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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.
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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.

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Still from *Imkaan* by Sumedha Bhattacharyya and Hediyeh Azma

Editorial: South Asian Dance Intersections

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

Three issues under the belt with this edition! With this edition we can put behind us the fear of the number 3. This is also probably our longest edition this far, making full use of the online status to include film, photos and videos. We bring you in this edition a dance film from Manipur that captures the current travails of the land, a photo essay in which artists of two countries are involved and a recording of an almost forgotten style, maybe the better word would be dialect, of Kathak. Our theme in this edition was 'hierarchies' and while not all, but many of the articles shine the torch on hierarchies in dance that manifest themselves in both obvious and subtle ways. It is hoped that this edition will help us dismantle hierarchies, especially those that cause harm to dance and dancers and help them to be more mindful and sensitive about this pervasive issue. With South Asia carrying forth a plexus of social, historical, gendered hierarchies, dance in this geography carries hierarchy reaching cult proportions, sometimes along misogynist lines and often creating unhealthy and unsafe ecosystems. In the last four years for instance, sexual harassment in the arts has been called out several times, but has not been heard. In the lineup of nine, a mix of essays and media submissions, we have none on this aspect. But that is not unusual as this is still a taboo subject. What the journal carries in this edition, via incisive articles, reflective works, visual essays, interviews and films, highlights so many lesser realized aspects of hierarchies. I see this edition generating new and more advanced discourse around the issue. It will also be the first edition that will have a "live" launch, in New Delhi, the capital of India. The recording of the event will be available online for those to see who could not participate in person but wished to have been a part of it.

Most dancers who have trained in the classical dances of South Asia, itself a hierarchical category, find themselves embroiled in multiple hierarchical structures operating at many levels, chief among which is the almost autocratic guru-shishya parampara, the pattern of learning over several years with a single teacher who enjoys unquestioned authority and an almost divine position. Scholar, dancer and dance educator, Aadya Kaktikar found herself in a similar dichotomy, especially since she wanted to offer a more emancipatory pedagogy. Living with this dichotomy compelled Kaktikar to offer a different way of looking at the linear training and find the spaces for individual agency, which she has laid out in this essay "The Hierarchy of Parampara: Rethinking Relationship to Legacy in Dance". Drawing on her own relationship with her Guru, on whom she has written a book in 2011, "Odissi Yaatra: The Journey of Guru Mayadhar Raut", she expanded on the idea of tradition and nuanced its hold on a dancer. The essay proposes a framework that takes cognizance of individual agency and its political manifestation to repurpose Parampara or tradition. Referring to how dancers in their attempts at protecting their material shackle themselves to idealizing the past, as if it were an ideal past. This crafted nostalgia once played effectively into the idea of post-colonial nationalism, but the recent debates around caste in the world of classical Carnatic music has punched a gaping hole into the argument of the bygone golden age and its accompanying positions of unchallenged structures.

Kaktikar cogently argues in the essay that the hierarchies of traditional methods of training are definitely a valuable inheritance, but examines it minutely to then suggest ways of going past the shackling, and surviving the chokehold of tradition. Her methodology is via a triptych of three frames, of play, mimesis and osmosis. Play refers to the individual directed (re)engagement, (re)negotiation and rethinking of taught material where the rules of lineage do not apply. The second frame of mimesis is an imbricated process of simultaneous imitation and interpretation, the result of identification with an idea to the extent of trying to own it. The third and final frame she brings to the fore is the of osmosis which refers to the way in which the received canon gets refracted through the lived experience of the recipient, allowing individual

agency to play an important role and make for movement that happens simultaneously on two axes, allowing for movement that is both forwards and sideways.

Arushi Singh's reflections in her essay "Configuring the "Contemporary" in Indian Dance Through the Development Discourse: The Influence of Max Mueller Bhavan's 1984 "East – West Dance Encounter", foregrounds the role played by the Max Mueller Bhawan, a German cultural Institution in India, at a key moment of India's dance history. The MMB as it is popularly called embodies postwar cultural diplomacy that works towards developing the cultures of the global south by "productive" and "peaceful" cultural coalitions. Its mark, on shaping the contours of contemporary dance in India is seminal. In India, the twentieth century is important for the many deviations and self-expressions, since it witnessed, classical dance being created as a category, that seemed to align well with the nationalist movement. This process was accompanied by many disruptions and usurpations, and saw a radical shift among practitioners and prevailing practices of dance. From the early part of the twentieth century, a form of creative but distinctly Indian dance emerged due to the efforts of Uday Shankar and Ram Gopal. However, since the East-West Encounter of 1984, organized by the MMB, which served as a watershed moment, a "contemporary" dance emerged in India that patently carried the ideals, aesthetics and influence of the west.

Interestingly, the MMB, is a German institution named after Orientalist Max Mueller, who while supporting the theory of Aryan supremacy, had never visited India. MMB has had a defining impact on contemporary dance in India, largely because the then Director of the institution, Georg Lechner, pursued the end he sought, in a systematic manner. He seemed to dismiss the "inter-cultural sympathies" of the institution's naming, and a form of cultural imperialism can be read into the endeavor. Interestingly, Lechner persisted the very next year in reinforcing what had started in 1984, resulting in the Sangeet Natak Akademi, the national academy of the performing arts of India, an autonomous body (questionable to say the least), under the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, initiating the Nava Nritya Utsav and seminar in Delhi in 1985. This served as a catalyst for the recognition and resulted in evoking some support for contemporary dance in India. Singh meticulously unravels the role of MMB, specifically, its persuasive Director in cultivating this development.

Gitanjali Kolanad opens her essay "Finding the Truth in Fiction" by shining the torch on a casualty of the segues made by dance, in the twentieth century. This is the devadasi or professional female dancer, often dedicated to a temple. Kolanad opens her essay with a quote by John Berger that "art makes inequality seem noble and hierarchies seem thrilling" (Ways of Seeing, 29), but then goes on to argue that if art can white wash hierarchies, it can also create inversions and versions that present other possibilities for organizing the world. From the seventeenth century padam repertoire of the prolific Telugu poet Kshetrayya, to films in which devadasis played the lead roles where the story was often about the devadasi community, to the novel "Web of Deceit', Kolanad traces how art is used to invert the hierarchies. The padams become fodder for her argument since the interpretative agency given to the dancer allows her to project herself in any way, out of the multiple options available in the erotic/ devotional poetry, often framing herself in a position of superiority that was quite contrary to the reality of their lives and station. In early Tamil films, it was often the devadasis who reinvented themselves as actresses, even playing the role of the devadasi. In the process, they gain in social and financial equity. It mattered little of the films used the word devadasi as a slur, for the fact of the matter was that the artistic world of the films allowed succor and improved opportunities to the devadasi, who was already beleaguered by social stigma. In the novel "Web of Deceit" written by Muvalur Ramamirtham, herself a devadasi, we find a detailed picture of the ills of the system. But, using the art of writing, the author directs the narrative to the protagonist who becomes an activist in the reform movement, finding her voice, agency and the courage to break free from an oppressive system—made possible through fictional affordances.

Some years ago, in a conversation with Manipuri contemporary dancer Surjit Nongmeikapam, I was fascinated by his comment that "Every time I dance,

I make a political statement". What else can you say about long neglected Manipur. As a land on the margins, a frontier province of India, it has not had an easy existence. The combination of a near continuous history in recent times of insurgency, violence and the imposition of the Armed forces Special Powers Act and the twin Disturbed Area Act, have cast a political cloud on this gem state of India. But over the last thirty months Manipur has seen an unprecedentedly disruptive political crisis. Out of the dark times emerged the dance film "Hypnagogia". Hypnagogia refers to the the transitional state of consciousness that occurs while falling asleep, and it is characterized by a range of sensory experiences. Capturing the liminal state between seep and wakefulness, in these turbulent times, the film maker uses griminess and grittiness to express the haphazard agonies of his people and their land. The film is accompanied by a moving note by the performing artist R.K. Bitesh and film-maker Tushar Nongthombam.

From the body political and the body diplomatic, Preethi Athreya's essay "Form, Identity, Dissent – Reclaiming the Critical Space" takes us to her interest in the human body per se, the functional body instead of the performative body. Drawing from her "Jumping Project" where she explores the many insights in the simple, non-decorative act of jumping, as a counterpoint to the movements of the decorative dance body. Referencing body based political counters in jal satyagrahas or the stripped bodies of Manipur's women protestors, Athreya, argues that "our bodies are being stolen from us". She comes to this conclusion based on the realization that even when born in dance labs that are supposedly free from predetermined ends and untethered to restrictions, the body gets co-opted, loses its autonomy, as the body, and is compelled by the process to become a performative body. Athreya's body centric argument reminds me of one of the most important writings on the body in our times- Brahma Prakash's "Bodies on a Barricade: Life, Art and Resistance in Contemporary India." In this book Prakash talks about how the state controls the body and why. "The figure of the poet and artist is an ideal of freedom…barricading them is special because the purpose is not to capture their bodies but to detain words and imagination" (Prakash, 2023; 122).

The compelling photo essay "Imkaan", a word which in Persian means possibilities, is actually a coming together of two artistes- Indian dancer, photographer Sumedha Bhattacharya and Iranian underground artist Hadiyeh Azma, who is currently in Norway, for a collaborative exploration of visual story telling of a censorship regime. Supremacies, hierarchies and hegemonic world views is at the root of censorship, which leads to shaming, embarrassment and repression. This photo essay captures how the body gets subjected to cultural codes and social protocols. But even a socialized, controlled and contained body carries its political body within it. It resists –compulsively, despite being once contained, without concern for time passed, as is evident in Iran today, where an embodied resistance plays out via the hair revolution.

In a simpler manner but marking a revolutionary moment nevertheless is Ramli Ibrahim's reflective work titled "Weaving Odissi Feminine: A Malaysian Perspective" that captures the subtle shift from male produced Odissi dance to female produced Odissi dance, in Malaysia. Linking it with the demographic dynamics emanating from India, the land of Odissi's origins, he argues that the men were always privileged as Gurus while the women were the dancers, till a subtle shift was witnessed in India in the eighties, about a decade after Malaysians were introduced to Odissi. However, for Malaysians to enjoy and participate in dance where women became makers of dance, another three decades had to pass. This happened as a direct result of Ramli Ibrahim's dance school, Sutra's mindful invitation to women creators, breaking the male shibboleth of gurudom. The essay has resonances that can be developed by future scholarship around issues of the changed nature, intent and dynamics of pedagogy and the creative content introduced by this gender shift.

Lionel Popkin's reflective writing "Reorienting the Orient: A Case Study" is based on a durational performance installation running for eight hours in which he examines his own archive of thirty years of art making, located within the history of representation of South Asian performers on

western stages, thereby augmenting the discourse around dance in diasporic settings, especially in the United States. This essay was first developed as part of a conference that accompanied the exhibit "Border crossings: Exile and American Modern Dance, 1900-1955" which was initially mounted at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts in the Fall of 2023 and then remounted in January 2024 at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Consequently, the writing has a mosaic-like quality to it.

Early in the piece Popkin asks the question of how his project enters the transnational hierarchies of form and social expectations that have historically characterized South Asian dance in diasporic settings. In answering it Popkin, who has strong Indian links, including stints in training, takes us through a series of works and writings on Ruth St. Denis, Ted Shawn, Uday Shankar, La Meri and Ram Gopal. He focuses in particular on the mystique and life of Ram Gopal, about whom coincidentally in 2024 was published Ann David's definitive book- "Ram Gopal: Interweaving Histories of Indian Dance". But, Popkin challenges the Orientalizing gaze imposed on South Asian artists in American Modern Dance, that largely as a result of America's fascination for these, "the reconstructionist classicists of Indian dance", as he calls them, which he believes has perpetuated a hierarchy of form. This form that they are exemplars of, limits the expressive capability of performance with respect to what it can do, while navigating the complexities of diasporic life. Given the fact that debates around hierarchies of caste and class have only recently begun rumbling in India, Popkin's questions are very significant.

I would like to conclude this editorial with reference to the one interview we have. Titled "Crossing Barriers: Dance Unwound- A Conversation with Sushant Gaurav", it is a detailed conversation between veteran theatre critic Ajay Joshi and a young Kathak dancer, Sushant Gaurav, who is being noticed globally for dancing a rare version of the well-known dance style of Kathak, which is very different from the routine craft associated with it. A large part of Gaurav's presentation is marked by performance in a very slow tempo, that is not seen today, although records testify that it once existed. Gaurav describes his lineage as the Lahore- Lucknow gharana. This would befuddle many for while we are aware of the court patronized Lucknow style, a stalwart of which was Acchan Maharaj, who was known to dance at different tempos starting from the very slow tempo (called the 'purana andaaz'- the old way), almost nothing is known about the Lahore Lucknow style. This story is one of migration, post-colonial country formations, borders, poor diplomatic relations and the obsession to get past all this, via travel and technology, driven by the desire to learn a specific kind of dance. It seems that Gaurav, by following old ways is fast gaining new audiences. An excerpt of Sushant Gaurav's dance is linked to the interview, for readers to see for themselves.

Finally, before ending, I would like to put on record that the mentoring program offered by SADI is growing in popularity, as this year, two young scholars have opted for it and we hope to include their writings in the next edition. The call for papers for the next edition, SADI 4.0 is called Pedagogies of Crossing where a sharpening focus is introduced into interrogating theoretical and practical predilections associated with pedagogy.

Wishing you all the best for 2025,

Arshiya Sethi (PhD)
Editor-In-Chief

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The Hierarchy of Parampara: Rethinking Relationship to Legacy in Dance

Aadya Kaktikar

The idea of hierarchy is unsettling. As a 'classical' dancer trained under the hierarchical pedagogy of my guru and as a dance scholar locating my work in the ideals of emancipatory pedagogy, the impetus for this article comes from my conflicted embodied response to the idea of hierarchy. Positioning the idea of hierarchy as both a relational form and a theoretical model, this paper recognizes that the notion of hierarchy is simultaneously problematic and productive. Arguing that hierarchical pedagogical systems in traditional dance forms in India co-exist with an ontological egalitarianism, this paper presents a possible framework to understand the relationship of the contemporary individual with legacies of traditional dance forms. In the discussion that follows, I draw upon my relationship with my guru, Guru Mayadhar Raut, and my training in critical dance studies to unpack the troubled relationship between the hierarchy of parampara (traditional lineages and their transmission through apprentice-learning) and legacy inscribed on the dancers body through training and the political goal of self-expression. In doing so, I do not repudiate the traditional pedagogical systems and neither do I glorify them. Reflecting on the problem of the hierarchy of tradition understood as such, Navtej Johar argues that,

> Tradition in terms of dance as we have defined it is like a monolithic score that is not to be tampered with, obediently followed, and diligently replicated. It is controlled through self-policing mechanisms that have become entrenched within its training and practice. It is fixed, linear, and unidirectionally ambitious, and nationalistic (2017, 211).

Johar argues for a schizophrenic relationship with dance; one that is under no pressure to conform to the nationalist ideal of tradition and at the same time is under no pressure to maintain a stance of resistance. He argues that tradition is an archive box whose potency lies in its "un-fixedness and dual directionality which needs to be rigorously de-policed and divested of any collective ambition." (Johar 2017, 214). Expanding on this stance, this paper proposes a framework that allows for a retooling, reorientation, and repurposing of parampara to make sense of individual agency and its political manifestation. Drawing upon the work of Victoria Browne (2015) questions like - how can dance in India draw productively on its own history, without passively conforming to expectations of the past, or elevating the past as a nostalgic ideal against which to measure and compare the present? Conversely, how can we, as dancers and dance scholars, usher in new ideas and approaches, without ignoring or returning to a singular past? And how can we speak of legacy, lineage, and parampara in traditional dance forms without instating or reproducing a singular, linear master narrative, underpin this paper.

The Problem with Hierarchy

Hierarchy as a pedagogical model runs counter intuitive to emancipatory sensibilities that most dance scholars share and yet many pedagogical and cultural systems of traditional arts are based on the centrality of hierarchy in the process and production of aesthetic value. In one view of hierarchy, the emancipation of the dancerly self from the hold of hierarchical oppressive social norms requires that liberation be found through a process of "excavating and asserting the inner autonomous agency of the individual" (Haynes and Hickel 2016, 6). Freedom, seen through the narratives of modernity, liberalism and progress, is a project predicated on progressive self-mastery (Keane 2007). The dancerly self, in this worldview, is a disembedded, free-thinking, rights bearing individual. Rolando Vázquez , calling out the hegemony of this worldview argues that as a colonial legacy, modernity and its worldviews have established themselves as a "world-historical reality through a particular politics of time, one that armed the west as the present, and the present as the legitimate site of the real" (2015). Given that

the self is produced by the pedagogical interplay of social norms and relationships some of which are hierarchical, individuality is imbricated within ties of (inter)dependance (Ferguson 2013), and agency and freedom are relational. This relation of the self with the other, with the world and with interiority, produces a relational temporality that troubles the conception of the past as an archive, a representation or an object of study and challenges the idea of the future as a utopia of the never-ending cult of the 'new' (Vázquez 2015). The dancerly self, in this worldview, is emergent, collective, and contextual.

As a dancer in contemporary India, it is difficult to say exactly what dance is (and what it is not). Today, cultural formations like dance and the identities it engenders are in a state of flux- constantly being made, remade and unmade. It is a moment that makes visible the enfolded and entangled constructions of dance that are ontologically complex. The socio-political predictability of pre-liberalization India and the cultural categories that emerged because of its postcolonial politics are a thing of the past (Chakravorty 2017). Traditional dancers and dance scholars, working in various contexts are encountering a world that often challenges the belief systems that these dance categories were built upon. The contemporary moment that we live in has also seen a hardening of borders and boundaries, and globalizing forces of neoliberalism and development have produced a cultural closure, a new longing for forms of social order that pivot around hierarchy as a social form, an ideology or as a nostalgia for an idealized past (Meyer and Geschiere 1999). The instinct for the cultural practitioner is to become to be protective and to fiercely protect what we understand of our past of our cultures and traditions. At the moment of writing this paper the Carnatic classical music world is fractured as a long and painful legacy of the position of caste in music publicly unravels and musicians and art aficionados harden their stance. The battle lines are drawn.

Thinking about the issue of hierarchy in terms of dance in India is a project fraught with anxiety produced by living through the wounds created by the colonial simplification of dance for the extraction of value, for its distribution in hierarchical ways, coupled with massive epistemic genocides – the kinds of massive simplifications and displacements that go along with disappearing (Haraway 2017). The frameworks that this paper discusses is not another simplification[1]. Instead, this paper proposes one possible pathway for softening the borders and boundaries drawn around categorization of dance. "so as to open up the contact zones of thinking" (Haraway 2017). Drawing upon diverse fields of philosophy, lived experience, and emancipatory education principles, the frameworks suggested in this article offer a way of opening up zones of thinking and talking about legacy and lineage in classical dance that stay with the inheritance of colonial histories, with the troubles of post-colonial exterminations and extractions, but also the inventions of precious things. The attempt is to find ways of dancing that continue to draw from the vortex of creative energies that have enabled traditional dance forms to endure and to find a way that provides generative possibilities to embrace a pluriverse of dance making and thinking. Acknowledging the epistemic violence of the colonial and post-colonial dance politics on the pedagogical formations of the guru-shishya parampara[2], this article proposes a renegotiation of the dominant understanding of legacy with a renewed attention to where, how, between whom, and toward what futures hierarchy is engaged in dance. This article is an attempt to "stay with the trouble" (Haraway 2016) produced by the hierarchization of lineage and legacy and the seeming deadweight of legacy under which a dancer in the contemporary moment might struggle, to rethink the ways which agency and freedom of the dancer might be understood from within these pedagogical systems. This article proposes that the hierarchy of traditional methods of training not as something to be overcome but

1 The dominant history of dance in India framed within the state-sponsored nationalist imagination is built upon the erasure of multiple narratives and communities. This erasure, promoting the idea of unity in diversity, is designed to produce a simple and replicable history of dance in India.

2 In her work on the Tawaif and their dance, Pallabi Chakravorty (2006) illustrates how the establishment of the contemporary idea of guru-shishya parampara is built upon the disappearance of female muslim performers and the establishment of a male lineage.

rather as an inheritance that we might (yet) survive (Singh 2018).

Methodology

The ideas presented in this paper are located in my own struggle to come to terms with the pedagogy of dance that I was trained in and the contemporary educational theories of bell hooks and Paulo Freire that I studied. Through unpacking the life and work of Guru Mayadhar Raut[3], his pedagogical practices and choreographies and from having documented his life's work of classicization of Odissi (a globally celebrated eastern Indian dance form deemed as 'classical'), I distill seeds and provocations for the future possibilities. His life and his work do not need an introduction, these have been celebrated and talked about for decades now (cite your book, perhaps). My aim here is to examine his artistry, his worldview, and his approach to dancemaking to potentially generate a blueprint for the future. My aim here is also to frame the hierarchy of tradition, its legacies, and histories as a feed-forward mechanism; not something that needs to be preserved, fossilized, and saved but as something that needs to be brought forth and put into action to engage with the world.

The genesis of Odissi as a classical form is in a blood oath that six young men with modest means took in the Chandi temple in Cuttack in 1959[4]. Straddling a time in between times where they were the custodians of the past and the receivers of the future, for these professional dancers survival was at stake. Familiar systems of patronage were gone, the old performers were gone, and dance was competing with the rising popularity of theatre and film. The world that Mayadhar Raut and his compatriots found themselves in as young men, was entirely different from the one they grew up in. Very similar to the times we live in today, their world was changing fast, through forces beyond their control and traditional dance and its traditions needed to find a place in it. Navigating India's advent into modernity, the actions that they took at that time and the changes that they made to dance that they had inherited from their Gotipua (prepubescent male dancing) and Raas Leela (socially danced celebrations of devotional fervor) traditions, were often considered audacious and risky. Some of the things they did were never done before[5] and yet these young men, bereft of resources and support persisted. This reorientation, this creative leap of faith, to imagine what Odissi could look like in the future, allowed Odissi to move out of the temple precinct and the Gotipua repertoire and engage with new forms of presentation like group choreographies, ballets, film, and the proscenium. Even in the face of opposition from within their communities, they insisted that they were not throwing out tradition, they were reconfiguring it and reframing it in order for Odissi to survive in the twentieth century and beyond.

Through my long association with guru Mayadhar Raut[6], in this paper I open the thought processes and ways of being in the world that enabled these gurus to reorient Odissi to the future and become legends. This examination takes a micro-historical method to engage with the reciprocal relationship of individual actions and experiences and cultural formations, institutions, and social process to produce a "culturally shaped context for action and interpretation" that is always "decisively

3 The book Odissi Yaatra (2010), is a biography of a kind which documents guruji's life and work. This book is an almost transcription of hours of conversations with him. His life story, as presented in this book, is told in his words.

4 While deliberations were on within Jayatika on how Odissi should be reframed as a classical form, Mayadhar Raut, Kelucharan Mohapatra, Dayanidhi Das, Debaprasad Das, Batta Krushna Sena and Choudhury Balram Mishra went to the Chandi mandir, pricked their finger and mixed their blood on a bel leaf, taking a blood oath to do whatever was needed for the cause of Odissi.

5 At the time of these deliberations, young dancers like Mayadhar clashed with senior people like Surendra Mohanty, Kartik Kumar Ghosh. Mayadhar's guru Pankaj Charan Das refused to continue participating in the discussions of Jayantika Association.

6 My association with guruji pans over three decades.

influenced and molded by materially objective living conditions and changes in those conditions" (Medik in Gregory 1999, 101). In keeping with micro historical research methods (Hargadon and Wadhwani 2023), this paper emerges from the reflexive use of dual temporal frames: a micro temporal frame grounded in the life and work of Guru Mayadhar Raut and a macro temporal frame accounting for processes of continuity and change in Odissi dance over time. The critical reading of the history of classical dance in India throws up a history of exceptional individual actions, unintended consequences, nonlinear and emergent processes, contingent processes, and unobserved or inconceivable processes. By offering three frameworks of *play*, *mimesis*, and *osmosis*, to engage with the legacy of a guru in classical dance and the hierarchical role that this legacy plays in the lives of classical dancers, this paper offers an agential opportunity to situate ourselves within the inherited pedagogical hierarchies of dance.

Frame One: Play

The idea of play provides a framework for experimentation within a formal pedagogical structure, creating space for exploring vulnerability, taking risks, finding pleasure, and also failure. Within educational philosophy, play is understood to be vital to enrich the taught regimes. In this spirit, play is not only a way of expanding the self but is central to self-preservation (Lin and Riefel 1999 in Henricks 2006). It is a laboratory where experimentation with new skills and practice of old ones is done without real-life repercussions. Play is also a social workshop where emotions can be expressed and displayed to stimulate creativity. Play is a province of the student, away from the mastery of the teacher. Here the student learns to develop and exercise their own critical and intellectual faculties (Henricks 2006). Playing in the dance class demands that we engage and invest ourselves completely in what the dance feels like and how it moves the body in the present moment. The focus is not on a pre-imagined final product or outcome, in terms of a learned choreography, and the central aim of the idea of play is to derive pleasure from being in the present.

When children play they are aware that there is a voluntary distance from the real world and at the same time there is a commitment to the value and roles taken on in the moment of play. This zone of play is mental and emotional, physical, and symbolic (Huizinga in Henricks 2006). While engaging in play, challenges are imagined and then resolved through a process of alternation between tension and completion, between opposition and union and therefore the experience of play is aesthetic, it is an encounter with rhythm and harmony. In the dance class, play emerges as an experimental engagement with the received legacy of the guru. Rather than a replication of the work of the guru, play implies a (re)engagement, a (re)negotiation, and (re)thinking of taught material, distancing the dance from the hierarchical position of the guru with relation to the student. To engage fully in play with dance implies to step sideways into another reality, where the rules of lineage no longer apply. "Like willful children, (students) unscrew reality or rub it onto their bodies or toss it across the room. Things are built anew" (1), and dancers are granted dispensation from mindless replication.

Play, according to Sutton-Smith (in Henricks 2006, 4), cultivates an individual's ability to be variable and flexible in a way that existing skill sets can be used to respond to various sets of challenges. But play does not imply a lack of rigor or seriousness. An example is the sanchari bhava that Guru Mayadhar Raut introduced to the Odissi asthapadi (citation). While teaching the sanchari (embodied, experiential, and gestural elaboration on a thought, concept, idea, character, lyrical refrain etc.) section of an ashtapadi, guruji would only teach us the broad outline and it was left to the dancer to fill in the details. That meant that the students needed to play with the story, experiment, listen to their bodies speak, and allow their life experiences to flow through the technique. Sometimes it worked and sometimes it did not; sometimes it worked for the audience and did nothing for the dancer and vice versa. That also meant that the presentation of the sanchari did not look the same every time, it was different in different classes and very different across performances. What he stressed throughout however was the importance of continuous play, to not stop and get fixated on something that works to continue to open the layers of what is possible. The idea of choreography then, according to guruji, is not something that is rigid and fixated. Dancing with play allows the technique to filter through the individual dancers' bodies and choreography then, instead of

being a fixed set of moves, becomes an idea that is manifested differently across different bodies. None of the great legends danced alike, they were not similar, and their choreographies bore their own individual mark. I believe that play and its varied manifestations are therefore an important element in the making of the legends and legacies we celebrate today.

It's not enough however to just think about something and the merging of action and attention during practice must take place for play to manifest. Play also does not imply that anything goes as attention to detail is critical to play. Play in fact demands complete immersion and dedication; however, there is no clear preset goal. Play therefore demands improvisation. It was perhaps 1945 and Mayadhar Raut had been a part of Kalicharan Pattnaik's theatre group for a little over a year. While playing on the swings, Mayadhar fell and suffered a deep cut over his right eyebrow. His elder brother Harihar was furious! Mayadhar was to play the part of Krishna and he could not possibly go onstage with a bandage. Mayadhar and his friend Gopi Krushna had a way out. Krishna's sakha would ask him Krishna how did you hurt yourself? And Krishna would answer I went to pick flowers for Radha's ornaments and got stung by a bee! So successful was this incidental screenplay that even after the wound healed, the dialogue remained. Guruji delights till date, in the way he was able to find a way around the authority of his guru and elder brother. This subversion, though playful, resulted in an aesthetic experience that became a part of his choreographic oeuvre.

Play demands the possibility of extending a skill to negotiate and contend with the unexpected and therefore demands an engagement with complexity and subtlety. Another small incident from his time in Kalakshetra demonstrates Guruji's capacity to take risks with what he knew in ways that not only challenged the status quo but created moments that make people take notice of him. In 1958, during his time in Kalakshetra, during the fancy dress competition at the Theosophical Society's school, Mayadhar used his makeup and painting skills acquired while working at Annapurna Thetare to transform a boy called Venkatesh into a leper. The dignitaries who attended, including Rukmini Devi, were taken aback at the choice of fancy dress but eventually were appreciative of the work that Mayadhar did. He was fondly scolded by Rukmini Devi for his naughtiness. This sense of presenting the unexpected has remained a constant in guruji's landmark choreographies. It is in this tension between pleasure and risk, between vulnerability and mastery, between the known and the improvised, between the maneuvered and structured that any dance form remains alive and responsive within hierarchical pedagogical structures.

Frame Two: Mimesis

Play is manifested through the potential of dance to alter perspectives and abstract rasa (the translation from the individual lived experience to a shared aesthetic immersion) from real-life experiences. This idea of abstraction leads me to my second proposition, *Mimesis*. Mimesis is a philosophical idea that describes the process of imitation or mimicry through which artists across genres portray and interpret the world. It is understood as an act of simultaneous imitation and interpretation. Mimesis as a concept has been much debated in western aesthetic philosophy. The understanding of mimesis proposed here draws upon a dynamic, historical, and anthropological notion of mimesis proposed by, among others, Roger Caillois, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno (Paddison 2011).). Mimesis, as understood here implies not only the notion of imitation, where dance is said to imitate something, or stand in as a representation or an expression of something. To clarify, in traditional dancemaking, it is the process of direct representation of the text/ music/ rhythm, for example the dancer interprets a line of a song with hand gestures- *Dheera samire Yamuna teere, vasati vane vanamali* (When the spring breeze blows on the banks of Yamuna, Krishna waits in the forest…). Dance and its technique are used to imitate the meaning of the lyrics and the raaga (melodic mode) they are sung in. However, it is also the process of simultaneous abstraction of the idea by using the moving and shifting body of the text/ music/ rhythm and is most obviously seen in the way in which this line is repeated and represented

differently twenty-three times in guruji's choreography.

Drawing from Walter Benjamin's argument that "mimesis can be seen as an impulse, a mode of 'identifying with' rather than necessarily as 'imitation of' or 'representation of' something external to itself (Padison 2010, 127), makes a case for mimesis as an embodied impulse which functions in relation to its opposite – the technical aspects of dance. Instead of drawing upon simply the imitation of received choreography mimesis in dance oscillates between its own internal rationalized constructional (the lineage of the guru) and unrationalized mimetic moments. "Mimesis in this sense may be regarded as a pre-rational, or not-yet-rationalized, mode of behavior, with an affinity towards the sensuous and embodied, non-conceptual re-enactment of cognitive processes" (Paddison 2010, 136). This process is evident in the different ways in which every piece of the Jayantika repertoire, from the Mangalacharan to the Ashtapadi has been impacted by the specific worldview of every guru and differently imagined, treated, and choreographed across the various styles of Odissi. Each style of Odissi is linked yet distinct emerging from individual mimetic processes.

Mimesis imitates but still creates a work of art removed from reality. That gap is a good thing because the audience responds best to a combination of recognition and distance. It is in this gap, in this shift of perception that rasa is generated, and the audience feels empathy and catharsis. I discuss this gap through the idea of music composition through the arguments of Eduard Hanslick.

> Two things must be kept distinct. One is the misconception ... that natural sounds can be directly and realistically carried over into the artwork ... . The other is the case where elements present in nature, being to some extent musically effective because of their rhythmic or sonorous character, are taken over by composers, not as something to be 'imitated', but as something that lends itself to their impulse to create musical motifs out of autonomous musical beauty, which with artistic spontaneity they conceive and actualize (in Paddison 132-33).

In the case of traditional dance practices, the hierarchy and rationality of received knowledge must encounter mimesis within the dance class, both during teaching and individual practice, to be freed from its fixedness. As a sensuous, embodied and expressive phenomenon, mimesis is a process that can enable dancers to intimately adapt dance and dance then becomes "rationally transformed and objectified mimesis" (Wellmer in Padison 2010). This adaptation, however, is not possible without the received repertory of dance practices from the guru. The oscillation between received practices and mimetic process keeps the dance 'moving', shifting the understanding of parampara from something that is stagnant to something that is constantly evolving, constantly in touch with what came before and what is now. Mimesis is essential to the process of dancemaking because it operates on the principle of shifting perception. In 1961, Guru Mayadhar Raut choreographed a two-hour long dance drama Tapasvini based on an eleven canto poem written by Shri Gangadhar Meher. The choreography of this piece was nothing like was ever done before in Odisha. There was a three-tiered stage created in an open ground, with more than a hundred people involved, and people stood on cars and buses to see the show. In many ways guruji drew upon his Kalakshetra training as well has his fascination for Hindi cinema to create a work that shifted the way Odissi was done and Odisha understood the genre of dance-drama. The great choreographic landmark works in the contemporary history of Odissi, that have been made into hierarchical canons today, fossilized to be replicated without thought, all have one thing in common; developed through mimetic impulses, they shift the way the audience perceives reality, they present new ways of knowing and understanding an already known story or text.

When the process of mimesis is simplistically approached, that is when it is understood as simply imitating what is understood as tradition, it creates an understanding of dance technique as something that is rigid, which has no space for personal interpretation and requires the dancers to just copy the teacher or the guru. But we all know as dancers, that is not true. Therefore, I propose that the key aspect of the work of every legendary Odissi guru and every legendary Odissi dancer that we seek to learn from is their mimetic capacity to constantly re-imagine what is already known.

Frame Three: Osmosis

This capacity for re-imagination is fueled by the last element that I would like to put forth today, *Osmosis*. Osmosis is a scientific term that implies a spontaneous transfer of elements from one fluid to another through a membrane. When I examine the work of Guru Mayadhar Raut through this lens, I realize that his approach to dancemaking operated on this very principle. Nothing was off-limits. Every experience, every life circumstance fed into their work. Dance does not operate in a bubble with technique becoming a barrier that keeps the world out. In an osmotic worldview dance technique becomes the membrane, the filter through which varied experiences and learnings from all aspects of life come into dance. The legends and legacies we celebrate understood dance technique as something that was available to them in their bodies. This meant that the technique adapted to changing bodily and life circumstances evolving in the role that technique played, the way technique was deployed. When we see later videos of elderly gurus performing, it is apparent that they have made technique their own rather than be subservient to its diktat.

Examining Guru Mayadhar Raut's work for examples of osmosis, I am overwhelmed by the examples that come up; he learnt multiple dance styles, from Kathakali at Kalakshetra to Uday Shankar's style under Kumar Dayal Sharan. Before that he learnt Gotipua and Mahari (temple-dancing traditions) dance sequences, dance sequences inspired by the work of Mumtaz Ali (father of well-known comedian Mahmood), he learnt Oriya folk dances like the sword dance, Bhil dance. He wrote two novels and several poems which were never published. Guruji learnt to play the Mridangam, the Pakhawaj, the tabla, and the Manipuri Khol. In his lifetime guruji has worked as a Gotipua artist, a mechanic, a printing press assistant, and an assistant to a set designer. He ran away to Bombay to be a film star, enthusiastically participated in the first election in independent India and he was even a social activist for a time. During his time at Annapurna theatre, he learnt how to do make-up and dress arrangement. He composed solo pieces, directed severely plays, composed the first ever dance dramas in Odisha, choreographed for films, choreographed on a range of texts from Oriya songs to Tagore's compositions; the list is inexhaustible. The range of training that he received and the life circumstances that engendered a diverse set of experiences seeped into his choreography and pedagogy. Osmosis suggests an ontological orientation that happens in the space between the non-linearization and non-hierarchicalization of experience to create a dance freed of the imperative to conform to its genealogical origins.

Osmosis as a process, I suggest, reconfigures the unity of the self towards a multiplicity of selves. Phillipa Rothfield, thinking through the work of Deborah Hay argues that thinking of the body as a cellular body undermines the choreographed body, its habits, body schematic dispositions and tendencies (2020, 236). Osmosis is an imaginary practice that invokes the whole body reminding us that "movements of all kinds can be abstracted from the projects to which they contingently belong; accordingly, they can be studied both as discreet units of meaning and distinct instances of kinesis" (Noland 2009, 6). Drawing upon the work of Merleau-Ponty, I suggest that dance, which is acontextual, impartial, and effectively disembodied, presenting a universal perspective unaffected by the corporeality of the individual is an impossibility. Pedagogically imposed hierarchy of replication of legacy forecloses the possibility that the taught technique fuses with the bodily schema of individual dancers. By shifting the idea that the received cannon is to be replicated as is, an osmotic process enables the deliberate noticing of the way in which lived experience permeates into the dance and dance becomes a corporeally situated experience.

Moving Forward and Sideways

Renegotiating the hierarchy of parampara or dance legacies revied through the guru implies that dance is seen not just as a representation but is rather a view form the body. This view from the body allows the dancer to move forward and sidewards though the legacy of their guru, bridging the gap between thinking, doing, writing, and making dance. Dancing

then becomes a perspective mediated by the critical practice of thinking about questions of difference, privilege, power politics, and marginalization which in turn become the ground for a corporeal formation embedded within dynamic encounters of the political self. The force of such a pedagogy will be felt at every level of viewing, critiquing, evaluating, and transmitting dance; in the dance class, in institutions, performance spaces, and scholarship.

If traditional forms are to survive the fossilization of the nationalist movement and continue to be a relevant art form in the twenty-first century and beyond, it is imperative that we learn from the legends to embrace the vulnerability of *Play* to create space for the *Mimetic* process and fuel it with being in an *Osmotic* relationship with the world. The aim here is not to imitate the past but to stand on the shoulders of giants and take a leap of faith into the future.

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Configuring the "Contemporary" in Indian Dance Through the Development Discourse: The Influence of Max Mueller Bhavan's 1984 "East-West Dance Encounter"

Arushi Singh

Abstract

The essay explores how the geocultural and geopolitical inequities formalized during the Cold War shaped the contours of the "contemporary" in Indian dance in the twentieth century. It analyzes the 1984 "East-West Dance Encounter," a conference initiated by the Max Mueller Bhavan (MMB) to foster transnational dialogue about dance innovations between Indian choreographers and their Western counterparts. The MMB, a German cultural institution in India, embodies postwar cultural diplomacy functions designated and adopted by Global North countries: (1) establishing "peaceful" and productive coalitions through cultural knowledge exchange, and (2) "developing" the cultures of the Global South. The essay focuses on the discursive commentaries from the Encounter, particularly the remarks by the MMB director, his allies, and the Indian participants. I argue that while Indian choreographers presented a multitude of perspectives on dance experimentation through local and global lenses, the MMB's representation advocated for the advancement of contemporary Indian dance in alignment with the aesthetics and ideals of Euro-American dance at the time. This, I contend, reflects the neocolonial aspirations of Western institutions to maintain ideological and cultural hegemony in the region.

Key Words

contemporary Indian dance; development ideology; cultural imperialism; institutional critique; postwar cultural diplomacy

Manuscript Category: Theoretical reflection

Introduction

While reviewing brochures from experimental dance events I attended in India over the years, I noticed that the MMB was frequently listed as a sponsor or partner institution. This sparked my curiosity about why a foreign entity would be particularly invested in experimental performance from the subcontinent and the extent of its intervention. The MMB is part of a network of embassies, consulates, and cultural institutions from the Global North that aim to cultivate long-term relationships with India through the exchange of artistic forms, as well as to support professional networking programs and "capacity building" for Indian artists and cultural workers.[1] Over the past six decades, the MMB has been described as a "hotbed of avant-garde art," and specifically in the realm of contemporary Indian dance, it has served as a significant galvanizing force ("MMB and Me"). Since the latter half of the twentieth century, the MMB has facilitated numerous conferences, workshops, festivals, and other programs that focus exclusively on new and modern dance in India. Its initiatives have introduced emerging and established figures in contemporary Indian dance, enabling them to reflect on and evolve their practices in dialogue with global developments in the performing arts, while also promoting critical discussions on this subject within academic circles.[2]

The 1984 Dance Encounter is often celebrated in dance scholarship as a watershed moment that marked the arrival of the "contemporary" in Indian dance. While I cannot dive into the complexities of such a claim here, the event was undeniably the first of its kind curated by an institutional patron

1 These include the British Council, Alliance Française, Royal Norwegian Embassy, Pro Helvetia Swiss Arts Council, Instituto Cervantes, Japan Foundation, and the National Arts Council of Singapore.

2 For example, the 2003 book *New Directions in Indian Dance*, edited by Sunil Kothari, was largely inspired by the growing interest in contemporary Indian dance, triggered by numerous events organized by the MMB in the 1980s and 1990s. Since its publication, there has been a significant expansion in the literature on contemporary Indian dance.

in the modern history of the subcontinent. The "First All-India Dance Seminar" in 1958, organized by India's national performing arts academy, the Sangeet Natak Akademi (SNA), included presentations on creating new dance idioms in a postcolonial context. However, it was just one of many topics debated and occupied only a small part of the agenda. Additionally, the "National Ballet Festivals" organized by the SNA in the early 1970s lacked an international scope. In contrast, the 1984 Dance Encounter, featured an array of performers from India, Europe, and North America, each with distinct approaches to dance-making. In the next section, I will outline key characteristics of the MMB to provide context for the discourse on contemporary Indian dance that emerged during the Dance Encounter.

The MMB's Constitution and Approach to Arts Programming

MMB's parent organization, the first Goethe-Institut, was founded in Munich in 1951 by the Foreign Ministry of West Germany to implement its external cultural policy after World War II.[3] The Goethe-Institut, predicated on ideals of cultural diplomacy and cooperation, was created to rehabilitate Germany's international image after the fall of the Nazi regime and in the aftermath of the Holocaust. The German Federal Foreign Office subsequently established a global network of Goethe-Instituts to promote the "positive" elements of German history, society and politics.[4] In the first decade, the Goethe-Institut's foreign cultural policy primarily focused on exporting and showcasing German national culture, particularly through language instruction. The Goethe-Institut has continued to serve as the leading German cultural association abroad, even after Germany's reunification in 1989, with teaching the German language remaining one of its core functions, alongside exposing worldwide audiences to contemporary German arts.[5] As the Cold War progressed, the German Foreign Office expanded its external cultural policy beyond national cultural projection to emphasize "dialogue and partnership" ("History of the Goethe-Institut").[6] It committed to "understanding the life of the partner" by fostering long-term knowledge exchanges, resource sharing, and the enrichment of creative talents in partner countries (Hampel 61). In the late 1970s, the Goethe-Institut incorporated this expanded mission into its cultural activities. The Goethe-Institut has six main branches in India, founded in New Delhi (1957), Kolkata (1957), Chennai (1960), Bengaluru (1960), Pune (1961), and Mumbai (1969). These branches have operated to varying degrees over the decades.[7] Their establishment is linked to the history of Indo-German diplomatic relations in the twentieth century, which began with an exchange of ambassadors between the two countries in 1951.[8] During this period, the first Prime Minister

3 In 1949, the four "occupation zones" established after the Allied Powers defeated Nazi Germany were reorganized into two new countries: West Germany, a market democracy modeled after the U.S. and officially called the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), and East Germany, a Soviet-controlled communist state known as the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Until the reunification of West and East Germany in 1990, West Germany largely dominated the projection and circulation of German culture abroad.

4 The first Goethe-Institut opened abroad in Athens in 1952. Today, the Goethe-Institut operates a global network of more than 158 institutes and 10 liaison offices across 98 countries (Lanshina).

5 During the period of German division, the FRG and GDR competed in the realm of foreign cultural policy. The Herder Institute in Leipzig began its work in 1951—the same year the Goethe-Institut was founded—by offering German language classes to 11 university applicants from Nigeria. For more on this history, see ("History of the Goethe-Institut").

6 The standards of international cultural cooperation developed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) informed this shift.

7 The Goethe-Institut in New Delhi serves as the regional institute for South Asia. Additionally, there are four Goethe Centers located in Hyderabad (2004), Coimbatore (2007), Ahmedabad (2008), and Trivandrum (2008), which focus exclusively on German language training. Overall, the Goethe-Institut has the largest international presence in India (Hampel 69).

8 The first German ambassador to India was Prof. Ernst Wilhelm Meyer, who held this position from 1952 to 1957. Under his leadership, Indo-German relations reportedly flourished (Rothermund).

of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, and the first Chancellor of West Germany, Konrad Adenauer, were devising political and economic strategies to enhance their countries' status within the context of the Cold War. Cultivating a relationship with India was part of Adenauer's broader strategy to strengthen ties with the Western bloc and promote the advantages of choosing a social market democracy. Although Nehru was a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement and ideologically invested in socialism—recognizing that capitalism and colonialism were part of a singular system of exploitation and oppression—he eventually chose to strategically collaborate with West Germany due to the material aid needed to achieve his industrialization goals for India.[9] Following Nehru's visit to West Germany in July 1956, the two countries launched several scientific and academic collaborations, which informed the subsequent establishment of the MMB network across the subcontinent.[10] Naming the Goethe-Institut after the German Indologist Friedrich Max Müller signified the organization's intention to continue the long history of encounters and collaborations between the two cultures.[11]

Although the purported goal of cultural diplomacy in the postwar context was to cultivate "peaceful" and "mutually beneficial" alliances, seeking to guide the war-weary international community back toward conciliation, this aspiration masked a newly emerging reality.[12] Political theorist Gregory Paschalidis (2009) writes that with the dissolution of modern era empires between 1945 and 1989, "external cultural policy was extensively deployed for the preservation or promotion of economic and cultural ties between metropolitan and ex-colonial countries, providing an alternative, new structure of integration" (282). For former colonial powers, maintaining dominance in this new age required a different rationale. Thus, the period described by Paschalidis witnessed the rise of the development discourse, reflected in the creation of institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and various U.N. agencies.[13] The ideology of development positioned industrialized nations of the Global North, predominantly capitalist, as the ideal models for the societies of the Global South, which were increasingly portrayed as "infant" and reliant on the former for advancement. Anthropologist Arturo Escobar (1995) argues that development amounted to little more than the West's convenient "discovery" of poverty in the Global South, serving to reassert its moral and cultural superiority in supposedly post-colonial times, while concealing the fact that the deprivation experienced by communities in the Global South was a direct consequence of colonial plunder.[14] As Paschalidis points out, the rhetorical emphasis on the "development mission" attached to Western diplomatic practices in this period

9 For more details about the political-economic maneuvers of India and West Germany, read (Rothermund).

10 The establishment of the South Asia Institute at Heidelberg University in 1962, in the presence of Indian diplomat Vijayalakshmi Pandit, serves as a notable example. This occurred around the time when Germany provided economic aid to India to help build the Rourkela Steel Mill and the Indian Institute of Technology in Chennai (Rothermund 1, 5).

11 On its official website, the Goethe-Institut provides a positive description for its naming choice: " The Goethe-Instituts in India…were named after this founder of Indology in honour of the inter-cultural sympathies and understanding he had nurtured through his saintly quest for a common Indo-European brotherhood"(" The Goethe-Institut in India— About Max Mueller"). For a critical analysis of Müller's writings, particularly their role in shaping and politicizing the Aryan race theory in the nineteenth century—an ideology of racial supremacy that contributed to Nazi doctrine and influenced early interpretations of Indian history, thereby legitimizing the hegemony of upper-caste Hindus—see (Thapar).

12 The establishment of UNESCO as the leading institution for international cultural cooperation in November 1945, just a few months after the end of World War II, exemplifies this claim to restore trust in the cultural dimension of international relations.

13 For an exploration of the institutional and conceptual framework of development that emerged in the post-World War II era, see Escobar and Cooper and Packard (eds.).

14 Other theorists, such as Frank, Amin, Galtung, Parenti, and Mies and Shiva, have argued that the scarcity of material and cultural resources in the Global South is a direct consequence of colonial history, during which the countries of the Western bloc overexploited the "Third World."

was, in essence, a reconfiguration of external cultural policy to maintain economic and cultural influence over formerly colonized nations—an archetypal case of neo-colonialism.

The expansion of German cultural institutes in the Global South has followed a similar pattern through programs of development aid and cultural, scientific, and academic exchanges. Moreover, the practice of MMBs have adhered to these structuring logics, even though Germany has no direct colonial history in the subcontinent, and the Goethe-Institut network claims to operate "independently and without political ties," having signed a general agreement with the German Foreign Office in 1976 ("History of the Goethe-Institut").[15] Although the German national government primarily funds the organization and its administrative structure includes key government representatives, I believe state agents still hold the power to influence MMB programs according to their agendas, despite the organization's autonomous status and its planning committee and advisory councils for programming being predominantly composed of art and cultural experts ("President and Executive Committee" and "Boards").[16] I argue that the objective undergirding the MMB's cultural exchange and professional development programs, particularly around the time of the 1984 "East-West Dance Encounter," was to assert the civilizational hegemony of Germany (and, by extension, the West) and to prescribe the assimilation of Indian modernity in line with Western values. In other words, "development," achieved through the "benevolence" of diplomatic exchange, became a vehicle for enacting cultural imperialism.

One key way in which the MMB has exerted its influence within the arts sector across the subcontinent is by hiring locals for staff positions such as Program Coordinators, Communications Officers, and Administrators of Cultural Programs ("Staff"). Additionally, it has invited local artists and scholars to often co-design projects. However, as far as I have observed, the Directors of Cultural Programs at each MMB branch have frequently been Germans with specialized knowledge of South Asia, approved by the Executive Committee of the Goethe-Institut flagship in Munich.[17] While hiring and partnering with locals has enabled the MMB build cultural competency and maintain an intimate understanding of the context-specific needs of Indian artists, cultural workers, and the public, placing Germans in Director roles has essentially meant that a foreign entity arbitrates the agenda of support, often determining the terms.

Contemporary art, including contemporary dance, modern theatre, contemporary literature, and electronic music, has been central to the MMB's cultural programming. Farah Batool, Programs Coordinator of MMB-New Delhi, shared during a 2018 interview with me that the various branches focus on art practices that demonstrate novelty, experimentation, and independent thought. Over the years, these branches have hosted, curated, or financially supported residencies, exhibitions, concerts, film series, seminars, training courses, and festivals dedicated to the above-mentioned mediums ("Projects"). While some of these initiatives focus on creative production and reflection, others prioritize professional development. Additionally, specific programs have facilitated exchanges between practitioners from India and Germany ("bangaloREsidency"), while others have focused exclusively on Indian artists (*Five Million Incidents*).

The MMB's focus on supporting contemporary art in the Indian context aligns with how Germany has viewed the role of aesthetic production since the postwar period. As part of distancing itself from its fascist past, the (West) German state has embraced the arts as a potential site for fostering a free and

15 The rationale for this was the institution's ability to determine its global programming independently of state-sanctioned interests.

16 Although the Goethe-Institut's various branches worldwide have been able to expand their work through self-generated income and contributions from individuals, companies, and patrons outside the German government, a significant portion of its overall budget still comes from annual grants provided by the German Foreign Office and the German Press Office ("Partners and Sponsors").

17 The Executive Committee oversees and directs the organization's global activities, including its regional branches. However, the selection of heads for regional Goethe-Instituts, including those in South Asia, typically involves multiple levels of decision-making. While the Executive Committee might have the final say, the selection process often includes input from regional Goethe-Institut offices, local stakeholders, and sometimes external experts ("President and Executive Committee" and "Boards").

democratic society.[18] This is a key reason, the German state claims, for allocating a significant portion of its national budget to arts and culture compared to other countries. In my view, championing contemporary art—particularly those that embody classical liberal values of individual liberty and pursuit of new ideas—is one way Germany seeks to influence the world and bolster Western ideological hegemony, more broadly. This objective has shaped the focus of German cultural institutions abroad, including the MMB. Driven by this underlying rationale, the institution has played a crucial role in shaping the evolving artistic language in India, particularly given the indifference of Indian state-run and public institutions toward curating experimental performance.

The 1984 "East-West Dance Encounter"

Between January 22-29, 1984, the MMB hosted the "East-West Dance Encounter," initiated by its then-Director, Georg Lechner, who held key positions within the Goethe-Institut for over forty years, spending twenty of those years in India, where he served in the Mumbai, New Delhi, and Kolkata branches. The Dance Encounter was the second in a series of cultural, scientific, and academic exchanges between 1983 and 1986, organized by Lechner during a period of renewed Indo-German diplomatic relations following a phase of benign neglect.[19] He described the initiative as follows: "[A] series of East-West dialogues involving authors, composers, musicians, theatre experts, choreographers, dancers, painters, sculptors, philosophers, and scientists, who are invited to participate in an inquiry into the possibilities of creative work and thought today, drawing from Indian and Western sources" (Mehta 84). The stated aim was to cultivate exchange between artists and academics from various disciplines, exploring the potential for creative and intellectual collaboration between the two regions. This initiative was also intended to build connections among cultural workers across national borders. The purpose of this series reflects the efforts of transnational institutions like the MMB during this time to prevent the Cold War from escalating into open conflict, by creating environments conducive to improving East-West relations.

The 1984 Dance Encounter took place in Mumbai at the National Center for the Performing Arts (NCPA), one of India's leading cultural institutions, established in 1969. The NCPA has a long history of presenting traditional and experimental performances across various art forms and regions. Lechner invited NCPA founder and then-Vice Chairman, Jamshed J. Bhabha, to serve as the creative consultant for the event. As noted earlier, involving local cultural producers was part of the MMB's operational strategy in India, and including Bhabha helped Lechner legitimize the presence of a foreign institution engaging in the Indian cultural landscape. The involvement of Bhabha, an elite figure whose family was instrumental in shaping institutions of Indian postcolonial modernity, was no coincidence.[20] Along with the SNA, the co-sponsors of the Dance Encounter included

18 In 1949, the FDR recommitted itself to a liberal representative democracy and established the Basic Law, the German constitution that has endured beyond reunification to the present day. Article 5, Paragraph 3 of the German Basic Law, titled "Freedom of Expression, Arts and Sciences," stipulates that the arts, culture, and sciences should be free and autonomous in their context and expression ("Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany"). However, the case of the Goethe-Institut disinviting Palestinian poet Mohammed el-Kurd from its 2022 event reveals the hypocrisy of cultural institutions funded by the German government in their commitment to safeguarding freedom of expression for all global citizens, particularly when such expressions challenge the racist and settler-colonial structures that sustain Western capitalist hegemony.

19 The Music Encounter occurred in 1983, the Philosophy Encounter in 1985, and the Theatre Encounter in 1986 (NCPA 1993). These programs anticipated a renewal of Indo-German relations following a period of diplomatic indifference between the mid-1960s and mid-1980s, influenced by a specific set of political and economic events, such as the 1965 India-Pakistan war, the Indian Emergency (1975-77), Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's restrictive legislation aimed at making the country "self-reliant," including the Monopoly and Restrictive Trade Practice Act of 1969 and the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act of 1973, as well as India's increasingly close relationship with the Soviet Union in those years (Rothermund). The West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl visited India in 1986, and Rajiv Gandhi, who succeeded Indira Gandhi as Prime Minster of India, reciprocated in 1988 by traveling to West Germany, signaling a resurgence of interest.

diplomatic and philanthropic organizations such as the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), the Alliance Française, the British Council, and the Parsi-owned Time and Talents Club (NCPA Quarterly Journal front matter).[21]

Lechner brought together approximately thirty-seven individuals from India, (West) Germany, France, Italy, the UK, and North America to participate in the event. The group included dance choreographers, their collaborators, and performance critics.[22] The Indian dance contingent featured practitioners from the states of Gujarat and Odisha, as well as the cities of Delhi, Chennai, and Mumbai, along with a few artists from the American and British diaspora.[23] Some of these individuals were foreigners practicing Indian dance within the subcontinent. Lechner's decision to include such a varied spectrum of performers aligns with the event's aim of fostering conversations about the intercultural and international dimensions of innovation in Indian dance. While some invitees are now recognized as prominent figures in the contemporary dance movement in India, they were still growing their styles and approaches at the time of the Dance Encounter. For many, including Chandralekha, Uttara Asha Coorlawala, and Astad Deboo, the Dance Encounter played a key role in their future visibility as noteworthy figures in the field. Most artists in the Indian contingent operated within the domain of modern, reconstructed "classical" forms, either exploring new aspects of Bharatanatyam, Odissi, Manipuri, Kuchipudi, and Kathak or reviving forgotten or distorted elements within these traditions. A few practitioners were also engaging in dialogues between Indian and Western techniques. The Western dance contingent included choreographers working in the realms of Euro-American modern and postmodern dance, primarily from countries that were (West) Germany's allies during the Cold War.[24] This is why the cultural embassies of France and the UK helped sponsor the event.

"To create a forum... where the respective artistic concepts, dance styles, and work modes of India and the West [could] be analyzed in depth," a key component of the Dance Encounter included daytime sessions, during which participants offered lecture demonstrations and academic presentations (*NCPA* 7). Most days, these daytime sessions were followed by evening performances at the NCPA's Tata Theatre and Little Theatre.[25] Additionally, there were film screenings that introduced the attendees to exponents

20 His brother, Dr. Homi J. Bhabha, is colloquially known as the "father of the Indian nuclear program," having been appointed by Nehru to establish an institution dedicated to the development of nuclear technology.

21 In the mid-1980s, state institutions such as the SNA and the ICCR (the latter established by the Indian government in 1950 to advance its foreign policy) began recognizing the value of supporting contemporary dance to showcase India's innovative and internationally-oriented character as an emerging geopolitical entity within the evolving neoliberal order. The Parsis are descended from Persian Zoroastrians who emigrated to India, primarily to Maharashtra and Gujarat, to avoid religious persecution nearly 1,300 years ago. The Parsi community, to which Bhabha belonged, is credited with playing a significant role in building modern India. They adapted swiftly to British colonial rule and became their chief collaborators. After independence, their merchant class, having accumulated capital through their partnership with the British, began to occupy key roles in trade, industry, and science, while also engaging in philanthropy.

22 The critics in attendance included Sunil Kothari, Sadanand Menon, Anne-Marie Gaston, Shirin Vajifdar, and Shanta Serbjeet Singh. Chandralekha's collaborator, visual designer Dashrath Patel, and Daksha Seth's long-time composer from Australia, Devissaro, were also present (NCPA 1-4).

23 The Indian dancers included Chandralekha, Kumudini Lakhia, Mrinalini and Mallika Sarabhai, Ileana Citaristi, Sonal Mansingh, Sharon Lowen, Leela Samson, Sucheta Bhide, Damayanti Joshi, Ram Gopal, Avanthi Muralikrishna, Yamini Krishnamurthy, Ritha Devi, Uttara Asha Coorlawala, Astad Deboo, Chitra Sundaram, Anne Marie Gaston, and Bharat Sharma (Ibid).

24 The participants part of the Western contingent included French choreographers Dominique Bagouet, Elisabeth Mauger, and Andréine Bel, as well as French composer Igor Wakhévitch; German *Tanztheater* exponents Gerhard Bohner and Susanne Linke, as well as German scholar Rolf Garske; Italian choreographer Patrizia Cerroni; Black American choreographer Carmen DeLavallade; and British dancers Stephen Long and Tushna Dallas and ethnomusicologist James Kippen (Ibid).

25 For details, see ("Evening Performances during the Encounter").

and works that had paved the way for dance innovations in India and the West.[26] The idea was to provide Encounter participants with a multi-modal exchange of information about the history and current state of dance innovations in both regions. Admission to the daytime sessions was restricted to participants and invited observers, many of whom were believed to be part of Lechner's "inner circle," but the performances were open to the public (Shankar Menon). In this essay, I trace the discourse on contemporary dance, particularly as it relates to Indian dance, that the Encounter generated, with a special focus on the daytime sessions.

While reading Lechner and Bhabha's joint introduction to the 1984 *NCPA Journal* issue on the Dance Encounter (which appears to be their remarks at the start of the event), I found it intriguing how they framed the relationship between India and the West. Introducing the Indian dance scene at the time, they observed: "…a certain openness to innovations, no doubt, an inevitable result of the constant contact with the West, is discernible among dancers of the present generation" (5). They viewed regular interaction with the West as a critical factor driving Indian dancers toward contemporary directions, a characterization that positions the West as the origin of modernity and anchors the Indian dancing body to the past. In one of the sessions during the event, Lechner similarly asserted that India "encountering" the West was necessary due to the "lack of a competitive and challenging local dance scene favoring experimentation" (*NCPA* 43).

The statements by Lechner and Bhabha appear to be influenced by the ideology of development, which is based on a re-enactment of Orientalist tropes that became globally hegemonic during the Cold War. Western Europe and North America deployed external cultural policies to establish a new structure of geopolitical integration rooted in the notion of "development." According to the development rhetoric institutionalized by these regions, postcolonial societies in the Global South, such as India, were viewed as lacking and in need of aid to prosper. Postcolonial scholars like David Ludden (1992) argue that this discourse of development drew upon colonial registers of Orientalist thought and the accompanying dichotomies of "advanced" and "primitive" societies. The development framework was an updated version of the Enlightenment-era evolutionary schema that positioned the West as "civilized" and the non-West as "backward." According to this hierarchical classification, the latter could only achieve modernity—across culture, politics, society, and economics—through the normative and material intervention of the former, which was assumed to be at the pinnacle of progress.

I argue that this thinking underpinned Lechner's views, as reflected in his two assertions: (1) that Indian dance has moved in a contemporary direction due to its exposure to the West, and (2) that Indian dancers need an encounter with the West to further "develop" in this area. Lechner applied a development logic to legitimize the necessity of foreign intervention, through both the organization he represented and the British and French cultural institutes that endorsed the event. It is also essential to understand why Bhabha may have participated in this discourse. As the head of the NCPA and a co-host of the event, Bhabha represented India's cultural interests at the institutional level.[27] Since the 1950s, Indian leaders

26 The list of screenings included *Pas de Deux* (1962), *Ballet Adagio* (1972), *Kalpana* (1948), excerpts of *Maya Darpana* (1972) and *Shakuntala*, and *Bala* (1976) (*NCPA* 38).

27 Bhabha, who was born into an aristocratic Parsi family in the early twentieth century and maintained close affiliations with British officials, experienced a privileged upbringing surrounded by a curated collection of Western art, music, and literature while also pursuing his studies in England. He epitomizes the concept of a colonized elite as articulated in the Fanonian framework. Frantz Fanon (1961) posits that colonizers strategically co-opt local elites—comprising intellectuals, lawyers, academics, religious leaders, and influential political figures—when they perceive a decline in their power. According to Fanon, these local elites are not only profoundly colonized but also driven by self-interest, leading them to willingly collaborate with colonizers in order to uphold the prevailing social order. Moreover, their experiences of colonization condition them to internalize the values espoused by the (former) colonizers, which they regard as essential to the process of "modernization."

from the upper classes and castes had actively engaged with the structures of development, seeing it as essential to becoming a "modern" nation.[28] Despite the problematic assumptions underlying development discourse, promoting it was seen as a way to maintain strategic alliances with the West, which they hoped would bring about the cultural, social, and political transformations needed to "advance" India. For Bhabha, the contemporaneity of Indian dance also seemed tied to Western-manufactured ideas of progress and internationalism.

Lechner opened the first daytime session of the Encounter (on January 23) by posing the following guiding questions:

> Does Indian dance feel the need for developing choreography to express new themes? Is it meaningful in the Indian context? Is it being done professionally or is it just an imitative process? What does it mean to be open to new cultures, or stepping out of one's culture into another? (*NCPA* 9).

Lechner wanted dancers to explore the relevance of experimentation in Indian dance and what makes it distinct. As the representative of an organization dedicated to cross-cultural exchange, it made sense that he foregrounded this subject as a springboard for discussing pathways to generating new choreography. The presentations by dancers Uttara Asha Coorlawala, Bharat Sharma, and Astad Deboo responded to this theme. During her January 24 session, Coorlawala highlighted how her work juxtaposes the relationships between movement and space fundamental to Bharatanatyam, Hatha Yoga, and the Martha Graham technique. In his session on the same day, Sharma shared that "Even though [he] began training in some Indian styles, such as Chhau and Kathakali, [he] only found [his] moorings outside the classical framework and more in the kind of free movement offered by Western-style modern dance" (Ibid 19). He also credited his readiness to pursue intensive training in American modern dance to his formative experiences with Narendra Sharma, who encouraged his students "to improvise and create freely in class" (Ibid).[29] Narendra Sharma was a disciple of early modern dancer Uday Shankar, whose open movement vocabulary combined "Indian conceptions of gesture, iconography, and theme alongside Western conceptions of time and presentation" (Popkin 3).

During his session on January 25, Astad Deboo recounted significant milestones in his dance journey that shaped his distinct movement language.[30] To illustrate how he integrates various dance encounters into his choreographies, Deboo discussed incorporating the focused attention given to facial expressions in Kathakali *abhinaya* (expressive choreography) with the minimalism and fluidity of movement drawn from Euro-American modern dance principles. Lechner appears to have selected these three dancers to demonstrate the productive effects of interweaving aesthetics and choreographic approaches developed in the West to create new Indian forms. In reading Coorlawala (2003), I discovered that Lechner had commissioned her to create *Winds of Shiva* in collaboration with French musician Igor Wakhévitch specifically for the 1984 Dance Encounter (106). He was intent on showcasing a successful example of international cooperation that birthed a new syntax for Indian dance.

The Encounter also featured artists who adapted and translated traditional Indian dance grammar and principles to demonstrate the formal possibilities of modern choreography. Lechner clarified: "We are not saying that the old traditions should be relegated. Side by side is the evolution of new experiences; this is what the whole gathering should address" (*NCPA* 10). He encouraged Indian dancers to challenge the applicability of inherited movement paradigms in relation to the changes they encountered in

28 Sangeeta Kamat (2002) analyzes the impact of development ideologies on the structure of postcolonial Indian politics, both during the era of state planning in the early twentieth century and the period of economic liberalization.

29 In the late 1970s, Sharma received a scholarship to study dance at Jacob's Pillow, followed by an Asian Cultural Council grant that enabled him to study with Hanya Holm, Alwin Nikolais, and Murray Louis.

30 Deboo traced his training in Kathak, his study of modern dance at the School of Contemporary Dance in London, his immersion in the Kathakali technique under the guidance of K.C. Panicker, and his experiences with Pina Bausch, the Wuppertal Dance Theatre in Germany, and Pilobolus, an American dance company.

contemporary society. Let's now consider what some participants shared in response to this perspective.

During the January 27 session, Chandralekha expressed her commitment to revitalizing Indian tradition at a time when, in her opinion, it had become "mummified, fossilized" (Ibid 10). She presented critiques and concepts that she believed could infuse the classical dance scene in the subcontinent with "much-needed contemporary vitality," some of which I highlight below (Chandralekha 61). Chandralekha cautioned her fellow attendees about certain developments in the Indian classical dance world that she found problematic. She denounced the field's insularity and its lack of responsiveness to the significant cultural, social, scientific, and historical changes in the modern world. She condemned the deification of dance on stage and the resistance of classical dancers to contemporary progressive values. Additionally, she criticized the co-option of classical dance by national governmental agendas, its commodification within the international dance circuit, and its commercialization in urban settings. Furthermore, Chandralekha urged her peers to reassess how Western mediation had shaped India's preoccupation with revivalism, nostalgia, purity, exclusiveness, conservation, and preservation in the dance field. She highlighted how colonial structures, institutions, and values had influenced the modern creation of India's traditional arts.

Chandralekha also introduced her parameters or references for creating new dance in the Indian context. In contrast to the MMB director's patronizing viewpoint, she asserted that change in Indian performance did not require "going West." Instead, she emphasized the necessity of drawing from the "tremendously rich and powerful" aesthetic traditions indigenous to the subcontinent: "To me, to be 'contemporary' would mean to understand and express the East in its own terms; to explore the full linkages generated by valid interdisciplinary principles common to all arts and central to the creative concept of *rasa*" (Ibid 61).[31] Chandralekha critiqued the histrionic use of *rasa*—the residual essence of an elemental human emotion like love or fear that shapes the dominant note of a dramatic piece—in the classical dances of her time. Instead, she chose to interpret it as a sensual portal that activates the "autonomy of the individual [to be integrated] with himself, with his society and with nature in an epoch of social fracture" (Ibid). Performance scholar Rustom Bharucha (1995) argues that, by applying the theory of *rasa* in this way, Chandralekha foregrounded the capacity of dance's physical language to "recharge" human beings from the everyday mechanization, alienation, and brutality of modern, industrial life (129). For her, it was this regenerative potential of dance that "constitute[d] its contemporaneity" (Chandralekha 61).

In a similar vein to Chandralekha, during the January 28 session, Kumudini Lakhia described feeling constrained by Kathak's religious underpinnings and reaching a significant crossroads in her dance journey: "I came to a stage when I wanted to divorce from Krishna" (*NCPA* 34). She explained that rather than restaging stories of Krishna—a mythic-religious figure central to the traditional Kathak repertoire—she chose to look outward toward society, focusing on issues such as the plight of contemporary, everyday women in productions like *Duvidha*.[32] She also sought to make classical dance relevant to the intellectual issues of the time. As Lakhia presented an *abhinaya* piece and her students demonstrated some of her innovations in group choreography, the dancer exclaimed, "We must have our own laws of expression," emphasizing the importance of individual prerogative in changing Kathak's vocabulary and presentation (Ibid).[33] Lakhia noted that she encouraged her students to question what they are learning, a pedagogical approach that differs

31 Chandralekha lamented that performing artists in the subcontinent were oblivious to the avant-garde ideas about the body, stage, and presentation outlined in ancient Indian aesthetic texts like the *Abhinaya Darpana*.

32 During the Encounter, Lakhia claimed that she was criticized by the Kathak community for this shift.

33 During her session, Lakhia also recounted the evolution of the Kathak form over the twentieth century, describing the various influences that shaped the practice and demonstrating that the dance tradition allows for freedom and change (*NCPA* 35)

from the one typically emphasized in classical dance education rooted in the *guru-shishya parampara.*[34]

Other Encounter participants sought to preserve the traditional function of the classical form in their process of innovation. In contrast to Lakhia, Bharatanatyam and Odissi dancer Sonal Mansingh, during her January 25 session, advocated for the "power" of classical dance's thematic conventions.[35] She emphasized that these conventions allow dancers to choreograph an aesthetic experience for audiences, offering them something distinct from the hardships of everyday life. On the same day, Sucheta Bidhe shared her process of synthesizing Bharatanatyam with Hindustani music and rhythms to create a classical dance style for the state of Maharashtra. She explained, "I am not trying to replace anything…just trying to expand the horizons, to add new dimensions to this [dance] technique which I love so much. My main objective is to bring Bharata Natyam closer to audiences in North India" (*NCPA* 23). Bhide associates experimentation with creating a new classical form that would help consolidate a regional Maratha identity. For her, this meant "keeping intact" the formal Bharatanatyam technique and preserving the "originality" of Hindustani music and its *talas* while also identifying points of contact between the two (24-25).

Bhabha and Lechner concluded their joint statement about the Encounter with the following words: "At the focal point of this inquiry may well be aggression and experimentation on the side of modern Western dance; stagnation and authenticity on the side of Indian dance" (*NCPA* 7). This ideological division between Western and Indian dance reinforced an Orientalist taxonomy, linking the former with forceful action and innovation and the latter with stasis and passive adherence to tradition (Said 1978). As I have shown above, while some dancers representing the Indian contingent were reluctant to depart from or critically question the conventions of Indian classical dance, many performers actively demonstrated how they interacted with or reimagined tradition.[36] Participants also demonstrated self-reflexivity about the dynamic relationships they were building between Indian and Euro-American aesthetics in their work. Some, like Chandralekha, were even critical of conceding to a Western framework of modernity. Despite this, the dichotomy assumed by Lechner and Bhabha in their opening remarks continued to circulate even after the event concluded.

In a comment he made to journalist Anees Jung a few days after the Encounter in February 1984, Lechner stated that Indian dancers were not prepared to ideologically grapple with the problems of classical dance in a contemporary context or to look beyond its imagined securities. As I substantiated above, this was an inaccurate generalization of what transpired during the Encounter. Lechner told Jung that, unlike their Western counterparts, Indian dancers do not expand their repertoire, repeating the same compositions without any sense of self-ownership or impulse to choreograph something new (Jung 54). He clung to the notion that aesthetic modernity, innovation, and autonomy were the domain of Western dance, while Indian dance, in his view, remained content with being old-fashioned and conformist. During the same interview, Jung asked German choreographer Susanne Linke, one of the international participants at the Encounter, the following question: "Are they [Indian dancers] also innovative, searching, aware?" and Linke responded: "Indians do not question…the Indian way is perhaps to accept life. They do not ask or question or

34 In classical dance training rooted in the *guru-shishya parampara*, knowledge is typically transmitted in a uni-directional manner, flowing from teacher to student. This approach views students as passive recipients into whom the teacher, seen as the expert, deposits information, thereby establishing a hierarchical relationship between the two.

35 Mansingh's insistence on preserving tradition has recently manifested in her full embrace of Hindutva—a modern political ideology encompassing a cultural justification of Hindu supremacy, and which seeks to transform India, a constitutionally secular state, into an ethno-religious nation called the Hindu Rashtra.

36 Given that this essay features in an issue exploring the concept of "hierarchies," it is important to note that the discussions surrounding new directions in Indian dance did not adequately engage with the historical context of casteism that accompanied the modern institutionalization of "classical" Indian dance forms in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Even figures like Chandralekha and Lakhia, who examined aesthetic issues from a structural perspective, appeared to sidestep the casteist politics inherent in dances of contemporary India.

change things as we do. To search for new things in creative work is *not yet a need* for them" (52). Like Lechner, Linke also broadly characterized Indian dancers as uncritical and resistant to change in their choreographic practices. She even supported her assumption with an evolutionary argument (as indicated by the phrase I italicized). Lechner and Linke's statements reflect the institutionalization of Western bias in contemporary dance within the postwar performance world, which inevitably perpetuated the cultural hegemony of the West and its assumed position as the proprietor of modernity.

Similarly, dancer and researcher Fabián Barba (2019) observes that the perception of contemporary dance outside the Western context as often antiquated reflects a broader, structural, Western-centric mindset. To explore this, she draws on the work of postcolonial scholar Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000), whose analysis is also relevant to my own. Chakrabarty explains that historicism, emerging in the nineteenth century, was a key ideological framework for understanding global progress and development. It created the notion that modernity and capitalism originated in Europe and then spread outward, establishing a timeline where Europe was seen as the starting point, with other regions following suit. This historicist view positions Western development as a model for the "less developed" world, reinforcing a temporal and cultural hierarchy. Historicism thus underpinned the assumption of a cultural difference between the West and non-West, particularly in terms of institutional progress (7). This historicist understanding of global development is reflected in Linke and Lechner's comments about the Encounter, which reinforce a hierarchical structure wherein the Indian dance scene appears outdated in contrast to the Western dance scene, which is presumed to be continuously modern (Barba 2019).

Dance scholar SanSan Kwan (2017) observes the "fraught nature of temporal terms such as "contemporary" and "modern" and the ways that they are often linked with the geographical and cultural, that is, the West" (44-45). This constructed connection highlights the Eurocentric codification of world dance, in which select countries of Western Europe and North America claim exclusivity over modernity, autonomy, and democracy in aesthetic explorations (Kunst 2004). This monopoly undermines expressions of these values by "non-Western" and "not-quite-Western" artists (Vujanović 2014), perpetuating the notion that non-Western forms exhibit a "delayed physicality" that needs to "catch up" to the Western dancing body to be considered contemporary (Kunst 2004). Lechner and his aides' commentary throughout the Encounter suggests that Indian dancers could become more innovative if they embraced individualism and openness to exploration and change, which were largely seen as Western ideals.[37] Additionally, a historicist logic is employed to suggest that Indian contemporary dance could eventually attain the present contemporaneity of its foreign counterparts in the future, especially with the intervention of Western institutions like the MMB.

Conclusion

Despite the power asymmetries between "East" and "West," the 1984 Dance Encounter was certainly instrumental in fostering experimental dance in India. As the above snapshots from the event illustrate, the Indian dance contingent was able to engage with a variety of subjects alongside local and transnational peers, including choreography, dance pedagogy, and the relationship between dance and everyday life. They put forward eclectic ideas, approaches, and propositions for creating new dance. Inviting exponents who cross-pollinate Indian and international movement vocabularies was a particularly vital contribution of the MMB. It validated the intercultural as a generative site for pushing the aesthetic and national boundaries of Indian dance, highlighting the rich movement complexity that emerges from the mixing, tension,

37 This stance encapsulates a double erasure in the global history of dance modernism: contemporary dance and theater movements from the West have drawn from the conceptual foundations of Indian performance to advance their own projects, while simultaneously denying Indian performance its association with creative experimentation.

and confrontation of premises inherited from different dance traditions and lineages. Of course, it suited the neo-imperialist agenda of the MMB to showcase forms that perpetuated the narrative that interactions with the West could make Indian dance more "advanced," "sophisticated," and "contemporary." However, this also ended up benefiting Indian artists. Before this event, cultural bodies of the state, including the SNA, reproduced the former's protectionist approach to political economy and barely acknowledged dancers drawing on international aesthetics to innovate Indian dance. After the Encounter, however, the SNA shifted its stance on contemporary transnational dance, increasingly including it in its programs and grant schemes. This shift aligned with the SNA's interest in presenting India as a nation assimilating fluidly with global modernity, especially as the 1990s approached.

Considering that professional structures for contemporary dance in India were still relatively scarce during the early 1980s, participants on the last day of the Dance Encounter agreed on the need for more platforms to deliberate on and develop their creative practices (*NCPA* 36). During this decade, the MMB continued to support innovative dance in India through similar exchanges, such as the second edition of the Dance Encounter in March 1985 and the "Dance Choreography Workshop: Possibilities for Extending Tradition" held in collaboration with the NCPA and the SNA in November of that year. Being recognized and supported by a cultural institute of international stature granted Indian choreographers who participated in MMB events a certain degree of prestige. For some, it led to the rapid growth of their careers, and they became leading figures in contemporary Indian dance both domestically and internationally. From the 1990s onwards, however, the MMB shifted away from curating events based on the dichotomy of "East" and "West." The MMB no longer saw this framework as appropriate for structuring their endeavors and sought to design initiatives that better represented local cultural priorities (Hampel 136).[38] This shift mirrored the broader transformations in geopolitical classifications and alignments following the end of the Cold War and the emergence of a multipolar world under neoliberalism, prompting Germany to reorient its diplomatic strategies from a dictatorial to a more collaborative role. The outcomes of this shift, however, are a topic for another discussion.

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38 For instance, the MMB's 1993 workshop, "New Directions in Indian Dance," did not focus on intercultural exchange. Instead, it prioritized the formalization of aesthetic, pedagogical, institutional, professional, and production networks for contemporary dance in India.

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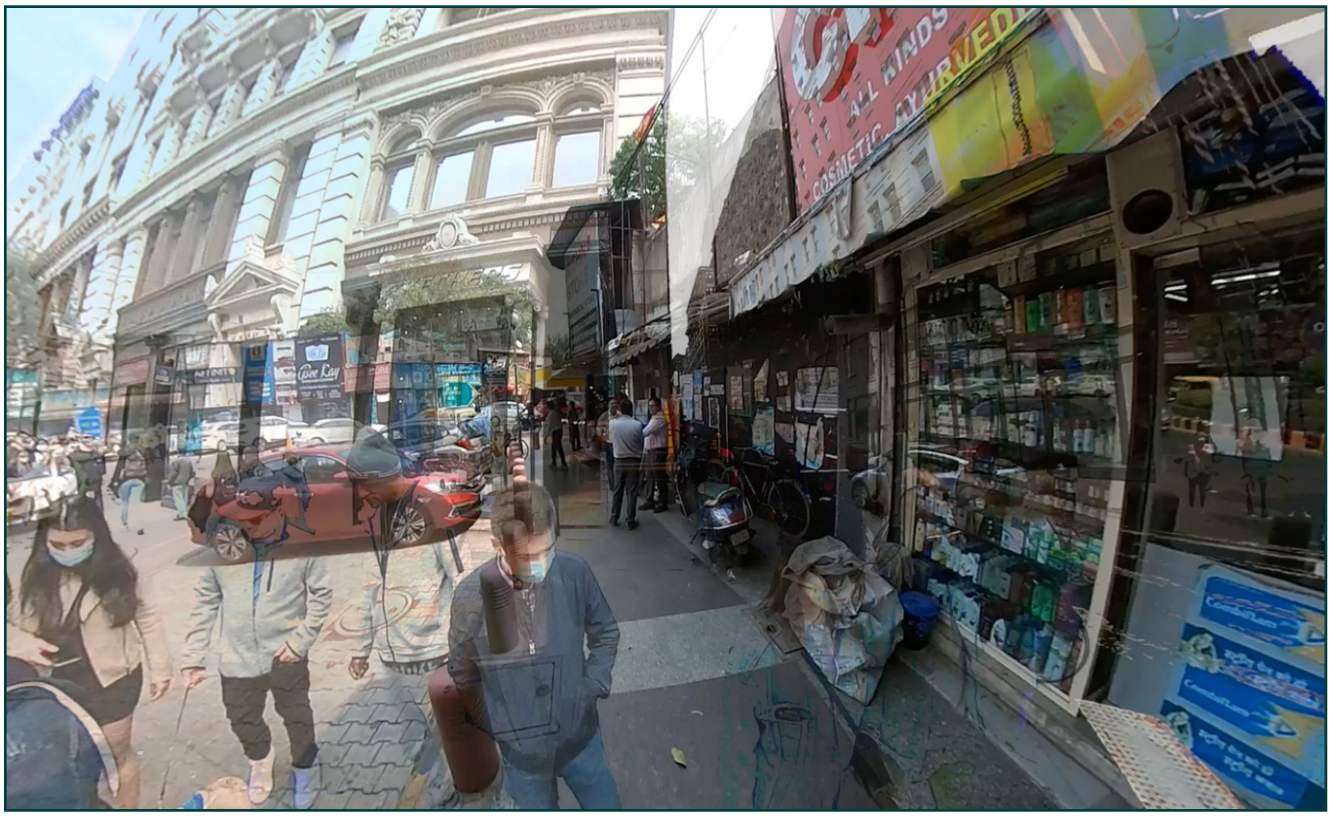

Video Stills from *Walking from Home* by Lionel Popkin

Finding the Truth in Fiction

Gitanjali Kolanad

John Berger states that 'art makes inequality seem noble and hierarchies seem thrilling' ("Ways of Seeing," 29). Watching bharata natyam[1] today and being moved by the beauty of the art form provides that thrill that Berger is pointing out, of inequalities and hierarchies. We notice the characteristics of the dance form that heighten its status as elite, refined, promoting high caste tastes and values – the expensive silk and jewelry of the costumes, the music, with lyrics that emerge from a mainstream Hindu Brahminical world view, and the notably 'classical' aesthetic.

But by the same token, it is art that is able to highlight the oppressive nature of hierarchies we take for granted and art that imagines and presents other possibilities for organizing the world. In considering the history of bharata natyam, before it had stratified so clearly, we can notice how it presented a series of inversions of the prevailing hierarchies – gender, caste, status – to audiences. I will be looking for the signs of these inversions in the past to which we have some access: in the padam repertoire of Kshetrayya, in some films of that time in which women from the devadasi community acted as devadasis in stories that centered devadasis, and the novel *Web of Deceit*, written by Muvalur Ramamirtham, a woman from the devadasi community about devadasis.

Truth in Poetry

The padams defined with the signature motif of Kshetrayya form a corpus of about four hundred songs that can be traced to the seventeenth century. They continue to find a place in the modern performance repertoire of bharata natyam. While very little is known about the historical Kshetrayya, what emerges from his hagiography is a poet intimately connected to the devadasi community. In fact, it is his love for a devadasi in Muvapuri whose deity was Gopala that inspired his own devotion and his poetic signature, muvagopala. The padams attributed to Kshetrayya are both knowledgeable and sensitive to women and their concerns. The songs treat erotic love using explicit terms. In the insightful essay by A. K. Ramanujan in "When God is a Customer" he points out one crucial inversion of the hierarchy: as the bhakthi tradition changes over time, the god becomes so human that he is at the mercy of his sensual desire for the devadasi. Even when he is being unfaithful, it is with another woman, and he is in the thrall of one or the other. So the balance of power has shifted to the courtesan/devotee who must be won over and the god is sometimes the one doing the begging (19).

In performance by devadasi women this reversal of roles can become the first step into a seductive persona somewhere between the real and the fictional. The devotional aspect, or bhakti, comes as an inference, not as the predominant expression, which can be her own emotional truth. As part of the repertoire of women for whom artistic labor and religiously sanctioned sex work were defining qualities, the words were interpreted using gestures – the rati hastas – that are precise in meaning, referring to sexual positions like sixty-nine, or the woman on top. Performed in front of an audience of men familiar with the tropes and conventions of the dance form, in a salon setting, these erotic padams were both art and foreplay, "fundamentally linked to the capital of an erotic and (at least theoretically) available body" (Morcom 129). As philosopher Ronald de Sousa put it in conversation, "a metaphorical strip tease is nevertheless a tease".

Many of the padams reference the skills of music and dance as one part of her command of the art of love-making, as in this *sankarabharanam padam*, where the nayika asks her lover, 'Is she (the other woman) really so much more enchanting than me?

1 As a political strategy of anti-assimilation and marking our postcolonial social reality, I have chosen to write non-English terms in plain English language without italicizing or using upper-case. I have used italics to emphasize a certain character or a situation especially at the cusp of being and performance.

Does she offer her lips to you, dance and sing love lyrics to put you into the right mood? In another padam in raga *pantuvarali*, the *nayika* describes preparing sandalwood paste and rose water to welcome him, and massaging his feet, along with singing fully immersed in the music. Her attitude to her lover is never one-dimensional. In one song the woman expresses jealousy over the lover going to another woman. In another it is more curiosity as to what quality or skills the other woman has that make him want her. She freely expresses anger, resignation, indifference, amusement, over his infidelities. She may be sarcastic and say at first, 'Don't touch me!', while in the last verse, she may end up describing his love-making. This openness to a range of emotional interpretations is perhaps why these padams survived the journey from salon to proscenium stage and remain popular with dancers and audiences today.

The padams feature many reversals of norms. In one collection of about a hundred and fifty Kshetrayya padams collected and translated by Rajanikanta Rao, we find a woman who is not only unfaithful to her husband, but requests her lover to ignore the injunction in the Shastras of not having sex while she has her period (Rao, 72). In another song, explicitly describing how she (by mistake) kissed and caressed this mysterious other woman, she asks her lover, 'Who was that woman you brought into our bed? (Rao, 60); she is amused but not angry when he makes love to both her and another woman at the same time' (Rao, 79, 82); 'she has to tell him to stay away after just having given birth' (Rao, 17); 'he dresses as a woman in order to seduce her' (Rao, 51, 90); 'he forces himself on a young girl' (Rao, 57); 'she asks him to find a drug for abortion' (Rao, 32); 'she is willing to make her infidelity known to her in-laws' (Rao, 46).

Without much other evidence from the seventeenth century – no living women we can talk to, no written first person accounts - these padams, can help us form a picture of the life of devadasis, their concerns and tribulations.

While the padams do conform to a prevailing heterosexual, male-oriented view of sexuality – they are after all a male poet's constructions of female desire, the padam form itself, in performance, gives the female performer great freedom of interpretation and control over the emotional content, through elaboration of her own preferred subtext. For example, take the padam *manchi dinamu*, the words translated as 'Ask him to come like a king, (or without hesitation), it is the auspicious day'. The crucial line, where the nayika says, 'Is my body not his property, after all?' can be interpreted to highlight her courtesan status, as one beholden to the man who maintains his right to go to other women without provoking her anger. Or she can use that line as purely devotional, as one who has completely surrendered herself to god. The erotic/devotional nature of the padam gives the dancer plenty of scope to make the words express her own emotional truth. It is this quality that gives the padam form continuing relevance, while also leading to claims of Bowdlerization/Brahminization (Ganesh, Feb 2020).

Truth in the Moving Image

Theodore Bhaskaran states that all the films made during the very early years of Tamil talkies were based on stage plays, and that the female leads came from the devadasi community, as actress/singer/dancer (Sivakumar, Aug 2015). When viewing a film we are closest to having the women themselves before us, a physical presence, their embodiment, however mediated by the screen.

Moreover, in some films, what we are witnessing is a devadasi in real life taking on the role of the devadasi as a character. In the 1937 Tamil film *Chintamani*, the devadasi plays a benign role, bringing the debauched hero to realization and sainthood through the strength of her own devotion to Krishna. The film is available for viewing on *YouTube*, where at the one hour mark we can see a few minutes of the actress Aswhathamma, seated, performing a Sarangapani padam still popular in bharata natyam performances, *mogaduchi pilache*. Though she is very modestly dressed, and the song has no overt eroticism, this version being purely devotional, Bilwamangal, played by M. K. T. Bhagavathar, can't stop thinking of her, and once he goes to live with her, he is so infatuated that he can hardly bear to leave her even when his father is on his deathbed.

The film *Haridas*, from 1944, tells a similar devadasi story. The hero, again played by M.K.T

Bhagavathar, is seduced and ruined financially by a devadasi before realizing the error of his ways and devoting himself to god. In this case, the devadasi Ramba, played by T. R. Rajakumari, herself from the devadasi community, and the first 'dream girl' of Tamil cinema, exudes charm and sex appeal before revealing her heartless, mercenary side. She is the one who lures Haridas into alcoholism and gambling, winning his house and promptly kicking him out of it.

The song '*Manmatha lilayai vendrar undo?*' was a resounding hit, with the words 'Who can overcome Cupid?' becoming a well-worn cliché in Tamil. T. R. Rajakumari dances in a revealing sleeveless blouse wrapped with a sheer upper cloth. The camera shows us close-ups of the looks exchanged between the two characters, emphasizing the provocative nature of their glances.

The two dances are a study in the development of the genre of film dance. The first one shows virtually how a dance piece might have been performed at the time when it was filmed: the dancer is seated, singing herself, for a small audience seated around her. The hand gestures are simple and easily understood, interpreting the meaning of the lyrics without elaboration. The sari Chintamani wears is not ostentatious or showy, the pallav pulled over her shoulders very modestly in a manner that wouldn't attract attention in a real life setting. The song has not been composed especially for the film, but is one that is already part of the repertoire.

The second dance is choreographed and shot taking into consideration both the strengths and the constraints of film as a medium. T. R. Rajakumari as Ramba is dressed in clothes too flashy for real life, appearing first frozen in silhouette carrying a bow and arrow. She then aims and shoots an arrow at a heart above Haridas, which showers him in flower petals. Standing, walking and using hand gestures, she expresses the meaning of the words as if addressing, not a god, not the audience seated on either side, but Haridas directly. Haridas and she sing to each other accompanied by tabla and sarangi, not traditional instruments for a Tamil dance form. Close up, mid and long shots are used strategically to heighten the choreography.

Certain conventions of film dance are already seen as well established in the years between Chintamani and Haridas: from a sari that the actress might have pulled out of her own almirah to a costume that is sexy without being from any particular place or genre of dance; from movements of the prevailing regional dance form to movements borrowing freely from any form; from regional music that was already part of the dance, to hybridized music composed for the film; to the choreography as it was in performance to choreography placing emphasis on the frame as defined by the camera and its movement.

As Ramba's dance nears the end, the wife sees what is going on and uses the word *thevaradiyal*, the Tamil version of 'devadasi'. It clearly has a derogatory connotation, conflating 'prostitute' and 'dancer'. The wife chases Ramba from her house, which is what provokes Ramba to seek her revenge, in turn casting the wife out.

The films reveal the changing sphere of dance and dancers: both were highly successful, and T. R. Rajakumari was a star. By taking a prominent place in the newly minted art form, the devadasi, while called a prostitute in the film, in real life was establishing herself with money and status. This was happening at the same time as the fight for abolition of the devadasi system was going on. So as one manner of livelihood and place in society was being taken away, the beautiful, talented and ambitious women of that community were finding new, more acceptable and lucrative avenues for making money and taking respected roles in the changing social order.

Truth in Stories

While the padams and the above-mentioned films have devadasis as central to the story, the implications of that role are only made explicit as necessary to the story of the male character. In contrast, Muvalur Ramamirthammal's novel, *Web of Deceit* sets out with a clear agenda, to reveal the dark side of the devadasi system and make the reader understand why it should end.

Ramamirthammal wrote from her own experience. At

the age of five, she was sold by her mother to a devadasi for ten rupees and an old sari. The devadasi educated her in music, Telugu and Sanskrit, but when Ramamirthammal was seventeen, and about to be fixed up with a sixty-five-year-old man as her patron, she ran away with her music teacher and established herself within the Self Respect movement as a radical activist for devadasi abolition. *Murasoli*, the newspaper published by M. Karunanidhi, described her in her obituary as "fiery speech, silver hair, bold walk and blazing eyes that sought to burn injustice" (Pon Dhanasekaran, 2022).

Modern day Western-educated scholars are often patronizing and dismissive of the position of women within the Devadasi Abolition Movement, characterizing them as "middle class, upper caste, feminist" (Hubel 128) or "English educated, Catholic-influenced *bhadralok* (genteel) community of Indian intelligentsia" (Chatterjea 294). Given that the two most prominent women in the abolition movement came from the devadasi community, it is surprising to read that "devadasi women were largely absent" from the debates about the devadasi system (Soneji 115). Their legitimate concerns over the exploitation of young girls who had no choice in the matter of their dedication are minimized and research and academic writing rarely addresses the horrific abuses this engendered.

In the novel *Web of Deceit*, two devadasis enter a first class compartment on a train taking them to perform at a concert in Chennai. They flirt with the young man who shares their compartment, and eventually divest him of his watch. While some things in this scene we can take for granted as being reliable for that time, for instance that train travel existed, what are we to make of certain other aspects of the story being revealed to us? The plot is convoluted and hinges on unbelievable tricks and coincidences. One of the characters, the zamindar's young wife, disguises herself as a man to trick the devadasis who have seduced her husband into kicking him out, and then disguises herself as a devadasi to show him that a wife too can be an enchanting companion. But the plot is merely a vehicle for the author to express her views on hegemonic Hinduism, paternalistic attitudes in marriage and inequality in relationships between husband and wife. As characters argue and manage the various situations, they give a nuanced and complex picture of the many kinds of exploitation and power dynamics, not only within the devadasi system, but within Hindu marriage as well.

For example, the brother of the two devadasi sisters is shown being pushed around and abused by the mother, because sons had little value within that system. The various subtle tricks that the mother instigates her daughters to play on the men who come to them are shown in detail. The infatuation of men with devadasis is taken to extremes, and their artistry and skill become the most important tools within a repertoire of seduction.

The atheism of Periyar is put into the mouth of Gunabusani, a reformed devadasi who, I imagine, stands in for Ramamirthammal herself, and articulates her position on the supposed agency, or more realistically, lack of agency that the devadasi had within the system. Gunabusani expresses a powerful argument against caste, patriarchy and religion, and for the egalitarian ideal of the Self Respect marriage for love.

As presented in *Web of Deceit*, the devadasi system is an oppressive arm of Brahminism, a servitude imposed on low caste women by high caste men. But in the novel, neither male nor female reaps any reward from the unequal relationship. In fact the infatuated man becomes the dasi's slave, while she loses her authentic self and must constantly prevaricate in order to maintain his desire for her. That is the web of deceit in which both sides are caught.

The end of the novel brings equality across the board, dissolving the most oppressive hierarchies, such that the rich zamindars spend their money to bring education and health to their subjects, the devadasis voluntarily give up their vocation, and marriages become equal partnerships between husband and wife.

Conclusion

The excitement of art, and its transformative power, lies in the potential of the artist, in the words of Berger, "to turn the tradition against itself" and "wrest its

language away from it”112. The hierarchies that may in one context be what the art form celebrates – kings, zamindars, patrons – may become the hierarchies that are subverted using the very same forms and language. The padams that were used to titillate a male clientele can be stripped of sexualized imagery and connotations to meet the needs of the dancer who no longer depends on her sexual availability to find an audience. The devadasi actress can perform a devadasi on screen to raise her economic and social status. The woman faced with the oppressive conditions of the devadasi system can break free of it, and use her own story to fuel the activism that brings the system down.

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Weaving Odissi Feminine: A Malaysian Perspective

Ramli Ibrahim

In April 2011, Sutra, a Malaysian Odissi dance institution founded by Ramli Ibrahim, staged *Odissi Stirred* at the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre. The newspapers reported that true to the art, the choreographers are inspired by the odissi tradition and reveal its rural and folk charm, incorporating elements of its originality while transcending into modernity generating moves which are mesmerising and captivating. The production included two twenty-minute compositions commissioned by Sutra called *Pallavan* choreographed by Madhavi Mudgal and another titled *Evocations*, choreographed by Sharmila Biswas. They were performed by Sutra dancers. Many were unaware that Malaysian audience had just been initiated to a paradigm shift, because this was the first time they had experienced odissi choreographed by women. Globally, it is now impossible to ignore women dance-makers who are expanding the frontiers and weaving new fabrics into the tapestry of odissi repertoire. Before this, the gurus and dance-makers of odissi tended to be male. Generally, male dancers learn odissi in order to become gurus; not many then could compete with the women, as dancers. The men seldom managed to come to the fore during the glamorous days of 'star' performers such as the late Indrani Rehman, Sanjukta Panigrahi, Sonal Mansingh and Yamini Krishnamurti. Performing the standard solo repertoire of odissi, these legendary dancers, then, were always the vehicles '*par excellence*' of lyrical odissi. Female dancers hardly ever ventured into the realm of dance-making in odissi, which was the territory of the men. Until now.

Triple Frontiers, Sutra Foundation's annual production miraculously premiered in 2020, in between Covid lockdowns, came into being after a series of successful annual offerings such as *GANJAM*, *Amorous Delights*, and *Odissi on High* among many others. *Triple Frontiers* featured the odissi works of three women dance-makers from India: Sujata Mishra, Parwati Dutta, and Meera Das. All them can be considered the younger generation of female dancers who had made successful dance careers as dancers, then as teachers and eventually as directors of their own dance outfits.

Sutra as *Sutradhar*: The Missing Link

The importance of this development in the evolution of present day odissi can be fully appreciated when one understands the hierarchy of the *guru-shisya parampara* tradition (apprentice-learning through a definitive lineage) that was observed within the context of odissi, thus far. In the late 1970s, very few Malaysians were exposed to odissi. Those who were lucky enough, might have seen the spellbinding odissi performance of *Dasavatar* by Chandrabhanu when he first danced the powerful dance of the ten incarnations of Krishna. However, by mid-80's, it was through Sutra that the larger population of Malaysia became familiar with this exquisite Indian classical dance form originating from the Odisha-Kalinga region of East India as if the pre-colonial cultural link that existed for centuries with South East Asia, had been once again resurrected.

The odissi exposed by Sutra to Malaysia was mainly that of the late Guru Debaprasad Das.[1] The creative spectre of pioneering male teachers of odissi loomed large on the tapestry of odissi, such that few repertoires from their disciples would emerge and survive outside the shadow of their genius. Most of their disciples, in the capacity of novice

1 Das was one of the three pioneer giants during the re-construction of odissi. It is important to note that by the early eight-ies, Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra was a popular odissi style. His odissi stamp had found extensive exposure, nationally and internationally, through his many disciples. Somehow, the works of the late Guru Pankaj Charan, the senior most of the three pioneer gurus, did not find as many following and remained a relatively rare phenomenon in odissi performances.

2 Durga Charan Ranbir, Gajendra Kumar Panda, Bichitrananda Swain and Ratikant Mahapatra are among the prominent 'next generation' male gurus who are not only grooming excellent dancers in their institutions but also choreographing new works and taking the creative mettle of charting the new paths of contemporary Odissi in the twenty-first century.

gurus and dance-makers, either did not want to, or were unable to, challenge the supremacy of their masters. In Odisha, experiments in odissi were usually met with vehement and heated resistance. Over time, institutions were established by both men and women, such as, Kala Vikash Kendra (date of establishment), Sangeet Mahavidyalaya (1965) and Odissi Research Centre (1984) where expertise, creativity, and talents were honed. When Cuttack and Bhubaneswar became saturated with odissi artistes, many senior disciples especially those who graduated from Kala Vikash Kendra (the earliest institution teaching odissi), ventured elsewhere to start their own schools. Ramani Ranjan Jena left for Chennai, Srinath Raut opened his school in New Delhi, while others went to Kolkata, Mumbai and other city-centres to chart their own dance odyssey. With the popularity of odissi world-wide, new dancer-gurus also began to travel internationally and made their teaching and creative presence felt. By the time the three pioneer gurus were no more, odissi has already consolidated a strong methodology of teaching. In the parallel domain of odissi music, essential to odissi, musicians who composed and performed odissi music started to be conscious of odissi music in the context of its acceptance as a unique Indian classical musical genre in its own right. Initially, the dance gurus were all mainly males whose focus was often on teaching. They might compose a few items for the annual dance productions of their institutions, but initially nothing outstanding or substantial emerged with regard to these new works. These performances concentrated mainly on highlighting 'classic' items of the three gurus as the mainstay features of 'authentic' odissi repertoire. No doubt, these are still the 'items' which odissi dancers endeavour to learn and dream of performing. The eighties were creatively dynamic time for the expansion of new repertoire thus establishing odissi as one of the most creatively driven of the Indian classical dance systems.[2]

Soon after the demise of Debaprasad Das (1986), Sutra's relationship with this *parampara* progressed into another phase. Post 1987, Sutra started to commission regularly new benchmark repertoires from the young Guru Gajendra Kumar Panda. These new commissioned works are focussed and independent collaborations where Sutra had a strong voice in demanding a more resolute theme and direction. The works became sensational success in Malaysia and when performed in Odisha, they equally created lasting impact. In the meantime, Geetha Shankaran, a senior Sutra dancer who was first introduced to Odissi in the mid 80's at Sutra, began teaching odissi at the Temple of Fine Arts, Kuala Lumpur (TFA) in the early nineties. Naturally, she based her teaching on Sutra's repertoire of Debaprasad Das. This was prior to the present TFA as an institution that changed direction and adopted Guru Kelucharan Mahapatra teaching methodology, through his son, Ratikant Mahapatra. For the last five years, Ratikant Mahapatra has become the resident odissi guru of TFA.

Thus, consistent exposures of odissi dance and music were being established continuously in Malaysia through more than four decades of Sutra performances, media exposures and exhibitions of odissi. In the process, Sutra's distinctive and innovative group compositions have influenced how odissi is viewed in a large theatre and outdoor performing spaces. These have set the 'Sutra factor' apart from others as an odissi brand which is both unique and inimitable. Simultaneously, visiting Odissi dancers and gurus from India came in good numbers, increasing the awareness of the public to Odissi. New institutions teaching odissi began to appear mainly in Kuala Lumpur. Within the last four decades since odissi was first performed under Sutra, odissi in Malaysia grew in popularity and became a favourite dance performed frequently on stage both with local and overseas dancers. It also became a favourite with audiences, placing it on par with the more established Bharatanatyam. Bharatanatyam and odissi are now the two of the most frequently seen Indian classical dances in Malaysia.

In early nineties, Sujata Mishra, Parwati Dutta and Meera Das run their own successful dance institutions in India and have dedicated at least decades of their lives to odissi representing the *paramparas* of Debaprasad Das and Kelucharan Mahapatra. They each started their careers as exceptionally gifted dancers, absorbed the style of their mentors, and subsequently became teachers of odissi in their own right. Soon, they found that they were embarking on the less-charted territory

of choreography and eventually contributing their own colours and hues to the creative fabric of the odissi *parampara* that had cultivated them.

Sujata Misra hails from an established and culturally enlightened family. She was the chosen dancer of the late Debaprasad Das to perform his main work '*Asta Sambhu*' featured at the landmark *Angahar Festival* (1985) in New Delhi, directed by Madhavi Mudgal. With the sudden demise of of the late Debaprasad Das in 1986, Sujata established her school *Mokshya* in Bhubaneswar in the mid 1990s. Soon, she created works for her dancers, which reflected the strong influence of her guru. She has retained the minimalist approach, the earthiness in the use of *sabda*, rhythmic passages and vocabulary. The underlying tantric and Shaivite undertones of the late Debaprasad Das *parampara* are also apparent in her works.

Parwati Dutta, spent a substantial part of her creative time with the highly respected odissi dancer-choreographer, Madhavi Mudgal, before establishing her own sprawling institution *Mahagami Gurukul* in Aurangabad. She was fortunate to simultaneously have Guru Kelucharan Mahapatra as her guru when the latter often came to New Delhi to conduct workshops for Madhavi and other dancers. Later, Parwati, who also made her mark as a dance-scholar-researcher, was mentored by the distinguished scholar, the late Dr Kapila Vatsyayan. The latter exercised a profound influence on Parwati's creative approach, underscoring the research-based treatment of her creative forays. Parwati's deep knowledge of rhythm garnered as a seasoned Kathak dancer gave her the edge to explore the rhythmic frontiers that becomes a hallmark of her creations. Through her dedicated works Parwati Dutta is responsible for transforming the cultural landscape of Aurangabad with her festivals, outreach programmes and talks, which are aimed at connecting the performing arts with the general population of Aurangabad. Meera Das is no stranger to Sutra having collaborated with us on *Amorous Delights* in 2015, mentored by scholar the late Dinanath Pathy. Meera was the first graduate of Odisha Research Centre (ORC), which was the brainchild of both guru Kelucharan Mahapatra and the pioneer odissi dancer, Kum Kum Mohanty. Meera, endowed with natural musicality and a nightingale singer-voice, flexibility of body, expressive facial expression and an outstanding aptitude for movement, not surprisingly is one of ORC's most outstanding graduates. She decided to strike out on her own and established her institution *Gunjan Dance Academy* in Cuttack where she teaches and simultaneously creates new works. Meera is fully occupied as a solo dancer, performing all over India and internationally while creating many new works for the various performances her institution is invited to perform.

Sujata, Parwati and Meera personally taught the senior Sutra dancers and thereafter contributed its inimitable mark in *Triple Frontiers* through the group compositions based on the works by these three women choreographers. Having learnt the repertoire as a solo form, the works then faced another round of transformation as they were interpreted as group compositions (with permission of the three dance-makers). As many as eighteen dancers comprising of company artists as well as young dancers from Sutra's Outreach Programme performed on stage. The result is an India-Malaysia collaboration of the highest order which simultaneously celebrated the talents of the Sutra dancers and the works of these outstanding new generation women dance-makers of odissi.

Stills from *Imkaan* by Sumedha Bhattacharyya and Hediyeh Azma

Reorient the Orient: A Case Study[1]

Lionel Popkin

My recent performance/installation, entitled *Reorient the Orient*, is an 8-hour durational exhibition examining my own archive of thirty-years of artmaking within the history of representations of South Asian performers on Western stages.[2] This article touches on multiple sections of the work as a means of expanding the discourse on how South Asian dance exists in the diaspora. Within this context, I speak from an artist's perspective, employing an episodic accrual of images. I am valuing artmaking as primary research and advocating for art's capabilities, on its own terms, to describe and express how we do what we do in the world.

Within *Reorient the Orient* dancers, videos, archival materials, rugs, sculptures, neon yellow wiffle balls, the headpiece from an elephant costume, among other items, all invite the audiences to make their way through the entire space, choosing where to be, and what to see. No person will see it all. This is purposeful. The audience can stay as long as they like and arrive whenever they wish. The multiple rooms and simultaneous events are a nod to the politics of partiality attributing it to Donna Haraway as a statement in opposition to singular comprehension and identity.[3] While the audience has access to the installation in the theater and gallery for the full eight hours, the performers do kinetic scores on a loop in a two-hour durational format. The work is intentionally modular, with multiple episodes, live and mediated, that overlap, dovetail, collide, avoid, and intersect each other.

How does my project enter the transnational hierarchies of form and social expectations that have historically categorized South Asian dance in the diasporic setting of the United States? The impact of historical figures is a key thread in the work. Ruth St. Denis lurks, but mostly through the legacy of my 2013 piece *Ruth Doesn't Live Here Anymore*.[4] The more immediate conversations are with Uday Shankar, Ram Gopal, and other figures who laid the groundwork for the potentials and possibilities available to South Asian performers on western concert stages and are featured in the exhibition. In my recent article, *Uday Shan-Kar and Me*: *Stories of Self-Orientalization*, *Hyphenization*, and *Diasporic Declarations* (2023) Uday Shankar is discussed quite thoroughly, as such in this context, I will focus on the parts of my overall project that directly intersect with Ram Gopal's legacy.[5]

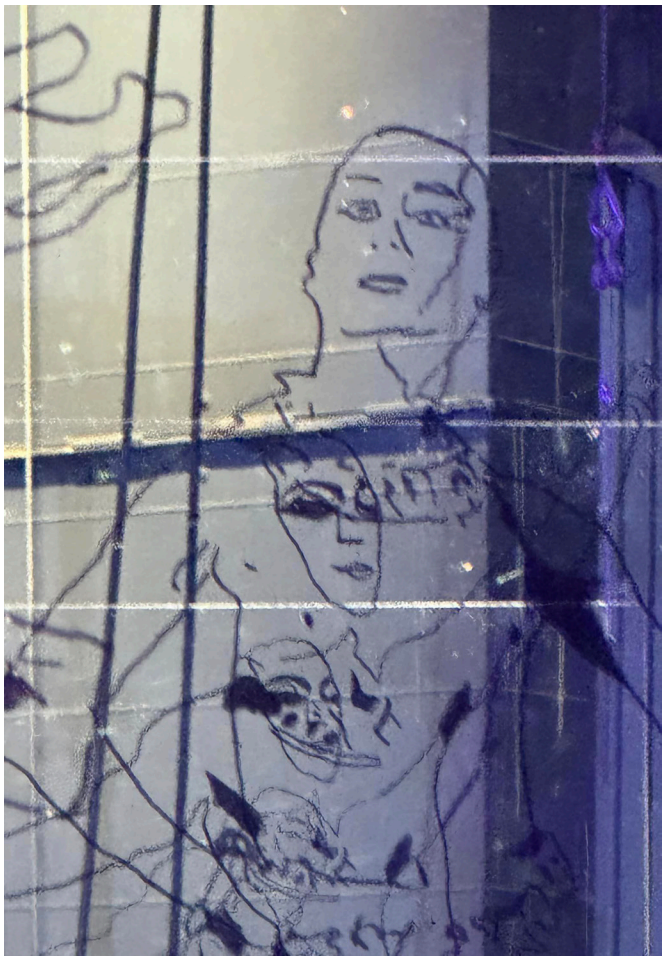
For context, I offer a brief biography of Ram Gopal and draw some comparisons between Gopal and Shankar.[6] Ram Gopal was probably born in 1912 in Bangalore, but there are conflicting reports. He definitely died in 2003 in London (citation source). He arrived on the international dance scene in the late 1930s, about a decade after Uday Shankar did. Gopal was frequently compared to Uday Shankar, and they shared many commonalities. Both were of mixed heritage. Shankar's father was Bengali, and his mother was from Rajasthan. Gopal's mother was Burmese, while his father was an Indian Rajput according to the literature. Unlike Shankar, Gopal was extensively trained in what was then becoming categorized as classical Indian dances and projected a new form of authenticity for western audiences. Shankar had continued the mantle of orientalist performance styles developed by pioneers such as Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn. The biggest difference was that Shankar, unlike white interlocuters such as Denis and Shawn, was from what is now India, and therefore more authentic to western audiences than that previous generation of performers. Gopal took the authenticity test one step further by having a more rooted and "real" classical dance training as opposed to Shankar's more experimental approach.

After living abroad and touring for a few years, Gopal returned to India in 1940 because of the second World War. Then, in the summer of 1947, as India and Pakistan were on the cusp of independence from colonial Britain, Gopal moved back to England where he would base himself for the rest of his life. On September 17, 1947, just over a month after the India's Independence Day, Gopal performed a suite of dances at the opening

festivities for the new India section in London's venerable Victoria & Albert Museum. Gopal toured extensively throughout the world in the 1950s and made major group works for venues such as the royal Albert Hall and The Edinburgh Festival. In the early 1960s he paired with the famous ballerina Alicia Markova to create a Krishna-Radha duet in a stunning echo of Shankar's early 1920s performance tours with Anna Pavlova.

Within the context of Gopal's life, there are three main ways my project interacts with him. First, hanging in the theater are six line drawings on thick acrylic, which are tracings of archival photos taken from different phases of Gopal's career. They lurk in the space, set up in a line so as to overlap and blur each other, as an ethereal or spectral reminder of his multifaceted legacy which included:

- his diasporic life in London
- his professional life as an ambassador of Indian culture
- his somewhat private homosexuality and his public marriage
- his constant dialogue with western presenters and audiences alongside his desire to perform in respected and lucrative venues.



[Figure 1 & 2] from *Reorient the Orient.* Photo 1 by Nicola Goode. Photo 2 by Ilaan Egelund. Used by permission.

Second, I have an excerpt of Gopal's 1954 performance at Jacob's Pillow playing on a monitor tucked into a corner for the audience to discover if they wander over that way.[7] Gopal's 1954 trip to the Pillow was fraught in many ways. Prior to his summer performances there, Gopal and Shawn exchanged letters and disagreed on the financial arrangements and support structures for Gopal. Rebekah Kowal (2020) has documented that correspondence quite well, taking into consideration the cultural and fiscal contentions at play.[8] Other correspondences in the archive reveal a different set of difficulties for Gopal when traveling to the Pillow and are less concerned with Shawn and more about La Meri, an orientalist performer who was a fixture at the Pillow and who had "discovered" Gopal in India in 1936. Gopal's friend Peter, in a letter dated 7 March 1954, writes "Don't be too hard on La Meri"

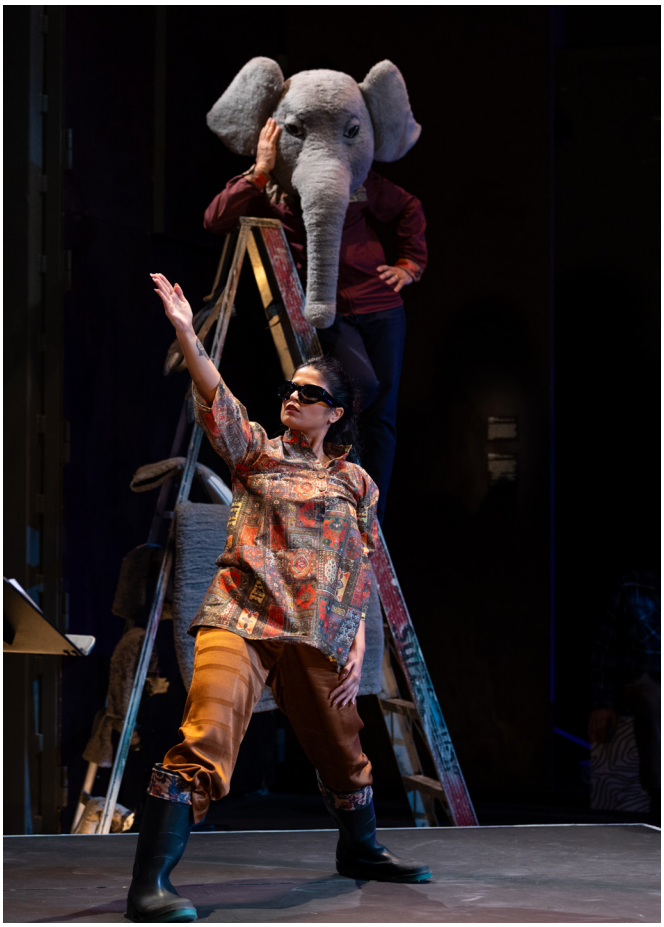
and then continues, “A wise and spiritual thing it is to avoid direct criticism, even of fakes: some people prefer the fakes… Presentation of the true is the best gospel.”[9]

Gopal’s friend, this mysterious Peter, was likely building on shared conversations and concerns, seeking to protect Gopal should he reunite with La Meri nearly fifteen years after their fraught parting in Tokyo in November of 1937.[10] There is both a personal care and a sharpness to Peter’s words. Gopal and Peter clearly value authenticity and, unsurprisingly, conclude that Gopal is the real deal, not a faker. Gopal’s dancing, unlike that of others, is a “Presentation of the true.”

Like Ruth St. Denis and Denishawn, like Uday Shankar, like La Meri, like the reconstructionist classicists of Indian dance, like Gopal, and like many curators, funders, and audiences today, the endless search for authenticity of presentation has driven the Orientalizing gaze imposed on South Asian artists in American Modern Dance, perpetuating a hierarchy of form and limiting the expressive capability of what performance can and does mean when navigating diasporic life with all its complexities and necessities.[11]

My third mode of summoning Gopal’s presence is a movement score I developed in response to the aforementioned archival footage. The score translates Gopal’s bodily approaches, positions, and gestures from his dancing, and converses with them in a performative score from my perspective. Asking questions such as:

- What does it mean to place one’s hands on one’s hips?
- What if your hands are as far apart from each other as possible in a diagonal?
- What is the difference between your arms hovering in space and your fingertips cascading through the air?
- How do those overlap?



[Figures 3 & 4] Performers in *Reorient the Orient*. Photos by Angel Origgi. Used by permission

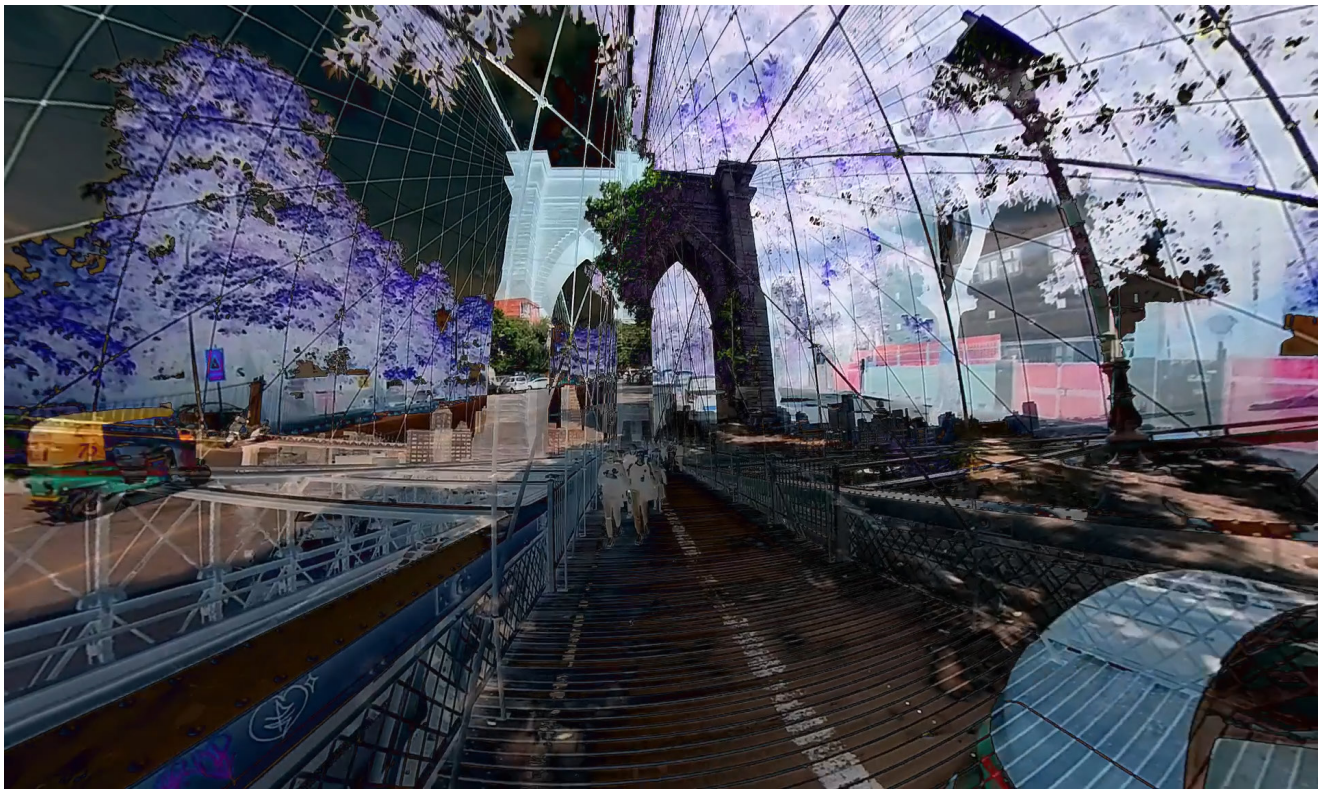
With *Reorient the Orient*, I am staking my own claim on process and representation. I am not interested in perpetuating imagery that promotes an orientalist fantasy, homeland nostalgia, assimilationist whitewashing, or that

contributes to the mirage of authenticity. Instead, I am investigating kinetic imagery that focuses on the trust, support, and risk necessary to survive and process the complex experiences of brown, particularly South Asian performers within the American art world.

As I said, the full work is extremely modular and episodic. In a nod to that I will touch on two other parts of the larger event. One is a video, the other is a wall text. I will start with the video. Between February and September 2022, as the world seemed to be opening up again and commuting for work and school returned as a reality, I traveled to and revisited multiple commutes from my past. Walking forward while looking back, I reflected on the nearly two years spent without commuting in contrast to those pathways that shaped and influenced how, where, and why I went about my daily endeavors. My walking was intentional. No wandering to get lost, no abandonment of maps and geolocation devices. The walking here was a retracing of old pathways revisited for new contemplations; old decisions re-examined, from perspectives anew. And I filmed it. I latched a camera to my head and walked forward while filming backward, letting the landscapes recede.

To be clear, I did not do every apartment, every job, every city. I did the ones that have stuck with me, that have resonance and mental duration. I skipped my middle school. Wouldn't you? In cities where I lived in multiple places, I chose the path that was dominant in my memory, even if it was not where I had lived the longest. In some cities the house had been replaced by another dwelling, or the studio had turned into a restaurant. No matter. I recorded the present.

Many have written on the complexities and nuances of memory and the act of walking.[12] A layered representation of these walks made sense to me. In my mind, places overlap, recollections dive into each other. The landscapes varied from the urban to the rural, with the suburban in-between. In the full work, we see snow covered fields and sun strewn bike paths, an iconic bridge, and a crowded roundabout. In the figures here, we see the walk in New York City from my Brooklyn apartment to Trisha Brown's loft where I sometimes worked, overlain onto the commute from my old flat in New Delhi to Mandi House where the Kathak Kendra studios used to be when I took classes there. These documents of past and present travel, provide a meditation on the commutes we take and the possibility of finding insight into the mundane.



[Figures 5, 6 & 7] Video Stills from *Walking from Home* by the Author. Used by permission.

Finally, I close by asking what has changed in the last 100 years, between the first half of the twentiethth century, the second half of the twentiethth century, and now just about a quarter of the way into the twenty-firstst century. In Reorient the Orient, this text is on the wall near the entrance between the gallery and the theater.[13,14]

The Attribution Game

100 Years of Change?

Below are four quotes in Column A. The sources of the quotes are listed in Column B.

Can you match which goes with which?

COLUMN A	COLUMN B
1. "The three-thousand-year-old vocabulary of Hindu dance is still employed, with its use of the hands, fingers, lips, brows, neck and head as well as the body."	A. 1934. Uday Shankar's performance brochure for his American tour.
2. "India has a tradition of dancing that is today, perhaps the oldest and most detailed of all existing techniques."	B. 1957. Ram Gopal, writing in his autobiography about his latest works, *Dances of India* and *The Legend of the Taj Mahal*.
3. "We come from a country where there is no such a thing as modern… anything we think of we have to go back two or four thousand years."	C. 1984. Amala Shankar in her preshow speech at the American Dance Festival in Durham, NC.
4. "Right now, far out in limitless space, the great Hindu god Shiva is dancing to set the rhythms of the universe."	D. 2023. Wall text for the San Francisco Asian Art Museum exhibition 'Beyond Bollywood: 2000 Years of Dance in Art'.

Answers are available in the map accompanying this exhibition.

[Figure 8] Property of Author. Used by permission.

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ENDNOTES

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1 This paper first developed as part of a conference in relation to the exhibit "Border Crossings: Exile and American Modern Dance 1900-1955," which was first shown at the New York Public Library Performance Arts Division in Fall 2023 and then remounted in January 2024 at the University of California Santa Barbara at which the conference occurred. The exhibit was an amalgam of multiple nationalities, dance forms, and social constructions on display as conveyors of transnational dance ideologies operating as modes of resistance to defined (bordered) categories. Thank you to Ninotchka Bennahum who organized the conference and was one of the curators of the exhibit. Special thanks also to Anurima Banerji who invited me to participate in the conference and encouraged me to put my talk into a written format.

2 *Reorient the Orient* is the recipient of a National Performance Network (NPN) commission with REDCAT in Los Angeles as the lead commissioner and Dance Place in DC as a co-commissioner. Additional funds come from the UCLA Council on Research, The UCLA Chancellor's Arts Initiative, the National Performance Network's Storytelling and Documentation Fund, and the Mellon Foundation. The work premiered on March 9+10, 2024 at REDCAT in Los Angeles, CA.

3 For further context, see Haraway (1998).

4 For a beginning on information on Ruth St. Denis, see Author (2013) and (2015).

5 For more information on Uday Shankar, see Author (2023) and Erdman (1987), Purkayastha (2014) and for the most thorough biographical information, Sarkar Munsi (2022).

6 For more information on Ram Gopal see Ambrose (1965) Sinha (2022), Gopal (1957), and David (2024).

7 Gopal performed twice at Jacob's Pillow, once in 1954 and then again in 1958.

8 For more information on the exchange between Gopal and Shawn see Kowal (2020), particularly pp. 183-185 and pp. 21-25 for information on La Meri and Gopal.

9 Special thanks to the South Asian Diaspora Arts Archive board members who gave me access to the trunks of archives in the Birmingham, England holding facility. Personal correspondence to Ram Gopal. March 7, 1954. Uncatalogued letter in Ram Gopal Collection. South Asian Diaspora Arts Archive, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

10 No last name is used in the letters, but Peter is quite likely the London dance critic Peter Williams who was professionally active from just before World War II until 1990, and certainly knew Gopal.

11 The topic of Orientalism is enormous, but the starting place is Said (1994) and much of my thinking is informed by Cheng (2013) and (2021).

12 Space is too limited here to go into details, but for more information on walking as a topic of research, see Ingold (2010) and Solnit (2005) and (2000).

13 Game sources include Shankar (1934), Gopal (1957), Shankar (1984), and McGill (2023).

14 Answers are 1=A, 2=B, 3=C, 4=D.

Form, Identity, Dissent – Reclaiming the Critical Space

Preethi Athreya

The origins of ***Conditions of Carriage: The Jumping Project*** go back to my obsession with the functional body in contrast to the performative body. As a dancer and creator in the Indian context, I have gone from one work to the next, trying to find a technique of the body that challenges the way dance is perceived and valued. Navigating through the various positions held on dance over time, I find myself struck by how complex it has become to locate ourselves through our bodies as social and political human beings.

Around the beginning of the year 2015, I began asking a series of questions regarding the dancing body. My search was to find a way to allow the autonomy of the body to come alive. I wanted to create an environment that values the immediacy of action over artistic interpretation. I began making a series of experiments that involved acts of jumping, running, walking and standing. I wanted to see how these actions could retain their rudimentary form and yet propose a complexity of time and space relationships.

I chose to explore the physicality of jumping for many reasons. Foremost among them is that jumping allows only the truth of the body to come to the surface. The effort demands a presence where there is no room for artifice.

Jumping is also a physicality that is common to other bodily disciplines such as sport , where the decorative element is stripped off to reveal pure mechanics of the body. But unlike an Olympian, the jumping here is not competitive. It is composed to draw attention to the immediacy of action, rather than a symbolic or iconic reference through that act. Yet, this functionality has a form of its own – there is a way of rolling the ball of the foot, a way in which the pelvis is held, the relation of the upper body, arms and head, and the timing and source of each step, turn, and shift. These choices surely propose a formal aesthetic, but it is one that stems from needing to be functional and effective.

I began to work with a group of ten people from backgrounds as diverse as boxing, theatre, parkour, law, art therapy, psychology, fitness, classical dance, contemporary dance, and cine dance. This choice of people was not premeditated on the basis of their backgrounds or their virtuosity. Rather, looking at the cohort of twenty-five people, young and old who have trained for this work over the last two years, I can fairly say that these are people for whom this minute scrutiny of the body has been of interest. In trying to find a language of the body that connects one with the other, the process of work took on a diversity of its own.

The decision to jump was also a natural outcome of working out of SPACES, in Chennai, home of the late choreographer, Chandralekha. I had been drawn to the open square pit - an installation of the late Dashrath Patel. Located in front of the Mandala work space and theatre, this pit of about twenty by twenty feet has an arresting quality with an endless upward energy. It was an invitation to plunge in and spring out. Our jumping began to activate the vertical axis that was already present. Patterns of jumping and running collided with the angularity of the space, often pouring out of the pit and sliding back in. The visually dominant square invited a challenge to displace the idea of borders and limitations. Of seeing and being seen.

Choosing to have the work visible from all four sides without a fixed viewing perspective, the body is hyper visible. Instead of being put on a pedestal, the performer is in a pit with nowhere to hide and with no advantageous position from where to express himself or herself. There is only the cavity of the pit and the edge to navigate. The viewer is free to move around and choose several perspectives to watch the work.

The act of jumping in this work is forced to be bereft of any purpose other than the integrity of the action. The work is meticulously designed to propose a grand nothingness. The discrete mechanical movements require precision and

focus while the more fluid ones demand endurance and strength. It allows you to see the effort and fragility of the body in meeting the requirements and sometimes also failing. The closeness of the viewing from all sides of a square space leaves nothing to hide. The more you look for meaning, the less it appears. What is palpable is the sheer physicality of the experience.

In the words of my colleague, Yashaswini who is a film-maker, "The body is invoked as a machine... put to use ... made to work... the effort is akin to humanising a ball socket, or circuits or the insides of a scanner. While the ten human beings move like a machine they almost, simultaneously cannot be a machine. The anatomies reveal - fatigue, sweat and salt covering the air - fit and unfit, efficient and inefficient, young, old, all engaged in simply carrying out the function of jumping and moving that is at hand." This grand nothingness that is at the centre of the endeavour becomes a counter spectacle. The spectacle here refers to Guy Debord's definition of the spectacle as the inverted image of society in which relations between commodities have supplanted relations between people, where a mindless identification with images supplants genuine response and relation (Guy Debord, 1967, The Society of the Spectacle). If the body is to counter this idea of the spectacle, what can it counter and how?

The body has always been used to challenge positions of power through resistance movements – in the form of a weapon at times, as well as the object of violation. We see this in hunger strikes, physical barricades, women's protests in Manipur,[1] Jal Satyagrahas[2] and so on. Also, there are theories about how a 'sleeping' body that is essentially an unproductive body is also a form of resistance where sleep challenges the foundations of a productive society. The anti-work campaigns[3] in various countries have spoken about this and interrogated this concept. The hunger strikes and violations subject the body to a form of self-brutalisation, equal in terms of a burnt-earth strategy. What is put to use is the 'functioning' body, except in the cases of extreme starvation like Irom Sharmila's[4] which has become an iconic image of resistance. It does not expose the 'functional' capacity of the body. In Irom's case too, it is a negation of the functionality. In the Jumping Project, I am focussing closely on specific functional areas of the human body within a performative space. Here there is certainly a reference to the body in a similar sense to the anti-work movements' view of the sleeping body. The difference is in how the body is occupied. What is common is the idea that pre-occupation resists occupation.

Within dance, the idea of a counter culture in resistance to the external 'gaze' is not new. One of the pioneers of this kind of resistive expression was Chandralekha. She reacted to the way 'Indianness' was being interpreted and sold in the post-nationalist period and therefore employed a range of techniques to make the body visible in another manner, the most famous of them being the hyper-slowness of movement, where the nuts and bolts of the mechanics of moving are revealed and given a place of pride. She challenged the viewers' need to be constantly entertained and remain passive receivers. Instead, she presented technique in a way that revealed the fragility of the human body and its endeavour as a way of replacing the idea of a perfect dancer or dancerliness.

The time we live in now is not marked by the particular reaction to nationalism that was present in the early decades of independent India. Nor is it gripped by regional political identity assertions in the way it was in the years to follow. All these have taken a new form today. Until a decade ago the dominant discourse in contemporary dance in India was the emergence of new forms and their departures from tradition. Notions of 'discovering our tradition' or the later debates on 'tradition and modernity' have all become irrelevant in today's contemporary dance context. The last ten years has seen a parallel strand of dance-makers, who arrive with none of this baggage.[5]

What seems to be the greatest challenge to the creators of today is the growing capitalist economy and its co-option of the arts, specifically the contemporary arts which have stood for their autonomy and critical self-reflection. It would not be amiss to say that contemporary dance seems to be emerging more and more from a culture of 'dance labs', 'camps', 'workshops' , 'competitions' and 'master classes' where, in effect, the context for creation is pre-decided. The subversive body that Chandralekha proposed is under threat of

extinction with the onslaught from a generation's own surge for finding its practice and an endorsement of it.

One sees it in the instances within the country where business houses and individual financial entrepreneurs have entered the scene and taken over the curation of contemporary expression, ostensibly in a partnership with the arts, but in effect, a co-option of it. Especially within dance, models of 'successful' contemporary expression are imported, bringing in both aesthetic and marketing values and systems. Therefore, while it affects the pool of potential creators, it also exposes the reasons behind such funding – at whose service is the funding? Francois Lecour, who works in theatre administration in France, reports that concepts like residencies are offered at no cost and no stake from the givers – they are a way of circumventing the necessity of directly funding the creators for the work they do.

In other instances, there have been attempts to institutionalise the practice of contemporary dance within the country by practitioners themselves. These set-ups provide the illusion of an alternate space for young aspiring contemporary individuals for they provide the 'space' which the rest of the cultural practice neglects. Unable to find it within the realms of existing practice, serious seekers of the contemporary are drawn to these new institutional models that seem to offer skills and opportunities. Many a time, the skills are imported from other systems and sometimes they are indigenous adaptations of earlier imported systems. New embodied indigenous systems are rare, if at all visible.

As for the opportunities, they exist only so long as the economic power imbalance exists between the east and the west. The opportunities also exist only inside the institutional frame, leaving individual or autonomous enterprise impossible to achieve. Effectively, what these scenarios offer is a 'tool-kit' that allows one to function as a technician dancer. Yet, to use technique as a key to propose a new paradigm requires another kind of rigour. It is only this rigour that can give rise to a stance, an approach, a world-view to be endorsed, a wager. It opens up the discourse around dance practice by asking some basic questions - Who are we, where are we, and where do we want to go?

The resistant body is once again relevant today for entirely different reasons than before. As We live in a hyper-sensitive political climate and a hyper capitalist society that is under no threat from the practitioners of art so long as the project of art does not function as a critical and emancipatory agency. How can we resist being consumed, how can we re-invite the body's autonomy? We have to resist, in our times, the mediation of powers, from within the country and from outside, in defining our contemporaneity or our Indianness; we have to keep our agency. It may be the only way to guard the critical energies released through creation from being co-opted by its opponents.

I quote Ram Bapat from his article 'The Internal Agony of True Pleasure-Seekers':

We have to act from the body today, because our bodies are being stolen from us. Capitalism allows the portrayal of the body, in the performing arts, etc, but never allows us to have a functioning real body. Because that body is subversive. That body is beyond their capacity to control. They want bodies as safety valves, and they want bodies as automatons.

With our dead bodies, we carry dead democracies.

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ENDNOTES

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1 On 15 July 2004, 12 Manipur women disrobed in front of the Assam Rifles HQ in Imphal to protest against the killing of Manorama Thangjam who was also allegedly raped. On 15 July 2004, these 12 imas had disrobed in front of the historic Kangla Fort in the heart of Imphal — then the headquarters of the Assam Rifles — carrying banners with messages painted in red. “Indian Army Rape Us”, read one. “Indian Army Take Our Flesh”, said another. The women were protesting against the brutal killing of Manorama Thangjam, a 32-year-old woman who had been picked up by Assam Rifles personnel in suspicious circumstances four days prior. ‘17 years since their naked protest against Army, ‘Mothers of Manipur’ say fight not over yet, artice by Simrin Sirur, The Print Magazine, issue July 22, 2021.

2 The Jal Satyagraha protest in the Khandwa district of Madhya Pradesh, India, was a protest in 2015 by residents of Gogalgaon village, and neighboring hamlets, that involves them remaining immersed in the waters of the Narmada River, as the government has not yet rehabilitated them as promised. It was a part of Narmada Bachao Andolan.

3 Ruth Noack in her article ‘Outrage: subversive sleep’ argues that sleeping is a political act against the workings of a capitalist society. She states, ‘Less an act than a way of being, the sleeper, by sleeping when and where it is not condoned, challenges everyone else, who is doing/working/functioning/functionalised. Contrary to the tree falling in the forest, the sleeper in the workplace or in public space affects and thus ever so slightly transforms those around them.’ The Architectural Review, issue April 9, 2020. In addition to this, historical accounts of various resistance movements, such as the abolitionist movement or the civil rights movement, often describe instances where sleep was used as a form of passive resistance. For example, during the Montgomery Bus Boycott, African Americans refused to use segregated public transportation, often opting to walk or sleep in their homes rather than submit to discriminatory practices.

4 Irom Sharmila is an Indian civil rights activist, political activist, and poet from the Indian state of Manipur, which is located on the north-eastern side of India. In November 2000, she began a hunger strike for abolishing the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act, 1958, which has received criticism from several sections for concerns about human rights violations in the regions of its enforcement. After 16 years, she ended her fast in 2016, after being nasally force-fed for over 500 weeks in custody.

5 In the choreographic works of Padmini Chettur, we see a clear language of abstraction that traces the idea of form through the handling of line, tension, effort and stillness that resists any complacent joining of dots with traditional forms or mythology. In the works of Mandeep Raikhy, we see a language of the body emerging from responses to lived experience of gender and identity. Deepak Kurki Shivaswamy embraces a fluid hybrid body that meets and moulds itself within the urban landscape of a changing India. Meghna Bharadwaj chooses the idiom of yarning, weaving as a methodological score/ interpretation of form and movement logic. Avantika Bhal draws out a language of the body from signing for the hearing impaired. Aseng Borang presents a body in conflict asserting its individuality and freedom by playing with the idea of the gaze rather than with martial forms and indigenous symbols.

***Hypnagogia* (Film)**

R.K. Bitesh and Tushar Nongthombam

Hypnagogia

Artist Statement

A poetic series of visuals and a soundscape depicting everything that humans want to omit in this Samsara. It portrays a soul penetrating through the worst and inevitable moments of existence, and the uneasiness we feel mentally, physically, and spiritually during this journey, searching for Nirvana in Samsara. It carries a patriotic feeling of bearing all the suffering from reality, freeing all beings from agony. The film reveals a character similar to Sisyphus, but leaves the nature of the character to the audience." In the film, I use visuals from the ongoing conflict as metaphors for things we want to omit in existence. I utilize sounds that are annoying to our ears to depict senses we don't want to feel. I express how we are trapped and stuck in this situation since birth through movements. Everything remains in a loop, a cycle that never ends but worsens. Our freedom is blinded until we bleed inside out. Each time we try to change or escape, we always end up in the same place. Nothing changes and I choose the medium of film to portray the chaos we feel. At the end, I introduce a character similar to Sisyphus, but I keep our hope. I end all the sorrows and miseries with the character falling into the water, carrying every ounce of suffering, symbolizing a release, an ounce of Nirvana in Samsara.

Based, Born, and Bred in Imphal, Manipur, my journey into photography began in 2012, and I transitioned to making films in 2020. Growing up in Manipur, experiencing the sound of gunshots, the smell of tear gas, and being confined to the house due to curfews and bandhs were quite common occurrences, happening maybe every alternate month. So, facing these events since childhood, is ingrained in our subconscious, a desire to escape from our surroundings. I believe that most of our contemporary arts focus on our conflicts, and knowingly or unknowingly turn into our identity.

In Manipur, over the last 10-11 months, we have experienced something new, something that has never happened before. This time, we are stuck without the freedom to express ourselves, especially as artists. It's a conflict that has altered the entire idea of our integrity and our identity.

How the somatic expression, natural spirit and the soundscape amalgamated each other, to express the undivulged gloominess of a lone Artist?I called it Nonverbal ballad, Performance art which expresses what mere verbal speech cannot. In this film, I experimented with Extemporization, Kinesics, and Synergistic Empathy to enter the realm, where I can emanate the transcendent agonies to the voracious spectators. And this one allowed me to extract the hidden selves with opening the ability for resonance with the dimension of Abyss(where the dead souls who perished in our Manipur violence linger) and I ultimately express the haphazard agonies in tandem with our physical vocabularies. All I want is Peace, Tranquility & Equanimity. And I hope Art can foster peace because they have the potential to serve as a forum for constructive dialogue. Also more importantly, artists require stability, security, freedom to produce, and share their works with the world.

Video Stills from *Hypnagogia* by R.K. Bitesh and Tushar Nongthombam

IMKAAN (Photo Essay)

Sumedha Bhattacharyya (INDIA) and Hediyeh Azma (IRAN)

In 2017, as an Indian Kathak dancer and photographer, I collaborated with an Iranian underground dance artist Hediyeh Azma currently based in Oslo, Norway in a dance project entitled Imkaan as an exploration of visual storytelling. Through our cross-cultural intersections, we attempted to interact and move, as photographer and dancer, to witness and record the ambiguity of the moving body in transition. Dance and censorship have been interconnected in both our cultures. These photographs are a way of seeing our relational journeys with dance, freedom, censorship as a dancer through our friendship and collaboration. Imkaan which means possibility in Persian and Urdu, uses the camera as a witness to explore both transformative self-performance and identiy- creation in multiple landscapes.

1. In the heart of the Middle East, and inside the geographical border called Iran, she birthed. A rich and colorful land, full of diversities and warmth, full of limitations and stagnation. Amidst loud laughter and deep cries, of passionate love and furious hatred, she opened her eyes and stepped onto the ground.

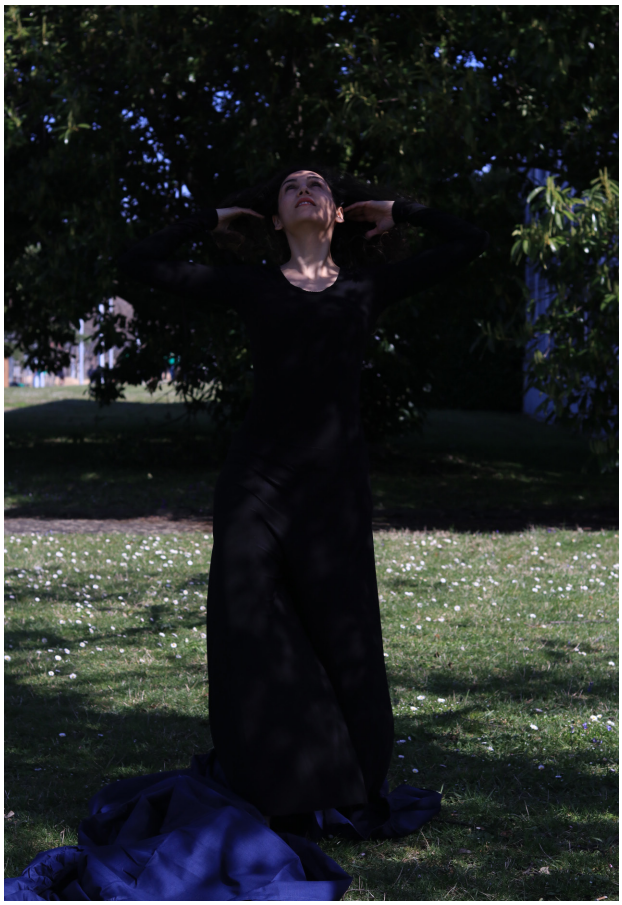
2. As she was growing up, her body became ever more subject to numerous cultural codes and social protocols. She was always carrying this political body with her in every single moment of her life.

3. As time unfolded, her body seemed to dissolve into the fabric of her surroundings, blending among other bodies with similar accents, similar behaviors, and alike habits. She was growing, and her dreams were growing. Dreams, the whispers of potential futures.

4. It is the imagination that flies, the wishes, the fantasies, they shape the desires, the goals, the next steps and the way to perceive your future. I dyed my hair, wore my scarf, wore my lipstick and went out to the streets to search for ways to make my dreams come true.

5-6 What you may call a fence, was my constant companion, an integral part of my upbringing, familiar to me and only me. Let me say that I enjoy the freshness of the rain drops and the gentle caress of the wind against my skin. Let me choose not to dislike the grey gloomy sky that creates those raindrops. You see, I only dance among the fragments of that fence, my fingers gracefully navigating through them.

7,8- Dancing in the darkness; there's allure in dancing amidst shadows, yet now I yearn for light— more light— so much light that can reveal even the slightest crease on my face, caused by the bliss of movement. But here I stand, shrouded in shadow, those lines unseen. I crave to witness the imprints of my existence upon the world. Do I depart, or do I ignite a light here?



9. I left home, allowing the sun to caress my hair... My movements revel in the warmth of the light…But where am I now? Who observes me? Do they comprehend my motions? Am I lost in their midst? I yearn for a home, not the one I left, but a radiant one, where my hair can dance freely under the sun.

10- I dream of having a wing, travelling to a land that is my land, a free one, a one where I dance in light. Dreams, the whispers of potential futures…

Crossing Barriers: Dance Unwound - A Conversation with Sushant Gaurav

Ajay Joshi

Having witnessed a recent Kathak performance in Pune, under the aegis of the *Birju Maharaj Kathak Mahotsav*, organized by the 'Kalachhaya Sanskritik Kendra,' I was taken aback by the grace and poise of young dancer, Sushant Gaurav. For one he did the honors by performing a large part of the presentation in 'Ati Vilambit Laya' (very slow tempo), set to Raag Darbari, a rare sighting for me, one otherwise exposed to the routine craft of Kathak. His lineage, which he said, belonged to the 'Lahore Lucknow Gharana,' was a first for the local audience in Pune, Maharashtra. There were many parts in his dance which were distinct to the routine repertoire and begged discourse. Interestingly, he trained under the Lucknow Gharana and then moved on to this lesser known family tradition of 'Lahore Lucknow Gharana.' It is not ordinary for a young dancer, still finding his feet in the dance arena, to move from the comfort and tutelage of a certain dance tradition and pursue an entirely different pedagogy, in search for himself and the philosophies he stands for. In a tete-e-tete with him about the comparison between Lucknow Gharana and Lahore Lucknow Gharana, I discovered his predilections and prejudices, his composure and aesthetic, and inquired into his desire and daring to tread the path less travelled while engraving a niche for himself.

AJAY: You have trained in the Lucknow Gharana of Kathak under stalwarts like Ustaad Birju Maharaj and Vidushee Mamta Maharaj. And then you moved on to the Lahore (Lahore-Lucknow) tradition of Kathak. This transition from one Gharana to another, was it done because it was something that you 'wanted to do' to 'stand apart from the milieu' or was it a 'need that you felt', because there was 'something amiss' in the kind of training that you were getting from the Lucknow Gharana?

SUSHANT: I would like to throw some light on Lahore Lucknow Gharana and its evolution before answering this question. Lahore Lucknow Gharana is actually the original Lucknow Gharana that was championed by Pt. Acchan Maharaj, father of Pt. Birju Maharaj. He was the pioneer of this style that focusses more on 'Ati Vilambhit Laya,' with a very strong command over movements that use different levels of bending with dancing to different speeds woven together in the same compositions called *Darzedaar Bandish*. *Darzedaar Bandish* means dancing the same composition in different *Jaatis* (rhythmic tempos) eg. *Dugun*, *Tigun*, *Chaugun*, *Khand Jaati*, *Mishra Jaat*i, and beyond. As the levels of composition rises with the levels of *Laya* (speed), the movements also change. The first speed is slow so it explores extreme bendings and curves more. The second level is a little above the first and it progresses on until you reach the fifth or the sixth level where one is dancing standing up straight with fast paced footwork and fast movements to arrive at the *Sam* (first beat of the rhythmic cycle). As the canvas of a painter is white in color and it does not change while the painter paints, similarly, the *Laya* is kept constant in *Vilambhit*. The dancers' poise and grace show the different speeds reflected through the body and the footwork but the *Tabla* (percussion) and *Lehra* (drone-like background score) remain constant. It's like the dancers showing their own command on different speeds and the musicians remaining constant and not guiding the dancer with changingspeeds, which is usually the norm today. As Pt. Acchan Maharaj Ji was a court performer in the court of Raza Ali Khan, the Nawab of Rampur, his style was set to the *Tehzeeb of Darbaar* (court etiquette) that is the signature of original Lucknow gharana. After the Nawabs and the courts perished, western influences of virtuosic presentation and rhythmic speed took significance. The musicians started guiding dancers with technicalities and the movements became shorter. With rhythm and speed assuming importance, the real charm of Lucknow Gharana was lost.

This original grace of Lucknow gharana was learnt by Maharaj Ghulam Hussain, who was the direct disciple of Acchan Maharaj ji. He went to Pakistan in post-partition India, and preserved the original Lucknow Gharana style of *Purana Andaz* (old

world charm) and hence called it 'Lahore Lucknow Gharana.'

As Acchan Maharaj Ji and his ancestors performed in courts of Wajid Ali Shah and other Nawaabs of Lucknow, the court had poets and singers like Jaddan Bai, Begum Akhtar, and musicians like Bismillah Khan and Allarakha Sahib performing in the courts as well. This syncretism with poetry, music, and literature gave Lucknow Gharana a "Gayaki Ang" (a musical inflection point) while maintaining extreme command over rhythm. I chose to revive the original Lucknow Gharana style of *Gayaki Ang* as it is lost to India. Hence, I chose to train in Lahore Lucknow Gharana with my Ustaad Fasih Ur Rehman Ji. I think this was needed. I have familiarized myself with Persian literature, music, and art. I felt that with the training that I had received in the Lucknow Gharana, the basic foundation was laid really well, but it felt very restrictive. There's a set pattern to Kathak, irrespective of the Gharana; he or she is dancing the same repetitive patterns. And I felt that if I'm doing a particular movement and if I'm not exploring my body, I'm not going in the space, not exploring how else it could go, like the journey of a movement, then what am I really doing ? You are taught certain beats and you follow them precisely. You are not even thinking about how the same movement can also be done in other ways with different patterns. When you read poetry by different Sufi saints, like, Amir Khusrow, Siraj Aurangabadi, or when you watch paintings by Picasso, you start questioning conventional boundaries—like classical, traditional etc. Disciplinary boundaries should set you free to explore yourself. I wanted to explore my body more. And that would happen only if I got to maintaining *Vilambit* (a slow speed), which is unlike the traditional speed of Kathak, which is 'Madhya laya' (the middle speed faster than *Vilambit*). I wanted to actually explore 'Vilambit laya', which is the essence of 'Lahore Lucknow Gharana.' They have not changed that. They dance everything in the 'Vilambit Laya' and explore various speeds keeping the base *Laya* constant. It's the base, it's the canvas, and like a painter has a white canvas and you paint on that. So, the *Laya* is the canvas, it will stay still, you as a dancer have to change your *Laya*, your rhythms, your body, your body-levels to show different kinds of speeds, within that format. And I like that thought process; it was clearer, more serene, and more austere to connect with.

AJAY: When did you first get in touch with this Gharana? Did you see something? Were you told about it? Did you read about it, something which made you want to switch over?

SUSHANT: When you are learning, I feel that there's an intellectual push from the inside, because I have academics by my side and I keep reading a lot. So, I had this intellectual push of doing something with what I have learned. Not just that I have learnt this' Taal' or seen that' Tukda' and I would want to go and dance it. I questioned myself. If I have learnt it, then what was it, where will it go? What will be my addition to it? I kept on exploring my body more and more and then I saw Fasihji's video online. This was in 2020. And I realized that this person is doing it, whatever I'm thinking ,whatever intellectual push I'm getting, this person is already doing it. He has already used so many 'Hastaks', which have been lost now but they existed back in the days when rhythm wasn't the leading force. I wondered how the *Purana Andaz* (old style) can be so beautiful. So, that's when I texted him, and said that I want to learn. I followed him for quite some time. I think he tested the waters; he wanted to know if I have that intellectual push to get beyond what's been taught to me. And we kept on talking on phone, it was not physical training initially. We kept on discussing a lot of poetry, a lot of Persian literature, and slowly it happened. He taught me one or two pieces. I was able to do it. He saw that my body is capable of taking it and, then I started my training.

AJAY: In the dance repertoire, you see that if you are being trained in a certain Gharana, there are some kind of rules and regulations where your body is getting molded into a certain kind of response that your Guru wants to do. When you changed over, what challenges you did you face? Did you have to unlearn what you had been taught to get onto a different system or did this give you a launch to learn further?

SUSHANT: In the Lucknow Gharana, Maharajji taught us that when you are on stage you are the king, which is the leading philosophy in the form today and makes the style look extremely appealing, confident and strong at the same time. So, you

would always take that stance and confidence. And you must have seen dancers from Lucknow Gharana doing just that, with bold, confident movements. This principle changes in the old style of Lucknow Gharana that I would henceforth refer to as Lahore-Lucknow Gharana. When they are using the poetry of Sufi saints and following the principles of Hindustani classical music, the influence is apparent. These saints have always written poetry on love, feelings, and emotions. So, with this philosophy in mind, my stance changed to a soft-gentle stance. The principle that you have in your mind, determines the form you are in. I already had my 'Hastaks' and my 'Taleem', right? Only the principle changed. And, when the principle changed, everything started adapting to that. I would start thinking, okay, if I have to dance with the feeling of love, I need to have my shoulders down, my elbows submissive. I kept on changing my movements that way as I kept on understanding more with Fasihji. I am still working on it.

AJAY: You had once said that there is a huge difference between 'Taleem' (instruction) and 'Riyaz' (practice). That they are things which need not be done behind closed doors, rather they happen as one goes through life. Can you elaborate?

SUSHANT: You must have seen Birju Maharaj Ji often talk about his father. But he passed away when Maharajji was nine. If you see my Ustaads guru, he weighed almost 100 kilos, he couldn't even get up. But, how do you think these people trained? How did they shape the form? Did they get physical training? No. It's all about thought pieces; it's all about letting the person understand what the meaning behind what you are doing. And if the person has an intellectual push and has that kind of understanding, then you need to adapt yourself to spend time with your guru. With Fasihji, it's never that he would teach me physically. He would just simply say that if you are using a particular movement, think as if with your right hand you're going in the twelfth century and the left hand to today's world. Now try to connect the twelfth century with today's world. Think of the dance from then till today, what the journey would be and this thought process would shape my movement. Okay, he would not really demonstrate much on camera; he would just sit and tell me that the movement should be like this, that this is the principle behind it. If I'm doing a 'Salaam'(bow) , he would not teach me how to do it, rather encourage me to engage with the meaning. If I am giving an interview, one has a certain confidence which you can project, but in doing a 'Salaam' you are reducing that confidence, my body must show submission and gratitude. When you are throwing your hand high up with broad shoulders, and then suddenly you pull your shoulders inside, you're reducing your ego, you're falling in submission. When you think of all this, when you talk about these principles, you start exploring it and then the form comes into you. So much of it is intellectual thought process and time spending with your Guru. It is not merely physical training.

AJAY: What are the important conversations you had with your Guru, that have been useful to you? Those that have been life changing or have kind of redefined or polished what you already knew?

SUSHANT: Fasihji often says that art forms need to reflect what you are going through in your life, be it good or bad. Art forms are meant to be a form of communication. You have to respond to whatever phase of life that you are going through at that stage. If you are an emotional person, you should take up and define those aspects, if you are a happy person you should take up the happy moments or then if you have a melancholic mood, you should respond accordingly. In Kathak you don't have to do all the things- 'Amad' ,' Tukde', 'Tihayi', 'Paran'. People dance all these things. But, he has always told me that search for the Sushant in Kathak. Sushant cannot dance the entire Kathak. What goes with your thoughts, what goes with your body, needs to be picked up, and then you work on that. This has been important for me, that is why I do not explore everything. I explore things as my mood goes. You see all great artists, Vidushi Girija Devi would sing Thumris well and Farida Khanum would sing Ghazals very well. And this happens later on in life when you do a lot of 'Riyaz'. But I was taught this at the start itself that you do not need to do everything; you need

to find 'yourself 'in the art form. He has taught me that dance depends on mood and is not a product that you are supposed to package and display. He has also taught me that you don't need to worry about 'claps' and reactions. A Kathak dancer tells the Tabla player to play a certain 'Tukda' and the Tabla player asks him to keep the *Laya*. He or she dances and the Tablawala plays. But, in my form, I tell the musician to sing 'Raag Darbari for example. The mood will be built depending on how you sing. Depending on how the Tabla is played, the movement gets decided. So, I have placed the musicians ahead and I follow them. But in the Kathak that happens today the percussion, dance, and music are painstakingly structured to the point of being banal and predictable. In my show that day, I asked them to open the Raag Darbari to the best of their capacity. It was an impromptu mood. Set patterns have to be broken. Be it good or bad. I am not here to convince someone that I am a good dancer. I am here to give what I feel on stage or what I feel about Kathak on stage. And I think that's the very essence of it.

AJAY: You said that you allow the singers to sing and musicians to play and you follow and adjust accordingly. Do you think this requires a lot of experience, because it cannot just be the mood. You may want to find something which you want to attach to, what is been led by the musicians. So how does it work for you?

SUSHANT: See, in Kathak, how much ever you modify it, it will have a set pattern. You know how to play the 'Amad'; you know how to play the 'Paran'. But where is the balance for all this? People get stuck at this point. I know my musicians have already learnt the compositions. So, now I don't want him to restrict himself, I want him to explore. At times you have two notes which merge into each other. Like the note 'DHA' can be played as it is, but if you drag it, it also incorporate the 'SA' in the drag. So that is the conversation I need to have with my musicians. One also has to focus on the musicality. This will give my body a chance to extend, explore the space and give a meaning to the movement and also help me create the mood. And this is what I feel was lacking in what I had learnt before. I mean I was taught that this is a notation and I have to do it just that way. When every person does the same thing in the same way, the personality of the dancer does not come out. Whether I am feeling the sensuality or am philosophic or spiritual while performing that takes me into a trance, I want the audience too to feel that emotion. I travel with the mood and do not get locked in fixed movements. I like the freedom to explore. My piece 'Salaam' (salutation) was not choreographed. It was spontaneous. My Guru tells me 'Khula Naccho', like a 'Khayal Gayaki'. Improvisation built into the vocal solo can be a viable template for creativity and improvisation for the Lahore-Lucknow Kathak artist.

If you are going with the Tabla and it gives the beat 12345 and you go and repeat 12345, I do not consider this as art. When you dance to the set beat, there is no story there. One can be in a different layer, yet every beat can match with every beat. What is art in that? I feel the story is where the cycles are and you are travelling between the beats, where your work is happening. In this pattern you have only your body and thoughts to glide. There is no hand-holding. You have to create, to fill the gaps. I like to work in the grey areas between the notes, areas which are silent, which do not determine, do not fix. That is where your personality comes out. These are the kinds of conversations I have with my Guru.

I feel that singing is a very important part of our training, to bring out the' Gayaki Aanga' in our dance. Unfortunately, it is given a low priority in today's pedagogy. For me *Sangeet* (music) is prime, and then the rest follows. I work very closely with my vocalists. It is important for me to be able to explain which Raga I am dancing. I cannot dance if my singer is singing badly. I must know the mood created. In the performance, I danced to' Raga Darbari'. It's a night-time Raga, sung in the coolness of twilight, when the moon is taking form. The mood is thus created for me to respond. While dancing 'Darbari', I cannot look the king in the eyes, they have to be lowered; while dancing the romantic 'Yaman', my look changes, my eyes respond accordingly. I saw this training in the Lahore Gharana, which had names such as, Bade Gulam AliKhan, Roshan Ara, and Farida Khanun.

You see Pakistan is a very small country, without the influence of Bollywood and without the influence of too many things happening. So there, Kathak and Sangeet have stayed together. My Ustaad has seen Noor Jahan

Begum, Mehdi Hassan Saab, and Farida Khanum Sahiba. When these people talk, they all talk of those times when they would attend each other's performances- the dancers and singers. We don't really get to see such things here. Do you see any good musicians coming for a Kathak performance? Once a sitarist, whom I was learning from said that when he works with me he feels good, because he felt there was Sangeet in my Kathak, something that he never felt with other young dancers. For me the test is not when a kathak dancer calculates my beat, but I feel more gratified when a singer appreciates my dance and comments on the musicality of the performance. I am very firm in my 'Taal' do not make a mistake in the beat. In 'Ati Vilambit' I picked from 1.15 beats, which is very difficult, but I did not falter, because *Ati Vilambhit Laya* makes your command on rhythm very strong. But 'Taal' is obvious and it is certainly going to be there to make a composition into *Bandish*. I search for that which is not obvious where my skill comes to test. This requires intellect, academic interest, and an interest in history.

AJAY: Is there anything else that is very specific to the Lahore Gharana- any kind of words, specific vocabulary, which you use in Kathak?

SUSHANT: In our area 'Thaath' is about poise. Through 'Thaath Bandhana,' we have also made 'Thaath' into an 'Amad'- by moving from one place to another. For us 'Thaath Bandhana', is about creating the mood of the 'Thaath,' by first entering into the 'Thaath,' then taking control of the 'Thaath.' Finally, by getting into the feeling of the 'Thaath' and then tying it all together, we stand in the final position. Then we also show a 'Thaath' in a 'Thaath.' Moving further along, we have 'GAAT SADHANA' that deals with rhythms. Often, you see dancers do their 'Tukda' and then leave their poise and reach for the mike. But in the Lahore Gharana we never do that. We hold the stance till the end. That is a specialty. Then you have specific ways of taking the stance when you put your hand on your cheeks. This is called 'Ruksar' in stasis or 'Gat e Ruksar' in motion. It is a Persian style of walking with your hands on your cheeks. Then you have words like 'Gat-e Husna', 'Gat e Peshani' or 'Peshani Ki Thaath'. In 'Gate Peshani', where 'Peshani' is Forehead- one hand is on your hair-bun and the other on your forehead. This 'Thaath' is unique to the Lahore Gharana. And this is the sign of feminine beauty and sensuality. I have done a 'Thaath' showing the gender-binary. Using 'Tandav' (male) as opening sequence, I glide in to the 'Husna' or the 'Lasya' (feminine) after which I close the 'Thaath'.

My Ustaad always tells me about his concepts of 'Teaching', 'Taleem', 'Practice' and 'Riyaz'. Teaching is where you teach the craft of Kathak. But 'Taleem' is not merely teaching but rather is the way you conduct your life, e.g. He says to chew your food well or else you won't be able to do a certain 'Tukda'! He says to control multitasking and to do one thing at a time but do it well or else you won't be able to dance the 'Vilambit Taal'. He says to go to work this way, control your emotions that way. It is a 'Taleem' of how to live your life 'Zindagi Ki Taleem'(Life's teachings). Then, 'Practice' is the time you spend with your Guru learning the pieces and nuances of Kathak. And, 'Riyaz' is the' Soch' (thought process) when you are on your own, with your emotional state of mind and you go through what you have learnt both in class and from life. And this is the time when all your feelings, emotions pour out in the 'Tatkar' that you are doing; you drown yourself in doing those pieces. That is 'Riyaz' and this is how it is taught to us. The 'Riyaz' is of two levels. One, that the students do and the other is the 'Ustadana Riyaz', where you do the basics in the first few hours and then move to the complexities, where each time you start from scratch. So, it becomes a revision of sorts. Mehdi Hasan would never start singing a 'Ghazal' in the first hour; he always spent three to four hours on the' SA'.

AJAY: You have said that detachment is the best form of attachment to love. Can you elaborate?

SUSHANT: I think love and fear can't exist together. These are two very opposite emotions. I feel that way and I feel love goes very well with freedom. In dance too it can be seen. One can sense love when you come out of merely following set patterns of 12345 and my dance 'opens up'. You feel free on stage and relaxed, and it reflects

in the dance. Love is a feeling you cannot determine, it is taking you to freedom from your body and your thoughts. Whereas I think attachment restricts you, there is a fear that I want this, I want to do this, I want to show this, I want to own! Attachment is when you look at a flower and you want to pluck it and keep it in your own room. Detachment is when you look at the flower and you are sitting there all day looking at the flower, admiring it, adoring the color, see how the sunlight is falling on it, how the green leaf looks. But not loving it to possess it. And I think this is the best form of love where you don't want to own. You give that freedom.

AJAY: Now that you are an exponent of the Lahore Gharana, how does the dance community here look at you? Would they feel you are leaving established Indian traditional Gharanas to pursue one which is lesser known?

SUSHANT: People need to understand that there is nothing specific to the Lahore Gharana rather it is the most traditional and original Lucknow Gharana. Actually, this is Birju Maharaji's father's style. This is a 'Purana Andaz' of Kathak. And this is the very style in which all the great Gurus, namely, Damayanti Joshi ji, Acchan Maharaj ji danced. Maharaj Gulam Hussain, who taught Birju Maharajji's father danced this style. All these styles used to be danced in the courts of Raza Ali Khan, where Acchan Maharaj also danced. So, this is nothing foreign as if from our neighboring Pakistan. Rather, it is about bringing in or reviving your own tradition, apart from geopolitical issues. One can claim that it was lost because of the speed of life where verything works according to temporal equations and gives little scope to understand and explore oneself and the craft.

You would never see rushed movement in 'Ati Vilambit Laya.' So, I do not see it as anything foreign. It is, in fact, more Indian because Kathak today has more foreign influences. It is influenced by *Jazz* and *POP* and *Rhythm* and *Flamenco* with a lop-sided emphasis on lot of footwork. My style is very much Indian. It is very much of the Gharana. It is of the 'Purana' Lucknow Gharana.

I have pictures and a video call with Birju Maharaj where he has acknowledged that this is Acchan Maharaj's form. It is his own father's style that used to happen in the courts or *Darbars*. Why is this concept that Urdu is a Muslim language and that doing the 'Salaam' is a Pakistani thing? Sorry, it's not that. These are our things. Amir Khusrow was an Indian poet. He has written so many Dohas on Rama. He has used Krishna in his Dohas. People in India adore him. They go to his 'Mazar' here. So, it is wrong to say that 'Urdu' is his, 'Sher-o-Shayari' is his, and 'Salaam' is his. This was made much later. Khusrow was never political minded. Lata Mangeshkar, Farida Khanum, and Kishori Amonkar never stopped talking to each other. Mehdi Hassan was from Rajasthan. He stayed in Pakistan and sang 'Kesariya Balam.' Did you see Farida Khanum wear anything else but a saree? They said they are from Bharat; they are from Hindustan. They said their 'Parampara' had taught them this. Come what may, they will never wear anything but a saree. Even today they wear a saree, don bangles, put on a bindi, which at one time was very difficult politically. There is no politics in art, in that sense. These are all created by others, not artistes.

AJAY: You have been dancing for about three years in the Lahore Gharana with its distinctive style, and performed extensively. How has your dance been perceived by the audiences?

SUSHANT: Very well. I performed in Kolkata and received a standing ovation. Everybody appreciated that there was stability, speed, grace, 'Chakkars' etc. Wherever I have performed, the response has been overwhelming. What I liked about my Pune show is that, not only the artistic community but even the general audience came up and appreciated my work. That is very rewarding for me. It meant that my work had reached out to a common person, to non-artistes. This is the real test. My dance felt different to the lighting technician , to the musicians, and to the organizers. Some said it was like a painting to them. In the hindsight a few seniors, teachers, are restrictive in their thought process. They do not look at dance from an innocent stance, open mind. They look at the form in their own technique. It is like 'one size fits all.' You go to any place; you would see the same thing. So, they have the spectrum, if you fit in it then it is working. Like in Pune if you start with a 'Ganesh Vandana' and then go on to do a 'Kavitt', then you are on the right track. But, if you enter with an 'Ati Vilambit Laya', do a

'Salaam', bend down, and then instantly eyebrows are raised. They need to free their mind and look at it from an innocent angle. It has nothing to do with the art, just to do with the cliques formed with the styles of dancing that each group follows and the comfort zone to not let the whip go in others hands.

I also miss the mingling of the arts. There is an absence of the togetherness of music with dance. I yearn for musicians to come for a Kathak performance and vice versa. A music concert hardly has a Kathak dance and Kathak festivals hardly invite musicians. This is the drawback. Years of practice can make you dance to perfection on stage, something that one will eventually achieve. But I think it is important to break stereotypes, move away from set patterns, feel the freedom to explore and navigate the 'grey areas', not to fear to get your ideas to work on. Show what you feel, do not decide for yourself what is good and what is bad. Let the viewer decide what he likes or otherwise.

AJAY: You mention that you are now working with 'Ghazals'. Also, that you are been trained in the 'Baithaki' (Sitting) style of doing Kathak. Can you explain?

SUSHANT: Because of the absence of musicality, I feel 'Taal' has become central to Kathak. There is reduced influence of music. I have not seen much of 'Ghazals' been used in Kathak. Some parts or a few lines are used. But 'Thumri' had found its place in Kathak. I heard Ali Sethi once say that the 'Ghazal' is an emotional response, which is relevant in every century. I mean one could identify with an old 'Ghazal' even today. It can never grow old; it is always very contemporary. Also, the courtesans would dance to the 'Thumri' outside the darbars. They sat down and danced in 'Baithak' style. And their movements were invariably very feminine. I wondered how a 'man' would do it. I wanted to explore that element. It would look strange if he did the feminine gestures, then how would he show his emotions? A man can actually sit and dance because this is what he goes through in life. He goes through life, experiences mothers love, feelings, relationships etc. So much has been written about it by Mehdi Hassan Saab, Faiz Ahmed Faiz and others. So, if not the feminine movements, how can men express these emotions. I realized men can dance to the 'Ghazal', which is good material for men. Because you have lived the written text as a father, a husband, a friend, a lover, a brother etc. There are so many compositions written about these relations. Here we can also show grace in masculinity. It gives an entirely different perspective to the dance. I am not claiming to be a pioneer in the 'Baithaki Andaz'. It has been done by Shambu Maharaj, Lacchu Maharaj, Birju Maharaj. I am now trying to pick up an intellectual idea has come, make transparent the thought process through my own communication. I will respond to what the singer is singing through my feelings. Who is right there in the 'Ghazal?' I want to find Sushant in the 'Baithaki!'

AJAY: When you are dancing to a 'Ghazal,' the temptation is to dance to the words, but do you want to dance to the emotional experience?

SUSHANT: Responding to words is the 'Thumri' style. That is why I say the 'Ghazal' is best suited for the male presentations. This is totally my opinion as I felt in my experience.

AJAY: I am aware that your Guru Fasih Ur Rehman Ji resides in London and you are based in Delhi. You meet for a month in Nepal, which is convenient for both. What do you do when you meet your Guru for a month like this? Is it a time to teach new things or is it time to correct the old things?

SUSHANT: I have my strong foundations laid with Mamta Ji and Maharaj ji. Their teachings have been extremely instrumental in developing the basics of Kathak and the ability to create my own sense of Laya-Taal-Ang (tempo-rhythm-control). So Fasih Ji and I connect over calls to discuss what we are going to work upon. We decide the technical pieces that I have to learn and basic Riyaaz is the most important part anyway. It is a time to first transform movements that I already know to reflect the philosophies that he teaches. Learning the technique is a second step. I am a dancer; I understand what the movement is; but what should be the proportion in the movement? I can

only understand that when I meet him physically. This is also the time to understand how to do 'Riyaz'. I have spoken of it earlier. I have also learnt the technique of 'Khada Riyaz'. Here there is no aesthetic. It is labor intensive working on the craft and technique. Like doing 'Riyaz' in the raw form.

AJAY: Do you also visit other spaces of art on a regular basis?

SUSHANT: I feel it is very important for us to explore other art forms and specifically music. I go for music concerts and I have more friends among musicians then dancers. I read a lot of literature, mainly Urdu literature and some English literature. I am also fascinated by architecture as many of our dance movements and 'Hastaks' align with forms, shapes, structures, which are architectural constructs, likes doors, windows, minarets, tombs etc. Unfortunately, dance has become very rhythmic. If you are unable to leave the 'Obvious' you will not be able to see the abstract. Then there will be no creativity. One has to think and question. These are times of technological advancements, such as robots which can be created on computers. But robots cannot bring in emotions. So, there is loss of 'Ruhaniyat'. I am aiming to bring that back.

AJAY: Do you introspect?

SUSHANT: I think I need to convince people, dancers and more so musicians, and talk about the freedom to express, to open themselves more and to accept the raw form of Kathak. Secondly, I think, I need to work on finding my balance, in what should be the proportion of everything, the proportion of dancing to 'Taal ' and dancing to 'Khayal'. I am still working on how should my performances flow?; how much should be done? How do I gauge the proportion? I would really urge dancers to actually get out of these rhythmic patterns, what a robot can easily do and get in introspective emotions and feelings of the 'Zindagi' that they have lived. And that will make it individual and personified.

AJAY: How do you think you could train the audience to see work? Should they be shown what they like to see or should they also be challenged to develop their sensitivity and sensibilities?

SUSHANT: This is a question which has been on my mind for long. Often, I do not do much talking but do the 'Tukdas'. I think if I explain a bit and interject that during the pieces, it might be easier for people to connect beyond the aesthetics. For example, I danced the 'Yaar-e-man...'. But no one knows the 'Yaar-e-man...'... as a composition. It can bring tears to one's eyes. Workshops, lecture-demonstrations, outreach programmes, and intimate space-programming could help to train audiences to see beyond the obvious. It will also trigger people to view a positive way, to read more and to explore more through an intellectual pursuit. And I think this is the purpose of art and 'obviousness is not'. I also feel young dancers must not fear to make mistakes on stage. This is their laboratory. It should be love only, and we do make mistakes in love, don't we? I had asked Maharajji and Fasihji what the difference was between them and the other dancers. And they both said they were not scared on stage and open to falter and reset. To me this is very beautiful. We need to remove the filters of judgement and appreciate that the person on stage is 'human' and not a 'robot' dancing. Mistakes are inevitable.

I am trying a different path, a path that is less travelled by my fellow artists. I am not sure of what the future holds for me and the form. But hopefully my work will speak for itself down the line!

AJAY: How many girls/ boys train under your Guruji or in this Gharana?

SUSHANT: Fasih Ji has nearly 50 students training under him currently in Barcelona and London. He usually likes to create solo dancers and explore each ones individualities. A lot of students cannot be trained together hence, this number. All his students are extremely graceful dancers who were appreciated by Birju Maharaj Ji upon his visit to Barcelona for the Hemantika festival. He keeps conducting workshops all across the globe which is attended by senior artists and performers. We will soon have an online workshop of his in India.

AJAY: Apart from your Guruji who else is well known exponent of this Gharana in contemporary times who are also known in India?

SUSHANT: Nahid Siddiqui and Bina Jawwad are the

stalwarts.

AJAY: In this once female dominated art form, there are now many male dancers. And some are really good. Do you feel any competition? Or feel threatened of how long you could dance?

SUSHANT: No. I think there's good balance of male and female dancers as of now. I think the focus should not be the gender, rather the quality. Honestly, we do not have many dancers who could hold the stage as soloists and perform for an hour or more. That kind of training has vanished. We see group compositions, duets, trios, productions but the solo recital that is the soul of Kathak is vanishing.

I do not feel any competition at all. I have extreme faith in my Taleem that I have received from such great Ustaads and my own academic self is used to doing a lot of research and the combination of these two is highly potent. I am trying to create my own path and I think of myself as my strongest competition. Every other concert has to be an upgrade from where I was previously. That is how I see it.

It is all about the strength to do more and more Riyaaz and keep learning from your Guru. It is not about five years of success or ten years of name in the classical field. It takes half the age to establish oneself and the other half goes in creating work and teaching. I am not in any hurry.

AJAY: Do you think there have been instances of partiality of not choosing your Gharana over some other for an invite/ competition?

SUSHANT: No. I have received immense appreciation from the organizers and the audience wherever I have performed.

AJAY: On a similar note, patronage is a major issue, along with the right kind of exposure. How do you look at this personally?

SUSHANT: If we look at history, we have always had patronage problem with classical arts, be it singing dancing or poetry. This is exactly what Amir Khusrow or Mirza Ghalib or Begum Akhtar or Bade Ghulam Aliu Saab must have gone through in their own ways. It was never easy. It was not easy for Maharaj Ghulam Hussain, to go to Pakistan post partition and establish an art form that was considered Hindu in a country with such high religious sentiment back then. I remember these people whenever I think about the challenges. It fills me with sense of purpose, power and excitement to keep working hard.

AJAY: I am sure there are many critics, both junior dancers and stalwarts, of this 'Ati Vilambit' style of dance. Being a young dancer how do you face it or engage with it or negotiate?

SUSHANT: There are hardly any dancers who are working on Ati Vilambhit laya and the Purana Andaz of Kathak. Honestly, it requires a lot of patience and strong Taleem to be able to glide through such difficult Laya. Also, the duration of the events have shrunk to fifteen to twenty minutes from solos that used to happen for two to three hours. That is also a very significant factor. I must also say that Gurus and people appreciate that I am working towards preserving the original Lucknow Gharana Kathak which is nearly extinct and needs to be brought in back to its old charm. I am saying this based on reactions of Ustaads like Saswati Sen Ji, Mamta Maharaj Ji, Manjushree Chatterjee, Anindo Chatterjee and many such stalwarts who have encouraged me to keep going. As we talk about critics, I think they signal growth. They highlight areas which need to be perfected and worked upon and I take it as a challenge and an avenue to look forward into my work. Adding to this, all great people who could make a mark in this field have been fearless to present their thought process through their form. That is what is appreciated in the long run as you see in the example of Sitara Devi Ji.

AJAY: This is a lesser known Gharana to the regular repertoire seen in India. Though you have explained its lineage earlier, that it was and is very much Indian, still a feeling that this is from across the border, is bound to crop up. How do you look at it? Will you feel intimidated? Would your career be affected?

SUSHANT: As I said earlier that organizers, Gurus and Fellow artists have always encouraged me to keep going and that is how I have been able to grow from a mere Kathak dancer to a soloist. It is important for them to understand that Pakistan was formed in 1947 but this art form is ancient. Lucknow Gharana's old form was developed in the courts of Nawabs like Wajid Ali Shah. I do not feel intimidated by this. Also, my Ustaad learnt in Pakistan but since the past twenty-five years has been living in London and working globally. Music and art knows no borders. I have the support of Birju Mahraj Ji's family who acknowledge the style to be the original Lucknow Gharana Style. With this support and my Riyaaz, this will keep growing. I am very positive.

AJAY: Will you need to make extra efforts to be invited to Indian stages to perform the Lahore Lucknow Gharana?

SUSHANT: Well! To be a soloist is anyway too much effort. I have already performed in six major festivals of India and all those festivals had invited me looking at my work. I think that is commendable growth for me. Of course some eyebrows will always be raised, irrespective of gharana or style. But, the balance lies in looking at the brighter side that musicians and non-artists are loving the style. This is important to me. I would just need more Riyaaz and more work on my form to be invited to perform in major festivals.

AJAY: Your Guruji had to face many hurdles to establish himself in the patriarchal and political scenario in Pakistan and moved on abroad. Will this affect your career presenting this Gharana? Your future in this form?

SUSHANT: That time was completely different. It was the era of Zia Ul Haq's rule and his hegemony. Things have never been like that after his era ended. India is completely different in those terms. We are way ahead and developed with established avenues of arts and opportunities. I told you that I have support of most gurus. They have stood up on stage and talked good about my work. Fasih Ji had a totally different journey where he was caught up in Pakistan in that era where art was banned. He then moved to London and attained British citizenship and worked in England. He also learnt with Kumudini Lakhia ji for some time and he was immensely praised by Pt. Birju maharaj ji. Once at Hemantika festival, Maharaj ji sat on the stage while Fasih ji performed his solos as Maharaj ji wanted to see him very closely to look at how he moves and uses his body. All of this culminates to a good future for me, I suppose!

An excerpt of Sushant Gaurav's performance.

Video Still of Performance by Sushant Gaurav

Call for Papers: South Asian Dance Intersections 4.0
***Pedagogies of Crossing* Volume 4 Issue 1**
Deadline: May 31, 2025

This is an open call for Volume 4 Issue 1 of *South Asian Dance Intersections* to be published in the autumn of 2025. Inspired by M. Jacqui Alexander's *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*, we turn to making visible subordinated knowledge that has remained marginalized at the confluence of multiple operations of power (gendered, sexualized, raced, classed, colonized, imperialized, categorized etc.). Alexander poses a provocation: "simply teach in order to teach" (8). This theoretical deliberation on teaching focuses on such a non-teleological vocation, one that is neither a radicalizing curriculum nor a conservative propaganda, decentering domination with a spiritualized secular imbued with lost memories with traces of imaginative freedom.

We welcome submissions from around the world in which the author(s) focus on interdisciplinary, intercultural, intersectional, and intergenerational pedagogies embedded within creative departures from the canon in the worlding of South Asian Dance Studies. *South Asian Dance Intersections* explores the concept of pedagogy in a journal length inquiry emphasizing upon and expanding the centrality of the process of instructional transmission within dance, especially, as it relates to the traditional canon. The publication emphasizes processes and practices considered at the intersections of and at the borders of common knowledge. We publish journal-length inquiries, photo essays, interviews, debates, and audiovisual content. All articles submitted should be original work and must not be under consideration by other publications. *South Asian Dance Intersections* offers traditional double blind peer-review where the author(s) and reader-reviewers remain unknown or 'blind' to each other. The writing is anonymized and the author receives anonymous responses from the reviewers via the SADI editorial team. We welcome submissions throughout the academic year. While contributions are invited from a diverse range of perspectives, we will prioritize critical methodologies that are intersectional, interdisciplinary, and experimental in nature. Topics might include:

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