

Ratna Roy reclaims *devdasi* through classical Indian dance

by Sunera Thobani

Ratna Roy portrays the multi-faceted reality of women's lives by addressing issues of social justice, particularly those concerning the oppression of women through classical dance. With innovative choreography and her commitment to women, Ratna wins the respect of both art lovers and social activists wherever she performs. Her choreography of the dowry death dance is one of the most powerful indictments of the dowry system in art form.

Dance as art form was developed by women in a matrilineal tradition. However with the rise of patriarchal relations and colonization, dance was taken out of women's hands. Ratna's commitment to reclaiming this tradition, and her insistence on portraying the power women have within themselves, is a source of inspiration for all women.

The *mahari* tradition in dance - the *devdasi* tradition in Orissa is part of a matrilineal, Tantric tradition in India. One of its central tenets is the worship of the Devi, the great god-

dess. This tradition is female-centered and does not recognize the divisions of caste. It celebrates sexuality as a form of realization of divinity, recognizing that the spiritual power of women is stronger than that of men.

This goddess-worshipping tradition is much older than the patriarchal caste-based system of the Vedic Age, which was introduced by the Aryans in 1700

AD-500 BC. It is this matrilineal tradition - the independence of women who have control over their bodies, their sexuality, and their property, which is at the heart of Ratna's work. As she says, "The *devdasi* tradition is a Tantric tradition, and all my dances are in this tradition."

Devdasi were originally accomplished, respected women. Around 2 AD, the *Smiriti* writers of the sacred law clearly defined



good women as women that men would marry and other women as those who had dealings with men but whom no men could marry. Dancers were among these other women. They were respected, their knowledge and learning was recognized, their political advice was sought, and their status was valued.

The *devdasi* owned land, would learn to read and write, unlike other women, and their funeral rites were carried out by their daughters. Their male chil-

to be taken into account. Some women received jewels and so on, from males, without engaging in sexual relations with them. Others did engage in sexual relations."

Ratna says it's important to her to continue the tradition of the dance in the old style and that all her performances have female lead characters. It is very difficult to make a woman-statement if the choreography does not reflect the complexity of being a woman.

reclaiming and elevating women, we have to reclaim and elevate the body.

"What has happened with me is that even though I dance on stage, a lot of the time I am isolated, in my own private world, in my prayer, in my despair and sorrow, or in my joy in being a woman. So I use training to express myself as a woman."

In keeping with the tradition of the dance, Ratna prepares for her performance in the old ways. "I prepare for the dance in a ritualistic way. The ornaments I wear came down from the *devdasi*. I also fast before every performance. All of my music is original music for the particular dances I do." A gifted performer and a respected teacher, Ratna continues to reclaim both the history and the dance of the *devdasi* tradition.

About the author: Sunera Thobani is a founding member of the South Asian Women's Action Network, (SAWAN), a feminist collective based in Vancouver and a regular contributor to *Kinesis*.

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dren had to work their land in order to earn their keep, or do other kinds of work, because the land and property belonged to their daughters.

When patriarchal relations arose and marriage became important, that is when these women's independence was a threat. The central issue was that she owned her body--no man owned it!

"The word prostitution needs to be defined because, if extramarital sex is prostitution then they were prostitutes. Otherwise each individual case has

"Reclaiming the dance in the *devdasi* tradition is one of the most important issues facing dance today," says Ratna, "because they were strong women, politically, socially, and intellectually. Dance is a living tradition; it is a language. It is essential that we redefine what womanhood is and depict it in this tradition. It is important to show women who are weak and abused in society, as well as to show women who are defiant and strong. It is important to acknowledge that sexuality is not sin. In the process of