

The Tale of a Choreographer, her Student, a River, and an Endangered Heritage: Indu Mitha's *Qaseeda-i-Ilm of Jamal/An Ode to Wisdom and Beauty*

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Abstract

Choreographing in Pakistan since the 1950s, the country's senior-most ninety-plus years young classical dance maestro Indu Mitha has made trailblazing contributions within *Kalakstetra Bharatanatyam*¹ using North Indian music and thought-provoking and contemporary content, while also producing unique tableau forms of dance².

In one of her recent solo pieces in the tableau style, titled *Qaseeda-i-Ilm of Jamal or An Ode to Wisdom and Beauty*, Indu engages with symbols derived from a Hindu concept of divine knowledge and aesthetics, Saraswati. Indu Mitha allows the author also Indu's dancer for this piece, to pay tribute to a forgotten dried-up river of the same name in the latter's engagement with people's histories of the land of present-day Pakistan, and eventually facilitates the former to access and embody, a pluralistic space of interfaith harmony which was occluded.

Key Words

Occluded *herstories*, Bharatanatyam, Pluralism, Pakistani dance

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

1 Refers to the institute and modern style of Bharatanatyam that emerged from it pioneered by Rukmini Devi Arundale in 1936 for her goal to create a space where expression of Indian thought can be artistically nurtured.

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 students are asked to physically construct a significant scene from literature through body placement, facial expressions, and the use of a few props." Originally used in religious rituals, it was first developed into a theatre technique by the Ancient Greeks. Indu dance drama use both spoken word "*Tehtul-lafz*" (of verse) recitation (without singing) and "freeze frame" technique of tableau style inviting her audience to identify the scene, its importance, and the significance of the characters, their actions, and reactions.

3 Her senior most *shagrid* is her daughter Tehreema Mitha, who is a professional choreographer/dancer/composer in her own right and continues Indu Mitha's legacy onwards, in her own work. After Tehreema Mitha others who were also part of her finale presentation include the author, Iftikhaar, Amna Muwaz and Zahra Khalid. Male dancer Asfandyar was also her student and continues a career in dance but in his own style. Others who were not in the show but who continue to dance as a career: Fauzia, Rafia, Zainab Dar.

4 *Mazmun-e-Shauq*, the name of Indu Mitha's institute in Islamabad, translates as the "Subject of my Passion," is from a verse by famed Pakistani poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz.

5 She received this award three years after her retirement presentation. Earlier the prestigious Annual Music Conference at Lahore created a new category, Performing Artist, to pay tribute to Indu Mitha's lifetime contribution to Pakistan's classical music and dance field.

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

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 are all simply captivated 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 finale presentation in August 2017, marking her official retirement as a teacher. The choreography was performed by me, one of her senior *shagrid* or dance students.³

For her finale presentation, *Hazaroen Khawahishaen Aisee* (A Thousand Yearnings), Indu Mitha created *Qaseeda Ilm-o-Jamal* (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.⁴

Indu Mitha is Pakistan's living legend, a recipient of Pride of Performance for Excellence in "Arts, Dance and Choreography" (2021)⁵, 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 Occluded 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 surprise at seeing a statue of Devi Saraswati⁶ 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 style into a tableau form better understood by a Pakistani audience. (The author has detailed this adaptation elsewhere.⁷) Using ethnography and autoethnography as a "de-colonizing tool" (Srinivasan 209), 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 project⁸) 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 what that entails 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

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.

7 See Aslam 2012, chapter 3, and my forthcoming book on Indu Mitha.

8 Aslam (2012) and forthcoming book.

Pakistan's prestigious Pride of Performance Award from the president himself, on the occasion of the country's National Day, March 23, 2021. This date 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), countering 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 unees sau unchas maey Delhi University se BA Honors, Unees sau ikanwe maey Miranda House Delhi University se Masters ki Degree hasil kee. Aap ne mukhtalif asatazah se saat saal kee umar maey raqs kee taaleem leni shuru kee. Lahore k Open Air theatre maey 13 saal ki Umar maey aap naey raqs ka muzahirah kiya. Aap 30 saal se zyadah Lahore, Pindi aur Islamabad maey raqs kee peeshkash maey shamil raheen. Aap ne Amir Khusroe aur Gul badan kee Kahani ke naam se do tareekhi musical dance dramaey Tehreer kiyaey aur hidayat karie kee. Aap kay klassiqi aur jadeed raqs Peking Women's Conference 2004 aur 2017 maey Shamil Kiyae gae. Fun, Raqs, Choreographer ke shobae maey aap kee shandar karkgardigee ke aitaraf maey Saddar Islami Jamhooriya Pakistan ne Mohtarma Indu Mariam Mitha ko Sadaratee ezaz baraei husn-i-karkartigee atah kiya haey.

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 dance dramas 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

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 Mujeeb, and were not done solely by Indu Mitha. Thirdly, Indu Mitha actually danced in the contemporary dance, *The Death Rattle*, which was choreographed by her student and daughter, Tehreema Mitha, and it was Tehreema who had been invited to present and perform her classical and contemporary choreography at the Beijing Women's Conference in 1995. Tehreema then performed solo in the ten-year anniversary of the UN 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 own right, and has been for 37 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 based 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.⁹

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 Christian male student from a marginalized community was at one point director of the Lok Virsa folk dance group, and who continues to teach, dance, and perform in the troupe at the Pakistan National Council of the Arts (PNCA).

However, few know of Indu's trailblazing work in

dance studies and in indigenizing the classical dance for Pakistani audiences. Indu's repertoire blends a philosophical understanding of the universe with her love for aesthetics and her preferred artistic expression via her training in Kalakshetra bharatanatyam and the Uday Shankar dance style. Knowing her family background helped the author comprehend the full genius of her work. Not only did Indu come from a highly educated Bengali Christian family, but they were key players in the history and philosophical movements of this land. In Bengal, her maternal great grandfather was part of the *brahmo samaj* movement and made his contribution to the South Asian women's movement. Her maternal grandfather Sushil Kumar Rudra, a brilliant and respected philosopher, was the first Indian principal of the prestigious Saint Stephens College in Delhi, and is known, along with his friend Charles Freer Andrews, to have asked Gandhi to return to India from South Africa. As long as Indu's grandfather was alive, whenever Gandhi visited Delhi, he stayed with Rudra. (Tagore too, translated his *Geetanjali*, while staying with Rudra.) Indu laments losing this close link that the family had with Gandhi.¹⁰ Summarizing her mother's side of the family, she once told the author, "The Singhas were the *rang rangeela* (colorful ones) and the Rudras were the moral lot, although both sides are educationists" (Aslam 63).

Always an independent thinker as a young woman, she chose dance as her passion, and learned the bharatanatyam dance style in Delhi and Madras. In 1951, this independence of spirit and the love of a young army captain,¹¹ who in her words "happened to be a Muslim"¹² would result in her crossing the newly created borders from India to Pakistan in 1951. When she started her career as a dance teacher, she would take help to translate the Sanskrit content into Urdu and philosophically engaging with Hindu myths, anthropomorphized them choreographed them as stories of everyday life for people of all religious beliefs.¹³ She worked hard with the best maestros and musicians in the land for her innovations in the music,

accompanying the dance to retain the best of the aesthetics of the form, sometimes stretching subtly the boundaries of the Kalakshetra classical repertoire she had inherited, but all to make them interesting and meaningful 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 whom this piece is choreographed) let us travel now back to the stage of her finale presentation in 2017 and let Indu's own English introduction to this piece reveal her dancer and welcome you to plunge slowly into to the watery depths of 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. Feriyal Amal Aslam, choreographed by Indu Mitha.¹⁴ 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 Feriyal 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 capitol'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 Mazmoon-e-Shauq.¹⁵ 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 students to her loving 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 heard overleaf already. The first half of the evening, a thirty-minute dance drama Charoen Peher (Four-Time Measures)¹⁶ followed by a short interval, and now the second half of the night starts with this piece ahead.

I wait beside the stage for my queue, as the MC shares the introductory explanation of my dance "Qaseeda-e-Ilm-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 nothing
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*

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"¹⁷

This is my queue to enter in the darkness of the prepared stage, and I am aware that only the sound of my *ghungaro*

⁹ 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/news/1153938/tehreema-mitha-dancing-amid-the-dharna>. Last year author presented paper titled "Dancing Resilience for "The Land of the Pure": Tehreema Mitha's Ratt Jagga (Vigil)" at the Dance Studies Association Annual Conference on Mitha and Indu's co-choreographic piece titled "Rat Jagga".

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 <https://www.ststephens.edu/history/> for details. Indu's "Gandhi connection" detailed in her brother's biography *Major General AA Rudra: His Service in Three Armies and Two World Wars* (1997, pp.4-7).

¹¹ Aboobakar Osman Mitha would rise to rank of Major general and a legend in the army, and author of *Unlikely Beginnings: A Soldier's Life* (Karachi, Oxford University Press, 2000) published posthumously by Indu Mitha.

¹² Indu, personal correspondence (2005).

¹³ Aslam, Barnard College 2005 author first presented her journey with Indu's dance *saaRii sunaihrii* (golden sari) taught as a woman in love's complaint to her handsome lover that she saw him looking at another woman, was adapted from a Telegu dance *sareega kunguu* a repertoire she carried from her dance teacher Lalita Shastri in South India.

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

¹⁵ This is also the name of a unique bilingual primary Montessori school founded by Indu's eldest daughter Yameema Mitha, offered evening classical music and dance classes.

¹⁶ See Aslam (2012), chapter 2 for details. There is a long history of Indu presenting this four-part dance drama over the years, one of her personal favorites in her long pieces (personal correspondence, 2022) as separate parts with different groups of students and dancers, and this night was only the second time. First time was in the 60's and called "*Younh din Guzarta hae*" ("Story of the 24 Hours"), Indu shared that the dance changed every time depending on the number of students available and their quality.

¹⁷ Over time Indu changed the title of the dance in the feedback to this paper from her MC script, but for this publication she gave me permission to use either one of the English translations of the Urdu title *Ilm-o-Jamal*.

(dance bells) is heard as I quietly takes my position before the soft central light comes on. In the dim spotlight, the audience can see me first as a seated figure crouched with my hands over my ears, on a traditional wooden stool, and my eyes are blind folded with a white net cloth. A *tabla* piece on my right and left, a stringed instrument, a lamp set on a low table and a book, though not apparent to the audience till later. But very distinctly visible are three colorful *saris* stretched, two along the stage breadth, and one from all the way from stage right to left. It is special that these are my guru's personal *saris* and her voice reciting these words she has written specifically for me perhaps to convey every seeker's pilgrimage through mine.

Before you hear those recited words, let me acknowledge Indu's role in encouraging me in my first steps to bridge the two lands of my love, Indonesia and Pakistan. Indu-ji was the one who encouraged me to perform Indonesian dance at the annual Rafi Peer Theatre Festival (2003) in Lahore where she and her students are annually invited, for which I had to borrow an elaborate costume from the Indonesian Embassy in Islamabad, which in turn led to introductions and now many exciting cross-cultural collaborations with Indonesian artists over the years continuing to date.¹⁸ But that's another story for a later time, for now I will let you return to PNCA where Indu's voice is heard in the background saying these words in silence:

*Maey kuch nahee huen
Mujaey kuch nahee atah
Muhaey kuch bhee to nahee atah
Na kuch banana atah haey, Na karna Na parhna
PARHNAH toe bohat he mushkil hoe ga
Parhna Seekhnaey k liyaey toe ustad ke zarurat paraey
gee?
Kiyah maey kuch bhee seekh sakuen gee?
Mujh maey seekhnaey ke silahiyat bhee haey k nahee
Mujhaey kissie cheez ka alim nahee.
Na deen ka na duniya aur mafiyah ka
Maey kaisaey seekhuen
Mujhaey koi sikhae gah
Kyoen?*

18 In 2010–11, the author studied with, and later collaborated with, the Indonesian Sundanese dance maestro Indrawarti based in Bandung. Since then, author has collaborated with dancers from different parts of Indonesia who practice different styles of Indonesian dance: Javanese, Sumatran and Balinese—rich material for future writings. Recently, The Golden-Bridge of Harmony Project (Nov 2012–May 2015), the brainchild of the late Indonesian ambassador to Pakistan, Burhan Muhammad, which included inviting dancers and *batik* artists from Indonesia to collaborate with Pakistani ones, in which author was honored to lead Pakistani dancers mainly students of Indu Mitha to create choreography performed in Islamabad and Lahore. In 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 Indonesia, and to the World” came into being. Further information is shared in forthcoming research (see brochure cover pic ahead).

19 from Indonesian maestro Eko Supriyanto, see <https://www.ekosdance.company/>

20 https://youtube.com/clip/UgkxaaczT_CdCl-gAAoHQPeQQzR11mgZiSh?feature=shares

I am nothing
I know nothing
Neither to make anything, neither to read.
To read will be so difficult.
To learn to read I will need a teacher
I don't have knowledge of anything, not of religion, or of the world or *worldly matters*.
How will I learn? *Will anyone teach me?*
Who?

Then we hear the sounds of *tabla* by late Ustad Ajmal Khan Sahab and Sitar Shabih Sen, and *bols* and *manjira* by Indu Mitha.

At first Indu wanted to find a poet to string together the words for these beginning verses or *tehtullafz* (verse recitation without singing), but a few days later at a rehearsal session she said “I have the beginning.” Seems it came to her, so she wrote it herself. These accompany the dancer as she sits with uninitiated 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 had learned first in a semester of classical Javanese dance during my PhD at the Department of World Arts and Cultures,¹⁹ and later in classical Sundanese dance training in Bandung. The gentlest slow tilt of the downward head, led by the chin in a semi-circle clockwise first to the right and then to the left, called *gilek* in the Sundanese language. The soft strings of the sitar strum at this point, the beginning notes of the famous *raga saraswati* joined by the fast beats of the *tabla's* greeting as it begins the rhythmic cycle of *rupak taal* (a cycle of seven beats). Paralleling the exciting discovery of the forgotten or “the lost” River Saraswati through the work of numerous archeologists, our creative discussions for this piece were fed by chance encounters of an old 1985 rendition of *raag saraswati* by Ustad Salamat Ali Khan and Sharafat Ali Khan.²⁰

It is beyond the scope of this article to go into the heavily debated and much written about discourse on this river, often complicated by the aftermath of Partition and identity politics. Instead, I would like to focus here

on the messages that the mighty river and the devi who inspired it convey. In particular, my mentor legendary Pakistani archaeologist Dr. Ahmad Hasan Dani and like-minded others who argue for interfaith harmony²¹ 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 traumatic baggage of the process of the “long partition” (Zamindar) 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.

Ahead, readers share the author's experiential journey of the embodiment of this illuminated soul that is known as Devi Saraswati. The first prerequisite for illumination is the opening of the sight. When the eyes of the heart really open, one can view so much beauty. And that is the space I prefer to write from.

Saraswati Devi the “Luminary”: Inspirations from the “Luminaries of Java”²²

I stretch my body slowly from my first crouched sitting position, triggered by the sound and stretch my right hand to try and explore the origins of the sound as eyes are blindfolded.

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 feel the illustrious waters of popularly called Mighty Saraswati. Inspired and invigorated they recall the rhythms of a familiar dance long forgotten everywhere, but for the body. The feet play these rhythms of bharatanatyam or dance bols (tihai)

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 she took courses and also ran a student organization *Indus-sians* under his patronship to preserve the regions heritage.

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 Saraswati*” instead of “goddess Saraswati” when referring to her in my writing.

23 It does not, however, cover “The Riddle of the Sarasvati River,” (p. 7) in all Harappan sites, since “Gujarat is also host to some 300 Mature Harappan sites, most of which cannot be said to be in the Sarasvati basin. ...the Ghaggar-Hakra's identity as the Sarasvati's relic was accepted by most archaeologists after Stein, including the British M. Wheeler (1968), R. and B. Allchin (1997) and J. McIntosh (2002, 2008), the American G.L. Possehl (1999, 2002) and J.M. Kenoyer (1998), the French J.-M. Casal (1969), the Pakistani A.H. Dani (in Mughal 1997: 11, 12), the Indian A. Ghosh (1952), B.B. Lal (1997, 2002, 2009), S.P. Gupta (1996), V.N. Misra (1994) or Dilip Chakrabarti (2006, 2009).”

24 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, Cholistan, Pathani Damb in Baluchistan).

*tak-kitta takka dhimmi
tak-kitta takka dhimi
tak kittaa dhikitta tai dhit-tai tai-dhit tai tai-dhit tai*

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.”²³

Keynoer highlights that the most striking aspect of this “Indus-Saraswati civilization” amongst others noted by archaeologists, is that in comparison to other similarly great civilization sites around the world like Sumer, Egypt, or Greece, there is an invisibility of “military might” (Danino 1673). Early archaeologists digging at Harappa or Mohenjodaro retrieved depictions of warfare and conquest all over the sites. But the first message of this land by the mighty Saraswati River is of *peaceful coexistence*. Though the understanding of this civilization is still in its early phase,²⁴ Jane R. McIntosh, a British archaeologist, writes in *A Peaceful Realm*: “One of the most surprising aspects of the Indus Civilization is that it seems to have been a land without conflict. There are no signs of violence and no depictions of soldiers or warfare in the Indus art. When we look at other civilizations, we see how unusual or unexpected this is” (177).

This 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 Saraswati, the lost stream of the old Sapta-Sindhavas, the river of Indian 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 ideas resume their way.” “Often enough it seems as though, like the River Saraswati, the lost stream of the old *Sapta-Sindhavas*, the river of Indian

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 ideas resume their way.”

*tak-kitta dhikita
tai dhit-tai tai dhit-tai tai dhit-tai*

While I am immersed in exploring the newly found rhythm of my dancing feet in this *tihai*,²⁵ my audience can see the saris slowly receding saris from centerstage by invisible hands to stage left, as gushing waters of the mighty Saraswati slowly dry up. It is as if the river sees her job is done as my feet are in full momentum, empowered by her waters. With trembling hands, I slowly open the blindfold around my eyes and throw it quickly to stage up left.

When the eyes open, I am able to see all the beauty around me, all of nature—how it is all one, beyond the divisions of forms, close to nature.

Yes, indeed, but only when the eyes of the heart open, as mystics say. For me, the answer comes via the story of the “luminaries of Java,”²⁶ famously the nine saints credited to another civilization where there is a unique *qaseeda* or story of a completely peaceful, creative, and efficient bloom of a new faith: Islam is fostered in the 16th and 17th centuries AD by the legendary nine saints or Wali Sanga.

The mystic poet Rumi’s words come to this one’s heart:
Beyond the space of right and wrong there is an open field

I will meet you there.

So, I venture in that open field and embody the *Devi Saraswati* inspired from this mighty river, both forgotten in “The Land of the Pure,” land of my birth as the other, a “Hindu goddess,” but celebrated in my second home by love, Indonesia. It is here that I write

these words and discover in Indonesian language even the word for “dance” is *persembahan*, translated as “offering” rather than performance.²⁷ So, this is my offering here ahead. As I begin to write and reflect on this dance, I discover what evaded me, and perhaps my generation, all this time and which was long known by elders of both the land of Indonesia and the subcontinent that what I saw as “Hindu God” stories are actually narrations of “luminaries” like Krishna or *Devi Saraswati*.²⁸ My dance is my offering to the dried-out soul of the land of my birth, thirsty for the sounds and 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 world²⁹ 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 Pakistani 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*, the former referring to an archipelago, 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.³⁰ One of these islands is Java. Although the inhabitants are the Austronesian-speaking people, they have been profoundly influenced by the Sanskrit language which could have reached Java as early as first century AD. A

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 *demystifying Indian Music* 6, Kuljit Bharna).

26 Term used in Cambridge Muslim College online course “Java: Formal Religion and the Inward Land: Lectures from the Indonesia Heritage Tour” by Nani Abdul Rahman and Shaykh Abdul Murad, accessed June 2023.

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

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

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

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

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 widely, with the act of recitation becoming primary while the semantic meaning, secondary.³¹ 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 traditional 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 *bedug* (drum) in the mosque. Shall we replace it with the *gamelan*³² whose sound resonates with their spirits?”³³

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 Shaykh Murad’s words “if you shadow puppet to convey the message of *tauheed* that’s fine, even though the former may have their own ancestry in a quite different culture.³⁴

The reason I share the *qaseeda* of the Wali Sanga is the clarity it has provided me into removing centuries of layers of dirt from my unaware 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 Indu, though an atheist herself, probes me to think of the *Ayat-ul-Kursi*³⁵ and names of Allah for the title of this piece, and she inspired me to choreograph Sufi whirling to bring in the *marafat* (or self-knowledge), which was missing for us both in the rehearsal music-making sessions. For her what is more important is the bigger picture, the story, but I am

31 Ibid.

32 The term *gamelan* refers to an Indonesian orchestra made primarily of percussion and flute.

33 CMC course “Java: Formal Religion and the Inward Land: Lectures from the Indonesia Heritage Tour,” by Nani Abdul Rahman and Shaykh Abdul Murad.

34 CMC, Ibid.

35 Title of an important Surah of the Quran, for the Muslims explaining attributes of God.

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 Indonesia, Malaysia, India, Pakistan, Philippines amongst others.

37 Bharatanatyam dance sequence used to end a dance sequence or “*jati*”

her dancer who struggles despite herself to throw away the dirt of centuries of alluvial accretion, particularly recent huge residues of divisive communal nation-state identity, and Muslim-Hindu problem of the modern nation states of 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 *Nur* 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 *Sarasvati*, once thrived and lived and inspired all and continues to do so. I understand only now as I immerse myself in the context of “other Islams” (Green 2008)³⁶ 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 visionaries 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

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

Bandung, Indonesia, August 2023

*ta -ta- ta- taK-tRaktum
ta-ta- ta-taK-tRaktum
ta-ta-ta-taKtRaktum
tak-taraKtrum tak-taraKtrum tak-taraKtrum ta!*

This teermanam³⁷marks 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

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, I am grounded in the land of my birth and so now I can humbly bow and accept the honour 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 conversation³⁸ 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 *saris* 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 performed!”

The focus on the beauty in the essence, beyond the form, is the crux of Indu’s choreographic vision within the dance tradition that she inherited from her teachers. Reflecting on this particular choreography of Indu, it is also a deep dive into a two-decades-long journey for the me as one of Indu’s senior students. The dance also narrates my journey with the maestro’s work, from our first meeting in my anthropology class in Islamabad where she introduced our class to *bharatanatyam* via a lecture demonstration, to joining as a student in her style, culminating in specializing in her style and, in the

process, becoming Pakistan’s first PhD dance scholar. Trained in dance too late to pursue dance professionally, my dance practice aids me as a *thinking tool* to be grounded in my body, to the land of my birth, and to indigenous struggles and movements around the globe. In the process I also become one of the examples to illustrate Indu’s impact on her students as they venture out in the world, reflecting on Indu’s empowering teaching style. In this article it is via new discoveries the choreographer and the dance student-scholar made in process of co-creating this piece, which brought the author in me to her engagements with histories/her-stories of the land of both our births.

Ananya Chatterjea, Hui Niu Wilcox, and Alessandra Lebea Williams in the book *Dancing Transnational Feminisms* investigate bodily histories and “remappings” (5), locating their work in diverse fields, in epistemological questions about how we come to know the world through cellular and kinesthetic resonance. In the process of this theorization of embodied epistemological subjectivities, important contributions are made to disciplines that center marginalized subjectivities. Via an invigorating dialectic between discourse and practice, they “highlight how dance-making and creative processes, when imagine interjectionally, can generate new knowledges and shift perspectives in multiple fields beyond dance studies, such as performance studies; women, gender, and sexuality studies; critical race and ethnicity studies; cultural studies; and *critical ethnography* (emphasis added).”

“Our dancerly ethnographic work” (8), like Audre Lorde’s biomythographies of women and femme’s lives and work quoted below, which have slipped through the cracks of history, are refracted and interwoven 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-ing, where the tensions and resonances between multiple stories reveal an emotional map of the physical choreography and trace connections, puts us in conversation with various communities and in alignment with our commitment to decolonized knowledge production (8)

Taking Chatterjea, 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 Aslam 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 ugliness of our imposed landscape. It cries out for an appreciation of diversity and indigenous craft, it needs the healing touch which only you, the artisan, can bestow on a wound that is festering. It cries out for the anarchistic impulse to destroy and rebuild. . . . I’ll leave you with Omer Khayyam at his anarchistic best:

*Ah love could thou and I with Fate conspire
To grasp the sorry scheme of things entire
Would not we shatter it to bits and then
Remold it nearer to the heart’s desire.*

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

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 “came” to Indu (personal correspondence), 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 dress, from an old white saree that Indu-ji gave me to use as the base of the dress, and I bought a deep red *jamawar*³⁹ material with elegant gold threads in it for

the blouse and the *punkhee* or fan. I also chose elaborate combinations of piping of *gotta* to line the sari border the blouse and the *pankhee*.

But this *Saraswati*-garbed body holding the symbols of the *dia* (light of knowledge) and the Book in the other was frozen. For the finale of the dance initially Indu choreographed a still posture with the dancer holding the *dia* 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 how she feels about it, she urged me to ponder independently: “It is not me, it’s you—you have to decide!”⁴⁰

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’s sound and lights rehearsal and between me and Indu ji we knew we had an unfinished choreography! It was not coming from within. Never failing to avail a teaching opportunity with her students even in this stressful moment one day before her retirement show, the maestro gave her student the challenge to think of the ending of the last one minute of the dance. I got a phone call from her early morning, she said: “Work on the ending to let the *marafat*⁴¹ come out and to let the ending come alive.”

To inspire me playing a Sufi qawwali *Mun Kuntoe Maula* (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 and “allowing” me to bring in the whirling movements, which she of course remembered were part of my personal spiritual Sufi practice (though I don’t recall talking much about it as she was not inclined that way).

And so, I did.⁴²

39 A popular satin cloth gets its name from weave techniques where the motifs are created using the primary weft itself creating an inlaid look.

40 Film “*How She Moves*” (2021) on Indu shows a snippet of this moment as I allowed the film makers to film one of these music composition sessions, though the film shows clips without much context and background of the process of making of this dance.

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-ilm-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



Curtain call for Indu's retirement show Hazroen Khawahisahan 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 Soeriatmadja (pictured above), pioneer collaboration of Pakistan’s metro 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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