mandala* shown through Surya, the flexibility and stretch of the curved spine in Soma, the perfectness and profuseness of inherent *trikonasana* of the body expressed in *Angaraka*, the inbuilt control and balance of a body reaching for the sky but at the same time gaining its strength from earth felt through *Vrikshasana* in *Budha* and the straight line of *Brhaspati*, portrayed by an erect spine as a potential hold or source of power. *The next, Sukra* or Venus, represented as a pentagon or a five-pointed star, evokes the imagery of an active centre channelling its core energy through the five-pointed ends. The depiction of Venus is commented on as 'nuanced femininity' by Bharucha (1995), 231. Visualized through the movement of the limbs, the shape of the body and bodies in totality, the image formed when the five dancers around raise their pelvis to balance their bodies on the arms do seem to create a 3D image of an upturned triangle or chalice which is symbolic of the female (Figure 4).

Sani comes seventh in the order of the week and so is represented by seven dancers and its Yantra, the shape of a semi-circle. To the rendering of "divAkaratanujaM shanaishcaraM" in Ragam, Yadukula Kambhoji and set to caturashra eka talam, seven dancers come on stage and six of them position themselves semi-circularly at the back of a dancer standing at the centre. All the six dancers at the back lie supine and slowly raise their arms upwards and then bend them to place their palms on the ground beside their necks. Simultaneously the dancer at the centre forms an *Ardhachakrasana* (half-wheel pose) or Sethubhandasana. When the dancer at the centre rests her torso, the others around her come to ardhachakrasana (Figure 5). When they go down, the central dancer comes up and goes down again. This reveals the image of Saturn with the central dancer showing the sphere of the planet and others representing Saturn's ring. All of them come to cross-legged seated positions, get up, take a circle around their position, and disperse. The manner of making a fast-paced ayatakuttana (quick move with heel) around one's own position to move out to disperse and the style and pace of getting up from a seated position to sama (standing with feet together) are two actions which are typical of Chandralekha's choreographies. These are used for transiting from one scene to another or before proceeding out of the stage. The second movement mentioned here is an interesting one. From any seated position, the dancer bends her knees and crosses them over her chest. The arms are also crossed near her ankles or knees. Now, in a swift move, she thrusts both her legs forward like a forward kick, places the feet on the ground and pushes herself up to

sama position. All this is done in one go, very swiftly. The purpose of elaborating on this action is to understand how Chandralekha's concepts become embodied and ingrained even in such simple transitional moves reflected in the body language of the dancers. The strength to push the body from a seeming inertia, to propel it forward and up is gained from a precisely timed strong inhalation, the force and tension that is built from a strong pelvic area. This strength and power in the pelvis are obtained and realized again from the dancer's erect seated position which enables a steady flow of Prana through an erect spine.

**Figure 5**



**Figure 5** Formation of Saturn  
Source NCPA archives

**Figure 6**



**Figure 6** Formation of Rahu

The last two *navagrahas*-Rahu and Ketu, the eclipses too, are visually pictured according to the shape of the yantras- arrowhead and arrow. *Ushtrasana*, formed by the spine and legs is held taut by the strong tensile string of the arms, the picture of an arrowhead ready for launch any moment just with the release of the string (Figure 6). The line of dancers positioned in *Dhanurasana* representing *Ketu*, where the body resembles a bow ready to strike an arrow, reinforces forces of tension and relaxation in the lines of the limbs and curvatures of the torso and spine; the flow of

breath with its *vilambit* (slow) inhalation and exhalation enables smoothness of movements.

The choreography concludes with a salutation, the music for which was a *Pushpanjali*, an invocatory piece usually done at the beginning of a dance performance in the contemporary practice of Bharatanatyam. This finale was performed as 'Namaskaar' by Chandralekha's dancers at the India festival in Russia in 1987. Initially adopted from the temple tradition of the devadasis where it was either performed or just sung to pay obeisance to gods to invoke their blessings at the start of the performance by offering flowers, the piece was more a private affair not done before the audience before the actual beginning of the dance recital. It later began to be adapted to be performed on the *sabha/proscenium* stage. Here it became an act of performance in which the classical dancer offered flowers at the feet of a deity whose idol or photo was kept at the left front corner of the stage. This act was part of 'temple-stage aesthetics' where the theatre stage began to be seen to symbolize a temple and has been problematized in research which have dealt with the post-colonial discourse of Bharatanatyam. However, here, instead of the vocabulary of yoga or Bharatanatyam, Chandralekha used the moves of Kalaripayattu with the dancers performing Kalari *vandanam*, an invocatory gesture of body moves. Martial art forms though are primarily not meant for performance on stage, it was more of an internalized process that was presented. However, the general moves of the martial art changed when presented on stage as does any art when displaced from its original context. The usual quick moves of a Kalari *vandanam* were long drawn out in *vilamba* kala, where the focus instead of being on an act of obeisance or salutation to an external body or agent, became an exploration of the language of the body itself. It was the flex and the extensions of the torso, arms, legs, and spine which became more pronounced and clearer. For the audience, it was these aspects of the new body language that was emphasized and for the dancer herself, it was the ultimate potential and power of the body that were saluted. Moreover, with the diagonal positioning of the two groups of dancers facing opposite to each other at the end of *Namaskaar*, *Pushpanjali* became "a mutual obeisance to each other's bodies, their energy and power that took centre stage" and "as an assertion of dignity and self-worth" Puthenedam (2014), Subrahmaniam (1994). It thus portrayed the importance of recognizing awareness of one's body and mind, probing to find our hidden latent energy and exploring the capacities of the human body and using this energy for positive and qualitative activities. For Chandralekha, "the essential meaning of dance, in terms of energizing oneself and coping with one's day-to-day life" looked at the principles of generating energy from the body which she considered as a tremendous resource material. By energizing, she had meant finding "areas of self-respect and dignity in the body" to revitalize lives and for self-renewal Chandralekha (1991).

## 7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Chandralekha's return to the basics of Bharatanatyam as seen to be used in *Prana* was led by a quest for awareness of the complex understanding of the body it contained. She was attracted by the form's formal richness and its structural strength. She said, "I was repeatedly surprised at the modernity of the form in terms of graphic and visual values. The question arose of de-structuring, re-structuring, or synthesis. The question arose of choreography." According to her, Bharatanatyam was originally meant for "renewal and energizing" and not for entertainment. She believed that "there were definite principles within Bharatanatyam which led to a generation of energy and are valuable for our times when we have to remain whole"

[Chandralekha \(1990b\)](#). The use of yoga or exploring of asanas and pranayama or martial arts in Chandralekha's words was to "break compartmentalization", see the commonalities and create interlinks between these forms and the traditions which according to her were deeply linked to dance and helped understand ourselves in our society. She slowly removed all religious and embellished paraphernalia associated with Bharatanatyam in her works and the dance became minimalistic conveying the body's language. Her concepts on stage brought dance closer to the body, closer to its principles where the idioms of folk, martial forms or yoga were imbibed to understand this philosophy of body- not by gleaning and covering it up with external embellishments of narratives, jewellery, stage settings, etc- those which according to her distracted from the very purpose of dance that was regeneration. As she succinctly pointed out:

"What I'm doing in dance today is far removed from the cosmetic and the superficial. I'm talking about the essential meaning of dance in terms of energizing oneself in terms of coping with one's day-to-day life. I'm interested in the principles of energizing oneself, of generating energy from the body which is a tremendous resource material" [Chandralekha \(1991\)](#)

As Chandralekha reduced some of her works to show bare basic moves not usually associated with being prominently displayed in classical Bharatanatyam, that too in vilambit kala, it became clear that her works were more about bringing an awareness of oneself, on 'how to stand, how to sit and how to move with the spine and understand the meaning and complexity involved in the economy of movements and to constantly refine this' [Chandralekha \(1991\)](#).

In her works and ideas, she dismantled the cultural specificities that she felt had become attached to dance over a period of time. She worked on the premise that dance belongs to the body- not any individual, religion or caste. It must have occurred as an overriding feeling that had come with a displaced outlook of a Gujarati with a Marxian bent who questioned the necessity to merge her dance to the conservative South Indian culture with its own ritualistic mores. As Kancheevaram silks and traditional temple jewellery were worn with ease, so were stated the body's sense of belonging as she wore *Bandhini* clothing and silver jewellery <sup>16</sup> of her home state, Gujarat. It was not adapting to new modes or reconciling with the old ones that made their stand, but, as with her ideas in dance about which she said [Chandralekha \(1991\)](#), "My idea is to question everything; to hold everything up to the light of the sun and examine it afresh", she questioned the view of tradition as a sacrosanct relic of the past. Her approach to dance adopted a post-structuralist view which grew as a response to the paradoxical existence of the classical tradition of Bharatanatyam that was secluded from the public eye either as a practice of the devadasi community and relegated mostly to the temples or which later became prevalent and practised largely with exclusive and dominant overtones.

This dance work studied here is premised on the fact that Prana or the life-breath has come close to becoming lifeless. Chandralekha saw *prana* as the 'all-pervasive life breath, a communicating link between our body and cosmos'. This analysis has shown the demand for greater meaningful dialogue on the body. The body is seen here as an all-powerful communicating link, a potential source that could be vibrant, active, aware, dignified, and honest in interacting with other bodies, with society and the world at large. In order that the body became a responsible communicating link and not be dead or passive, it was imperative to

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<sup>16</sup> Chandralekha had an incessant charm for Bandhani clothes and silver jewellery of Gujarat, her birthplace. There are many photos of her wearing these- Special is the one on her last trip with her troupe to perform *Sharira* at the Frankfurt Bookfair, (2006).



bring back, respond to and energize breath, to energize ourselves. She remarked, "In our times, prana is de-plenished. The breath has become short in our body and in our world" Chandralekha (1990a). In an increasingly fast-paced world, there was a greater need to emphasize the seemingly simple but vital concept of breath. As can be seen in this work she confronted the shortness of breath in our body and in our world by countering it both symbolically and choreographically through the usage of slowed movement with an elongated and controlled breathing of yoga asanas juxtaposed with elaborated three speeds of basic *adavus* of Bharatanatyam. The slowing down of movement accompanied by sustained and powerful breathing conceptually opposed the fast-paced breathless execution of *jathis* of the contemporary 'classical' Bharatanatyam performance. When she talked of Prana as a journey towards the recovery of breath, it not only meant controlling and expanding the breath using concepts of yoga in dance for performance, but also meant in a metaphoric sense, a recovery of the breath of dance- the life force of dance which filled it with throbbing live energy, to move away and reject the cosmetic stagnant concepts of dance which relegated the dancers to being passive recipients or objects of adoration. It meant an honest connection with one's body and its language. Revitalizing of prana in our body took different paths and conveyed many meanings according to this study. It meant -taking time to breathe, sensitizing the mind, opening the body of its hidden spaces, negated spaces and reclaiming the power in our body and dance by understanding our spine. By stating Prana as a journey towards "self-renewal" or "recovery of breath", the term metaphorically and choreographically meant regaining the power in the body for active and honest communication with itself and with the world.

## 8. GLOSSARY

Prana- life breath/ life force

Anjali- a gesture that means welcome

Bindu- a dot

Mandala- circle- signifying the universe

Sama- standing, where feet are kept even

Naadi- Pulse/ Vein

Tala- time cycle

Adavu- units of dance that are steps performed with moves of the limbs.

Jati- a combination of steps performed to the pneumatic utterances set to a tala

Trikaala theermanam- an extended phrase with three repetitions signifying an ending to a jati

Korvai- a string of adavus performed to a jati

Nattadavu- a variety of step/adavu

Gati bhedom- rhythmic combinations of speed

Chaturashra- four-beat cycle.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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