

September 22, 2025

## Dancing Like a Man: Astad Deboo and Contemporary Indian Dance

By: Kanika Batra

*Astad Deboo's career was intimately linked to the trajectories of Indian dance, such that his style shaped and reshaped Indian audiences' understanding of Indian dance.*

Twenty years ago, Mahesh Dattani's landmark play *Dance Like a Man* portrayed the personal and professional struggles of Jairam, a male dancer. While Jairam faces numerous challenges, his wife Ratna rises above the constraints of traditional respectability to achieve far greater success in the world of dance. The play is about rigid gender roles, stereotyping, and expectations of men as breadwinners within Indian patriarchal systems. While it is hard to make a career in any art form in India, dance is specifically labelled as a feminine pursuit. Like Jairam, many male dancers encounter charges of effeminacy, dismissal of their artistic practice as gainful employment, and accusations of attempting to convert dance—perceived as more of a hobby (and a disreputable one at that)—into a profession.

Even when there was no direct merging of theatre and dance, the arrangement of space during his performances, the use of puppets and choric ensembles of drummers ensured that Deboo's performances were nothing short of spectacular.

More recently, the 2023 Bollywood film *Rocky Aur Rani Kii Prem Kahaani* explored similar challenges faced by male dancers through the character of Chandon, the father of the lead character Rani. A skilled dancer, Chandon is perceived as unmanly by the Randhawas—his daughter's boyfriend Rocky's aggressively patriarchal Punjabi family—because of his talent and passion for dance. As Chandon has previously been booed on the stage, Rocky attempts to subvert some of these roles by joining him in a spectacular Kathak performance. The duo dance to the catchy tune of *Dola Re Dola*, which was originally performed by leading Bollywood actresses Aishwarya Rai and Madhuri Dixit in *Devdas*.

Male dancers and dance teachers in India are often typecast as effeminate and clownish, largely owing to stereotyped Bollywood representations. In that context, Rocky and Chandon's brilliant flowing angrakha costumes, standing out as an implicit homage to Kathak and to male doyens, are all the more remarkable. It would not be an exaggeration to state that the changed perception owes to the innovations and reputation of doyens such as Astad Deboo (1947–2020), whose career was intimately linked to the trajectories of Indian dance, such that his style shaped and reshaped Indian audiences' understanding of Indian dance.

### The Brilliant Star on the Firmament

In the 1970s, when Deboo began performing, Indian artists drew on indigenous performance traditions but were willing to be influenced by global practices and forms. Male dancers such as Uday Shankar (1900–1977) had received acclaim for their artistic practice, which fused Indian and European traditions. Deboo, like Shankar, learnt from and contributed to Indian classical forms such as Kathak and Kathakali, to develop an oeuvre responsive to the changing contours of Indian society. He had travelled widely in Asia, the Middle East, Europe and America in his youth. Absorbing varied dance practices in many ways liberated him from a narrow definition of dance. His early energetic and later meditative style, accompanied by a choice of costumes, music, lighting, and setting, allowed for an expansive contemporary definition of dance as a bodily and spatial art form.

For these reasons, a recent biography by Ketu Katrak is a welcome opportunity to examine both Deboo as an artist and the status of male dancers and dance studies in India. A theatre, dance, and performance studies scholar, Katrak's [earlier works](#) devoted equal attention to male and female dancers when providing an overview of the contemporary performance landscape in India and in the Indian diaspora. As part of the close-knit Bombay Parsi community, she knew Deboo's family well. As a practitioner and scholar of dance, she collaborated with Deboo on an important journal issue on contemporary Indian dance in 2020. Her 200-page work, *Astad Deboo: A Icon of Contemporary Dance*, is a magisterial account of the life and career of a figure who illuminated the arts firmament in India, luminously living up to the meaning of his name 'Astad', *brilliant star*.

It took the Indian cultural and artistic community well over three decades to recognise Astad Deboo's contributions to Indian and international dance.

Well over a decade ago, Katrak had written about her interest in the slowing of pace in Indian dance as epitomised by Deboo's career. She said the frenetic tempo of his early performances gave way to a more meditative, “slow dissolve” style of movement on stage. The comment also encapsulates the structure of the biography. The account begins with Deboo's childhood in Jamshedpur and Bombay; love of heights; close relationships with his parents, sisters, and extended family of friends and relatives; and an early interest in dance. The biography then moves on to his travels across India and various parts of the world to acquire the training and experiences that made him a consummate performer. In the first few sections of the book, we get a sense of the artist's accumulation of knowledge of various forms. These range from classical traditions such as Kathak, Kathakali, and Kabuki, to more modern American techniques such as Afro-Jazz and those learnt from the Murray Louis, Jose Limon, and Pilobolus dance companies, amongst others.

Deboo's innovations included grounding abstract movements through facial and bodily expressions and transforming the spins of classical dance by involving the upper body, especially the waist and the spine, such that he was twisting as well as spinning. Further, his choreographic novelties extended to the use of global instruments—the Korean kayagum, the Japanese koto and the Indian veena—and global artists in the music accompanying his performances. He brought in otherwise excluded groups by using techniques such as group counting to make deaf dancers understand rhythm.

An overview of contemporary dance would be incomplete without due acknowledgement of some of the many connections between theatre and dance. Luminaries from Uday Shankar to Navtej Johar have merged theatre and dance to create stunning performances. Amongst recent artists, Johar's 2022 solo piece, *Tanashah*, on the life and times of Bhagat Singh, is well recognised. However, as this chronological approach to Deboo's life career reminds us, the trajectory goes way back, as he was a pioneer in this regard. Deboo danced and acted solo in Sunil Shanbag's play *Mangalore Street* as early as 1984, where he played several roles of people from south Bombay, including a clerk, a chaiwallah, and a sex worker.

Even when there was no direct merging of theatre and dance, the arrangement of space during his performances and the use of puppets and choric ensembles of drummers ensured that Deboo's performances were nothing short of spectacular. Two specific instances of the biographer's use of photographs indicate the body in space. Farrok Chothia's photos of Deboo's performance of *Chewing Gum* show how he contorted his body and face through a white sheet, imitating in different ways the elasticity of a piece of chewing gum. Similarly, the black and white photos of the performance of *Circle of Feeling*, which Deboo conceptualised with the Action Players at the International Deaf Way Arts Festival at Gallaudet University in the United States, focus on facial features covered in a cake-like makeup, depicting the nine rasas from the Indian classical performance tradition. With these photos, readers of the biography can get some sense of the power of the artist on stage. Spectacle is also conveyed through the magnificent colour photographs included in the biography. Several colour photographs by Ritam Bannerjee depict Deboo dancing in flowing red or blue angrakhas against backdrops of sculptures or historic settings such as forts. In many of Deboo's performances, costumes, lighting, and props—including masks, oversized puppets, and, in one instance, Anish Kapoor's Chicago sculpture *Cloud Gate* (also known as 'The Bean')—are used to dwarf the performer, ensuring that the body is perceived as just one element amongst many on stage of everyday reality.

## Lighting the Way

It took the Indian cultural and artistic community well over three decades to recognise Deboo's contributions to Indian and international dance. Though he had been performing since the late 1970s, he was first recognised as a major contributor to Indian performing arts when he received the Sangeet Natak Award for Creative Dance in 1995. During the intervening decades, he had been travelling all over India and abroad to expand his knowledge and repertoire of dance forms. By the time he was awarded the Padma Shri in 2007, at the age of 60, he had become part of a line of illustrious contemporary male dancers in India so honoured: Uday Shankar (Padma Bhushan, 1971) and the Kathak doyen Birju Maharaj (Padma Vibhushan, 1968).

Though discussions of sexuality were taboo during the early decades of Deboo's career, his performances gestured toward his sexuality.

Despite achieving recognition only late in life, Deboo was not bitter about this belatedness. He understood that other teachers and dancers from whom he learned/collaborated would not receive similar accolades and made it his life goal to lift as many talented dance teachers, performers, and choreographers as he could. Many of his protégés would become established artists, choreographers, and

performers. Katrak recounts that a young Kathak dancer remembers Deboo teaching his signature twirling moves (“*chakkars*”) to younger artists by asking them to bend their spines till their torsos were parallel to the ground. Similar innovations characterised his training techniques for deaf dancers, where the visual of tapping beats took the place of sound to control the pace of the performance. His artistic generosity extended to financially supporting young dancers who were left without a way to make a living during the pandemic. These and other examples of mentoring indicate that Deboo saw his work as part of a tradition, with successful artists such as himself shouldering the responsibility of ensuring that art was passed on to those who come after them.

While Deboo as performer was front and centre-stage to his local, national, and global audiences, Katrak’s biography also presents the person behind the performer. He was a warm, affectionate, generous friend and uncle to many people around the world. He loved to cook, eat, and share good Indian food. He was especially fond of *mithai*. He could and did get angry on occasion, especially when facing artistic indifference or lack of hard work on the part of those whom he was training. And he was a gay man when it was not advisable or safe or cool to declare one’s sexuality in the India of the 1970s and 1980s.

Here it is useful to contrast Deboo as a gay artist, neither in the closet nor completely out of it, with a figure like Navtej Singh Johar, an openly gay contemporary dancer, yoga practitioner, established dance teacher, and one of the applicants with the Naz Foundation in their [case](#) to decriminalise homosexuality. Times were very different when Deboo was emerging as an artist. He was out to some of his family and many of his friends, including his biographer, but did not proclaim his sexuality. Katrak recalls Deboo’s ten-year relationship with a partner toward the end of his life, a relationship which made him very happy.

If dance as artistic practice is recognised and respected as a serious pursuit—even by Bollywood—it is owing in no small measure to Deboo’s life.

Though discussions of sexuality were taboo during the early decades of Deboo’s career, his performances gestured toward his sexuality. It is a truism that physicality is an essential aspect of every dance performance, or indeed, all performance. Deboo foregrounded the physicality and beauty of the male body through costume choices that often scandalised his audiences. This was especially the case with the unitards and leotards he wore for his early productions, costumes that Katrak says required him to be extremely fit as they would highlight every physical blemish. His early avant-garde productions, such as *Confluences* and *Space Odyssey* (Zontus), indicate a preference for such minimalist, body-hugging costume choices to highlight abstract themes. Katrak refers to specific actions on stage, such as Deboo hugging and making love to his toe, as subtly indicating his sexuality. It is also well worth noting that accessories such as leather restraints adorned with metal in Deboo’s first solo piece, *Space Odyssey*, are likely an homage to the gay leather subculture of the 1970s. Similarly, the masochism of his performance of *Ritual*, where he danced with candles which dripped hot wax on him, gestures toward S&M cultures.

Creative work of any kind, especially if it stems from a distinctive identity positionality, attracts accusations of self-indulgence. Deboo subtly foregrounded his sexuality in his performances, but above all, his career exemplified social commitment to the less privileged, disproving any charge of self-indulgence. As the biographer notes, his work with the deaf community and underprivileged children from the Salaam Balak Trust illustrates intergenerational mentorship. While juggling a demanding career of national and international collaborations, Deboo also mustered up time and energy to create meaningful work with untrained children.

With Deboo’s passing in 2020, the stage of contemporary dance lost its twirling maestro. Even as [tributes](#) came pouring in, his signature contributions of innovative collaboration across creative forms (music, dance, theatre, photography), genres, media, nations, and generations ensure that his legacy lives on in the male and female dancers he trained over his long career. If dance as artistic practice is recognised and respected as a serious pursuit—even by Bollywood—it is owing in no small measure to Deboo’s life and the acclaim he garnered through national and international collaborations and the work of the Astad Deboo Dance Foundation.

*Kanika Batra is a professor of English at Texas Tech University, United States of America.*