Institute of Folk Heritage, Lok Virsa, looks transformed
The Mai Bhagee Hall of Pakistan's National

Introduction
Lok Virsa, Islamabad August 10, 2017
The Mai Bhagee Hall of Pakistan's National Institute of Folk Heritage, Lok Virsa, looks transformed from its usual dull looking walls during classes, to a magical space adorned with fresh, fragrant rose petals that line the performance floor, complementing the stark black back drop, lovingly decorated with strings of fresh marigold. The downstage floor is lined with farshie nizam—carpets and bolster cushions that encourage audiences to relax on the floor—while chairs sit at the back.

Only a few loving supporters, friends and family, in the audience know that this petite lady, Indu Mitha, is Pakistan's senior-most and oldest maestro of a dance form called bharatanatyam, nor that this evening is the first of a two-night celebration of her retirement, after five decades of presenting choreographies with her students. They have all simply captured with her warm welcome and grace, and await with anticipation what she invites them to this evening.

This article is about one of the last choreographies created by Pakistani dance maestro Indu Mitha for her final performance in August 2017, marking her official retirement as a teacher. The choreography was performed by me, one of her senior shagird or dance students.

For her final performance, Hazareen Khawhishahen Aisee (A Thousand Yearnings), Indu Mitha created Qaseeda Iml-o-Jama (An Ode to Wisdom and Beauty), lovingly choreographed on me, allowing me to narrate a multi-layered story of glimpses of my guru Indu's life, but also reflecting on our passion for dance.

Indu Mitha is Pakistan's living legend, a recipient of Pride of Performance for Excellence in "Arts, Dance and Choreography" (2017), and a bharatanatyam dance teacher and choreographer. This article is developed from a two-decade-long ethnographic project I commenced in Islamabad in 2003 as part of my anthropology training. In my earlier research "Choreographing (in) Pakistan: Indu Mitha, Dancing Occasions and Histories in the Land of the Pure" (2012) Indu's life and work enabled me to dig into Pakistan's forgotten Indic past and highlight an alternate inclusive culture which has been occluded. Thus, in this article readers will experience "Indu's "Ode to Wisdom and Beauty," via three interwoven narrative voices in the three sections ahead distinguishable only by use of "author" in the first section, and use of first person in proceeding sections: 1. Indu's Ethnographer, 2. Dance student/artist for and on whom this piece is choreographed and 3. Dance Scholar/Activist of occluded histories.

1. The Dancer

This philosophical piece was inspired by Indu Mitha's surname, "Mitha," which means "sweet" and "true," being a statue of Devi Saraswati outside the Indonesian embassy in Washington DC. This qaseeda or tale allows the author to engage with a story about the land of present-day Pakistan, cradle of one of the oldest civilizations of the world, referred to by many archaeologists as the Indus-Saraswati Civilization. The dance is narrated through Indu's adaptation of the classical form of bharatanatyam better understood by a Pakistani audience. (The author has detailed this adaptation elsewhere.) Using ethnography and autoethnography as a "de-colonizing tool" (Srinivasan 2009), based on her intimacy with the research subject, the author invites the reader to journey alongside her. While this section we are introduced to dance teacher and choreographer Indu Mitha through a dance-ethnographer lens, section two closely follows the content of the choreography via the author's dancing body. The reader gets to sample a key contribution of Indu (fuller details and other contributions in author's bigger project) from the embodied reflections of one of Indu's dancer. In a tableau style, they together engage with a forgotten river and the Indus-Saraswati Civilization and its archaeological details for Pakistan. Finally in section three, readers experience the merging together of the dance scholar-activist indigenous heritage and cultures of South Asia through author's embodied knowledge.

President's House Islamabad, March 23, 2021
Moving ahead in time, let her ethnographer introduce you to Indu Mitha as she walks to receive Pakistan's prestigious Pride of Performance Award from the president himself, on the occasion of the country's 71st Republic Day, March 23, 2021. This day commemorates the historic passing of the Lahore Resolution (1940) when Pakistan became the first Islamic Republic in the world. This is no small feat for Indu as she receives this highest honor in her field from the president. She and a handful of other dancers resiliently continued their dance, finding spaces designated as "foreign soil" to perform on even when the dance was officially banned (in the 80s and 90s), counteracting the colonial legacy of the "No-Objection Certificate" (NOC), which classified dance as "vulgarity," and the wordings of which were only very recently changed.

Official announcement in Urdu (Translation by author), covered live by Pakistan National Television (PTV) News:
Mohtarma Indu Mariam Mitha naey se unees saa lachain maey Delhi University se BA Honor, Unees sau ikane nae miranda house Delhi University se Masters, Masters Degree haey. Aap 30 sau se saal kee uqal maraj aap naee raqs kee muzahirah ha.

The Honorable Mohtarma Indu Mariam Mitha received her BA Honors from Miranda House Delhi University in 1949. You started your dance teaching with different dance teachers at the age of seven. At the age of 13 you performed dance at the Lahore Open Air Theatre. For the last 30 years you have been involved in the production of dance in Lahore, Pindi and Islamabad. Your classical and contemporary pieces were included in the Peking Women's Conference in 2004 and 2017. To honor your excellence in the fields of "Arts, Dance and Choreography" the Islamic Democratic Republic of Pakistan has awarded the Honorable Indu Mariam Mitha with the Presidential Award.

In fact, some of this information is not correct, and Indu

2 Popular style in all Pakistani schools, using Urdu and local poetry across the country "A tableau is a dramatic activity where a group of people's histories of the land of present-day Pakistan, and eventually facilitates the former to access up river of the same name in the latter’s engagement of a Hindu concept of divine knowledge and aesthetics, titled Qaseeda-i-Ilm of Jamal/An Ode to Wisdom and Beauty and 3. Dance Scholar/Activist of occluded histories, Bharatanatyam, Pluralism, South Asian Dance Intersections, 2019, 11, 4.

6 The term devi means "goddess" or "divine manifestation," in the South Asian and particularly the Hindu context. Here the word functions as a title for a specific goddess, Saraswati.


welcomes an opportunity to correct it. Firstly, Indu Mitha graduated from University of the East Punjab, not Delhi University. In Lahore, she was a student of Kameshwar and Zohra Sehgal. Secondly, the plays Amir Khusro and Gulbadan were both written and directed jointly with Farzana Muejeb, and were not done solely by Indu Mitha. Thirdly, Indu Mitha actually danced in the contemporary dance company The Delhi Rains which was choreographed by her student and daughter, Tehreema Mitha, and it was Tehreema who had been invited to present and perform her choreography and contemporary choreography at the Beijing Women’s Conference in 1995. Tehreema then performed solo in the ten-year anniversary of the Women’s Conference at the UN Headquarters in NYC in 2005. Tehreema is considered by Indu Mitha to be the torchbearer of her classical style, and pioneered her own contemporary style. Tehreema is Indu Mitha’s only student who is a full-time professional dancer/composer in her very own right and has been performing since 25 years. She ran a dance company in Pakistan for 5 years and has been the artistic director of her own dance company in the U.S. since 2001. She has over 60 original dances in her classical and contemporary repertoire, both solo and ensemble. She co-choreographed several pure classical solo dances with her guru/mother which she continues to perform. She has been in the U.S. for 25 years but travels to Pakistan every year to perform, teach, and keep alive her mother’s name and work in the country.1

Indu Mitha has taught over 2,000 students over the years. Of these students, only five completed their arangetram, three of whom were taught by both Tehreema and Indu Mitha. In addition, Indu helped cultivate one as a dance scholar (the author), and one young army captain, who in her words “happened to be a Muslim” 12 would result in her crossing the border to Pakistan and living there. Tehreema, her student and daughter, Indu shared that the dance changed every time depending on the number of students available and their quality. 16

Aboobakar Osman Mitha would rise to rank of Major general and a legend in the army, and author of (Karachi, Oxford 1997, pp.4-7).

In forthcoming book, the author shares detailed genealogy of the family and the importance of her family’s “Gandhi connection” which has been lost. See Rat Jagga) “at the Dance Studies Association Annual Conference on Mitha and Indu’s co-choreographic piece titled “.

Author is currently also writing about her work and presented it at the DSA 2022. Earlier writings were for local newspapers, last in 2017 https://herald.dawn.com/english/872457: A River and a Devi

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10 In forthcoming book, the author shares detailed genealogy of the family and the importance of her family’s “Gandhi connection” which has been lost. See Rat Jagga, “A River and a Devi” at the Dance Studies Association Annual Conference on Mitha and Indu’s co-choreographic piece titled “Four-Time Measures” at the PNCA.

11 Aboobakar Osman Mitha would rise to rank of Major general and a legend in the army, and author of (Karachi, Oxford 1997, pp.4-7).

12 Indu’s personal correspondence (2005).

13 Aslam, Bernard College 2005 author first presented her journey with Indu’s dance safai sunaihri (golden sari) taught as a woman in love’s complaint to her Pakistani audience. For a glimpse of Indu’s philosophical approach to bharatanatyam in one of her latest choreographies, (through the experience of the dancing body of her student, for and on the floor) this piece is choreographed so as to travel not only to the stage of her finale presentation in 2017 but led Indu’s own English introduction to this piece reveal her dancer and welcome you to plunge slowly into the watery depth wisdom and beauty that Indu curates (see accompanying video of this premier 2017):

“Ladies and gentlemen, the next performance is an Ode to Wisdom and Beauty, a solo performance by Dr. Feriay Amal Aslam, choreographed by Indu Mitha. This piece is, as its name suggests, a vivid example of the beauty of knowledge, as well as its power of emancipation.”

2. Saraswati: A River and a Devi

Pakistan National Council of the Arts (PNCA), August 11, 2017

I am Feriay Amal Aslam, and it is with deep reverence and honor that I invite you dear readers to join our guru, maestro Indu Mitha with her students of Mazmun-e-Shauq to the finale, day two of Indu-ji’s “retirement” presentation at the capitó’s prestigious and beautiful auditorium, Pakistan National Council for the Arts (PNCA). Look—It is a packed audience as usual in the maestro’s presentations, well over the six hundred audience capacity. Once the seats are full even the stairs fill up with her loyal supporters, friends, family, and parents of over three decades of teaching in the twin cities of Rawal Pindi-Islamabad. She has annually presented her dance programs in the capitol consisting of her regular students (included myself last two decades) at the evening classes at Mazmun-e-Shauq.11 When the school had to close, the evening dance classes had to move to different private cultural spaces, until a haven (though temporary) was found at Lok Virsa when the then dynamic head of the institute let her offer her classes there. Day one of her Lok Virsa performance Indu-ji in her signature style personally introduced each of her pieces and her students to having an audience in beautiful Urdu, but on this very important finale night of her Hazaron Khwahishen performance, she passed her script on to two MCs for the night, one male who reads her detailed script in Urdu, and the female MC who briefly translates it for the foreigners in the audience as you hear overdose already. The first half of the evening, a thirty-minute dance drama Charoom Pehrer (Four-Time Measures)17 followed by a short interval, and now the second half of the night starts with this piece ahead.

I welcome the side stage for my queue, as the MC shares the introductory explanation of my dance “Qaseeda-e-film-o-Jamal” in Urdu, and, students assigned to set up the stage rush to do so, as well as set up the props Indu had chosen for this piece:

“In the beginning of the dance, you will see that the dancer is blindfolded a metaphor she is noting She doesn’t know anything As if she is saying how will anyone teach her anything. . . .

The central concept of this dance is based on the idea that the tangles of the mind do not open until one’s vision opens.”

“After a while she feels the presence of the sound of an instrument.”

And slowly tries to get up from her sitting posture She feels the sensations of a river nearby She starts to play with the water and she feels it around her body. It is as if she is feeling these sensations of touch and sound for the very first time

The blooming of the flowers, the soft sensations of the wings of a butterfly

Feeling the [sensation] of the winds on her she also starts to dance

Ladies and Gentlemen, the first of the senses is of sound, and then of touch

Then as soon as our eyes open then everything around us is revealed

That is why this dance is titled “An ode to beauty and aesthetics”14

14 Indu arranged the accompanying music which was funded via a grant won by the Pakistan-US Alumni Network (PUAN).

This is my quest to enter in the darkness of the prepared stage, and I am aware that only the sound of my ghungaro
I am nothing
I know nothing
Neither to make anything, neither to read.
To try and explore the origins of the sound as eyes are
open, I feel and play with it with my fingers, and then dip
my eyes are blindfolded.

At first Indu wanted to find a poet to string together the
words for these beginning verses or tehtulat (verse
recitation without singing), but a few days later at a
rehearsal session she said “I have the beginning.” Seems
it came with the words these accompanied the dance as
she sits with uninhibited senses depicted by hands on her
ears, eyes blindfolded, crouched, head hanging in despair.
When she shared these beginning verses with me, intuitively
the first movements that also came to my heart were gentle head movements
I learned first in a seminar of classical Javanese
dance during my PhD at the Department of World
Arts and Cultures, and later in classical Sundanese
dance training in Bandung. The gentlest slow tilt of
the sitar strum at this point, the beginning notes of the
sitar’s melody is heard in the background saying these words in
the language of the old Saraswati, the dancer’s offering of the wisdom of devi Saraswati.

Yes! I found it; it is a percussive instrument. Encouraged
by my first discovery I attempt to lift my body up for the
first time but I fall on the floor back to my crouched position but
this time I fall on my knees, and my hands hit the ground.
I am delighted to discover a flowing water source in
my fingers. I feel and play with it with my fingers, and then
dip my feet to step into the waters.

My feet illustrate the waters of popularly called Mighty
Saraswati. Inspired and invigorated they recall the rhythms
of a familiar dance long forgotten everywhere, but for the
bodys. The feet play these rhythms of tihai

2019, This work culminated in a bigger project to create a dance-drama with Indonesian and Pakistani artists—“From Java to Indus: A Dance Journey
which author was honored to lead Pakistani dancers mainly students of Indu Mitha to create choreography performed in Islamabad and Lahore. In

22 I am grateful to Javanese expert Nani Abdul Rahman who pointed out to me that the word “Devon” or “Dewa” means “source of Light” and recommend to
use “Dewi” instead of “goddess Saraswati” when referring to her in my writing.

In his 2016 article “The Riddle of Saraswati,” Michel Danino writes (6):

Since the Saraswati, it was now clear, had nurtured the “Indus” civilization as much as had the Indus, a few archaeologists, beginning with S. P. Gupta in 1989, have proposed the broader term of “Indus-Saraswati civilization.”

The ethos of this land seems to have been lost for a while
but not for too long, as expressed by H. H. Gowen, an
American orientalist who began his enthusiastic History of
Indian Literature (1931), “Often enough it seems as though, like the River Sarasvati, the lost stream of the old Sapta-
Dhara retrieved depictions of warfare and conquest all over
on the messages that the mighty river and the devi who
inspired them. In particular, my mentor legendary Pakistani archaeologist Dr. Ahmad Hasan Dani and like-

minded others who argue for interfaith harmony and
a higher vision historically for viewing the South Asian
region, or some refer as “Indus-Sarasvati Civilization” (Danino 6)
beyond the present-day problematic nation-state, and
transnational, which marks the process of the “founding history” (Zaminidr) a decades long on-going process of dividing the people of the subcontinent along communal lines. It is this
divisive process that tries to alienate Pakistan’s “dancing
girl of mohenjodaro” from her birth place, and occludes the
offering of the wisdom of devi Saraswati.

Saraswati Devi the “Luminary”: Inspirations from the
“Luminaries of Java”


21 Personal correspondence in class settings with late Dr Dani, a teacher and mentor for author since anthropology days at
Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad where I took courses and also ran a student organization Indus-sians under his patronship to preserve the regions heritage.

22 Less than 10% of the total of the 1140 known mature Harappan sites have been excavated, and less than 5 % if all phases considered (e.g., Ganweriwala,
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20 “Luminaries of Java”22

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thought, had disappeared beneath the surface or had become lost in Shallow marshes and morasses…But, sooner or later, we see the stream appear, and then old sights of the river full of layers of alluvial riches hidden to the casual passerby. Today Indonesia is the country with the largest number of Muslims in the world28 and Islam was spread in Java (the most populous island in Indonesia) largely by these famous Wali Sanga or Nine Luminaries and it is to their creative genius and mindful preaching that we owe this celebration of diversity here. I see here that Devi Saraswati is one of them, a female luminary, spreading her light filled with wisdom, beauty and aesthetics.

I want to briefly introduce my readers, especially the Indonesian youth, to these Muslim saints or sunan who used local shadow play or wayang, the gamelan, sekar or poems—the various expressions of indigenous arts—to spread the message of Islam.

Curious Case of the Wali Sanga
Come then with me to Nusantara, an archipelago of islands, which is connected by the seas, and whose residents live on both land and sea. Nusantara comes from two words, nusa and antara, and antara is possibly related to the word antero “all” or “inclusive of all,” and indeed spiritually aligned scholars view this as not only a geographical frame but also a social, cultural and spiritual concept.29 One of these islands is Java. Although the inhabitants are the Austronesian-speaking people, they have been profoundly influenced by the Sanksrit language which could have reached Java as early as first century AD. A profound imprint on the Javanese is “phonocentricity,” i.e., the importance of tonal qualities which is a strong cultural marker in the Sanskrit tradition. As such, “acoustic piety” spread which has been an act of reception becoming primary while the semantic meaning, secondary.30 According to Chinese records, Java had come into contact with Islam as early as the seventh century. However, it was only during the period of the Wali Sanga that many of the locals entered into the folds of Islam. This rapid and wide expansion was possible because the Wali Sanga understood how the Indian Javanese people experienced the divine and thus, their soul’s geographical, linguistics, cultural, and spiritual frames. The sunan made it look very clear though certainly it was no simple task. They had to surmount challenges and evolve their methodology. For instance, Serat Centhini, an old Javanese manuscript of sung poetry records one of the luminaries, Sunan Kali Jagah, advising the King, “Your Majesty, the Javanese are not moved by the calling of the beauty drum. Shall we replace it that Deiva Saraswati. The gameLAN31 whose sound resonates with their spirits?”32

Shaykh Murad describes the Indonesian model as a “little bit of a Geological model…the new alluvium brought in by the new water of a new dispensation overlies what was there before without necessarily washing it all away” So, in the end, “if you shuffle puppets to convey the message of tahu heed that’s fine, even though the former may have their own ancestry in a quite different culture.”

The reason I share the gaseeda of the Wali Sanga is the clarity it has provided me into removing centuries of layers of dirt from my unware dancing body, as it learned a dance which has been multiply configured and reconfigured over time, sometimes as “sacred,” “unholy”, “secular,” “Hindu.” They have helped me see the mindful and wise genius of my guru’s work in Pakistan. I am reminded now during music- and choreography-making sessions India, though an atheist herself, probes me to think of the Ayat- ul-Kursi33 and the title for this piece, and she inspired me to choreograph Sufi whirling to bring in the mystic poet Rumi’s words to come to this one’s heart.

Beyond the space of right and wrong there is an antero space, a monastery for monks, a temple for idols, and a Kaaba for those who turn, it’s a tablet for the Torah, and the pages for the Quran. I am bound by the religion of love to whatever direction its caravans turn, for love is my religion and my faith.” Ibn Arabi, The Interpreter of Longings

3. CREATING ALTERNATIVE CULTURAL FORMATIONS: “Dancerly Ethnographic” Reflections (Chatterjee et al 8)

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36 UCLA professor Nile Green defines “other Islams” as a syncretism of indigenous cultures with Islam in countries other than those in the Middle East, like India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. It is integral for me, as her Muslim bharatanatyam dance student to share here the Wali Sanga’s vision as only after beginning to immerse myself in Indonesia can I see and experience the story, the light at the origins of all the colors of the rainbow, how it all comes and returns to that one light. Thus, I move from Java back to Indus and the Land where the River and Devi, or Luminary Sarasvasti, once thrived and lived and inspired and all continues to do so. I understand only now as I immerse myself in the context of “other Islams” (Green 2008) like Indonesia, the trailblazing work that Indu did to subtly retain the beauty of the Indic history of the land of Pakistan after decades of resistance to and decades of counter efforts to forget this past. These visionsaries help me understand that the truth is so clear: they are all luminaries of light, lovers of my Allah, your God everyone’s God, which is One.

O marvel of My heart has become accepting of every form. It is a pasture for gazelles, a monastery for monks, a temple for idols, and a Kaaba for those who turn, it’s a tablet for the Torah, and the pages for the Quran. I am bound by the religion of love to whatever direction its caravans turn, for love is my religion and my faith.” Ibn Arabi, The Interpreter of Longings

These teermanam35 marks the stage in the dance where I witness a merging of my scholar and activist selves. I have seen without my blindfold, heard the rhythms, tasted the fruits, swayed my body to the winds, embraced the rainfall

25 A musical device or mechanism, used to create excitement, tension or release, usually in set of three culminating in the third, repeated phrase ending on the downbeat of the cycle (definition paraphrased from denouncing Indian Music by Kuljit Bharma).


27 Grateful to Javanese expert Nani Abdul Rahman for this insight.

28 See the Cambridge Muslim College (CMC) course “Java: Formal Religion and the Inward Land: Lectures from the Indonesia Heritage Tour,” by Nabi Abdul Rahman and Shaykh Abdul Murad.

29 Wikipedia reports 209 million, and about 87.2% of the population identifies as Muslim.

30 The term “Java” or “Dewa” means “source of Light” and recommend to use “Devon” instead of “goddess Saraswati” when referring to her in my writing.

31 Shykh Murad describes the Indonesian model as a “little...
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of Your blessings on earth. As I enjoy the raindrops on my body, I start to count the perfection of your universe. I have synchronized it with the rhythms of my feet, and so now I can humbly bow and accept the honor to pick up the responsibility of holding the “dia” the vessel of your pure light.

Indu stresses on the importance of “clarity versus classicism,” which is what led to the dance being choreographed in a more tableau form (than a purely classical piece in her Bharatanatyam repertoire) and her impetus behind the elaborate props on the stage, in a recent conversation with the author on choreographic process of this piece:

I was a bit fed up of the usual empty stages we danced on! Making actions, using mudras! That our Pakistani audiences might not recognize.

So, in your Saraswati Devi dance, I also used peeries [low wooden stool common in South Asia], your blindfolded bandage on your eyes etc. . . . and the music instrument, even the sari for the original three rivers and the Saraswati River disappearing by being pulled off stage by invisible off-stage hands, leaving the other sacred rivers, Ganga and Jamuna on stage. It made a beautiful stage set, too! However, the tree and sour fruit, and tasty fruit, and rain were all clearly understandable in classic mudras. The most important thing in a Dance which holds ideas, especially those that might be new or unusual for your audience, is that they should understand and appreciate the idea you are trying to express! So clarity is more essential than just classicism.

Also, the lamp which you were holding as you danced your exit: Carrying light to your whole world, both on the stage and off the stage to others. (emphasis added)

This is certainly one of my favorite compositions. . . . a solo which only you have been taught and have added (emphasis added).

“Your dancerly ethnographic work” (8), like Audre Lorde’s biomythographies of women and female’s lives and work quoted below, which have slipped through the cracks of history, are refracted and intervened through embodied practices.

The body becomes the site of weaving together research, memory, and imagination to invoke and create new collective memories and stories. This practice of story-telling, where the tensions and resonances between multiple stories reveal an emotional map of the dance. I got a phone call from her early morning, she said, "When you do a performance, you are always trying to do things differently. Perhaps that's why you are so creative."

Taking Chatterjee, Wilcox, and William’s call to reconsider and contemplate dance as a way to create alternative cultural formations, and see how the dance embeds these formations in the lives and memories of our communities (9), I reflect on remolding my community of birth, Pakistan, through my dance as urged by veteran Pakistani journalist late Imran Adam in a recent keynote address to scholars and artists at the country’s prestigious art institute (2021):

This country needs the music, it needs the blossoming of colors, it needs forms of beauty that can banish the world, reflecting on the dancer holding the dial up to the audience with her right hand and the book in the left. I felt that in those days leading to her retirement show Indu was constantly pushing her senior students to not be dependent on her anymore and learn to stand on our feet. For instance, when we were stuck in music-making as something was missing for both Indu ji and her senior student that she was choreographing on, and I asked her how she feels about it, she urged me to ponder independently: “It is not me, it’s you— you have to decide!”

Though we had finalized the music with the help of the late maestro Ustad Ajmal on the tabla (his expertise in music arrangement and recording were such a gift for Indu and her senior students over the years), and the young emerging sitar player Shabih Sen, rehearsing together before recording, the dancer and the choreographer were not at peace about the ending. It was a day before the show’sdress rehearsal and I received a call to come over. Shabih had a new idea. He wanted to make the choreography closer to the traditional Saraswati style. I asked how she feels about it, she said: “When you do a performance, you are always trying to do things differently. Perhaps that's why you are so creative.”

To go and remold. Become tomorrow. May your god go with you.

To grasp the sorry scheme of things entire

And so, I did. 42

To inspire me to playing a Sufi qawwal Mun Kurtou Mula (Whoever I Am Master To) sung by the maestro Ustad Shujaat, she continued, “Listen to this music and see how it makes you feel and then think of the ending and choreograph it.” In fact, she made a movement suggestion motivating me to think of the ending and let the entire process of this piece:

It was an exciting labor of love each step of the way, back then in July 2017, as we worked together on the choreography and music-making process to the props and costumes. From the spoken words at the beginning of the piece that “come” to Indu (personally, correspondences), to the choice of the raga saraswati that I chanced upon, to movements Indu choreographed to suit the tone and weight of message she wanted to convey through the devi. She took great care in her use of interesting rhythms of the musical instruments, enhanced by music from the bells on the dancing feet, signature of the classical dances of this land. Not only were the music and choreography a labor of love but so were the detailed props especially for Indu. I recall fondly one afternoon when we were to rehearse in Indu’s living room due to lack of any other space in town for a rehearsal I arrived to a converted living room. Eighty-six years young Indu eager to try out her choreographic inspiration that rehearsal morning had single handedly tied three of her sarees on the floor to depict the three rivers and the Saraswati, with the wooden stool and instruments in the center, before her dancer had even arrived. And finally, my Saraswati Devi–garbed body was painfully tailored in a red and white blouse, red pants, and off white saree that I chanced upon, the way I happened to be as the base of the dress, and I bought a deep red marawar41 material with elegant gold threads in it for the blouse and the punkheer or fan. I also chose elaborate combinations of piping of gota to line the sari border the blouse and the punkheer.

But this Saraswati–garbed body holding the symbols of the dial (light of knowledge) and the Book in the other was frozen. For the finale of the dance the initial Indu choreographed a still posture with the dancer holding the dial up to the audience with her right hand and the book in the left. I felt that in those days leading to her retirement show Indu was constantly pushing her senior students to not be dependent on her anymore and learn to stand on our feet. For instance, when we were stuck in music-making as something was missing for both Indu ji and her senior student that she was choreographing on, and I asked her how she feels about it, she urged me to ponder independently: “It is not me, it’s you— you have to decide!”

41 Defined in Rekhta dictionary online as “insight in divine matters or mysteries” or “mystic knowledge”.

42 This part of the choreography remains unchanged to date, much appreciated by even otherwise disapproving traditional audience members like my mother who said it was her favorite dance from the evening.
With that she was gone, turning to the hundred other little things she had to finalize as presenter and choreographer of her finale show! But she knew just what to say to me knowing my passion for Sufism. As I listened to the Sufi qawwali in solitude and tried out the movements that morning before the final sound and lights rehearsal, it came very naturally and the ending of the dance became a sama whirling ritual. Once I bow to the lamp in my right hand, and hold it up to share it with the audience, then I stamp my feet in double time, turning and bending to put up the book with my left hand (actually Indu ji’s notes journal symbolically also very important for me) the Sufi whirling ceremony initiated by a bow to the lamp, had already begun.

*Whirling in the Ocean of Love*

The rhythms of the tabla as my guide and the strings of the sitar too leading me, urging me from deep within my soul to the sacred geometry of the circle as I turn round and round with my right hand up, holding the light, just like the whirling dervish that holds his or her hand up to receive directly from the Divine. And in my left hand is the Book, my worldly means of sharing the messages I receive and means of service in the Path of Love.

For the author, also the dancer in this piece, these open a space of interfaith harmony illuminating and blessing all creation. Indu’s *Qaseeda-i-imam-Jamal* narrates the humble process of discovery of beauty and aesthetics that leads to ascension of each soul when it follows its individual calling and journey. When one is grounded in one’s unique indigenous land, committed to the honesty of the moment via one’s practice and the discipline that it requires, one transcends to higher vistas.

*One Day in your wine shop*

I drank a little wine,  
And threw off the robe of this body  
And knew, drunk on you,  
This world is Harmony Creation, Destruction  
I am dancing for them both.

*Mevlana Rumi*

There are many ways to the Divine. I have chosen the ways of song, dance, and laughter.  

*(Ibid)*

End / Salaam – Curtain Call

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Curtain call for Indu’s retirement show Hazroon Khawahisheen Aisee (2017). She introduces four of her senior students in the show, author included (wearing the attire from this dance).
Dance drama “Garuda in Mohenjodaro” (2019) co-choreographed and danced by Feriyal Amal Aslam and Keni Soeriaatmadja (pictured above), pioneer collaboration of Pakistan’s maestro Indu Mitha’s Kalakshetra Bharata Natyam and Indonesian Legong maestro late Bulantrisna Djelantik, part of Dance drama “From Java to Indus: Dance Journey Indonesia, Pakistan and the World,” produced by KBRI, Islamabad, Written and directed by Feriyal Amal Aslam

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