The "Wicked Problem" of Locating and Safeguarding Dance in Bangladesh

Lubna Marium

Abstract

The history of dances in Bangladesh reads almost like a history of the belief systems crisscrossing this deltaic plain, entrenched as these dances are within indigenous myths and philosophies. However, in the recent past, regional and global dance traditions have superseded indigenous dances by nearly erasing them from within mainstream, specifically urban, practice. Even a cursory interrogation confirms that the historical hierarchization of dance in Southasia[1] has spurred this divide between the evaluation of present-day manifestations of dance within local cultural expressions and, on the other hand, the dominant genres of classical and contemporary artistic representations of dance. This highbrow, selective notion of dance from beyond the borders has led to a gradual decline and devaluation of traditional dance, especially within the non-subaltern social classes, resulting in its "invisibility" in those circles. Therein lies the "wickedness" of the problem. Borrowing from theoretical notions in the social sciences, a "wicked problem" is a puzzle. Furthermore, adverse socio-political circumstances of the indigenous heritage-holding communities contribute to the endangerment and diminishment of their dances. At this juncture, a combination of research and practical action is the need of the hour (Nielsen). Action research, or ethnographic activism, can be a form of ethical praxis that can overcome historical bias and safeguard these dances.

Introduction

"…difference, be it racialized, gendered, sexed, nationalized, [hierarchized], et cetera, is constructed."
(Frazier-Rath)

"The communities, groups, and individuals who create intangible cultural heritage should benefit from the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from such heritage, and particularly from its use, research, documentation, promotion, or adaptation by members of the communities or others." (UNESCO)

In Bangladesh, the monsoons come after the scorching heat of *grishsho*, or summer, and with it come welcome thunder, lightning, and pouring rainfall. But in rural areas, with the downpour, comes the menace of snakes that spread a pall of fear. Thus, all over the countryside, amongst the marginalized communities, be they Muslim or Hindu, householders organize performative rituals to appease the mighty Goddess of Serpents, *Manasa Devi*. As the legend goes, she is the mind-born daughter of *Shiva*, whom the ill-fated Brahmin merchant *Chand Saudagar* refused to worship. *Manasa* retaliated by taking the life of *Chand*'s youngest son *Lokkhindor*. Thus began the epic battle between *Lokkhindor*'s newlywed bride, *Behula*, and the mighty Serpent Goddess. *Behula* resolutely carried her dead husband's corpse on a raft over the river to the great God Shiva, overcoming obstacles at seven ghats, or wharves, to finally compel *Manasa* to give back *Lokkhindor*'s life.

Amazingly, this tale is performed every year on the rivers of the Tangail District of Bangladesh on *Srabon Shongkranti*, the last day of the month of *Srabon*,[2] as a riverine performance on colorfully-bedecked boats. Nothing could be more Bangladeshi than this exciting day-long performance called *Shaone Dala* (the offering of *Shaon/Srabon*), with actors dressed as *Behula*, *Lokkhindor*, and other characters of this tale of *Manasa*. Competing groups navigate these colorfully-decorated boats, making stops at seven *ghats*, emulating Behula's journey. Eventually, each boat stops at a designated household where the *jiyoni*, a last act representing a resurrecting from dead, is performed to bring the hapless *Lokkhindor* back to life. The reality, though, is that there is rare documentation or acknowledgement of practices like these within dance discourses and institutional programs.

The Premise: Marginalization of Indigenous Dances

Going back a few centuries, the history of dances in Bangladesh, such as *Shaone Dala*, reads almost like a history of the belief systems which have crisscrossed this deltaic plain, entrenched as they are within indigenous myths and philosophies. However, in the recent past, regional and global dance traditions have superseded indigenous dances, nearly erasing them from within mainstream, specifically, urban practice. This erasure is readily affirmed by the proliferation of high-profile Bangladeshi dance events showcasing young dancers performing to *Tamil*, *Telegu*, *Hindi*, and *Meitei* songs. Additionally, bodies perform *jatis*, *toras*, *tukras*,[3] and even movement phrases from Western classical jazz, with not a thought to dance movements which have been part of this soil for centuries.

Even a cursory interrogation confirms that the historical hierarchization of dance in Southasia has spurred this divide between the valuation of present-day manifestations of dance within local cultural expressions and, on the other hand, the dominant genres of classical and contemporary artistic representations of dance. It is this highbrow, selective notion of dance from beyond the borders that has led to a gradual decline and devaluation of traditional dance, especially within the non-subaltern classes, resulting in its "invisibility" in those circles. "Invisible" means not existing in any way of being significant or relevant. And therein lies the "wickedness" of the problem. Borrowing from theoretical notions in the social sciences, a "wicked problem" is a puzzle that's difficult or impossible to solve, generally because of its complex nature and its interconnectedness with other impediments. In the case of dance traditions of Bangladesh, the "wicked reality" is that indigenous dance and its "fascinating field of innovation, alternatives, and creativity do not reach our news or our universities. It does not reach our theories either because our theories are sometimes part of an 'epistemology of blindness,' in that they allow us to see certain things but blind us from seeing other things" (Santos 237-258). To further clarify, the contention is that there is a rare acknowledgment of these embodied practices and their practitioners within dance discourse. *Dance Matters*, a comprehensive anthology of dance in India, raises the question: "Can the subaltern dance?" (Chakravorty and Gupta 1). Can the non-subaltern see and acknowledge the dance of the subalterns?

Resolution: Ethnographic Activism as A Means of Conservation

On another note, adverse socio-political circumstances of the communities at the "weak end of power," (Grant 629-641) who are the bearers of these cultural expressions, contribute to their endangerment and decrease. This adversity ultimately leads to circumstances where the transmission of these practices is at risk of becoming significantly destabilized. At this juncture, a combination of research and practical action, where "the researcher joins with and acts with practitioners to help improve practice and theory building," is the need of the hour (Nielsen 419-428). Action research, or ethnographic activism, can be a form of ethical praxis that can overcome historical bias through "a non-extractive approach of investigation, where subjects are not merely objects of research to be extracted, captured, measured, and quantified. Instead, ethnographers can recover alternative knowledge and (re)build new ones that developmentally change the action researcher and the external world" (da Silva, Sauerbronn and Thiollent 1-17).

Dance in Bangladesh: How the Visible Became Invisible

Bangladesh, the eastern part of Bengal, has primarily been rural in character with urbanization setting in only in the middle of the last century of the last millennium.[4] The general populace, until today, are largely non-literate and agrarian. As an aside, though, literacy in no way defines wisdom. That having been said, the agroecology of the land has produced a fount of predominantly indigenous, embodied traditions practiced by communities of varied religious, ethnic, and regional denominations for over several centuries to date. These include: (1) performances during "rites of passages" (i.e., *dhamail*[5] during weddings, *lathikhela* during circumcision, etc.); (2) rituals and celebrations of seasonal/agrarian events (i.e., *baha*[6] of Santhals celebrating spring, , *jari nāch*[7] during *Muharram*[8]); (3) musical debates (i.e., *kabi gaan*[9]); (4) ritual performances (i.e., *shaone dala* to appease *Manasa*); (5) martial arts (i.e., *lathikhela*); and (6) performances for entertainment (i.e., *jatra, nosimon* and others).

Unfortunately, rarely do these dances get any

---

1 Usage of "Southasia" as one word is inspired by HIMAL *Southasian*, a magazine which urges us to rethink Southasia as a region beyond political dictum and geography, and to look at the historical and cultural bonds between its people. Using "Southasia" as one word is a result of "Southasian" activism which seeks to restore some of the historical unity of our common living space without wishing any violence on the existing nation states. This usage, spearheaded by Nepali journalist, Kanak Mani Dixit, believes that the aloof geographical term South Asia needs to be injected with some feeling.
2 This is the second month of the monsoons in the Bengali calendar.

3 These are movement phrases from Indian Classical dances.
4 In 1901, only 2.43%, or about 0.7 million, of the total population of the Bangladesh areas of British India lived in urban areas. During the first half of the twentieth century, urban population growth was almost static. In 1941, less than 4% of the population lived in urban areas, and the total urban population was 1.54 million. Urbanization boomed after 1947, when the Indian subcontinent became free of the British rule, creating the two independent states, India and Pakistan, with East Bengal (present day Bangladesh) as the eastern part of Pakistan. Between 1951-1961, there was a significant growth in urban population (45.11%) compared with the 1941-1951 period (18.38%). Total urban population rose from 1.8 million in 1951 to about 2.6 million in 1961. The important factor behind this rapid growth was the large-scale migration of Muslims from India after 1947, who mostly settled in urban areas. In 2020, approximately 61.82% of the population in Bangladesh were residing in rural areas. (Urbanization, Banglapedia).
5 https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Dhamail_Gan
6 "Baha" means flower in Santali. It is the second biggest festival of the Santals after SORHAI, the harvest festival.
7 https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Jari_Nach
8 The "sacred month" is the first month of the Islamic or Hegira calendar.
9 Kabigan a genre of competitive folk songs performed by two groups of poetic singers.
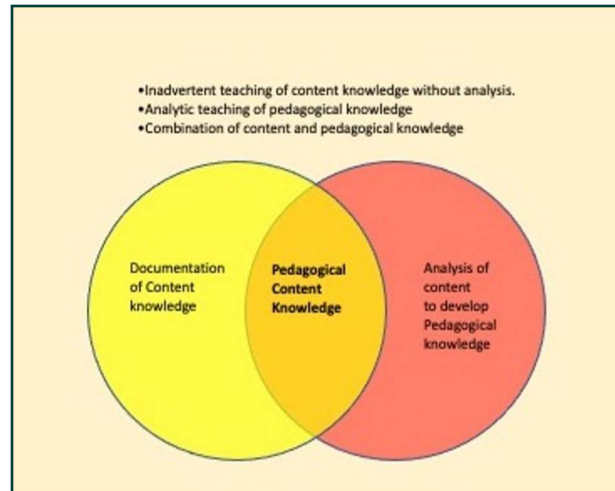
Fig. 8: Pedagogical Content Knowledge.

Fig. 1: Ritual performance of "Shaone Dala" based on the myth of Manasa, the Goddess of Serpents; August 16, 2017: Tangail, Bangladesh. Here the bride Behula is singing by the corpse of her hapless husband, Lokkhindar, while appealing to Lord Shiva to bring him back to life.
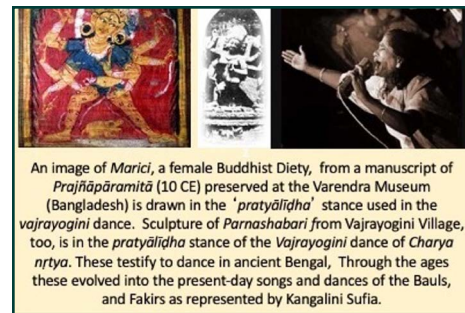

An image of *Marici*, a female Buddhist Diety, from a manuscript of *Prajñāpāramitā* (10 CE) preserved at the Varendra Museum (Bangladesh) is drawn in the '*pratyālīḍha*' stance used in the *vajrayogini* dance. Sculpture of *Parnashabari* from Vajrayogini Village, too, is in the *pratyālīḍha* stance of the *Vajrayogini* dance of *Charya nṛtya*. These testify to dance in ancient Bengal, Through the ages these evolved into the present-day songs and dances of the Bauls, and Fakirs as represented by Kangalini Sufia.
Fig. 2: Charya Dance in Bangladesh.

Fig. 4: The jester, or Shong (Vidusaka).

Fig. 3: Shaone Dala, a riverine, performative ritual on the Elenga river in Tangail Bangladesh, 2015.

Fig. 9: A Display of Lathikhela By Girls of Bir Shreshtho Noor Mohammad Lathiyal Dol from Narail District of Bangladesh.
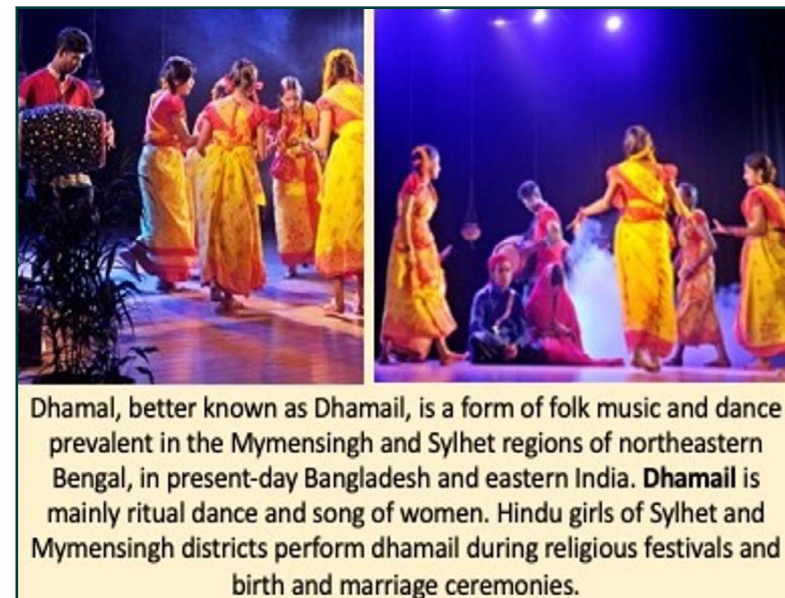

Dhamal, better known as Dhamail, is a form of folk music and dance prevalent in the Mymensingh and Sylhet regions of northeastern Bengal, in present-day Bangladesh and eastern India. **Dhamail** is mainly ritual dance and song of women. Hindu girls of Sylhet and Mymensingh districts perform dhamail during religious festivals and birth and marriage ceremonies.
Fig. 6: Dhamail.

exposition apart from that within the practicing communities. Sadly, this "othering" of these indigenous performances has been debilitating myth-making cultural baggage that Bengal, like the rest of Southasia, has carried for centuries. This claim is corroborated by Indian poet, scholar, and folklorist, A.K. Ramanujan, in his statement, "Indian traditions are organised as a pan-Indian Sanskritic Great Tradition (in the singular) and many local Little Traditions (in the plural)" (Ramanujan 6-33). This dichotomy has, however, long been perceived as contested and constructed, just as "the writing of Indian history, even the colonial and postcolonial histories written by westerners, has often reflected the efforts of a restricted section of Indian society to define their own situation as normative and unmarked and those of others: tribal peoples, Dalits, Muslims, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, as variants" (Morrison 3).

The Genealogy of Hierarchy within Performative Traditions

Genealogy is the historical enquiry of an issue which begins with a question posed in the present. The issue at hand is the persistent "epistemological blindness" toward indigenous dance and dancers. Acknowledging hierarchy as the primary cause, it is then necessary to excavate its underlying features by "diagnosis, conceptualization, and problematization" (Garland 365-384) of the issue.

Diagnosis of the Fissure
Historically, the onus of this unwitting "hierarchization" falls heavily on the shoulders of venerable sages like Bharatmuni, the promulgator of *Nāṭyaśāstra*—the definitive first-century treatise and handbook on Indian dramaturgy—and Dhanañjaya, author of *Daśarūpaka*—the tenth-century landmark exposition on theatre.

Bharata presents dharmī as the *modus operandi* of

theatre, without which various concepts and aesthetic principles cannot be put into practice. He then goes on to categorize the two modes of practice. *Lokadharmī*—or realistic mode—portrays popular narratives wherein the performance depends on natural behaviour, is simple, and has no artificiality. *Nāṭyadharmī*, on the other hand, is a stylized mode of creative expression. Though Bharata's derision of the folk is evident right at the outset,[10] it is centuries of public usage that have given the term *lokadharmī* a negative connotation, representing the "pedestrian." Kālidāṣa uses the term *anyathā karaṇa*[11] for *nāṭyadharmī*, or craftsmanship, which corrects whatever is not right in the picture. *Anyathā karaṇa* is the way to transcend the mundane and the ordinariness of the loka to scale the heights of excellence. On another note, Bharata co-relates the *nāṭyadharmī* with *aṅgas*[12] and *abhinayas*.[13] According to the tenth-century philosopher, mystic and aesthetician from Kashmir, Abhinavagupta, the very nature of the phenomena when represented through these *aṅgas* and *abhinayas* on the stage becomes the *nāṭyadharmī*.[14] All of these usages affirm the labelling of *loka* performances as "mundane" and "ordinary" or relegate the abundance of kinesthetic movements within indigenous performances to the boondocks. Furthermore, *Lokadharmī* performances are seen as "crossing the bounds of aucitya, or appropriateness." *Nāṭyadharmī*, or idealistic, on the other hand, are those representations which the "arts of dance and drama select, fix and refine out of real situations for an idealised or stylised presentation on the stage" (Arundale 1-7), (Zarrelli 85-86).

Two Conceptualizations of Representation Creating the Divides of Exclusion

Bharata very precisely points out the distinction as well as the interrelationship between these two practices: "While lokadharmī is the very svabhāva, or nature of things to be presented in a dramatic performance,

---

10 *grāmyadharmapravṛtte tu kāmalobhavaśaṃ gate*/All engaged in rural religion became subject to lust and greed. | (NŚ 1.9)
11 *yadyatsādhu na citre syātkriyate tattadanyathā* |
tathāpi tasyā lāvanyaṃ rekhayā kiṃcidanvitam || Abhijñānaśākuntalam (4.14)||
Whatever is not right in the picture is done differently.
yet her beauty is only partially represented by the delineation. (AŚ 4.14)
12 Movement of the limbs
13 Modes of histrionics
14 *yaḥ ayam svabhāvaḥ lokasya sukha-duḥkha-kriyātmakaḥ.*
saḥ aṅgābhinaya-saṃyuktaḥ nāṭyadharmī tu sā smṛtā.. . .
yaḥ ca itihāsa-vedārthaḥ brahmaṇā samudāhṛtaḥ.
divya-mānuṣa-ratyartham nāṭyadharmī tu sā smṛtā.. nāṭyadharmī-pravṛttam hi sadā nāṭyam prayojayet.
na hi aṅgābhinayāt kiñcid ṛte rāgaḥ pravartate (NŚ 13.0-83)
The nature of the world is composed of pleasure, pain, and action.
It becomes theatrical with acting, and thus remembered. . . . .
Meaning of the Vedas, which is history, is explained by the Brahman. Through stylization theatre is propagated. (NŚ 13-83)

nāṭyadharmī makes it *vibhāva*[15]—endows it with artistic beauty.[16] "This brings us to the fundamentals of Indian aesthetics. The very phenomena of our own mundane world are taken up in art, but they are transformed" (Tripathi 1-11). The operative phrase here is "artistic beauty" with the implied allusion that there is a lack of it within indigenous dances. In fact, there is a categorical dismissal of dance within indigenous performances, even by later dramaturgists who locate dance only within *Uparupaka*—or minor *Lokadharmī* performances—and *Bhana*—a *rupaka*[17] with strands of the *loka*. Unfortunately, through the ages the conception of the term *loka* was devalued further, so that by the tenth century, in Dhananjaya's compendium, the modes of practices were designated as *deśī* and *mārga*. The nomenclature of *deśī*, meaning "provincial," now gave a slightly more pejorative turn to the "realism" of *loka*[18]. *Mārga*, literally meaning "the path," endowed idealized "art" as appreciated by the connoisseur possessing the knowledge of sixty-four skills with the power to "elevate the spirit, not to degrade it" (Arundale 1-7). Firstly, this is dismissive of the non-literate spectators of indigenous performances. Secondly, the world of good, which is related to wellness and good-health and delivered by indigenous ritual performances featuring actors who are often also "faith healers," does not even come into discussion.

Problematization of the Aesthetics of Marginalization

Aside from the above artistic and conceptual differences related to the *modus operandi* of the two genres of *dharmī*, Bharata posits two stages of the creative process within the practice of the *nāṭyadharmī* on the basis of which the "spontaneous" practices of the *lokadharmī* are excluded. The first is *vyutpatti*[19] the act of acquainting and equipping oneself with empirical knowledge. This is followed by the more reflexive stage of moulding the crude material derived by the processes of *prakhya* and *upākhya*,[20] the capacity of the artist to perceive and express into a beautiful and harmonious world absolved from the shortcomings of

God's creation (Tripathi). This rationale of exclusion is problematic, as all performative presentations have a certain measure of reflexivity, setting them apart from the empirical experience with merely the modes of expression remaining different. Once again, taking into consideration the performative ritual of *Shaone Dala* mentioned above, rarely do we see a more creative transformation of the empirical world than this riverine performance.

These were the discursive practices which defined the epistemic order of an era during which the discourses of hierarchization were written. Based on these discourses, the seemingly simplistic, spontaneous, fluid, and pastoral indigenous practices were relegated to the margins.

Socio-Political Dimensions of Exclusion and Marginality

The variance in the spatiotemporal presentations of the two modes of practice, yet again, sets them apart. Spatially indigenous performances—situated within community commons, under the sky in open fields, on boats, in places of worship, or even the humble courtyards of householders—are distanced both physically and socially from the connoisseurs and patrons of "art." Furthermore, these presentations are organized either on the basis of a seasonal calendar of agrarian events, or during 'rites of passage' where there is engaged participation by the members of the community who value, own, and undertake responsibility for its enactment. Most of the time, the spectators and performers share a permeable relationship, co-creating the space through informal interactions. This differs from a connoisseur's role as passive "observer" of the creative processes of *nāṭyadharmī* performances. Gender and identity issues, too, are dealt with flexibly within the *lokadharmī*. These issues are enhanced by performative "crossdressing," with men playing female roles.

The temporality of a performance is fluid, with

characters like the *shong* (*vidūṣaka*)—or the ubiquitous "jester"—often interpolating present-day socio-political issues within the narrative—be it mythic or epic—with aplomb. This subjective positionality, in which "presence" and "non-presence" have a natural coevalness, contributes to the lived experience of folk performances. However, these very features, which allow the actors and spectators of *lokadharmī* presentations to treat with disdain—even if temporarily—the hegemonic oppression within their real world, designate the performances as "illogical," "vulgar," "irrational," or "loud," pushing them further into the peripheries of discourse.

The Colonial, Regional and Global Split

The urban-rural divide of the colonial era pushed the two modes of dance further apart. While urban centers in Bengal embraced a "Western" conception of culture, notwithstanding seething anti-colonial and nationalist dynamics, it was only within rural and indigenous communities that performative traditions continued to be quietly upheld and practiced. This rupture between tradition and modernity caused a fissure between what anthropologist James C. Scott, in his book *Seeing like a State*, calls "high modernism." Or, it attempts to design society in accordance with scientific laws on one hand, and on the other, "mētis," or practical, locally rooted knowledge (Scott 309). This rupture continues to be a reality in Bangladesh.

Aggression of dance practices from beyond the regional and global borders further exacerbated the distancing between the indigenous arts and the urban practices of classical and contemporary dance, driving the final nail on the exercise of turning the "visible" into the "invisible."

Understanding and Resolving the Continuity of the Divide

Faith and belief lie at the heart of indigenous performances. Invocations to almighty *Allah* and to the Gods and Goddesses of Hindu scripture, pledges to deities to earn their blessings, faith-healing by chanting of *mantras*,[21] and efficacious ritual performances are all part and parcel of the performative traditions of the indigenous recitals. "In the field of knowledge, abyssal thinking consists in granting the monopoly of the universal distinction between the true and the false to science, to the detriment of two alternative knowledges: philosophy and theology. This monopoly

is at the heart of the modern epistemological dispute between scientific and non-scientific forms of truth" (Santos, The Resilience of Abyssal Exclusions in Our Societies: Toward a Post-Abyssal Law). How, then, does one reconcile the two forms of truth?

"Rational" mainstream discourse has, by and large, relegated indigenous dance to the margins, except for acknowledging its value in maintaining cultural diversity and perpetrating inter-faith dialogue. However, there has been little effort to build an epistemology which acknowledges the beliefs, opinions, magic, idolatry, intuitive or subjective understandings which are an important component of indigenous performances. The seeming incommensurability of the task adds to the "wickedness" of the problem.

A resolution of this conflict is the constitution of a "post-abyssal ecology of knowledges" as visualized by social theorist Boaventura de Sousa Santos based upon the idea of the "epistemological diversity of the world" which entails the acknowledgement of the existence of a plurality of knowledges beyond scientific knowledge (Santos 45-89). This implies abandoning any general epistemology, while acknowledging that the epistemologies of the South, with their dialogical dynamics, derived from an inclusive atmosphere of the "infinite experiences of the world." This idea, therefore, encompasses a "plurality of heterogeneous knowledges." As outlined by Santos, given the crisis of modern values and the ongoing global ecological disaster, instead of privileging the West and its distinctive notion of progress and civilization, there is an urgent need for a dialogue between the various systems of knowledge. "This is a dialog between different cultures that are set on an equal standing, an intercultural dialogue in which knowledge is understood as interknowledge. A dialogue conceived in such wide terms cannot be termed anything other than an 'ecology of knowledge,' one that replaces the monoculture of the dominant epistemology of the North and that allows and promotes a real intercultural dialogue" (Barreto 395 - 422).

Identifying Indigenous Dances

Before embarking on a dialogue, there is a need to identify, document and inventory performances in Bangladesh to understand the processes of cultural formation and its modes of transmission to help situate the cultural practices.

---

15 Vibhāva refers to "determinant." According to the Nāṭyaśāstra (NŚ), chapter 6.31 and chapter 7, the "the sentiment (*rasa*) is produced (*rasa-niṣpattiḥ*) from a combination (*saṃyoga*) of Determinants (*vibhāva*), Consequents (*anubhāva*), and Complementary Psychological States (*vyabhicāri-bhāva*)."
16 lōkadharmī bhavēttvanyā nāṭyadharmīmēva hi /in fact, lokadharmī is the ordinary, and nāṭyadharmī, the other: svabhāvō lōkadharmī tu vibhāvō nāṭyamēva hi /in fact, lokadharmī is literality, while nāṭya is suggestion alone (NŚ 21.203).
17 Sanskrit plays are usually termed as *Rupaka*. There are ten different *Rupaka* that enrich the plays with their own peculiarities.
18 *Kāvyādarśa* by Dandin, the earliest surviving systematic treatment of poetics in Sanskrit, enumerates the mastery of over sixty-four arts, called *chatushashti kalas, as a prerequisite for a connoisseur* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kalā).
19 lokasya sthāvarajaṅgamātmakalokavṛttasya /śāstrāṇāṃ chandovyākaraṇābhidhānakośakalācaturvargagajaturagakhaḍgād ilakṣaṇagranthānāṃ /kāvyānāṃ ca mahākavisaṃbandhīnām /ādigrahaṇāditihāsānāṃ ca vimarśanādvyutpattiḥ
Of the world's movable and immovable expanse /Scriptures, verse, grammar, expression, dictionary, art, four classes, elephant, horse, sword, characteristic texts, and poems relating to the great poet and the derivation of the histories conjointly, and not singly, constitute the source, and not the sources, of poetry. (Kāvyaprakāśa by Mammaṭa)
20 *Apurvamyadvastu prathayati vinā kārana-kalām/jagad grāvaprakhyam nijarasabharāt sārayati ca*/ / The unprecedented is created without cause or reason by observing the world and then reconstructing it one's own emotions. (Dhvanyalokocana by Abhinavagupta)

---

21 Sacred text or speech, a prayer or song of praise.

"Circuit of Culture" and its Transmission

Meanings are produced and shared through a representational system accessible to all within the same "circuit of culture." All cultural meaning is produced through a series of stages, or "moments" which include its representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation (Hall 1). It is through discursive discourses that meaning and knowledge of a particular practice are constructed to include "a cluster (or formation) of ideas, images, and practices, which provide ways of talking about forms of knowledge and conduct associated with a particular topic, social activity, or institutional site in society" (Hall 6).

Interestingly, in Bengal, knowledge and its inherent meaning has for centuries been disseminated through performance, both esoteric and candid, within both initiates and the lay, gaining honor as tradition. Transformation and reinterpretation of received material is central to the process of cultural transmission of traditions to ensure 'continuing patterns of cultural beliefs and practices.' Over centuries, transmission of cultural practices has taken place through enculturation and socialization within the rural communities of Bengal, as most cultural practices have been public and performative in nature.

Conceptual Framework for Understanding Indigenous Traditions in Bangladesh

Bengal has neatly documented written and oral histories of the transmission of its cultural practices over a couple of millenniums. From works of literature, such as *Caryācaryāviniścaya*—the medieval Buddhist book of songs—to redactions of the songs of Lalon Fakir—the rustic philosopher, mystic and minstrel from 19th century East Bengal—there is an unbroken history of the transmission of traditional performative literature. Thenceforth, however, the advent of the Colonial period ushering in the "modern" era caused a seminal cleft within the social strata of Bengal and the way in which traditions were organized and understood.

The Performative Space

Within rural Bangladesh, performative spaces are wrested from the normative world to create an extra-daily and liminal platform where they are in an effective and, as social theorist Henri Lefebvre states,

"generative relationship" with performing bodies (Lefebvre 411). Thus, "bodies and spaces, cleverly, co-produce one another through practices, gestures, and events" (McCormack 2). This is especially true for open-air, night-long performances of rural Bangladesh, where there is, often, a blurring of lines dividing the performers and the audience. Spectators sit crowded on floormats in front of make-shift stages, interspersing enactments with comments, impromptu participation, interactions with performers, applause, or slander, thus creating and recreating themselves and the actors. Spectators often walk or row boats for miles to attend these performances.

Spatially, folk performative cultural practices occur in (1) the "commons" or community spaces under open skies with easy public access, patronized by the community itself; (2) in the courtyards of householders commissioning the performances, and (3) in holy shrines such as Muslim *mazaars* or Hindu *mandirs*.[22] The riverine processional performance to depict the journey of *Behula* in the myth of *Manasa* the Serpent Goddess during the ritual performance of *Shaone Dala*, or the "Gift of *Srabon*," is a unique appropriation of the river as a community space.[23]

Occasions of Performances

Most performative practices occur during: (1) rituals, commissioned against *manots*—or pledges—by householders; (2) auspicious occasions on the lunisolar Muslim and Hindu calendars, such as birth and death dates of sages and divinities; and (3) during rites of passages, such as births, weddings, and circumcisions.

Auspicious days are occasions during which the following are arranged and enacted to generate merit: (1) narrative-dependent presentations such as theatrically-represented myths of divinities and sages and performances of the epics and folk-tales; (2) popular musical debates on a range of topics by *boyatis*,[24] or folk singers; (3) processional rites and rituals; and (4) the supra-persona masked performances. A popular practice during rites of passage is the commissioning of skill-based presentations such as acrobatics and martial arts.

The prevalence of these practice, for centuries, is corroborated by British Administrative records from the Colonial period such as one from 1877 which informs us that "Other indoor amusements consist

of games of chance…while the weavers and other Vaishnava indulge in nautches and lilás or theatrical representations of the exploits of Krishna" (Hunter 81).

Dramatis Personae

Performance is mostly an alternate vocation for the performers who are commonly from marginalized professions such as landless peasantry, masonry, and barbering. The extra-empirical space of performance, is an interstitial place which defies social structures by empowering performers and giving them agency.

Women rarely perform; men perform the roles of women. The remarkable absence of social participative practices, except for rare interactions during weddings, are worth noting and seem to reflect the insidious rise of patriarchal views and conservatism within the social strata of Bengal.

Unique Features

Aside from the above mentioned spatial and temporal diversities in cultural practices, some of the unique features of "mētis," or inherited cultural traditions of Bangladesh, are its orality, community base, ritual nature, subaltern character, and inherent plurality of belief.

Orality

Julian Jayne, in his 1976 book, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, posits the thesis that these works are from an era of human pre-consciousness, when people were not yet conscious of their consciousness. As a result, Roger D. Abrahams proposes "a list of three imagistic universals in oral art: (1) overstatement and understatement, (2) concrete and specific language, and (3) translation of idea and emotion into action and symbol" (Lindahl 131), thus explaining the abundant use of kinesthetic movements in these performing arts.

Though redactions are available, practitioners are mostly non-literate and perform from memory. A big advantage is that these open-ended oral scripts allow greater freedom for cross-cultural transmission and intertextual incorporation.

Issues of Rituality, Plurality, and Community Base

The use of the performative body as a vehicle for spiritual realization during rituals is a trend that commenced with the seminal Carya culture of Vajrayana Buddhism in

the 8th-10th Centuries A.D. based on the philosophical concept of *sahaja*.

This later continued through different structures within other belief systems. Verily, underlying these performances is an entire cosmology known to both the initiated and the lay. Remnants of these kinesthetic practices, both in rituals and performances, can still be observed within the culture of the present-day *Bauls* and *Fakirs*—the initiates of a folk belief system of Bengal.

Rituals enacted against pledges, made to Hindu and Muslim divinities, are a common practice amongst the subaltern communities of both Hindu and Muslim populace. The performers are both actors and faith-healers of maladies like snake bites and diseases. Performance spaces are consecrated with a worship to that particular divinity, primarily the Hindu Serpent Goddess *Manasa*, beginning with incantations to *Allah*, *Rasul*, and *Saraswati*, all in one go. We learn from the 1920 book on folk literature by Dineshchandra Sen that, "A manual of these incantations and mantras has lately been published by Mir Khoram Ali from 155-1 Masjidbari Street, Calcutta. This writer says in the Introduction to his Manual that his name stands first in the list of those physicians who cure by charms and incantations" (Sen). This confirms the plurality of beliefs inherent in these practices. Furthermore, patronage of these practices is totally community based, with little or no acknowledgement or recognition by urban centers.

Interestingly, in the pre-Islamic eras the narratives were based on *mangal-kavyas* and *panchalis*, which are genres of Bengali-Hindu religious texts, composed more or less between the thirteenth century and eighteenth century, and consisting, notably, of myths of indigenous deities of rural Bengal in the social scenario of the Middle Ages. After the advent of Islam, this trend of narratives was transposed onto the newly arrived preachers and guides of Islam, which had given rise to many popular saints—or *Pirs*—graced with divine power, and are called *pir panchalis*. "If aspiration to come nearest to the ideal established in *Nātyaśāstra* lent grandeur to the classical performing arts, the need to appropriately and creatively respond to the sacred and non-sacred in varied circumstances lent variety to the folk performing arts" (Singh 18).

Dance Within Indigenous Traditions

It is worth remembering that all cultural forms glossed in Western academics as "dance" are not necessarily consistent with the equivalent traditional concept of *nāch* in Bangladesh. Seeking a political ontology of the

---

22 *"Mazaar"* is an Islamic mausoleum or shrine dedicated to saint or notable religious leader and *"mandir"* is a structure which houses Hindu divinities where devotees pay homage.
23 http://www.thedailystar.net/showbiz/ode-the-serpent-goddess-134116
24 *Boyatis* are folk minstrels who explicate the tenets of beliefs, derived from the Arabic word '*bayan*' or elucidation.

use of various kinesthetic continuum of movements, we come across some of the most radical and subversive epistemologies of dance within the folds of the inherited traditions of Bengal.

Kinesthetic Enactments of Belief

Sahajiya philosophy proclaims the individual's capacity to realize Truth—or *sahaja*—through embodied practices. It is this concept of *sahaja* that has, for centuries, fired the imagination of the people of this amazing deltaic land that is Bangladesh. Not just a confluence of rivers from the east, west, and north, this land also has witnessed the convergence of mystic beliefs from far and wide which have all converged into the ocean of *sahaja*. The *sahaja* culture rejects the inference of hegemonic textual religions and declares a firm belief that the finite body has the potential to realize the Infinite creative principle through corporeal practices, including dance. As this "discourse of protest was constructed within the cultural context of dominations" (Bandyopadhyay 37), it continued under various configurations as a popular practice. The polysemic nature of these practices makes it popular within the general populace, while retaining the double entendre significance for initiates alone.

Movement as Martial Art

The other exception is the martial dance, variously known as *raibeshe*, *lathikhela*, or *binoti*, amongst others. Martial dance is based on elaborate techniques and precision of presentation. Having evolved as an art of serious combat, using the bamboo staff as a weapon of both defence and offense, it is now merely a performative art due to its decline since the colonial era. This is when its practitioners were brought under the purview of the draconian Thuggee and Dacoity Suppression Acts (1836–1848) enforced by the British. Presently, it continues to be one of the most popular forms of entertainment in Bangladesh.

Symbiosis of Movement and Narration

Kinesthetic movements identified as dance are embedded within narrative performances and are rarely autonomous acts of performance. This is consistent with the comprehensive concept of *nāṭya*—or theatre— as described in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the extraordinary first-century CE compendium of dramaturgy. It states: "Theatre (*nāṭya*) actually encompasses all forms of art expressions. There is no knowledge, no craft, no lore, no art, no technique, and no activity that is not found

within it" (Bharata 1.16).[25] Dance, therefore, "cannot be understood in isolation" (Vatsyayan 9), rather it is a symbiotic concoction of music, theatre, and movement (i). These dances are marked by an informal spontaneity and fluidity which welcomes experimentation and assimilation (ii). Though lacking the formality of the *śāstra*—or science—each genre of dance has a basic formation, where rhythm and melody play a major role (iii). Notably, none of the dances within folk theatre of Bangladesh use the elaborate hand gestures of classical Indian dances (iv). Underlying eroticism, use of pelvic thrusts, and swaying of hips, albeit by male dancers impersonating the female, is an integral part of most forms. In fact, there is an ambience of Bakhtin's "carnivalesque" within most indigenous performances, which celebrates "a transitory freedom from hierarchical ranks, privileges, norms, and prohibitions," and a simultaneous renewal of hope (K. Singh 8).

Safeguarding and Strengthening Dance

We may well ask ourselves: In what way does this elaborate exercise of documentation, validation, elaboration, and refinement of ideas provide usable knowledge? A reasonable response would be an acknowledgement of the investigation in collaboration of activism as a step toward empowerment of communities who are the heritage holders of these traditions. We could even go on to state that action research is a step toward social and, potentially political, change. As succinctly stated by ethnographer Dwight Conquergood:

> Whereas analytical interpretation and artistic creativity often are segregated in the academy (liberal arts/fine arts), I try to unpin these thinking/doing, interpreting/making, theory/practice oppositions and help students appreciate the productive dialectical tension between ideas and action. Theory is enlivened and most vigorously tested when it hits the ground in practice. Likewise, artistic practice can be deepened, complicated, and challenged in meaningful ways by engaging critical theory. (Conquergood 5)

Action Research

Most of the time, work with grassroots, indigenous dance and dancers results in contemporary, urban-based performers appropriating information from folk forms and enriching their own repertoire of movements. The same can be remarked about academics augmenting their own theoretical work with information from the field

25 na tajjñānaṃ na tacchilpaṃ na sā vidyā na sā kalā /nāsau yogo na tatkarma nāṭye'smin yanna dṛśyate./ Hence, I have devised the drama in which meet all the departments of knowledge, different arts, and various actions. (NŚ 1.116)

Jarināch (Persian Jari/zari for lamentation and Bengali *nāch* for dance) or (dance of sorrow) is one of the few indigenous music art performances of Bangladesh relating to Muslim heroes, of the Battle of Karbala, Hasan ibn Ali and Husayn ibn Ali, grandsons of Muhammad. This is performed during Moharram festivities.

Fig. 5: Jarinach.

Raja Pratapaditya (1583 – 1609) of Jessore (17th century) is said to have had fifty-two thousand 'dhali' (shielded-warrior) under his patronage who wielded bamboo staffs (lathi) as weapons.
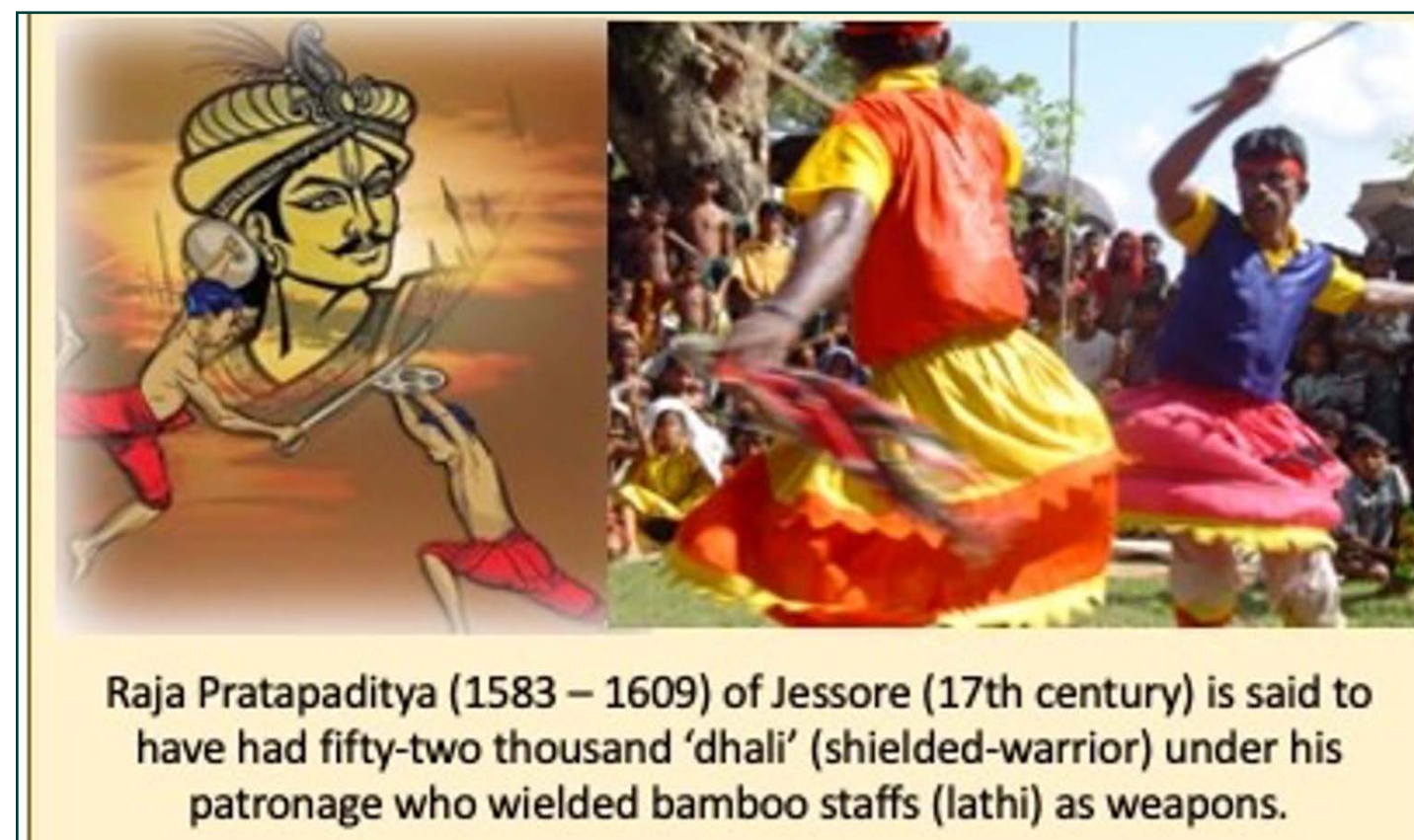
Fig. 7: Lathikhela.

with little impact on the indigenous community itself. The challenge is to come up with a win-win situation for both groups. "Projects that are most successful in empowering community members in some way seem to be those in which professional researchers and community members work together as equals to decide on levels of community participation, the degree and type of action that is appropriate, setting goals, and other matters pertinent to conducting the research" (Wilmsen 135–146).

In Bangladesh, several projects of ethnographic activism have achieved remarkable success. The project to revitalize *lathikhela* was aimed to combine "inadvertent teaching of content knowledge" with "analytic teaching of pedagogical knowledge," while multisectoral practitioners participated in it. The *Cholo Lathi Kheli*[26] project was designed in two phases, by Shadhona, a cultural organization in Dhaka, covering a fifteen-month period. The different phases were:

- Phase One was a brainstorming session. The idea was to bring practitioners from all over Bangladesh for a final brainstorming workshop in Dhaka where extensive documentation of each group's performance was carried out. Also, "Sharing of the Local Knowledge" (SLK) sessions were organized to garner information from the indegenous knowledge experts through the "mapping of collective memory" still reposited in them in the form of myths, riddles, and songs about "*lathikhela*."

- Phase two involved follow-up workshops: Sharing interactions led to follow-up workshops where twenty young practitioners of "*lathikhela*" trained in body fitness, acrobatics, dance, martial arts, and pedagogy of *Lathikhela* and *Dholbadon* (drum playing) with the aim of extending, revitalizing, strengthening, and safeguarding the practice.

This is a continuing initiative. As a corollary, the project actively supported the teaching of the martial art to young girls with the result that in Norail it is now the norm for girls to participate in *lathikhela*.[27]

The riverine, a processional ritual performance of *Shaone Dala*, is also now supported by a few groups of cultural activists. The *Cholo Poddar Gaan Gai* Project, also initiated by Shadhona, included: (1) arranging attendance of the yearly event by research scholars, heritage professionals, and government officials; (2) supporting the community of performers and (3) building an equitable relationship between indigenous performers and urban theatre/performance activists. The two groups co-produced a much-appreciated production, "Podda Behular Akhyan,"[28] which also traveled to India.

There are ongoing research projects to empower ethnic communities by strengthening their cultural practices through the four-goal approach of: (1) documenting Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) and living traditions in Bangladesh, (2) recognizing and celebrating ICH with festivals and commemorations, (3) supporting and encouraging the transmission of knowledge and skills, and (4) exploring the potential of ICH as a resource for community development and achieving the goals of safeguarding.

Prioritizing Human Experience

> It can be argued that dance has a particular propensity to foreground cultural memory as embodied practice by virtue of its predominantly somatic modes of transmission. Indeed, in traditional forms of danced display, it could be argued that longevity of human memory is publicly enacted, demonstrating the ethereality of human existence and the continuity of human experience, as successive generations re-present the dancing. (Buckland 1-16)

Given this context, recent acknowledgement of the "body pedagogics"[29] of human experience, on top of available literary and oral sources of knowledge, it is worth our while to explore embodied knowledge of cultural practices. Transmitted through "enskillment of" and "attention to" sensory inputs from the environment rather than through socialization and enculturation, ways of perceiving are the sedimentation of past histories of direct, mutual involvement between persons and their environments (Ingold 220-221). The body carries unique knowledges of its own—both known and unknown to us. To document, analyze, strengthen, and ensure its transmission to coming generations can only enhance our fount of knowledge.

To enable us to do this, it is imperative to acknowledge all knowledges and formulate a general epistemology, which overrides the geopolitics of both knowledge and culture, with the aim of embracing all.

The truth is that there is no one universal and evenly distributed knowledge construct, but many—differing conceptually and differing in their stages of critical and analytical development. Under the circumstances, the catchphrase "freeing ourselves of parochialism," from Tagore's quote and the concept of an "ecology of knowledge" could be actively examined to, at least, start a discourse about acknowledging all forms of performances sans hierarchy.

---

26 https://www.thedailystar.net/news-detail-136708
27 https://m.theindependentbd.com/magazine/details/125036/Lathi-Khela-With-A-Message
28 https://www.prothomalo.com/entertainment/%E0%A6%9A%E0%A7%8B%E0%A6%96%E0%A7%87%E0%A6%B0-%E0%A6%B8%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%AE%E0%A6%A8%E0%A7%87-%E0%A6%AC%E0%A7%87%E0%A6%B9%E0%A7%81%E0%A6%B2%E0%A6%BE-%E0%A6%B2%E0%A6%96%E0%A6%BF%E0%A6%A8%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%A6%E0%A6%B0
29 Body pedagogics emphasises learning as a physically embodied process. It illustrates how multisensory experience causes embodied changes which relate to the process of cultural transmission.

Works Cited

Arundale, Rukmini Devi. "Philosophy of Dance." Broadcast on All India Radio. April 14, 1954. Speech.

Bandyopadhyay, Sekhar. Caste, Culture and Hegemony: Social Dominance in Colonial Bengal. Sage Publications, 2004.

Barreto, Jos-Manuel. "Epistemologies of the South and Human Rights: Santos and the Quest for Global and Cognitive Justice." Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies. vol. 21, no. 2, 2014, pp. 395-422.

Buckland, Theresa Jill. "Dance, Authenticity and Cultural Memory: The Politics of Embodiment." Yearbook for Traditional Music 33, vol. 33, 2001, pp. 1-16.

Chakravorty, Pallabi and Nilanjana Gupta. Dance Matters: Performing India on Local and Global Stages, edited by Pallabi Chakravorty and Nilanjana Gupta, Taylor & Francis Group, ProQuest Ebook Central, 2010.

Conquergood, Dwight. Cultural Struggles Introduction. The University of Michigan Press, 2013.

da Silva, Cleia Maria, Fernanda Filgueiras Sauerbronn and Michel Thiollent. "Decolonial Studies, Non-Extractive Methods, and Participatory Action Research in Accounting." Journal of Contemporary Administration (2021).

Eaton, Richard M. "The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760." UC Press E-Books Collection, 1982-2004, 1993.

Frazier-Rath, Emily. "EDx." 2022 йил. 9 February 2022. https://learning.edx.org/course/course-v1:DavidsonX+DavidsonX_D010+2T2021/block-v1:DavidsonX+DavidsonX_D010+2T2021+type@sequential+block@e1b5f4d900ee4432af63593ecb4b4af4/block-v1:DavidsonX+DavidsonX_D010+2T2021+type@vertical+block@0199f3a62d9344cbb1c7e414.

Garland, David. "What is a "History of the Present?' On Foucault's Genealogies and their Critical Preconditions." Punishment & Society 2014, vol. 16, no. 4, pp. 365–384.

Grant, Catherine. "Endangered Musical Heritage as a Wicked Problem." International Journal of Heritage Studies, vol. 21, no. 7, 2015, pp. 629-641.

Hall, Stuart. 'Introduction', Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices. edited by Stuart

Hall, Sage Publications, 1997.

Hunter, W.W. A Statistical Account of Bengal - Vol. 5 (1877). 1st Reprint. D.K. Publishing House, 1973.

Ingold, Tim. "The Art of Translation in a Continuous World." Beyond Boundaries (Explorations in Anthropology), edited by Pálsson, Gísli, Taylor and Francis, 2020, pp. 220-221.

Lefebvre, Henri. The Production of Space. Basil Blackwell Inc., n.d.
Lindahl, Carl. "The Oral Aesthetic and the Bicameral Mind ." Oral Tradition. vol. 6, no. 1, 1991), pp.130-136.

McCormack, Derek P. Experience and Experiment in AffectiveSspaces: Refrain for Moving Bodies. Duke University Press, 2013.

Morrison, Kathleen D. "Constructing 'the Great Tradition:' The Comparative Civilizations Project at Chicago in the context of South Asian Studies." Appraisal of Robert Redfield's "Great and Little Traditions" Framework

for Theorizing Long-Term Historical Processes in the Pre-Modern Levant, Center for Advanced Study, 2014, pp. 1-7.

Nielsen, Richard P. "Action Research As an Ethics Praxis Method." Journal of Business Ethics, vol. 135, 2016, pp. 419-428.

Ramanujan, A.K. 'Where Mirrors are Windows,' The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan, edited by Vinay Dharwadker, Oxford University Press, 2006.

Santos, Boaventura de Sousa. "The Resilience of Abyssal Exclusions in Our Societies: Toward a Post-Abyssal Law." Tilburg Law Review, vol. 22, 2017, pp. 237-258.

Vatsyayan, Kapila. Traditional Indian Theatre Multiple Streams. 1st Reprint. National Book Trust, 2007.

Vatsyayan, Kapila. Indian Classical Dance. Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1974.

Wilmsen, Carl. "Extraction, Empowerment, and Relationships in the Practice of Participatory Research." Towards Quality Improvement of Action Research. edited by Boog, Ben, et al., BRILL, 2008, pp. 135–146.

Zarrelli, Phillip B. "An Ocean of Possibilities: From 'Lokadharmī to Nāṭyadharmī' in a 'Kathakaḷi Santānagōpālam.'" Comparative Drama, vol. 28, 1994.