

Spiritual Ecology of my Bharata Natyam Dance: A Peacebuilder's Reflections on her guru's Pedagogies of Crossing

Feriyal Amal Aslam

Abstract

This article is part II of articulation on SADI's call, of an over two decades long reflexive journey of the author's dance practice, body and spiritual path. Thus, it aligns with SADI's turn to making visible subordinated knowledge that remained unarticulated and marginalized at the confluence of multiple operations of power. It not only highlights a pioneer dance scholarship project for Pakistan (Aslam, 2012)¹ a seedling, but the ongoing process of mindful dispersal of this seed of interfaith harmony, peace-building via deeper connection to the lands in its new home of Nusantara.

Introduction

The dance I am referring to in this article is *Bharata Natyam* originally a Hindu temple dance from South India, from movements carved out of some of the oldest dance relics, South Indian Hindu temples. But for me it was in Pakistan, the land that I was born and mostly raised in that I learned an indigenized version of this dance. Now it is in Nusantara, the land I have fallen in love and made home that I discover deeper wisdom or *hikmah* of my practice.

SADI welcome submissions around the world with focus on:

interdisciplinary, intercultural, intersectional, and intergenerational pedagogies embedded within creative departures from the canon in the worlding of South Asian Dance Studies.

This article is *interdisciplinary* as it takes baby steps to bring together fields of ecology, interfaith harmony and dance studies with the author's focus on the later via her practice and the body at the center of it all. My Pakistani Bharata Natyam repertoire is a model example how a lived *intergenerational* pedagogy of a teacher is passed on, despite controversial histories that it deters, and "Long Partition" (Zamindar 2007) of the people and of the *lands* that it helps suture. Indu Mitha is Pakistan's senior most maestro of Bharata Natyam and from its reconfigured revival *Kalakshetra* origins that she inherited, Indu has tirelessly worked to indigenize/ *Urdu*-ize her trail blazing philosophical innovations. These include innovations in music, themes and technique (I detail in Aslam 2012) taught to mostly Muslim students, like myself in Pakistan for over six decades.²

It is also in the realm of *intercultural* and *intergenerational* as Indu's trail blazing pedagogies choreographed on Pakistani soil, passed on to the next generation who are now based in different parts of the world (namely United States, Indonesia, Germany and Europe³). SADI's emphasis on "processes and

1 "Choreographing [in] Pakistan: Indu Mitha, Dancing Occluded histories in "The Land of the Pure". Doctor of Philosophy in Culture and Performance, UCLA, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8km963tz>.

2 2017 she presented her official "retirement show" *Hazaroen Khawahishaen Aisee* (A Thousand Yearnings) which the author helped produce and facilitate independent film makers to film, for their film "How She Moves". <https://puan.pk/a-thousand-yearnings-when-expression-meets-dance/>.

3 Indu's torch bearer and senior most student is Tehreema Mitha, a professional dancer based in Washington D.C with both classical, bridge dances and extensive contemporary dances completely her own style. Other senior students continuing dance focus and part of her finale show and in Indu's [public statement](#) include Iftikhar Masih, author a first dance scholar for Pakistan, and Zahra Khalid a Fulbright scholar, Amna Muwaz khan who combines social activism with her dance work.

practices considered at the intersections of and at the borders of common knowledge” is timely for my guru’s engagement and inspired creation of an indigenously relevant *bharata natyam* for her Pakistan audience from 1950’s to her declared “retirement” in 2017. Still in 2019 when author was invited to create her intercultural dance drama “From Java to Indus: A Dance Journey from Pakistan, to Indonesia and to the World”⁴ by the Indonesia embassy in Islamabad, Indu continued to support the music making process and that proved to be our last collaboration with *Tabla* maestro Ustad Ajmal Khan who passed away a month after the premier of the dance drama.

Thus, shared ahead is this *intercultural* crossing of pedagogies in Indonesia via the author’s personal life as a bridge between Indonesia and Pakistan and over the years with KBRI, Indonesian Embassy Islamabad to produce and co-choreograph with Indonesian artists for preservation of intangibles heritage of her *lands*. These lands of mine of South and South East Asia are connected by severe impact of climate change (both on red zone of natural disaster impact areas in the world), and constitute the largest populations of Muslims in the world. Unfortunately, in addition to this natural disaster threat in South Asia the “man-made disasters of communal violence continue to be a very real threat part of the “unfinished business of Partition”, and “Long Partition” (Zamindar, 2007) as reminded by the recent *mini-war* between India and Pakistan last month.⁵ In this context the intersectionality of Hindu-Muslim philosophies in Indu’s repertoire for her majority Muslim students is a beautiful testimony to how artists here and around the world continue to build peace through their art one step at a time.

I am so grateful for SADI’s timely nudge to

begin to articulate in words and also to help share ethnographic video documentation from its 2017 premier, , one of Indu’s favorite solo *bharata Natyam* pieces “[Qaseeda-ilm-o-Jamal](#)”/“[An Ode to Wisdom and Beauty](#)” inspired by a Saraswati statue she spotted outside Indonesian embassy in Washington D.C, and also the dried up River Saraswati in present day Pakistan. Indu choreographed this piece on the author in Indu’s 2017 retirement show, but little did I know when we worked on this piece together, the portals it would continue to open for me since then. Ahead in dance scholar style to engage with my land and my practice in a much deeper way I return to the piece. The dried up River Saraswati that dance student and choreographer discovered together in process of choreographing on *Raag Saraswati* in 2017 Pakistan become a powerful reminder of multiple valences. First of the urgent Climate crisis in this part of the world, and then as metaphor for rich ecological, cultural and intangible heritage of my land including many rich traditional music and dance traditions with classical roots which are threatened to dry up too.

Grateful for the call to contribute a keynote last month at the *Institute Seni Indonesia*, Solo on the theme of “Ecology and the Arts: Sustainable Practices and Study in Performance, Design and Visual Art” at the International Interdisciplinary Conference on Arts Creation and Studies (IICACS), 2025. The conference themes brought together for me “the protection of ecological systems and cultural heritage” from war as well as “the development of heritage through artistic innovation” in its aftermath. It brought home the urgency of both Climate change and the intangible heritage protection and preservation work that I have been committed to for over a decade now.⁶ The urgency to consciously

4 <https://centrelines.com.pk/2019/11/18/indonesian-artists-present-spell-binding-performance-pnca/>

5 <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1311914-heat-hate-and-hegemony>

6 Grateful to World Arts and Cultures (WAC), UCLA alumni and friend Eko Supriyanto for the call to contribute to this exciting international conference and to Professor Kim Anno’s reflexive workshop in aiding these “wild” connections.

continue to use my art as peacebuilder tools and to collaborate with like-minded⁷ ecology and earth focused others. My first steps in this direction are inward and reflexive and to encounter my “other” and as I do so in the process, I hopefully illuminate the path for others to do so for their respective “others”. Ahead I return once again to a special space or “field” in the words of Sufi poet Mevalana Rumi, and then share ahead the next best steps that I have taken since then to embrace my “Hindu” other.

*“Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing
and right doing there is a field.
I’ll meet you there.”*

Mevlana Rumi (paraphrased by (Nicholson n.d.)

1. INCLUSIVITY AND SACRED SPACE: From Luminary *Saraswati*, to “Muslim Garuda”⁸ to getting to know *Krishna*

Bandung, 2023

*“So, I venture in that open field and embody the Devi Saraswati inspired from this mighty river, both forgotten in “The Land of the Pure,” land of my birth as the other, a “Hindu goddess,” but celebrated in my second home by love, Indonesia. It is here that I write these words and discover in Indonesian language even the word for “dance” is **persembahan**, translated as “offering” rather than performance. So, this is my*

*offering here ahead. As I begin to write and reflect on this dance, I discover what evaded me, and perhaps my generation, all this time and which was long known by elders of both the land of Indonesia and the subcontinent that what I saw as “Hindu God” stories are actually narrations of “luminaries” like Krishna or Devi Saraswati. My dance is my offering to the dried-out soul of the land of my birth, thirsty for the sounds and sights of the river full of layers of alluvial riches hidden to the casual passerby. Today Indonesia is the country with the largest number of Muslims in the world and Islam was spread in Java (the most populous island in Indonesia) largely by these famous **Wali Sanga** or Nine Luminaries and it is to their creative genius and mindful preaching that we owe this celebration of diversity here. I see here that Devi Saraswati is one of them, a female luminary, spreading her light filled with wisdom, beauty and aesthetics.” (p.16)*

(Aslam 2023)

Since then, I have witnessed this celebration of diversity here in Java, and in my travels across border to Malaysia and Singapore through my interaction with both Muslim and Hindu friends in this region. *I see here that Devi Saraswati is one of them, a female luminary, spreading her light filled with wisdom, beauty and aesthetics.* I also ventured on a call to choreograph a “Muslim Garuda” as my friend and cultural expert for Java Nani Abdur Rahman called it, when we discussed her concept for our

⁷ Here I will like to expand the notion of “mind” beyond narrow neuroscience definition, thus beyond the physical head instead the entire body as proposed by eminent Philosopher Professor Bambang Sugiharto (*personal correspondence*). Professor Sugiharto is founder of unique integrated arts program at UNPAR and nurtured course “*Body as Medium of expression*”. A semester long engagement of students with their bodies to explore and narrate their reflexive life journey, and cultural heritage <https://metrum.co.id/our-story-our-land-refleksi-dan-ruang-sakral-dalam-pertunjukan-tari/>

⁸ Term by Javanese cultural expert Nani Abdur rehman in our collaboration discussion process (*Personal correspondence*, 2024).

collaborative piece “*Mantra Merah Putih*”/ “Red and White Mantra” and thus a new exploratory journey this time into Javanese indigenous spirituality has just begun.



Figure 1. Instagram Poster of “*Mantra Merah Putih*” (Red and White mantra)

Magaleng September 2024

Festival Gunung Lima/ The Five Mountain Festival, Magaleng, Java

It was both perplexing and exciting to venture in this wild collaboration with Master Gamelan musicians Wibowo and his group from Jogjakarta and to choreograph with a Solo classical style trained dancer and cultural expert Nani Abdur Rahman, on this philosophical critique of state of Indonesia’s socio-political problems on soul stirring poetry by Pa Hadi. Especially challenging for me as a secular bharata Natyam trained dance student

from Pakistan with no such vocabulary in my repertoire, to create and reflect on what my “Muslim Garuda” (as my co-collaborator Nani called it to help my process), should look like.

Komunitas Lima Gunung (KLG, the five-mountain community) was founded in 2002 by Sutanto Mendut a renowned cultural practitioner.

KLG refers to communities living in the five mountains of *Magelang*, Central Java that from *Mount Sumbing, Merbabu, Andong, Merapi, and Menoreh* have come together to form one community. According to Adia and Ma’arif “*Sutanto Mendut*, the president of KLG has built the community with the characteristics of what Victor Turner calls “*communitas*”. Their research examines ideas of *communitas* and their results indicate that society emerges through ritual performances that create moments of liminality, in turn result of re-articulation of the anti-norms/social order structure. Sutanto Mendut, has rearticulated this sense of togetherness through the Land Oath (*Sumpah Tanah*) of KLG to become the Five Mountains Festival (FLG). Lastly KLG is the strength of the community as members learn are no longer dependent on established social structures and are free to feel the moment of togetherness.

Innovation Park, Institute Technology Bandung (ITB), November 16th, 2024

Brinda Bun ***Krishna stories***: A Cultural Bridge, a Symbol of Unity

Once again, I am dancing “Brinda Bun⁹ Krishna’s stories from maestro Indu Mitha’s repertoire invited to share my Bharata Natyam dance

9 Note Indu only taught me this repertoire in a summer break from my graduate studies so only repertoire blatantly about *Krishna* in Brinda Bun as I will be sharing overseas and not in Pakistan. Post 70’s Partitioned Pakistan and Martial law “Islamization” by dictator Zia imposed a ban on dance which though removed, but requirement of

for the annual gathering of my student from a semester of Urdu-Hindi that I ITB offered. My student is the founder of this foundation (*Teman Saling Berbagi*) which supports huge network or orphanages and mostly in the pesentran/ Islamic schools. This year Peace Generation is also supporting it and I am pleased to share the message of Love, Peace and Tolerance. I shared in a talk show after how the **Sunan's** spread **dawa** in this Land and I used Krishna's story passed down from my Guru-A Brahmin-converted to Christianity and now secularly inclined dance teacher to the youth of today and my daughter joined me in the performance.

As I reflect on the work of these saints, my baby steps in the oceans of Indonesia's philosophical, cultural, and spiritual landscape I discover a syncretic Javanese spiritual tradition that blends Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic elements called "*Kejawen*". I learn that it focuses on inner spirituality and harmony with nature rather than strict religious adherence. Here, Krishna is revered as symbol of wisdom and divine love, alongside Islamic figures, without conflict. This philosophy allows people to honor both Krishna and Allah as expressions of the same ultimate truth. Also, in "*Wayang Kulit*" (Shadow Puppet Theatre), a powerful medium used by them to blend Hindu epics of "Mahabharata" and "Ramayana" with Islamic values. Characters from these epics, including Krishna, are well-known in Javanese and Balinese culture, where Krishna's character is reinterpreted with moral and ethical values that resonate with both Javanese culture and Islam, portraying him as a wise and compassionate leader. In many "*wayang*" adaptations, Krishna is depicted in a way that appeals to Muslim audiences, focusing on universal moral lessons rather than overtly religious themes. This helps bridge Hindu and Islamic teachings, presenting

Krishna's actions as morally instructive rather than bound to one faith.

I am also reminded of the South Asian context that I have explored in my earlier research, where Sufism's emphasis on divine love and personal devotion shares many parallels with the Hindu concept of *bhakti* and this shared space is only recently coming up in scholarship. Especially in case for Kathak. Margaret Edith Walker's PhD dissertation *Kathak Dance: A Critical History* questions the Hinduization of kathak, and complicates this history by discussing how kathak reflects the amalgamation of orientalist, nationalist and colonial frameworks present in India by the turn of the twentieth century. Pallabi Chakravorty in her book (2008) also shows that the "syncretic traditions of Sufi-bhakti philosophy found a sophisticated expression in the dance that emerged in the royal courts" and that kathak was influenced by a mix of Sufi-bhakti philosophy (Chakravorty 2008, 37).

Now I discover that "Krishna, in this Indonesian context, serves as a cultural bridge, embodying values that resonate with both Hindu and Muslim communities. This concept reflects Indonesia's broader philosophy of religious and cultural harmony, where diverse traditions coexist and inform one another, enriching the spiritual life of the nation. Through this lens, Krishna's role extends beyond religion, becoming a universal symbol of wisdom, love, and moral courage, appreciated across faiths."

But I am also reminded of the forgotten histories of inclusivity and pluralism of my land of origin meticulously carved by certain artists. From the subtly discussed Krishna in my dance guru Indu Mitha's *shabdham* (bharata Natyam piece) *Sari Sunehree* (A Golden

"No-Objective Certificate" for all performances wording dance as "vulgar activity" has just recently been removed. In this context Indu had to creatively strategize her preservation of pluralistic context (detailed Aslam 2012).

Sari) which I detail elsewhere¹⁰ to the *Kavita bols* (recited Shloka type chant)¹¹ that Indu purposely choreographs in Urdu language and uses in her *kathak* repertoire which otherwise has virtually disappeared in Pakistan.

The usage of *kavita bols* is a subtle transgression that may be lost on those unfamiliar with the available classical dance music and traditions available in Pakistan. Only people familiar with these *bols* in pre-Partition North India may recognize that these are one of the beautiful elements occluded and lost in classical dance repertoire in Pakistan after the Partition.

(Aslam, 2012)

Similarly in classical music maestro musicians /*Ustads* are adding to the fire in the darkness of Partitions and divisions along communal lines. Recently I came across this online music concert¹² of our music Ustad from Indu's *Mazmun-e-Shauq* evening classes Ustad Ghulam Farid Nizami who is now based in the United States. Here he is sharing his ancestor, a muslim Ustad Ahmad Bakhsh Khan writing poetry with deep respect for Krishna. Thus, now in the US after seeking asylum he continues to preserve this shared Muslim-Hindu space which is almost extinct in Partitioned lands of Pakistan, India and Bangladesh.

2. STEPS TOWARDS THE SPIRITUAL ECOLOGY OF MY DANCE

“The body becomes the site of weaving together research, memory, and imagination to invoke and create new collective memories and stories. . . . This practice of story-ing, where the tensions and resonances between multiple stories reveal an emotional map of the physical choreography and trace connections, puts us in conversation with various communities and in alignment with our commitment to decolonized knowledge production”

(p.18, Chatterjea, Wilcox, and William)

And so, this journey with my *bharata natyam* dance continues to be, despite the opposition to dance, a rich one of connecting with many artistic and literary communities in the United States, South Asia, Asia and now indigenous communities in Indonesia as well. I start with the indigenous communities of the land of my birth. So that brings me to the figurine of the “*Dancing Girl of Mohenjodaro*” the highly evolved Indus Civilization and the role of Arts in that Civilization. Scholars argue that the dancing girl was possibly the balance in the society between its focus on economic development and religion.¹³ This is a crucial message for my generation onwards of *Partitioned* Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and Indians from the indigenous wisdom of these lands. And for it is Pakistan the region of my birth that is the site, both of forgotten pluralistic spaces, and of this 5000 years old figurine titled “The Dancing Girl of Mohenjodaro”. While the original figurine resides in New Delhi Museum today.

10 My first paper at Dance Studies Association (DSA), Barnard College, 2007 on my discovery of Krishna in Indu's choreography that Indu learned in Telugu *sareega kunguu* from her dance teacher Lalita Shastri in South India. Later she translated it into Urdu for her new Pakistani context changing the content accordingly to *saaRii sunaihrrii* (golden sari).

11 *Shlokas* are poetic verses or couplets, usually religious or “sacred”, recited in time to the rhythmic beats played by tabla drums. Details see p.31, Aslam 2012.

12 Available online titled Raag Bihag - Sitar - Ustad Ghulam Farid Nizami, Program *Dream Journey*.

13 Renowned Urdu Language and Cultural history scholar Arfa Zehra (*personal correspondence*, 2016).

I recall Indu's words in 2016 at the prestigious Islamabad Literature Festival (ILF) when her work was selected as the inaugural performance and I was Indu's dancer that night for her contemporary choreography¹⁴ which started with the still began posture of this possibly oldest intact dance related figurine in the world. Indu in her introduction to the piece reminded the literary audience about the dance drama as culmination of all the arts and that:

“Dance is the only art which uses both Space and Time all three dimensions of space and the three dimensions, Body within space and movement which means the passage of time”

I have written elsewhere (Aslam, 2012) on forgotten and occluded histories and cultural practices shared across the problematic borders of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. But SADI's earlier call¹⁵ helped me articulate for the first time, which I continue ahead my embodied experience from another one of my lands by love. As resident of Nusantara blessed by the wisdom and hikmah of Java, and of the *Sunans* of this land a sustainable vision of peace inclusivity that the embodied practice of this dance form, and my moving bodily explorations continue to gift me with.

I initially found material on “Spiritual ecology of Bharat Natyam dance” in the Indian context from the mainstream literature on aspect. A recent paper by S. Pillai in the International Journal of Research Culture Society titled “*Eco-aesthetics awareness and bharata Natyam*”¹⁶ connects nature and the environment aesthetically reflected in bharata natyam performances, hand gestures

and movements and how bharata natyam can spread and present ecological awareness. Work of renowned dancers of bharata natyam namely Malavika Sarukai is mentioned and Geetha Chandran view on the two problems of today I want to highlight to zoom in ahead:

“On my view, there are two significant problems today. The first one is the problem of the *environmental disaster* which the earth faces with, and the next is of equality based on sex. Each artist is obliged to be an aid in the protection of nature. Art is the only means to have the finest creation of ecological awareness. (Madhusoodhanan, G. 2006 P. 211-212).

Inspired to look for solutions instead of complaints I drew inspiration from Thomas Berry's ideas in “The Great Work” and also Elly Verrijt in “*Ecological Leadership: Spiritual Leadership for an Ecological Time*” which urge a move away from Human kind's anthropocentric world view (which is that all cosmos created for Human and so all evolves around the human). This view has led to uncontrolled human greed. Scientists like Copernicus, Giordano Bruno and Galileo were brutally opposed for their vision that humans are not at the center of the universe. So, in short, they believe that the transition from an anthropocentric worldview to an ecological worldview is at the heart of ecological conversation. This integral perspective can be summed up in Berry's urgent call to view *our universe is a communion of subjects not a collection of objects* (Berry, 2006).

Thomas Berry also talks of “The Fourfold Wisdom” available to us if we reflect to guide us in the future in the 21st century: wisdom

¹⁴ *Hum Gunahgar Aurtaen* we sinful women, poetry Kishwar Naheed a contemporary bharata natyam piece choreographed by Indu Mitha on the women's movement premiered 2016.

¹⁵ See <https://journals.charlotte.edu/sadi/issue/view/143>

¹⁶ <https://ijrcs.org/wp-content/uploads/IJRCs202104012.pdf>

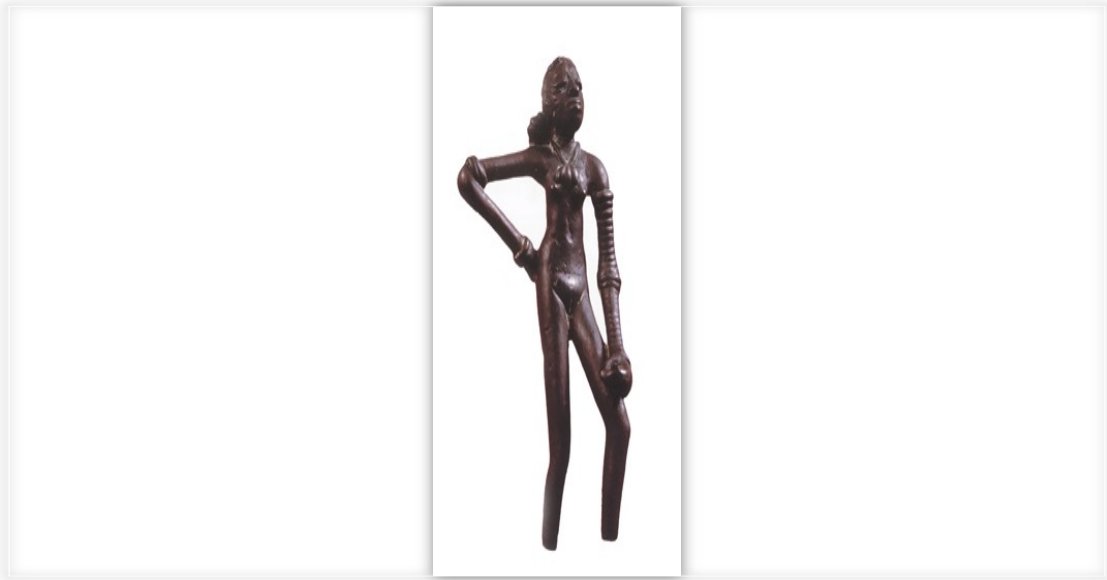


Figure 2: Delhi Museum “Dancing Girl of Mohenjodaro” (Used with Permission)



Figure 3: Indu Mitha poses in front of the original figurine in a visit to Delhi

of the indigenous people, wisdom of women, and then wisdom of classical traditions and of science. As I sit with the indigenous *wisdoms* of this land of Nusantara, I chance upon a paper “indigenous religion paradigm” as an alternative to world religion paradigm in examining varieties of religious practices of Indonesian indigenous peoples, by Samsul MAARIF a scholar of religions of indigenous people, ecology, community development and advocacy in Indonesia (Centre for Religious and Cultural Studies (CRCS), Universitas Gadjah Mada).¹⁷ Building on scholarship of indigenous religions Maarif argues that indigenous religion paradigm is based on a cosmological concept that the cosmos is occupied by different “persons” of human and non-human beings. Personhood is not identical to human beings, but perceived as extending beyond them. It is a capacity that may belong to the so-called “nature” (an essential category in a hierarchical cosmology along with “culture” and “supernatural”). Suddenly everything becoming clearer now. Indeed “Humans are spirits having a Human experience” (Berry). Percolating with these embodied wholistic *wisdoms* I move to absorb and comprehend this gift from the sacred geometry of my practice.

3. SACRED GEOMETRY OF MY DANCE: Creating Alternate Cultural Formations contd.

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

my left hand is the Book, my worldly means of sharing the messages I receive and means of service in the Path of Love. For the author, also the dancer in this piece, these open a space of interfaith harmony illuminating and blessing all creation. Indu’s Qaseeda-i-ilm-Jamal narrates the humble process of discovery of beauty and aesthetics that leads to ascension of each soul when it follows its individual calling and journey. When one is grounded in one’s unique indigenous land, committed to the honesty of the moment via one’s practice and the discipline that it requires, one transcends to higher vistas.”

(p.20, ibid)

WISDOM OF THE MANDALA

A recent Anthroposophy class drawing and learning about the Mandala in different faith and cultures around the world Art Teacher Van James facilitated the entry through a portal of sorts. I experienced his words when he said “human artistic activity brings things out of the future that haven’t happened yet” unlike the AI which takes past images and assembles them. So, what we owe to the next generation is what I call *spiritual ecology of the arts* so I will end with inspirations from the “*ipeace mandala*” and the uniting message that I receive clearly thanks to my loyalty to my practice and to great guides along the way. An “end Salam” in beginning and end of an evening of bharata Natyam is about sending peace and blessings to all round you, both the space and the audience, and also to ask forgiveness from the earth before we can begin to strike our feet on it” (Indu, 2000).

¹⁷ “Indigenous Religion Paradigm: Re-interpreting Religious Practices of Indigenous People” written as part of Asia project on “Rethinking Religious Pluralism in Asia: India-China, Indonesia (2017-2019). I am grateful to graduate student Muhamamd Rhaka Silsa his student at CRCS for this connection.



Figure 4: The iPeace Mandala by Maja Apolonia Rode¹⁸

End Dance Salam:

From Peace to Spiritual Ecology of my Dance

"I stand upright feet together and hands in a titli (butterfly) mudra, which is made by holding three fingers, thumb, and two forefingers together but stretched out tightly. My other two fingers spread out from there. Both hands are held at chest level and face each other, almost but not touching. Elbows are up. Once ready in this position, feet are lifted to stamp in the first position of bharata natyam, where all of your body, including the legs, is held straight. First the right foot, then the left, is lifted and stamped to the beat of one and two. Next the hands and arms are stretched out in front of the chest with thumbs facing down. Bring them first away from the body in front center and then back closer to the chest towards the center, thumbs down. From this center position the hands start turning in a small circle with the thumbs slowly coming towards the upper side. The downward thumbs become upwards thumbs at the same time as the elbows are turned in

and out again. It ends with the hands stretched out palms up in a horizontal line, parallel to the floor. Next I move to the third position in bharata natyam, while the outstretched palms complete their semi-circle to the front middle of the body as the body moves down, knees stretched outwards as the hands. Once again palms are down, and the earth is touched in reverence. From the earth the fingers touch the center of the forehead. Finally, I am back to the first position, but the hands and arms make a wider circular movement in the body's kinesphere and end in an arch framing the head as the palms touch."

(Aslam, 2012)

"The *salaam* was Indu Mitha's first lesson to me in her dance class in Islamabad. A woman culturally Christian, teacher of a dance form popularly associated with Hindu temple dance, taught me, a practicing Muslim, a deeper understanding and meaning of *salaam*, a word which scholars argue is at the core and is the essence of *Islam* (the word *Islam* comes from the root "*salaama*," which is peace and thus the name refers to a religion of peace and security).¹⁹ Though I had repeated the word *salaam* countless times through my voice, its finer embodied meanings would take a whole decade to begin to unveil, as nurtured by my engagement with the body as a tool of analysis. The over two decades long journey with this dance form and this research project is an integral part of this unveiling and it pauses and lingers on the in-between spaces that borders fail to divide and that persist despite them. Today I can see clearly as I dance and embody luminaries *Saraswati* and *Krishna* and struggle with my *Muslim Garuda* movements the message from one of my spiritual teacher

¹⁸ See "iPeace Mantra & Mandala: A Meditation for Interfaith Peace" <https://medium.com/@markallankaplan/meditation-for-interfaith-peace-2e751c6c4cbe>

¹⁹ Personal correspondence with Urdu teacher Zahida Aslam. For further discussion and nuances of the roots of "Islam" see Pal, "*Islam*" means *Peace*, 4-43.

Shaikh Nur in his book *Atom from the Sun of Knowledge*:

“Ya Wadud O Allah, You are none other than Love---a single love in countless beautiful forms and brilliant facets. Only through awakening as your Divine Attributes, manifest as both lover and beloved, can we envision, approach, and merge with your Reality, which is the Only Reality”

(Lex Hixon Nur Al Jerrahi)

Acknowledgements:

I am grateful to Siddharth Kak, M K Raina and Shahejahan Bhagat for providing useful resources and materials without which it would not have been possible to write this paper.

| WORKS CITED

- Adia, B.T and Ma'arif S., 2020 Komunitas Lima Gunung: Concept of Art Communitas on Five Slopes Mountain of Central Java, Indonesia, *International Journal of Visual and Performing Arts*, p 60-71.
- Aslam, 2012 *Unpublished PhD thesis* "Choreographing [in] Pakistan: Indu Mitha, Dancing Occluded histories in "The Land of the Pure". Doctor of Philosophy in Culture and Performance, UCLA, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8km963tz>.
- Aslam, Feriyal, "Tale of a Choreographer, Her student, River and an endangered Heritage: Indu Mitha's Qaseeda-i-Ilm of Jamal/ "An Ode to Wisdom and Beauty", *South Asian Dance Intersections* Vol 2, No. 1, Dec 2023.
- Chakravorty, Pallabi, 2008. *Bells of Change: Kathak Dance, Women and Modernity in India*, Seagull Books).
- Hixon, Lex Nur Al Jerrahi, 1993. *Atom from the Sun of Knowledge*, Pir Publications, Westport, CT.
- Marif, Samsul. "Indigenous Religion Paradigm: Re-interpreting Religious Practices of Indigenous People" written as part of Asia project on "Rethinking Religious Pluralism in Asia: India-China, Indonesia (2017-2019).
- Van James session in Anthroposophy Conference, Bandung 2025.
- Verrijt, Elly, 2024. *Ecological Leadership: Spiritual Leadership for an Ecological Time*, Erry Verrijt.
- Walker, Margaret Edith, 2020. PhD dissertation *Kathak Dance: A Critical History*, University of Toronto.