

Chasing Manodharma: In conversation with Kamalini Dutt

Kamalini Dutt, Retd. Producer, Central Production Centre and Director, Doordarshan Archives

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Image 1: Kamalini Dutt

Kamalini Dutt (b. 1950) is nationally acclaimed for her enormous contributions to dance on Doordarshan, Indian national television as a producer and director and as a founder-director of the digitized Doordarshan Archives. In her career spanning 38 years, she is credited with envisioning and crafting over a thousand programs, both Indian music and dance. She established norms for recording Indian 'classical' dance and music, pushed the boundaries on camera technology in India and set new trends in televising these forms. With in-depth knowledge of texts in multiple Indian languages, the construction of musical elaborations to poetry, the conventions and logic of abhinaya as well its mastery involving a keen perception of how human emotions are revealed in the intricacy of layers of the human body, Dutt has captured the work of every celebrated dancer without missing the heartbeat of their improvisatory choices. As Banerjee, U.K. 2021, remarks, "In fact, the 'post-production editing' (both 'linear editing' of the simple 'cut and splice' kind and, more complex and far-reaching, 'non-linear editing' with computer aid) is the crucial process in the third (and fourth) genres. An instance would be the memorable dance films produced especially for Indian Doordarshan Archives by its founder-director Kamalini Dutt in her time".

With great respect and admiration for the work and life experience of Kamalini Dutt in Indian dance, I submit this interview is an edited version collated from conversations conducted via zoom in Jan- Feb 2024 and her own notes and writings.

In this interview, Kamalini Dutt reflects on her career as a dancer, producer- director for Doordarshan, India's national television and educator, from her first foray in television in 1972 to the present. As Sharon

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Lowen writes “Most of the quality programs that were created and are today preserved in the archives of Doordarshan, by far the largest archive on Indian dance in the world, have been made by her. While generations of dancers, musicians owe Kamalini a debt of gratitude for her documenting their art effectively, the nation owes perhaps a greater debt for her achievements in preserving, restoring and digitizing invaluable intangible cultural heritage from Doordarshan Kendras around the country. She has pioneered methodology for meta-tagging a huge library of materials so that entering any word, name, or identifier connected to any program will reveal it in any relevant search.”

Kamalini Dutt is a key producer-artist in Delhi, who maintains creative contacts across generations of artists:

“She had joined the organization as a producer in its infancy in 1972, when it only broadcast 2.5 hours of spartan, socially-minded programs in the evening – Krishi Darshan, school capsules, a little dance and music, all wrapped up with a news broadcast. Those were days of black and white television when the recording equipment was seven-foot high and each spool weighed around 12 kg, she remembers. In her three decades as a producer, she had transformed how dance and music programs were conceived and executed on television.”

She is also the founder-director of the digitized Doordarshan Archives. In this interview, she also shares the vitality of the artists she produced-directed for television and using the camera to capture their bodies in space- time in her experimentations with recording through decades of the changing media technology.

Notes: 1. Manodharma is a composite of ‘manah’ and ‘dharma’, portraying ‘mind’ and ‘in accordance’, in that order. Manodharma relies on the performer’s innate abilities that are dynamically created and displayed during the performance. In Indian traditional dance styles, the artist’s prowess is revealed through their interpretations, rather than a strict adherence to textual content.

2. All images are courtesy of Kamalini Dutt unless specified.

Sandhya Kalyanasundaram (SK): Kamaliniji, can you please share your earliest memory of television in India?

Kamalini Dutt (KD): Television service was inaugurated in 1959 by the then president Dr. Rajendra Prasad on 15th September as part of All India Radio’s Research and Development project. The inauguration ceremony had a live Bharatanatyam performance by Vj Jayantimala. That was the first dance performed for electronic media. Television broadcasting was then only an experimental service. Programs were aired for 30 minutes twice a week. I was an eight-year-old girl just shifted to Delhi from Tanjavur. On 21st November I was given a chance to perform Bharatanatyam for 10 minutes. Least did I know that I will spend four decades in the same institution!

SK: Can you share how to came to be a Doordarshan (National television) Music and Dance producer?

KD: When I joined Doordarshan in 1972, I came with some training to produce programs in a multi camera set up and single camera field production. The training was given by foreign experts. One of whom was a music program director. The knowledge I had gained under his training was based on his experience of producing western music and dance basically concerts, symphonies, ballets and modern dance. When I entered the studio to direct my first production which was Tyagaraja Kritis sung by Akhila Krishnan, the practical guidance given by my instructor did not work for Carnatic music. The way our musicians preferred to sit for a concert, the camera angles, the division of shots, the transition from one shot to

another, everything was of different orientation. I set aside my camera cards and sat on the hot seat trusting my intuition and my own knowledge of Carnatic music. The particular challenge was recording in the absence of notated rendering. Even though Indian music (Carnatic and Hindustani styles) is broadly preset at the raga level, the artist renders through spontaneous interpretation. For example, Pt Bhimsen Joshi sang Puriyadhanashree several times in his concerts. In Doordarshan we have got three recordings of this raga. Each rendering is unique in itself. This great quality of manodharma found in both Indian music and dance compelled me to re-invent the approach and technique of recording music and dance.

SK: Can you tell us how you made decisions when you recorded dance programs particularly from the point of view of capturing each artist's manodharma?

KD: Compared to music, dance is more dynamic. The subject – the dancer is always moving. The camera without interfering with the movement must capture the moments. Key aspects that I used for recording powerful performances were:

Knowing the dance form – its strength and limitations

- Knowing the individual strengths of the artiste
- Knowing the pieces chosen for recording
- Planning the camera angles and movements ahead of time based on whether it was a solo, duo or a group production
- Gathering a general idea about how much of the composition is choreographed and how much improvised

A lot of it was intuitive," "I knew when the vocalist's alapanai (alap) was drawing to a close and the violinist would be stepping in for an interlude. I 'learnt' every form of dance by watching, insisting on sitting in on every rehearsal.



Image 2: Kamalini Dutt in "muzhumandi" posture, 1968.

SK: Please share your experiences recording Bharatanatyam performances as you are an accomplished Bharatanatyam dancer yourself?

KD: Which shot is to be called at which point is to be broadly decided before rolling the camera/recorder. For example – a dance producer who is familiar with the *Varnam* format will instantly decide that *jatis* or rhythm sequences will be in a long shot and *abhinaya* sequences will be in mid shot (from face till the waist) or close-up. The transition is made according to the pauses punctuated by rhythm. At the end of the *jati* after the *teermanam* when *sama*, *ateeta* or *anaahata* is touched for the lyric to begin – a cut on the rhythm energizes the flow of shots as it matches the rhythm experienced and shared by the dancer and the viewer.

SK: As a television audience member through the 80s and 90s, one of my biggest aha moments in dance came from how transition points were captured. How did you conceive of recording these key moments?

KD: Most of the dance forms are driven by *taala*, *kaala* and *laya*. Like in life, these three factors energize our dances which, when matched with proper transitions, enhance the aesthetic experiences of the viewer. The content will decide where to change the shot. In our classical dances, cuts are preferred as the punctuations in the rhythm get highlighted by cuts. Dissolves can be used but with great discretion. The transition should add to the visual energy and not distract from it.

Another energy point is to identify proper close-ups. Strength of close-up shots are exclusive to viewing through the camera. This is essential for Abhinaya where the signs and symbols of bodily expression are minimalistic. The costume becomes immaterial as it does not have any role to play. The intense emotions pass through both artist and viewer- like swans swimming on the lake not getting wait by the water. It has been my pleasure to create this experience for the viewers through camera where the performer and the audience are deprived of each other's presence.



Image 3: Kamalini Dutt looking through the camera during studio recording

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SK: Kamalini, how do you overcome space and time constraints to align with philosophical meaning while recording dance?

KD: Dance when seen through a camera happens in a virtual space. Camera sees what eyes cannot see. One sequence can be shot in more than one location *Jagadanandakaraka* in Kathak by Harish Rawat was shot in two locations. All the *swara* passages in north Indian temple and *sahitya* in a south Indian temple. This is an illustration of how a creative producer can break the requirement of one space and linear time for a dance performance. If the program producer discusses her camera positions in advance with the dancer, *nrtta* sequences can be choreographed to suit any one angle and the other sequences to another angle. This way there will be an interplay between dance and camera angles, composition and cutting between cameras. Such a choreography is meant only with a camera, creating an interesting energy of multiple dynamic images.

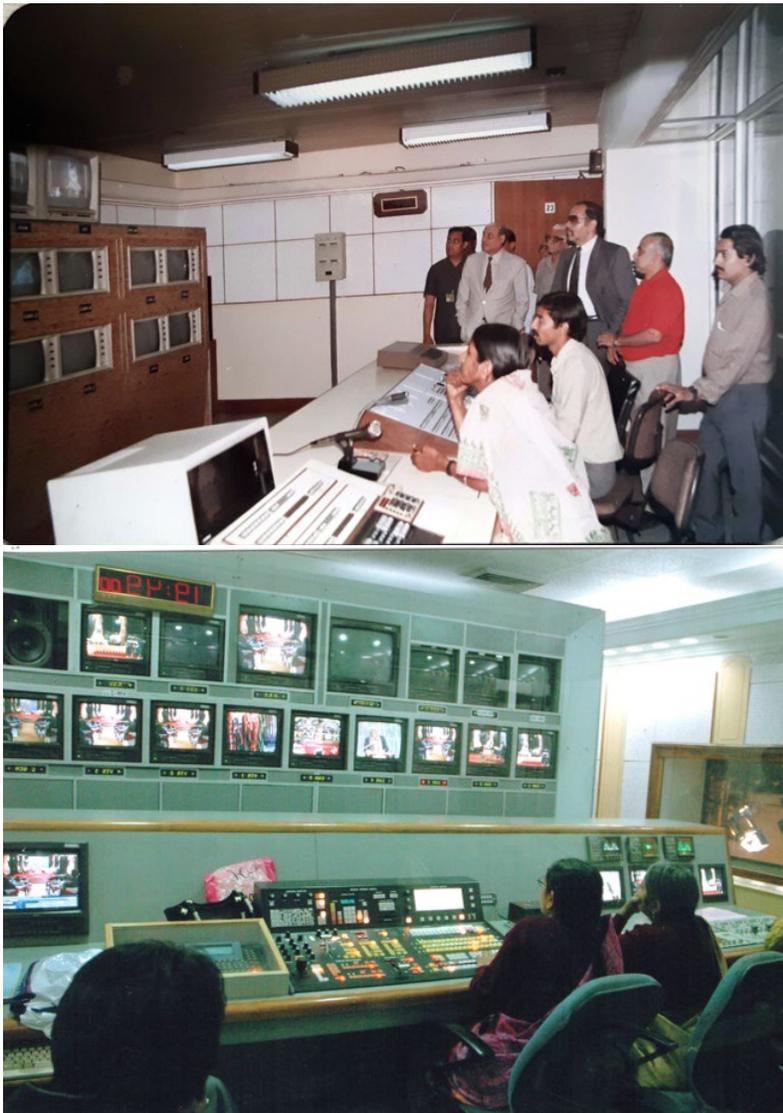


Image 4: Kamalini Dutt in multichannel recording rooms (1970s- 1980s)

Nayikas of Kalidas

SK notes: While a detailed description is not the focus of this interview, a slice of the video from 2.35 to 3.22 min (Ritu Samhara) is described to enable readers to understand and appreciate the nuances of how the camera and continuity editing are used by Kamalini Dutt to capturing the performer's inner and outer worlds. This [production](#) brings together five heroines (nayikas) from the works of the poet Kalidas (4th-5th century CE), Ritu Samhara, Shaakuntalam, Malvikaagnimitram, Meghadootam and Kumara Sambhavam. The production was a year-long collaboration between Kamalini Dutt, Sanskrit scholar Jeevan Pani and Odissi exponent Sharon Lowen. The production does not have a continuity in the story and the five segments represent moods and experiences of women in different stages of life. As part of the collaboration, the dance was choreographed and curated especially for the camera's eye.

The first segment, drawn from the Ritu Samhara metaphorically likens the quality of youthfulness to elements of nature such as the blossoming lotuses, purple- pink inflorescence of tall reeds in riverine environments, long necked swans gliding with their wings lit by the rays of the sun. The segment was shot on the banks of Yamuna at dawn with one camera in a sugarcane field recasting the dancing human body as an inseparable experience of the landscape for the audience. Sharon Lowen's sway of the body tantalizingly plays with the sway of the tall sugarcane and the camera's eye pauses between the Sharon Lowen's brow movements and the flicker of the feathery sugarcane panicles. Then the camera intimately, yet lightly (as if the camera were a zephyr), caresses the adorned waist in 'tribhanga', the raised foot, the painted fingers evoking the anklet bells resounding in harmony. Thrilled, the camera participates by gazing at the toes spinning into a rhythmic abandon of the body at 3.22 min.



Image 5a: Screenshot from Nayikas of Kalidasa by Sandhiya Kalyanasundaram



Image 5b: Screenshot from Nayikas of Kalidasa by Sandhiya Kalyanasundaram

SK: In your experience producing the work of artists across several dance traditions, how do you think manodharma subverts in the male-female binary?

KD: In dance, there is no binary. In our everyday lives, there is gender beyond the binary, our Narthaki Nataraj¹ is there representing genders beyond the binary, a great dancer, I love her art. I have shared photographs of working with the doyens of several Indian classical dance forms with you (see below). I have also produced several group choreographies. Several male dancers have had to overcome societal restrictions to fulfil their dedication and passion to dance!

In the traditional Indian dance forms, the philosophy and the performance are intertwined. The Ultimate is genderless and formless. Is what is dancing just the body? What is dancing is the soul in the Shivasutra of Vasugupta², we can see how this is elegantly described:

“nartaka ātmā” Sutra 9

- The self (soul) is the dancer

“raṅgo'ntarātmā” Sutra 10

- The innermost heart space is the performance arena

*“pumrūpaṃ vā smaret devī strī rūpaṃ vā vicintayet
athavā niṣakalam dhyāyet saccidānanda lakṣaṇam
sarvatejomayaṃ dhyāyet sacarācara vighrahaṃ”*

- One may meditate on a male form or one may choose a female form
Or, one may meditate on the formless, unmanifest, supreme consciousness,
Meditate on the manifest Universe as the form of the nondual self-effulgent Being

As solo dance forms, the ekaharya mode implies that the male or the female performer almost always is required to perform 10 or 15 characters, many of which could be representing the other genders and they have to do it convincingly. When you dance, you perform life. In Kuchipudi, in those days, Satyanarayana

played Satyabhama, he was so beautiful as Satyabhama. For the audience, there was only Satyabhama on stage.

*“sadā ṣoḍaśodita aśeṣa devatā gaṇa sevitam
evam cittāmbuje dhyāyet
ardhanārishwaram Shivam”*

- Eternally youthful, the male-female fusion in one form (Ardhanarishwara) is worshipped by all Gods. Let This Auspicious form be invoked in the lotus of consciousness. This form represents oneness beyond binaries, unmanifest and manifest.



Image 6: Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra, Odissi



Image 7: Dr. Padma Subramanyam, Meenakshi Kalyanam, Bharatanatyam



Image 8: Kamalini Dutt with Vasanthalakshmi, N. and M. V. Narasimhachari, Kuchipudi and Bharatanatyam before recording the Natya Veda dance drama.



Image 9: Dr. Kanak Rele, Mohiniyattam



Image 10: Dr. Sonal Mansingh before a Bharatanatyam performance.



Image 11: Kathak Group choreography with multi-channel cameras.

SK: Kamalini, you have also recorded modern choreographies, could you share about recording these modern and contemporary productions?

KD: I have recorded all of Narendra Sharma's² choreographies, I have also recorded Chandralekha's³ Mahakaal and Sharira^{4,5}.

Antim Adhyay (The last chapter)- 31.34 minutes

SK notes: Antim Adhyay is Pandit Narendra Sharma's contemporary meditation on the rhythms of death and life set to Sushil Dasgupta's music and performed by his students at Bhoomika Creative Dance Center. While the description of the production below does not analyse the work in detail, the goal is to show Kamalini's innovations with the camera and dance on screen for a television audience in India from the 70s through the late 90s and range spanning Indian classical styles, regional folk dances as well as contemporary dance. The Antim Adhyay production reveals yet another layer of the camera that Kamalini explored through her intense engagement with the contemporary dancer, their choreographic process and the camera's eye witnessing the dancing bodies, offering both attention, provocation and meaning-making to the audience. The choreography's ability to draw upon vast exterior spaces while residing in an internal reflective time becomes the magical allure of this production. In this dimension of recording, the camera walks quietly alongside Pandit Narendra Sharma in a Mughal period cemetery reveling in the deep shadows, ancient trees, the sounds of birds, a dancing peacock and the casting of the dice in the game of life and death. Wandering onto a bridge, the camera like a good friend, leans into and watches the busy clamor of the city (Delhi's) roads beside Pandit Narendra Sharma. Unhurriedly, the camera reaches into his mindscape as he ponders the peculiar rhythms and begins inspired choreographic creation with a white shroud and a Balinese mask he unearths from an old trunk (starting at 3.05 min). With this, the

audience is seamlessly transported into the actual performance of Antim Adhyay as six dancers (in pairs) pace with the white cloth over their shoulders. Evocative, this shroud-like cloth envelops and layers the movements of the dancers as it tugs, reminiscences, and philosophizes through the multidimensional body both the acts of living and of death while the camera participates fervently (8.43) but respectfully as these bodies encapsulate the experience of being human and being confronted and contorted with mortality.



Image 12: Antim Adhyay, 0.34s, Pt. Narendra Sharma walking in a Mughal period cemetery, screenshot by Sandhiya Kalyanasundaram



Image 13: Antim Adhyay, 3.11min, Pt. Narendra Sharma choreographing and improvising, screenshot by Sandhiya Kalyanasundaram



Image 14: Antim Adhyay. 23.52 min, Screenshot by Sandhiya Kalyanasundaram

For the television audience, Kamalini offered an unparalleled watching dance experience as the camera breathes through the intricate interplay of movement and stillness, slowness and speed, radiating circles of power and resistance traversing both the mind of the artist, his improvisation and the performance on the reflective proscenium stage. Thank you for inspiring generations of dancers!

Biographies:

Kamalini Dutt retired as Director, Central Archives Doordarshan, New Delhi. She is a teacher and choreographer. Trained under great Gurus in three styles of classical dance forms, Kamalini Dutt has nurtured several young artistes who have acquired national repute. She is a scholar with a deep interest in Shastras related to dance and music. She continues to research in this area. She has given several lectures and also written articles and contributed to books on Shastras related subjects. Her significant work in the field of audio-visual archives, is the major digitization initiative of Doordarshan content. She had the privilege of recording performances of most of the great stalwarts in the field of music and dance in her career in Doordarshan as a producer spanning over four decades. Under her leadership, Doordarshan introduced a media asset management (MAM) solution for archiving which was first of its kind in the country. As part of the dissemination program, Kamalini has been responsible for releasing more than 100 titles as DVDs and CDs, of the precious archival performances.

Sandhiya Kalyanasundaram is a dance educator, choreographer and poet. Trained in Bharatanatyam, Butoh and Flamenco, Sandhiya has led and performed in several collaborative performances between dance styles, served on the Jury Panel for the San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival and used dance therapy to work with survivors of domestic violence. Sandhiya enjoys working at the intersection of science, technology and art. Her current research and teaching interests lie at the intersection of cinema, performance, and philosophy, with a specific focus on environmental humanities.

Her works have been published in the Art and Perception, Nature, Sahitya Akademi's Indian Literature Journal, The Trumpeter, International Journal of Screendance, Scholar and Feminist Online, Theatre, Dance and Performance Training, Lens Network on Sustainability.

Dr. Srisrividhiya Kalyanasundaram (Srivi Kalyan): Srivi Kalyan is a multifaceted artist, designer and scholar. Srivi has authored and illustrated several books for children and adults and is an award-winning writer and illustrator. At Srishti Manipal Institute of Art Design and Technology (SMI), she is a Dean in the Cluster of Law, Environment and Planning and has pioneered several cutting-edge programs that bring social design, artistic practices, self-reflection and ecological consciousness together to reimagine our present and our futures. She is the Principal Investigator at Lila- Artist Research Studio and heads the Centre for Reimagining Transitions. She is an adjunct professor at the Consciousness Studies Program, National Institute of Advanced Studies and a trustee at the Trust for Environmental Education. Her personal work can be viewed at www.sriviliveshere.com.

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Terminology:

Taala: A traditional rhythmic beat pattern in classical Indian music.

Kala: Signifies time, duration, cycle

Laya: Laya is the tempo/pace at which a musical composition or performance is sung/played and determines the structure, dynamics, and expressiveness of a performance.

Swara: Polysemic word that can denote an accent, tone or musical note of an octave in Indian music.

Sahitya: definition of literature (also poetic verses sung in music) as aesthetic thought and expression

Muzhumandi: A full sit on the toes keeping the spine upright, while the core, rotators and quadriceps are engaged to provide a lift to the seated Bharatanatyam body.

Images Introduction: Legends of Indian Classical dance styles

Dr. Sharon Lower, Odissi, Manipuri, Mayurbhanj & Seraikella Chhau (Image 5a, 5b): <https://www.sharonlowen.com/>

Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra, Odissi (Image 6): Credited with restructuring and revival of Odissi- ["I never find myself in a hurry to move on speedily with words and expression. The movement of expression must slip by and by, like a flower smiles in the very fine morning for the first time."](#)

Guru Dr. Padma Subramanyam, Bharatanatyam (Image 7): Indologist, musician and dancer-creator of a new dance style, Bharatanrityam, she has carried out extensive research and reconstruction on the [108 Karanas](#).

Gurus Vasanthalakshmi, N. and M. V. Narasimhachari, Kuchipudi and Bharatanatyam (Image 8): Guru Narasimhachari is a music composer, choreographer, mridangam player, concert musician and revivalist of the burra katha, a regional ballad style of Andhra Pradesh. Guru Vasanthalakshmi is a linguist, lyricist, veena virtuoso and nattuvanar (dance conductor). Guru Vasanthalakshmi has a unique expertise with the ancient "Simhanandana Tala Chitra Nrithyam" in which the dancer draws the [image of a lion with her feet](#).

Dr. Kanak Rele, Kathakali, Mohiniyattam (Image 9): A lawyer and dance scholar, credited with re-envisioning Mohiniyattam using Sopana sangeetham and creating notation that with body kinetics and mnemonics. Dr. Rele created choreography using tradition and mythology to [highlight social urgencies](#) of her time.

Dr. Sonal Mansingh, Bharatnatyam and Odissi (Image 10): ["A dancer is not just a dancer. She is part of this environment. She does not exist in a vacuum. Society and its happenings have an impact on all individuals, specially artists. If an art form does not reflect the existing milieu, it stagnates."](#)

Pt. Narendra Sharma, Contemporary Dance (Images 12-14): Uday Shankar style, <https://bhoomikadance.blogspot.com/2009/07/on-founder-director-narendra-sharma.html>