## Crossroads

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South Asian Dance Studies has emerged as an international site for critical debates about various intersections of identity, power, media, and globalization. This multidisciplinary academic space is also a site for the intersections of theory and praxis/practice, criticality, and creativity. Yet, this arrival of South Asian Dance Studies is happening in a world daunted by political polarization and authoritarianism, inequalities deepened due to the pandemic, wars, refugee and environmental crises, a severe economic and political breakdown in Sri Lanka, and the changing political atmosphere in India—filled with instability, violence and divisive identity politics.

Writing about dance and its history, or even its relevance, needs new methodological frameworks that, at once, give us the ability to speak from within as well as outside. This changing scenario requires the placing of dance within the framework of intersectionality as a survival strategy against the totalitarian reframing of ideas of culture, history, gender, class, caste, human rights and the politics of assertive and often violent marginalizations. Although not directly connected to any of these issues, the three essays below are situated within these discursive spaces that we are calling *crossroads*. We envision them as sites for interventions. It began accidentally, with the three authors independently writing about their standpoints in the current times. The diary-like entries are short, reflexive, and introspective regarding personal engagement and its changing relevance in current times. They are generated from the common wish to create a space for diverse ways of looking at practice—theory—interface. These short essays are also framing an invitation to debate and dialogue about the future of Indian dance studies by using the critical methodologies available to us. By doing so, we hope to foster an inclusive and globally ethical dance discourse. Among other things, this means giving ethical agency to the dance community of the contemporary times, identified by their relationship to the field of dance as enthusiasts, performers, teachers, choreographers, scholars, patrons, audience, and students and their parents. Above all, this effort calls for a recognition of the tremendous diversity and the contemporaneity that the dance forms and dancers consistently deal with in India and on the global stage.

The health of the very young scholarship in dance studies across India and among diaspora communities shall hopefully thrive in its diversity through holistic multi-disciplinarity and differential experiences of the practitioners, writers, and audience. We felt looking back critically and reclaiming rights to dance is as important as looking at the present policies and pedagogies. In that process, criticisms, experimentations, and challenging of old and new hierarchies became our key directions to create a document that could reassert the urgent requirement of all actors who engage in dance making and writing—and not chose a few who agree with our individual and/or collective positions. We also hope that this intervention will shift the discourse taking place in select academic sites to carefully look at the relationship between patriarchy and Indian dance history alongside gender, sexuality, caste, religion, region, and the state. We want to also emphasize that political debates surrounding Indian dance and culture cannot only be located and concerned with the past, but our research and analysis must take into consideration how culture and dance are lived now and what implications they have for the future.

### *The Unruly Third Space*

*Priya Srinivasan*

Unruliness, when I first wrote about it over a decade ago, was a call to action to become aware and then to act on blind spots, invisibilizations of labour, and marginalizations of history that hid appropriation, hybridity, rising totalitarianism, and intercultural connections. Spectatorship was not just about viewing/spectating/watching dance, but also about reading bodies, reading dancing bodies as texts, reading her-stories instead of his-story, reading our own bodily practices and textual practices as artists and scholars, to be in respectful dialogue, to debate, and, when necessary, call ourselves out through self-reflexive and dialogic processes. I was fundamentally interested in bringing out intersectional thinking on complex historical engagements that led to contemporary problems. I started at the place of the moving body to ask these questions.

The rising power of social media and the "disinformation" emerging from it that preceded the Trump and Modi years—and other governments which also then aided and abetted fascism to rise on the far right and the equally violent rhetoric of the so-called progressive left—deeply troubles me. Ultimately what I have realized is that academics are speaking in a language not accessible to those on the far right or left, let alone the lay person/artist/dancer. There was/is a chasm between these worlds; between those who theorize, research, and write slowly and those who write daily, quickly, and instantly. I believe there needs to be a bridge between rigorous academic thought—ideas that have been slow cooked over time—and instant microwave thinking on social media. While I understand the power of social media to democratize representation, I also think when the body is reduced to texts, memes, digitized images, bits, and bites of video clips, Insta pics, likes, dislikes, comments, and critique, the body can disappear. Particularly vulnerable are female dancing bodies, just as they have always been. As Sarkar argues in this publication, all kinds of dancing bodies have been legislated against, stopped, silenced, and made invisible. We are now seeing a remapping of this policing from various positionalities claiming marginal positions both from the far right and the left.

In my 2012 book, *Sweating Saris*, which was published before the 2014 takeover of the Modi right wing BJP Hindutva government, I had discussed the danger of the hegemony of Hindutva discourse already embedded in Indian arts practices and particularly in classical dance. I had positioned myself as an upper-caste migrant woman from India who grew up in a deeply racialized environment in Australia as a minority. I made myself vulnerable in a way that many of my counterparts (particularly male academics) were not doing, and demonstrating the idea that in one space, subjects can hold social, economic, and symbolic power and, in others, a marginal position. I also noted that, at times, the simultaneity that both possibilities can co-exist in the same space. I discussed how migration, race, and the White Australia policy in Australia was quite different to the US and its waves of migration and immigration policies had created quite different demographies. I was demonstrating how power shifts and is contingent and why we need intersectional thinking to understand privilege as loss and to invoke and evoke empathy to better ally with marginal subjects and marginal locations.

The binaries of the dancer versus academic, body versus mind, performing versus writing, classical versus contemporary, practice versus theory, purity versus pollution, to be ruly versus unruly transformed into a bricolage of many things layered one on top of the other, weaving strands between these many ways of being. At times, this jostling of being between things—insider/outsider—has been a way of being with some practices silencing others. These concerns helped me understand the problems inherent in and the simultaneous power of practice as research and paved the pathway for me to live a dual existence as a dancer and researcher. This both/and approach has helped me navigate myself out of binaries of either/or to the third space. To move away from singularity/ binary to multiplicity. The privilege of living outside institutional structures has also made me simultaneously vulnerable symbolically and economically.

This is in line with the many women of color and women from the global South who have been writing "back" to power by putting their bodies on the line. While these voices were emerging to speak back to power, the post structuralist turn in anthropology and in dance studies turned the body into a sign—a text that could be read for meaning—separating the practices of the body to legitimize dance studies in the academy. Similarly, the texualization that was prevalent in many fields, particularly in South Asian Studies, was also something that deeply disturbed me. "South Asia" as a category emerged during the cold war, although it had its inception in colonial and oriental encounters earlier. The study of philology was something the CIA valued deeply as the US created its own various imperial others. I found that I was again between and betwixt spaces because I could not identify with the texualization discourse of South Asia that removed bodies, particularly female bodies, and embodiment and lived knowledges. If the body appeared in South Asian Studies texts, often, it would be reduced to just the sign; the situated knowledges of the experiential body disappeared.

This idea of the third space and multiplicity is now more important than ever. As Chakravorty notes in this essay, until we understand that we are all part of an interdependent ecosystem, we will continue to exist in the me-versus-we debate. I realize that artists, organizations, producers, presenters, and audiences—both IRL and online—have to see unruly possibilities in order for meaningful and lasting change to occur or, at the very least, a middle ground that enables multiplicity of thought, dissent, and respectful debate to occur. I find meaning as a dancer/choreographer/scholar/public intellectual creating work outside of institutions, universities, and being "in between" in order to navigate power and in order to be the bridge that builds dialogue into silences to move toward that interdependent ecosystem. I build on feminist scholarship and praxis through allyship, solidarity, and non-violence in creating this space. I am in conversation with my mentors, former colleagues, and former students from whom I continue to learn. Here is a small sample of the writers I use in my thinking about

unruliness, dance, power, solidarity, and non-violent means of debate, critique, and dissent (Chakravorty 2008, Djebar 1993, Gordon 2008, Mahmood 2011, Robinson 2021, Sarkar Munsi 2022, Savigliano 1995, Srinivasan 1985, Thakore 2021).

In what follows, I share three of the key performative acts in which I have collaborated in unruly ways with my collaborators across the globe contingently on sites that span the Hermitage Museum in the Netherlands, Mettumulluvadi Village in Kanchipuram District (Tamil Nadu), and an online collaboration triangulating Hyderabad, Mummidivaram, and Bunjil Place, which culminated in a live performance in the outer suburbs of Melbourne.

I ask how, within Indian contexts, we can reimagine bodily knowledge, moving into dialogic modes of inquiry through the body and to move from singular/binary to multiple modes of being to find meaning. I don't turn away from the classical building blocks that are embedded in my body (although I did do that for some time while I was understanding the history of the form and my complicity in it) to explore different spaces, ask contemporary questions, and discovering through dialogic encounters. My work often begins at the level of practice first before the research question emerges.

In Amsterdam in May of 2018, I worked with a Surinamese choir and the Moving Matters multidisciplinary international collective started by Susan Ossman, to examine what it would mean to occupy the Hermitage Museum for four hours to take over the museum albeit temporarily. Surinamese people in the Netherlands are a syncretic ethnic mix of African, Chinese, and Indian backgrounds. The Indians that went there in the nineteenth century were taken from Bihar primarily speaking Bhojpuri as indentured laborers to Surinam, which was a British colony. The Chinese were also indentured, and many Africans were enslaved there. The British then sold the colony to the Dutch and when Surinam got its independence in 1975, about 50% of the population migrated to Holland. However, after migrating many were unable to assimilate because of race and class differences. They settled in various parts of Holland but particularly around the Hermitage Museum area. Ironically, until we did our collaboration, none of them had ever set foot in the museum, leaving them feeling like they never belonged there and that it was not for them.

The museum curator, Annemarie De Wildt, was aware of the lack of equity and enabled us to "take over," temporarily, with museum goers not aware that we would be activating the space with music, dance, movement, and installations that would trouble the predominantly white male representation from the Dutch Golden Age represented in the exhibits. Uthra and I had worked remotely over Zoom for a few months with the choir conductor, Dennis, who was African American. Using Carnatic and folk music to weave with the Surinamese and Dutch music, we activated the choir members and dancers to move as they sang and moved inside the exhibit, at times disrupting it. In particular, a projection of a Rembrandt, *The Night Watchman*, something very dear to the Dutch, was taken down and replaced with a photo of the Moving Matters and Surinamese Choir/Dancer group and ourselves. Audiences were quite surprised, as they were not expecting to see an artists-of-color "flashmob" take over the museum space. After the takeover, many members of the choir said they felt excited and transformed at the possibility that they had spoken back to their colonizers even for a short amount of time. Nobody expected that the takeover was anything but temporary as the exhibit went back to "normal" as soon as we left.

However, we were shocked when, in October, 2019, the Hermitage Museum made headlines declaring that it would diversify its exhibits and the displays would include people of color in its collection to account for Holland's complex colonial history. This was soon ratified by all main museums in Amsterdam—no short feat,—despite meeting much opposition. Annamarie de Wildt had, in fact, been promoted to head of Museums Amsterdam and told us that our performance and takeover affected her deeply and led her to institute that change. Thus, the performance practice in this instance led to a massive shift in the colonial archive, also leading to changes in representation of people of color in Amsterdam who rarely saw images of themselves in any positions of privilege or power.

My second example, *Churning Waters*, was a collaboration of Indian Australian, Indigenous Australian, and Koothu artists, who are from Paraiyar (Dalit) communities, to create site-specific performances in Australia and India that focus on water futures and climate change. A tour of South India for Australia Festival in India in 2019, the work enabled ancient and contemporary texts about water, land, and sky knowledges to be shared by dancers, musicians, and storytellers. This work intends to reimagine water futures, given different responses to climate change by Dalit artists in South India, Diasporic artists in Melbourne, and Indigenous artists from Australia. What is possible when immersive site-specific performance engages community through women's perspectives? To this end, we created site-specific, participatory performances in several spaces including Dakshina Chitra in Chennai, Adishakti in Puducherry, and Mettumulluvadi Village near Kanchipuram from where Thilaga, one of our key collaborators, originated. The performance at Adishtakti drew a unique international and local audience reflecting the history of colonial Puducherry. It was met with a fantastic reception, as audience members who were accustomed to experimental work walked together from one space to another, ending up in the black box auditorium. Dakshina Chitra in Chennai, a living museum, reflected an audience accustomed to classical Indian dance and music and, here, the work met with a mixed reception—especially with an audience not used to moving and walking. There were also problems with audio and sound in the performance. Mettumulluvadi village, however, was probably the highlight of our tour.

Thilaga was the first woman from her village to perform the male-dominated form of Koothu. Sylvia Nulpintidj, who is of Yolgnu background in Arnhem Land Northern Territory, connected with Thilaga immediately. We visited the village and stayed to be part of the nine-hour Koothu performance. All of us walked around the village meeting people and inviting them to the evening performance. We gathered the village en masse, creating a procession that met at the village center where the pandal was set up for the performance. They incorporated us into their practices and perhaps this is why, despite the experimental nature of the work, the performance was received with great enthusiasm. The performance became improvisatory and much more interactive compared to the structured form we were doing in other spaces. By the time the more than 1,500 audience members had gathered, we knew that, through performance, we were entering a completely different space/time. We were using folk, ritual performance in contemporary contexts to discuss water and climate change and, with Thilaga's request, to ask questions to the audience about rethinking plastic usage. While the show was probably a novelty for the audience and they enjoyed it, for Thilaga and her troupe, our indigenous collaborators and the rest of us, we benefited from the connection we had forged between each other and found ourselves changed profoundly by this interaction. However, as insider/outsiders entering this space we need to keep questioning the ongoing power shifts in these engagements and how we can serve those who are vulnerable at different moments in different contexts and spaces? To this end, we are in touch with each other via whatsapp groups and continue building our allyship to support one another as we continue the fight for social justice in our different locales.

My third example is my work with Dr. Yashoda Thakore and her guru Annabattula Mangatayaru, who are from the Kalavantulu community based in Hyderabad and Mummidivaram in Andhra, respectively, and the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. Two extremes, it would seem, were bridged together by the work that my collaborator Hari Sivanesan (a Sri Lankan/British veena player and composer) and I were doing with our platform/festival Sangam. This festival was created to provide representation for marginalized South Asian artists in Melbourne/Victoria.

Based on my research that spans fifteen years, the *Encounters* performance tells the story of five South Indian dancers (known as Devadasi/Kalavantalu) and three musicians who toured to Paris in 1838—a time when India was colonised by France. They performed hundreds of shows in France, the UK, and throughout Europe, ending up in Vienna. During the tour, they met many European artists. One significant encounter occurred in Paris when a teenaged dancer called Amany (a bronze statue of whom can now be seen in La Musée de Guimet) and the rest of the troupe met several composers in Vienna including Johann Strauss I and Joseph Lanner.

The dancers' footwork and music inspired the composition of Indian-themed songs such as Strauss's "Indianer Galopp" and Lanner's "Malapou-Galopp," which had a significant influence on classical music emerging from Vienna in the years to follow. The dancers and musicians disappeared from history after this encounter. Their practices also became banned in India in the twentieth century due to colonial, patriarchal, caste, and national pressures, and the women were shamed into silence and invisibility. Encounters explored the material from that era through an experimental dance, live, and on-screen performance by myself and Yashoda, respectively, with Melbourne-based musicians accompanying them. *Encounters* merged with Strauss's Indianer Galopp, arranged by Sivanesan and Alex Turley a young Melbourne Symphony Orchestra composer.

It is remarkable that the archival research, which had sat with me for so long, did not come to life until I shared my story with Yashoda and then her guru. It was in a Zoom meeting when I shared lithographs

and reviews and discussed repertoire such as the *Rajah's Salute* (known as the *Salaam Daruvu,* which is still present in Yashoda's dance repertoire) that Mangatayaru Amma casually mentioned that Amany was the sister of her direct ancestor. She could even recall the names of the many women that went before her, from her mother to her grandmother, Buli Venkatratnamma, to six generations of women that went before her to lead us to Amany. She insisted that this story was told to her by her Ammama (grandmother) who reminded her not to lose hope in the women ancestors—that they were powerful women who travelled internationally. Yashoda and I were stunned. It was truly miraculous for us all to find this connection. Who would even believe this? How do we account for what was unfolding? What came first, the archival or the embodied research? We cannot explain this easily but only to say that what emerged was a result of the intersubjective encounter between bodies of knowledge! The fact is that the archival research does not work without the embodied research, and vice versa. We realized we are truly interdependent.

Yashoda described the project as "a huge step toward exposing the layers of oppression that my Kalavantulu community lives under. *Encounters* is a celebration of our strong women ancestors as they became international personalities…This ethical exchange gives me hope that dance and music projects like these will bring much-needed empowerment."

The project was not without its controversies. While audiences in Melbourne and the diaspora celebrated this monumental performance for the historical collaboration between the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra and South Asians, who remain deeply marginalized within the Australian context, some voices in the Indian dance world began trolling Yashoda and I for having the audacity to do such a collaboration, questioning: who does this story actually belong to? "Who has the right to dance" is the crossroads at which we are now.

**Conclusions**

Some questions and thoughts that have come to me are: Why does it seem as though women dancers' lived experiences are wiped out in favour of the ahistorical text? Why is the return to the body and practice more important than ever and why a celebratory return to practice without research, criticality and context doesn't work either? If the encounter with the other through extreme power imbalance from the colonial experience is at the heart of practice as research how can Indian dance practices/studies reimagine it from another place? Learning critical methodology such as performance and dance ethnography, the idea of the insider/outsider, feminist global south approaches to understanding the dialogic encounter has enabled me to understand that practice and research cannot be separated. Dance practices have no fixed meaning, the differing contexts give meaning, and the meaning of the dance changes accordingly. Practice enables contradictions to exist within the same context. While the text too can enable this the practice enables an experiential understanding of it that can't be dismissed. When you live the contradiction you are less likely to move into the polarity of the binary and when you center the body what else is possible?

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***Who Owns Culture? Heritage Politics in a Fractured Nation***

*Pallabi Chakravorty*

**Sacred Silences**

Birju Maharaj, the samrat of the Kathak dance tradition of north India, passed away recently. In his extraordinary career, he was instrumental in positioning the tradition of Kathak—which covers a vast geographical expanse from Rajasthan, Lucknow, and Benaras, to Calcutta—on par with Bharatanatyam, as a glorious and deep tradition with a continuous "classical heritage." After his demise at the age of eighty-three, the outpouring of grief and homage by his disciples, patrons, and admirers on various media outlets was breathtaking. During his lifetime he had gained the status of a demi-god, an incarnation of Krishna, a guru like no other. The deification on social media reminded us of his power, not only in India, but also internationally, as an icon of India's ancient heritage.

During his life, Birju Maharaj was celebrated as the living connection to India's past, its medieval courts and, above all, the so-called Kathaka tradition of the Brahmin minstrels who sang the praise of Krishna (a form called natavari nrithya) in temple precincts. This state-created narrative of Kathak's mythic origin among the ancient Kathaka caste, connecting it to male Brahmin gharana lineages over several generations, was repeated over and over again in books, magazines, brochures, festivals, websites, and television since the 1950s. A key element in the propagation of this narrative was Kathak Kendra, the national institute of Kathak dance, that was established as part of Sangeet Natak Akademy in New Delhi in 1964. Birju Maharaj, who was associated with Kathak Kendra from its inception, became its director after the death of his uncle Shambhu Maharaj. He gradually became an institution himself in whom power was centralized.

Not taking anything away from his charismatic personality and great artistry, the feudal culture that Birju Maharaj spawned through Kathak Kendra and, later, Kalashram—his own institution—through the guru-shishya model of imparting knowledge. This became a fertile ground for abuse of power, which included many allegations of sexual abuse, some of which recently flared up on social media posts. A culture of sycophancy and servitude became endemic in the practice of Kathak in the name of guru, parampara, bhakti, and seva. Birju Maharaj, after all, was the very incarnation of Kathak, who had the power to open the gates to state funding, places in festivals, international travel, and paths to stardom. To be associated with him in any way, even a photo opportunity, presaged prestige and legitimacy in the Kathak fraternity. He and his coterie vehemently delegitimized any deviation from his enunciation of "authentic" Kathak, its history, and technique. His ownership of the Kathak tradition, through hereditary lineage politics and stylistic monopoly within the multitude of Kathak styles, created an insular binary world of cultural insiders and outsiders among modern practitioners of the form.

Only a handful of scholars have challenged the Brahminical patriarchal gharana history that he represented. In my book, *Bells of Change: Kathak Dance, Women, and Modernity in India*, I tried to create an alternative history of Kathak with women dance artists, such as the baijis and tawaifs—who were primarily Muslim women—as one of the original sources of the modern Kathak tradition (Chakravorty 2008). It was the first book to bring the colonial nautch women back into Kathak's history and show how they were erased during the construction of the hegemonic discourse of male Kathakas and gharanas through various institutions, festivals, workshops, and competitions in modern India. This examination also underlined the process of deification of Birju Maharaj by his followers and beneficiaries.

The environment of unquestioning servitude embedded in guru-shishya parampara placed an enormous burden on women from middle and lower socioeconomic positions with diverse castes and, in some rare cases, Muslim identities, who had to negotiate this space as aspirational dancers. While they needed the social capital of tradition and classicism for their legitimacy as Kathak dancers, the social capital came attached to a familial patriarchal lineage through Birju Maharaj, whom they had to please and bow to as the supreme authority. These contradictory forces shaped the identities of generations of women Kathak dancers in modern India. There were voices of dissent, but they came at the cost of being excluded from the coveted coterie of Kathak artists who graced international

festivals and prestigious concerts. The stories of these women belonging to middle and lower-middle class/caste backgrounds and their dissenting voices, their negotiations of patriarchy and Brahminical tradition in their everyday life, are narrated in my ethnography. But a critical and analytical narrative of Kathak dance as it is lived in contemporary India by women practitioners who are neither celebrities nor hereditary practitioners was not a subject that had much cachet then or now; as a result, *Bells of Change* did not create the much-needed intervention—or change—in the discourse of heritage politics. The larger issues the book tried to raise regarding questions of dance history, ethnography, lineage, and voice in relation to tradition and heritage, and how they are transmitted as "traditional/oral knowledge" in the context of modern institutions of knowledge production, remained incidental.

Now, with the demise of the Kathak samrat, the issue of abuse of power through the hierarchical relationship of guru-shishya parampara and tradition has resurfaced. Moving forward we are once again left with questions of ownership, legitimacy, and construction of authority. Are we going to continue to look for authority, authenticity, and legitimacy in familial lineages that construct dance history in linear ways from a particular original source through male blood/caste lines? We know that these kinds of claims of historical continuities of tradition ("invented traditions") create the ideal conditions for gatekeeping, insularity, and dominance. Can the future of the past ("tradition") be sustained by discourses of authenticity and ownership through select hereditary lineages and familial claims that reduce the complex and complicated history of cultural inheritance? Such discourses invariably elevate the idea of authenticity through the purity of belonging—and not belonging—to a homogenous and bounded community. A particular identity and subjectivity of an artist are not about where she/he belongs in some essential way, whether it be a caste, religion, or community, but how that individual artistic identity is constituted through the intersections and the shifting interplay of caste/class, gender, sexuality, religion, region, etc. in her/his lived history and practice. The purity politics and ownership of culture mobilized by extreme right and left ideologies tend to bring up the same binary questions of insider/outsider, self/other, powerful/powerless, oppressor/oppressed, and hereditary/non-hereditary, without regard for individual differences or historical nuances. We need to release these practices, whether they be Kathak, Bharatanatyam, Sattriya, or other "classical arts"—from both the ideology of Brahminical patriarchy and the overdetermined category of hereditary lineage politics—to let them breathe the air of autonomy and democracy. The discourses of lineage, guru, Parampara, and inheritance, and the professional world to which it leads creates the rarified world of the classical arts. These bounded identities suffocate artistic collaboration and innovation. They ultimately deny artistic freedom of expression, access, and the right to question.

**Voices**

The hereditary claims and narratives of disenfranchisement we see in Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi today are important interventions in the narratives of classicism by artists who come from the hereditary community of practitioners and lineages of revered gurus of dance in modern India. These narratives embedded in South Indian caste and regional politics are couched in the powerful language of caste/race and dance appropriation. Although these counter-narratives to statist patriarchal history are not new in the scholarships on Bharatanatyam that came out almost two decades ago (Srinivasan 1985, Kersenboom 1987, Meduri 1988), what is new today is the empowered voices of a handful of hereditary practitioners who are talking back to the Brahmin hegemony and asserting their identity. Unfortunately, these important assertions circulate primarily among a select Indian elite who are already knowledgeable about the debates within the classical arts. These discourses also form a significant part of scholarships that are situated in the hallowed corridors of academia in the global North. Moreover, these critiques often posit caste as a homogenous category, while eliding the political mobilization of certain caste identities and their changing social status at various historical junctures, especially concerning the music and dance communities (Srinivasan 1985, Geetha 2021).

This is not to deny the serious issue of casteism and caste oppression in India or the caste/class power structures that control the classical arts. However, the historical facts of caste mobility, state support, and prestige accrued by certain Brahmin and non-Brahmin dance communities to construct their dance and musical pedigree are important if we are to be serious about democratizing the arts to make room for marginalized and unheard voices. I am referring here to the innumerable students of classical dance and music in Indian universities and schools—many from non-Brahmin groups—who do not belong to any prominent familial lineages nor have elite class status. These individuals are never able to enter any narratives of classical dance as historical actors/performers, whether it be in the prestigious circles of sabhas, festivals, sammelans, or academic writing. The insidious heritage politics and gatekeeping by the insiders tend to create "permanent outsiders " in the classical dance world in contemporary India, while, at the same time, the upper caste/class continue to consolidate their power through Hindutva propaganda and its communal and casteist rhetoric.

The Brahminical dominance of the classical arts gets further fueled by this majoritarian politics. Unfortunately, the negotiations of these complex conversations on the ground, where dance is a practice, are often deeply divisive and polarizing. These totalitarian ideological debates centered on who is a greater victim according to their caste in the Bharatanatyam field. Voiced by people who already have considerable power and privilege, these debates create a cycle of victimology among its already visible, authoritative, and prominent insiders. Not surprisingly, these authoritative voices feed into identity politics from both ends of the caste spectrum whereas class privilege is rendered invisible. In an insightful essay, Yashoda Thakore, a Kuchipudi exponent and scholar, who is from the Kalavantulu (devadasi) community, powerfully argues that the simplistic understanding of caste, bloodlines, and hereditary transmission of knowledge among her community obfuscates the traditional familial/social organizations of the past. She writes:

> We were never a caste! My father said to me 'We are a guild of like-minded people. Adoption from within the families and from other communities was a way of life. My Kalavantulu teacher, Annabattula Lakshadweep Mangatayaru herself was adopted by her mother. I am a combination of so many bloodlines! This complexity of caste lineage is part of my life, dance, and quest. Today, I bring your attention to a set of practices, people, and lineages that make me who I am to question the simplistic understanding of caste-defined bloodlines. (Thakore 2021)

**Inheritance of Loss**

Returning to the question of heritage, caste, and lineages, we see they now form a fertile ground for regressive state policies and educational curricula in colleges and schools in India. We also know that there is not a singular narrative of the past or a caste identity. Therefore, we must ask the difficult question about heritage and parampara: Can a cultural practice such as dance be owned by a person, and can that person's right to it as familial or community property be established by claims of an unbroken link to the ancient past that is inherited through blood lineages? I bring this up here as Birju Maharaj and his gharana created a system of virulent gatekeeping and ownership through his claims of biological inheritance through several generations. Heritage, in this process, is not a culturally shared object but is personally owned. Since heritage is an inherently political object that has the power to legitimize or delegitimize a tradition/culture/practice and its modern practitioners, it is time we decenter the patriarchal statist discourses of the classical arts from the language of hereditary lineages through bloodlines. The male line of inheritance through a singular bloodline/caste identity was how males in the hereditary communities became complicit in patriarchal nationalism in the first place. The nationalist narrative successfully erased or marginalized many communities of women practitioners (devadasi, tawaif, baiji, etc.) who could not claim their biological inheritance of tradition because of patrilineality despite being the source of the practice. There is no need here to regurgitate that history in Kathak, Bharatnatyam, or Kuchipudi, for the list is long. The anachronistic feudal model of guru-shishya parampara and its civilization narrative became a part of modern nation building to link the past to the present. The embodiment of traditional bodily knowledge, hence, ironically, became an "inheritance of loss" for its modern practitioners.

**The Permanent Outsiders**

The good news is that the guru-shisya system and its hereditary lineage politics, the elite Brahmin strongholds of dances, and the saffron forces celebrating them do not constitute the singular narrative of concert dances in contemporary India. There are other trajectories and initiatives. One such compelling trajectory of dancers who do not claim any heritage politics, pedigree, or elite status is found in dance reality shows. A new generation of dancers claiming the stage has turned the narrative of guru, parampara, and tradition on its head (Chakravorty 2017). One could argue that they represent the category of "permanent outsiders" to the classical/traditional arts I previously mentioned. These dancers have come forward from all walks of life—and caste, religion, class, gender, and sexuality—to participate in India's cosmopolitan contemporary dance culture. They have swept away some of these questions of nepotism and inheritance by their participation in reality shows without any connections to important classical gurus (parampara kinship networks) or hereditary links to tradition. Although they have their own stories of hierarchies, stardom, and sexual opportunism, they are negotiating them without the social capital of tradition/heritage and, in many instances, without much

economic capital.

These secular dance spaces have shown that we need democracy and more democracy to rebuild Indian dance teaching and practice. I hope that we can seize this moment to usher in a different discourse of tradition and heritage that will not make us prisoners of the past. In the globalized world we live in today, there should be an acknowledgment that there are multiple communities of any dance practice, including the classical arts—both Brahmin and non-Brahmin—hereditary and non-hereditary—and that we all operate in an interdependent and dynamic ecosystem. Ultimately, the issues we select to highlight show our preferences, interests, and who we are and who we are addressing—that is, who comprises our audience and what is at stake for the researcher/researched in creating new knowledge.

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***Imagining Possibilities for Setting Dance Free: Right to Dance in Contemporary India***


*Urmimala Sarkar*


Referring to the context of dance studies as a multidisciplinary subject that spreads across and enables a range of engagements within the larger purview of dance research in India, I refer to Janet O'Shea's "Introduction" in which she suggests:

> [f]our strands of intellectual activity, each of which predate the emergence of dance studies as a separate arena, laid the ground for the present-day field: anthropology, folklore, and ethnography; the writings of expert viewers and dance analysis; philosophy, especially aesthetics and phenomenology; historical studies including biography and dance reconstruction. (2010: 2)

In addition to what she has included in the section of "historical studies," I would like to mention historiography, which specifically enables engagement with the changing interpretations of the past events in the works of individual historians.

In India, the overarching importance put on the last strand by virtually every Indian, Western, and diaspora scholar, has overshadowed, undervalued, and silenced the other three strands almost completely, while also delegitimizing and rendering irrelevant most discourses on dance as a part of the contemporary reality in India. This malaise spills over into the dance/dancers who receive patronage, who get jobs in academic spaces, and whose endeavors are seen as "valuable" or survival/discussion/writing-worthy only in continuation or in reference to the history of dance(s) from India. This is unfortunate, as the white academic space then retains the rights to write about dance and dancers worldwide. They would also write about the contemporary issues in dance and the avant garde, while the Indians regurgitate and debate dance history.

In more ways than one, this agenda creates a ghettoized space for Indian dance studies—specifically within Indian cultural studies and South Asian studies—enabling voices from the non-dance world to gain agency. This situation delegitimizes the rights of dance practice-theory interface/analysis/phenomenological-ethnographic discourses. This agenda also steps into the murky world of identity politics, similar to the conservative discourses around rights to dance, that have already harmed dance and dancers in many Indian communities in immeasurable ways. The current narratives around dance are thus placed on a double-edged sword. The first and most dangerous circumstance is related to direct or indirect restrictions imposed on the freedom to practice art by artists who do not adhere to or stay away from the fundamentalist myth-building agenda. The second is that which is centered around rights to dance, as evidenced by the violent delegitimization of dancers from hereditary communities in parts of India. As a dancer who does not belong to any of the delegitimized communities, and has not practiced any of those forms, I see myself somewhat safe from the second discourse, though I have directly faced the brunt of the first one, along with the student community of universities in India and Indian academics, artists, writers, and performers since 2014. This is when, with the formation of the far-right government, the intellectual and artistic freedom was restricted. These schemas of restrictions are imposed on dancing and thinking and are formulated without contextualizing the contemporary rights of the dancers and the dance scholars who would want to spread knowledge beyond specific historical or geographical focus.

It seems that, whether it comes from conservative assertions of social or religious norms and values of one person or one group, the infringement of the right to dance always was and still remains a common practice. This infringement makes dance practice a space for completely undemocratic assertions. That there is a history behind the current fissures and frictions in dance as well as "a history in the way we perceived issues" (Geetha, xi) is very clear. Resisting has gotten complicated as we realize that all of us who identify as dancers are not speaking of the same specific cases, similar kinds of oppression, or even identical modes of resistance. V. Geetha asks in her book *Patriarchy*: "How do we reconcile them? Are we stranded in theory?" (Geetha, xiii). I ask here: "Do we stop dancing? Do many dancers resign to the fact that they have to give up their right to dance, what they have learned, again and again, as different oppressors continue to stamp their rights to curb rights of the dancers in different times and spaces again and again?"

Dancers have always been stopped from dancing. The conservative patriarchal rhetoric has stopped women from dancing in the past in a variety of ways. Families have asserted their norms and values to stop male and female children from dancing for different gender-specific reasons. Colonizers have stopped colonized people from dancing, Upper-caste reforms have stopped the ones who were designated as lower in caste and class status from dancing. Patriarchal society has been known to forcibly stigmatize any person who dances for a living. Automatic assumptions of sexual promiscuity and availability have scared many women away from taking on this form of art practice. Fear of assumed demasculinization by society has kept men away from dancing. Last, but not least, lack of economic support for this form of art has often led to delegitimization of the art as a viable career option. Many laws were forced upon women dancers to restrict their lives, and society constantly regurgitates references to the "fallen" dancing woman, often referred to in different derogatory manners in past writings. There probably are many more assertions of different kinds that stop men and women from taking up this practice as a chosen career. Heteronormative understandings and expectations have made any non-conformity vulnerable and, therefore, restricted by self-policing by dancers who do not want to conform to strictures imposed by heteronormativity.

On the other hand, generation after generation of young minds and bodies have invested in learning these forms and have grown to love them and perform with clone-like precision. They have learned the grammar and aesthetics of these specialized artistic practices without knowing the history of the original practice or practitioners. Because the practice was shaped with the assumption that dancers are bodies without minds, these new members of the dance community were never given any extra information. These bodies were equipped with skills, somewhat programmed to become mechanical dancing dolls. We, as dancers, have found ourselves within those structures of control which have become our cage, our limitations to creativity. We imagine our failure and success only within the parameters taught to us. Caught within the structures of a particular named and framed skill defined as a *style* of dance, we fear venturing out. The structures themselves are asserted often as *parampara*, which in a patriarchal/patrilocal/patripotestal system, automatically decode themselves as non-negotiable structures and norms attached to a specific value system by which we are now bound. As V. Geetha says, "This power is not merely coercive. Rather it seeks our consent, beguiles us with its social and cultural myths and rituals and implicates us in its workings" (Geetha 2).

I reflect on the intersectional space many like us occupy. As an example, I state my subjective position to expose my vulnerabilities of not knowing or being a part of a different history than a one concerning any of the classical dances. As a student who joined a modern non-hereditary dance institution in an urban center, I grew up loving dance and performing on stage from the age of thirteen. I learned four classical styles as per the requirements of my institution, alongside choreography and movement generation in creative style, and eventually became a member of the performing troupe of Uday Shankar India Culture Centre in my teens. I danced with love, with excitement, and with respect for the styles, the histories—or whatever I knew of

them—and I toured constantly within and outside India until I was over forty years old. I was not a hereditary performer, I did not know the history in detail, and as far as I understood, I was not harming anyone by my obsessive prioritization of dance in my daily routine. I was not coerced at any point nor did I stop. I now understand that I am labeled as a privileged person. But I am my own dance history, framed by the atheist family background and urban upper-caste life. My background is unlike many dancers who embody histories and, therefore, are marginalized, hierarchized, coerced, or shaped by them.

I dream of undoing such marginalizations and have worked all my life through academic interventions—creating a space for equal participation, agency, and voice. One cannot undo the past, but one can certainly choose to create a path of unlearning, relearning, generating awareness, and dancing in the present. Dismantling hierarchies and patriarchy can begin by being aware of the exploitative and forceful oppressions of the past as well as the present.

Classicization has been very successful in the ways it has obliterated multiple pasts and set as default, some dance histories. This process remains one of the basic demarcations in dance history, with a deeply etched "before" and "after," that is marked by the post-independence standardization of formats of learning, presentation, patronage, and audience expectation—while completely destabilizing regional performance ecologies. But that is also a story from the past now. In the name of classicization, nationalized dance styles occupy major space, and some classical dances, such as Bharatanatyam and Odissi, are the most popular of them. With systematic patronage, many classical dancers have created their own lineage of teaching and claim a three-generation long hereditary practice post-independence. This new lineage further de-stabilizes the already unstable histories of the regional forms that were appropriated to create the new forms that have since been used as the jewels on the nation's cultural crown. As I cannot claim any space of legitimacy through that history, I am saved again from the burden of expectation that could bind me to some weighty *Parampara*.[1] Therefore, in a manner of speaking, the nameless undefined form that emerged out of the Indian dancer Uday Shankar's then-contemporary experiment, has saved me from aspirations of belonging to the larger cultural history of the nation-state. And my gendered awareness of the need to unlearn and relearn remains my only companion.

**Dancing as a Contribution to National Culture**

One needs to stop and reflect before becoming judgmental about the practitioners of the post-classicization generation and its complete lack of understanding of the complexities of appropriation that continue to plague dance history. For these practitioners, the owners of the intellectual property and embodied practice of the classical dances are the Indian nation-state and the Gurus. Again, one must stop and understand the role of patriarchal, caste-controlled dissemination of history—that the Gurus of today have learned from the Gurus of yesteryears. One way to atone for this dissemination process is to think of an individual 'Guru' as a retailer or seller – and the learners as consumers, with both mistaking their roles as nation-builders.

Dance and music practitioners have unending stories about how their rights to perform independently were restricted by their Gurus. Assertion of ownership still takes various forms in dance on the issues concerning rights to dance. The unwritten laws of being the dedicated Shishya weigh heavy on young dancers. Many leave dancing disillusioned after they are exposed to the cyclic exploitations of the dance world, where the moving space is never enough to accommodate all and there is no retirement age for Gurus growing older as they continue to perform and control the dancers' micro-ecologies. The emerging/new dancing bodies do not replace older ones, they hover on the fringes hoping to be allowed into the restricted space, all the while terrified of disappearing without a trace. They exist forever in the threat of rushing and failing in the race of making the most of the restricted time they have to perform, or else….What might be the understanding of the teachers' responsibilities? Here, it is important to understand how the Guru and Shishya often start competing to inhabit the same proscenium and to hold onto the same patrons and audience. In a comparison with learning dance, I refer to the time when I attended a German language class in a failed attempt to learn speaking in that language. I finished and passed the preliminary course and was given a certificate, but I understood my inability to speak fluently. If I had the patience or perseverance, I would have continued to learn and become proficient. I would have earned my right to speak and communicate in German and no one would have questioned my rights as long as I had the ability. By learning a language, I was not signing up for knowing or even respecting the history, and I was free to use the language for better communication.

1 Dancers consistently assert aesthetic quality and inner gains, while claiming caste-like rights through their birth into a family of practitioners.



What if dance grammar was taken as skill that enables learners to learn and perform grammar, and not history? In that case, there are two ways to see dance: (1) as a form/style/historical tool for identity creation and assertion, or (2) as a language for the body to learn and use. While one way ideally should not be totally delinked from the other, the freedom that we all crave today is to be free to choose either of the two ways or both. And thus, dance could become a way of asserting identity, of belonging to a particular tradition, and even representing a history. Or, dance could be a tool or skill that the dancer uses for creating and choreographing. In an ideal world, the choice would be a prerogative of the young and emerging dance artists. In the twenty-first century, that choice must remain with these individuals as a part of their right to dance.

**Stereotypes and Control**

In dance, decontextualized learning of grammar as a skill set is not encouraged because that would render the traditional practitioners powerless and without long-term economic support. The overemphasis on stereotypes of history, caste-based control, gendering, and performance ecology are all tools of control for retaining the safe cocoon of economic autonomy. The problem of referring to history to validate and perpetuate stereotypes of ideal dedication, discipline, form, norms and values in dance practice and teaching relates to automatic and assured validation of past practices. And, of course, that argument has good and bad sides. It offers shelter and security of the Guru's name and fame to the Shishya automatically, but also takes away or, at least, restricts, one's agency as a dancer. Stereotypes do not allow changes nor debates and are not accommodative of acceptance of differences.

Dance history in India is all about creating stereotypes through propagating Natyashastra, enforcing a certain aesthetic, by ensuring propagation of myths and mytho-histories as real history of the origins of dances. This is done by creating demi-gods of Gurus, and even through telling stories of aesthetically empowered patrons who enabled the dance-art to be etched as sculptures on temple walls of the past. We dancers have never thought about the way in which such sweeping assumptions also take dance and dancing bodies as stereotypical presences. One never goes beyond appreciating dancing bodies on temple walls to ask who these dancers may have been or whose dance postures may have been the inspirations for the sculptures. On the other hand: Do we ever think whether the sculptors depended on the actual bodies of dancers to curve the female figures on the temple walls? Or, did these exquisite postures even need a woman to dance as an inspiration for the sculptor? Maybe these static representations were just perpetuated by the stereotypical representations. It may be useful to think of how dispensable the dancer's body becomes once it is stereotyped into an aesthetic formula.

I would then want to also state that the stereotyping we do of women's bodies has stopped us from ever questioning why and how the regulations from the Devadasi Act to the present day bars dancers. Affixing dancers' welfare by never considering asking the community of practitioners what they actually would like to change in their dance practice or representation or ecology is problematic.

While on the topic of stereotypes, one must historiographically contextualize the process by which the stereotypical structure of classicization was thought as possible for forms across India. As the classical dances are "neo-classical" (Vatsyayan, 20 - 32), at best, with reformed grammar, new names, and ruthless changes in the practice and the rights of the performers from whose rights to dance were being diminished. Classicization also involved newly imposed and prescribed aesthetics. This project involved creation of eight classical dances, one after the other, and followed a template that has become chiseled through years of experience.

In retrospect, the template of classicization appears to have been put in operation under the free will of a team of cultural engineers, seemingly adhering to the principles of the prescribed classicization process in each specific case. For example, the classical dance form Manipuri's roots maybe found in Sankirtan/Raasleela of Baishnavite ritual practice and religious performances of the Meitei community. This amalgam now carries the name of the state Manipur and is known as Manipuri—referring to an authentic capsule of the past—rendering invisible the practices of several Adivasi communities of the same space. Contestations plague the practice and the theory of the dance because of the new aesthetics imposed on its movement repertoire and the dresses and ornaments that selectively highlight or obfuscate its past connections. In Manipuri, like in other classical forms, imposition Guru-Shishya Parampara is held in place through institutionalized and controlled process of learning. The hierarchy is complex with the Meitei being the numerical and economic majority and the most visible. Socio-political dispossession as well as cultural appropriation/invisibility of the Adivasi cultural practices of the geopolitical space, named Manipur, replicate hierarchical power structures of classical dances

of other states. The Gurus in dance and music exert different forms of control to regulate cultural ownership of knowledge transmission, managing to control modern university systems within dance and music academies and also in state patronage and scholarships in the arts. Guru-Shishya Parampara has resisted death even after being removed and replaced by formal systems of education at least from obvious power-wielding positions in urban spaces, it still tries to keep its controlling grip on the performing arts, through production, perpetuation, and affirmations of various stereotypes. This form is stripped of almost all of its utility in the current times of claims of a selfless perpetuation of knowledge, in which the master teacher—or Guru—is responsible for the safe delivery of knowledge and nurturing of the new dancers in a continuous shaping of the inner and the outer world of the learner or Shishya. Now, this form of teaching can only claim mythical affirmations through historical references and establish them by using words that refer to the power of the Guru as the assessor, appreciator, and rewarder, who becomes the oppressive agent of control, reaffirming his control through stereotypical references of "appropriate dedication," discipline, endless practice, ideal aesthetics, and immeasurable rewards awaiting the Shishya if s/he complies with the "requirements" associated with the ideal form of submission to the Guru.

By privileging history as a mode of control, dance discourse in India largely continues to be the privilege of higher castes and classes. The classical dances continue creating the ideal reference to a patriarchally transmitted aesthetic that uses the notion of the feminine body as the carrier and transmitter—but NOT interlocuter—of cultural expressions. The stereotyping of the national culture is, of course, representational of Brahminic privileges, Sanskritic texts and contexts and concocted aesthetics projected through dresses, ornaments, and accompaniments depend on privileges available to persons of highest economic positions. But in recent times the nationalist fervour of post-independence years has been replaced by oppression through the "manufacturing of consent by controlling of patronage—especially for performing arts. In the process, we witness delegitimizing of all solidarities and closing off democratic spaces, furthering far-right agendas rather than creating a healthy dance space that accommodates one and all. Simultaneously, the ongoing marginalization of living traditions carries on due to cultural appropriation enabling an ongoing accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 75 - 76). Meanwhile, the academic community continues to remain the avatars of the classic colonial ethnographers, often creating discourses based on trending issues without much ground-level engagement as a survival strategy in a tenure-centered world.

At this moment, as dancer-scholars, we are caught between multiple identity assertions of inherited hierarchies and socialization as well as newer political ones that inevitably place us in binaries. The understandings of the binaries are complicated by the immense variation in micro-ecologies of dance, individual embodied experiences, and different levels of personal ambitions. In my opinion, critical dance studies in India cannot stereotype or hierarchize vulnerabilities and must let all vulnerabilities breathe. We need to make space for multiple discourses on religion, caste, and gender-based vulnerabilities so that we are not suppressing any form of marginalization based on caste hierarchies, Adivasi identities, religion, language, gendering, violence against women, electoral politics, citizenship issues, and economy. We also need to understand that all stereotyping discourses from above, below, in the stratified hierarchical ladders, or from left, right, and center need to have their spaces, but we (and here I dare to include myself) as dancers can consciously work on acknowledging and spreading the stories of all of those dancers, in India and all over the world, whose rights to dance were violated by experiencing their choice to dance (or not) being taken from them. One of the ways to continue the process of dismantling power sources is to be together with those who have been trying to relearn, unlearn, and break stereotypes, and question history through historiography and critical ethnography. In the academic space, the right to continue as a critical dance studies scholar can only be registered through the reclaiming of dance studies as a space for multi-disciplinary and practice-theory discourse on the yesterday, today, and tomorrow of dance. The ultimate claiming of the right to dance can be done only by continuing to dance.

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