SADI
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MISSION

South Asian Dance Intersections is a progressive, scholarly, blind peer-reviewed, and open-access journal which seeks to publish a unique blend of original high-quality research in scholarly, choreographic, contemporary, community-building, and technical explorations within South Asian dance and its interdisciplinary intersections. It seeks to publish policy, theory, and practice articles, reflection essays, book and resource reviews, and arts-based works related to all aspects of dance appreciation in South Asian performing arts in both discursive and embodied contexts. It desires to make connections between the verbal and performative in live-performance, pedagogy, and creative interpretations. It also provides a forum for the social activist scholar and artist to use writing and other forms of representation as vehicles for ventures at the intersection of artistic excellence and social justice. Submissions undergo a peer-review process. There are no author fees.

HISTORY

This journal hopes to integrate and interrogate multiple voices in South Asian dance. Some of them are loud voices, such as state recognized forms, while others are not so loud. It attempts to capture a full discourse in dance by bridging languages and by catching the discourse by casting multiple nets over the years. The journal hopes to initiate and extend trends and patterns of existing discourses. The vision of this journal is to eventually produce the discursive extent through a compilation in an anthology compiling three or four editions of this exercise.

Front cover photo: Artist/ scholar Debanjali Biswas, Photo courtesy Debanjali Biswas

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Screenshots for Debanjali Biswas's essay: Fig. 1 (Top), Fig. 2 (Bottom Left), and Fig. 3 (Bottom Right).

Editorial: South Asian Dance Intersections

Arshiya Sethi, Editor-In-Chief, Independent Artivist/Scholar

Welcome to the second edition of *South Asian Dance Intersections* (SADI). We look at globally relevant, overarching themes of democracy, nationalism, and censorship in dance: the democratizing spaces of the internet and film, critical note on nationalism, and the rise of censorship during an era of hyper/cultural nationalism. This volume is our attempt to continue decolonizing dance discourses, in the belief that colonization is not just about material conquest—where land, air, and water are mere "resources" as Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang argue in their essay "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor" (5)—but that colonization creates the canon as well. Unlike some settler colonialisms that "desire to be made innocent" (Tuck and Yang 9), native supremacies come from entitled positions often premised as natural; therefore, need to be resisted more firmly. SADI attempts to resist the tendency for naturalisation and valorization of cultural elitist practices.

SADI's editorial journey has been an exhilarating one, as we offer the community, and especially young scholars, the opportunity to write about their own dance practices and intersections with other forms, disciplines, and pedagogies. This edition has a selection of essays—five journal-length articles and one brief review—from six countries—Pakistan, United States, United Kingdom, France, Australia, and India—and brings several new voices to the fore. Manipuri dancer and anthropology scholar Debanjali Biswas presents a media-based ethnography in which she studies the digital in relation to the "material, sensory, and social worlds" in people's everyday lives (Pink et al. 7). According to Harmony Bench and Alexandra Harlig, editors of the International Journal for Screendance (2021), "In 2020, the screen was seemingly the only venue, and its logics of geography and access to movement communities across the globe suddenly shifted in ways that will likely reverberate for years to come." Dance seems to have escaped its limitations, finding a foothold across all media forms including on online platforms (Bench and Harlig 1). Cultural anthropologist Michel Wesch suggests that the internet is "the most public space on the planet" (21), and each upload cultivates a new audience while connecting with those who have witnessed their practice before. The COVID pandemic has irrevocably turned us towards digital spaces, and the trend is here to stay.

Referencing Trisha Brown's *Roof Piece* (1971), Biswas studies a COVID-time initiative built around dances to Bengali literary genius Rabindranath Tagore's songs since the sensitivity of his writing, the everydayness of his metaphors and his embedded mysticism and spirituality was life-affirming. The act of giving back via dance, and the emotions invested in Tagorean humanism, gave these digital sharings the effulgence of a lamp in darkness. Admittedly, being able to dance and film at that time was an act of privilege, but it created an unexpected solidarity, a powerful safety net and a source of positivity for those who survived the pandemic. In the wake of backsliding from democracy seen in India according to *The Global State of Democracy 2021*, Biswas's work on democratizing digital spaces has a thematic relevance to our volume given the retreat of South Asia's biggest democracy, India, evidenced by the "backsliding" and the "violations".

Meghna Bharadwaj's essay, "Teaching Dance as a Multi-spatial/Multi-media Practice: Reflections on Devising Contemporary Dance Pedagogy in University Spaces," addresses pedagogy in higher education. Bharadwaj's piece predates National Education Policy 2020, the latest experiment in India where dance gets institutional valence as early as at the school level. In India, dance and music have always been part of the cultural fabric of society, but with little to no curricular integration. Most of the learning was left to specially interested students who pursued art forms through the traditional system of apprentice-learning, in institutions of varying tangibility and certification. Pedagogy for some dance practices and lineages has been controlled primarily by those gurus.

For the last decade, the main discussion on pedagogy in India has been about policing of state critique, politicized curricular scrutiny, as well as irrational erasures and additions in state-mandated syllabi. How different are these changes from the prescriptions of Macaulayan education? In her seminal essay "Decolonizing the Curriculum? Unsettling Possibilities for Performance Training," dance scholar Janet O' Shea has referred to the university as "colonial and corporate", and points to its links with the "precarity of neoliberalism" (O'Shea 750). Most Indian universities, including iconic liberal institutions and even some in the private space, have fallen victim to the ideological divide, and lost their cutting edge in the liberal art and education industry. They increasingly appear to be pre-colonial and corporate. Yet they retain their interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary forms of research, and an unpredictable scope for upsetting traditional hierarchies and trajectories of dance pedagogy, while challenging the exclusive notion of dance itself.

While dance is significant as a self-standing discipline of body and space, a university setting also validates dance as a valuable methodology for research. During her own stint at a private liberal arts university, Bharadwaj realized that the understanding of dance as a research methodology lies in how it can enable the researcher to acknowledge her spatial and sensorial experiences within the network of her research activities involving knowledge, language, and text. Describing her access to contemporary dance training as "an identity-refuge" vis-à-vis a lack of Indian dance lineage in her practice, she claims that the term "contemporary" identifies her as a practitioner belonging in not one, but a multitude of dance vocabularies, as well as in a here-and-now time frame. The rubric of contemporary dance offers space for diversity, experimentation, inquiry, and novel expression. It provides tools to challenge old hermeneutics as well as to envision alternatives to the hegemony of more fixed dance ecologies. As this dance program was located in a visual arts department, the author was encouraged to interpret contemporary dance as not just an inquiry of multiple dance techniques, but as a multi-spatial and multi-sensorial process. She was thus encouraged to evolve a contemporary dance pedagogy, docking it into an engagement with camera, site, sound, and text, in addition to the dancing body. She came to understand that the university as a site whose unique architecture, inside and outside, provides exciting spaces for creative work; that writing, theorizing and documenting dance are part of practice; and that digital space has emerged as the dominant space following the university's challenging experience with the pandemic.

French artiste Annette Leday and Cyrille Larrieu's filmic exploration *Dance India Today* (2021) comprises of SADI's feature: Hybrid Footprints. You can find it at the end of the journal in a special page it shares with the CFP for the next edition. The film contains the voices of performers in India who are trained in contemporary dance. It stirs in the mind some of the multivalent understandings of the term contemporary dance, that SanSan Kwan prospects in her piece "When is Contemporary Dance"? In this essay, Kwan argues that placing multiple uses of the term "contemporary" alongside one another reveals ways in which so-called "high art" dance and other so-called "lesser" genres are both increasingly braided and separated, exposing our artistic, cultural, and political prejudices. This churning is welcome in the context of the ubiquitousness of 'classical' dance in the Indian dance imaginary, leading to a dearth of creative exploration. Leday accompanies this collation of voices, narratives, and experiences of key figures with a book *C ontemporary Dance in India Today* published by New Delhi–based Goyal Publishers. We carry an introductory sketch of the book by David McRuvie. McRuvie is a Sydney-based Australian playwright who had worked with Annette in adapting Shakespeare to Kathakali dance in which Leday had trained. Leday has made the entire suite of unedited interviews also available for SADI.

In SADI's premiering issue, we carried a richly embellished photo-essay on Vajira Chitrasena, Sri Lanka's dance pioneer. In this edition, we feature a portrait of the brave and indefatigable dance pioneer of Pakistan, Indu Mitha through dancer-scholar Feriyal Aslam's essay "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*.[1] Aslam writes about her guru Indu, the nonagenarian icon of dance in Pakistan. The article acquaints the reader with the trailblazing work of Mitha who adapted her training in bharatanatyam from India for her new home in Pakistan, where North Indian music was more familiar than Carnatic music. There are few dance stories from Pakistan and even fewer writings. In fact, in intransigent Pakistan, at times, even the sheer act of dancing, is not without risk. In our first edition board member Sheema Kermani wrote about the stigma about dance experienced by male dancers and by extension female dancers. The dance of women and those who dance about Hindu symbols is even more risk prone. Dance has been ubiquitous in all of South Asia and Pakistan is no exception (Gera Roy, 2010). Well-known dances include Dhammal which has Sufi links and Khattak, which is danced by Pashtun men, and only has an onomatopoeic similarity to the Indian classical form Kathak that has had a problematic history in Pakistan. Aslam recounts the last choreography created by Mitha *Qaseeda-i-Ilm of Jamal* (meaning an Ode to Wisdom and Beauty) and her own performance of it. Woven into the artistic tapestry of the recounting, Aslam dreams of pluralist spaces and interfaith harmony. Occluded her-stories juxtapose with the topographic symbolism to complicate geopolitical boundaries while creating appreciation for movement based social mobilization in Pakistan. We continue to hope that a growing number of dance writers and scholars working on Pakistan, will emerge in coming years.Another facet of democratizing of dance is evident in Deepa Mahadevan's "Dance Aesthetics When Bharatanatyam Moved from the Realm of the Popular to the Classical." Mahadevan, a trained bharatanatyam dancer, describes changes within bharatanatyam through three waves: nationalism, globalization, and neoliberalism. She argues cogently that in the first wave, the dance moved from its

popular form as seen in cinema, to the classical form on proscenium stages. She shifts the focus from dominant individuals and institutions, like Rukmini Devi Arundale and Kalakshetra toward more democratic trends. Mahadevan weaves together multiple issues of equity in the field of Bharatanatyam the disenfranchisement of female hereditary dancers; the multiple pathways by which nattuvanars from hereditary families—often initially musicians accompanying renowned female hereditary dancers—gained in social equity; and the ways in which upper-caste dancers created their own aesthetic lineages by ascribing to the lineage of the hereditary male nattavunar from whom they had learnt the art after the female dancers of the community were disenfranchised. This essay is a seminal addition to the burgeoning field of bharatanatyam studies that is seen considerable churning in the field of Indian dance.

The last essay in this edition of SADI deals with censorship. Censorship is pervasive and deceptively close, as evident from the experience of SADI board member Ananya Chatterjea, Artistic Director of Ananya Dance Theatre. In 2022, Chatterjea's Ananya Dance Theatre was invited to present its new work *Nün Gherão* at the "Erasing Borders Dance Festival" organized by the Indo-American Arts Council. ADT is known for its social-justice work and for its people-powered-dances-of-transformation. *Nün Gherão* is a provocative piece in line with ADT's work that uses a 1978–79 massacre on the Marichjhapi Island in West Bengal, India, as its point of departure to explore betrayal, dispossession, and exile, as well as the desperate global resistance, which against great odds, fuels hope and survival. The last-minute and overnight cancellation and erasure of ADT from festival roster and social media dissemination by IAAC's curatorial committee, raises the issue of censorship and conscription. Two decades ago, Judith Lynne Hanna warned us that "dance with its power to arouse has subversive potential which leaves it open for negative interpretation regardless of actual intent" (Hanna 305).

In her essay "Censorship and the 'Nationalization' of Dance in India: An Overview from 1947 to the Present," author Arundhati Chakravarty inquires into the hegemonic forces of nationalism that determine patterns of privileging, excluding, and erasing. Chakravarty argues that a double-pronged effort is underway. One is of overt censorship enforced by instruments of state power, such as policymaking bodies that create censoring legislation, labels, and institutions carrying forward pernicious colonial legacy and an orientalist mindset. Another mode of censorship was enacted through the laws that eliminated hereditary artist communities and professional women performers from mainstream practices of dance and sanitized those practices to be worthy of the labels of "high art" and "classical." In an argument that has also been proffered by Deepa Mahadevan, Chakravarty argues that this mode of censorship also influenced popular forms of dance, especially through cinema, by inscribing them with nationalist notions of womanhood, sexuality and, more recently, religious majoritarianism.

Among covert pathways the author includes pathways of patronage, of funding and making available other resources which in the absence of a clearly enunciated policy can be enacted rather whimsically. Such ways subscribe to the deeply embedded caste and class hierarchies and in more recent times communitarian categories compelling dance to fit its practices within the nationalist framework of a normative Indian cultural identity that is predominantly Hindu and Brahminical. Sustained efforts towards these ends have resulted in standardization of codes of aesthetics that through repetitions have constituted de facto policy. She concludes her argument by establishing how censorship has not just played a repressive role but also a productive one, especially through art washing, patently evident in the fact that due to the centrality of dance in the national cultural discourse, it has been successfully used as propaganda to censor negative actions or perceptions of the government. For example, the danced face of the idea of Amritkaal, and the priority accorded to finding, appropriating and tableauxing lesser-known heroes of the Indian nation and dancing their lives, are examples in the contemporary context, of Hindu majoritarian nationalism seeking to launder its exclusionary programs and, in the process, redefining Indian cultural identity on its terms. Where do we go from here? Scholar Brahma Prakash declares in a newspaper headline, "To truly democratize Indian art and culture, the 'classical' must be declared dead." More on such issues in the next issue of SADI themed around "Hierarchies"!

While the nation plays a very important role in this essay, I think the bigger picture reveals a global feel to the writings included here. SADI is not limited to the geographical limits of South Asia, rather it has a far bigger diaspora, and a global footprint. The Indian diaspora alone has been the largest of any country in the world since 2010 and SADI continues to recognize and find ways to occlude its loud presence in terms of thematic content or authorial ethnicities. SADI is committed to de-territorializing, breaking imaginaries, and de-shackling dance studies from jaded labels by initiating exciting forays into the unfamiliar, while redefining the pithy, trite and jaded. Read the announcement at the end of the journal about the year-long array of symposiums coming up in 2024 around troubling the term, *choreography*.

This edition of SADI would not have been possible without the contributors, the peer reviewers, the board of SADI and the members of the University of North Carolina, Charlotte, especially Savannah Lake, Wendy Fishman, Gretchen Alterowitz, and Ritika Prasad. I would be failing in my responsibilities if I were not to thank Kaustavi Sarkar, Assistant Professor of Dance at the University of North Carolina in Charlotte, soloist Odissi dancer and educator, who has helmed this issue as SADI's *Interim Business Manager*. We make a good team and an unexpected benefit of this initiative is the close friendships it is fostering among the South Asianists.

I want to remind our readers that SADI is open to receiving articles written in regional languages. If selected, your work will be translated into English for our global readership. SADI also is proud to offer year-long mentoring to emergent scholars, writers, practitioners, and activists. SADI is available only on line and via free and open access, to enhance its unrestricted and democratic reach. We believe that knowledge needs to be dispersed unfettered to seed new ideas and enquiries. Should you like to write an essay, review, photo feature, or can come up with any another imaginative mode of academic dissemination, turn to the end, which will inform you of this year's themes and the process of submission.

Till then, happy reading!

Arshiya Sethi (PhD)
Editor-In-Chief

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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*

Feriyal Amal Aslam

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 dance[2].

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 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 Saraswati[6] 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 project[8]) 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 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

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.

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.

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?

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 harmony[21] 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)

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 Mohenjo-daro 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

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/UgkxaadczT_CdCl-gAAoHQPeQQzR11mgZiSh?feature=shares

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).

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 world[29] 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 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 choregraph 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 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 Sarasvasti, 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 teermanam[37]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 *demystifying Indian Music 6*, Kuljit Bharma).

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.

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*"

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 conversation[38] 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]

38 Telephonic "WhatsApp" correspondence Oct 10th, 2022

39 A popular satin cloth gets it 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 it 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.

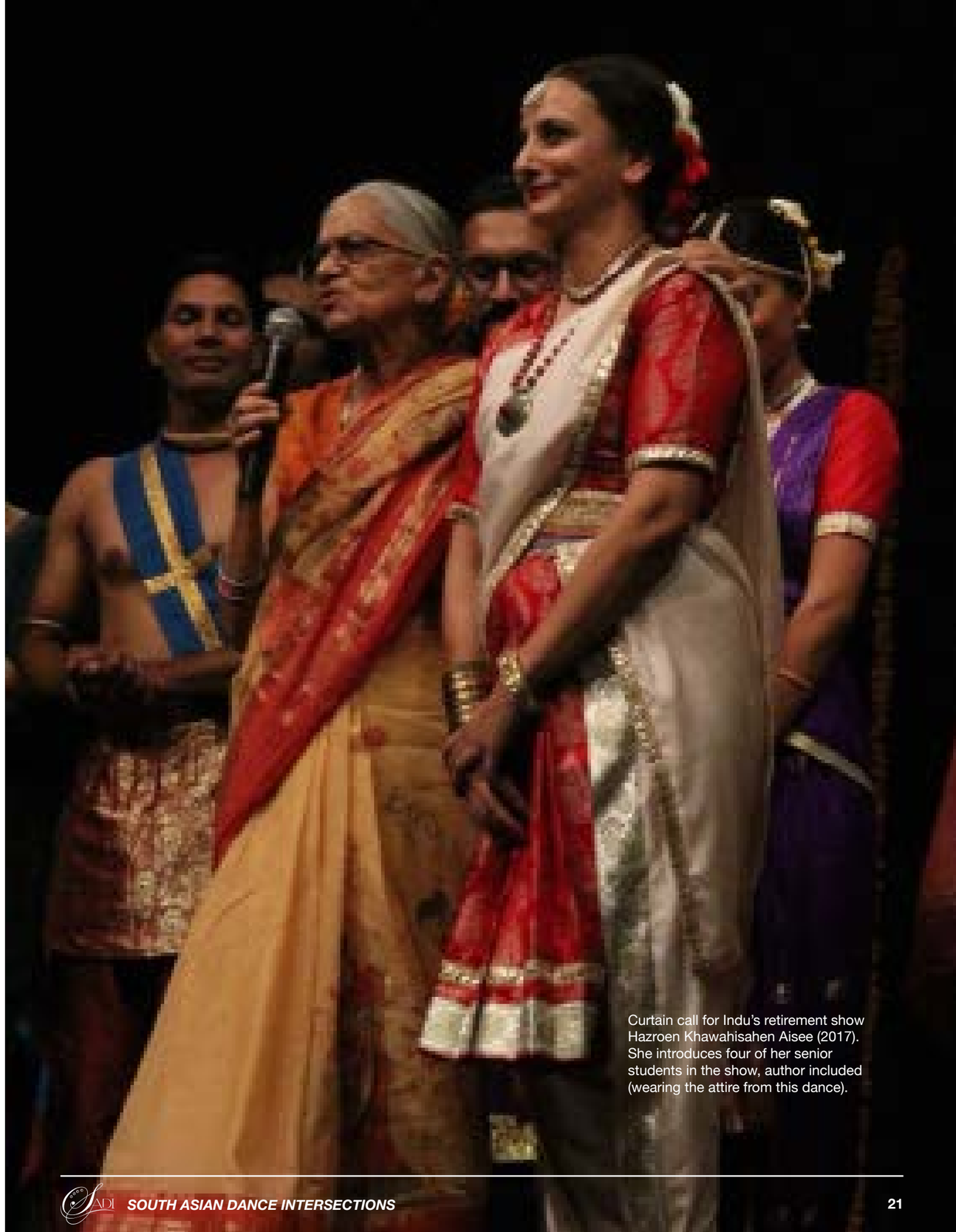
One Day in your wine shop
I drank a little wine,
And threw off the robe of this body
And knew, drunk on you,
This world is Harmony Creation, Destruction
I am dancing for them both.

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 Khawahisahen 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 maetro 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,
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Teaching Dance as a Multi-Spatial/Multimedia Practice: Reflections on Devising Contemporary Dance Pedagogy in University Spaces

Meghna Bhardwaj

Abstract

The last ten years have seen a remarkable rise in the number of art and dance degree programs in universities worldwide. This essay originates in my experience of having taught for three years (2019–2022) on an ad-hoc basis at one such program in a private Indian university. I describe some of my pedagogic methodologies and creative teaching experiments devised during my tenure and that were dedicated to questions of space and multimedia in dance and performance research. I examine how these methodologies and experiments were not just creative in nature but also triggered by: a. the output-driven approach of private-university systems, and b. the precarity of my own status as an adjunct teaching faculty and a "contemporary"—by which I mean non-classical, non-traditional—dancer in the Indian context. Dance scholar Janet O'Shea, in her essay *Decolonising the Curriculum? Unsettling Possibilities for Performance Training*, critiques the structure of the university as both "colonial and corporate" (750), and points at its links with the "precarity of neoliberalism" (750). I resonate with O'Shea's position and acknowledge the neocolonial and neoliberal tendencies of private universities in India that idolize Euro-American university models in their approach to higher education. However, I also argue that these universities, with their advocacy for the interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary forms of research, mostly aimed at claiming the "cutting-edge" in the liberal art and education industry, inadvertently generate scope for upsetting the traditional hierarchies and trajectories of dance pedagogy and challenging the exclusive notion of dance itself.

Key Words

site-specificity, colonial/neocolonial, body-space interface, visual arts

Introduction

Dance education programs in India are being shaped by two factors, in my view. One is the turn towards the liberal arts that universities worldwide, but especially in the Euro-American context, are taking. And second is the increasing visibility of scholarly discourse and experimental practices within Indian dance that intend to trouble the tyranny of classical traditions in the epistemological and pedagogic frameworks of Indian dance research. This essay concerns my experience as an ad-hoc teaching faculty at one such program, namely, the dance minor program at Shiv Nadar University. Considering how most Indian dance academics appointed as teaching faculty in university dance and art departments around the world are primarily Indian classical dancers, I would like to flag my case as rare. I situate myself in the realm of "contemporary" dance in the Indian context, which I am framing less as a form on its own and more as a condition reflecting a distance from, but in my case an absence of, the "classical" or "traditional" dance in my practice.

At one level, my appointment was supported by my PhD in theater and performance studies, gives me an edge over several other dance artists in my context (I studied at a public university which, in the context of this essay I argue, still retains some hope for subsidised education in India against the high fee structures being adopted by the newly emerging liberal art institutions). But at another level, I thought of my being hired as a matter of chance because as a practitioner I have trained in "Western" dance forms such as classical ballet, jazz, modern dance, hip-hop, etc; as against a form that may be considered quintessentially Indian or indigenous. For a South Asian dancer, it is almost mandatory to show some connection to classical dance training in their resume to find a faculty position in a university, even when the whole body of Indian dance history rests on criticisms of classical traditions such as bharatanatyam, classifying these traditions as casteist and colonial. In case a performer is trained in Indian folk and tribal traditions, which occupy immense academic attention in university-based research, they may still not be employed by a university. These performers mostly hail from lower-economic and -caste backgrounds, their practices are oriented at survival, and they rarely acquire the kind of artistic accolades and higher university degrees one needs to fit the criteria of university recruitment calls. In this essay, I will reflect on how in my teaching methods I navigate the complexities and limitations of my dance training by seeking an identity-refuge in the term "contemporary." I see it as an identity-refuge vis à vis a lack of Indian dance lineage in my practice, but also vis à vis the neocoloniality of the Western dance academies and networks in India that I come from. As an artist, I claim the term "contemporary" to identify myself as a practitioner belonging in not one but a multitude of dance vocabularies. In other words, by claiming "contemporary," I claim a practice that foregrounds diversity and experimentation in its expression, and envisions alternatives against the hegemony of classical dance ecologies in the local and global arenas of Indian dance scholarship

My key aim in this essay is to illuminate how while teaching a dance minor program that was situated in the context of a visual arts department—that is, the Department of Art, Media, and Performance—I encountered multimedia thought processes and discovered ways that the term "contemporary," as used in connection with the philosophies and economies of the visual arts, could prompt dance research. With respect to my focus on choreography and composition, I have always been interested in the interspersion of bodies and spaces—an idea that framed the center of postmodern dance in the West (Briginshaw, Banes), and also prevails in the basic definition of "contemporary"dance as bodies moving in relation to their here and now. Teaching in a dance program in the context of a visual arts department encouraged me to interpret contemporary dance not just as an inquiry into multiple dance techniques, but also as a multi-spatial and multi-sensorial inquiry. It encouraged me to evolve my contemporary dance pedagogy into an engagement with media such as camera, site, sound, and text, other than just the dancing body, and through which it would be possible to perceive dance as movement dispersed across spaces as well as split into embodied and disembodied expressions.

In this essay, I attempt to reflect on my pedagogic experiments by assuming two contrasting positions. On the one hand, I problematize the multi-spatiality I seek in those experiments as an example of "creativity in art education" that Jan Jagodzinski critiques as a consequence of "designer capitalism" (Jagodzinksi). In that, I describe how this notion of multi-spatiality for me was prompted by a need to produce "visible output" in dance and meet obligations, which university structures, as agents of the global market, can insert into curriculum-building processes. But, on the other hand, I suggest the uncertainties of private university structures as fertile. I argue that these universities may be seen as spaces for what O'Shea calls "unsettling" (O'Shea, 754) the disciplinary boundaries of dance and performance research within the larger framework of liberal art education programs, which can also be perceived as nascent and still emerging.

"Body/Space": University as the Site of Dance Pedagogy

In the year 2019, when I started teaching dance studies at SNU, I realized I was most excited not so much by the availability of a well-furnished studio in the university, but by the quality of outdoor spaces I found access to all over the campus. As someone born and brought up in an exceptionally crowded and congested city like Delhi, I felt overwhelmed to have access to the open skies, the lush green lawns and meadows around, the spacious parking lots, the landscape views from terraces, etc. The experience in many ways also became a way to further realize the disparity and privilege based on space and spatial politics in the human society. Briginshaw writes, "I use the slash (/) between body and space to indicate the conjunction of two concepts creating an interface. . . . The conjunction of bodies and spaces is important because it is through this interface, through our material bodies being in contact with space, that we perceive the world around us and relations to that world." (1) Taking Briginshaw's argument further, I would say that one's body too is to be considered a form of space and perhaps the only space one may be entitled to occupy by birth. However, that too, as one may further argue, is a matter of one's sociocultural and economic circumstances. The labor-class women I get to see sitting on their haunches on the floors of Delhi metro trains, suffer varied forms of social repression as a result of which they learn how to invisibilize themselves and inhabit the least space possible with their bodies in public places. In other words, one's sense of embodied subjectivity and identity is formed by the socio-political hierarchies of the spaces one traverses. And, as I entered the university, I realized that as much as this logic qualifies the significance of studying dance as a self-standing academic discipline of body and space, it also validates dance as a valuable methodology for university-based research. I realized that the understanding of dance as a research methodology lies in how it can enable the researcher to acknowledge her spatial and sensorial experiences within the network of her research activities involving language and text. In other words, the role of dance is to insist that any academic research is a matter of both bodily and spatial practice.

As a young dance pedagogue, I encountered university as a "site" where the idea of body = / space could be investigated and developed into a formative understanding of dance, without one having to conform to its definitions imposed by forms and categories. I use the word "site" here because I want to invite the reader to perceive university not simply as a "location" but as a set of spatial/temporal, infrastructural, and intellectual dispositions that are distinct from those prevailing in other contexts and institutions of dance, and with which dance may interact constantly to evolve into a multi-dimensional study of human body and movement. In the process of devising my teaching methodologies, I dissected the site of the university into three sub-sites: 1. The architectural sites, which involved the spaces inside and outside of the dance studio to be explored via

an interplay of live performance and video; 2. The space of theory-making or writing as the site of performance, reflection, and documentation of dance; 3. The screen or digital space that emerged as a dominant site of dance for much of university education as a result of pandemic circumstances.

Before I elaborate on these, I would like to discuss the three conditions I needed to navigate to arrive at space/site as my key pedagogic inquiry. One was the structural obligations and conflicts posed by the university system. As much as the university was a site provoking for me philosophical and compositional dilemmas about moving body and space, it was also a site involving logistics and resources that would impact my articulation of these dilemmas into my curriculum modules. The dance minor program that I was teaching in comprised both theory- and practice-focused electives for undergrad students from all disciplines. Most students who opt for these courses are usually absolutely new to the academic discipline of dance with no background of any kind of training in technique, and often only stay in the program for as long as one semester. As a result, I as a faculty was free to design my courses in my own way, but then I would also feel obliged to keep the course content equally accessible for all students. This meant that in order to maintain a sense of democracy in my class, many times I would have to compromise the level and intensity of technique I would teach in my practice courses; while for the theory courses, the number of readings an undergraduate non-dance studies student could sustain also felt very limited. Considering it is not a major degree program yet, I also felt the need to orient my methods towards maintaining decent enrollment in my classes, and generating advocacy for the program in the context of a corporate university mostly governed by an overarching emphasis on natural sciences and vocational degree programs. In addition, my methods were influenced by my adjunct status in the university, which was further complicated by the faculty assessment criteria that private university systems lay out. This, on the one hand, gives students the discretion to assess their instructor (even when they have only remained under her guidance for a short span of three months and for a course they tend to regard as secondary), and on the other, demands the faculty to produce publications and other calculable personal research, in addition to maintaining their teaching and administrative responsibilities in order to contribute to the university's branding/ranking. The collaborations with other artists and scholars that I invited in my courses, were influenced by the department as well as the university's criteria for providing acknowledgement and funding for such collaborations.

The other two conditions were, the absence of classical dance lineage in my practice, and my training in Western dance forms. As I have already pointed out, these two conditions have led me to seek an alignment with the term "contemporary" in my practice, and which I argue, I was able to recognize and articulate further owing to the location of the dance program in a visual arts department. In my opinion, it is important to trace, in these three conditions, representations of the neo-liberal and neocolonial in the context of dance in India. But I would also alternatively argue that it is these three conditions/forms of precarity that enabled for me a sense of conceptual open-endedness, as well as material and intellectual faculties required to test the boundaries of dance curriculum and cultivate in it a multi-spatial/multi-media pedagogic practice.

Teaching Dance in a Visual Arts Department: Constraints and Openings

The dance minor program that concerns this essay holds a singular position in the Indian context, since, currently there are no full-fledged degree programs or departments dedicated solely to dance studies and research in the country. The main degree program of the Visual Arts Department that houses the dance minor is the MFA in Art, Media, and Performance. I believe this particular aspect of the dance program has impacted my premise in this essay at several levels and therefore needs some critical analysis.

Curator, writer, and producer Andy Horwitz in a blog-post titled, "Visual Art Performance versus Contemporary Performance," recalls his conversation with an artistic director who, on this question of the difference between the two kinds of performance, said to him, "The visual arts world hates craft—they're seeking 'authenticity.'" Horwitz explains that what the comment essentially suggested for him is that "when a visual artist stages a performative event it should not have any degree of artifice, that it be perceived as "real." He further argues,

> It would seem that they (visual artists and curators) are frequently unaware of—or indifferent to—the fact that there is a long history of performance theory; that theater, and especially dance, have for many years explored issues around presence, embodiment, presentational aesthetics, the observed/observer relationship, the visual presentation of the constructed environment, the semiotics of representation, etc.

I remember a similar conversation I once had with a fellow faculty member in which they had made the same comment, saying that performance art was more "real," and therefore somewhat superior and more complex, than dance. During the time I taught at the department, I remember experiencing a sense of binary between visual art and dance, very similar to the one Horwitz is addressing as "visual art performance versus contemporary performance," the latter of which he sees as being fundamentally rooted in theater and dance. As much as I would feel compelled to interact with visual art theories and practices involving a range of artistic media, so I could situate but also visibilize dance within the larger vision and interest of the department, I equally felt troubled by the limited appreciation and engagement dance received from the visual arts practitioners and scholars. From my experience of having danced in gallery and exhibition settings, I can tell that this issue persists very much at the ground level as sometimes curators and organizers, who invite choreographic works stating their enthusiasm for live body and ephemeral scenarios involving performance, appear unaware about meeting some of the most basic necessities of dancers such as a green room, which they require for preparing and resting their bodies while they are not performing.

As Horwitz points out, visual arts as against dance and theater have been historically focused on creating finished objects for ownership and sale, which well aligns them with the goals of both the capitalist market and the corporate university. For me, as a dance pedagogue recruited by a liberal arts department, the problematics of such a separation between visual arts and dance became apparent when this impacted not only my participation and relevance in the department, but also the amount of resources the university would allocate to the dance minor program so I could aim for it to grow into a full degree program over time. Yet, as urgent as this issue is for me, in this essay, I propose to look inwards and discuss how teaching in a dance minor program in a visual arts department brought me closer to the issues persisting in, as well as possibilities available in, my own discipline, which is dance. I analyze how the department's consistent focus on seeking contemporaneity in its practice-led teaching methodologies helped me to identify the colonial, neocolonial, and capitalist elements in dance, as well as find resolutions in certain aspects of my dance training and situatedness in critical Indian dance scholarship.

Lack of Indian Dance Lineage in My Practice

In his essay, "But We Will Not Give Up The Categories! (De)valuing the Categories in South-Asian Performance Traditions" (2022), Brahma Prakash examines a very pressing issue in South-Asian cultural performances that one cannot overlook in discussions on Indian cultural institutions including universities. He critiques the prevalence of labels such as classical, traditional, modern, contemporary, urban, folk, secular, ritualistic, etc. and argues that "devaluing" these categories must comprise an important step towards "decolonising existing discourses." He writes,

> Naming and categorization are some basic criteria through which others are pushed aside. Institutional claims such as your movements are not dance; your rituals are not theatre; yours is song, not poetry, become the usual rhetoric through which artistic and cultural activities are disseminated and dismissed. . . . [C]ultural institutions create a framework in which only individual artists or those trained in "legitimate" institutions are recognized as dancers, musicians, and theatre makers, in a society where marginalized sections remain uneducated.

When I started teaching at the university, I felt constantly alerted by the fact that I could not name allegiance to a tradition or, as Prakash says, "legitimate" institution to justify a sense of cultural rootedness in my dance practice. As I have said before, I had trained in Western dance academies, international dance companies, and open studios, in multiple forms such as ballet, modern jazz, hip-hop, modern dance, contemporary techniques etc, that meant that my practice comprised a combination of Euro-American, elite/urban, and popular dance aesthetics. The real problem though was not just this, but that it meant that one could dismiss my training as "half-baked," something I would hear passingly both in scholarly and artistic circuits of dance. And it is quite true that I am not a "proper" ballet dancer, and neither am I a proper jazz, or proper hip-hop, or proper modern dancer. This in effect means that in the context of university teaching, I cannot claim "expertise" in a single technique, and as a result of that I cannot claim inheritance of a historically approved and institutionalized model of pedagogy.

So far as the absence of Indian classical dance in my practice is concerned, as a critical dance studies scholar I am aware of the relentless labor of resistance that a whole generation of South-Asian scholars as well as artists have invested in calling out the colonial legacy of classical dance traditions such as bharatanatyam. In that, they have strongly condemned the nationalistic procedures comprising the inventions of these traditions that have led to cultural and historical disenfranchisement of marginalized communities (Cherian, Munsi, Basu). Urmimala Sarkar Munsi, in her essay "Becoming a Body" argues, "A body that claims history is not necessarily a historical body" (2). Prakash rightly points out that if South-Asian dance scholars, both

in the local and diasporic networks, want to participate in the decolonization project, they need to take internal structures of colonization in dance such as caste and Hindu nationalism very seriously (Prakash). Empowered by such academic works, as a dance scholar I have never felt bothered about a lack of lineage in my dance in the way it sits next to my academic practice. This is to say that in my theory classes at the university, I could claim an indigenous alignment in the realms of dance history and research by focusing on the works and practices of critical Indian dance scholars and artists who have resisted the dictatorial politics of classical dance. However, the question for me was how would I find such an alignment in my practice classes?

In what he terms as "4D model of decolonization," Prakash underlines democratization and diversification of art and cultural practices as one of the key nodes in decolonial processes. For him, the separation of dance, music, and theater into individual categories is itself Western, as "in folk forms and popular cultural performances, genres tend to cross over, and maintain more organic links." As I evaluate my pedagogic experiments in retrospect and think in the light of Prakash's reflections, I feel I found my answer to the above question, which I may re-articulate as: *How do I find methods in my practice-based teaching with which to participate in processes of diversification of art and cultural practices and align with critical Indian dance discourse?* Precisely in the multimedia approach of my department. Beyond the fact that part of my reason to incorporate this approach in my teaching methods was to strengthen ground for dance research both in the department as well as at the university, this approach that corresponds to the "contemporary" in visual arts discourses directed me to redefine my contemporaneity as an Indian dance artist.

In dance especially in the Indian context, the term "contemporary" is often used simplistically, to refer to one's closeness to Western dramaturgies and idioms. As against that, in the visual arts "contemporary" signifies fluidity in one's form and radicality in one's inquiry. It is a term that any artist may seek to denote their interest and investment in contemporary culture, and therefore may be interpreted as an open-ended unifier. In the words of Mexican curator Cuauhtemoc Medina, "Contemporary art carries forward the lines of experimentation and revolt found in all kinds of disciplines and arts that were brought "back in order" after 1970, forced to reconstitute their tradition" (19). From such a perspective, if one looks for examples of contemporary art in Indian dance history, one notices how "the spirit of revolt and experimentation" that Medina is speaking of defined the practices of artists such as Rabindranath Tagore, Uday Shankar, and Chandralekha among several others. These artists were never bound in genres and labels, but moved freely across them while pinning their focus in issues of social inequality and modernity. Raqs Media Collective, who describe contemporaneity as a "refusal to historicize" (42), see Tagore's artistic pursuits involving poetry, dance, theater, and music as an illustration of "de-hierarchization" of time and spaces (48). Chandralekha's reach across disciplines, as Tishani Doshi writes, "from dance to poster-making to poetry to design to feminism to film" as well as her exchanges with stalwarts such as Vivaan Sundaram, Dashrath Patel, Bhupen Khakhar, John Cage, Henri Cartier-Bresson, and many others of her generation and time have been well acknowledged and documented in Indian art discourses. Recently, at a book discussion of Munsi's *Uday Shankar and His Transcultural Experimentation: Dancing Modernity* (2023), conversations around Shankar's "nomadic" temperament as an artist made me wonder if such a temperament also equals the "contemporary," "transdisciplinary," or "research"-based, inventive outlook to education that modern universities seek in their faculty.

For my PhD, I studied the artistic practices of Navtej Johar, Padmini Chettur, and Jayachandran Palazhy, and argued how their experiments in testing the spatial and temporal limits of body and performance went far beyond dance and choreography. As I started teaching the dance minor program, I felt it was a moment for me to imbibe the principles of multidisciplinarity that I only theoretically discovered during my PhD, into my practice and that through my methods of teaching. What indeed inspired me and brought me to imagine an ideological communion with experimental artists in Indian dance history were the heterogenous practices of both faculty and MFA students at the department. As I observed them engaging with film, photography, performance, movement, object art, text, painting, and curation with equal rigor, I could comprehend the relevance of "collage principle" that Garoian relates with the values of dialectics and paradox in art education and that is visible in contemporary practices of dance both in India and the West. I understood my position as that of a researcher-pedagogue and found many foundational questions to investigate such as: Is the true ethic and aesthetic of contemporary dance about crossing the boundaries of dance itself? Is dance, as I know it, an exclusive canon of knowledge? How must it go beyond the totalitarian labels of technique and become a process ofdemocratizationn in education? How does it not remain a divisive discipline but a facilitator, or as Anna Morcom writes, a kind of "performance methodology" (Morcom in Prakash, 2022) in inventions of new forms and inquiries?

My Training in "Western" Dance Techniques

Responding to the discussions on categories and decolonization in dance curriculum, O'Shea argues that in order to truly decolonize, "histories of global circulation" (756) in dance have to be acknowledged so that the intercultural complexity of the incubation and proliferation of dance forms is not reduced to their "geographical nomenclature" (757). With regard to her location in the American context, here O'Shea is problematizing the categorization of South-Asian and African dances in American university curricula as "world dances" (756) as against white-Western forms such as classical ballet and modern dance that continue to be perceived as the "norm" (756-757). If I speak from the purview of my dance training, I see a reverse of this binary in the Indian context. Here, the South-Asian dance, especially the classical forms, represent the "norm," while what gets taught in the Western dance academies, very popular and widespread in metropolitan areas, represents the "world" or "international" dances. These Western dance academies started to appear on the Indian dance scene around the 90s with the trends of liberalization, privatization, and globalization. Despite having exposed a whole generation of Indian dancers to forms such as classical ballet, hip-hop, modern dance, jazz, etc., they have received very limited attention in ethnographic and scholarly writings on Indian dance. I too trained at one such academy, and even danced as a repertory company member before I left it to explore dance and choreography residencies, and freelance projects.

In my analysis, there are two contradictory aspects to these academies that I would like point out. On the one hand, these academies need to be acknowledged for generating alternative spaces as much as a level playing field for dancers from across diverse class and cultural backgrounds, while equipping them with a range of skill sets to survive as a professional dancer. On the other hand, these academies very well exemplify what O'Shea describes as "neo-liberal systems in which profit is pursued at all costs" (753). It is very easy to see these academies optimizing dancing bodies as resources, and operating on the hyper-capitalist logic of labor, which involves underpaying their dance-employees while expecting from them prolonged hours of commitment. In my experience, these academies really put to test the illusionary ideal of "rooted-ness," commonly and uncritically associated to dance training, as most dancers cannot sustain themselves in these academies, both physically and economically, for long enough to stay dedicated to their training years. As a result, they fall into what I term a "freelance" project-based model of dance economy, which means staying employed through annual-day choreographies in schools/colleges, short-term commercial events including projects in Bollywood, and dance residencies and choreographic works in the circuits of experimental dance. And I must add here that given the precarities of this project-based economy, a chance of claiming the dignity of the "artistic" as well as "personal" is what some of us, who continue to inhabit this economy, tend to seek in the term "contemporary."

When I started teaching in the dance minor program at SNU, I felt there was value for me in both these aspects. I had at hand my exposure to various physical approaches so as to bring my students to reason with the fundamentals of dance and movement, and not simply clone a particular technique. And then, I had my experience of dancing across multiple kinds of spaces and social contexts, as a result of my situation in the freelance dance economy. As a dancer, I have been part of several projects that have attempted to bring dance outside of the elite and exclusive proscenium settings and studio/art gallery contexts, into popular/public spaces such as flash mobs in the malls, reality TV shows, corporate sales events, musicals, and many times onto the streets. In the context of a visual arts department, education was perceived as dispersed across spaces outside of classrooms, and artist studios encouraged me to notice the value of the existing multi-spatiality in my practice and embrace it into my teaching modules. During the MFA project-room discussions, I remember relishing the practice of walking together as a group with other faculty and the students, and locating these rooms across university spaces. I felt there was a sense of both conceptual and physical mobility integrated into patterns of teaching and learning, which, for a discipline conventionally dedicated to the notion of movement such as dance, must be thought of as indispensable. Inspired by such practices, I decided to foreground the idea of site in dance as my most immediate pedagogic inquiry, and devised as part of it certain artistic/pedagogic experiments with my students. I discuss some of those experiments in the following section.

Disintegrating Dance: Generating Form through Site-Specificity

In the West, the concept of site-specificity in dance first became visible in the 1960s and 70s with the works of choreographers such as Trisha Brown, Twyla Tharp, and Pina Bausch, among others. These works were also seen

to be exemplifying conceptual and material overlaps between disciplines of choreography and visual arts (Rosenberg). For me, as valuable as the site-specific interventions of these artists are, one cannot overlook how innate site-specificity is to the dramaturgy of folk, ritualistic, and protest performances. While teaching in the dance minor program in the context of a visual arts department at SNU, I rediscovered the significance of site-specificity for my artistic teaching practice. I started to perceive the university as a "site"—a site of embodied action and sensorial learning, as well as a site of critique vis à vis prescribed spatial/temporal aesthetics of education. As I have mentioned previously in this essay, I saw the university as representing three kinds of sites, which I elaborate as follows:

University as "Architectural" Site: Experiments with Camera and Sound

Here I describe the two site-specific experiments I created with my students for a practice course, The Dancer's Body, which I taught in the monsoon semester of 2019. One was a site-specific video-work titled *24 places = 24 traces*, and other was a live performance titled *Setting #24* by Marcel Zaes. Both the works were shared at the end of the semester as installations within the frame of an exhibition titled *The Dancer's Body*.

1. *24 places = 24 traces*, A Video Installation

I choreographed and filmed this video-work with the students at varied indoor and outdoor sites inside the university. The film did not have a sound of its own but was projected next to a sound installation comprising a few compositions by visual/sound artist and scholar Marcel Zaes. Both the video and the sound did not have a clear beginning and end, and were intended as durational/immersive works (played on a loop of 29 minutes for 6 hours). This meant that the audience could enter and exit this video-sound installation any time they wished, and were encouraged to find their own connections between the two. There was a curatorial note kept next to this installation that said: "Through the making of the video, some of the questions that the students have attempted to contemplate are: Who moves us? What moves us? Where do we locate movement?"

My process of building the vocabulary for the video-work involved teaching the students both inside and outside the studio. In the studio, I remained focused on introducing to the students basic principles of dance and movement, comprising a very simple warm-up involving pilates for muscle strength, balance, and flexibility, and sometimes beginner-to-elementary level dance routines choreographed from a mix of ballet, jazz, and contemporary floor techniques. As a study of body alignment, we would improvize on everyday/pedestrian movements—walking, standing, sitting, lying down, and getting up from the floor—and through that bring attention to the connection between the feet and the floor, or the spine and the flatness of the floor or the wall, impulses of weight shift, and responsiveness of the body to other body's gaze, rhythm, and presence. This study would become more complex as the semester would progress and we would become aware of the role singular body parts play in initiating and facilitating a movement, the body's relationship to speed and sound, and the connection between presence/performativity and spectators.

While teaching these undergrad students, most of whom were non-trained dance enthusiasts, I became observant to the diversity in their body types, their corporeal conditioning, and their aspirations vis à vis dance that was really hard to contain within a studio space. Despite an effectively non-hierarchical space that a dance studio offers to learning (as compared to the usual classroom spaces made of a raised platform for the teacher and desks kept at a lower level for the students), its flat architecture does not allow for explorations and projections of varied body alignments and physicalities. In the studio, one is the agent/initiator of one's movement, which can be extremely intimidating for non-trained dancers. It takes a long process of training to arrive at an impulse/inner motivation to move, to dance—that is if we are speaking of those dance and rhythmic practices that are distanced from one's very specific everyday sociocultural practices. These thoughts led me to invite the students to improvize outside of the studio, at sites such classrooms with benches, staircases, foyers, lawns, roads, and parking lots where they would put to test their studio-based training, learn to make impromptu choices with their bodies, and encounter more vocabulary evoked by the shapes and contours of these architectures. I observed how dancing site-specifically helped the students grasp many fundamental questions pertaining to gaze and presence, questions pertaining to whether or not certain movement is a stimulus or a reflex to another body, and helped them absorb the important play between individual and collective rhythms.

On the day of the final shooting, I witnessed how the boundaries often perceived between the rehearsal space and final performance, or onstage and backstage, felt dissolved. I could sense a lot of playfulness and ease in the bodies, more creativity in individual decision-making, and a more compassionate than competitive relationship amongst the co-performers. With an intention to keep the bodies focused, as well as a sense of improvisation alive, I decided on shooting the video over a single day with least number of retakes. So the filming took the form of a somewhat final performance in which the camera person, co-performers, passersby, and I, turned into a group of spectators contributing to the unfolding of the performance in varied ways. In this sense, I propose to think of the final display of the work on the day of the exhibition as a post-performance space, which, I believe, is an extremely crucial space in contemporary dance and choreographic practices. Given that most contemporary choreographies seek a critique of narrative through processes of abstraction, this post-performance space can be perceived as a space where such abstraction can be deconstructed and its meaningfulness consolidated.

A screen shot from the video-work *24 places = 24 traces* (2019). At Faculty Housing Parking Lot, Shiv Nadar University.

2. *Setting #24*, a Live Sound-Movement Installation by a Marcel Zaes

Unlike the video installation that was displayed on a projector inside the studio, this was a live performance set on the library lawns. Setting is originally conceptualized by Zaes, who brings together an ensemble of performers and non-performers alike to record pieces of everyday sounds on their phones, or other recording devices, and hold those as "sound objects" while they perform simple movements such as walking and standing still. The work is performed at various sites (parking lots, playgrounds, streets, etc.) that Zaes calls "found stage" and is documented into a series titled *Setting*. As part of our creative process, the students first received written instructions from Zaes on how to record the sounds and turn them into a score of 1–2 minutes. Next, we held studio rehearsals so the students could understand how to connect with each other in space. And then the work was performed live on the day of the exhibition in two slots—one in the morning and other in the afternoon.

My key intention to invite this kind of performance art model that was easy to execute and involved building a relationship across moving body, sound-making, and site was to provide for the students a comfortable and playful performative space in which they would not feel pressured by a spectator's gaze. As we discovered during the moment of its performance, the work was able engage passersby not simply as spectators but as participants. The audience that gathered around seemed much interested in entering the installation, holding sound objects in their own hands, and walking and interacting with the performers during the performance. Sometimes there were smiles exchanged, other times there were a few collisions, all of which came together to spell out the very valuable fragility of the work. We saw the work transform the relationship between the spectator and the performer as, after a point, it became hard to tell who was who.

The documentation can be viewed at: https://vimeo.com/388585482

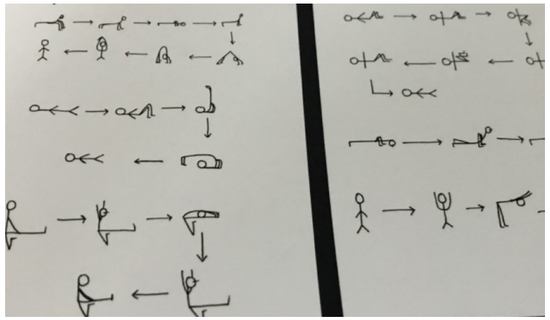
For me as a pedagogue, the achievement of both these site-specific experiments lies in how they could function as alternatives against the tropes of beginning-to-end finished dance pieces, and encourage the students to stay in the mode of improvisation and exploration. In both these experiments, I sought to critique the black-box/white-box aesthetic of contemporary dance that projects moving body as space neutral—as if it is nowhere—and in that, renders her identity neutral. I, instead, hoped for my students to find through my processes a sense of "place-ness" (de Certeau 117) and belongingness within the university. By positioning myself as a composer-pedagogue, I learnt that any sense of fidgetiness or expression of lack of surety in the body was what required a careful calibration and curation, almost to be valued over and above the codes of the forms and "correct" posture that tend to take away from the body her sense of vulnerability and humility. There is something deeply moving about watching a body slowly and precariously arrive at her individual moment of balance and breath in her process of finding her place in an ensemble/collective. The sense of rootedness or place-ness, in the context of contemporary dance training that employs multiple forms and ethics of dance, therefore comes from striving to stay fully attentive and alive to each and every shift in the body as well as to the surrounding space. If the students can learn how the invitation to move is external to their bodies, something that their bodies need to speak to or surrender to, then they know dance is not about self-indulgence, just as self isn't

about itself anymore but a variable vis à vis the external other.

Setting#24 being performed at Library Lawns, Shiv Nadar University (2019). Image credit: Ajay Bahal

University as a Site of Theory-Making: Text as Performative Installation

A third installation that was displayed as part of The Dancer's Body exhibition was a handbook titled Textualising Dance. This text comprised excerpts from student journals printed on A5-size sheets tied together with jute threads. For an inquiry based in movement, language is the most inevitable question to investigate. This is simply because movement and language comprise the two primary modes of human existence that interact with each other as much as destabilize each other's relevance. With this understanding, I encouraged my students to maintain a journal throughout the semester in which they were to record their insights and experiences from their movement sessions with me. While writing these journals, students were encouraged to think of the self and the body as separate and through the process of writing arrive at an understanding of how and when the two meet in dance. In other words, they were encouraged to seek a balance between an objective way of treating the body, as if in a laboratory, and a subjective way of orchestrating the emotions and sensations that emerge while dancing (Chettur). My intention behind inviting the audience to engage with short phrases and sentences from these writings was to make the whole process of "the dancer's body" more transparent and graspable for them.

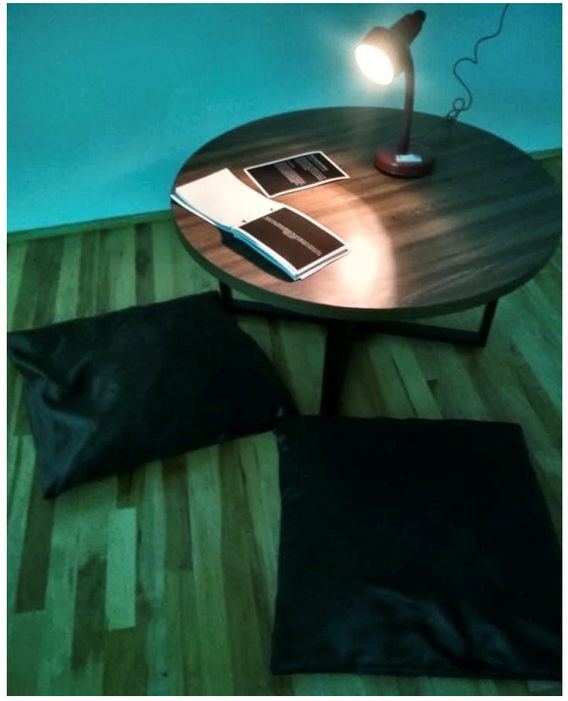


An image from a student journal (2019). Image credit: Ragamalika Muraleedharan. Shiv Nadar University.

In order to provide them the vocabulary, methods of reading and reflecting, focus areas, and a sense of ethics that they would require in this writing process, I inserted into my modules lecture classes in which I would introduce the students to academic essays from dance history, dance philosophy, theater and performance studies, and visual art. I would also ensure the students were exposed to the extensive interconnections these disciplines have with social science and humanities disciplines such as history, sociology, critical theory, gender and feminist studies, political philosophy, cultural studies, anthropology, to name just a few. In addition, the students were invited to engage with dance and performance films, video documentations of choreographies, artists' talks, etc. which I felt could be a way for the students to learn articulation through affective and visual means.

At the center of this whole process was my aim to dissolve the dualism of theory and practice, to emphasize that neither is to be considered a "privileged place of critique" (Klein 7). I wanted the students to imagine this journal writing as an artistic practice that involved not simply reproducing a learnt concept but devising theory; and supported by this logic, to perceive the university as a site where the meaning of theory could be aestheticized and diversified using the experiences of the body. Many critical Indian dance scholars have recognized that the hegemony of classical dance over other performative practices, especially those of the marginalized communities, is centered on the institutional credibility it is attributed through the means of dogmatic Hindu scriptures such as the *Natya Shastra* (Prakash, Munsi, Coorlawala). Therefore, it was important for me to generate in dance a space where students can assume a sense of agency vis à vis text, witness it become both relevant and irrelevant over time, and relate it to critical thought and reason. Apart from writing, students were encouraged to engage with drawing and sketching, and understand how text could be developed into a compositional tool and a performative object.

This is to say that just as much as there was a focus on investigating the form of the moving body, there was an equivalent focus on studying the poetics and forms of text and theory. In my observation, this process availed for the students an alternative and emancipatory site of performance, as I saw many of them finding this medium of expression safer for themselves than their own bodies.



Textualising Dance displayed at *The Dancer's Body*. Dance Studio, Shiv Nadar University. Image Credit: Ajay Bahal (2019).

University as a Virtual Site: Deriving Embodied/Disembodied Expression through Collaborative Pedagogy

Once the dance education systems were hit by the pandemic, the key question that emerged was not so much *How to continue to dance?* but rather *How to continue to dance together?* For universities, the most important value of dance education must lie in how it generates a space of learning that brings focus to an embodied sense of interdependence. And, with the classrooms/studios turning into digital spaces, it was exactly this sense of inter-dependence that we as dance pedagogues had to find a way to ensure for the students. The crisis also represented a disintegration of both body and the university from physically coherent units to multiple and incomplete digital fragments. I felt it was very important to foreground this thought into my teaching methods and benefit from the porous boundaries that art disciplines and education spaces had acquired during this time through digital means.

The two studio courses that I taught for this one year starting August 2020 until April 2021, were *The Dancer's Body,* and *Movement and Meaning*. For both the courses, I decided on a dual methodology, part of which comprised focussing on learning movement through solo improvisation, and the other part, foregrounding making/composing through collaborations. The former in effect meant, I had to figure a way to value the diversity of spaces I was confronted with through the tiles of the Google Meet window, in which each student projected their respective domestic circumstances. Some had access to considerably large rooms with posh décor around, while some could hardly manage a corner. What was instantly clear for me was teaching a uniform technique would only mean devaluing the rich dynamics and prompts of such diversity. Improvisation methods made most sense in which I would introduce in class a simple physical impulse (a very brief instruction such as explore what the tip of the head rolling on the wall would do to the rest of the body), which the students would elaborate by interacting with the curves, hollows, textures, and, surfaces that were available around them. During this process, what was most interesting for me to witness was how sometimes the most congested spaces brought out the most engaging interweavings of the body and space, which very large spaces could not. That dance did not always require seamless and perfectly aligned spaces with sprung floors. It meant more the ability of the body to navigate abrupt, uneven, rugged spaces that physically reflect the paradox between obstacles and solutions.

For the latter, that is the collaborative methodology, I invited a couple of my artist and scholar friends to organize with me a structure similar to a virtual residency for the students. This unfolded as the following:

1. *Across Time Zones*: A Collaboration with the Students of Williams College, USA.

During the monsoon semester 2020 when I was teaching *The Dancer's Body* to a new batch of students, I got invited for a collaboration by Prof. Shanti Pillai at Williams College in the United States (Williamstown, MA). Pillai proposed to bring our students to work in direct collaboration with each

other, and we organized a total of 23 students from *The Dancer's Body*, to team up with 20 students from the two courses Pillai was teaching, namely, *The Art of Playing: Introduction to Theater and Performance,* and *Global Digital Performance*, and through this bridge to encourage them to co-create with their international partners short films based on their reflections on the pandemic. Apart from Pillai and me, the collaboration was led by one of Pillai's colleague at Williams, Prof. Amy Holzapfel, and my friend Marcel Zaes from Brown University. Since Zaes was not directly teaching the students, we invited him to deliver mentorship lectures involving a couple of sound and digital media workshops for the students to equip them with technological tools they would require in such a process. He also held one-on-one discussions with the students to give them feedback on their works-in-progress.

Conceptually, the collaboration, on the one hand, was meant to emphasize the unique chances the pandemic had created for cross-border interactions, and on the other, to think through artistic ways of how the loss of physical intimacy in the current circumstances could be tackled and resolved via exploring forms of digital intimacy. Through the multimedia and multidisciplinary methods of communication with their collaborators who, very valuably, came from varied languages, races, and ethnicities, students were encouraged to notice how their circumstances were disabling and enabling at the same time. The students were given about two months to create their works, at the end of which we held a brief Zoom sharing to facilitate engagement with an audience for the students. We got to see how students had experimented with a range of forms such as animation, sound art, storytelling, political activism in the arts, choreography, text, to name a few—which exemplified Garoian's "collage principle," and thus, embodied as well as disembodied ways of artmaking. A compilation of all the works by Prof. Pillai can be viewed at: https://vimeo.com/543208412

2. *Care Index* Project with Alecia Neo:

I met Alecia Neo—a Singaporean artist, who works on communitarian projects—at a virtual conference in July 2020. At that time, Neo was in the middle of her project Care Index as part of which she would collect via open calls "diverse gestures of care performed by people from all walks of life, sharing states of well-being with the audience." In the summer of 2021, for my course *Movement and Meaning*, I decided that for the collaborative component of the course, I would direct the students to create individual films based on the concept of care/exhaustion, for which I organized their weekly virtual workshops with Neo. In these workshops, we would together to arrive at embodied gestures of care that Neo would weave into a prolonged score and perform at the final sharing of her project. Based on these workshops, the students were encouraged to build their individual films in their respective pandemic environments that would be published on Neo's website. The students also had a chance to receive virtual workshops and one-on-one sessions with UK-based independent choreographer Marina Collard, and Delhi-based dance-film artist Sumedha Bhattacharya, who had been generous enough to join us on my invitation. My key intention in this collaboration was to avail the students of an experience of how the notion of "care" (Basu) that had become so prominent in the context of the pandemic, could be employed to author their own dance vocabulary. It was to emphasize an understanding of dance as a social practice (Millard) that could transform the space of education into a space of caregiving. The whole process is available for viewing on the following link: https://www.careindex.net/programmes/dance-nucleus-element-residency

Conclusion:

In this essay, I have attempted a non-binary critique of the ongoing corporatization of art education in the Indian context. To think in a non-binary way about this issue is important for me considering my precarious situation of being an artist and pedagogue subject to the overarching sociocultural, political, and economic precarities of contemporary times. My perspective emerges from my disciplinary knowledge of critical dance studies and pedagogic experience of teaching in a dance minor program in a private university. I have addressed how private universities in the Indian context need to be acknowledged as agents of the competitive capitalist art market, yet the true political relevance of these universities lies in how, with their expansive infrastructure and emphasis on transdisciplinarity in higher education, they can operate as disruptive forces and destabilize traditional power hierarchies and divisions in the arts.

Considering the high-fee structures of these universities, one cannot overlook the claim that these indeed are elite institutions, in which most students come from high-class backgrounds. These students often aspire to acquire higher degrees from Euro-American universities that are often glorified in the private university networks. Hence, as a dance pedagogue, the questions I was constantly confronted with were: What is the gap between the indigenous concerns that exist on ground and the popular representations of those as claims in the Global South that the students need to be acquainted with, if their aspiration is to study in the Global North? How do I navigate this gap as their teacher? How do I process this gap in my own academic and dance training? I have demonstrated in this essay that teaching dance through a multimedia/multi-spatial approach that prevails across Indian dance history, visual arts, and contemporary artistic practices in dance, turned out to be my pragmatic and creative solution to these questions.

One aspect that distinguishes private universities from public is that they provide wide discretionary powers to their individual departments reasoned on the logic of their expertise and knowledge of disciplinary requirements. I have therefore tried to reflect extensively on my position of a dance pedagogue teaching a dance program within the framework of a visual arts department. I have argued that while I found myself often troubled by the disciplinary boundaries that are perceived between dance and visual arts, the very precarity of my situation also gave me a sense of freedom to design my curriculum as creatively and critically as I wanted to. It helped me identify the colonial and neocolonial forces in dance, deal with the scatteredness of my own practice, and allowed me to equate the notion of contemporaneity in dance with the transdisciplinarity of the moving body. I learnt that for me, the true ethic of contemporary dance pedagogy lies in encouraging my students to stay as diverse and nomadic in their inquiries as they can, without ever imposing on them the obligation to commit to a certain genre or category.

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i Urmimala Sarkar Munsi uses the term “cloning” with reference to the idea of sadhana or dedication to technique as persists in classical dance forms (Munsi 4).
ii Priyanka Basu argues, “A critical pedagogy framework informing Indian ‘classical’ dance is a possible first step towards humanising a practice that can teach care-work as an important lesson to the learner.”

Roof/Room Pieces: An Ethnography of Lockdown Lives, and Digital Performances of Rabindranritya

Debanjali Biswas

Abstract

This essay is an exploration of precarity and sociality within performing arts in India. It analyses dances made digitally for audiences during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-21) and engages with scholarly literature and movement system with reference to Bengali polymath Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) and forms of dance identified as rabindranritya. Interpreted through interdisciplinary research methods of digital ethnography, questionnaires, content analysis and dance studies, the essay aims to understand why some of us continued to dance through the global pandemic. I focus on YouTube as a site of research as we realize that technology's relationship with human and arts have now evolved and 'liveness' could be optional. I question various forms of precarity in arts industries through respondents' answers and observe what notions of sociality are exchanged between the performer and their audience. I bring to light the mundane and vibrant of the quotidian lockdown lives of performers who remained cloistered at home, but with cameras on them, how they seized the pandemic precarity and continued dancing with a sense of immediacy and new kinds of intimacy, communicating their imaginations and emotions and bridging social-temporal-spatial distances.

Key Words

dance studies; digital ethnography; YouTube; COVID-19; rabindranritya

Introduction

In April of 2020, dance writer Brian Seibert wrote about *Room/Roof Piece*—a performance made remotely by the dancers of Trisha Brown Dance Company. They revisit Trisha Brown's gritty, urban choreography *Roof Piece* (1971) that premiered on the roofs and terraces of lower Manhattan buildings and became a part of the company's repertory. In Roof Piece, dancers executed a series of movements which the dancer on the next roof tried to imitate. Trisha Brown's dancers received and transmitted movements making improvisations if they could not follow. A film and photographs by Babette Mangolte captured the assorted movements on rooftops as a codified whole.[1] The *Roof Piece* was a metaphor for communication across distance, and the same metaphor carried over to the virtual staging of choreography in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Company dancers Amanda Kmett'Pendry and Jamie Scott conceived the piece anew, and other dancers created movements in the confines of their residences spanning New South Wales to Brooklyn. Dances were performed on the videoconferencing platform Zoom, and subsequently edited for a virtual audience. The dancers write, if "*Roof Piece* uses distance to transcend the boundaries of a room, a stage, and the eye of a single viewer, […] in order to hold the integrity of the original work, dancers in *Room/Roof Piece* are limited to seeing one dancer on the screen" using remote technology to transcend distance.[2] The dancers repurposed Brown's ideas on how dance is communicated across a distance, which included imitation, improvisation, and "decomposition" of the original movements. Although the pandemic kept dancers apart, it allowed them to adapt a site-specific choreography as a round-the-world message. Through dancing in their own rooms, dancers explored ways of communicating across distance. Seibert quotes Scott ("Home Version") saying, they expressed "a nod of solidarity to people who are also confined." Viewing the recreation of Brown's avant-garde choreography alerted me to a defining cultural moment in the dance world that has already been taking place in the years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.[3] Inspired by *Room/Roof Piece*, I borrow Brown's symbolic frames of communication across distance and sites, as well as the ethos of dancing in rooms and on roofs to explore a century-old dance legacy from India—a contemporaneous cultural movement transforming everyday domestic spaces and born-digital media.

In 2020–21, the closure of institutions and arts venues to contain the spread of the infectious virus SARS-CoV-2 or Coronavirus, affected the sector of creative and performing arts globally. In India, from March 24, 2020, all civilians were subjected to mandatory lockdowns, which included intense restriction to movement and choice, drastic adjustments to social and professional environments, and in the case of COVID-19 infection—a quarantine. Performers and technical and administrative workers of arts and creative industries lost work and income during the pandemic. This deepened a sense of precarity that in turn intensified the ever-precarious state of the creative arts. The restrictions and containment measures posed fundamental challenges to those who dance, being deemed "non-essential" professionals. They faced an absence of live programming, and were disallowed to dance in proximity, or engage socially. Disjointed and plural voices chimed on social media expressing concerns for self and householders, lost performance opportunities, and prolonged bouts of isolation. Despite "all in this together", pandemic loss became an everyday reality set against asymmetrical and informal infrastructures within which creative arts industries operate in India.

A different kind of critical reflexivity within the public discourse of arts is perhaps needed to debate why society needs dance and dancers. What I will bring to this essay is how cloistered at home, with cameras on them, dancers seized the pandemic precarity and continued dancing with a sense of immediacy and new kind of intimacy, communicating across distance.

Methodology: Digital Ethnography, 'You' Tube Choreography

With this paper, I offer a peek at experiences of creating dance in India during the COVID-19 pandemic. I do so through an ethnographic account of *rabindranritya* in the digital medium across performers as varied as amateurs, experts, cultural workers, and hobbyists. This empirical research on dance is derived from a particular set of texts focusing on interconnected questions I raise while doing digital ethnography, specifically i) YouTube as a site of research, ii) precarity in arts industries during COVID-19, and iii) dance studies with reference to Bengali polymath Rabindranath Tagore and rabindranritya.

Web-based ethnography can broadly be identified as internet ethnography (Miller and Slater), cyber-ethnography (Teli et al.), digital ethnography (Kaur-Gill and Dutta; Murthy), netnography (Kozinets), and ethnography of the virtual worlds (Taylor et al.). Often these terms are used as synonyms, sometimes rightly so. These scholarly studies emphasize that the technological and human relationship has been evolving; the pervasiveness of the internet in people's everyday lives has unlocked the potential to conduct ethnographic research on online practices, as well as expanded the range of public worlds and culture (Horst and Miller). Digital ethnography is media-based form of research that focuses on people's everyday lives and use of technology. The research studies the digital in relation to "material, sensory, and social worlds" (Pink et al. 7). Being a socio-anthropological method, digital ethnography does not confine itself to one medium, but encapsulates the uses users make of digital environments and their functions, and observes social formations, cultures, and shared identities that naturally emerge from such use practices (Wesch). Moreover, some elements of our everyday existence and lived experiences are distinctly digital which makes expressions of accomplishment, creativity, and sociality via the digital into compelling sites for contemporary ethnographic practices.

Central to my methodology has been 16 months of participant-observation, observing dance made for YouTube, the largest online video repository and a digital platform that I argue is a catalyst of sociality and inclusion in the field of creative arts. Founded in 2005, YouTube gained prominence as a field of study after the digital turn[4] (Taylor et al.; Strangelove; Wesch). It continues to serve as a platform that entails media transfer and archiving with an interface that prioritizes interactive engagement.[5] Unlike many social media sites, YouTube does not require individuals to register to view videos on the site, unless they want to comment on those posted by others.[6] YouTube allows for easy availability of viewing and sharing without creating an account, or what anthropologist Michael Wesch observes "connection without constraint" (27). YouTube displays videos as a playlist or an algorithm that is based on user behavior. For example, if I watch excerpts of *Cymbeline or Coriolanus*, the next few suggestions are then the most-viewed videos of Shakespearean plays.[7] Utilizing user behavior—or in other words, audience preference— YouTube personalizes viewing experience through a smorgasbord of videos. YouTube's democratic, participatory nature plays a significant part

1 See Mangolte's filming process: https://babettemangolte.org/maps.html. Accessed 22 June 2021
2 See video and note: https://trishabrowncompany.org/news/?pg=3 Accessed 22 August 2023
3 In a similar vein, Rebecca Weber discusses *Project Trans(m)it* as a 'social (distance) dancing project' (2021) that was originally conceived as a long-distance digital dance improvisation between international collaborators resulting into a multi-screen immersive screendance installation. Mitchel Rose's film *Glob Trot* (2014) and *And So Say All Of Us* (2019) too feature multiple performers across several countries imaginatively explore public and domestic spaces through movements.
4 The growing importance of digital media technologies in contemporary sociocultural, political and economic processes signalling a paradigm shift in the anthropological study of media (Udupa et al. 1- 2)
5 YouTube is a Web 2.0 domain owned by Google Inc. where data, i.e., content, is user-generated and dynamic. Besides enabling a wide viewership that is democratic and participatory in nature, YouTube is a technology in which media is stored, referenced, and shared or as Robert Gehl (44) and Henry Jenkins (116-117) note, content is archived, annotated, and re-circulated.
6 Some channels may limit the communication by 'switching off' the feature to be commented upon, hence managing audience response to spread negativity or sensitive content.
7 The number of viewers is recorded; however, the view counts are imprecise measures of knowing one's audience (Strangelove 21), therefore popularity can be artificially inflated.

in my discourse of dancing and viewing.

What could have prompted performers to publish themselves dancing? YouTube's early motto had been "broadcast yourself" (2005–2012); i.e., its primary function was to motivate YouTube users to share their lives on the web. Thereafter, new regulations for online culture were introduced by the platform through a mission statement—"to give everyone a voice and show them the world"[8]—to inspire diverse users to contribute to the platform and to reflect on the shifting roles of agency and identity. This act of creating and broadcasting on video-sharing sites, one Wesch calls "YouTubing" oneself, has become a ubiquitous method of expressing oneself. The transnational growth of social networking sites and video sharing technology, especially recording, digitizing, and 'uploading' of experiences of the self has become practice of everyday life. YouTube can be seen as an epitome of digital culture—"by allowing 'you' to post a video which might incidentally change the course of history" (Snickars and Vonderau 11).

Burgess and Green note that beyond the technological, commercial, and aesthetic principles behind the meteoric growth of YouTube, is a cultural ecosystem, an "accidental cultural archive" (90). A decade since their study, the archive has grown daily as YouTube makes a creator out of every user, thus providing possibilities for new creative forms and new socialities. A thriving community has emerged in around such videos where an artist performs in what Wesch notes to be "the most public space on the planet" (21). For performing artists, these uploads cultivate a new audience and connect with those who have witnessed their practice before. To quote Alexandra Harlig, "dance is having a prolonged moment in the public imaginary" across all media forms including online (8). Noting YouTube and other social media's flexible qualities in teaching and learning various components of dance, Nell Haynes draws attention to an unfolding of knowledge production and circulation, and the connection of digital sociality in creating one vast, communal experience (149). Even engendering of a collective national identity through repeating viewing of performances on YouTube, as found by Nadia Younan, suggests how dance attains a sense of transnationality when shared through the digital medium (55). In "finding new forms of embodied sociality in the unpredictable travels of digital tracks" Jesse Shipley also notes the popularity and transnational craze of Azonto dance is due to the possibilities introduced by new technologies (365). In these scholarly works, , YouTube is viewed as a means through which archived performance videos are shared anew, current choreographies and processes are readily published.

Due to the COVID-19 disruptions, a rapid and radical reconfiguration of processes, practices, interactions, and relations was experienced by performers. The pandemic has magnified the embeddedness of digital mediation into performers' lives. For example, during the pandemic, dance communities communicated via screens using social media and sharing sites that created spaces to convene and reimagine the sites where we dance. Performers took to technologies in creating dance-for-camera, mediating interpersonal relationships, making and indulging in communicative ecologies, establishing digital rhythms while popularizing screendance and home videos, or as Bench and Harlig succinctly put it: "This is where we dance now" (1–12). Virtual domains like YouTube that had been transforming the viewing experiences of performances, became a site for the staging of performances. The pandemic was a time of proliferation of dance in the digital format.

Cultural workers and creative artists were not regarded essential in the global health crisis, but, as we have seen, they brought vitality and a value of a different kind towards "alleviating negative effects of social distancing and enhancing public well-being" (Tsioulakis and Fitzgibbon). While many modes of work transitioned online, artists too found enthusiasm for creative solutions to pandemic restrictions there. Retreating indoors, some considered lockdowns as opportunities, while others used art to calibrate anxiety, fear, and grief. Most artists were not waiting for something special to come their way before they created. A movement practice offers a way of coming to oneself when worry and uncertainty cause stress and tension, and movement fostered a sense of togetherness by cheering up creators and their communities.

I locate this study in the interdisciplinary research of social anthropology and dance studies. I juxtapose two seemingly disparate components—1) multimodal approaches to exploring the creation, re-creation, and circulation of vernacular dance cultures and 2) artistic practices in the digital medium. One reflects the evolution of rabindranritya, a genre which took form from the creations of Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941); the second component explores how plurality and precarity of lockdown lives during COVID-19 pandemic can be analyzed through the same practice as digital dances . The entangling of these components, I demonstrate, indicates a "radical universal humanism" as outlined in Tagorean thought, amidst a sea of individual expression of creativity (Chakravorty "Intercultural Synthesis").

8 www.youtube.com/howyoutubeworks, 2017.

This study revisits the genre of rabindranritya as performed in video blogs or vlogs, amateur films, home videos, and dance films. The videos I discuss are choreographed creative experiments, not spontaneous expressions of an artist's everyday life. The digital ethnography has been conducted on videos published between March 2020–June 2021, bracketed by the first and the second wave of COVID-19 pandemic in India.[9] The analysis is based on over 70 hours observation of user-generated publicly available digital video material on YouTube, where individual videos average at five minutes each.[10] I engage in purposeful random sampling. In order to manage the prolific amount of sharing, and to find a way to work around YouTube algorithm, I conducted my observation daily at the same time; each time I refreshed and reordered the uploads 'by date-newest first' with keywords such as 'rabindranritya' and/or 'rabindrasangeet dance.'[11] This analysis is coupled with a more targeted peer study of ten early-to-mid-career dancers who, during the pandemic, had regularly created dance videos and published on YouTube. These dancers completed a questionnaire and communicated through emails and phones. All are of Bengali ethnicity, and all except two reside in Kolkata, the capital city of West Bengal, India. In both approaches, I consciously eliminated minors from the ethnography for ethical reasons.

The scope of the essay also ponders upon digital divide and access to technology to stage dance in virtual platforms. Although recording with phones and cameras (which my respondents possessed), are deemed cost-effective and universal, a digital divide was present in India before the pandemic, and did not diminish during it (Jamil, 2021).[12] The volume of dances on YouTube suggest that a significant number of performers can afford to have their dances documented and published. Moreover, the freedom to create and publish at will has also penetrated the hegemony of elite artists or institutions who control visibility and other platforms of dance, physical, or virtual. Many dancers who belong to rural, peri-urban areas or to lesser-known dance schools, and those who are talented hobbyists or YouTubers, exercise their agency in creating and promoting their dances on multiple platforms.[13]

The COVID-19 pandemic exerted a major impact on our agency as artists. Dance became a collage of expressions of selves, for crafting affinities and alliances, challenging pandemic-related isolation and rules, and to seek opportunities for 'creating content,' 'staying relevant,' and 'finding gainful creative employment.' At first blush, it may seem the pandemic had levelled the dancing field on the account that everyone was at home and filming their dances from within their households. However, the possession of a space to practice, dance, or film; equipment such as camera, tripod, or editing software; the connectivity to participate in or upload performances; and even a clutter-free background to record in front of are all resources required to produce shareable dance content. The need for these resources speaks volumes about privilege, access, and precarity that performers must negotiate.

As mentioned earlier, performers whose videos I analyse are as varied as amateurs, experts, creative workers, and hobbyists. All of my respondents perform rabindranritya and or Indian classical dance. It emerged that they wanted to dance to disassociate the lockdown from mundaneness and inertia while making a contribution to contemporary cultural life. By publishing themselves, they contributed directly to the confluence of dance and the digital and simultaneously to an evolving vernacular practice, during a historic moment of global crises. In the absence of the security of time, personhood, health, and other opportunities, dance delivered a sense of stability, a rhythm. In this manner, the dancers had continued to set a discourse of the self that keeps in line with Tagorean thought of sustaining the self even against the forces of nature.

What also emerges from the digital ethnography and independent responses is that Tagore's compositions—poetry, verses, texts—remain significant, familiar, comforting, and contemporary. The access to Rabindranath Tagore's body of works is near egalitarian: almost all dancers in the region of Bengal are acquainted with it. Through the crucial months of pandemic inquietude, Tagore's words seem to fittingly describe transformative experiences, which echo in the writings of Robert Desjarlais as "moments of despair and scenes of resiliency; creative making and renewal; exhaustion, weariness, separation, isolation; new arrangements of space and time; new connections and forms of communication, virtual or viral" (368).

9 The Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897 and Disaster Management Act, 2005 was invoked in mid-March 2020 with the first wave and the first nationwide 'total lock-down' before March ended. The country began a phased lifting of restrictions or 'unlocks' till November 2020. The second – a more virulent wave of the pandem-ic began to rear its head from February 2021; in some ways that wave abated in June, with a drop in infection and mortality observed since July 2021.
10 Videos are also shared as 'private' and 'unlisted' which do not surface in advanced search.

11 I agree with Harmony Bench who observes, "My IP addresses, my online search histories, my interpersonal connections, my social positions, and my aesthet-ic inclinations have all acted as content filters prior to my curating examples for inclusion" (11)
12 The dependence on internet-based services in India during lockdown is one with which we are too familiar (De, Pandey and Pal 1 - 5)
13 Although the essay considers the dancer or the dance video as a metric of popularity, due to the paucity of scope, this essay discounts the practices of audi-ence-hood and spectatorship, interactive viewing, impact and consumption of popular culture.

In terms of reflexivity and positionality, I am trained in dance studies and anthropology, and I am a practitioner of Manipuri. I bring to this research a personal history that resonates with the sociocultural and phenomenological questions this essay entails: they explore what my dancer's body knows, having trained in Manipuri, a dance form within which rabindranritya was historically and gesturally grounded, and the precarity of well-being and economy that I experienced in the pandemic. I also draw from my own engagement with rabindranritya in which I have participated individually and collectively, across West Bengal, India and elsewhere, for corporeal, digital, and diaspora publics.

Rabindranritya: History and Practice

While interpreting Rabindranath Tagore's *Religion of Man* (1931), Martha Nussbaum recalls, "the significance of creativity is inseparable from the freedom of the individual to discard all traditions, all group norms, in favor of a profoundly personal vision" (88). Tagore emphasized recognizing compassion, individual self-expression, and self-love as qualities towards artistic freedom. His was the religion with "a view of culture and society based upon the capacities in each human being" that in turn could be "sources of poetic creation: passionate experiences of wonder and beauty, love of both nature and other particular people, and the desire to make something whole and meaningful out of the isolated fragments of one person's perceptual experience" (91). In his quest for consciousness, knowledge, and self-realization, to appease his creative impulses, Pallabi Chakravorty notes, he set out to experiment with dance idioms ("Intercultural Synthesis").

Within the geopolitical space of the Indian subcontinent, Tagore remains a pivotal figure in the national, cultural renaissance and pre-independent networks of globalization. He was instrumental in shaping the course of indigenous literature, crafts, and arts, and he also expanded the town his father founded—Santiniketan in West Bengal—and founded Visva Bharati University in Santiniketan. In the last decades of his life, dance had become an ingenuous way of expressing his words and the world. At present, a substantive body of scholarship focusses on and around Tagore's influence on dance in Bengal (see Banerjee; Bhattacharya; Bose; Chakravorty; Chakraborty; Ghose; Mukherjee; Purkayastha). Those writings present a layered history of public performance, theatricality and innovation, femininity and masculinity, modernity, and other contemporary themes. Moreover, writings by witnesses of his choreographic experiments, such as Pratima Devi, Abanindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose, Amita Sen, Shantidev Ghose, Sreemati Hutheesing Tagore, Sukriti Chakravorty, Rama Chakravorty, Sahana Devi, Jyostna Banerjee, Madam Levy, Alain Danielou, Krishna Kripalani and Gurusaday Dutt I.C.S.,[14] are rich sources to mine for personal and anecdotal experiences on dance at Santiniketan under the guidance of Tagore.

Tagore's was a period that saw monumental shifts in the presentation and reception of dance itself. Many of the aforementioned scholars unequivocally conclude that dance in Santiniketan has been a great signifier in the creation of the modern Indian woman and the creation of new publics including a new audience for performance. Alongside Tagore's aesthetic project of incorporating movements to his music, he orchestrated a broader project of delimiting women's presence in performance and public spaces. These projects commenced at a time when in the Indian subcontinent, a set of mechanisms of conformity and policing of women, their artistry, and their bodies in the interest of maintaining a social order were afoot. Historiographical scholarship speaks to and about larger sociocultural processes of hierarchy and control that marked the atmosphere of dance-making in India in the early twentieth century.[15]

While Tagore built dance into the curriculum of Visva Bharati, his daughter-in-law Pratima Devi (1893–1969) and research-scholar and practitioner Shantidev Ghose (1901–1999) assisted him in the incorporation of movements to his song compositions, collectively recognized as rabindrasangeet.[16] The dance that is performed with these songs can be broadly defined as rabindranritya. Movements were added to the "lyrical exposition of Tagore's own poetry and *abhinaya* they evoked" (Bhattacharya 254). They did not follow a stylized code, and did not claim genealogy from any one source. It is known that he preferred abstract movements over mimetic or gestural dance with his song compositions. When it came to dance, Tagore was a bricoleur, one who was able to envision and assemble movements, create meaning with the resources he became familiar with.[17] In the beginning rabindranritya was a synthesis of Manipuri and Kathakali styles. The abstract expressivity and languid flow of one movement to the other is a defining characteristic of the Manipuri style, whereas every word can be enacted through a combination of hand-facial and/or bodily gestures in Kathakali. Pratima Devi noted that *mudras* from classical dance styles were toned down (32–33),[18] and simplicity of facial expressions were recommended so that larger public may be able to follow. Furthermore, Tagore's dance texts or dramas (*nritya-natya*) inscribed new meanings on representation, gender, and sexuality while his musical compositions were based on an array of themes such as eroticism, patriotism, humor, seasons observed in nature, and spiritual universalism. Tagore was also fond of Javanese, Balinese, and Kandyan dance. Ghose writes how he brought back new dance idioms to Santiniketan having learnt various kinds of dances from Kerala, Java, Burma (Myanmar), and Ceylon (Sri Lanka) (26–31). In Tagore's institution, the process of incorporation of various styles of dance and music from South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Europe led to an active perusal of creative experiments. During Tagore's lifetime, Shantidev Ghose and later dancer-choreographer Uday Shankar (1900 – 1977) enthusiastically pursued these styles; Ghose deepened his study of rabindranritya through research, while Shankar's creative experiments led to the birth of a new style.[19]

In the formative stage, Ghose recalls that dance-making with Tagore was a process of absorption and imaginative expansion, drawing from local-regional, Indian, and foreign practices. In other words, dance was made through processes of cross-fertilization, and the results of these processes emanated out into choreography, dramaturgy, performance, and thereafter, their legacies. Ghose's involvement with dance-making was eclectic and formal, individual and collaborative, consciously and unconsciously adopting learnt styles while fashioning new movements. Tagore's envisioning of dance may be "located in a multivalent philosophy of movement that privileged individual and collective *gati* (rhythm) in tandem with beauty in the everyday" (Bhattacharya 101). In Tagore's approach to the bricolage of dance-making, we see the emergence of a pan-Indian diversity, and with a hidden set of trajectories such as passion, intent, quest.

Following the seminal writings of Pratima Devi and Shantidev Ghose, numerous authors have produced scholarly work on dance legacy, discourse, and the practice of rabindranritya that is relevant to the study at hand (Bhattacharya; Bose; Chakravorty; Chakraborty; Purkayastha). Rabindranritya has always been a popular medium of expressive practice in Bengal and Bengali diaspora, though it was not always received with enthusiasm in the Indian dance world. Writing about rabindrasangeet, auteur Satyajit Ray noted that Tagore's song compositions (and thereby their derivatives) were "overwhelmingly individual musical presentation of a specific class of Bengaliness" in which Tagore's "tastes, his beliefs, his environment, education, artistic appreciation, literary appreciation—that is his whole character is reflected in his songs" (52). The same can be said about rabindranritya; from the 1920s, Tagore's pedagogic method of holistic education introduced at Visva Bharati included learning dance and movements. Through his literature and musical compositions, he contributed to the coming-of-age of modern Bengali identity, inspiring the public to create alternative spaces to nurture arts and education during the tumultuous years of British rule. This left an enormous cultural footprint upon Bengal's intellectual, social, and creative history. The music and dance genres he engendered later became components of the foundation for middle-class Bengali identity, youth, and public culture.

Although Tagore propelled a dance movement that was, in the words of Pallabi Chakravorty, not "bounded by an unbending grammar of school (*gharana*), a hierarchical ideology of tradition (*parampara*)" (251), in modern times, practitioners and audience find two primary genres of rabindranritya in practice. One of the genres is the direct bequest of Tagorean institutions, like the Sangit Bhavan (Department of Rabindra Sangeet, Dance and Drama) of Visva Bharati, and the Department of Dance at Rabindra Bharati, Kolkata which adhere to specificity of form and grammar. The other genre of rabindranritya could be all that is danced to rabindrasangeet; in this genre, each dance challenges the institutional style of rabindranritya, thus making each choreographer a bricoleur, assembling their dances from a sea of familiar yet heterogeneous styles and influences. Such styles demonstrate rabindranritya is not a static genre.

Till 2001, the copyright on Tagore's works was strictly controlled by the institution founded by him, Visva Bharati. Through a ritualized practice of performing Tagore's creations, Visva Bharati had, on the one hand, attempted to create an ideal template for reproducing, recording, and staging them. On the other, it had imposed censorship on performances deviating from that template. This attempt at control had a prolonged bearing on how plays, songs, and dances written by Tagore were performed and received. Singer Debabrata Biswas (1911–1980) had wielded an unconventional performative power in recognizing individuality and experience in expression Tagore's sung verses. He spent a lifetime singing rabindrasangeet and tussling with critics on use of musical accompaniments

14 Dutt led a movement for popularising folk dances of Bengal and India around the same time.
15 See Srinivasan "Sweating Sarees"; Kersenboom-Story "Nityasumangali"; Meduri "Nation, Women".
16 Tagore composed his songs as songs, language, and music conceived together (Banerjee 113)
17 Lévi-Strauss explains the creation of a bricolage is achieved with a "set of tools and materials which is always finite and is also heterogeneous" which is "defined only by its potential use or putting this another way and in the language of the bricoleur himself" (17-18)
18 Pratima Devi had no training in dance, yet she was Tagore's dance collaborator, a dance-maker and a pedagogue (See Purkayastha "Choreographing gender in Colonial Bengal")

19 Sarkar Munsi traces Shankar's evolution in *Engendering Performance and Dance: Transcending Borders*.

and changes in tempo of Tagore's songs amongst other matters. Biswas and the Visva Bharati Music Board were bound in disagreement over his rendition of many songs; he was often rebuked by letters for songs to be "re-recorded after eliminating defects" before they were released by record companies (Biswas 87). In a few of his exchanges Biswas emphasizes the freedom of expression and interpretation (130–131) and intellect and emotion (119) while criticizing the self-assured hubris he tolerated from his detractors ultimately writing to them: "I have seen persons possessing a creative mind engaged in new experiments in their respective sphere of activity who did not like the idea of repeating the existing art-patterns like birds and insects. Their examples were a source of inspiration […]" (91). He claimed to be inspired to sing experimentally. While taking on a relatively centralized system that allowed re-production of Tagore's creations, Biswas paid dearly with interruptions in his singing career. However, he believed in subjective interpretations and nuanced experiments, which he often found in Tagore's own assimilation of values, aesthetics, and fluid thinking in creative activities such.

Another experiment towards contemporizing Tagore's vision that gave precedence to freedom of expression and interpretation, to intellect, and to emotion, was Navanritya as expounded by Manjusri Chaki-Sircar (1934–2000) and Ranjabati Sircar (1963–1999) of Dancers' Guild, Kolkata. Navanritya was born during the postcolonial and phase of Indian dance, furnishing what Aishika Chakraborty recognizes as "a new body politics, stressing its social, historical, and ideological constructions" ("The Daring Within" 185). While charting the history of modern dance in Bengal, Chakraborty recounts her dance-mentor Chaki-Sircar's description of her dance lineage: "the legacy of Tagore was one obvious springboard for creations" (193). In Renaissance Bengal, "Tagore facilitated a responsiveness to dance as a legitimate social activity" (191) although the Tagorean dance style was rejected as "amateurish and marginal" ("Calcutta Choreographs" 302). As Chakraborty and other scholars have noted, selected elements or stylistic characteristics from other movement traditions were pastiched and reconstructed as a vocabulary for a dynamic Tagorean dance style. These processes of dance-making were as erratic as intuitive, loyal to Indian dances and but moving towards a dynamic hybrid "through constant absorption of transcultural body languages" (Chakraborty "Calcutta Choreographs" 298). Chaki-Sircar critically analyzed and freely synthesized movements to mark the genre of Navanritya, thus embodying the Tagorean ideal of "chemical synthesis" (*rashayonik shongmishron*) in bodily representation of Tagore's creations. Chaki-Sircar's own research on ritual and performances of Manipur may have played a role in resisting what Bhattacharya calls a "wholesale importation of regional performance traditions (such as the *ras lila* in Manipur)" (99). But her creative rethinking of Tagorean dance drew ire from many guardians of Tagore's legacies. She aspired to engender a new purpose for a contemporary artist delving into Tagore's creations, to integrate within "vibrant creativity" and make a "breakthrough in the modernization of the Indian dance scene" (Chaki-Sircar 32).

In the nineties when I grew up, I observed that dance was an acceptable hobby, perhaps a desirable accomplishment for women in Bengali middle-class homes. Dancing to rabindrasangeet at school, social clubs, dance groups, and even at unmemorable events was extremely common, even lauded. Ananya Chatterjea even notes women dancing rabindranritya offered "rich material to deconstruct and rearticulate in the creation of a contemporary feminist aesthetic" (122). However, Urmimala Sarkar Munsi mentions, dance was "a sought-after hobby" till she wanted "to become a full-scale professional dancer" especially in the classical arts ("A Century of Negotiations" 299). In comparison, rabindranritya was and continues to be a fail-safe option to explore by professionals and amateurs alike. It is a genre that was not bound to royal courts, domestic spaces, public culture, temples, or hereditary traditions and yet was indirectly bound to all. But it is important to remember that rabindranritya "remained experimental and ad hoc" in practice, since "it was never codified," and teachers "never created a rigorous regimen for training dancers" even though it was fully integrated within the educational curriculum at Santiniketan (Chakravorty "Intercultural Synthesis" 257). Perhaps a lacuna in the training system and indeterminate pedagogy discouraged budding performers from taking on rabindranritya as a specialized style. Perhaps the classical dances offered greater creative, conceptual, socioreligious, and pedagogic clarity and consistency, by comparison. Perhaps in an atmosphere where, for most parents of dancers and many students, dance is not a dependable career and is known to be poorly renumerated as much of it is embedded in an informal, unregulated creative industry, rabindranritya remains only part of elementary and extracurricular education. Or perhaps it is a mode of artistic expression connected to leisure and cultural capital, evoking memories of natal culture and "Bengaliness," and nothing more.

Or perhaps what is now needed is to observe that the horizon of rabindranritya is shifting, expanding. In observing how Tagore's works are popular texts for dance in the digital medium, it shows that rabindranritya has been moving out of concerts, classrooms, and ensemble productions, towards more personal, individual, artistic expressions. Modern non-classical dance forms of India have evolved too. Interactions with movement styles from across the world through workshops and collaborations, and through dance reality shows and dance videos, has brought about a change in the process of creating new movements to rabindrasangeet. Dances that are brought to digital platforms are viewed with frequency, and reviewed, critiqued, and praised both within and devoid of a sociocultural context. They stand alone as choreographies.

In the following segment, I explore the current trend of choreographic experiments by etching out the complex interlacing of social and cultural domain—that of rabindranritya created for the digital medium and emplaced in quarantined isolation.

Rabindranritya in Lockdown: Observing Plurality in Form and Choreography

The peeling paint of the balustrade has been covered with fabrics, pots with lush foliage have been turned to face the camera. The space is to simulate a stage. From the terrace of the neighbor's building, breezy garments on a washing line festoon the immediate space. Within the frame is the figure of a dancer in a sari draped simply, with colorful fabric tied around waist and shoulders, few flowers tucked in the hair—a common visual trope motif of a performer dancing to rabindrasangeet.[20]

Another dancer. Now in a room. The ceiling-fan keeps blowing off the carefully arranged fabric to giving a peek of a pile of books. Other signs make the domestic visible: a forgotten water jug, patterned floral curtains, children's toys. Before beginning a dance to rabindrasangeet, a prayer is chanted for the good of humankind in front of a small idol and a framed photograph of Tagore. Dressed in fineries unfitting for a summer day, the movements follow the tempo of the song. The handheld camera continues to shake till the very end.

Do these descriptions seem familiar? The first video is of a dancer representing an institution, in the second a hobbyist who dances recreationally. What unites them are their commitment to dance, and dance videos set to Tagore's music compositions made for digital public. What further connected the performers during the COVID-19 lockdowns, or *dushamay*, the worst of times, was probably a desire to move out of their claustrophobic interior dwellings, towards dancing as an expression of much-needed *ananda*, joy and *kalpana*, imagination.

As Tagore preferred for the performer and the audience to have an out-of-door experience, the dances in these videos frequently emulate the original mise-en-scène—open skies, trees, or plants surrounding the dancers, garments such as saris or *uttariya* decorating the backdrop. The domestic, as much a discursive as a physical space, is transformed into a cultural space, a stage, a site to dance. Not many of these dance videos fit the definition of site-specific dance,[21] yet in a Lefebvrian sense, they create sites to dance within their existing spaces, even if for a temporary period. The dancers approach domestic spaces—room, terrace, garden, corridors—with boundless possibilities, and dance is made part of everyday private life.[22] The lockdowns during the pandemic also meant limited contact with public spaces. Although the first nationwide lockdown began in India on March 24, 2020, eventually each of the federal states had their own "unlocks." Towards the end of the second more virulent wave of COVID-19 ending in June 2021, we see fewer dance choreographies in the confines of four walls. By then, dance had become a part of the urban environment with dance videos being filmed in the commons and outwardly public spaces such as streets, parks, ruins, woodlands.[23] This is a conscious attempt by an individual or an ensemble to enliven public space for filming dance videos. At this historical moment of a global crises, these videos with various incarnations of dance on Tagore's compositions, were accepted as means of creativity, skills, and entertainment and had paved a trend in digital cultures. In this segment, I track divergences in the genre of rabindranritya in the post-copyright years of creative adaptations of Tagore's oeuvre, i.e., creating dance for digital public.[24]

A key transformation in dance cultures has occurred due to transitions in rabindrasangeet. Much of Tagore's 2,200 songs were set to music during his lifetime. These included non-narrative songs and songs within dance-dramas.

20 Simplicity in costumes and adorning the hair with flowers became a mark of 'Santiniketani' sensibility (Bhattacharya 96). A key decorative element of costume has been the *uttariya* (a long scarf), usually tied around the head or waist or worn around the neck.
21 Site-specific dance is performed and created in response to a particular site or location, it encompasses engagements with urban, rural and virtual environments and incorporates a range of themes from the sociopolitical to the romantic, historical, ecological and factual.
22 Sukanya Chakrabarti probes the state endorsed performances by celebrity and the public during the pandemic and calls them "choreographed joy" (893).
23 Unless mentioned, I limit the scope of the essay to the home as the main site of lived and danced experiences through isolation and lockdown.
24 The immense richness of Tagore's corpus in digital world can now be mined as 'big data', as observes literary studies scholar Sukanta Chaudhuri in the variorum named Bichitra containing Tagore's works in Bengali and English (2020; 2021). Although the archive is entirely textual, it ushers the readers towards a self-annotating archive within the hypertext i.e., the Internet. The Bichitra archive contains (almost) every version of Tagore's every work thus allowing an em-

Since the copyright on Tagore's works expired in 2001, the Bengali music industry began to adapt his songs while experimenting with instruments, harmony, tempo and other parameters to keep up with changes in music performance styles and to excite new listening publics.[25] In contemporary times, rabindrasangeet is used in musicians' independent albums, in cinema as well as web-based series. I have found a phenomenon of dancing for the camera known as "cover dance" or "dance cover" become popular ways of moving to new renditions of rabindrasangeet. Globally, for a "dance cover", performers emulate the choreography from an original music video or choreography by well-known dance artists to the same music. Dancers also move freely and perform their own renditions showing off their virtuosity. [26] But in this context, the recurring mention of "dance cover" in the description or video titles of rabindranritya indicates that dancers view the new musical arrangements of rabindrasangeet as "trending" music, which in turn offers myriad possibilities for creating original choreographies of rabindranritya without emulating anyone. Furthermore, since almost all the music and dance are archived on YouTube, it substantiates what Harmony Bench notes "how digital cultures reimagine who gets to be a dance performer or choreographer" (10). While the finer nuances of kinesthetic style and movement impulse of rabindranritya on YouTube cannot be compared with other styles of rabindranritya (such as the Santiniketani style), it cannot be dismissed that pre-recorded, trending, rabindrasangeet used by YouTube performers forms a basis to dramatize and visualize their choreography for camera, often showcasing a bricolage of movements.

Besides music, we look at the body of the dancer as the site of research and discovery, of revisiting rabindranritya. Almost a century after Tagore introduced dance as "a language of the body in motion that spoke of emotional experience" and "as the perfect articulation of his songs and poetry" (Bose 1086), this could be a moment to ask what kinds of processes and practices does rabindranritya presently engender? To arrive at the stylings of the body with a critical eye, I see that performers do not blithely borrow from Indian classical dances, though they have received extensive training in them. In the past, Bose notes, classical dance idioms have attested "to the potential of rabindranritya in advancing the modern spirit in Indian dance but they cannot be "equated with Tagore's own style" (1090).[27] Presently dancers build on a combination of various movement languages and rely on their freedom of expression. They too indulge in a "chemical synthesis," a new dance language, and an intercultural dance aesthetic propagated by Tagore, Shantidev Ghose, and Pratima Devi in the early years of rabindranritya. Even if the dance adheres to three of the laws Bose collates, that it "must be set to Tagore's songs, that it must represent the meaning of the songs through body movements, and the movements are fluid and rhythmic" (1092), the boundaries of the uncodified, undefined territory of rabindranritya, appear to be dislimned.

Independently, choreography in many of these dance videos demonstrate a dis/harmonious blend of the physical, textual, aural, and gestural elements. The experience of the dancer(s) comes through. The digital is not a unidirectional arena, interactive engagement between the performers and their audience is alive; they motivate them, praise, and criticize them. The performers highlight their commitment and emotional attachment involved in creating dance by inserting customized messages, behind-the-scenes vlogs, by maintaining an aura of the personal. The cultural currency of the video is not only in the dance, or the 'authentic' Santiniketani, Navanritya, classical, or hybrid styles, but how the dance speaks to the new media publics. As was seen amongst the first dancers in Tagore's institution, "the professionalizing of arts brings with it the promise of self-sustenance and the much-desired freedom of the artist" followed with "a continuous search for new patrons" (Bhattacharya 13–14). The same resonates with artists even while leading precarious pandemic lives. For many of the dancers and choreographers I came across while conducting the YouTube ethnography, the virtual space had already become the new social arena to express themselves with their desire to participate in a wider, global sphere of performance cultures. The COVID-19 pandemic further cultivated audience who welcomed their dances in the wake of isolation, distancing, and lockdown measures. Performers and audience pursued professionalization and a transformative potential through the arts.

In the digitally mediated world, filmed and watched through handheld devices, dance covers of popular rabindrasangeet circulate well among the audience. Tagore himself classified his song compositions into *parjay-upaparjay* or segments such as songs of piety, patriotism, love, seasons, ceremonies, and miscellaneous. Songs describing the beauty of Bengal's nature and cycle of seasons (*prakriti parjay*) have always been popular amongst dancers and remain so. When usurped by the pandemic, dancers attempted to bring harmony and balance to everyday life by interpreting Tagore's poetry and rhythms of nature. I revisit three videos by performers who use the classical dance vocabulary for presenting Tagore's work for a digital audience, to assert that choreography atypical to conventional rabindranritya lend multidimensionality to the song text and his philosophy. Filmed for camera, sites around dancers shape particular resonances, and dance-making to rabindrasangeet can be unique to the individual's training.

Noted Odissi performer Jhelum Paranjape introduces her video interpreting rabindrasangeet song *Jeebon jokhon shukaye jaye karunadharay esho* (YouTube.com 2020a). She explains *karunadhara* or "shower of mercy" is art itself that brought back color to a listless pandemic life. Art has helped break open the cocoon of pandemic loss; online classes and virtual performances are a source of work for artists which replenish them financially and existentially. Filmed in front of a thrashing sea at monsoon in Mumbai, with a choreography based on Odissi movements and improvisation, Paranjape looks at Tagore's words to find within oneself the strength for embracing the unpredictability of lockdown lives.

In another video Bharatnatyam dancer Sukanya Kumar dances *Momo chitte niti nritye* in an open green space (YouTube.com 2020b). She employs the lyrics *ta ta thoi thoi* (words describing percussive beats) as a rhythm for beating heart, blooming of a bud, steps of a dance, the coursing of time through the planet. She uses her ankle bells to bring out the tempo of the song. Without compromising bharata natyam vocabulary, Kumar interprets Tagore's philosophy of cycle of rejuvenation and chaos as he intended. This song is frequently used for dance (on YouTube); the depth of Tagore's philosophy, often concealed behind the song's alliterative words in others' rendition, comes alive in Kumar's dance.

Staying with the theme of cycle of seasons and respite from a second summer of lockdown, Anjan dances Kathak Esho *shyamala sundar* on a roof as it rains (YouTube.com 2021a). The background music of the vocals in sarod, santoor, and tabla creates an apt soundscape for the movements of kathak in which Anjan is trained. He does not, however use feet movements and spins to demonstrate his dexterity; he embodies being caught in the rain with abhinaya. For these three dancers, their significant departures from rabindranritya conventions give a glimpse into the potential song texts possess.

The possibilities of departure from Santiniketani style have also led performers to raise questions amongst themselves. Organized by Kalapi titled "Rabindranritya: a Myth or Truth?" suggests an unrestricted approach towards dancing Tagore, in which speaker Soma Dutta brings up few of the nuances I discuss in this essay (YouTube.com 2021b). She mentions ridding the term 'rabindranritya' altogether, which idealises preinscribed movement and sartorial guidelines, denoting its restrictiveness which in turn urges duplication or repetition of movements. As Tagore often spoke of freeing the body as well as imagination, institutional guidelines such as those outlined through the Santiniketani style by Visva-Bharati and Rabindra Bharati University, are un-Tagorean.[28] For Tagore, creativity was an ongoing search for perfection that would create empathy and free the human soul (Chakravorty "Intercultural Synthesis" 250). This is also seen in several of Kalapi's dance videos that have been made through lockdowns. For example, in *Nobo anonde jago*, a rabindrasangeet rendition fused with Hindustani music, the dancers draw from movements of rabindranritya, Uday Shankar style, and the eight Indian classical dance styles (YouTube.com 2020c). Several dancers are accommodated on the screen beside each other even when they are filming from multiple sites. Choreography and techniques are impacted by spatial limitations. Their steps and garments are synchronised and edited to appear in unison and the outcome is a musical, danced, and visual bricolage, signaling a metaphorical coming together despite the multi-sitedness.[29] Made for International World Dance Day (April 29, 2020), they note that times are critical: "as the sun rises after the night, likewise our planet will also emerge as victorious." Many of Kalapi's videos are filmed with multiple dancers from the rooms and roofs of their houses and are edited to appear in unison. They explore with movements as well as different genres of music for making dance videos for YouTube.

It appears fluidity and multidisciplinarity or cross-genre work

placement of the human in the digital. http://bichitra.jdvu.ac.in/index.php Accessed 22 April 2023.

25 Sengupta quotes praises and criticisms from YouTube videos on new renditions of rabindrasangeet to further the debate on artistic independence and authenticity of Tagore's compositions. Sengupta, Ipsita. "'Originality', 'Authenticity' and 'Experimentation': Understanding Tagore's Music on YouTube', *The Centre for Internet and Society*, 2015. https://cis-india.org/raw/blog_understanding-tagores-music-on-youtube Accessed 22 April 2023.

26 Performers or YouTubers in the Indian context interpret "dance cover" to set their own choreographies to popular or film music, and although faithful replicas
of sequenced movements from Bollywood songs are common, dances can be widely open to reconfiguration, especially the choreographic elements.

27 Also, "In Devi's words, Shantiniketan's dance aesthetics was less concerned with pure forms and more interested in developing a new dance language that could express the new content of Tagore's writing" (In Purkayastha "Choreographing gender in Colonial Bengal", 80)

28 Dutta also warns against bringing classicism from Indian dance forms as they are rooted in religious traditions, which counters Tagore's vision of art and life that was iconoclastic. The divine resides within the human. Moreover, to understand rabindrasangeet and interpret to dance requires an artist to understand the social and the cultural history of Bengal, and Tagore's role in seeking what Chakravorty writes as an "organic relationship between knowledge and humanity" ("Intercultural Synthesis" 246)

29 While discussing the process of making videos, dancers mention their mentor Susmita Nandi Sethia presented the idea as a 'dance challenge' to exercise their creativity and inculcate a positive spirit; team members inspired each other to dance together and overcome the confinement of space by imagining beyond the site by using camera. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mD6KDrV-3So Accessed 22 April 2023.

is not out of the ordinary for those who make dance videos for YouTube. Besides discussions, dancers show their proficiency in diverse forms to retain audience attention while working on original choreography. Tagore too features in their repertoire. For Bangladeshi artist Ridy Sheikh, Tagore's birth anniversary was a moment to pay tribute to him (YouTube.com 2020d). Collaborating with dancer S. I. Evan from two separate sites (two terraces), their dance *Majhe majhe tobo dekha pai* incorporates movements that were never part of the rabindranritya canon. They distil the canon with dance languages they have picked up while learning and choreographing other forms, yet the new abstract language flows with song text. At one point, they both dance with facemasks to underpin that the video was in fact filmed during a historic crisis. On another note, Tagore is an iconic figure outside Bengal and Bengali diaspora, but amongst the performance cultures of Bengal and Bangladesh, he occupies a place of immense significance that is deeply emotional. Every year, his birth and death anniversaries see a deluge of tributes, offerings to him by performing his oeuvre, and since the digital turn, the archive of tributes has been expanding.

During the pandemic, many dance groups took to staging Tagore's dance-dramas from the confines of their own homes. Designed for an ensemble, often around protagonists undergoing deep internal conflict, dance-dramas are musicals with dialogues. From an assorted milieu, I found dances to songs of *Chitrangada* appear frequently in my search, especially two. One song describes Chitrangada's inner emotions as they encounter a warrior for whom they fall deeply, the second is when assured of their own sense of self, they deliver a soliloquy. I take here two such instances to demonstrate how independent of the narrative, songs could also be individually performed as an expression of each character's identity and angst.[30] *Amar onge onge* is a song about bodily transformation, here danced by a cross-dressed man Biswajit H. (YouTube.com 2020e). Ordinarily the song describes the changes Chitrangada finds within them having received divine boons to alter appearance to seduce the warrior. The dancer choreographs the movements in rabindranritya and Bharatnatyam styles. It appears in his attempt to embody gender and body fluidity he challenges notions of manly masculinity and womanly femininity that Tagore initially ascribed to the characters in the drama. Towards the end of the drama, in the soliloquy Chitrangada states they are more than their gender. *Ami Chitrangada* has always been choreographed as a depiction of strength, grace and virtue of the protagonist; one common interpretation of the song text veers towards women claiming their identity overcoming inner dilemmas (Purkayastha "Warrior, Untouchable, Courtesan") with a powerful subtext of being accepted as an imperfect individual. In Sulagna R.B.'s dance video of *Ami Chitrangada* filmed in an interior space lined with furniture and bookshelves, what comes across is an everyday woman, whose creative expression has found one's place in the wider world (YouTube.com 2020f). Her movements are in Odissi. This is one of the many dances that was performed when the socio-familial space of the home came to be denoted as confines but also refuge. Physically adapting to dwellings and journeying within them not only becomes an important tool for dancers at home, but they learn to amplify the physical and evocative qualities of these sites as well.

As I mentioned before, as artists along with others settled into the pandemic everyday, sites beyond the four walls offered more possibilities for filming dances. In between the first and the second wave when morbidity and mortality had declined, extraordinary control measures came briefly undone. The pressure to re-emerge financially and reconstitute creative and social lives gave artists courage to explore beyond their immediate spaces. Persisting by the Tagorean aesthetics of seeking "festive in the everyday" (Bhattacharya 14), this was a time to transform one's art in relation to people, nature, and seasons, and within that context, I discuss two dance videos by the ensemble Subhangik.

The ensemble of Subhangik led by Subhajit K. Das employs in the video's creative process camerawork and choreography, thereby striking a balance between the human-nonhuman site elements. In many ways, this has been the next stage of making dance films—combining choreography, site-specificity, camerawork along with music and song text giving rise to vibrant encounters. The creative assemblage to Tagore's compositions here wears a cinematic quality, breaking free from the frontal gaze of the camera. One video narrativizes the devotee seeking the divine to *Gahan kusuma kunjo majhe*, penned by Tagore while imitating medieval Vaishnavite Bhakti poets.[31] The ensemble performs in the courtyard of a building in ruins. The arches and pillars act like backdrop of a proscenium (YouTube.com 2021c). The site itself imposes a form of grandeur The ensemble dances as devotees and consorts, from which one—a male—ardently seeks Krishna, the fountainhead of Vaishnav spirituality. A small portion of Tagore's rabindrasangeet directly addressed Hindu divinities, within which the somewhat erotically charged Krishna songs are extremely popular. Here, dancing bodies create a movement aesthetic within an interstitial zone of multiple classical vocabularies. In contrast, staged under a tree draped with saffron fabric, Subhajit pays a solo homage to dancer-choreographer Uday Shankar through the celebrated movement idiom created by him. In *Maharajo e ki shaje* the dancer takes a more personalized approach to movement exploration, including placing his body at a site to produce particular affects to show an organic connection between song, nature, Bengaliness (YouTube.com 2021d). Dance practitioners and dance writers note Tagore's unfailing influence on Shankar, and here I quote the former's views on interculturalism that stood for unfettered creativity and embracing newness in dance:

> "There are no bounds to the depth or to the expansion of any art which, like dancing is the expression of life's urge. We must never shut it within the bounds of a stagnant ideal, nor define it as either Indian or oriental or occidental, for such finality only robs it of life's privilege which is freedom".
>
> —Tagore, Letter to Uday Shankar, 1933 (Bhattacharya 346)

Exponentially, we see more dancers preferring to explore movements to rabindrasangeet on their own perhaps as an embodiment to what Tagore envisioned. We see an openness to hybridity, porous bodies through which newness enters the dance lexicon.

While conducting the digital ethnography, two channels stood out for its consistent approaches of dancing rabindranritya in Santiniketani style. Sundar: Rabindranritya and Rabindranritya Riya joined YouTube in March-April 2020. The first channel is managed by an ensemble of artists connected with Visva Bharati, the second is by a solo artist who has graduated from Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata. These experienced dancers scrupulously adhere to rabindranritya style as taught by their institution, which means, there is an absolute, uncorrupted way Tagore's composition are danced. The stylistic movements are based on amalgamation of Manipuri and Kathakali, but veer on abstract expressivity and non-realistic representations. Manipuri movements are preferred for songs with a gentler cadence, while for songs with a pronounced percussive rhythm, vigorous Kathakali steps are molded to suit the text. The range of movement possibilities are from within the 'traditional' vocabulary of rabindranritya, they may appear limitless as well as limited. Both Sundar and Rabindranritya Riya use rabindrasangeet sung with traditional accompaniments; the team at Sundar dance to music sung by their peers. Although they dance within a small space, allowing for a proximal kind of viewing, they film the videos in single shots, with full bodies in view at all times.

In Sundar's dance videos, I see spontaneity in spirit and symmetrical presentation, with an indication of shared participation in the dance-making process. Inflected through their performances, is a coherent harmony of movements, song texts, and Tagore's core sentiment of dance as a celebration of infallible human spirit, the nature and its resplendent colors. They derive their sensibility and resources from a group of scholars and performers who have been initiated at Santiniketan in creative arts. Their YouTube channel is not only a space to "maintain the legacy of rabindranritya in Santiniketan style" (YouTube.com 2020g), but all the processes and lines of enquiry that had made rabindranritya happen. They draw a continuity in traditional representation of dance and allied arts. For example, in a discussion, Tagore scholars Amarnath Mukhopadhyay and Sudhi Ranjan Mukhopadhyay speak about the role crafts and scenography play in enhancing the essence of dance-dramas (YouTube.com 2021e). They distinguish presentation and application (*proyog o byabohar*) of material objects in ornamentation of characters and scenes for Tagore's dance-dramas and plays. Alongside dance videos filmed exclusively for a digital audience in houses and gardens, they also share choreographies performed in studios and concerts. Sundar continues to seek newness of dance language simultaneously expanding rabindranritya's referential lexicon.

Like artists of Sundar, Riya C. of Rabindranritya Riya does not tamper with the sartorial, embodied, and movement aesthetics of old Santiniketani style. In this way, she acknowledges receiving a shared, inherited repertoire that was hierarchically transmitted to her in her institution of learning. She recasts it for her digital audience producing a template for aspirational traditional rabindranritya soloists. As dancers today cultivate individual distinction, Riya C.'s dance videos provide a structure for creative elaboration while simultaneously incorporating traditional and new, Manipuri and Kathakali movements. She has often filmed her dance on a terrace of a house surrounded by greenery or brick walls. This gives the appearance of an atemporal style of rabindranritya, the simplicity of which makes her videos popular. Since the beginning of the pandemic, she has published rabindranritya videos at least once or twice every month. In her words, she wants to spread the "Tagore tradition" (YouTube.com 2020h) and to entertain YouTube audiences having learnt for 14 years and earned her degree in rabindranritya.[32] The plurality that I find in my viewing of rabindranritya in the digital medium, can also be summated

30 See Purkayastha's "Warrior, Untouchable, Courtesan" for a discussion on marginalised women occupying central positions in Tagore's dance-dramas.

31 Imagining himself as a medieval poet Bhanusingha, Tagore simulated the Maithili dialect to write songs which collectively came to be known as *Bhanusingher Padabali*. Most songs imagine scenes of union and separation between Krishna and Radha.

in the words of Martin Kämpchen who anticipated the possibilities of bringing performances of Tagore forward in future:

"Why not experiment more and more with the conventions of performing his plays and dance dramas? Why not add European or Japanese styles of acting, novel dance idioms, pantomime, if you want even video installations. Have a dance performance while reciting Rabindranath's poems, enact some of his ballads, allow different instruments to play his tunes, add modern experimental music to his dance dramas—and so on.

The results may, in many cases, become unconvincing, they may end up a failure and not be Rabindranath anymore. But in some successful productions, the mind and art of the Indian poet will reveal a surprising sparkle and impact that is capable of shaking and moving us more deeply than perhaps the original play did which we have watched a dozen times since childhood. Let us remind ourselves that tradition—including the traditions around Rabindranath—can be kept alive and relevant only when it is confronted by new ideas and styles. If these confrontations are being renounced, we soon will confront a museum, rather than a living tradition."[33]

In the years 2020–2021, dance videos on Tagore's compositions peaked in the period between Bengali New Year (mid-April), International World Dance Day (April 29) and Tagore's birth anniversary (May 8/9). Using Tagore's song texts, the dancers earnestly express their artistry towards emotional, physical even spiritual freedom. The digital ethnography made apparent that performers need to constantly attune with new modes of performance to remain relevant in the larger public domain. The digital had become ubiquitously infused with all parts of pandemic lives, but a valid vehicle of cultural expression. To practice art, was for some soulful and sobering, offering sanctuary from the unpredictability of pandemic and sudden feelings of being unmoored from daily life. For the rest it came to be an act of replenishing the praxis of art and everyday life, where artists learnt how to work with the digital medium. A performance for the digital suggests larger and presumably heterogenous audience. Although rabindrasangeet could be viewed as a representative of a region's collective personhood, Tagore's compositions rouse deep emotions beyond the Bengali-speaking peoples. Dances to rabindrasangeet bridges the generational and other hierarchies, including professionals, amateurs, and hobbyists, and Santiniketani and new styles, giving a contemporary outlook to a nostalgic, vernacular aesthetic. Rabindrasangeet continues to challenge the imagination of contemporary choreographers, upcoming and established dancers which they rose to accept even during the pandemic. As described before, dancers attempted to embrace the quotidian aspects of dancing in domestic spaces. In the following segment, I cue into the pandemic lives when dance as a digitally native content evolved with everyday life.

Rabindranritya and Sociality in Times of Precarity

"As I finish my practice and trace the arch of the terrace, I felt sad and proud. I have come to appreciate the warmth of my room, the possibilities of choreography the roof offers. But, at what loss?"

amar a ghore aponar kore grihodipkhani jwalo he
shob dukhoshok sharthok hok lobhiya tomari alo he" (S35, 2021)

(I light a lamp in my own way to illuminate my home
Let sorrow and grief triumph while they seek Your light. Tagore [1901], *Geetabitan* 106; Translation mine)

In the remainder of the essay, I discuss my research with responses from ten dancers. All have danced through the pandemic, and even after a decade-long training, some have embraced dance as a recreation and not as métier. Previously I analyzed tenacity and creativity of dancers; two other relevant registers emerge - they are precarity and sociality. By precarity I refer to forms of threats (often extreme) to a livable life (Butler 146), in this case how the pandemic enforced loss of work or how people came to inhabit their worlds. By sociality I mean forms of social interrelatedness which involve shared activities and a sense of togetherness.[34] What unfolds in the words of my research participants is that the pandemic had reconfigured the embeddedness of digital mediation because dancers found themselves in different states of precarity and sought to further their art and meet their social needs online. Commenting on how dance and making dance videos have helped them in the pandemic, one of the performers affirm:

"Even though I was choreographing and teaching, my own learning had stopped as my teacher stopped taking classes. I don't prefer (learning in) online dance classes either. Economically I didn't suffer as much. But dance did help my mental and emotional health. It helped me to connect with audiences far and wide and motivated me to start my own YouTube channel. Unknown people praising my work was a great boost for me." (N33, 2021)

Recognizing the threatening and eventually transformative potential of precarious living as a dancer during the pandemic, through my interlocutors' words I could unite few of the underlying contentions of this essay—creativity and sociality in times of precarity. They acknowledge the loss of their training with their teacher who preferred in-person teaching. They mention financial and psychological health—both in miserable state but admit satisfaction at building a new audience and connecting with them. The creative experiments and shared cultural experiences are emplaced within digital sociality, the predominant form of maintaining social interconnectedness during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The newly significant space for informal community gathering and cultural participation had existed before the pandemic. In the digital ethnography on regional Mexican music conducted by Margolies and Strub (1–14), it was concurred that audience watched related videos not only for familiarity but a continued sense of community and identity. Likewise, the formation of a thriving community to dance with during the pandemic aided Parkinson's patients (Kelly and Leventhal 64S–69S), students and teachers in higher education (Schmid and McGreevy-Nichols 135–142), ballet in domestic spaces (Ferrer-Best 30–49) or as I deliberate—by making dance videos of rabindranritya and sharing them with digital public. One dancer who was "socially and culturally deprived" and would dance infrequently, found watching dance videos shared by "likeminded people" helped "bridge distances" caused by social isolation (C42, 2021). They also felt creating the "right" digital audience is "difficult without promoting" videos which leads creators to be techno-social or hyper-social—traits that they personally did not possess (C42, 2021). But they enjoyed the challenge of creating for an audience made of known but largely unknown peoples. Pre-pandemic it would have been "unthinkable to dance without a physical audience", but once the newness settled in, it was "unthinkable not to dance" for the audience that was already willing and available (M33, 2021). That also prompted them to directly interact with their YouTube viewers and "keep their requests on mind" while choreographing dances (M33, 2021).

Sociality, in all its light, shade and complexity underwent a change in micro-contexts of everyday life. If interaction over the digital emerged as norm, some interactions within households and residences changed during lockdowns too. Since they lived in a high-rise urban housing with neighbors living downstairs, one dancer mentions "I could not stamp my feet, so I opted for sit-down choreography," i.e., to not move lower limbs at all (B36, 2021). Some spent "quality time" with their daughter by making "duet choreography in this period" (U40, 2021), taught their father "how to hold the phone and film in landscape mode" (B36, 2021), sought suggestions from "mother-in-law about costumes and songs as she knows more about Bengali culture" (S35, 2021). "Other dancer-friends" kept them motivated though for the first five months of the pandemic they felt extremely "vulnerable having not met their parents" even if they lived not far away, and "dance was a way to connect with them over distance" (M33, 2021). The field of socialities was marked with a vortex of different emotions that came from staying far away from family and friends; their words speak of "disconnect, isolation, rage, hopelessness" all of which led them through profoundly affective experience making them unable to dance (D38, 2021). Of grief, they say, although they lost no one to death, the collective grief of many people felt like an encumbrance. To dance during the pandemic was to be at a privileged place. It meant their health, preparedness, materials, affects, sentiments, hardships could be largely adjusted to the social, economic and medical crises. They responded that they each of them have experienced either of three forms of precariousness—health risks, loss of kin and unstable employment. Precarity is an existential vulnerability or conditions of intense uncertainty resulting into a different mode of being.[35] The "absolute lack of control over own present and future" continued and convinced to them to "join a local volunteer organization to raise funds for household helps"; as gratitude, they made a private dance video for the donors (S35, 2021). Voluntarism and reciprocity aside, dance videos were primarily made as expressions of creativity. Except two, all dancers informed that their dance videos for YouTube were neither monetized, nor were they financially compensated for making them. Five of them held other jobs and danced recreationally, other five are dancers by profession out of which three experienced economic challenges due to the loss of performance and teaching opportunities. This demonstrates the manifold ways in which pandemic precarity engulfed individuals from similar socioeconomic backgrounds. The pandemic made them reflect "over livelihood and existence" realizing there is no economic safety net; "making videos did not generate income" but it got them noticed by viewers leading to enquiries and new students, leaving them realizing "there is future in teaching online" (M33, 2021).

Although precarity offers tenuous opportunities to create lasting forms, these artists have found a dependable vehicle of expression in filming themselves dance. It can

32 Riya C. has a second channel where she publishes dance covers on music other than rabindrasangeet.

33 Kämpchen, Martin. "After Rabindranath Tagore 150—Where to go from here?", 2012 http://www.martin-kaempchen.de/?page_id=226. Accessed 22 April 2023.

34 See Long and Moore (38) grasp various definitions of sociality, especially acknowledging the distinctive of human sociality, collective behaviour and belonging, as well as processes underlying socialities online.

35 For economic, and other precarious state in India during COVID-19 pandemic, see Arora & Majumdar (307-320), Chakraborty (330- 339) and Pandhi.

be as a genuine response to reconstruct artistic skills during lockdown i.e., teaching oneself techniques of filming, editing audio-visual materials, or a process to mitigate the aching awareness of dissonance. There is an earnest effort towards beating social confinement, emotional exhaustion, even spiritual freedom—this is where they find Tagore's compositions soothing. Amidst the rigidity of confinement, rabindrasangeet inspired "to appreciate the minute and the particular" of everyday life (B36, 2021), the verses describe "many layers of human emotions" (U40, 2021), and continued to help them "understand life" (C42, 2021). Deeply motivated by Upanishadic philosophy, Tagore wrote about everyday life and human emotions with profound sensitivity. His words are alleviating, apotropaic even "during any moment of human crisis or loss" (K39, 2021). Choreographing Tagore's compositions implies their messages are reflected within his words, through which "a global audience, a larger group of people can cope with distress – this is "is a responsibility and a goal as a performing artist" (K39, 2021).

Through a "synthesis of verses, movements, music and visuality", Tagore's compositions "can educate and entertain the digital audience" (B36, 2021); the verses speak of "continuous re-creation and spontaneity" as instilled his "philosophy of creativity and freedom" (Chakravorty "Intercultural Synthesis" 250). We see the dancers engage with and speak of embodying the Tagorean thought of sustaining the self even against the forces of nature. They might "not engage with the larger civic, social, cultural or political sides of the worlds at all times", but in the lockdowns they considered making dance videos as "a service to people, to give a little of me through art" (S35, 2021). Through dance they sought to find their place in the warp and woof of creativity and sociality, while learning to articulate their inner world. By interpreting Tagore in movements, they make an effort to embrace a radiant vitality – filling the basic biological struggle for survival with something more numinous, as in *Gitanjali*, for instance,

Conclusion

In revisiting dancers in everyday spaces—off the stage and out of the studio—and while studying new relationships between artist and audience, choreographer, and site, we see dances created during the pandemic that facilitate an understanding of connectedness and solidarity, as well as touch upon new findings on telepresence and video-making by individuals for a global, digital audience. At the time of lockdowns, many were creatively exploring their rooms and roofs, i.e., domestic spaces out of curiosity, gratitude, even boredom, thereby bringing private spaces more into the public especially virtual domain. Moreover governments, citizens, artists, cultural workers reacted to the unprecedented disruptions to their lives by embracing some amount creative activity, suggesting that for few, dance did extend a sense of togetherness despite isolation. I focus on a small fragment of this tapestry: the vernacular and contemporary culture of Bengal, which shows that Rabindranath Tagore's compositional legacy possesses an ability to be interpreted innovatively. This essay is the first scholarly examination of rabindranritya in the digital medium, and role of creativity and sociality in the co-constitution of experiencing dance emplaced within this site.

With digital ethnography as one of the methodological tools to research culture and society in the digital space, I examined dance at multiple sites regulated by pandemic restrictions. However, this research does not fully embrace the potential of the pandemic moment. Firstly, the drawback of digital ethnography and conscious sampling is that I cannot connect with those who are at the convergence of digital inequality and many other forms of precarity. It connects with those who have appreciated the care and sense of safety their homes provide, but not knowing if art has impacted the lives of the refugee, the migrant, the vagrant, residents of care homes, or in palliative care. Nor do the peer-research include dancers from other intersections of caste, class, gender. Secondly, while I focused on creativity, sociality, and visibility on YouTube—though I reflect on precarity—the responses I have are inadequate in knowing the breadth of economic and social differences that sharply rose amongst performers without stable social or financial support systems, thereby raising the complexities of creating art. Precarity is strongly associated with the field of performing arts or work associated with creative and cultural industries. Some performers have more stable and better-paid work than others, but precarity is more acutely experienced by those who are already battling other disadvantages and vulnerabilities. This research is largely based on individuals who were not forced to find other means of earning a living, nor faced exploitation as artists by digital platforms. They created, collaborated, and curated a communal experience with or without their peers. From this perspective, the essay is insular in scope. It does not offer comments on distribution of precariousness, intermittent work, or the loss of work dancers faced during the pandemic. What it does, is to make visible creative labor of unnoticed performances that peppered our screens in our lockdown lives.

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Censorship and the Nationalization of Dance in India: An Overview from 1947 to the Present

Arundhati Chakravarty

Abtract

In this essay, I present a broad overview of the intersections between dance and censorship in independent India. I try to explore the consequent exclusions within the mainstream dance discourse and practices as they were shaped by hegemonic forces of nationalism. I also look at how the changes in instruments and objectives of censorship reflect changing visions of nationalism. This essay broadly examines two major forms of censorship, both of which have been crucial in the appropriation and reconstruction of dance as an integral part of the nationalist cultural identity of India. First, there are the overt forms of censorship, which have been enforced by instruments of state power like legislation and statutory bodies. The post-independence government enacted the Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act 1947 and Cinematograph Act 1952 ostensibly for social reform and protection of public morality, but in effect they carried forward socio-political biases of Orientalism and colonialism into the postcolonial project of constructing the Indian imaginary. The process necessitated the elimination of hereditary artist communities and professional women performers (and many of their movement idioms) from mainstream practices of dance, even as their art was decontextualized and reconstructed to suit the officially sanctified high culture. This mode of erasure also influenced popular forms of dance, especially those appearing in Indian cinema, by inscribing them with nationalist notions of womanhood, sexuality, and, more recently, religious majoritarianism. Second, I trace the covert operation of censorship, in which state institutions play a key role in the support and promotion of art. Through selective funding and promotion, conferring privileging labels like "classical," and presiding over the formalization and classicization of dance, these institutions helped fit dance practices within the nationalist framework of a normative Indian cultural identity that is predominantly Hindu and rahminical. This process resulted in hierarchization, stigmatization, and even omission of certain dance practices, some of which I have highlighted in this essay. The sustained influence of direct and indirect modes of censorship created standardized codes of aesthetics and performance practices, contributing to a chilling effect and leading practitioners to censor themselves. Finally, I argue that the centrality of dance in the national cultural discourse enabled its use as propaganda to censor negative actions of or perceptions about the government. The phenomenon, which may be described as artwashing, has become increasingly prominent in the contemporary context of Hindu majoritarian nationalism seeking to launder its exclusionary tendencies in the process of redefining Indian cultural identity on its terms. Thus, I argue that censorship in the domain of dance has played not just a repressive role but also a productive role by enabling discourses of nationalism. It has acted as a tool of governmentality, by which nationalist ideologies have been established and reinforced to public, such that they are no longer confined to the sphere of the state but have percolated down to the conduct of individuals.

Key Words

Dance, censorship, classical dance, nationalism, cultural identity, Hindu majoritarianism, devadasi, tawaif, Devadasi Act, Cinematograph Act, CBFC, cultural appropriation, governmentality, artwashing, pre-censorship, self-censorship.

Introduction

In this essay, I present a broad overview of the intersections between dance and censorship in independent India and the consequent exclusions within mainstream dance discourse as it was and continues to be framed by hegemonic forces of nationalism. I also explore, through an analysis of the changing instruments and objects of censorship, how such interventions reflect shifting visions of nationalism.

As an official representative of India's identity and culture, dance makes a statement like little else. It did so way back in 1953, when the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru established a Folk Dance Festival as part of Republic Day celebrations. Seventy years on, dance still takes pride of place on national and international platforms, crowding out programs to celebrate the 75th anniversary of India's Independence and even the 2023 G20 summit hosted by New Delhi. Dance symbolizes the richness and diversity of India's culture, heritage, and antiquity, so much so that it is a critical component of the country's soft power and widely recognized as a significant part of the global cultural capital.[1]

1 Thobani explores the hold dance has as a "representative of Indian culture in the popular transnational imaginary" (5). She also demonstrates that dance, especially the "classical dances," have become a "preeminent signifier of Indian diasporic identity in multicultural imaginaries" (Thobani 6).

[Figure 1] A cordon of dancers welcomes the then U.S. President Donald Trump, seen with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, at Ahmedabad airport in 2020 (official White House photo, Shea Craighead/ Wikimedia Commons).

The narrative of dance—especially "classical" dance—as a symbol of India's cultural identity did not arise organically. Rather, it developed through a deliberate process of construction and elimination shaped by the forces of nationalism. These forces led to the "invention of a tradition" (Hobsbawm and Ranger)—the crucible in which ritual and community dance practices were decontextualized, reconstructed, and sanctified as national dance traditions. The dregs in the crucible—indigenous and popular performers and hereditary artist communities—were either marginalized or eliminated from the mainstream discourse. While several studies have analyzed the constitutive aspects of this process,[2] this essay focuses on the silences and exclusions embedded in it. The silences and exclusions, I argue, are a function of censorship, which has operated in various forms to chisel the narrative around dance.

The play of these forces in the creative sector is especially significant in a postcolonial state like India. While print-capitalism provided a space for the development of colonial-era nationalism,[3] the realm of visual vocabularies[4]—including dance—provided another rich space in which the postcolonial Indian imaginary could be shaped. Looking at this process through the lens of censorship throws light on how the discourse of dance has developed into an integral part of India's postcolonial cultural identity based on silences and marginalizations.

Drawing upon Butler's concept of censorship as a productive form of power (Butler 132) central to the establishment of a nation-state, this essay examines censorship in India as a formative tool to redeploy dance to serve the nation-state. This idea is also echoed in Kuhn, who did not subscribe to the "prohibition model" of censorship as it "isolates censorship practices from their broader social and historical conditions of existence and effectivity" and makes one forget that "censorship might equally well be productive in its effects" (Kuhn 4-5).

In India, censorship is largely the prerogative of the government, which has used various instruments at its disposal to restrict or suppress dance practices that were contrary to its aims and policies. I look at instances of dance censorship from 1947 till the present and examine how they led to the suppression or marginalization of certain practices, communities, or ideas that were not aligned with the forces of national identity formation and consolidation. Further, through Foucault's framework of governmentality, I argue that the intersections between censorship and dance illustrate the exercise of state power as a "conduct of conducts"—a control over artists—in order to facilitate the project of nationalism (Walters 11).

I have tried to delve into direct and indirect modes of dance censorship. The first section of the essay traces the direct forms, which have operated through state instruments like legislation and statutory bodies to ban the devadasi practice and enable the policing of culture by monitoring representation of dance in movies. The second section examines indirect forms of censorship, which have operated through state institutions that support and promote art: soft censorship, pre-censorship, and artwashing. While these are broad distinctions, there are overlaps between them, with instances of one form of censorship feeding into another.

Not only have these interventions shaped dance practices according to nationalist prerogatives, but also they have served to guide national narratives and nudge public opinion in a certain direction. In this context, I argue, the changing methods and objectives of censorship broadly reflect changes in the dominant vision of nationalism from postcolonialism and Nehruvian pluralism to Hindu majoritarianism.

I. Direct Censorship

a. Legislation for Social Reform

2 Scholars like Allen, Bakhle, Lopez y Royo, Meduri, Morcom ("Indian Popular Culture"), Oldenburg (The Making of Colonial Lucknow), Soneji ("Living History, Performing Memory" and Unfinished Gestures),

3 Here I draw on Benedict Anderson's suggestion that print-capitalism provided a new institutional space for the development of the modern "national" language.

4 Freitag discusses the significance of the visual realm as a building block in shaping nationalism. She identifies three areas in which "visual images arc the shapers and bearers of thought"—South Asian courtly culture, religious practices, and live performance traditions. Note that dance is an important aspect of all three realms.

The redeployment of popular performance traditions to serve a nationalist narrative entailed a reconstruction of not just performances but the performers themselves. Very few of the mainstream dance practitioners we see today belong to the lineage of professional women performers or hereditary artist communities, who used to be central to performance practices in the subcontinent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Chakravorty, Walker, Morcom, Oldenburg, Srinivasan, Soneji, and many others have traced how these communities were increasingly marginalized in colonial India, first by dwindling patronage and social acceptance and then by the nationalist and social-reformist narratives equating them with "prostitutes" and seeking to end their "exploitation." It was in this context that legislation like Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act of 1947 provided state sanction to the marginalization of hereditary dancer communities and paved the way for the appropriation of their art to serve the nation-state.

The Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act, passed just two months after India's Independence in 1947, was the culmination of a two-decade-long effort to ban the dedication of girls to temples. The Act aimed to bring about "social reform" by ending a system in which "innocent children of a certain caste or community are trained to become proficient in all the arts of solicitation that they become captives to vice" (Devika 93). In effect it ended up censoring entire communities of women performers by criminalizing their livelihood and ostracizing them socially. These women performers, who occupied a liminal space outside the conventional socio-sexual boundaries, could not be contained within the nationalist ideological framework that predicated its sovereignty on the sphere of the family (Chatterjee 237–40) and in women as upholders of respectability, tradition, and cultural identity. The nationalist appropriation of dance, therefore, required the elimination of practitioners like devadasis, *tawaifs*, and *baijis*. The mainstream dance community was repopulated mostly by educated women hailing from upper-caste and upper-class Hindu backgrounds, symbolized by the entry of figures like Rukmini Devi and Madame Menaka on the national stage. They were sanctified as "artistes" and "classical dancers," while the traditional practitioners of the art were delegitimized and downgraded as entertainers or sex workers.

[Figure 2] A nautch performance in India, 1860–70 (Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies and Leiden University Library/Wikimedia Commons). The anti-nautch campaign began in the late 19th century.

The Madras Devadasi Act was ostensibly a postcolonial social reform that served the nationalist cause of cultural revivalism. In practice, it carried forward colonial and Victorian biases into the postcolonial cultural imaginary. These biases were perpetuated by The Cantonment Act (1864) and Contagious Diseases Act (1868), which sought to regulate prostitution in British India and ended up equating courtesans with prostitutes. Even as the anti-nautch movement gained momentum, the courtesan community was harassed and taxed heavily by the British because they did not fit easily into their social and administrative frameworks.[5]

Neither were they a natural ally of the nationalists, who saw them as morally questionable and socially transgressive.[6] All these factors fueled the nationalist project to eliminate courtesans from the cultural discourse, culminating in legislation like the Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act of 1947, Karnataka Devadasi (Prohibition of Dedication) Act of 1982, and Andhra Pradesh Devadasi (Prohibition of Dedication) Act of 1988.

While the courtesan community was erased from mainstream culture, excluded even from institutions like All India Radio[7], the women themselves could hardly disappear. Stripped of their means of livelihood and ostracized by society, they took up alternative professions or identities. Some joined the film industry, downplaying their lineage, while others got married and integrated themselves with upper-caste or middle-class norms of domesticity. In mainstream society, professional women performers were pushed to the margins of respectability and deemed vulgar and inferior entertainers. A significant number faced increasing poverty and became sex workers (Walker 95).[8]

Despite the institutionalized sexual exploitation of the poorest sections of society, the enabling conditions of caste, religion, patriarchy, and poverty have kept devadasi practice very much alive.[9] Yet official data does not account for the numbers of women engaged in it. Devadasis have been erased from official discourses to the extent that the government barely recognizes their existence in contemporary India. In some instances, when commercial women performers do enter the mainstream discourse, they are usually objects of contempt or degeneration. Take *lavani* dancers, for example. In 1948, the chief minister of Maharashtra banned *lavani* performances in Bombay because the form was considered inappropriate. The ban was lifted on the condition that obscene lyrics and dance movements would be "cleaned up," and legal and quasi-legal bodies were formed in Maharashtra to sanitize the performances (Singh). *Lavani* is still popular in rural areas of Maharashtra and often feature in political events, but the notion that it is "uncivilized" and "vulgar" continues to be perpetuated, sometimes by performers themselves. In February 2023, a prominent NCP leader told party members to stop organizing "raunchy performances" in the name of *lavani*. This followed a complaint by one *lavani* dancer against another for allegedly degrading the dance by using DJs and obscene performances (Yadav, "Explained").

Figure 3] A lavani performance in Delhi (Ramesh Lalwani/ Wikimedia Commons). Lavani was recently in the news, with a Maharashtra politician condemning the "degradation" of the dance form.

The narrative of censure against the cultural labor of women performers has surfaced even in the realm of the judiciary, an example being the court ban on bar dancers in Mumbai in 2005. The Maharashtra government's arguments seeking the ban were in fact the same as those used in the campaign against *tawaifs* and devadasis a century ago. The ban affected around 75,000 performers, of whom a big majority were hereditary artists from several tribes across India (Morcom, "Indian Popular Culture").

Thus, state intervention aimed at social reform served to censor professional dancers and hereditary artist communities from the national cultural discourse. This censorship played a productive role—to produce an idea of the quintessential Indian dancer, who was the artistic counterpart of the paradigmatic Indian woman representing the spiritually superior and culturally autonomous domain of national identity.[10] This project played out not just on stage but also on the screen. The following section traces how dance censorship served nationalist movements through the medium of cinema.

b. Legislation for Protection of Public Morality

Cinema may have remained outside the ambit of high culture for decades, but the industry had already acquired a mass presence by the mid-1940s (Majumdar

5 In terms of their social roles, courtesans were the antithesis of Victorian domestic morality and viewed as an immoral influence in the context of rising prostitution. In administrative terms, they were classified as "singing and dancing girls," taxed heavily, and harassed for lending support to anti-British activities. For more details, see Oldenburg ("Lifestyle as Resistance" 259–87).

6 See Chakravorty ("The Tawaif and the Item Girl") and Oldenburg ("Lifestyle as Resistance").

7 In 1954, the then Broadcasting Minister B.V. Keskar said that they would not hire any woman "whose private life is a public scandal." See Morcom (*Illicit Worlds* 176).

8 The practice of dedicating girls to temples is officially prohibited but the practice still exists in parts of India. Torri discusses the conditions in which present-day devadasis live.

9 The official ban on devadasis has resulted in lack of data on the prevalence of the practice. In 2011, the National Commission for Women estimated that there were 48,358 devadasis in India. However, a 2015 report by Sampark Data Center submitted to the International Labour Organization estimates that the number was actually around 450,000. See Kothari, Ganesan, and Jayalakshmi.

10 Here I refer to Chatterjee's framework of the material/spiritual distinction in the discourse of nationalism. See also Chatterjee, Sangari, and Vaid.

9) and the leaders of newly independent India could not ignore its impact on society. One of the foremost planes of interaction between the state and cinema was censorship. The Cinematograph Act of 1952 (which again had a colonial precedent—the Cinematograph Act of 1918) gave the government the authority to constitute the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) in order to "raise the standard of films as a medium of education and healthy entertainment" and serve the project of nationalism (Bhowmik 70).[11]

Bhowmik and Mehta among others have discussed the centrality of sexuality in post-independence film censorship, and how it was particularly telling in its attempts to "protect" Indian culture by embodying the ideal Indian womanhood on screen. As Mehta explains, "female sexuality is fundamentally tied to notions of being Indian," and censorship has been "central to clarifying conceptions of the state, democracy, and liberalism" and the "(re)production of the state" (Mehta 21). Much of this censorship was and continues to be centered on song-and-dance sequences. An early example is the call to delete the "jerking of bust in close-up by one of the dancers" in the 1953 Telugu film *Prapancham* (*Journal of the Film Industry*, June 1954). Interventions like this reinforced the notion of the quintessential Indian woman as *sanskaari* (cultured), refined, and chaste; and reproduced dichotomies such as heroine/vamp and wife/courtesan, mirroring portrayals of women in "classical" dance from the *ashatanyika* (eight types of heroines as classified in *Natya Shastra*) to contemporary depictions of "saintly sinners."[12]

Thus, as Mehta shows, the "practice of censorship reveals informal pacts between the Indian state, the Bombay film industry, and indigenous patriarchy" (22), which served to further entrench the gendered idea of nationhood. Even decades later, song-and-dance sequences such as "Choli ke Peechey" (*Khalnayak*, 1993), "Sexy, Sexy, Sexy, Mujhe Log Bole" (*Khuddar*, 1993), and "Meri Pant Bhi Sexy" (*Dulaara*, 1993) were censured as obscene (Ghosh 566–69). The "vulgarity" in these sequences was condemned by government bodies such as the CBFC, National Human Rights Commission, National Commission for Women, and a Parliamentary Standing Committee; and led to a revision in CBFC guidelines listing "objectionable visuals" (Ghosh 566–69).

It is worth noting here that the furor against "Choli ke Peechey" was led not by any state body but by political organizations like the Shiv Sena, a right-leaning party, and Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, the student wing of the Hindu nationalist organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). On the one hand, this signified the diffusion of nationalistic censorship. On the other hand, it marked a shift in the focus of censorship, parallel to the mobilization of Hindu nationalist outfits and electoral successes of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the 1990s. The appropriation of cinema to disseminate Hindutva narratives became all the more conspicuous in the BJP's and Shiv Sena's 1993 campaign against Hindi films, boycotting Pakistani-origin stars and "anti-national" actors for attending Pakistan Day celebrations (Ghosh 566–69).

With globalization and liberalization of the Indian economy gathering pace on the one hand and Hindutva nationalism gaining momentum on the other, the 1990s marked increasing tussles over the prevailing assumptions of Indian cultural identity. In the context of cinema, this project played out in efforts to censor dance sequences. For example, Hindutva groups wrote to the CBFC in 2019 against the title song of the film *Dabangg 3*. Outfits like Hindu Janajagruti Samiti claimed that the song hurt Hindu sentiments by portraying *sadhus* dancing and playing the guitar. #BoycottDabangg3 trended for a while, asking Hindus to boycott the film. Under pressure, the filmmakers voluntarily removed certain scenes from the sequence for the song "Dabangg 3."

In another instance in 2023, a saffron bikini sported by Deepika Padukone in the song "Besharam Rang" from *Pathaan* raised a furor. Calls for boycott and censorship did the rounds, with Hindutva groups and state ministers claiming that the visuals were "vulgar," and that the gerua (saffron, the color of Hindu ascetics' robes, and dominant color of the BJP flag) bathing suit was an attack on the Hindu religion, and, by implication, the BJP. Following CBFC intervention, some sensual dance movements were edited out of "Besharam Rang" but the orange bikini was retained ("Deepika Padukone's Orange Bikini"). These calls for censorship served to bring Hindutva indignation to the fore, contributing to religious polarization of national cultural discourse.

It seems here that the purpose of censorship is not so much to change or reshape dance practices per se, but rather to use film dance to assert and propagate the discourse of Hindutva nationalism. As a mass medium with global cultural influence, films offer a rich arena for production and perpetuation of narratives, which in recent years increasingly reflect the Hindutva vision of nationalism.[13] Following Butler's approach, this illustrates the role of censorship as not just repressive but a productive form of political power.

Hindi cinema gained cultural legitimacy only since the 1990s (Morcom, *Illicit Worlds* 21). By then, the "classical" and "folk" dances had already been sanctified and institutionalized as national cultural capital under the influence of indirect censorship. The next section explores how non-coercive methods nudged performers and the art market into adapting to nationalistic ideologies and, in the process, shaping dance practices to serve the nation-state.

II. Indirect Censorship

a. Institutionalization

The restructuring of indigenous dance traditions as nationalized performing arts entailed not just the marginalization of traditional practitioners but also a separation between the utilitarian and artistic aspects of dance. This made the dance arts heavily dependent on the government—which assumed the role of chief patron of the arts in independent India—for funding and favor (Cherian, Erdman). For the leaders of the newly independent India, who were seeking to establish a unified identity for the postcolonial Indian imaginary, dance provided a ready arena through which to reinforce markers of cultural identity such as language, caste, religion, and morality. The dances, particularly the "classical" forms, thus came to symbolize a classical past, an "ancient golden age," and served to bolster the narrative of a unified high culture and history of India. This meant Sanskritizing dance by inscribing it with the character of Hinduism, particularly Brahminism, spirituality, and refinement.[14]

The role of state institutions in this restructuring of dance has been extensively documented (Chakravorty, "Hegemony, Dance and Nation" and "From Interculturalism to Historicism"; Cherian; Walker; among others). Opening dance academies at national and state levels; branding of dance forms as "classical," "folk," and "tribal"; creating an institutional pedagogy; codifying and textualizing movement practices are some of the key instruments the state actors deployed in this process. While these institutions played a productive role in building this discourse of dance, this section highlights the restrictions, modifications, and exclusions embedded in the process. These restrictive codes operated in the form of covert or soft censorship, by which indirect pressure was applied to influence dance practices and gradually guide or manipulate public preference and expression. This pressure took the form of selective disbursal of funds and opportunities, limiting, or discouraging access and shaping aesthetic and artistic standards. The following examples illustrate how soft censorship is reflected in the present repertoire, movement vocabulary, stagecraft, and costumes, especially in the "classical" dances.

Consider the current form of bharatanatyam, popularly recognized as the "oldest" dance form of India with "divine" origins in the dance of Shiva and a 2000-year-old unbroken history. This conception has been shaped over the past century by forces ranging from Orientalism, Theosophy, and anti-nautch to anti-colonialism, cultural revivalism, and postcolonial nationalism—all of which have fed into institutional censorship of bharatanatyam. In the 1940s, for example, the Madras Academy spoke of jettisoning "unsastraic mudras" and "unsuitable" *padams* (Subramaniam 135). This carried forward anti-nautch and cultural revivalist efforts to dissociate dance from nautch—which included replacing erotic elements with the divine and drawing deliberate connections with the *shastras* (Sanskrit treatises) and temple sculptures to "refine" the form—and make it suitable for the new urban, upper-caste, and elite audiences and patrons.

Post-independence, bharatanatyam received state recognition as "classical." As such, it was the beneficiary of government funds and performance opportunities on the one hand, and the object of classicizing and Sanskritizing influences by patron institutions on the other (Chakravorty, "Hegemony, Dance and Nation"; Harp; Coorlawala, "The Sanskritized Body"; Meduri; Walker). As a consequence, the sensual and sexual gestures of devadasis were replaced by more austere and abstract material drawn from the *Natya Shastra* and *Abhinaya Darpana* (now considered foundational texts for bharatanatyam practitioners). Erotic *javalis* from the devadasi repertoire were replaced by devotional *kritis*. Storytelling aspects became secondary to technical perfection and complicated rhythmic sequences. References to patrons in *sadir* compositions were replaced by references to gods. Preference was given to Sanskrit and classical Tamil compositions, over other institutional languages in the repertoire. Compositions with references

11 Chakravarty lists the planes of interaction between the government and film industry: film festivals and film institutes set up by the government; taxation in the state-government domain; and censorship in the central-government domain, exercised through the Cinematograph Act. This essay focuses on the role of censorship in furthering nationalist projects.

12 See Nijhawan for an analysis on how popular Hindi cinema mirrors nationalist myths of dancing women, apsaras and devadasis.

13 This trend is evident in the recent proliferation of movies like *Bajirao Mastani, Padmaavat, Manikarnika, Kashmir Files, Ram Setu, Pathaan, and Adipurush,* which align with Hindu right-wing narratives.

14 Here I use M. N. Srinivas's concept as explained by Coorlawala ("Classical and Contemporary Indian Dance").

to religions other than Hinduism were jettisoned. All this fed into the narrative of bharatanatyam as a sacred and spiritual practice with roots in an ancient brahminical golden age.

Similar exclusions are embedded in the modern form of kathak, another "classical" dance form. Several strands of cultural practices of *kathaks* (Walker 35) from various parts of north India were homogenized to create a seamless narrative of the "classical" kathak within the nationalist cultural framework, but which excluded the contributions of *tawaifs*, Vaishnavite women, and Muslim courts in the kathak tradition (Chakravorty, "Hegemony, Dance and Nation" 118). The institutionalization and codification of kathak resulted in educated and upper-middle-class teachers and practitioners entering the field, excluding the *gharanedar* artists (those coming from an artistic lineage); courtesans; and Muslim dancers, teachers, and musicians (Allen 69). Walker traces how the new profile of practitioners and patrons resulted in gentrification and Sanskritization of the dance form, which was reinforced by formalization of the choreographic vocabulary and repertoire and sanctified through grants and opportunities. This hegemonic influence affected various aspects of dance practices. For example, the *sarangi* was jettisoned because of its perceived association with the *kothi*. Gestures like biting the lips or raising the eyebrows were dropped, and choreographies shifted towards devotional interpretations of poetic material. Compositions like *salami* were removed from the repertoire because of courtly and Muslim associations, and Hindu mythological themes were highlighted instead.

The notion of *Bharatiya sanskaar* (Indian culture) and *auchitya* (appropriateness) of a dancer was centered not just on her movements but also her appearance. Even today, specific costumes are associated with specific dance forms, and a deviation from these conventions sparks outrage. For example, a woman dancing without an *odhni* (a piece of fabric worn over the chest, covering the blouse, and considered a symbol of the woman's virtue) is deemed vulgar and inappropriate. In 2005, an odissi performance by Ramli Ibrahim's dance company in Bhubaneswar was criticized as "undignified" and "inauthentic" because it featured women dancing without an *odhni*. The allegations of inauthenticity are, however, questionable. In the 1950s and 1960s, odissi dancers like Ritha Devi and Indrani Rahman were dancing without an *odhni* (Sikand 49–65). Several dancers in ancient temple sculptures are depicted as even more "skimpily" clad. It is worth noting that the critics of the Ibrahim show included odissi gurus and connoisseurs, which point towards an internalization of the sanitizing and Sanskritizing influences of the preceding decades. These influences are actively reinforced by state institutions even today. In 2013, Kathak Kendra frowned upon a dancer without an *odhni*, asserting, "Kathak dance has a classical dress code like all other dance forms. That is the first identity of any classical form."[15]

The above instances provide a broad overview of indirect censorship of dance by the state by means of economic or political incentives and controlling access. These may be considered as soft censorship, which is becoming increasingly prevalent globally as greater domestic and international exposure of governments increases the costs of direct censorship. As a less visible but equally effective method of control and suppression, soft censorship in dance is thus a significant window into contemporary mechanisms of cultural reconfiguration by the Indian nation-state. The following section provides an overview of self-censorship and pre-censorship as further examples of soft censorship.

b. Self-censorship and Pre-censorship

The consolidation of certain standards and aesthetics in the field of dance through the 20th century, and the accompanying exclusions, have had a chilling impact on contrary practices. As a result, practitioners have tended to censor such practices themselves, in effect becoming willing participants in the hegemonic discourses that led to the censorship in the first place.

Self-censorship is the act of censoring or repressing one's own expression to conform to a particular thought regime. Therefore, by definition, evidence of self-censorship in dance is hard to come by. Anecdotal evidence is, however, available. After a recent performance in Delhi, I heard a "classical" dancer rue that while she had revived the dance of courtesans, she had had to sanitize the choreography to make it "suitable" for the present audience.

Such tastes and preferences in dance have been inculcated though sustained acculturation, resulting in, for example, interpretation of *shringara* (love) only as divine love and censoring the erotic kind. Therefore, one finds a proliferation of compositions exploring *vipralambha shringara* and very few of *sambhoga shringara*.[16] Kelucharan Mahapatra desisted from teaching Jayadeva's erotic composition *Kuru Yadunandana* for a long time, saying that it would be unsuitable for his students, given their urban and upper-class backgrounds. He finally choreographed it in 1967 for Sonal Mansingh, saying that she was bold enough to dance it. Sharmila Mukherjee, another student of Kelucharan Mahapatra, said, "Our version of Jayadeva's *Kuru Yadunandana* is quite explicit. I remember guruji would tell me he can't teach me the piece until I'm married!" (Nathan, "In the Memory of Her Guru").

Instances of self-censorship go further back. Madame Menaka, who symbolized the entry of upper-caste, educated women on the public stage in the 1920s, dropped the sarangi from her ensemble because the sound reminded her of the *kothi*. It was a conscious dissociation of her dance from the courtly connections of kathak. Descendants of *tawaifs* were not allowed in her dance troupe or to even teach at her school. Menaka's disciple Damayanti Joshi would not perform expressive material in a seated position, which was considered typical of courtesans (Walker 120). Many dancers today omit the overtly courtly repertoire, particularly the *salami*, and instead highlight the Hindu devotional aspects of the dance (Walker 97). These erasures also tie in with the earlier-mentioned instance of one *lavani* dancer censuring another, eventually leading to a warning by a political leader.

[Figure 4] The Brihadeeswara Temple in Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu, hosts a classical dance festival on the eve of Mahashivaratri. Other temple sites like Khajuraho and Konark also host classical dance festivals organized by the government (Vasanthan Rajendran/Wikimedia Commons).

This is visible even in the biggest dance festivals of India. Usually backed by the government, they are organized in the backdrop of temples and thematically mirror the nationalist construction of dance as the apotheosis of Indian culture, religion, and womanhood. The government's cultural extravaganza celebrating 75 years of independence (Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav) gives precedence to topics like *viranganas* (women warriors), themes from Hindu myths and epics and bhakti rather than contemporary social issues, popular performance traditions, and overt sensuality. Dancers who do not fit the dominant mold of "Indianness" or "tradition" are lumped together in categories like "contemporary" or "modern," which do not receive the same government funding and opportunities as those in the "classical" mold.[17] The aforementioned factors have all facilitated self-censorship, nudging dance practices to conform to state-sanctioned standards and push the dominant nationalist vision.

The Sanskritized character and brahminical aesthetics of mainstream dance, especially "classical dance," made it a fertile ground to reinforce exclusionary narratives of Hindu majoritarian nationalism.[18] This is especially evident in contemporary instances of pre-censorship, which amount to prior restraint or restriction of freedom of expression with the explicit or implicit backing of the state. These instances, exemplified by patterns of curation of performers, locations, themes, and content, appear to be less concerned with the dance practices themselves, but rather seek to use the domain of dance to suppress certain voices and strengthen the discourse of Hindutva nationalism.

In January 2023, Mallika Sarabhai had to shift her performance outside Warangal's Ramappa Temple in Telengana after the union culture minister reportedly denied permission for the show inside its premises ("Culture Minister Denied Permission"). The incident came a week after Sarabhai voiced concerns over the "complete destruction of ideals" in the country and how "Hindutva was being shoved" down the people's throats. Incidentally, Ramappa Temple was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2021, an event that was celebrated by the government and even Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

In March 2022, Mansiya V. P. and Soumya Sukumaran were not allowed to perform at Koodalmanikyam temple in Kerala's Thrissur district because they were not Hindu (Modak, "Three Hindu Dancers"). The temple is considered

15 Here I refer to a 2013 episode when Aditi Mangaldas declined a Sangeet Natak Akademi award, saying the institution had misclassified her work in kathak as "Creative and Experimental Dance" instead of "classical." She pointed out an "authoritarian decree" under which a dancer had to change her publicity material as it portrayed her without a dupatta, thus sparking a heated debate on the dupatta's place in kathak. The detailed correspondence is available at https://narthaki.com/info/rt/rt53.html. Accessed on 7 April 2023.

16 *Shringara*, one of *navarasa* or nine rasas, is the emotion of romantic love. It has two aspects—*sambhoga shringara*, where the couple is together or united, and *vipralambha shringara,* where they are apart. Intense and erotic desire for the lover is conveyed through *sambhoga*.

17 See Sarkar Munsi.

18 Drawing on Chatterji, Blom, Hansen, and Jaffrelot; see also McDonald.

the only one in India dedicated to Bharath, the younger brother of Rama—incidentally, the central figure in the Hindutva discourse.

In August 2022, the New York–based Indo-American Arts Council took Ananya Dance Theatre's *Nün Gherāo: Surrounded by Salt* off the Erasing Borders Dance Festival lineup. The show, which explores themes of casteism and forced migration, was ostensibly cancelled by the council as it "did not meet the call for submission criteria for the Festival of India@75" (Regan, "Ananya Dance Theatre").

The suppression of artistic works exploring casteism, forced migration, and religious exclusion point to the redeployment of dance censorship to produce and perpetuate the narratives of Hindu nationalism. In Foucauldian terms, the combination of pre-censorship and self-censorship appears to be part of a project of governmentality to redefine national cultural identity through a system in which individuals and groups shape their own behavior. In other words, tools like pre-censorship and self-censorship enable the nation-state to exercise power and disseminate its narratives through the "conduct of conducts" (Walters 11).

c. Artwashing

While governmentality has always existed in the appropriation of dance by Indian nationalist narratives, the modes of employment have differed along with the changing visions of nationalism. While the first decades after independence used censorship to appropriate dance to build the postcolonial cultural identity of India, the present decade has witnessed the indirect use of state power in the domain of dance to censor other activities or issues. This recent phenomenon may be described as artwashing, which is the use of art to distract from negative actions of an organization and sanitize its public image.

In the context of India, artwashing may be considered a form of soft power that uses dance as propaganda to sanitize the image of the government. In fact, artwashing has become increasingly prominent as the Hindutva brand of nationalism seeks to establish its vision of Indian culture through the power of cultural representation. Dance, as a major component of India's cultural capital, has therefore been appropriated in the artwashing efforts of the state.

This process has operated on two fronts. First, on the domestic front, artwashing may be considered to be aimed at improving the ruling party's political image and electoral prospects. Over the past decade, the central government has been especially vocal about its efforts to boost cultural diversity and inclusivity, even as it enacts exclusionary and polarizing policies (Prakash "India's Cultural Pride"; Chakravorti, "Reluctant Inclusionist"). To counteract criticism, the state has nominated Dalit artists to high government positions (Mandal, "Rajya Sabha"), instituted "People's Padma" (Menon, "People's Padma"), recognized unsung art forms ("Sursingar, Karakattam, and Others"), and organized an exhibition of works by prominent artists to celebrate the Prime Minister's radio address *Mann Ki Baat* (Kalra, "Mann ki Art").

However, some of these initiatives are tokenistic and serve to deflect attention from reports of inequality, repression, or discrimination at the grassroots. For example, the 2018 Padma Shri award given to Sitavva Jodatti, a devadasi, was lauded as a progressive move. However, four years later, Sitavva Jodatti felt compelled to stage a protest against the meager government pension for devadasis (Uppar, "Padma Awardee Protests"). Padma Shris given to Manjamma Jogathi and Rani Machaiah were seen to foreground lesser known "folk" dance forms, but the awards have not led to any direct improvement in the lives of community dancers, nor have they highlighted the challenges faced by them on a larger stage. Active government intervention led to the UNESCO recognition of *kalbeliya* as intangible cultural heritage in 2010, but the practitioners are yet to see the consequent benefits (Joncheere).

Even dancers from the more privileged "classical" streams, who have represented India at international events, were served eviction notices in Delhi and made to scramble for accommodation (Shekhar, "We Are in the Dark"). The performing arts remain mostly in the unorganized sector and the proportion of artists empaneled with government institutes is minuscule. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the arts was one of the worst affected sectors and received negligible institutional support.[19] The mainstream media highlights the government's narrative of "building cultural infrastructure" ("Govt Continuously Working to Preserve") and indirectly provides political and electoral mileage to the party in power. One may look at all of these instances within the framework of artwashing—the use of art to manufacture an image or perception of cultural inclusivity that leads to the eventual "pricing out" or censoring of certain communities. Artwashing plays a similar role on the international front, as the Indian government uses art to sanitize its image as an inclusive democracy even as it faces consistent downgrading in global indexes on democracy, freedom of expression, and human rights (Krishnankutty, "Freedom 'Losing Ground'). The government's recent promotion of tribal art at international meetings, celebration of the global impact of Indian art, and prominence of dance at high-level events [20] may be seen as virtue signaling through art. While at the macro level the foregrounding of cultural diversity diverts attention from the polarizing and discriminatory aspects of Hindu nationalism, at the micro level, it obscures the expression of marginalized and dissident groups. This coopting of art serves to redefine national identity as Hindu *rashtra* (nation), as conceptualized by Hindu majoritarian nationalism, and any artistic expression outside its normative boundaries may be deemed "anti-national." This expression may be considered "impossible speech," which, for Butler, is that which is socially unacceptable to say and renders the speaker "asocial" or "psychotic" in society (Bulter 133).

Conclusion

I have attempted to show how these instances of excisions, elisions, suppressions, and omissions have "produced" dance in independent India. Throughout, they have been informed by the underlying discourses of nationalism, which have shaped and used them as a tool of governmentality.

The essay has analyzed the effects of explicit and implicit modes of censorship in the field of dance, all of which have served to "invent a tradition" to serve the needs of the nation-state. This process has worked along the lines of gender, caste, religion, and class to map out legitimate and illegitimate zones of the performing arts that persist till today.

I have also examined how different methods of censorship have catered to evolving brands of nationalism over the seven decades since independence. Further, I have tried to show how state mechanisms have seeped into the consciousness of the Indian polity and society at large, to the point that they constitute a system in which individuals and groups are willing stakeholders in the perpetuation of the discourse of the nation-state.

In the context of a global trend towards autocratization of governments and backsliding of freedom of expression, the study of censorship as a quiet, ubiquitous, and productive force of power is increasingly relevant. It also remains to be seen whether these trends can be disrupted, subverted, or metamorphosed by the internet or the entry of major private players in the world of art in India.

19 See for instance, Ratnam ("Anita Says…"); Sethi ("Revival Package for the Arts?"); Korgaonkar ("Lavani Performers"; Sarukkai ("Classical Arts Must Be Authentic"); Arora ("Aditi Mangaldas").

20 See "9 Years of PM Modi"; "Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi"; "Watch: G20 Delegates".

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When Bharatanatyam Moved from the Popular to the Classical

Deepa Mahadevan

Abstract

This paper is abstracted from my larger research where I study the aesthetics of bharatnatyam through the axis of spectacularization of the bharatanatyam body at different points of its history. I focus on the period between the end of 1950s and 1970s, which sets off the rupture between popular aesthetics in film and classical aesthetic in the mainstream bharatanatyam world. This period led to the complete transition of transmission techniques to a tertiary model of learning from its primary habitus in hereditary practitioner households spearheaded as early as 1936 by Rukmini Arundale through her institution of mass learning and transmission, Kalakshetra. Several dance schools mushroomed among the bharatantyam middle and upper class, largely populated by upper-caste, Brahmin female students of hereditary *nattuvanar* teachers following the lead set by Arundale's tertiary model of transmission. This period was punctuated by a loss of dancing bodies, practices, and methods that irrevocably impacted how dance is being transmitted, presented, and assimilated by bharatnatyam practitioners today.

Keywords
Bharatanatyam, Pedagogy, Spectacle,Structures of feeling

Introduction

Bharatanatyam dance in the popular narrative has claimed an unbroken legacy of dance aesthetics by tracing itself to temple sculptures and Sanskrit texts dating as far back as two million years (Subrahmanyam 10). Many scholars have challenged this "mytho-poetic" historical narrative (Soneji and Peterson; Soneji, *Bharatanatyam: A Reader* and *Unfinished Gestures*; Harp, "Rewriting"; Meduri, *Nation*; Srinivasan). Taking this discourse as a departure point, my research traces the aesthetic history of the bharatanatyam body between the early to mid-twentieth century and current times (Mahadevan). The journey of bharatanatyam aesthetics even in this short period is a history of rupture, loss, realignment, and calibration.

Apart from the somatic methods used to discipline the physical dancing body, the hegemonic players or forces—upper-caste educated elites, and the prevailing patriarchy—from the early twentieth century have used the body of the female dancer to further tenets of nationalism, and upper-caste Hindu womanhood (Anagol; Anandhi; Ramaswamy; Silva; Sinha; Sreenivas; Sunder Rajan; Chatterjee). Now during the age of social media, the Hindu woman continues to be a spectacle, though with the additional qualities of being independent, expressive, and bold as a means of transitioning the bharatanatyam dancer to the global stage.[1] Thus, while the hegemonic discourse in the early twentieth-century muted female sexuality, filmmakers, teachers, and the audience have foregrounded it, though by masking it in more appealing discourses of spirituality and national pride. This disciplined, gendered, and sexualized body continues to sustain a spectacle and steers the direction of aesthetics in the bharatanatyam field.

I have divided the aesthetic history of bharatanatyam into three different waves each shaped by distinct socio-political-economic forces. Each of these drivers shape the aesthetic orientation of bharatanatyam, positioning it as a spectacle for popular consumption in that period and thereby place certain demands on the body and mind of the bharatanatyam dancer. The pedagogical methods within bharatanatyam classrooms and the performances engendered by those methods and dance techniques, respond to these macro drivers and steer the aesthetic orientation of the field.

The major driver for the first wave, from the 1930s to the 1960s, was the much-discussed anticolonial nationalism (Anagol; Anandhi; Ramaswamy; Silva; Sinha; Sreenivas; Sunder Rajan; Chatterjee). I present globalization as the major driver in the second wave, between the 1960s and early 2000s. I mark the final and current wave as beginning in the early twenty-first century and its major driver as neoliberalism played out predominantly through social media and other such digital representations. The bharatanatyam body veers towards a particular axis of homogeneity during each wave in response to the driver shaping it—nationalism, globalization, and/or neoliberalism.

Furthermore, the effect of each of these waves on the bharatanatyam body and aesthetics has been cumulative. Anticolonial nationalism removed certain aspects of the dance and added others to make the dance palatable for the emerging middle class and appropriate for its "respectable" young women. Globalization brought with it a certain adventure, where dancers started to gradually move away from the comfort zone of their primary schools of learning and were exposed to more ways of dancing, through both collaborative and competitive means. The transnational flow of visual culture opened up new methods of cultural production and assimilation that impacted mainstream bharatanatyam practice. The political economy of dance—venues, funders, and artists—concentrates on maximizing the frequency and reach of market engagements in the field by using technologies of dissemination and elitist access to information guiding aesthetic decisions in the bharatanatyam marketplace.

For the purpose of this paper, I will be focusing on the end of the first wave from the late fifties to the beginning of the second wave from the early sixties to the seventies. While globalization has already reared its head by the mid-sixties, I will not be delving in detail on its impact on bharatanatyam aesthetics in this paper.[2] The period from the end of the 1950s to the beginning of 1960s moving into the second wave deserves attention as it is ridden with rupture and loss that have shaped the ongoing aesthetic direction of bharatnatyam.

This paper narrates the story of this rupture and loss by analyzing:

a. the divide between popular and classical aesthetics created in the early twentieth century when bharatanatyam moved from the popular aesthetic of the movies into the classical aesthetic of bharatanatyam mainstream as we know it today.

b. the shifts in knowledge transmission from its primary habitus in hereditary practitioner households to the emerging middle class. Knowledge transfer in hereditary practitioner households were through immersive and lived-knowledge transmision. However, the students of these hereditary practitioners from the emerging middle class extracted portable modules of knowledge for the purpose of mass transmission. This diluted, modular, and fragmented understanding of the bharatanatyam tradition is what has been transmitted since the mid-twentieth century in dance classrooms around the world.

c. the ways in which upper-caste female hereditary dancers formed their own aesthetic lineage, but claimed a continuity in traditional knowledge by attaching themselves to the hereditary lineage of their nattuvanar-teachers who hailed from hereditary practitioner families.

A Brief History of Dance in the Movies

Before bharatanatyam developed into an independent practice of its own with designated venues, dance institutions, audience members, and festivals, cinema offered an important space for generating awareness of and garnering acceptance for the dance form. Male teachers and choreographers or *nattuvanars* from hereditary practitioner families, who sought avenues to establish themselves and fill the void created by the erasure of the devadasi socioeconomic model of living and sustenance, entered the movie industry as choreographers.[3] Movies were a stopgap arrangement before these male members from the hereditary practitioner families moved on to establish schools as dance teachers. Male *nattuvanars* like K. N. Dandayudapani Pillai (1921–1974), Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai, Vaideeswaran Koil Meenakshisundaram Nattuvanar (dates unknown), V. S. Muthuswamy Pillai (1921–1992), Kutralam Ganesan Pillai (1918–1983), and Kancheepuram Ellappa Pillai (1913–1974) belonged to the newly formed caste of Isai Vellalars (Soneji, *Unfinished*, 112–160), and were among the choreographers who established themselves in the movies at this time (Krishnan,161–202). These *nattuvanars* were the conduit through which the dance moved away from the bodies of Isai Vellalar dancers to women outside the community (Srinivasan). The movies created an opportunity for *nattuvanars* to establish themselves and prove their expertise to a larger public in this newly emerging bharatanatyam field.

By the end of the 1950s several of these *nattuvanars* exited the movie industry and set up dance schools outside among the rising upper- and middle-class society. This was a significant period of shift in pedagogical methods from a primary method of learning and knowledge transmission to a to tertiary one. This paper will focus on this period of bharatanatyam's aesthetic history and discuss the censoring of bodies, practices, and repertoires that took place at this time. Several practices, bodies, and repertoires were added to the corpus at this time, too, which changed the composition of the dances, aesthetics, and public reception of bharatanatyam.

1 I use the word "Hindu" instead of "Indian" as bharatanatyam dance, since its reconstruction in the early twentieth century, has been a predominantly a Hindu dance form. While a very small minority of non-Hindus pursue the dance form, they largely adopt practices, names, languages, and other markers to pass as Hindu in the bharatanatyam mainstream.

2 This paper is an abstracted version of my longer research and study. For a more detailed understanding of the three waves and their impact on bharatanatyam aesthetics see Mahadevan, *Bharatanatyam Body*.

3 Much has been written about the complicated sociopolitical history of bharatanatyam between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that led to the disenfranchisement of female hereditary practitioners of the art form commonly referred as devadasis. For a detailed account of this history with primary and secondary sources refer Soneji (*Bharatanatyam*); Meduri, and Srinivasan.

Popular and Classical Aesthetic

In the early twentieth century, bharatanatyam was establishing itself as an "urban, devotional and Sanrkitized cultural practice. The language of classicism was first applied to bharatanatyam only during the process of its reinvention at the hands of the English-educated Brahmin elites in Madras in the 1930s" (Krishnan 7). Thus, the classical arts were constructed in opposition to the popular arts such as cinema. The ways *nattuvanar*-choreographers responded to the music presented to them in the movies reflect the essence of the regional and vernacular cultural origins of bharatanatyam. However, with the rise of Indian nationalism, when the country was marching towards independence, upper-caste, educated elites reconstructed several indigenous artistic traditions into what we consider "classical" today. Indigenous practices in multiple parts of India were reinvented with imagined traditions for nationalistic purposes (Soneji and Peterson; Bhakle; Meduri; Harp; Soneji, *Bharatanatyam* and *Unfinished Gestures*; Subramanian; Weidman). Upper-caste/class, educated elites reformulated these indigenous art forms to serve as a source of national pride—cultural nationalism—through methods deemed scientific and aligned with ideals of colonial modernity. These methods included standardizing pedagogy, institutionalizing transmission, theorizing through Sanskrit texts or *shastras,* and undermining practice by relegating it as whimsical. . For instance, Vallathol Narayanan Menon (1879–1958) established Kerala Kalamandalam in 1930s in Kerala to formalize transmission of *kathakali*, *kudiyattam*, and *mohiniattam*. Rukmini Arundale (1904–1986) founded Kalakshetra (1936) to institutionalize the transmission of bharatanatyam. Vishnu Digambar Paluskar (1872–1931) started the Gandharva Maha Vidyalaya (1901) in Lahore to formalize what is now known as Hindustani music. Vishnu Narayan Bakthande (1860–1936) formalized music practiced in North India by introducing systems of learning through notation and was one of the founding members of a music department at Maris College in Lucknow (1926). All of these organizations invested in standardizing pedagogy and methods of knowledge transfer, enabling an uninterrupted process of transmission of arts. During this early- to mid-twentieth century period, the term "classical" became associated with the modified, abstracted versions of indigenous, hereditary art forms.

Specifically with respect to bharatanatyam, female hereditary practitioners danced in the courts, in the temples, in ritual and non-ritual contexts, in the homes of people, at community festivals. However when the dance moved predominantly to a concert hall, a new "classical" repertoire and therefore pedagogy was formalized. A syncretic dance form that could be "less formal" at times was rearranged selectively into the bharatanatyam that we know today.

Following her emphatic condemnation of bharatanatyam as it appeared in the movies Rukmini Arundale, founder of Kalakshetra (1936), was one of the prime shapers of this "classical" imaginary. Amanda Weidman refers to an article written by Rukmini Arundale in *Creative Spirit*, published by the Theosophical Society in the early 1940s. Arundale calls attention to this shift in aesthetics of dance as an awakening from the physical level of the "acrobat" to a higher level where the slightest of movements conveys higher expressions and meaning: "A tiny finger lifted with meaning," she concluded, "is far more thrilling than all the turns and gyrations and tricks of the circus performer" (Weidman 203).

This period from the late 1950s into the second wave at the beginning of 1960s marked the move from popular to classical aesthetics paralleling the move of *nattuvanars* from the movie industry into forming what is known today as the bharatanatyam mainstream. What was dance in the movies? What aspects of its aesthetics framed it as more popular than classical? What were the series of events that prompted *nattuvanar*-choreographers to exit movies? The next section of this paper will address these questions.

In his book *Celluloid Classicism*, Hari Krishnan elaborates, through detailed ethnographic research, the status of dance in the movies. His study is a discourse on colonialism, nationalism, orientalism, and rising patriarchy, and how these have affected the conception and presentation of dance in Tamil cinema and how in turn cinema dance influenced public sentiment. Putcha discusses a similar, concurrent process in Telugu movies in which a "constellation of social forces such as anticolonialism, nationalism, and migration have at once amplified and ventriloquized" the female dancer's voice (Putcha 3). I will be drawing from Krishnan's detailed research along with my own to draw attention to ways in which movement aesthetics, body holds, and sartorial choices impacted the aesthetics of bharatanatyam as it moved from the realm of the popular in the movies to the classical in the mainstream bharatanatyam world.

One of the most prominent dancer-actors during the first wave who influenced public sentiment towards bharatanatyam was Kamala Lakshman, better known as "Baby Kamala." By the late 1930s, dance had entered the cinematic medium, and Kamala Lakshman's representations of nation and womanhood through her dance was integral to bringing bharatanatyam aesthetics into middle-class homes. The South Indian film industry with its male directors, script writers, choreographers, musicians, set designers, costume designers, and producers used the body of the female bharatanatyam dancer to transmit ideals of nation building and womanhood to the emerging Indian middle class.

Kamala started learning dance from Kattumanarkoil Muthukumaran Pillai (1874–1960) before moving to Vazhuvoor Ramiah Pillai in the 1940s. Both were male teachers from the hereditary family of practitioners. Kamala's presence in the movies from the 1940s through the early 1960s was very important in shaping bharatanatyam aesthetics. Her status as a Brahmin woman, and the fact that she was cast to embody national spirit and ideal Hindu womanhood, inspired several Brahmin girls to take up the art form as a hobby. Kamala's roles in the movies centered more around herself as a dancer than as a character in the narrative. These roles were often desexualized, for example when she plays the sister of the film's protagonist in *Nam Iruvar* (1947) or acts as a deity in mythological or devotional films like *Sri Valli* (1945) and *Meera* (1945). In other films she appears in a dance number without playing a part in the main picture. Many of these dances, especially between the mid-1940s and mid-1950s, were patriotic. She was also popularly referred to as "Kumari Kamala." "Kumari" references an unmarried status, akin to the prefix "Miss." This nickname advanced the idea that dance could be a finishing school for young girls of that time. Performing the patriotic, unmarried, Brahmin dancer; the endearing sister; or the mythological deity muted Lakshman's sexuality and brought her closer to her middle-class audience. These markers of womanhood and nationhood were critical and formative in the public consciousness at this time for building a relationship between the emerging middle- and upper-classes and bharatanatyam, especially after the public stigma that had been systematically placed on the dance and its hereditary dancers during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The rounded upper body when bending forward is not a common aesthetic today (Kamala Lakshman in 'Chori Chori,' 1956

Kamala Lakshman's dance in the movies between 1940s and late 1950s—many of which were choreographed by her teacher Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai and later by K. N. Dandayudapani Pillai, P. S. Gopalakrishnan and others—differed markedly from Rukmini Arundale's aesthetic leanings. For instance, in the movie *Chori Chori* (1956), Kamala Lakshman dances a *thillana*, an item-genre that is typically performed as part of the bharatanatyam repertoire.[4] Even though this is much later than when Rukmini Arundale founded Kalakshetra, I invoke this moment to highlight Kamala's way of dancing, which was passed on to her by her teachers Muthukumar Pillai and Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai. The choreographers who are credited in the movie *Chori Chori* are hereditary *nattuvanars*, K. N. Dandayudapani Pillai and P. S. Gopalakrishnan. The dance is performed in a proscenium setting with the dancer wearing a typical bharatanatyam costume. The almost four-minute-long *thillana* features many *adavus* that can be recognized as part of the vocabulary of dance as it is practiced today.[5] However, her body posture is very different from that of dancers today. Today performers are taught to have an erect and extended spine, whereas Kamala's spine appears to be rounded. She does not hold the turned-out plié position in a firm and clear manner throughout the dance as is expected by current teachers. By maintaining *aramandi* or bent-knee position throughout the dance, the technically proficient performer also maintains a particular height; but Lakshman moves up and down, regarded as less proficient by most aesthetic standards today. In my opinion, none of her body bends originate from a centered pelvis as is emphasized in bharatanatyam training today, rather the dancer shifts

4 See https://youtu.be/z4zVZL5B0LQ (00:37–00:41 min).

5 An adavu is a basic unit of bharatanatyam movement vocabulary.

her weight to one side while bending to her side.[6] During my conversation with her sister Radha (1942–) she emphasized that many of Kamala's movements were choreographed to respond to a more sensational aesthetic required of the movies (Ramanathan 2020). We can observe this in the dances in movies at that time. While there were many recognizable adavus, we can also notice other movements like quick turns not typical of the bharatanatyam movement repertoire. Although movements might be drawn from other idioms, in dances like the *thillana* in *Chori Chori*, the actor is largely presented as a bharatanatyam dancer—her hair, dress, makeup, and jewelry align with the commonly received aesthetics of bharatanatyam—and

Kamala Lakshman was known for her acrobatic moves (*Chori Chori,* 1956)

the basic body posture might still be very representative of the bharatanatyam aesthetics of those times. I also draw attention to the body hold and posture: She does not have an erect spine, and her body bends without rigorous attention to the core. These were characteristics of bharatanatyam at that time. Her contemporaries also possessed a more supple way of holding the body, which might have enabled them to do better body bends and "acrobatic moves" (as Rukmini Arundale called them), but was not favored by the formative classical idiom outside of the movies.

In the Tamil film *Dr. Savithri* (1955), performers Sayee and Subbulakshmi present a dance in a proscenium setting that seems like a typical bharatanatyam performance. Even though their dance is choreographed by Muthuswamy Pillai who worked under Muthukumaran Pillai and Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai who in turn taught Rukmini Devi, one observes that our current standards of an erect spine and firmly held hand gestures with lifted elbows is not emphasized. The song praises the male protagonist, possibly a male deity or a local lord. However, if we look at the dancers' bodies, they are not holding their bodies tall, as students are taught today, but rather there is a softness in the leg, and the knees seem to move fluidly. When they use their hands to gesture, they do not fully extend their arms to form angular lines as dancers are taught in classrooms today.

Video clips of female hereditary dancer Balasaraswati (1918–1984) also show that her style of dancing did not have the erect spine of Kalakshetra dancers, although it is a little more angular than both Kamala Lakshman's and Sayee and Subbulakshmi's dance in the movies at that time. This difference could be because most of Kamala, Sayee, and Subbulakshmi performances are part of movies whereas Balasaraswati's dance is in a proscenium setting. We may see more fluidity in film dancers because they perform inside the cinema medium, but also because during this period—the end of the 1950s to the beginning of the 1960s—many of the body positions performed by cinema dancers that required suppleness were relegated as not "classical" enough by the bharatanatyam mainstream.

Kamala was much younger than Balasaraswati, and when Kamala was a child artist in the movies and was developing her career as a solo dancer outside of cinema under the guidance of her *nattuvanar* teacher Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai, Bala was already in her thirties. Bala's dance did not have the body bends and athleticism of Kamala's, but she still possessed a suppleness in the way she held her body that seemed more typical of dance during the 1940s and early 1950s. I am contrasting a supple body hold to the erect postures that was later introduced as the norm largely by Kalakshetra and has come to stay. Beryl de Zoete (1879–1962), is a critic and ethnologist of Dutch descent, who traveled independently in South Asia and wrote three ethnographies. She visited India in the 1950s and in a chapter dedicated to Balasaraswati

6 See post by dancer-researcher, Swarnmalya Ganesh as she emphasizes this aspect of "finding the hip" in her recent post on Instagram. Here she terms *sadir* as the older version of what we practice as bharatatanatyam today. It needs a longer discussion to validate and nuance this argument of Ganesh but for our immediate purpose I draw attention to these two videos to elaborate on the difference between Kamala Lakshman's body hold and what is assimilated as bharatanatyam aesthetics today. https://www.instagram.com/reel/CU45GaCD7n8/?igshid=MWZjMTM2ODFkZg== (October 11, 2021); https://www.instagram.com/reel/CU7rlJDBIja/?igshid=MWZjMTM2ODFkZg== (October 12, 2021).

in her book *The Other Mind: A Study of Dance in South India*, De Zoete writes about a dance concert by Kamala, in order to set her apart from Balasaraswati. She reports that Kamala performed in a space that could accommodate around seven thousand people. While De Zoete favorably comments on Kamala's *abhinaya* (facial expression), and calls her a "born dancer," she does not favor the acrobatic body practices in Kamala's performance and condemns them as "vulgarisation of Bharata Natya." She draws the reader's attention to a snake-charming dance in which Kamala, whom she refers to as the "commercialized young dancer," introduced "backward bends, serpentine coils and continually writhing arms, which are as much out of place in Bharata Natya as they would be in classical ballet" (182). She notes that the "not classically minded" crowd broke into loud applause every time Kamala's feet touched the back of her head (182–3). De Zoete's disdain for Kamala's snake dance with acrobatic feats reflects the sentiment of the times. Kamala was accompanied by her teacher, hereditary practitioner Ramaiah Pillai, in this concert. The implication was that these moves were introduced in the main body of the dance under his approval and guidance. These moves that were sometimes relegated and eschewed as not "classical" enough were part of the choreographic choices by hereditary *nattuavanars* like Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai. In the same chapter De Zoete applauds Balasaraswati for her simplicity and purity of style. While Kamala stayed away from the erotic *javalis* and the gestures associated with them, she retained some of the acrobatic moves that were choreographed for her by Vazhuvoor Ramiah Pillai. Balasaraswati, on the other hand, was from the hereditary practitioner community, and while she stayed away from the "acrobatic feats" of Kamala, she argued for sensuality in the dance, as according to her, all of dance was spiritual including its erotic elements. But the "classically minded" had to leave out both the erotic javalis of Bala and the acrobatic moves of Kamala, leaving space for a newly forming aesthetic of the then bharatanatyam mainstream.

There is a clear parallel between the history of bharatanatyam aesthetics from the early twentieth century, which veered toward spectacularization, and the history of yoga of that time. The orientalist discourse revealed through colonial records on yoga between the seventeenth and early twentieth centuries indicate a moral castigation—"disgust and morbid fascination"—of yogins who perform postural austerities (Singleton 6). It was exoticized, and to that extent was a spectacle that made them feature in these colonial records and added to the colonial imaginary about faraway exotic lands in the east (Said)). But the practice was considered by Europeans and English-educated, elite Indians as backward and superstitious, without a place among the prevailing colonial modernity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Well before the intervention of the Europeans, the postural contortions associated with hatha yoga was considered a "ritual pollution for caste Hindus" (Singleton 6). The specific hatha yoga practices that involved these postural austerities was left out of circulation before the 1920s and gained importance only after they were connected with the discourse of health and well-being.

Set within the same timeframe and colonial context, this contempt for postural austerities in bharatanatyam precluded many movements from entering the emerging classical aesthetic of the dance form. This contempt persisted well into the twentieth century and was shared by Europeans like De Zoete and elite Indians like Arundale. The "acrobatic" dancing disliked by Indian elites was also documented in colonial records from the nineteenth century and later in colonial Madras in the twentieth century.[7] They carried on into the cinematic medium with dancers like Kamala. In films, the female dancer continued to be the desired visual spectacle.

Sayee and Subbulakshmi, disciples of V. S. Muthuswamy Pillai, like Kamala, performed exclusively in the role of dancers or were presented as sisters to the protagonist. For instance, they appeared in *Malai Kallan*, a blockbuster movie released in 1954, as sisters of the hero, the reigning super star, M.G. Ramachandran, who later became the chief minister of Tamil Nadu. They were never glamorized; on the contrary, their casting elevated the status of their identities. Their swift knee drops were athletic and can be compared to Kamala's acrobatic moves. It kept the spectacle alive in their dancing, such that they were popularly referred to as *pambara sahodarigal,* or sisters who spin like a top. (Vijayaraghavan, *A Marve*l 19). This move, and their athleticism more generally, stayed within the cinematic sphere. Similar to Kamala's snake dancing, their athleticism did not find a place within the movement vocabulary of the "classically oriented" bharatanatyam mainstream.

The reflexivity that Arundale brought to her pedagogical methods at Kalakshetra caused a radical rupture in the aesthetics of the dance form. What we consume as bharatanatyam today traces its origin not to a distant past, or to the past represented by the hereditary performers of Thanjavur, but to this legacy of rupture conceived by Rukmini Arundale at Kalakshetra in the 1930s.

7 See De Zoete (p. 165) for a colonial account of acrobatic dance written in 1870. Also see Soneji ("Performing Pasts" 5), where a primary source article by P. Ragaviah Charry from 1806 explains that young girls need great "agility of constitution" to dance bharatanatyam. See also, Pattabhiraman (The Whole World 25) for Balasaraswati's account of dancers performing brave acrobatic feats while dancing Viribhoni Ata Talam varnam in three tempos.

As a traditional practitioner, Bala positioned herself contrary to Rukmini Devi, an upper-caste, Brahmin dancer. She challenged Rukmini's effort to "cleanse" the repertoire, arguing that everything that is part of the dance is an offering to God and that there was no need to cleanse it, if the dancer approached spiritually.[8] However, they were both responsive to the rhetoric of anticolonial nationalism, rooted in Hindu spirituality, finding form in the arts. This spirituality was positioned in opposition to the Western materialism. The knee drops, the acrobatic back bends, the *rati* mudras and many other embodied practices, such as biting the lower lip to show erotic longing, a movement of the shoulder to show displeasure called *toal thalli* (Samson 79) or pushing one's shoulder were ejected from the aesthetic vocabulary of the "classical" idiom of dance.[9] These moves represented a physicality, sexuality, and materiality that was undesirable in the spiritual framing of the emerging Indian sentiment. However, the dominant feature of the Kalakshetra aesthetic lies in its overpowering physicality. While Rukmini Arundale criticized a certain kind of physicality, she embraced another. She opposed any element of spectacle that she saw as preventing the dance from reaching the spiritual realm, its true purpose. Ironically, the means she used to realize this spirituality was derived from a more globalized, Western aesthetic of lines and angles, creating yet another visual spectacle.

Primary to Tertiary Methods of Knowledge Transmission

The beginning of 1960s through the 70s saw the mushrooming of several dance schools set up by hereditary practitioners and sometimes senior students of hereditary practitioners. This was a significant period that clearly marked a shift in pedagogical methods from a primary to a tertiary, or a more modular method of learning and knowledge transmission. While this move to tertiary learning was initially marked by the inception of Kalakshetra in 1936 and from there proceeded steadily but sporadically, the 1960s marked the beginning of a more pervasive shift into a tertiary method of knowledge transmission across the bharatanatyam dance field.

Rukmini Arundale, the founder and visionary behind Kalakshetra, faced initial resistance from the traditional *nattuvanars* of devadasi households to learning dance. Rukmini was 23 years old when she saw her first bharatanatyam performance and was in her late twenties or early thirties when she ventured into learning bharatanatyam. The teachers from traditional families were skeptical of an upper-caste, relatively older woman learning their art. In Leela Samson's biography of Rukmini Arundale, she recounts the hesitation of senior teacher Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai when asked to teach Arundale:

> "I do not feel inclined to do so. You are a rich lady, a society woman and from the Brahmin community. Dance for you is only a pastime. It will not be a profession, like it is for those I teach. Their life is hard. I am very strict with them. They work seven to eight hours a day. If they do not dance properly, I am severe with them. I cannot do all this with you (Samson 80).

Here Pillai expresses apprehension to teach Rukmini Arundale whose assimilation of the dance form would stem from a secondary or tertiary habitus rather than primary one, as in the case of the traditional devadasi dancer.

Wacquant (2013) elaborates on Bourdieu's concept of primary and secondary habitus in his essay "Homines in Extremis: What Fighting Scholars Teach Us about Habitus": "The primary habitus is the set of dispositions one acquires in early childhood, slowly and imperceptibly, through familial osmosis and familiar immersion; it is fashioned by tacit and diffuse "pedagogical labor with no precedent"; it constitutes our baseline social personality as well as the basis for the ulterior constitution of any other habitus" (Bourdieu and Passeron, *Reproduction* 6). Meanwhile, the secondary habitus is any system of transposable schemata that becomes grafted subsequently, through specialized pedagogical labor that is typically shortened in duration, accelerated in pace, and explicit in organization. "This distinction echoes the contrast established by Bourdieu between "the two modes of acquisition of culture," the familial and the academic, the experiential and the didactic, which indelibly stamp one's relation to culture and the character of one's cultural capital, of which habitus is the embodied form (N, *Distinction*, 65-8). The first spawns the ease and insouciance that define excellence; the second bears the mark of effort and tension born of ascesis" (Wacquant 7). This elaboration of primary and tertiary habitus maps perfectly on to the habitus of the devadasi women, to which Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai refers, and the habitus Rukmini Devi represents respectively. More importantly, it maps to the tertiary habitus that defines all students of bharatanatyam, including myself, who are not from a hereditary community of practitioners.

During this first wave, the spirit of anticolonial nationalism was the overall driver for the different creative and structural choices that were made to the bharatanatyam idiom and therefore to the body of the bharatanatyam dancer. However, the prominence of the tertiary habitus, for the most part triggered by Rukmini Arundale during the first wave, was a structural change introduced into the field of bharatanatyam, and the only mode for the "cultural acquisition" of bharatanatyam today. This pedagogical labor, which is shortened in duration, accelerated in pace, and explicit in organization, was the basis for Rukmini Arundale's Kalakshetra and all subsequent methods of bharatanatyam transmission. This tertiary method of cultural acquisition has allowed for far-reaching access to bharatanatyam and its ongoing transmission. This tertiary method of knowledge transmission has had a cumulative and irreversible effect on the bharatanatyam body, its idiom, aesthetic orientation, structures of transmission, and its reception in public consciousness.

Wacquant (2013) argues that knowledge gained through this method (tertiary) is grounded in a primary habitus, in this case, nation, gender, caste, class, etc., and is mediated through a scholastic habitus or a system of learning that becomes "both a motivating resource and a built-in hindrance to gaining mastery of a corporeal craft, insofar as it inclines the apprentice to a reflexive attitude" (7). I observe that this hindrance that Wacquant mentions is a crucial factor in Rukmini Arundale's assimilation of the art in her body, given how it is loaded with a level of reflexivity that changed or altered several facets of the original form.

However, Rukmini Arundale goes a step further. Not only did she assimilate the dance form in her body with a reflexive attitude, but explicitly organized a pedagogical model to transmit that knowledge through a tertiary habitus to a larger pool of students. When she established Kalakshetra School of Arts in 1936, she institutionalized this dance form and prepared it for transmission to a wider audience. Ironically, even though Rukmini Arundale learned the dance from the hereditary community—thus directly in touch with those from its primary habitus—her distance from its objective structure was much greater due to the level of reflexivity, or subjective intervention, that she brought to her learning. Over time, this method of learning has become the only method of learning bharatanatyam. Dance students in the third wave were thus only exposed to the classical orientation through this tertiary method, the sole method of assimilation for over a couple of generations before them.

Rukmini Arundale's primary habitus was shaped by her position as an educated Brahmin woman—in other words, she came from one of the highest caste groups in the nation. She married Dr. George Arundale (1878–1945), an Englishman and a prominent member of the Theosophical Society. At a very young age, she accompanied Arundale on several world tours where she was exposed to different cultures (Samson 53–74). Her reflexive attitude toward bharatanatyam imposed a critical distance between her and the dance form, a distance that arose out of her tertiary position compared to the devadasi dancers. Her primary habitus grounded in being a brahmin upper-caste woman, the idea of world religion as furthered by the Theosophical Society, and access to several world cultures as Dr. Arundale's spouse, shaped the way she assimilated bharatanatyam in her body and her singular manner of teaching at Kalakshetra. While the movies between the 1940s and 50s sustained the idea of spectacularization both in content and form, Kalakshetra was the parallel movement, launched in 1936, that created a spectacle by furthering the vision of Hindu nationalism through spirituality in the arts. Rukmini Arundale was creating the "classical" aesthetic as opposed to the popular aesthetic of the movies.

Second Wave: *Nattuvanars* Exit Movies and a Tertiary Practice Begins

I have plotted the second wave of bharatanatyam as spanning four decades, starting at the beginning of the 1960s and ending with the new millennium. The decade of the 1950s was the most commercially and artistically generative for both the movie industry and the artists associated with it. The decade also marked an increased exchange of artists, choreographers, and artistic ideas between North and South India, engendering a wider range of movement styles, vocabularies, and sartorial choices to South Indian cinema. Therefore, I observe that by the end of the 1950s changes to popular aesthetics through North-South collaborations started to make bharatanatyam in the movies unrecognizable even to the nattuvanar teachers, who had by this time started to build careers outside the movies and whose teaching practice was influenced by the classical aesthetic.[10]

Dances in movies like Vanjikottai Valiban (1958), choreographed by the Bombay-based choreographer Hiralal and starring leading upper-caste dancer-actresses like Padmini and Vyjayanthimala, were a commercial

8 See Soneji, *Unfinished Gestures*, pp. 95–111 where he presents the problematic nature of *javalis*. These erotic *javalis* were the casualty in the crossfire between colonial modernity and emergent nationalism in the early to mid-twentieth century. They were largely censored from the repertoire of "classical" bharatanatyam.

9 Soneji talks about "*rati* mudras," a gamut of gestures indicating the different lovemaking positions that were also ejected from the gestural vocabulary of dance during its classicalization.*(Unfinished Gestures* 105). Nandini Ramani, a senior disciple of Balasaraswati who has retained the core of Balasaraswati's aesthetics, continues to use this embodied practice today.

success. The movement aesthetics, aligned with the popular aesthetic, moving away from bharatanatyam's crystallization outside the movie industry. While the female dancer was always the object of the visual spectacle in both the popular and classical aesthetic, until the late 1950s her sexuality was largely masked by nationalistic messages about ideal womanhood and Hindu religiosity. The casting and presentation of actresses were carefully managed to mute her sexuality. But now, the unabashed objectification and sexualization of the female dancer was another important change in dance in the movies.

The precariousness between classical and popular increased in the 1960s with Tamil movies like Parthiban Kanavu (1960) starring upper-caste dancer Vyjayanthimala, Konjum Salangai (1961) starring upper-caste dancer Kamala Lakshman, Thillana Mohanmbal (1968) starring upper-caste, though not Brahmin, dancer-actress Padmini,[11] Amrapali (1966) starring South Indian Vyjayanthimala. These movies glamorized their dancer-actors, through tight-fitting dresses and movements that objectified them, versus desexualizing or mobilizing them for nationalistic ends, as in the first wave.

The heterosexual female body was at the center of the visual spectacle both in the movies and outside in the growing field of bharatanatyam. However, outside the cinema in the bharatanatyam field, the dancer's sexuality was masked in her status as an upper-caste, educated, English-speaking woman who practiced this art for higher spiritual ends. Thus dancer-actresses from non-upper-caste and hereditary families, like E. V. Saroja (1935–2006), Kuchala Kumari (1937–2019), and the sisters Sayee and Subbulakshmi, did not transition into the "classically oriented" mainstream bharatanatyam after the 1960s. But upper-caste dancers like Vyjayanthimala, Kamala Lakshman, and Padmini who were stars in the popular realm, also became stars in the classical.

The higher spiritual ends invoked by the classical stream translated directly into an increase in content drawn from Sanskritic sources. The mimetic movement vocabulary was drawn from largely brahmanical religious practices. This was crucial for retaining the classical status and creating a safe space for young girls from upper-caste, upper-class families to learn the dance form (Coorlawala).

Hereditary *nattuvanars*, who had attained recognition for their work in the movies by the end of 1950s, began to associate themselves with the classical mainstream of bharatanatyam. Vazhuvoor Ramiah Pillai, one of the most popular and prolific hereditary *nattuvanars* and a pioneer in the cinematic medium in the 1940s, was the first to enter and exit the field of South Indian cinema and dissociate himself from the popular aesthetic it nurtured.[12] He began training upper-caste, typically brahmin, dancers outside cinema and established his own following. Many other hereditary *nattuvanars* like K. N. Dandayudapani Pillai and Muthuswamy Pillai, who were commissioned as choreographers for many movies in the 1950s, followed suit and phased themselves out of the popular aesthetic to align with the classical aesthetic that had taken root in the mainstream bharatanatyam field.

Establishment of Hereditary Lineages by *Nattuvanars*

Until the 1950s, senior *nattuvanars* like Pandanallur Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai (1869–1954), T.P. Kuppaiya (1887–1981), and Kattumanar Koil Muthukumaran Pillai supported younger *nattuvanars* like Vazhuvoor Ramaih Pillai, Kittappa Pillai, Muthuswamy Pillai (1921–1992), K. N. Dandayudapani Pillai, and T. K. Mahalingam Pillai (1916–2002) through both sharing their knowledge and pointing them to new commercial opportunities in order to survive in the competitive settings in Madras. Many of these *nattuvanars* initially started out as musicians who accompanied the Isai Vellalar dancers (Gaston, 140–217).

In both first and second waves, teaching dance to young upper-caste, upper-class, educated women generated income, and so the elder *nattuavanars* in the family guided the junior *nattuvanars* to this professional route to financial security.[13] Thus, Vazhuvoor Ramaih Pillai worked with his maternal uncle Mannikam Nattuvanar (dates unknown) and Muthukumaran Pillai (1874–1960) before starting his own school and gaining a following. Muthuswamy Pillai also worked with Muthukumaran Pillai before setting off on his own. Dandayudapani Pillai worked in Kalakshetra for six years alongside Chokkalingam Pillai (1904–1981), son-in-law of Pandanallur Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai, before setting up his own school, Nayakalalayam, in the 1960s. Before the 1950s when the classical stream was still forming and *nattuvanars* were still working in the movies, these teachers exchanged notes and sometimes repertoire with other *nattuvanar* teachers in their community.

During the 1950s and 1960s, it was common for female upper-caste students to move between *nattuvanars*. For instance, Kamala Lakshman started her training with Muthukumaran Pillai in the late 1930s and completed her *arangetram* with him at that time. Later, in the 1940s, when she moved to Madras (Chennai), Muthukumar Pillai requested Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai to teach young Kamala and her sisters (Gaston, 179). Likewise, Rukmini Arundale started her initial training with Mylapore Gowri Ammal (1892–1971) then with Pandanallur Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai at Kalakshetra, who later brought other members of his family, including Muthukumaran Pilai, Chokkalingam Pillai, and K. N. Dandayudapani Pillai to aid him.

Rukmini Arundale learned from the collective expertise and creativity of all these teachers who were sharing knowledge among themselves. Leading actress-dancer Vyjayanthimala was a student of Kittappa Pillai, Mylapore Gowri Ammal, and later, K. N. Dandayudapani Pillai (*Ramani A true,22*; *A Tribute*)

Similarly, though much later, Chithra Vishweshwaran (1950–), who was also associated with the Vazhuvoor style of dancing, started learning dance at the age of ten from T. Rajalakshmi (1917–2003), a devadasi from Tiruvidaimarudur who had settled in Calcutta where Chithra lived at that time. Chithra moved to Madras from Calcutta in the 1950s to pursue a dance scholarship and started training under Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai (*Visweswaran Namvirundhinar*). Similarly, Sudharani Raghupathy started training with U. S. Krishna Rao (1912–2005) in the late 1940s, but then continued her training with Mylapore Gowri Ammal and Kittappa Pillai in the late 1950s (Chowdurie *Looking back*). The dance aesthetics imbibed in all these dancer bodies was an assemblage of techniques and performance styles. The aesthetics they inhabited thus resulted from the exposure to these different teachers, a product of their different pedagogical methods at specific stages in their lives.

Most of the dancers eventually settled down with a single teacher around the 1960s. Though she trained with Muthukumar Pillai in her initial years, Kamala went on to have a long performance career under Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai and trace her style of dancing to him. Sudharani Raghupathy is largely associated with the Thanjavur tradition as passed on to her by *nattuvanar*, Kittappa Pillai. Kamala's sister Radha traces her style to Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai and did not learn from any other *nattuvanars*. Though having studied for just for a few years with Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai, Chithra Vishweshwaran is still associated with his style of dancing. Alarmel Valli (1956–) is a disciple of Subbaraya Pillai (1914–2008) and did not learn from other nattuvanars. All the dancers mentioned above—Chithra Vishweshwaran, Sudha Rani Raghupathy, Kamala Lakshman, Radha, Rukmini Arundale—are well-to-do, English-speaking brahmins who trained under a hereditary male *nattuvanar*. There were scores of female dancers from upper-caste, upper-class families who studied with these hereditary *nattuvanars* between the 1940s and 1970s, and who then went on to establish their own dance schools or performance careers in the 1970s. They were the first generation of tertiary students who learnt the dance from their teacher, not in an immersive setting, but more often as an after-school activity, at prescribed times in specific modules.

Radha told me that her sister Kamala sequenced the steps and created a categorization of *adavus* in the 1970s in order to establish a modular teaching curriculum for her own students. She did not remember Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai following a systematic sequence of *adavus* within his dance school. She added that Kalakshetra's teaching methodology was an important influence for Kamala in devising a systematic module for the Vazhuvoor style of teaching in her own school (Ramanathan, Personal interview).

Nandini Ramani, a disciple of Balasaraswati, shared with me that every day after school during the 1950s and 1960s she had dance class with Ganesan Pillai (1923–1987), son of Balasaraswati's teacher Kandappa Pillai (1899–1941), who made them dance ten to twelve categories of *adavus*, with each category having between five to eighteen variations. (Ramani, Personal interview). It is difficult to say whether these highly structured adavus were passed on to Ganesan Pillai by his father, or whether it was something that Ganesan Pillai, similar to Kamala Lakshman, put together.

10 Outside the movie industry, the new classical aesthetic continued to further the ideology of Hindu nationalism, gaining recognition and validation from the nation, both from its institutions and its powerful elites. A key moment in the recognition of the classical stream was the establishment of Sangeet Natak Akademi in 1953, a public entity that was set up to be the custodian of culture for India. Sangeet Natak Akademi pronounced bharatanatyam dance a "classical" dance of India, thus formalizing, and articulating something that was more a pervasive sentiment until then (Charkavorty).

11 Padmini was not a brahmin Brahmin but belonged to the upper-caste Nair community.

12 See Krishnan, *Celluloid*, p. 183 for an interview given for the Tamil film magazine Citra in 1954, Ramaiah Pillai writes about his angst about the state of dance at that time in the movies.

13 K. J. Sarasa is one of the very few women nattuvanars from a herditary family of teachers. While she was inspired by Kamala Lakshman and wanted to dance herself, Vazvoor Ramaiah Pillai discouraged her from becoming a dancer and advised her to take teaching dance as a career choice instead. He pointed to her that dancers who took up bharatanatyam were glamorous and looked like "queens" and that Sarasa with her plain looks would never stand a chance among them. Also, he argued that since she came from a struggling hereditary practitioner family, being a teacher rather than a dancer would help her family financially. Sarasa became one of the very few women who became a teacher from the Isai Vellalar community at this time. https://youtu.be/z_4UqCZFpRE

Rukmini Arundale is said to have given her first public performance within six months of training with her teacher Pandanallur Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai. I doubt if there was a pre-existing system of *adavu* classification that Arundale had to master before moving to the next level of proficiency. The categorization of the *adavus* to facilitate modular teaching must have been done by Rukmini Arundale during her process of standardizing and institutionalizing bharatanatyam that started in 1936. Dance schools that started much later in the 1960s and 70s were influenced by this model and created their own modular training packages.

Tertiary Learning Sets Hereditary Lineages apart from Aesthetic Lineages

Hereditary lineage (Gaston 140–144) was invoked by the upper-caste dancers to bring a sense of authenticity to the newly emergent classical stream. But, it is critical to distinguish here between hereditary lineage and aesthetic lineages. The first generation of upper-caste female dancers developed their own unique aesthetic slant largely due to the way knowledge was transmitted to them by their male non-performing teachers from the hereditary community, and secondly also because many of these dancers were exposed to more than one *nattuvanar* teacher. However, the hereditary lineage of a *nattuvanar* teacher or their *bani* has been erroneously conflated with the dancer's own aesthetic byproduct. Actually, this first generation of dancers created their own aesthetic lineage modeled on their own dancing/performing selves. Tertiary learning from hereditary *nattuvanars* largely happened on a one-on-one basis and the knowledge transfer took place between a non-performing teacher and an educated young female student, typically from a brahmin family. The individual and personalized transmission method, where the teacher demonstrated or described the movement while seated, led to a wide range of interpretation, and therefore aesthetic diversity, in the bharatanatyam field. These brahmin student dancers who learned the dance from seated nattuvanar teachers had to dig deep within their own aesthetic sensibilities to translate the words, gestures, and eye movements indicated by their seated teachers into actions (Vaidyanathan personal interview, Sundaram, personal interview).[14] The teacher and student typically developed a unique vocabulary of words and gestures through which the students translated the intention of the teachers. The *nattuvanar* teachers also altered their teaching methods to suit the aptitude and abilities of their students in this personalized training arrangement. Radha, the sister of Kamala Lakshman, shared with me that Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai used to suggest hand and neck movements while seated. She added that her sister, Kamala, was a prodigy who used to grasp his suggestions and translate it into movements with a unique sensibility (Ramanathan personal interview). Kamala's style of dance then served as a template for her sister, Radha to follow. Thus Radha's dance, while it is attributed to the hereditary lineage of the Vazhuvoor *bani* is for all practical purposes a unique formulation of this Vazhuvoor *bani* by her performing model, Kamala.

S. K. Rajaratnam Pillai, another hereditary *nattuvanar* who assisted Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai (1931–1994), largely taught on a one-on-one basis and had a large student following. One of his senior disciples, now a teacher in California, shared with me that her teacher very rarely got up to demonstrate abstract technical movements, but rather gave most of his instructions through verbal cues and hand gestures while remaining seated. She remembers that keen attention was required to translate his suggestions into movement. This individualization of aesthetics was evident in 2011 when his students got together to celebrate his 80th birthday. She was surprised that there were certain movements that some of his disciples knew and others did not. The movements and choreographies that came out of those interactions were unique to the teacher-student combination. The teaching was largely customized to the student and the teacher's state of knowing at the time of transmission. It drove their creative trajectory, rather than being based on an extraneous syllabus or curriculum, standardized repertoire, or collective aesthetic generated through mimicking senior students in a larger class.

From the 1970s through the early 1990s, these first-generation, upper-caste, English-speaking, tertiary students of the hereditary *nattuvanar* teachers started to set up their own dance schools and teach dance. Sudharani Raghupathy founded Sree Bharatalaya in 1970, Vyjayanthimala started Natyalaya in 1969, Radha started Pushpanjali in 1984, Revathi Ramachandran (1952–) started Kala Sadhanalaya in 1987, and Chitra Vishweshwaran started Chidambaram Dance Academy in 1975. Even hereditary *nattuvanars* like S. K. Rajaranam Pillai who apprenticed with Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai started Rajaratnalaya in 1970, and hereditary female *nattuvanar* K. J. Sarasa (1935–2012) who apprenticed with Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai started Sarasalaya in the late 1960s.[15] These performing teachers offered a template that produced students who danced like them. As we saw, Radha based her dance on her sister Kamala's understanding of Vazhuvoor Ramaiah Pillai's aesthetics.

The students of the second generation of tertiary teachers mapped onto their performing teacher's aesthetic. Unlike the first generation of student performers, the second generation of students did not have to harness their inner creative sensibility and epistemological base as deeply as was demanded of their teachers. This was significant as it marked the beginning of a certain level of homogeneity within the students of a particular teacher. This homogeneity set off a distinctive aesthetic lineage that started with these upper-caste performing students of *nattuvanar*-teachers. Rupa Srikanth reported in *The Hindu* that Uma Namboodripad (1980–), a senior student of Chithra Vishweshwaran, "has adapted and internalised Guru Chitra's dynamic style that involves adavus in motion and introduction of the flick of the head and wrist to finish with a flourish, in a sense" (Srikanth). Though this report is from the third wave (2000 onwards), it signals the kind of aesthetic lineage that can be traced to first-generation tertiary students like Chitra Vishweshwaran who became performing teachers during the second wave. On the one hand, the first generation of upper-caste dancers who trained directly under *nattuvanars* from hereditary families engendered a range of aesthetics that were attuned to their understanding of the styles passed on to them by their teachers. On the other hand, these upper-caste teachers needed validation of their aesthetics, and they sought this validation from the *nattuvanar* teachers from hereditary families who gave them a stamp of authenticity and claim to a heritage or lineage. While Radha's students danced like her or Kamala, they associated themselves with the Vazhuvoor tradition. This was a strategic move to give their dance a sense of authenticity (Meduri, *Temple stage*, 141). In sum, upper-caste Brahmin dance teachers needed a non-Brahmin hereditary *nattuvanar* to create a sense of validation, authenticity, and continuity of tradition.

Nonetheless there is often a discrepancy between two schools that claim their hereditary lineage to a particular *nattuvanar*. While their aesthetic lineage can be traced to performing gurus, their hereditary lineage is traced to *nattuvanar* teachers. The students of Radha, a direct disciple of Vazhuvoor Ramiah, perform their *theermanam adavu* keeping the knee of the extended leg bent, rather than keeping that leg straight. However, the students of K. J. Sarasa, a female hereditary dancer, the founder and artistic director of Sarasalaya, also lay claim to the Vazhuvoor tradition. Her students perform the same *theermanam adavu* by keeping the working leg straight rather than by bending the knees as done by Radha and Kamala. Radha's students, moreover, have a very distinctive head shake attributed to Kamala's style of dancing, and which is hardly seen in any other dance school that claims the Vazhuvoor tradition (Ramanathan, Personal interview; Lakshman, Personal interview).

Aesthetic Lineage Fosters Aesthetic Diversity

During the second wave, most teachers seem to be conflicted about accepting other styles and were anxious to leave their mark on their students. Male dancer A., who runs his own school in Chennai, recalls his teacher, K. J. Sarasa, teasing him in class by inquiring if he went across the Adyar Bridge over the weekend or to Mylapore when he executed certain steps that to her keen eye seemed to be a slight aberration from the movement vocabulary typical of her teaching. She was referring to Kalakshetra, which was on the other side of the Adyar Bridge, and also where Sudharani Raghupathy, senior disciple of Kittappa Pillai, resides and teaches in Mylapore.[16] Teachers were respectful of the skills and aesthetics of other dancers while fiercely guarding their own aesthetics.[17] This created the opportunity for different aesthetic streams to co-exist and thrive during the second wave, fostering a healthy aesthetic diversity.

Thus, the beginning of the second wave started with a rupture with the popular aesthetic and a classicalization of bharatanatyam outside the movies. Many practices, movement vocabularies, and repertories were altered, or all together left out, to suit the requirements of the abstracted "high art" that bharatanatyam was forming into. The transmission methods moved from the primary to tertiary

14 While a few *nattuvanars* like Muthukumaran Pillai, Muthuswami Pillai, and Kalyanasundaram Pillai were known to demonstrate movement, most of the times the movement was conveyed through a generated vocabulary of seated movements, gestures, or words that were usually developed over the years between the teacher and their students. See https://narthaki.com/info/tdhc/tdhc12.html, an article in Narthaki.com by Ashish Mohan Khokar on Muthukumaran Pillai (30 Aug 2009) and https://www.thehindu.com/features/friday-review/on-a-classical-path/article4787717.ece by Savita Gautam for *The Hindu* on 6 June 2013 that document that these teachers were taught dance but hardly danced.

15 In contrast, K. J. Sarasa and S. K. Rajarathanam Pillai were still non-performing teachers from the hereditary community who started schools around the same time as these upper caste dancers. Their students still maintained an aesthetic diversity, as neither of these teachers demonstrated movement. They also maintained a one-on-one teaching model, especially for those students who were securing opportunities to perform. However, in the case of K. J. Sarasa a certain uniformity came through due to larger class sizes, especially in the later years as junior students watched the senior student dancers both perform and demonstrate movement in class settings (Sundaram, Personal interview; Rangarajan, Personal interview).

16 It is also noteworthy that as the city of Madras developed, certain districts such as South Madras were largely Brahmin occupied. Kristen Rudisill (2007) traces the creation of upper-caste brahmin taste in art appreciation and maps out caste clusters in Madras which features Adyar, Mylapore, and T. Nagar that have the highest number of *sabhas* where brahmins congregated to cultivate their appreciation of "high art" (pp. 58–60).

17 Lakshman, senior student of K. J. Sarasa, shared with me that he used to love watching the new *adavu* variations that Muthuswamy Pillai brought to his choreographies. He also shared that his teacher, K. J. Sarasa, while making snide remarks about learning movement vocabularies other than the ones passed

methods of knowledge transfer. This brought the loss of implicit, familial knowledge transfer. The hereditary dance practice was the antithesis of the tertiary method of instruction and presentation. Many believe that the art of hereditary practitioner and solo performer Balasaraswati (1918–1984) died with her (Pattabhiraman and Ramachandran, 1984). Though she trained a few dancers, it might have seemed largely futile to invest in a time-based, modular teaching method given that she had six generations of hereditary dancers preceding her and another six generations preceding her teacher, Kandappa Pillai. Her training in the primary Isai Vellalar habitus sets her apart from all other well-known dancers who performed between the 1950s and 1970s. Dance was an immersive learning experience for her. She was as good a musician and vocalist as she was a dancer. Her in-depth knowledge of music and hereditary culture, and her tacit understanding of dance and its lived history infused her engagement with the dance. It would have been impossible to pass along all this through a tertiary model. At the performative level, this translated into the interruption of the seamless nexus between music and dance, the multiple aspects—historical, familial, and situational—of interpreting a line of poetry, and the embodied movements that were an extension of sociocultural lifestyle, all of which had been funneled through the art of improvisation. This practice of improvisation, which cannot be taught but rather is seasoned into a hereditary dancer over years of immersion, was lost to the stripped down, modular way of transmitting the art in the tertiary manner. Improvisation lost the race to pre-choreographed, time-bound, rehearsed routines.

The futility of teaching a grand tradition that the hereditary practitioner inherits might have been felt by Balasaraswati, Kittappa Pillai, and many other *nattuvanars* who were sometimes accused, especially by upper-caste, Brahmin dance students, of "hoarding" their art.[18] Some amount of distrust also stems from the actions of dancers like Rukmini Arundale, who systematically took their art and did away with the community. Rukmini Arundale remarked, "It is a well-known fact that they (hereditary performers) are a small clan of people who have never believed it possible for anybody else to conduct a dance performance… Now there are so many girls from good families who are excellent dancers. The second part is to train *nattuvanars* from good families. I am happy that on Vijayadasami day I was able to prove that we could do without them" (Harp 207).

While on one hand, the second wave promoted the notion of higher spiritual ends over monetary returns, on the other hand, it simultaneously opened up spaces for professionalizing and monetizing bharatanatyam through the method of mass transmission, which increased class sizes and therefore revenues. The modular way of assimilation by stripping the art from its original methods resulted in the field fragmenting into modular experts: *nattuvangam, abhinaya*, choreography, music, and rhythm composition, branching out as subfields within bharatanatyam. This fragmentation into subfields often resulted in a very reductive assimilation of the art by performing dancers who then transmitted this skeletal form to the next generation. One thing that prevailed in the second wave was aesthetic diversity due to the multiple aesthetic lineages that co-existed at this time. However, we see at the end of the second wave, due to increase in competition and collaborations there is a growing homogenization of aesthetics. In the third wave, this homogenization of aesthetics is further catalyzed by social media and other neoliberal manifestations that urges the bharatanatyam dancer to compete with the Western aesthetics in order to keep the heterosexual spectacle thriving in the body of the bharatanatyam dancer.

on through her school, also appreciated difference and innovation when she saw it. See also articles by Nandini Ramani of the Balasaraswati school on Kittappa Pillai and K. N. Dandyudapani Pillai (Ramani, *A True, A Tribute*).

18 Upper-caste actress-dancer Vyjayanthimala shared frustration about her teacher, hereditary nattuvanar Kittappa Pillai. "When I ask my *nattuvanars*, will you please teach me this or that aspect of dance, they never agree immediately or even whole-heartedly." She bemoaned that they gave excuses and hardly committed to sharing what they knew. "Take Kittappa Pillai, an invaluable treasure trove of the Thanjavur tradition. Learning from him is extremely difficult. I keep imploring him to train somebody before the art becomes extinct, but perhaps such people are not interested in keeping their art alive." She then compared him to her brahmin music teacher who freely shared her knowledge (Ramnarayanan, *Trailblazing*,31). Kittappa Pillai has trained accomplished dancers like Vidya Natarajan, Srividya Sankaranarayanan, Hema Verma and many others. The transgender dancer Narthaki Natraj, who was conferred the Nritya Kalanidhi by Music Academy in 2023 was one his prime disciples. Thus while we can take Vyajayanthimala's frustration with a grain of salt. The futility of teaching a tradition through tertiary means could have caused the reluctance she sensed in her teacher.

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SADI Feature: Hybrid Footprint FIlms

A Thousand Yearnings (2017), courtesy of Feriyal Amal Aslam.

Dance India Today (2022), courtesy of Annette Leday.

Book Reviews

*Leday, Annette. Contemporary Dance in India Today. New Delhi, Goyal Publishers, 2023, Large format, 110pp***.** In 2017, the CN D (Centre nationale de danse) in Paris commissioned Annette Leday, a French choreographer with experience of both classical and contemporary Indian dance, to research the state of contemporary dance in India. In 2018 and 2019, Leday travelled throughout India and, as part of her research, conducted a series of filmed interviews with leading choreographers. Ms Leday's report to the CN D is the basis of the present volume. Following two scene-setting chapters on the Indian subcontinent and twentieth-century founders of modern dance in India, the third chapter discusses the creative work of twenty-seven contemporary choreographers. Chapter four considers choreographic themes, especially the search for a contemporary Indian identity in tension with both classical dance forms and Western influences. Throughout these chapters large space is given to the words of choreographers themselves. Further chapters contextualise contemporary Indian dance in Indian press, pedagogy, and funding models. This survey attests to a vibrant and engaged choreographic movement in contemporary Indian dance. The text (available in both English and French) is presented, with portrait photos, a 35 minute documentary film **Dance India Today** made by Cyrille Larrieu, and an archive of twenty interviews as **Dance India Today Series**.

David McRuvie

CFP: Hierarchies in Dance
Deadline: March 15, 2024

This issue seeks to mitigate encounters of South Asian dance and movement systems with hierarchies. Bodies and hierarchies perform together in and through dance. We conceive of hierarchies expansively: as concretized social constructions delimiting personal and collective freedom (such as caste, race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, identity, genres etc.). The undeniability of hierarchies haunt the struggle of the very existence, validation, and sustainability of dance forms and communities. By focusing on hierarchies, we want to open up discussion of overt and covert inequities in sociologies, praxis, kinetics, geographies, and demographics that the imaginative dance scholar/ practitioner can cleave out, without being prescriptive, or excessively descriptive, leaving enough interpretational space. Hierarchies are also dynamic as living-breathing-porous-structures that can be reorganized through performative resistance and choreographic repositioning. In an atmosphere of authoritarian silencing of voices, lives, peoples, and bodies, hierarchical reorganization needs to take choreographic precedence. Such is the clarion call for the next issue of *South Asian Dance Intersections*. Calling out to artists and academics, activists and theorists to submit full-length article submission (6000-8000 words), experimental writing (1500-2000 words), photo essays, and on-screen works. All works should adhere to the journal's submission guidelines. Submissions are accepted only through the journal website. For all submission-related queries, please contact Kaustavi Sarkar, ksarkar@charlotte.edu.

Please send your submissions to: https://journals.charlotte.edu/sadi/about/submissions

2024 Area Studies/ Dance Studies Colloquium

SADI will take proactive measures in revisiting vocabulary dominating the field of dance studies through a year-long engagement through workshops, conferences, townhalls, and laboratories. This recuperative/ revisionist initiative will focus on the term *choreography* from an area studies perspective. We will scrutinize and generate a discourse around *choreography* and allied, pithily used, foundational terms as we explore how it might be imagined by diverse artists and scholars. How inclusive or culturally competent is choreography? By interrogating this privileged practice, and shining the light on the state of dance in South Asia, we get a chance to question the dominant lexicon in the broader field and revisit, possibly even reconfigure current terminologies. Does this process require dismissing labels, vernacularizing universal words, reinventing meanings and terminologies, reassigning new meaning to represent better "glocal" developments? This exercise will hopefully make the discourse more reflective of the reality of emerging and dynamic dance ecologies and their continuously developing epistemologies in the South Asian dance constituency.

We will run announcements for this year-long initiative starting January 2024 for multiple pathways of participation: online townhalls, in-person workshops, study-groups, conferences, and artist laboratories.