

## The Unchanging Reality of Male Dancers in Pakistan

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The social status of male dancers in South Asia has been well-furrowed as a field of scholarly investigation. Since time immemorial, Shiva has been described as Nataraj and Bharata's Natya Shastra refers to both male and female dancers. Wajid Ali Shah, the ill-fated Nawab of Avadh, was not just a patron of dance, but also a dancer and choreographer who wrote several books on dance like *Najo*, *Bani*, and *Saut-al Mubarak*. A more recent history of male dancing began with the many books on Rabindranath Tagore and Uday Shankar. But the way male dancing found social acceptance in the different countries of South Asia is quite uneven. Post-colonial India and Sri Lanka celebrated dancers such as Uday Shankar; Kathak doyens such as Shambhu Maharaj, Lachhu Maharaj, and Birju Maharaj; the Manipuri Gurus such as Amubi Singh; Kathakali Asan's such as P.K. Kunju Kurup, T.K. Chandu Pannikar; and many more in the many dance styles of India. Patronage included the national Padma Awards, the National Performing Arts Awards (Sangeet Natak Akademi Awards), and performances and valences of many kinds. Sri Lankan dance flourished under the legendary Chitrasena; things in Pakistan were very different then.

I have been associated with dance in Pakistan for more than fifty years, first as a student, then as a practitioner and, since 1984, additionally, as a Guru. Due to a variety of reasons, including the lack of political patronage, the negative valence given to Raqs (dance) by some fundamentalists and the injuries of colonialism that questioned masculinity of the colonized populations, declaring them to be fundamentally effeminate (Sinha, 1997), the pursuit of dance in Pakistan for a male dancer has been challenging. Many dancers have been associated with training or lineages that migrated to Pakistan.

Once, before partition, Lahore was an important center for dance—and not just the north Indian Kathak, but also for Bharatanatyam (Khokhar, 2013). One of the reasons for Lahore's eclectic dance life was the fact that it was an important center for film making as well (Ahmed, 2012). But the demographics and dynamics changed radically, as Mumbai grew in significance, and, after independence, dance even in Lahore was mostly restricted to Hira Mandi area. Its special offering was of the "mujra," that incorporated elements of Kathak, *thumri*, and *ghazal*. It suffered from the stigma associated with professional dancing women, inevitable in a strongly patriarchal society—a pan-subcontinental

phenomenon in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Brown, 2006). Regrettably, this continues even today, except that in many cases the dance is more filmic, fusion, western, and erotic, and has little resemblance to the classical dance practices that once flourished here.

This essay consists of three parts (1) a background note on the state of male dancers in Pakistan, (2) a conversation with one of the dance pioneers, the late Mr. Ghanshyam, my own Guru, and (3) a conversation with a present-day dancer, Asif, who has learned from me. In this triptych lies a frank exploration of the state and status of male dancers in Pakistan today.

It is important to recognize that even though Pakistan has had male dance Gurus from the very beginning, there have been very few male dancers. The few that existed had a short lifespan as performers. Some of these were actually male folk dancers. The few male classical dancers have mostly been teachers, with the exception of Ghanshyam ji. Before I discuss the trajectory of Mr. Ghanshyam, I would like to mention the other male dancers who lived and taught in Pakistan because, through their lives and their struggles, one gets a very clear picture of the state of dance in Pakistan and the difficulties that male dancers have faced.

Before the partition of the subcontinent, Zohra and Kameshwar Seghal, both trained at Uday Shankar's Almora Centre, had set up The Zoresh Dance Institute in Lahore. Due to the political unrest that had started in Punjab it closed down and they moved to India just before partition.

It was in 1947 that India got partitioned and Pakistan was created with two wings, East and West Pakistan. A dancer known by the name of Bulbul Chowdhury had, by 1947, already earned a name for himself in the culturally-rich Bengal region, and had become quite famous in Dhaka. He had begun his dance training and career in unpartitioned India and was known to be close even to the poet Rabindranath Tagore. In 1948 he was invited by the Prime Minister of Pakistan Liaquat Ali Khan to Karachi. However here he very soon understood that politics of religious and ethnic identities had already started playing in Pakistan. Even though he himself was a Muslim he began to feel unwanted and realized that, because of his Bengali identity, he was unwelcome in West Pakistan. He passed away in 1954. His wife,

Afroza Bulbul, continued to stay on in Karachi and set up the Bulbul Academy. In 1971 she left for Bangladesh.

Rafi Anwer, born in 1929, had learned BharataNatyam and Kathak in Bombay. His conservative Muslim family did not approve of his love for dance and he migrated to Pakistan in 1956. Here he tried for many years to set himself up as a performer. However, it was very difficult for him and he was only able to teach a few students privately. He continued to teach, commuting between student's homes as long as he lived. For a short while I also had him coming to teach me at my residence. He died embittered, moneyless, lonely, and unremembered. Dr Faqir Hussain Saga was a veterinary doctor with a passion for dance. In 1958, he became a student of Madame Azurie and then got a scholarship to learn dance in India (Kermani, 2010). In around 1960 he went to India for a short period and took lessons in Kathak. He came back to Lahore and tried his best to set up a teaching and performing centre. Once on a performance trip to Lahore I went to meet him – this must be around 1983; he was a very sad man. He told me how he was laughed at, mistreated, looked down upon, only because he wanted to dance. He also died penniless and unknown.

Ustad Ghulam Hussain Kathak of Patiala Gharana came from Dhaka in 1949 and settled in Karachi where he lived for 20 years and then in 1969, he shifted to Lahore where he spent most of his time teaching Kathak. Ghulam Hussain earned a name for himself as a teacher rather than a performer.

A wonderful male student of Ustad Ghulam Hussain is the Kathak dancer Fasih ur Rehman. He had started learning at a young age and had soon become a soloist, but Fasih felt that he could not survive as a male dancer in Pakistan. By 2010 he had already moved away to live in the United Kingdom. The same year he wrote to me, "I just want to be in a dance environment which is not possible in Pakistan, I don't know what our future will be in Pakistan but for now I want to be out of that place."

In 1954, Mr. and Mrs. Ghanshyam were invited by Prime Minister G.H. Suhrawardy to establish an academy of dance and music called the 'Rhythmic Art Centre' which they set up in Karachi. Mr. Suhrawardy knew Mr. Ghanshyam from Calcutta and offered him and his institute patronage and funds. Mr. Ghanshyam and his wife Nilima had been students of Uday Shankar at Almora. They were trained by Uday Shankar the pioneer of modern Indian dance who believed that a dancer must learn many different classical, folk and traditional styles. For almost thirty years their troupe was the only

performing dance group in Pakistan and unfortunately in 1983 they were compelled to leave the country when the military dictator General Zia ul Haq banned dance on all national media. Ever since then dance has been a very difficult subject both for men and for women in Pakistan.

In 1963, my family moved to Karachi and my mother discovered the famous dance couple Mr. and Mrs. Ghanshyam and took me to meet them. They were located in a small house, teaching in a small dark room, where they created what seemed to me in those early years a magical world, which I longed to enter.

I joined the Ghanshyams and stayed with them as their student throughout my school life and then joined them as a teacher at their institute and as a member of their performing troupe as long as they remained in this country. They taught us not only the classical styles of Kathak and Bharatanatyam but also Manipuri and Kathakali as well as many dances that they had choreographed themselves. I worked with them to create their sets, design their costumes, and learned that when you are full of passion and love for your art form, you are willing to do anything and everything that is required for the sake of that love. I realize now that it has to be a madness nothing less that can keep one going because, given the circumstances under which one has to function, it is easier to give up than to continue.

Twenty years later in March, 1983 I was in Delhi where I had gone on an Indian Council for Cultural Relations scholarship to study dance, when I got a call from Karachi. It was Mr. Ghanshyam on the phone. He said he was leaving Pakistan and wanted to know if I would be interested in taking over the Rhythmic Art Centre their dance and yoga institute. Of course, I was interested, but by the time I got back they had already left. Their departure was sudden and hasty because they were being targeted by the Islamist General Zia-ul-Haq's military regime and were forced to, literally, run for their lives.

When I returned from India and held my first solo performance in 1984, there were hardly any classical dancers in the country. They had either left the country or disappeared into oblivion. For the next ten years, there were no other dance recitals aside from mine. Those ten years were certainly very difficult years of extreme cultural and political suppression. But interestingly, my performances were always packed, even though I was not allowed to advertise. It was in those years that the challenge of getting an NOC (no objection certificate) was both a horrendous task as well as an exciting one.

The tragedy of it all is that the acquirement of an NOC is still essential, and, after all these years, one still has to go through the horrendous ritual of the bureaucratic hassles of the government offices and excise and tax departments.

All of these male dancers who lived and performed in Pakistan tried their best to say, through their performances and choreographies, that dance can transcend the narrow religious divide. They created works that were truly secular in their content, but sadly these male dancers were never accepted in and by Pakistani society and the establishment.

Here I am adding an interview I did with Mr. Ghanshyam in 2010. He had returned to Pakistan after twenty-seven years on my invitation, as I wanted to pay him tribute. I held a festival dedicated to him.

*Interview with Ghanshyam ji, an Associate of Uday Shankar and My Own Guru*

Q. Ghanshyam Sahib, you were a student of the great pioneer of Indian Dance, Uday Shankar, who had set up a Cultural Centre at Almora. Please tell us how this came about.

A. It was while I was a young boy, perhaps about twelve or thirteen years old, studying in Bombay, that my father's friend, Professor G.N. Mathrani, who was a Sindh gentleman and a professor of Philosophy and Psychology, became my guardian and brought me to live with him in Shikarpur, Sindh. This is, of course, before the partition of India must be around 1936 or so. Here, I spent a great deal of time outdoors and close to nature. Professor Mathrani saw and recognized in me a spark for dancing, as I would climb trees and skip and jump and dance around outdoors, I was not really interested in going to school. He had heard about the legendary Uday Shankar who had recently set up this Centre for Dance at Almora and he decided that I should learn dance. He wrote a recommendation letter for me to Uday Shankar and, on the basis of the recommendation, I was asked to come and give an audition before I was given admission. I remember that I had to wait till I was sixteen years old before I joined the Dance School as that was the minimum age of admission. I spent four years at Almora.

Q. What was it like at Almora? What were you taught there?

A. Well, classes would begin at 7:00 a.m. There would

be a general class which comprised 40-60 students. Shankar Dada himself would give a lecture every day in the general class. Then he made us do improvisations. Sometimes, he would make us walk across the classroom, which was a huge room—sixty feet by forty feet. He would say, "Feel the ground that you are walking on; imagine yourself in different situations, imagine everything around you and recall all from birth to now." He made us do these exercises so that we could develop our imaginations. Imagination, improvisation, and creation were the cornerstones of Shankar Dada's teaching. Then we would have the dance exercise classes. We were taught different movements, different styles. We would have breakfast at about 9:00 a.m. Later, we would be given an hour to rehearse all that we had learned. I remember that, at all times, a teacher would be observing us and would suddenly ask us random questions. This, he did to basically ascertain our level of alertness.

Q. So, it was not just a dance school, rather it was an entire system of education?

A. Yes, you are right. We were expected to immerse ourselves in the dance and the movements so completely that it became a part of our system. Shankar Dada was a great artist and a wonderful performer. He was also an incredible teacher: taught us to put expression into all our actions, movements, and then create further actions. It was almost like weaving pearls into a necklace.

Q. How did you happen to come to Pakistan?

A. A very dear friend of mine from Calcutta, who was in the film business, George Malik, had obtained a large amount of money to produce a film in Pakistan called *Funkaar*, and he asked me to come down to Pakistan to do the choreography for his film. So, I came to Karachi to work with him. The film never got completed, but this is how I came to Pakistan.

Q. And why did you decide to stay on?

A. While I was working on the film it was around 1952—I had a performance and Mr. Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy who was the Prime Minister of Pakistan at the time happened to be the chief guest at this show. I had known Suharwardy in Calcutta where he had been my neighbor when he was the Governor of Bengal. He recognized me and he invited me to stay on in Pakistan. He suggested to me that I start a dance center in Karachi. He was a great patron of the Arts and he felt that Pakistan needed artists and dancers and art

institutes.

Q. Did you have any problems in those early days in Pakistan?

A. Well, not really, except for certain occasions when some small petty officials of the bureaucracy would sometimes give us trouble. You see, I did not have a passport in those days and these officials would turn up and ask to see my passport.

Q. And why would they do that?

A. Oh, basically, to make some money. I went to Mr. Suhrawardy and complained to him and he immediately took action and demoted those officials. He told me to remain calm and unafraid and was kind enough to depute a police guard outside my place. And that's how I stayed on in Pakistan. Had he not supported me, I would have not been able to stay.

Q. Mr. Ghanshyam, while you were living in Pakistan and right up to the 1980's, the Government and the Ministry of Culture used to give you funds. Besides this, the industrialists and businessmen would also give a lot of financial support. I remember that the brochures printed for our performances in those days would be full of advertisements. Then, during General Zia-ul-Haq's time, all government funding for cultural activity ended and so did all other support. Now, it is a very tough task to get any kind of funding for culture—especially dance. One has to literally knock on so many doors and often return empty-handed. I feel that when the state and the government does not patronize the arts, then others—philanthropists and industrialists—also do not give their support. Tell us about the time when you and your family started getting threats and you were forced to leave Pakistan.

A. That was, indeed, a very difficult time for me. First, the funding became erratic and then it stopped. I would write to the Government and to the Ministry to send me funds, but they would not respond. I didn't have any connections, nor did I know any ministers, so I did not know how I could continue without funds. Then,

the conditions started becoming really bad. I would hear shouts and abuses outside my house; they would scream at me saying, "Aye Hindu ka bacha yeh naach gana band kar". I would not know what to do! I started becoming very frustrated and then sometimes I would react with defiance and say to them, "Yes, I am a Hindu. Yes, I sing and dance. Do whatever you want. Let's see how you can stop me!" My wife, Nilima, would be very afraid for me. She feared that someone would kill me. It was a terrible, terrible time.

Q. This kind of harassment started soon after General Zia came into power in 1977 and you and Mrs. Ghanshyam left in 1983, the year when Zia brought in all these anti-women and anti-minority laws, like the Blasphemy law.

Tell us: How did the problems that made you leave Pakistan start?

A. Well, as I said, I started getting threatening letters. Then, my house, which was also my teaching center, was attacked with stones. I reported to the police and requested that they help us, but they did not. It was my neighbors, my students, and my family friends who were kind enough to patrol our house, even at night. They were a great source of comfort and help to us, but all of this stone throwing and abuse did not stop.

Q. Yes, I remember the writings on your compound wall: "Jo bhi yahan ayega naach ganay kay liyay, un ko Islami nizam kay tahat saza dee jayegi". (Whoever comes here to dance and sing will be given Islamic punishments). I remember that, every day, you would have to replace the bulb outside, as someone would have thrown a stone aimed at it.

A. Humm . . . but actually, it's when they started to threaten my family, my children. That is when I knew that now I had to leave. Luckily, my children had already started getting scholarships and going abroad, one by one.

Q. Mr. Ghanshyam, you know the same thing happened with me in the 1980s. I started to get threatening letters that said that I am spreading Hinduism and Indian culture, and that they will bomb my house.



A. But dance is a humanist art! It doesn't belong to any religion. It is human action. You cannot stop action. Action is dance. If you stop action, then you die. (At this point Mr. Ghanshyam had tears in his eyes and became very emotional. We continued the interview a little later).

Q. I remember the Rhythmic Art Centre where I used to come as a child. It was a very vibrant place and parents would feel comfortable dropping off their kids [there].

A. Yes, we tried to create a family environment. The first teacher at the center that we hired was Ustad Shabbir Hussain, who taught music. Even though it was a small house, we had set it up in such a way that several classes could take place. In one room, my wife would teach dancing to the younger kids. In another, there would be a sitar class going on. In another room, singing. Then, we would also have lots of shows, performances, do dance dramas and I would ask my students to help me out in set construction. I remember you doing a lot of painting for our sets and helping to make the props, etc.

Q. Tell us about the time when you put up performances for various dignitaries, because I remember that I performed in your troupe in front of Chou En-Lai, the Chinese Premier.

A. President Ayub Khan was very supportive, and he often sent me and my troupe all over the world to perform. Even Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, when he was the foreign minister, would invite my troupe to perform in front of the ministers and dignitaries who were visiting from other countries.

Q. You left Pakistan in 1983 and went to the U.S. How has it been there for you?

A. Once we shifted, we set up a teaching place and I was surprised to see that many Americans were keen to learn dance, but relatively fewer Indians and Pakistanis. When I approached the local Indian and Pakistani population, they informed me that they were there to earn money not to spend it. I joined University of Indiana in Fort Wayne as a Professor of Yoga. I enjoyed my teaching stint there, but soon realized that American students do not want to put in the kind of effort that is needed to learn our kind of classical dance.

Q. Mr. Ghanshyam, after you and Mrs. Ghanshyam left Pakistan, I took over and started teaching dance here in Karachi. Now, I have been teaching since 1983 and I really want to set up an institute, but there are so many

obstacles.

A. Yes. I have told you several times that you should set up a center. I don't have that much long to live, but I truly want to help you in this venture, and I want to impart whatever I can to you and your students.

Q. Yes, I know, Mr. Ghanshyam. But you see, the situation here is very tough now. For a start: Where and how do we find the land to set up such a place? I have been trying for so long. Since after you left, my aim has been to set up an institute, but it all seems so difficult.

A. Why doesn't the government help you? You have a lot of courage my dear. I really appreciate what you are doing, and I know that you need a lot of support! I wish I could do something to help set up this institute.

Q. When we were learning dance from you, you taught us so many different styles and forms. We learned Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Kathakali, and Manipuri. Basically, we learned various classical dance forms. Now, it is the fashion to say that "so-and-so is a Kathak dancer and so-and-so is an Odissi dancer," and so on and so forth. What is your view about this trend of categorization of dancing?

A. I believe that classical dance is classical dance. You see, the layperson doesn't know what classical dance is; that is why I never taught my students one particular dance form. They learned all forms of classical dance from me. The aim was to draw from all these forms and evolve something called Pakistani dance. I was leading all of my students toward finding the dance of their country. I, myself, travelled to Sindh and Peshawar and did research on Ghandhara and Mohenjodaro. All of these dancing artifacts belong to you. I would say that you should take pride, do research on them. In Pakistan, people do not know what their culture is.

Q. We know that female dancers in Pakistan are looked down upon as immoral and are so-called "loose" women or women with bad character. Do you think that, being a male, it was easier for you or did you have to face more problems? Did you find any discrimination because you were a male dancer?

A. Well, I think I have always been made to feel uncomfortable because of my sex. In the eyes of the general public a male dancer is always considered not masculine enough and mocked. But yes, here, right from the very beginning, people looked at me strangely, as if they were trying to figure out whether I was a "proper"

man. People who knew that I was a dancer would pass rude comments. I guess because I was married and had a family, I was more acceptable! Had I been a single man, then I think it would have been much worse.

Q. You once told me that when you used to represent Pakistan, how warmly you would be received in other countries and how you used to get so much appreciation within Pakistan. But, you know, when I have performances here, even in front of government functionaries, they treat us and all performers like their servants. I wonder when that will change?

A. That's because now there is dirty politics and, unfortunately, it looks like this will never end unless people like you come into power. You see, in those days, there were people like Raja Tridev Roy, who was a Minister for Minorities as well Minister for Art and Culture; he was a very cultured and educated man- truly a gentleman! I remember that, once in a conversation, he asked me: "How long do you think you can survive here?" I laughed it off and said to him: "Well as long as I can!" But you see I had to almost run for my life.

Q. Mr. Ghanshyam, when you first came to Pakistan, did you feel discriminated against?

A. Well, perhaps not initially, so much. Initially, I did not feel discriminated against because of my religion. But as a male dancer, yes I did find that there was a great deal of prejudice and people would taunt and refer to me as "Hijra." This has been the case here in Pakistan and I felt it becoming worse with time.

Next, I would like you to watch a recording of an interview (watch here, <https://youtu.be/XCY2Q84JHe0>) I recently conducted—on November 7th, 2021 in Karachi—with my student, Muhammad Asif. It will reveal how little has changed for the male dancer in Pakistan.

In conclusion, I recognize that there is need to study the field of dance in Pakistan, particularly male dance in Pakistan, through the theories of gender, identity, embodied performativity, feminism, and hegemony. But at present, the field is bereft of any attention from scholars. The questions that need to be asked in the case of dance scholarship may need to transcend the familiar categories of research. The constant shadow of violence on dance compels the interrogation of dance to include theories of violence. And yet, the scholarship has to be sensitive and find itself capable of asking questions about the time when violence is not taking place. Maybe we need a new language and a richer vocabulary to encompass this dimension.

I also reiterate that the policies followed by Pakistan result in making its cultural wealth vulnerable and endangering the life of its cultural exemplars. Dance is being pushed to the edges of precarity. This is an attack on the patrimony of future generations of citizens. In the sliver of space that dance occupies in Pakistan where its music has been making waves globally, one finds a pastiche of dance forms, including hip-hop, sufi, and modern, as exemplified by the Wahab Shah Dance company, for instance. It is hard to sustain a career with classical dance alone. For all practical purposes I am "the last classical dancer in Pakistan" (Pande 508). Regrettably, the hope that my Guru had of dance being a humanist activity is fast receding. Equally unfounded is his dream of a Pakistani dance. So, in Pakistan, dance is a smorgasbord of styles, singularly subaltern and sometimes subversive. Increasingly, it is being used as a political tool of resistance. For this reason, dance has featured frequently in my acts of activism.

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