Failure of Rasa:
Story of Indian Dance During COVID-19

Kaustavi Sarkar

What is the premise and promise of Rasa during a period of confusion, turmoil, and fear of human connection? "Rasa is the experience of a state of generalized stasis that results from an accumulation of empathetic responses to performed sequences of emotional experience" (Coorlawala 25). As a practitioner-scholar of traditional Indian dance, I negotiate with tenets of performativity based on texts, such as the *Natyasastra*, *Abhinaya Darpana*, *Sangeet Ratnakara*, *Abhinavabharati*, *Natya Manorama*, and *Abhinaya Chandrika*, among many others that explicitly or implicitly deal with affective communication of narrative, musical, rhythmic, and metaphoric content. These are texts in Sanskrit language and are embedded within a worldview that can be attributed to Hinduism. Bharata's *Natyasastra*, approximately dated between 200 B.C. to 200 C.E., devotes chapters six and seven to Rasa theory noting that the primary goal of performance is to transport the audience to a transcendental realm while entertainment is only a mere consequence. *Abhinavabharati* is a commentary on Rasa theory of the *Natyasastra*. While *Natyasastra* is considered to be the oldest treatise on performing arts, other texts, namely, *Abhinaya Darpana*, *Sangeet Ratnakara*, *Abhinavabharati*, *Natya Manorama*, and *Abhinaya Chandrika* are equally significant in propounding Rasa. Nandikesvara's *Abhinaya Darpana* notes Rasa as the object of Abhinaya or theatrical expression. The chapter on dance in Sarangadeva's *Sangeet Ratnakara*, a musicological treatise, presents the Rasa theory. Raghunath Ratha and Maheswar Mohapatra wrote *Natya Manorama* and *Abhinaya Chandrika* respectively. These texts belong to the eastern Indian state of Odisha and contributes to the development of Odissi dance with its distinct and particular regional flavor although adopting conventions from the aesthetic Sanskritic lineage of the *Natyasastra,* South Asian dance-scholars have written extensively about the obsession with the 'classical' in Indian dance referring to dance that aligns with the Sanskritic lineage. This linear narrative has invisibilized numerous forms, dancers, and choreographers who choose to steer clear of this narrow focus. This becomes essentially potent today as the ring-wing Hindu nationalist Indian state celebrates its seventy-five years of freedom from British colonialism with censorship. Dance-artist and scholar, Anurima Banerji writes about the conformity of the dancer with the Indian nation even when artists from other genres choose to return their state-sponsored awards protesting the state's curbing of artistic freedom. I also would like to point out to the recent repealing of Ananya Dance Theatre's performance from the roster of Erasing Borders Festival that is an important event organized by the Indo-American Arts Council in New York City (Ananya Dance Theatre). ADT's work is vocal about white supremacy and brahmanical oppression in the same vein. I believe their transnational feminist activist approach was perceived as dissent and taken off the festival itinerary despite publicity and the signing of contracts and completion of hotel bookings in New York City. Dance studies scholar Urmimala Sarkar Munsi rightly notes that "the ecology of Indian dance continues to hierarchize dancers. Some of them are glorified as legitimate citizens, whileothers are discriminated against, and subjected to multiple marginalities" (2)

In this article, I explore the complexities of Rasa during a complete lockdown of live performance. Rasa appears in ancient Vedic literature as flavor, liquid, taste, and self-luminous consciousness, among many other meanings. Rasa theory is used across live performance, visual art, and new media. This essay focuses on artistic practice that is collaborative, socially-engaged, external to formal institutions of production, less prescriptive than say, the traditional repertoire in classical Indian dances, and that was produced during the COVID-19 lockdown.

The concert dance form of the Odissi repertoire is instituted as a progression from invocation (Mangalacharan) to salvation (Moksha) for the creation of Rasa. Reminiscing its ritualistic counterpart in the Jagannath temple where Maharis or temple dancers performed to the lyrics of the Gitagovinda, among other pieces, establishes dance as a significant offering to the deity (Banerji 12). Speaking about Delhi-based Odissi, an eastern Indian traditional art form, dancer Kavita Dwibedi says, "He was playing the lights for me." Dwibedi is referring to Lord Jagannath, the male Hindu deity who remains at the heart of Odishan (an eastern Indian state) religious and cultural fabric.

Dwibedi speaks about the minimal arrangements of the recording of her dance-film *Woh 50 Din* (translated as "those fifty days"). Made for artivist/scholar Arshiya Sethi's *Danced Poems of Double Authorship*, the work's creation took place during the first fifty days of the COVID-19 lockdown. In this virtual event, dancers, Dwibedi and others choreographed to Sethi's poems in Hindi and English. Dwibedi attributes metaphorical and spiritual agency to Lord Jagannath, noting that he ensured Dwibedi's face was lit for the filmic capture. In the video, we see Dwibedi seated in front of a quaintly visible Jagannath idol. Her gestural expressivity related to the horrors of the pandemic infuses the receptivity with Rasa—an aestheticized portrayal of emotional tenor.

Dwibedi's offering of Rasa is of a different kind. The primary message is that of freedom from the shackles of narrow-mindedness through Bhaichara, or friendship. Sethi-Dwibedi co-write and co-perform this danced poem as an appeal to the Indian citizen to prevent communalization of the pandemic. A Tablighi Jamaat religious congregation in Delhi's Nizamuddin Markaz mosque in March, 2020 was considered a COVID-19 super-spreader event with twenty-seven deaths and more than 4,000 confirmed cases resulting from the event. This was an unfortunate event during which all participants, including international registrants with necessary government clearances, were clustered indoors in response to a sudden imposition of a lockdown. The ring-wing Hindu majoritarian instigation of a campaign of vilification against Muslims in India led to forced captivity, abuse, and othering (Mahuarkar; Ujjan). Standing against pathologization of a community and communalization of a pandemic for narrow political gains, Dwibedi's offering of her embodied labor is a testimony of Bhaicahra where humans protect one another at all costs: "Manav Manav Ka Rakshak." Dwibedi's maneuver reorients her movement toward social commentary through a conflation of the aesthetic and the performative, the mediated and the medium, and portrays the ontological, epistemological, and political possibilities of Rasa. Yet, Sethi's choice of well-connected and established classical Indian dancers to choreographically explore her poetic expression is suspect. As an Odissi soloist, Dwibedi remains complicit in a culture of casteist gatekeeping, statist appropriation of artistic agency, and a world of dance that refrains from explicit commingling with the political under the garb of the aesthetic.

This article is embedded in the Indian arts scenario—its complicity in structural marginalization adhering to power and its activist potential—during the COVID-19 pandemic. In "Using Arts Activism and Poetry to Catalyze Human Rights Engagement and Reflection," scholar Jane McPherson notes that arts activism has the potential to promote reflective engagement with a rights discourse. With the loss of live performance, emerged a culture of greater discourse—sharing of artistic and creative process alongside a greater call for rights, equity, standardization, and rebutting an otherwise culture of silence. For example, initiatives, such as the "Arts and the Law" series and "UNMUTE," series, organized as training, workshop, and discussion events, directly address artists facing marginalization, harassment, and discrimination at their workplaces. While the Indian nation state reneged on contracts and delayed payments, individual artists rose to the challenge of the pandemic in philanthropic capacities by commissioning paid work, donating money and food, and creating competitions through their foundations and connections. Artists, namely, Sonal Mansingh, Anita Ratnam, and Aditi Mangaldas created merit-based opportunities mainly for established dancers. Many artists—namely, Sanjoy Roy of Teamwork Films and Anurupa Roy of Katkatha—organized charitable donations of food and other basic necessities. Artrepreneur Arshiya Sethi's Kri Foundation organized donation to families comprising of dancers from all strata—folk, back-up show, and Jagran. During the online premiere on YouTube Live of *Danced Poems of Double Authorship*, Sethi reminisces that the Sthyayee Bhava (dominant expression in the Rasa theory) during the pandemic has been one of being "fed-up-of-COVID" (Sethi, Covid Creations). A conversation regarding Rasa's efficacy in technological mediation is not restricted to the pandemic, given the role of film, social media, and other channels of artistic dissemination beyond the live before COVID-19 hit. Nevertheless, the long, accidental pause of the live option, in my opinion, makes this question timely and significant. Rasa that presupposes an audience educated in the codes of performance does not have a disclaimer regarding the absence of viewership. The pandemic forced the artist community to rethink modes of expression as dancers shifted from in-person concert performance to dance-films. Live telecast through a profusion of online pivots does not make possible the reciprocal connection that brings alive the promise of Rasa.

Trained in expressional-theatrical movement-repertoire known as Abhinaya—the object of which is Rasa, according to *Abhinayadarpana*—I present a practitioner's perspective on theorizing Rasa in live performance. Further, I comment on this theorization in on-screen departure from the live during the pandemic. Performer-choreographer Vikram Iyengar's dance-film called *Water-Bodies* (2021) projects the grotesque as the ravaging second wave of COVID-19 hit India with victims floating down the Ganges River. I focus on the import of Rasa through technological mediation—that one could also term as *failure of Rasa*. I argue that the contextual unmooring of reciprocal communication, as envisaged by Rasa in live performance, opens up newer modes of relationality—modes that demand analytical inquiry into existing and new contexts negotiating Rasa. The Indian dance scene reels under hierarchy,

territorialization, hoarding of knowledge, patriarchy, sexual harassment, and lack of knowledge of artists' legal rights. Artist-organizer Sanjukta Wagh's poem, "Why Sometimes the Show Must Go On," is a visceral response to a workshop called "UNMUTE: Breaking the Culture of Silence." The workshop mobilizes against patriarchal oppression in the field. Pandemic-induced loss of performance creates more space and time to think through due process in pushing toward greater awareness of diversification and standardization in the field. Yet, change is excruciatingly slow and inundated with further pitfalls as noted in continuing censorship of artistic freedom. I want to bring attention to the banning of the filmmaker Sandeep Ravindranath's latest work, "Anthem For Kashmir" that shows state-sponsored oppression in the conflicted political territory of Kashmir in India (Bergen). Although the silent movie is brilliant for its nuanced handling of grassroot activism, it threatened the large Indian nation-state that wants to crush any dissent to its linear narrative dominated by a politically motivated Hindu right. Navigating across programming by artists and activists allows for a balanced view regarding the relevance of and need for revision of Rasic contexts. Simultaneously discussing political responses in aesthetics and organizing, I discuss steps taken in Rasic discourse during the pandemic, bearing an ever-fleeting promise of greater equity, awareness, and standardization.

Hypothesizing Rasic Intimacy

Moving in tandem with the viewer lays the primary charge of Rasa as reciprocity through a specific Indic worldview. Rasa, as first mentioned in the Rig Veda, refers to the nectar of immortality. Translated as juice or flavor, Rasa refers to sensuous savoring of performance (Schechner 29). In the sixth chapter of the *Natyasastra*, Rasa theory is explicated in theatricality. In his commentary on Rasa, Abhinavagupta writes how the experience of Rasa demands audience preparation and spiritual expertise, while dance scholars, Royona Mitra and Kapila Vatsyayan, delineate its universality outside of the everyday and the mundane. Rasa is extremely hard to define as a concept, practice, experience, or interpretation. There is vast literature on Rasa by Sanskrit scholars regarding the influence of Rasa in performance, spirituality, literature, and other fields. Rasa is the moment of relish, defined by T.S. Nandi as an experience different from "memory, inference, and worldly (sensation of) pleasure" (48). Yet, owing to loss in translation, knowledge of the Rasa emerges only to a qualified observer—one who is familiar with the gestural codifications and is perceptually able to process sensitive information. Aesthetic stylization of emotive expressivity by the performer enables an abstract registering in the viewer. The narrative and thematic import of the expressive do not overdetermine audience receptivity. Rather, the viewer transcends the particularities of storyline and emotional valence towards a more personal landing of the performative. Such is the promise of Rasa that is said to be able to transcend the thematic purport toward a tailoring by individual viewers' coloring through their experiential understanding and resultant meaning-making. The meaning is not universal. Rather, it is particular to each person viewing the material and abstracting according to one's positionality, training, and access to this philosophy. Mitra theorizes an intercultural possibility of gestural communication within Rasa while analyzing UK-based choreographer Akram Khan's work across contemporary dance and Kathak, a traditional dance form from northern India. Mitra gestures towards possibility of Rasa of reciprocal meaning-making beyond the confines of the cultural or the aesthetic insider, similar to author Swapna Koshy who, in *Rasa Theory in Shakespearian Tragedies*, notes that Rasa has found a place in audience-centric communication.

Rasa activates an engaged viewing across postural, gestural, melodic, and percussive registers. Embodied analysis of choreographic material percolates my training and practice into my research. I am inspired by dance scholar Ann R. David's conceptualization of embodied ethnography among Gujarati communities in the UK through participation in social movement practices connected to religious festivity. Having Rasa as a sieve makes the process of absorption much more visceral and corporeal than just being restricted within the premise of the optic. While discussing a camera recording of a solo Odissi performance, Uttara Asha Coorlawala notices how perceptions of the performer, aesthetic codes, receptivity by the audience, and enframing by the filmic apparatus—camera angle, editing, and focus—influence meaning-making. She notes that the culturally-situated audience watches Mohapatra's performance through the principle of *Darshan*, meaning the manifestation of the divine for a religious insider. "It is only when the devotee is 'seen' (i.e., blessed) by the deity, that transformation occurs and the Divine Presence is experienced" (24). But *Darshan* also refers to philosophy. Thus, the viewer is engaged in a philosophical encounter with the performance noting the possibility of manifesting one's own worldview. This viewing is unlike the distant analytical and alienated viewing by a dance critic. Contextualized across the artwork as well as art reception, Rasa initiates an alchemical possibility as described below.

As experienced in my own practice, Rasa is generated through a dialogical embodied exchange made possible through performance. In the article, "The Alchemy of Rasa in the Performer–Spectator Interaction," artist-scholar Scheherazaad Cooper argues that Rasa is generated together by both practitioner and spectator within a performance. The experience of the performance is meant to function within a dialogical capacity grasped within the upstream and downstream flow of energy between the participants—the spectator and the performer. It is not reified in the imaginary, but a positive experience within the exchange.

The scriptural basis of Rasa theory has led to its investigation as a spiritual experience. For example, Susan L. Schwartz denotes how spirituality permeates *Natyashastric* performance. Schwartz notes that the transcendence of the ego by both the performer and the viewer remains the transformative premise and promise of Rasa. Real-time interpretation by the spectator of the performer's Bhavas or day-to-day emotional experiences generates Rasa where the suspension of the performer's ego allows for the audience's apprehension of Rasa. The energetic exchange across performance and reception literally depends upon the nature of the knowledge base and respective interpretations. Not every artist is necessarily Hindu or spiritual, although it is impossible to deny the ritual-spiritual-philosophical-religious basis in artistic choice, training, practice, and performance. Implicit connections to Hindu myth, literature, and religiosity permeate the dance. Yet, interpretations enabled by the Rasic exchange within performers and viewers of multiple leanings and associations are also key to shaping and developing the art form.

The ideal spectator, or the Rasika, operates at the juncture of feeling and knowledge. Emotions and real-life concerns constitute the Rasika as much as literary and aesthetic foundations of Rasa, as noted by Ayal Amer in the analysis of the subjectivity of the Rasika within Sanskrit poetics. On one end, the Rasika relishes the psychic components of the narrative while empathizing with the artist's emotional contours. On the other, the Rasika interprets the performance based on existing conceptual knowledge and experiential investment within performance theory and its spiritual associations.

Distilling the performance through a foundation of existing knowledge base creates the possibility of transcendence of the egotistic self beyond the primacy of emotions, feelings, and thoughts. K.S. Shivkumar notes that for a spiritual seeker Rasa implies an experience of undivided bliss of the pure consciousness also known as Brahman. While at an empirical level, the bliss can be experienced through unselfish individuality, a Rasika's reception of the performative co-creates meaning with the performer. The material embodiment of the artist mediates between the emotional tonality and alchemical energy of the art work and the Rasika. Embodied performance alongside conceptual and technical elements of the Bhavas (emotional moods) lead to the Rasika's entry into the meaning-making procedure. Physical movement (Angika), facial expressions (Mukhaja), and codified hand gestures (Hasta) are integral to the communication of meaning in Abhinaya or expressional dance. The first refers to Angika Abhinaya, the second to Mukhaja Abhinaya, and the third to Hasta Abhinaya. In addition to technical perfection, Abhinaya assumes an advanced degree of conceptual understanding of philosophy and character. Scheherazaad Cooper notes the "challenge, then, comes in the dancer transcending his or her own acquired physicality—a physicality inevitably mediated by the dancer's own sociocultural development within the specific time and space in which he or she lives—so as to represent the character whose movements are based largely on a poetic representation of myth" (344). The ideal Rasika, in that case, distills this meaning through an embodied encounter of such Angika, Mukhaja, and Hasta Abhinaya towards a non-egotistic interpretation of Rasananda, or pure bliss. According to Kalpana Ram, "to be a Rasika is to inhabit the time of the present in a very particular way," where time is slowed down for the right flavors to be released (161). From this experience of the Rasika, I define Rasic intimacy as one birthed between live performance and spectatorship transcending narrative import, physical virtuosity, and egotistic affiliation.

Audience receptivity is integral to the success of the artist's performance of emotional and conceptual elements as well as showcasing of technical mastery. The creation of an expression through internal states and physicality usually implies the predominance of a strong emotional tone, also known as the Sthyayi Bhava. Further, evoking emotions or aesthetic feelings due to a situation, a person, or an object, deepens the expressive interface. An example of this exchange, known as Vibhava, might involve portraying love among two individuals—called Alambana—alongside showcasing the spring-time beauty that enhances the feeling of love—called Uddipana. The emotional landscape of the performer is explored in depth as one exploits personality traits, physical sensations, and mental conditions for engaged storytelling. A variety of improvisatory emotional states are used

by the performer to illustrate an expressive nuance without repetition. Finally, pointing out the calmness within—a centering achieved through repetition and understanding of the subject matter at hand—gives the spectator the necessary pauses in order to transition within the narrative or expressive process.

While narrative understanding differs between audiences with varying degrees of cultural understanding, the sensitivity to respond to emotional stimuli is available across the board. Performativity and receptivity both enable experiential access to multiple characters, circumstances, and aesthetic parameters. The function of receptivity is woven within the expressive fabric. The location of Rasa is not locatable in any one entity—the performer or the spectator. Rather, the dialogic accomplishment of non-verbal expressivity results in the generation and apprehension of Rasa in an act of transcendence. The performer as well as the spectator transcend the self through an aesthetic distancing. While the performer transcends the self in the act of aesthetic negotiating across multiplicity, the spectator lets go of the self in identifying with the character. However, the receptive self does not stop at complete identification with the performative. Rather, the stylized possibilities of expressivity lead the reception toward aesthetic distancing from both the spectator's self as well as the performer's characterization. This distancing culminates in pleasure, also known as Rasananda, or bliss.

Religious studies scholar Kurt Heidinger notes how Abhinavagupta locates the transcendence in the union of the male god and the female goddess that bridges the distance "of question and answer, of word-thought and interpreter thought, of sensible and intelligible" (Heidinger 140). This notion of the transcendental signified has been investigated in South Asian sculpture by art historian Vidya Dehejia. She attributes the enlightenment within *Sakti*, the eternal feminine principle of power flowing through the material as well as the spiritual world. As the embodiment of the ritual sexual union as well as being the epitome of *Sakti*, or the eternal feminine principle of power animating the cosmos, my Odissi solo exploits power and pleasure as modes of transcendence. The acculturated spectator is left with *Rasic Intimacy*—one that transcends the notion of the self as identified with one's body-mind complex while achieving a sense of blissful transcendence, also known as Rasananda. Unable to perform nor to find bliss within the Odissi's harmonious symmetry during the pandemic, I repeatedly questioned the sheer discrepancy between the idealized Rasic world and my immediate reality—one that had transmigrated to the screen. Speaking from this vantage point, I ask: Does Rasic intimacy and the promise of egotistic transcendence hold true in the mediation of the live to the screen?

Testing Rasic Intimacy

The abundant gestural, postural, and expressive communicative potential of Rasa has been explored in the traditional Indian dance canon by prominent artists, mainly for live performance. The promise of Rasa has been perfunctorily exploited in the screenic medium, although the pandemic saw a serious engagement with the medium. Author-editor Melissa Blanco Borelli, in the introductory chapter of the edited anthology, The *Oxford Handbook of Dance and the Popular Screen*, writes that "the choreography of the camera, the camera as a body unto itself, where it looks and where it gazes from, contributes to the reading of the dancing as it progresses" (16). Codes of the camera intersect with the aesthetic conventions of Rasa theory in analyzing the premise of Rasa. In the article, "Moved to Dance: Remix, Rasa, and a New India," dancer-scholar Pallabi Chakravorty notes how traditional codes and associations with Rasa are being replaced by a consumer culture that goes hand in hand with the economy of song-and-dance sequences in Bollywood films. While discussing the neoliberal impact of Rasa is beyond the scope of my article, I want to point out that the importance of Rasa in understanding contemporary on-screen cultural production. While discussing her film *Nishi Dhombol*, that premiered in the online film festival called Ghorā—The Grotesque Goddess, Sangeet Natak Akademi awardee Sharmila Biswas urges dancers to place similar ritualized attention to the screen as a medium with its own aspirations, affordances, and limitations as enunciated in the *Natyasastra* for the stage.

Considerations of space and time onstage vastly differ from their screenic perception. Performance studies scholar T.N. Cesare Schotzko notes how the film screen animates an intimacy based on visual proximity, prioritizing the visual experience over and above other senses (270). Schotzoko's presupposition of intimacy relies strictly on sensory presence and possibility of engaging with the mediated performing body. It precludes the alchemical possibility of *Rasic Intimacy*.

Here, I extend my quest to explore the alchemical potential of Rasa on screen. Is it possible to effectuate *Rasic Intimacy* through the filmic medium? I find the pandemic-induced transposition of the live to the screen generative for this discussion. I investigate two online festivals curated by Kri Foundation under the artrepreneurship of Arshiya Sethi. *Danced Poems of Double Authorship* reflects the collaboration between leading dance artists and Arshiya Sethi. Sethi's poems penned over the course of the pandemic were translated to movement and varying levels of cinematography by eight leading dancers, namely, Shama Bhate, Rama Vaidyanathan, Sharodi Saikia, Kavita Dwibedi, Ileana Citaristi, Anwesa Maahanta, Mangla Bhat, and Jyoti Srivastava. I also investigate Chakshu, a dance-film festival that curates thirty Indian works from various parts of the world. In addition to showcasing these films, Chakshu also invests in panel discussions with the filmmakers and choreographers who share their creative process. These two events differentially exploit choreography and the dancing body's ability to communicate in the online medium.

It is rare that traditional Indian dancers choreograph in the spirit of social commentary, although Arshiya Sethi's *Covid Creations: Danced Poems of Double Authorship* remains an exception. The dancers bring their creative imagination to Sethi's poetics through music, gesture, technology, and translation in regional languages. Sharodi Saikia's gestural rendition in Assamese of Sethi's *History Will Remember This War*, captures the spirit of resilience in the midst of struggle. Images of death alternate with images of public health workers interspersed throughout Saikia's Abhinaya-esque rendition of the poem. Sethi's *Umeed*, meaning hope, performed by both Jyoti Srivastava and Mangla Bhat in Odissi and Kathak respectively, show two very different renditions of hope. While Srivastava's *Umeed* treats the poem in facial expression and musicality, Bhat's *Umeed Udasi ka Virodabhasi Safar* is a Sufi-esque surrender, walking amidst nature, desirous of change with a willful suspension of her artistic subjectivity. Rama Vaidyanathan's integration of an iPad as an active performer and not just a tool of capture negotiates constantly with multiple agents adopting dual roles of both the seer and the seen—the dancer is not just the seen but is also actively choreographing the logic of her presence. Naad Roop's (Shama Bhate's professional company) dancers—Ameera, Avani, Shilpa, Ragini, Shivani, Bhargavi, Neerja, and Esha—use the musicality of percussive syllables: *Dha Thei Ta Dhei Thei Ta Dhei*, to edit choices alternately with Sethi's motto: "Lockdown, not lock-up." These poems were chronologically organized with the growing number of days spent in the lockdown mode.

I began this article with Kavita Dwibedi's *Those 50 Days*, in which her face and the idol of Jagannath behind her are both faintly lit by the sunlight, portraying the human condition in isolation. Unlike Dwibedi's faintly visible Jagannath in the backdrop, Ileana Citaristi creates her rendition, *Jagannath Speaks to Me* as a conversation with the presiding Odissi deity. Gestural invocation of relationality across multiple planes of reality—that between Citaristi and Jagannath—weaves the natural horizon to establish a sense of vastness. Nature plays a significant role in the poem, "Which Fork We Take," various portions of which are enacted by ten dancers establishing various degrees of intimacy with gestural, postural, and metaphoric communication. The collage by ten artists, curated by Sattriya artist Anwesa Maahanta for her Pragjyoti International Dance Festival on Sethi's "Which Fork we Take," enacts a communal bonding across countries and embodied literacies. These danced poems generate degrees of intimacy that traffic predominantly with elements of Rasa while eluding the phenomenological encounter between the dancer and the audience in live performance.

Chakshu, quite contrarily, employs choreography in a mediated environment, obeying the logics of the making of a dance-film. The lens often frames the dancing bodies, showing a part of the movement, thus creating a sense of energy. The viewer is left to actively imagine the rest of the motion. Zooming in and out of the part to the whole body, the viewer gets the visual and the proprioception of the complete movement. This creates a much more engaged viewing, attending to and honoring the affordances of the filmic medium. Dance and video artist, Katrina McPherson argues that "very often, this type of shot will express much more about the movement than a wide shot featuring the entire body in motion would" (2019 53). Kathak artist Sangita Chatterjee's film, *Quest: A Lockdown Diary of a Dancer*, makes quotidian, domestic and non-performative spaces as crucibles for the creation of Rasa and Rasic worlds. The film focuses on Chatterjee's feet. The heel-toe articulations in walking, turning, and fast rhythmic footwork show the variegated efforts needed to manipulate spatial and temporal logic. Staying in place for a fast-paced Tatkar—or footwork—accompanying syllabic sounds in a rhythmic cycle is juxtaposed with pedestrian walking in linear directions. While the bottoms of the feet remain hidden during the Tatkaar, they are visible when the dancer is walking away from the camera, making visible the balls of the feet, the curvature of the arches, and the heel. One is left wondering about the sonic effects of the heel, toe, and flat footwork according to rhythmic accents, noting temporal progression and the visual scope of the feet meandering through space, perhaps in search of an escape from the lockdown mode of Chatterjee's

pandemic-induced reality. Interesting use of space focused on moving feet juxtapose with Chatterjee's Garuda Samyukta Hasta (both hands joined showcasing a bird), which she uses to experientially communicate the feeling of a caged bird via intermittent flapping of the wings. Chatterjee's Angika Abhinaya can be compared to Aditi Mangaldas's Mukhaja Abhinaya in the latter's tryst with a photo frame in *Enframed*. Mangaldas, another Kathak artist, literally uses a golden frame to show an image coming into life from stillness. A newspaper review of *Enframed* by Chitra Swaminathan notes that "although the dynamics of a dance piece are expressed through the physical language of choreography, most often its essence is conveyed neither by narrative nor movements, but by the body of the dancer." Mangaldas's framing of corporeality, fleshiness, and sheer existence with minimal gestural motion with her face, hands, and torso layers the narrative meaning with a sense of eerie stillness—one that breaks the momentum of the twirling Kathak dancer from the viewer's imaginary. The working hypothesis for a dance-film relies on the supposition that the intention of the work deploys the camera lens to direct viewers' perception of movement. Motility is life-breath for a mover.

Danced Poems of Double Authorship takes an organic approach to filming the dancing body maintaining corporeal integrity over and above technological gimmicks. The body gains precedence in Kavita Dwibedi's *Voh Pacchass Din*, in which she forces the audience to focus on her sunlit corporeal self, while exposed to auditory stimuli from Sethi's recitation of the poem in Hindi and minimal percussive accompaniment. Dwibedi's facial virtuosity in communicating a plethora of emotions, concepts, ideas, and experiences ranging across love, humor, kindness, death, struggle, despair, and anger presents a message of universal consciousness of humanity. *Manav Manav Ka Rakshak*, translated as "humans protect one another," summarizes the choreographic import of a world torn asunder by a pandemic of disease, mistrust, and hatred. The vibrancy of Dwibedi's face and economy of hand gesture draws attention to her faintly lit dancing body with the backdrop of the Jagannath. In this particular rendition, Dwibedi has no cognitive dissonance in sharing her craft in the medium of dance-film instead of live performance.

As if an extension of Jagannath, Dwibedi foregrounds her corporeality accented by emotion and gesture. Ileana Citaristi's *Jagannath Speaks to Me*, establishes a working relationship with Odissi's presiding deity. The film starts with Citaristi's Puspanjali Pradan flower-offering at the feet of Jagannath's idol. The conventional salutation to the ground is replaced by Citaristi's gestural exposition in which she brings her hand close to her ear as if to hear words spoken especially for her by Jagannath. Gestural enactment of hearing also refers to Sruti—or scriptural wisdom—in the Hindu pantheon; this is considered to be a significant source of knowledge. Jagannath, in interesting ways, remains the source of the collaboration between Sethi and Citaristi. Sethi's pull towards Jagannath in Gajavesham, who is dressed as an elephant, inspires her to compose *Jagannath Speaks to Me*, bringing to fruition Citaristi's desire to offer her dance as an offering to Rathayatra—a chariot festival in a Jagannath temple in Puri. The Arthapatti, that is, the meaning supposition in Citaristi's exposition that Jagannath speaks to her, leads to her choreography exploring representation and abstraction across ritual, nature, and religious lore. The camera focuses on her hand pointing toward the horizon—one that is occupied by Sraddha, her faith and love for Jagannath. Her Sraddha (devotion) becomes her Arthapatti (presumption) that explores the corporeal connection between her embodied self and the object of her divine manifestation, Jagannath.

Douglas Rosenberg's "Dance/Technology Manifesto," as quoted by McPherson (250) in *Making Video-Dance*, critiques privileging of technology over dance, urging makers to reinscribe the body on the corpus of technology for a recorporealization of dance and technology. Odissi scholar Anurima Banerji (2012) argues for the distributed body of dance across ritual performance, the body of the Jagannath, and the architectural construction of the temple as a critique of human subjectivity as liberal individualism. Banerji's distributed corporeality illuminates Dwibedi's and Citaristi's corporeal interventions on film. *While Jagannath Speaks to Me* explores the relational, *Voh Pacchass Din* exploits the extension of the dancer's corporeal extensions in the dance-film exemplifying Rosenberg's manifesto against technocracy.

The notion of hope becomes a catalyst of bringing together communities of practice across geographical distance. Sethi's poem, "Umeed Udasi ka Virodabhasi Safar," loosely translated as the journey between despair and hope, results in two very different manifestations by dancers Mangla Bhat and Jyoti Srivastava. Bhat's minimalistic presentation taking refuge in Kathak's turns and footwork, contrasts with Srivastava's scripting of the poem into a fully produced musical piece within the Odissi repertoire. I argue that the notion of the Tihai, or a percussive segment repeated three times to return to Sama or the first beat of the Tala (rhythmic cycle with a definite number of beats), plays an important culminating factor in the dance. Interesting interjections of Tihai by Bhat and Srivastava enforce the purpose of the arts not only in Sethi's words, but also in mnemonic syllables corresponding to the percussive accompaniment. Bhat's casual yet dancerly walk through a garden with occasional hand gestures and facial expressions is interrupted with a rhythmic section repeated three times as if journeying experientially from despair toward hope. While Bhat's Tihai acts as a bridge, Srivastava's Tihai leads to a climactic culmination as the Mardala (percussion used in Odissi) resounds with the following bols:

Dhane Dhane Dhane Dhane Dha Dhin Dha Tere Kete Gadi Ghene Dha

Dhane Dhane Dhane Dhane Dha Dhin Dha Tere Kete Gadi Ghene Dha

Dhane Dhane Dhane Dhane Dha Dhin Dha Tere Kete Gadi Ghene Dha

The camera aids in choreographing audience involvement as we see Srivastava's back reflected in a mirror, noting the importance of holding onto one another and having each other's back during these uncertain times. The back space is not explored in the frontal live performance of traditional Indian dances. So, exposing the back becomes not just an aesthetic choice but also one that is laden with the filmic possibility of layering multiplicity and choreographing the viewer's perception and engagement with dancers' corporeality. The intrusion of Srivastava's back makes an aesthetic intervention in corporealizing the dance on video. The climactic Tihai on the Mardala communicates in metaphorical rhythmicity the need for friendship amidst the despair and death brought forth by the pandemic. *Danced Poems of Double Authorship* ends with a collage on Sethi's *Which Fork We Take* by ten dance artists from Italy, Japan, India, Bangladesh, and Canada, curated by the Pragjyoti International Dance Festival. Artists visualize moments of crisis as well as hope through their Hasta or gestural, Angika or embodied, and Mukhaja or facial expressivity. Dr. Anwesa Mahanta, festival director and curator, returns to the tactic of the Tihai as she appears last in the film asking the viewer "to do for another daily, unfailingly" and repeating the phrase, "something kind" three times for her audiences. Sethi's *Which Fork We Take* makes hope surge creating communities across movement—one that is rooted in India's Abhinaya tradition.

Abhinaya features through transposition in the dance-film avatar showcased by Chakshu. In Anwesa Mahanta's *Sakhi: An Emovere*, Sakhi means a friend. This work presents a brilliant example of spatial and conceptual swapping, especially in explicating traditional contexts of Sattriya dancing that come from the Vaishnavite monasteries of Assam in northeast India. In the Vaishnavite tradition, the divine is compared to the Sakhi, one in whose presence "streams out our inmost thoughts unwaveringly." Mahanta's voice echoing these words are juxtaposed with her Alta-stained (Alta is a red pigment) foot submerged in clear and still water. The clear and still water is a reflection of the calm and focused mental state of the devotee who seeks the divine in the form of the Sakhi. "Who is a Sakhi?" asks Mahanta, while we see her gorgeous facial expressions infused with Sakhya—the expressive immersive state of a devotee seeking divine companionship. Transposing the notion of submergence and immersion across the mental state and the physical body portrays equity across the body and the mind as well as expression and movement. During the *(Hu)Manifesto: Possibilities for Screendance*, devised collaboratively at the *Opensource: Video Dance* conference at Findhorn Foundation in Scotland in 2006, the possibility of an unfolding of a larger truth "through an accretion of images of bodies in motion" was noted (McPherson 254). *Sakhi: An Emovere* presents such a possibility where the Rasic Intimacy across Mahanta's face, foot, hands, and her surroundings—water, sand, earth, and sun—contextualize a larger manifestation of the world beyond the movement, the dance, and the expression. Such contextualized Abhinaya became a feature of the dance-films at Chakshu. Another such example is Nehha Bhatnagar's *Forest*, combining pedestrian and stylized in the same vein to create complex, potent, non-linear, and non-narrative storytelling. The camera pans in and out dancing with Nehha Bhatnagar's grounded, serpentine, and largesse geometries. We feel Bhatnagar's ecstatic joy as she walks, jumps, runs, and meditates amidst the large trees, the curvilinear trails, the gnarly creepers, and peeking sunlight. Stylized gestures and postures weave through the pedestrian traversing in and through nature bringing yet another example of Abhinaya as the theoretical transposition across expressive possibilities through moving images of the body on camera.

A deconstruction of the expressive through intersectional consciousness of social injustices is decipherable in the *Dastak* films called *Earth, Water, Fire, and Air* created by Darren Johnson of Northern Dawn Media with choreographer Ananya Chatterjea, who is trained in Odissi. *Dastak: I Wish You Me* is an evening-length work about one's personal and political belonging across the sense of home and public places. In Farsi, *dastak* means "knockings" and the dances—both in the films and in live performance—resonate with the percussive traces of global injustices on our

hearts through the materiality of four elements: earth, water, fire, and air. Mud-stained nails on parched earth pair with grounded large undercurves, running, and exasperated breath, forcing the viewer to attend to the injustices toward those people who were denied their share of the Earth. Similarly, the ethereal, wavering, and fierce are dealt through the lens of social justice in *Air*, *Water*, and *Fire*. *Fire* is shot at the same police precinct in Minneapolis where George Floyd, a forty-six-year-old African-American man was killed by a white police officer. Occasionally obscured with images of fire and smoke, this film shows the extent of material damage on the streets of Minneapolis. Such images of destruction are partnered with the sunlit bodies of Ananya Dance Theatre (ADT). Dancers move together during Floyd's struggle, tracing curvilinear asymmetries through their arms and spines. I see these as remnants of Odissi sieved within Yorchha (ADT's grounding in and instituting of the contemporary Indian dance-technique) drenched in Shawngram—meaning struggle or resistance in Bengali.

Quite distinct from the earlier video-dances, Vikram Iyengar's *Water Bodies* (2021) is a chilling capture of the pandemic. Adopting text from Parul Khakar's compelling poem, "Shavavahini Ganga" (meaning the Ganges River carrying dead bodies), Iyengar uses his corporeal virtuosity as the primary expressive conduit. Instead of deploying expressive repertoire—gestural, postural, facial—movement presupposes an expressive ethos of musculature and cellular consciousness that does not require neural translation. We hear voices in Bengali translating Khakar's poem and marking Iyengar's homebase in Kolkata, West Bengal. We feel the sweat, we hear the breath, we experience the slow decay, the impending disintegration of a nation-state refusing to let go of political opportunism in the form of religious appeasement, even in the face of death.

In film studies, it has been established that the intervention of the camera compromises the possibility of a more phenomenological intimacy on and off stage. The willing suspension of the fact of exaggerated proximity as manipulating one's sensibility leads to a loss of Rasic agency. Rasic intimacy that is possible in live performance, presupposes complete agentic control of one's aesthetic sensibility. Technological manipulation by the camera introduces factors—the particular viewpoint of the lens through which the viewer's gaze is sieved—outside of the Rasic framework. There is also an unwanted possibility of a bias towards concretization in the filmic medium. The belaboring on a movement or a body part allows for the predominance of its concrete materiality in the spectator's psyche. However, the promise of Rasa lies in the viewer's ability of abstraction—aesthetic metaphorizing the material leading to a distancing of the self as well as the displayed subject.

Our experience of dance-film is implicitly marked by such exaggerations as well as fragmentations activated by the lens, even as we experience the dynamism, energetic transfusion, and affect intimately. While analyzing Hindi cinema, author Ronie Parciack argues that while the movie industry "relies on a distinctive aesthetic lexicon corresponding to *rasa* theories and its contemporary rendition within the realm of popular and visual culture, it eventually hinders the radical potential of *rasa* it nurtures" (119). Parciack makes his claim through the material handling of the subject at hand. Since rasic intimacy relies on the agentic abstraction by the spectator, I note that the close proximity and the desire to concretize impedes Rasa's potential in the filmic medium. Yet, this might generate an intimacy on other registers—those that are not necessarily of transcendental significance but have more contemporary social, political, and activist stance.

While discussing art work of the reputed queer artist, David Wojnarowicz, inspiring and inspired from the political organizing during the AIDS epidemic in the United States, feminist scholars Shannan L. Hayes and Max Symuleski note the necessary work of the intimate in maintaining a sense of vulnerability and openness afforded within the realm of the aesthetic (264). Bringing such an openness emanating from embodied practice to spectatorial labor indicates a "desire for a world in which sensible rejuvination and doubt are embraced as necessary and valuable parts of collective world-building and political critique" (Hayes and Symuleski 271). Yet, such work is bound to entail further negotiation, conversation, and critique, as noted by Sarah Cascone's report on the protests by AIDS activists against Whitney Museum's memorialization of David Wojnarowicz's art drawing attention to the ongoing nature of the crisis. The point I make here is that artistic conduits of Rasa, though they fail in the traditional roster, might be potent in their relationality with the intimate and the concrete—both inspiring ongoing conversations that are absolutely crucial for social change.

Unmuting Rasa

The pandemic has seen a plethora of on-screen activity. While the radical potency of *Rasic Intimacy*, defined as transcending one's egotistic affiliation, is hindered due to the screen's allegiance to the concrete and the proximate, the failure of Rasa has been rather generative in what is otherwise a culture of silence and oppression. The radical potency of the performative does not preclude the radical possibility in totality. There has been an explosion of imaginative use of social media through video conferencing for paid and unpaid workshops, talks, and performances among a large number of amateurs. A discursive movement began on issues related to copyright, plagiarism, and sexual harassment in the arts, directly aiming to empower the artist community. Kri Foundation's Arts and the Law webinars, premiering live on YouTube in both English and Bengali languages, is particularly noteworthy. These webinars present a number of topical panel discussion episodes such as: "The Abuse of Power, Harassment, and Sexual Harassment," "The Arts and IPR Protection of Traditional Cultural Expression, Classical, Fine, and Folk Art Forms," "Rights of All Artistes: The LGBTQ+ Artistes," "NDPS Act and Drug Use in the Arts," and "Obscenity in the Arts: Prescriptions and Parameters." There has been an active intervention in the creation of a safe space through closed-door workshops, trainings, online forums, and active vocalization by artists facing marginalization, harassment, and discrimination through the workshop series called UNMUTE, another offering by Kri Foundation and various partners such as beej with Sanjukta Wagh. Wagh's poem, "Why Sometimes the Show Must Not Go On," emerges from a workshop on breaking the silence around a culture of sexual exploitation in January, 2021. Scholars, artists, and activists present a scathing critique of institutional unaccountability, raising a clarion call against all enablers who play a major role in creating a culture where sexual harassment is normalized and where it is extremely easy for the perpetrator to continue their behavior, unchecked. I borrow the timely phrase, "Reboot/Reform/ Respond," from another UNMUTE training on ethics and safe practices in arts practices and environments to identity the promise of the pandemic. Having experienced gendered and sexualized powerplay in my professional life as a performing artist in India, I perceive a seesaw effect—a simultaneous decline in the radical potential of transcending one's ego through *Rasic Intimacy* and raising collective consciousness of what I am glibly referring to as an unmuting of Rasa. For too long, Rasa has been deployed for patriarchal powerplay as Kathak exponent Nisha Mahajan articulates succinctly in a newspaper interview: There was this notion that, in order to be able to present bhaav or abhinaya, if you don't go through certain experiences, it does not work. This was considered a part of the mentorship, of course, informally…There was this aura of hero-worship and personality cult. And not all students were compelled. Either the students gave in, some others who really wanted to dance were willing to make the compromise. Then there were others who just left." (Khurana 2020)

In closing, I reminisce with Wagh's poem, "Why Sometimes the Show Must Not Go On," to concur and celebrate the UNMUTE-ing of Rasa:

It's not meant for all, they say this thing we call "art"
this thing we call "art"
You must be a fighter, they say, and you must be smart
and you must be smart
If you become part of the circle you are in a pact
you are in a pact
And if this pact's ever broken
only you have your back
only you have your back
The field is full of competitors ready to pounce
ready to pounce
Best to have a godfather or mother to show you around
to show you around
How lucky you are to be chosen
to at last be found
to at last be found

Worthy of this grand tradition bow down,
kiss the ground bow down kiss the ground
We must break you to make you they exclaimed and them you believed
and them you believed
A few pushes, wounds, and heartbreaks
are all part of the deal
are all part of the deal

Your generation has had it easy,
they said the things we endured
the things we endured

Without a sound, a cry, even a whimper towards the larger goal
towards the larger goal
Zip up now child and smile wide
to be seen in the herd
to be seen in the herd

Now swallow those pills with your pride your fears and your tears
your fears and your tears

You sense your health and self shrinking, but the spotlight is on
This is hardly the "art" you had dreamed of but the show must go on

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