

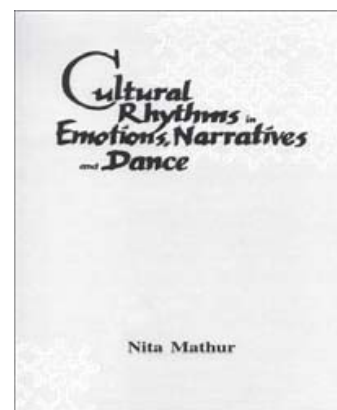
Cultural Rhythms in Emotions, Narratives and Dance,
by Nita Mathur,
New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2002,
pages 225, hardbound, Rs. 525.

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The interconnectedness between art and culture, with dance being one of its most popular prototypical illustrations has been written about and commented upon at length. However, the view that art itself is cultured has been documented relatively less in academic discourse, especially with respect to dance. While addressing this dimension of art and identifying Tamilian Brahmins as a cultural community, the *Cultural Rhythms in Emotions* seeks to study their relationship from a symbiotic psychological perspective on the one hand, to a more contemporary socio-cultural one, on the other. The exploration is routed through an elaborate in-depth study of the emotions, habits, customs, beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, rituals and other practices that characterise the lifestyle of the Tamil Brahmin community living for several generations in certain prominent geographical locations in Delhi.

The most mesmerising feature of the book is the ease with which the author transports the reader into the multiple worlds of art, aesthetics, anthropology, child development, cultural psychology and mental health. The multidisciplinary paradigm has been put to optimal use and it is evident in the very rich and engaging texts she has put together. Whether it is a description of how Bharatnatyam originated from the dance of Lord Shiva, or an account of the life and culture of the Devdasis, or even the Tamil women adorning themselves, or making *kolam* designs, the flavour of narration is extremely haunting. It immediately triggers a cognitive visualisation process and the imagery begins to come alive in the mind of the reader. This is particularly so where the lifestyle and culture of the people is described and where the details about the dance form itself are elaborately presented.

The chapters, "Dance and Lifestyle" and "Cultural Construction of Emotions", have been conceptualised and analysed very meaningfully. The connections with child rearing practices being



centred in the principles of child development, the cathartic release of pent-up negative feelings through dance, the sense of inner joy and self-fulfilment which it promotes, the rich potential for the expression of creative, cognitive and aesthetic needs in humans which it offers, and the possibility of a dancer being transported into the different realms of ecstasy and consciousness, have been elaborately discussed and presented, with epistemological insight and the refreshing sensitivity of an insider.

All through the book, the very unobtrusive and non-outsider presence of the author is very striking. From the introductory chapter itself, which sets the tone and background of the study and describes the methodology which the author has adopted and narrates the ways in which she developed rapport with her sample and dealt with the obstacles in her data gathering efforts, one is struck by the sincerity of her commitment and the genuineness of integrating with the Tamil Brahmin Community. Many instances of sharing the domestic chores, helping in baby sitting, teaching young children, facilitating their homework and rendering help in family difficulties have been highlighted by the author and interpreted as symbols of acceptance. It seems that the 'experiencing self' of the author is striving to be in congruence with her 'researching self' and this has added a great degree of depth to her work.

Being from neither the field of anthropology nor dance, I was initially apprehensive about being able to do justice to reviewing the book, but once I began reading it my apprehensions were dismissed, for here was a book, I concluded, with phenomenal levels of appeal to all possible readers. For the dancer, I felt that the symbolic representations in the dance form and their cultural ramifications would be important. For the Tamil Brahmins, I was sure that the depiction of their lifestyle, culture and community would take precedence over all other issues. For fellow researchers, the research paradigm, tools and mode of inquiry would undoubtedly be the most crucial. And for the naïve reader, knowing about Bharatnatyam as a dance form and getting acquainted with the culture and practices of the Tamil Brahmin community would be a journey towards better knowing themselves.

The book ends with a significant reflective note wherein the author asserts that there is a close correspondence between lived life and configurations in dance, making dance a very important element in the enculturation process. Reflecting on what one has read, one is able to appreciate how the rhythms of Tamil Brahmin culture integrate creativity, self-expression and collective identity in various processes of life at one level and merge with the universal rhythms of cosmic order at the other.

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