

SADI

SOUTH ASIAN DANCE INTERSECTIONS





VOLUME 1, ISSUE 1

| MISSION

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

| HISTORY

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

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Editorial: South Asian Dance Intersections

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

Welcome to the inaugural issue of *SADI—South Asian Dance Intersections*—a progressive, scholarly, blind peer-reviewed, open-access online journal. *SADI* was conceived during the pandemic as a transnational feminist project. It proposes a field-defining modality of looking at scholarship around South Asian dance studies emerging within the field across values, theories, and practices. It seeks to carry to newer and larger audiences, a unique blend of high-quality research in scholarly, theoretical, textual, choreographic, contemporary, social justice, and community-oriented, interdisciplinary, and intersectional writing. *SADI* explores the ecosphere of South Asian dance activities, celebrating plural practices, diversity, and richness, while challenging incongruencies.

SADI is a manifestation of the frameworks of decolonization we have heard in recent times in dance studies. It is a pushback against prevailing paradigms of power-predicated knowledge qualifiers. However, dance as a deeply meaningful and complex cultural practice in the region of South Asia, urges different and newer ways of reading. Therefore, the writings in *SADI* are inclusive, often self-representational, and frame alternative points of view to the exclusionary, singularized, unidimensional determinant, and prescriptive lens of what constitutes knowledge. The alterity is reflected in the foregrounding of lesser-heard and, often marginalized, voices who live the practices, and is reflected in the disparate ways of writing. This scholarship prioritizes alternate artistic canons that root and nourish these regional practices.

Decolonization today is a loaded term, strategically used to satisfy different, often oppositional, agendas. In fact, it is the key word deftly being used to replace one supremacist paradigm by another. That is why *SADI* is a two-way pushback. It is a pushback against Western ways, but it is equally a pushback against the entrenched hierarchies and privileges prevailing within the South Asian region. This includes the region's diasporic, cultural, and performative migrations and poor advocacy

for rights, freedom, agency, and choices. The stranglehold of fossilized knowledge, reinforced by unquestioning and blind acceptance of descriptions, definitions, and discourses, buttress hierarchies and supremacies, including of race, caste, faith, gender, and sexuality that prevail locally in the crucial cartography. By interrogating and challenging power structures that reinforce local legacies of elitist stratifications, which influence corporeal politics through censorship, exclusion, shaming, and silences, egalitarian access to knowledge is impeded. Many within the region have been kept outside of the portals of knowledge, including artistic knowledge, while being subject to particular, regressive, unchanged, and unchallenged ways of social and epistemological orderings.

This has forced us to contemplate what is at risk in the face of the persistence of shackling perspectives—both Western and homegrown—and in the face of the incubus of homogeneity facing the academy. Also, this feminist initiative in praxis resists the academic literary and theoretical fascism that devalue situated kinesthetic contexts and epistemologies and reinforces the debilitating mind-body binary and subversion of the body. In the unstated contract between generations whose time it is and generations whose time is yet to come, lies the understanding that each generation will carry the next into a new dawn. *SADI* seeks to do precisely this—usher in a new dawn of fresh writing—honest, bold, and interrogative, yet respectful.

To guide us in this process, we have worked with a hands-on board consisting of important scholars from the South Asian region, scholars of South Asian origins in different parts of the world, and renowned South Asianists who don't hail from South Asia per se, but whose work has embellished our understanding of the region. In fact, editorial board member Sarah Morelli suggested the title: *South Asian Dance Intersections*; the acronym *SADI* means “ours” in my first language—Punjabi.

A process that involved collecting invited and curated essays and submissions that went through a scholarly review process and mentoring of younger scholars was undertaken. This situates *SADI*'s nurturing ethos and commitment to grow capacity among young scholars and practitioners from the region. Although not encountered in this inaugural issue, it shall be *SADI*'s endeavor to encourage writing in regional languages, which, if found suitable, will be translated before inclusion, in the hope of highlighting hesitant and recalcitrant voices and the South Asian flavor.

The inaugural issue's call for articles carried two themes: The first was, *nation and citizen*, and the other was the *Covid public health disaster*. We received far more entries than we are carrying. This inaugural edition contains research from six countries, including India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Australia, and the USA, organized in a set of seven thought-provoking essays. These essays range from hard-hitting political writing, contemplative arguments, personal musings, and a return to roots and looking at moments of troublesome and problematic pasts. Essayists use this opportunity to expose invisibilizations, marginalizations, intersectionalities, blind spots, and denials, using self-reflexive, dialogic processes that can help reveal appropriations and hybridities. Along the way many unexpected archives, serendipitous truths, and small histories that lie in the interstices of chronicled broad strokes may be uncovered and may interestingly segue into possible answers to long-persisting enquiries, garnered from the past itself.

The flagship essay “Crossroads,” is a tryptic written by Urmimala Sarkar, Pallabi Chakravorty, and Priya Srinivasan. The challenges to the fullness of citizenship offered by acts like the Citizenship Amendment Act, the exclusionary intent of the National Register of Citizenship, the strengthening of the already draconian Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA)—especially with the tightening of the bail clause—serves as the backdrop for “Crossroads.” It is a provocative piece that raises a red flag. In doing so, it argues that dance should be reflective of the present. Dance should not, it argues, glorify or mitigate

the ills of an imagined past by upholding a specific statist agenda or relegating all South Asian dance to history. It disclaims the tendency of states to promote favored dancers and pleads for an expansion of the artistic and terpsichorean population, believing that many voices will be better reflective of the state of the Art and the State of the art. *SADI* believes in multiple voices, not just the well-networked, as a way of articulating the realities of the dance studies field more accurately. It also makes a plea to find safe third spaces, which would allow dance, itself, to be a product of the dancer's agency and not the product of a political/cultural/historical agenda. Finally, “Crossroads” serves as a clarion call for making dance studies a representative, reflective, rigorous, and robust field of study.

Sri Lankan scholar Mirak Raheem, presently working on a large research project on the iconic Kandyan dancer, Chitrasena, shared with us a piece, “Vajira: The Pioneering Female Kandyan Dancer.” Vajira Chitrasena is the first female professional Kandyan dancer, who, in 2021 at the age of 89, was awarded the Padma Shri by the Government of India, in recognition of her contribution to culture. This award came after a host of awards and honors had already come her way. Vajira, who was Chitrasena's partner in life and on stage, has been mostly hailed for breaking the gender barrier. But her role and contribution are much more, including the fact that, in addition to being a performer, she has been a choreographer of traditional dance items and a co-creator of productions. She has also been a teacher to numerous dancers over the decades and, in this role, has developed her own influential pedagogy. This article is accompanied by a rich selection of photographs from the archives of the Chitrasena Dance Company, many of which have never been seen before and which, together, give a rich pictorial glimpse into a female dance pioneer's life.

Pakistan-based dancer-activist, Sheema Kermani, authored the essay, “The Truth of Male Dancers in Pakistan.” Kermani creates an argumentation across verbal and multimedia modes of expression. The essay covers the history of male dancers in Pakistan since its formation in 1947 and testifies

to the intertwined dance histories between India and Pakistan. The writing is accompanied by a recent video interview with a male dancer, Asif, struggling to sustain himself through dance. The directness of the questions and the unfiltered lens of the camera create an intimacy between the subject and the consumer of this essay. The space available for dance is decreasing, especially for the male dancer in a society with pre-determined stereotypes of masculinity and stigma around the art of dancing. In fact, both the interviewer and interviewee acknowledge the soft politics and defiance of their artistic pursuit, which they see as in line with Pakistan's Sufi lineages and cultural productions.

Lubna Marium, apart from being a trained dancer, has been deeply involved with the artistic life of Bangladesh for almost five decades. She has firsthand knowledge of the dance archives of Bangladesh and has been an active mover and shaker on issues, pedagogy, scholarship, and showcases of dance in her country. This is the reason why her essay, "The 'Wicked Problem' of Safeguarding Dance in Bangladesh" gains in kinesthetic and epistemological significance. The "wicked problem" that Marium writes about pertains to "epistemologies of blindness" and our tendencies toward deliberate exclusion of the marginalized in identity formation of self, cultures, or nations. In the highly stratified societies of South Asia, Marium's essay, rich in pictorial, theoretical, and factual details, speaks to many in the region—mostly the excluded. Marium weaves in the pluralistic and pre-Islamic practices persisting in Bangladesh. Despite the fact that the state religion of Bangladesh is Islam, the pluralism is something that the population at large holds dear. But reminders of this diverse mosaic become important in our difficult, attritional, and stressed times.

Swaranamalya Ganesh investigates vernacular performative literatures, such as *Abhyudayamu*-s and *Yakshagānamu*-s, from pre-colonial *Tāñjāvur*, placing creative traditions as mnemo-history in re-framing South Asia's historical consciousness. *Raghunātha-abhyudayamu*, a Telugu *Yakshagāna* text written by Vijayarāghava Nāyaka in the

seventeenth century, records a day in the life of his father *Raghunātha Nāyaka*. The text, in the performative *Yakshagānam* genre, with song and dance as its central mode of expression, extolls *Raghunātha's* greatness through factual historic conquests, his administrative prowess, warfare accomplishments, processions and cultural activities, and romantic alliances. Performing it daily in open court can be read as layered ways of embedding historic memory in public consciousness. Thus, argues Ganesh, *yakshagāna* literature becomes an important historical intervention through the performing arts.

The second theme that the *SADI* board suggested for the inaugural issue was the public health crisis of Covid. Two essays caught its impact. The first essay is an unusual writing, a first-person musing by Yashoda Thakore, who, due to severe travel restrictions, was unable to get to Australia for an Indo-Australian performance that featured her—even after the country opened up for performances. Eventually, by an imaginative scenario of digital stage hybridity she delivered the performance. Thakore's essay makes for interesting reading by itself. The sudden twist in the content makes it a piece that will live long and be cited frequently in subsequent writings. The second piece related to this theme explores many initiatives that were created during the Covid pandemic and its restrictions. Capturing the darkened stage floors through a political and filmic re-churning, Kaustavi Sarkar writes about this output in "Failure of Rasa: Story of Indian Dance During COVID-19." Her piece concludes by featuring a topical poem, "Why sometimes the show must not go on," written by the Mumbai based Kathak dancer Sanjukta Wagh.

"Rethinking Endings: Amany's Persistence," by Yashoda Thakore, relies on reflexive ethnographic methods to theorize claims to artistic and creative ownership. It focuses on the performance, *Encounters*, an international production based on the life story of the "bayadere," Amany, of the early and mid-nineteenth century. The author participated in the production—digitally, given the Covid restrictions—exploring the history of a group of Indian dancers from Puducherry and Yanam who were taken to Europe in 1838 to perform at

numerous European venues. While Amany has been immortalized by the sculptor Jean Auguste Barre (1811-1896) and her story is somewhat known, the rest of the story is an eye-opener. By revisiting the repertoire performed by them and the representation of these dancers, Thakore argues that autoethnography revealed facts that make these women relevant to present-day performing artists, in particular, and society at large. The little-known histories of Amany and the author coalesce, brought together by the author's guru, Annabatulla Mangatayaru, whose ancestress—six generations removed—was Amany. Thakore's style of writing captures effectively the thrill of the serendipitous discovery of the linkage.

In her piece, Kaustavi Sarkar, herself a practitioner of the Indian dance style of Odissi, interrogates the premise and promise of *Rasa* during a period of confusion, turmoil, and fear of human connection. The *Rasic* experience is possible only when the practitioner or "patra" has an audience, which becomes "sahridaya," meaning of one heart with the performer. This transaction assumes a spatial intimacy for the *Rasic* experience to transfer and translate. Have the writings on *Rasa*, this uniquely Indian idea, in any of the texts that dancers use as their manual, ever anticipated the conditions similar to those of the COVID-19 pandemic? Sarkar's ideational exploration is a seminal contribution to critically interrogating *Rasic* adaptability in crises. But it begets further questions: Even when the anxieties between creator and consumer are urgent and shared, can *Rasic* intimacy be created and transmitted via mediated bodies as dancers moved on to the digital platforms of social media? Did the poetry underlining the *Danced Poems of Double Authorship*, a collaboration between Covid-specific poetics with choreography by dancers worldwide, work, or did the dance in the dance-films render mute the poetry? Did we need to dance the spectacle or was it alright for the show not to go on?

All of these brilliantly-written intersectional essays bode well for the new direction of South Asian dance studies. The call for submission for the next issue is included in this edition and we urge scholars to consider submitting through the Open

Journal Systems.

We are very grateful to the University of North Carolina at Charlotte for encouraging us and supporting us at every step. I would take this opportunity to particularly thank Wendy Fisher, Savannah Lake, and Kaustavi Sarkar from UNC Charlotte. A big thank you to all of the members of the Board and a special shout out to our Interim Journal Manager, Kaustavi Sarkar, for being a rock throughout this process.

For me, this is a thirty-year-old dream coming true. Thirty years ago, it was unrealistic. Now, it has fructified. I have only gratitude in my heart. Here's to strengthening South Asian dance studies and multiplying and amplifying local voices to stand at par with the best in the world.

South Asian Dance Studies has emerged as an international site for critical debates about various intersections of identity, power, media, and globalization. This multidisciplinary academic space is also a site for the intersections of theory and praxis/practice, criticality, and creativity. Yet, this arrival of South Asian Dance Studies is happening in a world daunted by political polarization and authoritarianism, inequalities deepened due to the pandemic, wars, refugee and environmental crises, a severe economic and political breakdown in Sri Lanka, and the changing political atmosphere in India—filled with instability, violence and divisive identity politics.

Writing about dance and its history, or even its relevance, needs new methodological frameworks that, at once, give us the ability to speak from within as well as outside. This changing scenario requires the placing of dance within the framework of intersectionality as a survival strategy against the totalitarian reframing of ideas of culture, history, gender, class, caste, human rights and the politics of assertive and often violent marginalizations. Although not directly connected to any of these issues, the three essays below are situated within these discursive spaces that we are calling *crossroads*. We envision them as sites for interventions. It began accidentally, with the three authors independently writing about their standpoints in the current times. The diary-like entries are short, reflexive, and introspective regarding personal engagement and its changing relevance in current times. They are generated from the common wish to create a space for diverse ways of looking at practice—theory—interface. These short essays are also framing an invitation to debate and dialogue about the future of Indian dance studies by using the critical methodologies available to us. By doing so, we hope to foster an inclusive and globally ethical dance discourse. Among other things, this means giving ethical agency to the dance community of the contemporary times, identified by their relationship to the field of dance as enthusiasts, performers, teachers, choreographers, scholars, patrons, audience, and students and their parents. Above all, this effort calls for a recognition of the tremendous diversity and the contemporaneity that the dance forms and dancers consistently deal with in India and on the global stage.

The health of the very young scholarship in dance studies across India and among diaspora communities shall hopefully thrive in its diversity through holistic

multi-disciplinarity and differential experiences of the practitioners, writers, and audience. We felt looking back critically and reclaiming rights to dance is as important as looking at the present policies and pedagogies. In that process, criticisms, experimentations, and challenging of old and new hierarchies became our key directions to create a document that could reassert the urgent requirement of all actors who engage in dance making and writing—and not chose a few who agree with our individual and/or collective positions. We also hope that this intervention will shift the discourse taking place in select academic sites to carefully look at the relationship between patriarchy and Indian dance history alongside gender, sexuality, caste, religion, region, and the state. We want to also emphasize that political debates surrounding Indian dance and culture cannot only be located and concerned with the past, but our research and analysis must take into consideration how culture and dance are lived now and what implications they have for the future.

The Unruly Third Space Priya Srinivasan

Unruliness, when I first wrote about it over a decade ago, was a call to action to become aware and then to act on blind spots, invisibilizations of labour, and marginalizations of history that hid appropriation, hybridity, rising totalitarianism, and intercultural connections. Spectatorship was not just about viewing/spectating/watching dance, but also about reading bodies, reading dancing bodies as texts, reading her-stories instead of his-story, reading our own bodily practices and textual practices as artists and scholars, to be in respectful dialogue, to debate, and, when necessary, call ourselves out through self-reflexive and dialogic processes. I was fundamentally interested in bringing out intersectional thinking on complex historical engagements that led to contemporary problems. I started at the place of the moving body to ask these questions.

The rising power of social media and the “disinformation” emerging from it that preceded the Trump and Modi years—and other governments which also then aided and abetted fascism to rise on the far right and the equally violent rhetoric of the so-called progressive left—deeply troubles me. Ultimately what I have realized

is that academics are speaking in a language not accessible to those on the far right or left, let alone the lay person/artist/dancer. There was/is a chasm between these worlds; between those who theorize, research, and write slowly and those who write daily, quickly, and instantly. I believe there needs to be a bridge between rigorous academic thought—ideas that have been slow cooked over time—and instant microwave thinking on social media. While I understand the power of social media to democratize representation, I also think when the body is reduced to texts, memes, digitized images, bits, and bites of video clips, Insta pics, likes, dislikes, comments, and critique, the body can disappear. Particularly vulnerable are female dancing bodies, just as they have always been. As Sarkar argues in this publication, all kinds of dancing bodies have been legislated against, stopped, silenced, and made invisible. We are now seeing a remapping of this policing from various positionalities claiming marginal positions both from the far right and the left.

In my 2012 book, *Sweating Saris*, which was published before the 2014 takeover of the Modi right wing BJP Hindutva government, I had discussed the danger of the hegemony of Hindutva discourse already embedded in Indian arts practices and particularly in classical dance. I had positioned myself as an upper-caste migrant woman from India who grew up in a deeply racialized environment in Australia as a minority. I made myself vulnerable in a way that many of my counterparts (particularly male academics) were not doing, and demonstrating the idea that in one space, subjects can hold social, economic, and symbolic power and, in others, a marginal position. I also noted that, at times, the simultaneity that both possibilities can co-exist in the same space. I discussed how migration, race, and the White Australia policy in Australia was quite different to the US and its waves of migration and immigration policies had created quite different demographics. I was demonstrating how power shifts and is contingent and why we need intersectional thinking to understand privilege as loss and to invoke and evoke empathy to better ally with marginal subjects and marginal locations.

The binaries of the dancer versus academic, body versus mind, performing versus writing, classical versus contemporary, practice versus theory, purity versus pollution, to be ruly versus unruly transformed into a bricolage of many things layered one on top of the other, weaving strands between these many ways of being. At times, this jostling of being between things—insider/outsider—has been a way of being with some practices silencing others. These concerns helped me understand the problems inherent in and the

simultaneous power of practice as research and paved the pathway for me to live a dual existence as a dancer and researcher. This both/and approach has helped me navigate myself out of binaries of either/or to the third space. To move away from singularity/ binary to multiplicity. The privilege of living outside institutional structures has also made me simultaneously vulnerable symbolically and economically.

This is in line with the many women of color and women from the global South who have been writing “back” to power by putting their bodies on the line. While these voices were emerging to speak back to power, the post structuralist turn in anthropology and in dance studies turned the body into a sign—a text that could be read for meaning—separating the practices of the body to legitimize dance studies in the academy. Similarly, the textualization that was prevalent in many fields, particularly in South Asian Studies, was also something that deeply disturbed me. “South Asia” as a category emerged during the cold war, although it had its inception in colonial and oriental encounters earlier. The study of philology was something the CIA valued deeply as the US created its own various imperial others. I found that I was again between and betwixt spaces because I could not identify with the textualization discourse of South Asia that removed bodies, particularly female bodies, and embodiment and lived knowledges. If the body appeared in South Asian Studies texts, often, it would be reduced to just the sign; the situated knowledges of the experiential body disappeared.

This idea of the third space and multiplicity is now more important than ever. As Chakravorty notes in this essay, until we understand that we are all part of an interdependent ecosystem, we will continue to exist in the me-versus-we debate. I realize that artists, organizations, producers, presenters, and audiences—both IRL and online—have to see unruly possibilities in order for meaningful and lasting change to occur or, at the very least, a middle ground that enables multiplicity of thought, dissent, and respectful debate to occur. I find meaning as a dancer/choreographer/scholar/public intellectual creating work outside of institutions, universities, and being “in between” in order to navigate power and in order to be the bridge that builds dialogue into silences to move toward that interdependent ecosystem. I build on feminist scholarship and praxis through allyship, solidarity, and non-violence in creating this space. I am in conversation with my mentors, former colleagues, and former students from whom I continue to learn. Here is a small sample of the writers I use in my thinking about

unruliness, dance, power, solidarity, and non-violent means of debate, critique, and dissent (Chakravorty 2008, Djebbar 1993, Gordon 2008, Mahmood 2011, Robinson 2021, Sarkar Munsri 2022, Savigliano 1995, Srinivasan 1985, Thakore 2021).

In what follows, I share three of the key performative acts in which I have collaborated in unruly ways with my collaborators across the globe contingently on sites that span the Hermitage Museum in the Netherlands, Mettumulluvadi Village in Kanchipuram District (Tamil Nadu), and an online collaboration triangulating Hyderabad, Mummidivaram, and Bunjil Place, which culminated in a live performance in the outer suburbs of Melbourne.

I ask how, within Indian contexts, we can reimagine bodily knowledge, moving into dialogic modes of inquiry through the body and to move from singular/binary to multiple modes of being to find meaning. I don't turn away from the classical building blocks that are embedded in my body (although I did do that for some time while I was understanding the history of the form and my complicity in it) to explore different spaces, ask contemporary questions, and discovering through dialogic encounters. My work often begins at the level of practice first before the research question emerges.

In Amsterdam in May of 2018, I worked with a Surinamese choir and the Moving Matters multidisciplinary international collective started by Susan Ossman, to examine what it would mean to occupy the Hermitage Museum for four hours to take over the museum albeit temporarily. Surinamese people in the Netherlands are a syncretic ethnic mix of African, Chinese, and Indian backgrounds. The Indians that went there in the nineteenth century were taken from Bihar primarily speaking Bhojpuri as indentured laborers to Surinam, which was a British colony. The Chinese were also indentured, and many Africans were enslaved there. The British then sold the colony to the Dutch and when Surinam got its independence in 1975, about 50% of the population migrated to Holland. However, after migrating many were unable to assimilate because of race and class differences. They settled in various parts of Holland but particularly around the Hermitage Museum area. Ironically, until we did our collaboration, none of them had ever set foot in the museum, leaving them feeling like they never belonged there and that it was not for them.

The museum curator, Annemarie De Wildt, was aware

of the lack of equity and enabled us to “take over,” temporarily, with museum goers not aware that we would be activating the space with music, dance, movement, and installations that would trouble the predominantly white male representation from the Dutch Golden Age represented in the exhibits. Uthra and I had worked remotely over Zoom for a few months with the choir conductor, Dennis, who was African American. Using Carnatic and folk music to weave with the Surinamese and Dutch music, we activated the choir members and dancers to move as they sang and moved inside the exhibit, at times disrupting it. In particular, a projection of a Rembrandt, *The Night Watchman*, something very dear to the Dutch, was taken down and replaced with a photo of the Moving Matters and Surinamese Choir/Dancer group and ourselves. Audiences were quite surprised, as they were not expecting to see an artists-of-color “flashmob” take over the museum space. After the takeover, many members of the choir said they felt excited and transformed at the possibility that they had spoken back to their colonizers even for a short amount of time. Nobody expected that the takeover was anything but temporary as the exhibit went back to “normal” as soon as we left.

However, we were shocked when, in October, 2019, the Hermitage Museum made headlines declaring that it would diversify its exhibits and the displays would include people of color in its collection to account for Holland's complex colonial history. This was soon ratified by all main museums in Amsterdam—no short feat,—despite meeting much opposition. Annemarie de Wildt had, in fact, been promoted to head of Museums Amsterdam and told us that our performance and takeover affected her deeply and led her to institute that change. Thus, the performance practice in this instance led to a massive shift in the colonial archive, also leading to changes in representation of people of color in Amsterdam who rarely saw images of themselves in any positions of privilege or power.

My second example, *Churning Waters*, was a collaboration of Indian Australian, Indigenous Australian, and Koothu artists, who are from Paraiyar (Dalit) communities, to create site-specific performances in Australia and India that focus on water futures and climate change. A tour of South India for Australia Festival in India in 2019, the work enabled ancient and contemporary texts about water, land, and sky knowledges to be shared by dancers, musicians, and storytellers. This work intends to reimagine water futures, given different responses to climate change

by Dalit artists in South India, Diasporic artists in Melbourne, and Indigenous artists from Australia. What is possible when immersive site-specific performance engages community through women's perspectives? To this end, we created site-specific, participatory performances in several spaces including Dakshina Chitra in Chennai, Adishakti in Puducherry, and Mettumulluvadi Village near Kanchipuram from where Thilaga, one of our key collaborators, originated. The performance at Adishtakti drew a unique international and local audience reflecting the history of colonial Puducherry. It was met with a fantastic reception, as audience members who were accustomed to experimental work walked together from one space to another, ending up in the black box auditorium. Dakshina Chitra in Chennai, a living museum, reflected an audience accustomed to classical Indian dance and music and, here, the work met with a mixed reception—especially with an audience not used to moving and walking. There were also problems with audio and sound in the performance. Mettumulluvadi village, however, was probably the highlight of our tour.

Thilaga was the first woman from her village to perform the male-dominated form of Koothu. Sylvia Nulpintidj, who is of Yolgnu background in Arnhem Land Northern Territory, connected with Thilaga immediately. We visited the village and stayed to be part of the nine-hour Koothu performance. All of us walked around the village meeting people and inviting them to the evening performance. We gathered the village en masse, creating a procession that met at the village center where the pandal was set up for the performance. They incorporated us into their practices and perhaps this is why, despite the experimental nature of the work, the performance was received with great enthusiasm. The performance became improvisatory and much more interactive compared to the structured form we were doing in other spaces. By the time the more than 1,500 audience members had gathered, we knew that, through performance, we were entering a completely different space/time. We were using folk, ritual performance in contemporary contexts to discuss water and climate change and, with Thilaga's request, to ask questions to the audience about rethinking plastic usage. While the show was probably a novelty for the audience and they enjoyed it, for Thilaga and her troupe, our indigenous collaborators and the rest of us, we benefited from the connection we had forged between each other and found ourselves changed profoundly by this interaction. However, as insider/outsideers entering this space we need to keep questioning the ongoing power shifts in these engagements and how we can serve those who are

vulnerable at different moments in different contexts and spaces? To this end, we are in touch with each other via whatsapp groups and continue building our allyship to support one another as we continue the fight for social justice in our different locales.

My third example is my work with Dr. Yashoda Thakore and her guru Annabattula Mangatayaru, who are from the Kalavantulu community based in Hyderabad and Mummidivaram in Andhra, respectively, and the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. Two extremes, it would seem, were bridged together by the work that my collaborator Hari Sivanesan (a Sri Lankan/British veena player and composer) and I were doing with our platform/festival Sangam. This festival was created to provide representation for marginalized South Asian artists in Melbourne/Victoria.

Based on my research that spans fifteen years, the *Encounters* performance tells the story of five South Indian dancers (known as Devadasi/Kalavantalulu) and three musicians who toured to Paris in 1838—a time when India was colonised by France. They performed hundreds of shows in France, the UK, and throughout Europe, ending up in Vienna. During the tour, they met many European artists. One significant encounter occurred in Paris when a teenaged dancer called Amanya (a bronze statue of whom can now be seen in La Musée de Guimet) and the rest of the troupe met several composers in Vienna including Johann Strauss I and Joseph Lanner.

The dancers' footwork and music inspired the composition of Indian-themed songs such as Strauss's “Indianer Galopp” and Lanner's “Malapou-Galopp,” which had a significant influence on classical music emerging from Vienna in the years to follow. The dancers and musicians disappeared from history after this encounter. Their practices also became banned in India in the twentieth century due to colonial, patriarchal, caste, and national pressures, and the women were shamed into silence and invisibility. Encounters explored the material from that era through an experimental dance, live, and on-screen performance by myself and Yashoda, respectively, with Melbourne-based musicians accompanying them. *Encounters* merged with Strauss's Indianer Galopp, arranged by Sivanesan and Alex Turley a young Melbourne Symphony Orchestra composer.

It is remarkable that the archival research, which had sat with me for so long, did not come to life until I shared my story with Yashoda and then her guru. It was in a Zoom meeting when I shared lithographs

and reviews and discussed repertoire such as the *Rajah's Salute* (known as the *Salaam Daruvu*, which is still present in Yashoda's dance repertoire) that Mangatayaru Amma casually mentioned that Amanya was the sister of her direct ancestor. She could even recall the names of the many women that went before her, from her mother to her grandmother, Buli Venkatratnamma, to six generations of women that went before her to lead us to Amanya. She insisted that this story was told to her by her Ammama (grandmother) who reminded her not to lose hope in the women ancestors—that they were powerful women who travelled internationally. Yashoda and I were stunned. It was truly miraculous for us all to find this connection. Who would even believe this? How do we account for what was unfolding? What came first, the archival or the embodied research? We cannot explain this easily but only to say that what emerged was a result of the intersubjective encounter between bodies of knowledge! The fact is that the archival research does not work without the embodied research, and vice versa. We realized we are truly interdependent.

Yashoda described the project as “a huge step toward exposing the layers of oppression that my Kalavantulu community lives under. *Encounters* is a celebration of our strong women ancestors as they became international personalities...This ethical exchange gives me hope that dance and music projects like these will bring much-needed empowerment.”

The project was not without its controversies. While audiences in Melbourne and the diaspora celebrated this monumental performance for the historical collaboration between the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra and South Asians, who remain deeply marginalized within the Australian context, some voices in the Indian dance world began trolling Yashoda and I for having the audacity to do such a collaboration, questioning: who does this story actually belong to? “Who has the right to dance” is the crossroads at which we are now.

Conclusions

Some questions and thoughts that have come to me are: Why does it seem as though women dancers' lived experiences are wiped out in favour of the ahistorical text? Why is the return to the body and practice more important than ever and why a celebratory return to practice without research, criticality and context doesn't work either? If the encounter with the other through extreme power imbalance from the colonial

experience is at the heart of practice as research how can Indian dance practices/studies reimagine it from another place? Learning critical methodology such as performance and dance ethnography, the idea of the insider/outsider, feminist global south approaches to understanding the dialogic encounter has enabled me to understand that practice and research cannot be separated. Dance practices have no fixed meaning, the differing contexts give meaning, and the meaning of the dance changes accordingly. Practice enables contradictions to exist within the same context. While the text too can enable this the practice enables an experiential understanding of it that can't be dismissed. When you live the contradiction you are less likely to move into the polarity of the binary and when you center the body what else is possible?

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Who Owns Culture? Heritage Politics in a Fractured Nation

Pallabi Chakravorty

Sacred Silences

Birju Maharaj, the samrat of the Kathak dance tradition of north India, passed away recently. In his extraordinary career, he was instrumental in positioning the tradition of Kathak—which covers a vast geographical expanse from Rajasthan, Lucknow, and Benaras, to Calcutta—on par with Bharatanatyam, as a glorious and deep tradition with a continuous “classical heritage.” After his demise at the age of eighty-three, the outpouring of grief and homage by his disciples, patrons, and admirers on various media outlets was breathtaking. During his lifetime he had gained the status of a demigod, an incarnation of Krishna, a guru like no other. The deification on social media reminded us of his power, not only in India, but also internationally, as an icon of India's ancient heritage.

During his life, Birju Maharaj was celebrated as the living connection to India's past, its medieval courts and, above all, the so-called Kathaka tradition of the Brahmin minstrels who sang the praise of Krishna (a form called natavari nrithya) in temple precincts. This state-created narrative of Kathak's mythic origin among the ancient Kathaka caste, connecting it to male Brahmin gharana lineages over several generations, was repeated over and over again in books, magazines, brochures, festivals, websites, and television since the 1950s. A key element in the propagation of this narrative was Kathak Kendra, the national institute of Kathak dance, that was established as part of Sangeet Natak Akademy in New Delhi in 1964. Birju Maharaj, who was associated with Kathak Kendra from its inception, became its director after the death of his uncle Shambhu Maharaj. He gradually became an institution himself in whom power was centralized.

Not taking anything away from his charismatic personality and great artistry, the feudal culture that

Birju Maharaj spawned through Kathak Kendra and, later, Kalashram—his own institution—through the guru-shishya model of imparting knowledge. This became a fertile ground for abuse of power, which included many allegations of sexual abuse, some of which recently flared up on social media posts. A culture of sycophancy and servitude became endemic in the practice of Kathak in the name of guru, parampara, bhakti, and seva. Birju Maharaj, after all, was the very incarnation of Kathak, who had the power to open the gates to state funding, places in festivals, international travel, and paths to stardom. To be associated with him in any way, even a photo opportunity, presaged prestige and legitimacy in the Kathak fraternity. He and his coterie vehemently delegitimized any deviation from his enunciation of “authentic” Kathak, its history, and technique. His ownership of the Kathak tradition, through hereditary lineage politics and stylistic monopoly within the multitude of Kathak styles, created an insular binary world of cultural insiders and outsiders among modern practitioners of the form.

Only a handful of scholars have challenged the Brahminical patriarchal gharana history that he represented. In my book, *Bells of Change: Kathak Dance, Women, and Modernity in India*, I tried to create an alternative history of Kathak with women dance artists, such as the baijis and tawaifs—who were primarily Muslim women—as one of the original sources of the modern Kathak tradition (Chakravorty 2008). It was the first book to bring the colonial nautch women back into Kathak's history and show how they were erased during the construction of the hegemonic discourse of male Kathakas and gharanas through various institutions, festivals, workshops, and competitions in modern India. This examination also underlined the process of deification of Birju Maharaj by his followers and beneficiaries.

The environment of unquestioning servitude embedded in guru-shishya parampara placed an enormous burden on women from middle and lower socioeconomic positions with diverse castes and, in some rare cases, Muslim identities, who had to negotiate this space as aspirational dancers. While they needed the social capital of tradition and classicism for their legitimacy as Kathak dancers, the social capital came attached to a familial patriarchal lineage through Birju Maharaj, whom they had to please and bow to as the supreme authority. These contradictory forces shaped the identities of generations of women Kathak dancers in modern India. There were voices of dissent, but they came at the cost of being excluded from the coveted coterie of Kathak artists who graced international

festivals and prestigious concerts. The stories of these women belonging to middle and lower-middle class/ caste backgrounds and their dissenting voices, their negotiations of patriarchy and Brahminical tradition in their everyday life, are narrated in my ethnography. But a critical and analytical narrative of Kathak dance as it is lived in contemporary India by women practitioners who are neither celebrities nor hereditary practitioners was not a subject that had much cachet then or now; as a result, *Bells of Change* did not create the much-needed intervention—or change—in the discourse of heritage politics. The larger issues the book tried to raise regarding questions of dance history, ethnography, lineage, and voice in relation to tradition and heritage, and how they are transmitted as “traditional/oral knowledge” in the context of modern institutions of knowledge production, remained incidental.

Now, with the demise of the Kathak samrat, the issue of abuse of power through the hierarchical relationship of guru-shishya parampara and tradition has resurfaced. Moving forward we are once again left with questions of ownership, legitimacy, and construction of authority. Are we going to continue to look for authority, authenticity, and legitimacy in familial lineages that construct dance history in linear ways from a particular original source through male blood/caste lines? We know that these kinds of claims of historical continuities of tradition (“invented traditions”) create the ideal conditions for gatekeeping, insularity, and dominance. Can the future of the past (“tradition”) be sustained by discourses of authenticity and ownership through select hereditary lineages and familial claims that reduce the complex and complicated history of cultural inheritance? Such discourses invariably elevate the idea of authenticity through the purity of belonging—and not belonging—to a homogenous and bounded community. A particular identity and subjectivity of an artist are not about where she/he belongs in some essential way, whether it be a caste, religion, or community, but how that individual artistic identity is constituted through the intersections and the shifting interplay of caste/class, gender, sexuality, religion, region, etc. in her/his lived history and practice. The purity politics and ownership of culture mobilized by extreme right and left ideologies tend to bring up the same binary questions of insider/outsider, self/other, powerful/powerless, oppressor/oppressed, and hereditary/non-hereditary, without regard for individual differences or historical nuances. We need to release these practices, whether they be Kathak, Bharatanatyam, Sattriya, or other “classical arts”—from both the ideology of Brahminical patriarchy and the overdetermined category of hereditary lineage

politics—to let them breathe the air of autonomy and democracy. The discourses of lineage, guru, Parampara, and inheritance, and the professional world to which it leads creates the rarified world of the classical arts. These bounded identities suffocate artistic collaboration and innovation. They ultimately deny artistic freedom of expression, access, and the right to question.

Voices

The hereditary claims and narratives of disenfranchisement we see in Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi today are important interventions in the narratives of classicism by artists who come from the hereditary community of practitioners and lineages of revered gurus of dance in modern India. These narratives embedded in South Indian caste and regional politics are couched in the powerful language of caste/race and dance appropriation. Although these counter-narratives to statist patriarchal history are not new in the scholarships on Bharatanatyam that came out almost two decades ago (Srinivasan 1985, Kersenboom 1987, Meduri 1988), what is new today is the empowered voices of a handful of hereditary practitioners who are talking back to the Brahmin hegemony and asserting their identity. Unfortunately, these important assertions circulate primarily among a select Indian elite who are already knowledgeable about the debates within the classical arts. These discourses also form a significant part of scholarships that are situated in the hallowed corridors of academia in the global North. Moreover, these critiques often posit caste as a homogenous category, while eliding the political mobilization of certain caste identities and their changing social status at various historical junctures, especially concerning the music and dance communities (Srinivasan 1985, Geetha 2021).

This is not to deny the serious issue of casteism and caste oppression in India or the caste/class power structures that control the classical arts. However, the historical facts of caste mobility, state support, and prestige accrued by certain Brahmin and non-Brahmin dance communities to construct their dance and musical pedigree are important if we are to be serious about democratizing the arts to make room for marginalized and unheard voices. I am referring here to the innumerable students of classical dance and music in Indian universities and schools—many from non-Brahmin groups—who do not belong to any prominent familial lineages nor have elite class status. These individuals are never able to enter any narratives of classical dance as historical actors/performers, whether

it be in the prestigious circles of sabhas, festivals, sammelans, or academic writing. The insidious heritage politics and gatekeeping by the insiders tend to create “permanent outsiders” in the classical dance world in contemporary India, while, at the same time, the upper caste/class continue to consolidate their power through Hindutva propaganda and its communal and casteist rhetoric.

The Brahminical dominance of the classical arts gets further fueled by this majoritarian politics. Unfortunately, the negotiations of these complex conversations on the ground, where dance is a practice, are often deeply divisive and polarizing. These totalitarian ideological debates centered on who is a greater victim according to their caste in the Bharatanatyam field. Voiced by people who already have considerable power and privilege, these debates create a cycle of victimology among its already visible, authoritative, and prominent insiders. Not surprisingly, these authoritative voices feed into identity politics from both ends of the caste spectrum whereas class privilege is rendered invisible. In an insightful essay, Yashoda Thakore, a Kuchipudi exponent and scholar, who is from the Kalavantulu (devadasi) community, powerfully argues that the simplistic understanding of caste, bloodlines, and hereditary transmission of knowledge among her community obfuscates the traditional familial/social organizations of the past. She writes:

We were never a caste! My father said to me ‘We are a guild of like-minded people. Adoption from within the families and from other communities was a way of life. My Kalavantulu teacher, Annabattula Lakshadweep Mangatayaru herself was adopted by her mother. I am a combination of so many bloodlines! This complexity of caste lineage is part of my life, dance, and quest. Today, I bring your attention to a set of practices, people, and lineages that make me who I am to question the simplistic understanding of caste-defined bloodlines. (Thakore 2021)

Inheritance of Loss

Returning to the question of heritage, caste, and lineages, we see they now form a fertile ground for regressive state policies and educational curricula in colleges and schools in India. We also know that there is not a singular narrative of the past or a caste identity. Therefore, we must ask the difficult question about heritage and parampara: Can a cultural practice such as dance be owned by a person, and can that person’s right to it as familial or community property be established by

claims of an unbroken link to the ancient past that is inherited through blood lineages? I bring this up here as Birju Maharaj and his gharana created a system of virulent gatekeeping and ownership through his claims of biological inheritance through several generations. Heritage, in this process, is not a culturally shared object but is personally owned. Since heritage is an inherently political object that has the power to legitimize or delegitimize a tradition/culture/practice and its modern practitioners, it is time we decenter the patriarchal statist discourses of the classical arts from the language of hereditary lineages through bloodlines. The male line of inheritance through a singular bloodline/caste identity was how males in the hereditary communities became complicit in patriarchal nationalism in the first place. The nationalist narrative successfully erased or marginalized many communities of women practitioners (devadasi, tawaif, baiji, etc.) who could not claim their biological inheritance of tradition because of patrilineality despite being the source of the practice. There is no need here to regurgitate that history in Kathak, Bharatanatyam, or Kuchipudi, for the list is long. The anachronistic feudal model of guru-shishya parampara and its civilization narrative became a part of modern nation building to link the past to the present. The embodiment of traditional bodily knowledge, hence, ironically, became an “inheritance of loss” for its modern practitioners.

The Permanent Outsiders

The good news is that the guru-shishya system and its hereditary lineage politics, the elite Brahmin strongholds of dances, and the saffron forces celebrating them do not constitute the singular narrative of concert dances in contemporary India. There are other trajectories and initiatives. One such compelling trajectory of dancers who do not claim any heritage politics, pedigree, or elite status is found in dance reality shows. A new generation of dancers claiming the stage has turned the narrative of guru, parampara, and tradition on its head (Chakravorty 2017). One could argue that they represent the category of “permanent outsiders” to the classical/traditional arts I previously mentioned. These dancers have come forward from all walks of life—and caste, religion, class, gender, and sexuality—to participate in India’s cosmopolitan contemporary dance culture. They have swept away some of these questions of nepotism and inheritance by their participation in reality shows without any connections to important classical gurus (parampara kinship networks) or hereditary links to tradition. Although they have their own stories of hierarchies, stardom, and sexual opportunism, they are negotiating them without the social capital of tradition/heritage and, in many instances, without much

economic capital.

These secular dance spaces have shown that we need democracy and more democracy to rebuild Indian dance teaching and practice. I hope that we can seize this moment to usher in a different discourse of tradition and heritage that will not make us prisoners of the past. In the globalized world we live in today, there should be an acknowledgment that there are multiple communities of any dance practice, including the classical arts—both Brahmin and non-Brahmin—hereditary and non-hereditary—and that we all operate in an interdependent and dynamic ecosystem. Ultimately, the issues we select to highlight show our preferences, interests, and who we are and who we are addressing—that is, who comprises our audience and what is at stake for the researcher/researched in creating new knowledge.

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Imagining Possibilities for Setting Dance Free: Right to Dance in Contemporary India

Urmimala Sarkar

Referring to the context of dance studies as a multidisciplinary subject that spreads across and

enables a range of engagements within the larger purview of dance research in India, I refer to Janet O’Shea’s “Introduction” in which she suggests:

[f]our strands of intellectual activity, each of which predate the emergence of dance studies as a separate arena, laid the ground for the present-day field: anthropology, folklore, and ethnography; the writings of expert viewers and dance analysis; philosophy, especially aesthetics and phenomenology; historical studies including biography and dance reconstruction. (2010: 2)

In addition to what she has included in the section of “historical studies,” I would like to mention historiography, which specifically enables engagement with the changing interpretations of the past events in the works of individual historians.

In India, the overarching importance put on the last strand by virtually every Indian, Western, and diaspora scholar, has overshadowed, undervalued, and silenced the other three strands almost completely, while also delegitimizing and rendering irrelevant most discourses on dance as a part of the contemporary reality in India. This malaise spills over into the dance/dancers who receive patronage, who get jobs in academic spaces, and whose endeavors are seen as “valuable” or survival/discussion/writing-worthy only in continuation or in reference to the history of dance(s) from India. This is unfortunate, as the white academic space then retains the rights to write about dance and dancers worldwide. They would also write about the contemporary issues in dance and the avant garde, while the Indians regurgitate and debate dance history.

In more ways than one, this agenda creates a ghettoized space for Indian dance studies—specifically within Indian cultural studies and South Asian studies—enabling voices from the non-dance world to gain agency. This situation delegitimizes the rights of dance practice-theory interface/analysis/phenomenological-ethnographic discourses. This agenda also steps into the murky world of identity politics, similar to the conservative discourses around rights to dance, that have already harmed dance and dancers in many Indian communities in immeasurable ways. The current narratives around dance are thus placed on a double-edged sword. The first and most dangerous circumstance is related to direct or indirect restrictions imposed on the freedom to practice art by artists who do not adhere to or stay away from the fundamentalist myth-building agenda. The second is that which is

centered around rights to dance, as evidenced by the violent delegitimization of dancers from hereditary communities in parts of India. As a dancer who does not belong to any of the delegitimized communities, and has not practiced any of those forms, I see myself somewhat safe from the second discourse, though I have directly faced the brunt of the first one, along with the student community of universities in India and Indian academics, artists, writers, and performers since 2014. This is when, with the formation of the far-right government, the intellectual and artistic freedom was restricted. These schemas of restrictions are imposed on dancing and thinking and are formulated without contextualizing the contemporary rights of the dancers and the dance scholars who would want to spread knowledge beyond specific historical or geographical focus.

It seems that, whether it comes from conservative assertions of social or religious norms and values of one person or one group, the infringement of the right to dance always was and still remains a common practice. This infringement makes dance practice a space for completely undemocratic assertions. That there is a history behind the current fissures and frictions in dance as well as “a history in the way we perceived issues” (Geetha, xi) is very clear. Resisting has gotten complicated as we realize that all of us who identify as dancers are not speaking of the same specific cases, similar kinds of oppression, or even identical modes of resistance. V. Geetha asks in her book *Patriarchy*: “How do we reconcile them? Are we stranded in theory?” (Geetha, xiii). I ask here: “Do we stop dancing? Do many dancers resign to the fact that they have to give up their right to dance, what they have learned, again and again, as different oppressors continue to stamp their rights to curb rights of the dancers in different times and spaces again and again?”

Dancers have always been stopped from dancing. The conservative patriarchal rhetoric has stopped women from dancing in the past in a variety of ways. Families have asserted their norms and values to stop male and female children from dancing for different gender-specific reasons. Colonizers have stopped colonized people from dancing, Upper-caste reforms have stopped the ones who were designated as lower in caste and class status from dancing. Patriarchal society has been known to forcibly stigmatize any person who dances for a living. Automatic assumptions of sexual promiscuity and availability have scared many women away from taking on this form of art practice. Fear of assumed demasculinization by society has kept men away from dancing. Last, but not least, lack of economic support

for this form of art has often led to delegitimization of the art as a viable career option. Many laws were forced upon women dancers to restrict their lives, and society constantly regurgitates references to the “fallen” dancing woman, often referred to in different derogatory manners in past writings. There probably are many more assertions of different kinds that stop men and women from taking up this practice as a chosen career. Heteronormative understandings and expectations have made any non-conformity vulnerable and, therefore, restricted by self-policing by dancers who do not want to conform to strictures imposed by heteronormativity.

On the other hand, generation after generation of young minds and bodies have invested in learning these forms and have grown to love them and perform with clone-like precision. They have learned the grammar and aesthetics of these specialized artistic practices without knowing the history of the original practice or practitioners. Because the practice was shaped with the assumption that dancers are bodies without minds, these new members of the dance community were never given any extra information. These bodies were equipped with skills, somewhat programmed to become mechanical dancing dolls. We, as dancers, have found ourselves within those structures of control which have become our cage, our limitations to creativity. We imagine our failure and success only within the parameters taught to us. Caught within the structures of a particular named and framed skill defined as a *style* of dance, we fear venturing out. The structures themselves are asserted often as *parampara*, which in a patriarchal/patrilocal/patripotestal system, automatically decode themselves as non-negotiable structures and norms attached to a specific value system by which we are now bound. As V. Geetha says, “This power is not merely coercive. Rather it seeks our consent, beguiles us with its social and cultural myths and rituals and implicates us in its workings” (Geetha 2).

I reflect on the intersectional space many like us occupy. As an example, I state my subjective position to expose my vulnerabilities of not knowing or being a part of a different history than a one concerning any of the classical dances. As a student who joined a modern non-hereditary dance institution in an urban center, I grew up loving dance and performing on stage from the age of thirteen. I learned four classical styles as per the requirements of my institution, alongside choreography and movement generation in creative style, and eventually became a member of the performing troupe of Uday Shankar India Culture Centre in my teens. I danced with love, with excitement, and with respect for the styles, the histories—or whatever I knew of

them—and I toured constantly within and outside India until I was over forty years old. I was not a hereditary performer, I did not know the history in detail, and as far as I understood, I was not harming anyone by my obsessive prioritization of dance in my daily routine. I was not coerced at any point nor did I stop. I now understand that I am labeled as a privileged person. But I am my own dance history, framed by the atheist family background and urban upper-caste life. My background is unlike many dancers who embody histories and, therefore, are marginalized, hierarchized, coerced, or shaped by them.

I dream of undoing such marginalizations and have worked all my life through academic interventions—creating a space for equal participation, agency, and voice. One cannot undo the past, but one can certainly choose to create a path of unlearning, relearning, generating awareness, and dancing in the present. Dismantling hierarchies and patriarchy can begin by being aware of the exploitative and forceful oppressions of the past as well as the present.

Classicization has been very successful in the ways it has obliterated multiple pasts and set as default, some dance histories. This process remains one of the basic demarcations in dance history, with a deeply etched “before” and “after,” that is marked by the post-independence standardization of formats of learning, presentation, patronage, and audience expectation—while completely destabilizing regional performance ecologies. But that is also a story from the past now. In the name of classicization, nationalized dance styles occupy major space, and some classical dances, such as Bharatanatyam and Odissi, are the most popular of them. With systematic patronage, many classical dancers have created their own lineage of teaching and claim a three-generation long hereditary practice post-independence. This new lineage further de-stabilizes the already unstable histories of the regional forms that were appropriated to create the new forms that have since been used as the jewels on the nation’s cultural crown. As I cannot claim any space of legitimacy through that history, I am saved again from the burden of expectation that could bind me to some weighty *Parampara*.¹ Therefore, in a manner of speaking, the nameless undefined form that emerged out of the Indian dancer Uday Shankar’s then-contemporary experiment, has saved me from aspirations of belonging to the larger cultural history of the nation-state. And my gendered awareness of the need to unlearn and relearn remains my only companion.

Dancing as a Contribution to National Culture

One needs to stop and reflect before becoming judgmental about the practitioners of the post-classicization generation and its complete lack of understanding of the complexities of appropriation that continue to plague dance history. For these practitioners, the owners of the intellectual property and embodied practice of the classical dances are the Indian nation-state and the Gurus. Again, one must stop and understand the role of patriarchal, caste-controlled dissemination of history—that the Gurus of today have learned from the Gurus of yesteryears. One way to atone for this dissemination process is to think of an individual ‘Guru’ as a retailer or seller – and the learners as consumers, with both mistaking their roles as nation-builders.

Dance and music practitioners have unending stories about how their rights to perform independently were restricted by their Gurus. Assertion of ownership still takes various forms in dance on the issues concerning rights to dance. The unwritten laws of being the dedicated Shishya weigh heavy on young dancers. Many leave dancing disillusioned after they are exposed to the cyclic exploitations of the dance world, where the moving space is never enough to accommodate all and there is no retirement age for Gurus growing older as they continue to perform and control the dancers’ micro-ecologies. The emerging/new dancing bodies do not replace older ones, they hover on the fringes hoping to be allowed into the restricted space, all the while terrified of disappearing without a trace. They exist forever in the threat of rushing and failing in the race of making the most of the restricted time they have to perform, or else....What might be the understanding of the teachers’ responsibilities? Here, it is important to understand how the Guru and Shishya often start competing to inhabit the same proscenium and to hold onto the same patrons and audience. In a comparison with learning dance, I refer to the time when I attended a German language class in a failed attempt to learn speaking in that language. I finished and passed the preliminary course and was given a certificate, but I understood my inability to speak fluently. If I had the patience or perseverance, I would have continued to learn and become proficient. I would have earned my right to speak and communicate in German and no one would have questioned my rights as long as I had the ability. By learning a language, I was not signing up for knowing or even respecting the history, and I was free to use the language for better communication.

What if dance grammar was taken as skill that enables learners to learn and perform grammar, and not history? In that case, there are two ways to see dance: (1) as a form/style/historical tool for identity creation and assertion, or (2) as a language for the body to learn and use. While one way ideally should not be totally delinked from the other, the freedom that we all crave today is to be free to choose either of the two ways or both. And thus, dance could become a way of asserting identity, of belonging to a particular tradition, and even representing a history. Or, dance could be a tool or skill that the dancer uses for creating and choreographing. In an ideal world, the choice would be a prerogative of the young and emerging dance artists. In the twenty-first century, that choice must remain with these individuals as a part of their right to dance.

Stereotypes and Control

In dance, decontextualized learning of grammar as a skill set is not encouraged because that would render the traditional practitioners powerless and without long-term economic support. The overemphasis on stereotypes of history, caste-based control, gendering, and performance ecology are all tools of control for retaining the safe cocoon of economic autonomy. The problem of referring to history to validate and perpetuate stereotypes of ideal dedication, discipline, form, norms and values in dance practice and teaching relates to automatic and assured validation of past practices. And, of course, that argument has good and bad sides. It offers shelter and security of the Guru’s name and fame to the Shishya automatically, but also takes away or, at least, restricts, one’s agency as a dancer. Stereotypes do not allow changes nor debates and are not accommodative of acceptance of differences.

Dance history in India is all about creating stereotypes through propagating *Natyashastra*, enforcing a certain aesthetic, by ensuring propagation of myths and mytho-histories as real history of the origins of dances. This is done by creating demi-gods of Gurus, and even through telling stories of aesthetically empowered patrons who enabled the dance-art to be etched as sculptures on temple walls of the past. We dancers have never thought about the way in which such sweeping assumptions also take dance and dancing bodies as stereotypical presences. One never goes beyond appreciating dancing bodies on temple walls to ask who these dancers may have been or whose dance postures may have been the inspirations for the sculptures. On the other hand: Do we ever think whether the sculptors depended on the actual bodies of dancers to curve the female figures on the temple walls? Or, did these exquisite postures

even need a woman to dance as an inspiration for the sculptor? Maybe these static representations were just perpetuated by the stereotypical representations. It may be useful to think of how dispensable the dancer’s body becomes once it is stereotyped into an aesthetic formula.

I would then want to also state that the stereotyping we do of women’s bodies has stopped us from ever questioning why and how the regulations from the Devadasi Act to the present day bars dancers. Affixing dancers’ welfare by never considering asking the community of practitioners what they actually would like to change in their dance practice or representation or ecology is problematic.

While on the topic of stereotypes, one must historiographically contextualize the process by which the stereotypical structure of classicization was thought as possible for forms across India. As the classical dances are “neo-classical” (Vatsyayan, 20 - 32), at best, with reformed grammar, new names, and ruthless changes in the practice and the rights of the performers from whose rights to dance were being diminished. Classicization also involved newly imposed and prescribed aesthetics. This project involved creation of eight classical dances, one after the other, and followed a template that has become chiseled through years of experience.

In retrospect, the template of classicization appears to have been put in operation under the free will of a team of cultural engineers, seemingly adhering to the principles of the prescribed classicization process in each specific case. For example, the classical dance form Manipuri’s roots maybe found in Sankirtan/Raasleela of Baishnavite ritual practice and religious performances of the Meitei community. This amalgam now carries the name of the state Manipur and is known as Manipuri—referring to an authentic capsule of the past—rendering invisible the practices of several Adivasi communities of the same space. Contestations plague the practice and the theory of the dance because of the new aesthetics imposed on its movement repertoire and the dresses and ornaments that selectively highlight or obfuscate its past connections. In Manipuri, like in other classical forms, imposition Guru-Shishya *Parampara* is held in place through institutionalized and controlled process of learning. The hierarchy is complex with the Meitei being the numerical and economic majority and the most visible. Socio-political dispossession as well as cultural appropriation/invisibility of the Adivasi cultural practices of the geopolitical space, named Manipur, replicate hierarchical power structures of classical dances

¹ Dancers consistently assert aesthetic quality and inner gains, while claiming caste-like rights through their birth into a family of practitioners.

of other states. The Gurus in dance and music exert different forms of control to regulate cultural ownership of knowledge transmission, managing to control modern university systems within dance and music academies and also in state patronage and scholarships in the arts. Guru-Shishya Parampara has resisted death even after being removed and replaced by formal systems of education at least from obvious power-wielding positions in urban spaces, it still tries to keep its controlling grip on the performing arts, through production, perpetuation, and affirmations of various stereotypes. This form is stripped of almost all of its utility in the current times of claims of a selfless perpetuation of knowledge, in which the master teacher—or Guru—is responsible for the safe delivery of knowledge and nurturing of the new dancers in a continuous shaping of the inner and the outer world of the learner or Shishya. Now, this form of teaching can only claim mythical affirmations through historical references and establish them by using words that refer to the power of the Guru as the assessor, appreciator, and rewarder, who becomes the oppressive agent of control, reaffirming his control through stereotypical references of “appropriate dedication,” discipline, endless practice, ideal aesthetics, and immeasurable rewards awaiting the Shishya if s/he complies with the “requirements” associated with the ideal form of submission to the Guru.

By privileging history as a mode of control, dance discourse in India largely continues to be the privilege of higher castes and classes. The classical dances continue creating the ideal reference to a patriarchally transmitted aesthetic that uses the notion of the feminine body as the carrier and transmitter—but NOT interlocuter—of cultural expressions. The stereotyping of the national culture is, of course, representational of Brahminic privileges, Sanskritic texts and contexts and concocted aesthetics projected through dresses, ornaments, and accompaniments depend on privileges available to persons of highest economic positions. But in recent times the nationalist fervour of post-independence years has been replaced by oppression through the “manufacturing of consent by controlling of patronage—especially for performing arts. In the process, we witness delegitimizing of all solidarities and closing off democratic spaces, furthering far-right agendas rather than creating a healthy dance space that accommodates one and all. Simultaneously, the ongoing marginalization of living traditions carries on due to cultural appropriation enabling an ongoing accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 75 - 76). Meanwhile, the academic community continues to remain the avatars of the classic colonial ethnographers,

often creating discourses based on trending issues without much ground-level engagement as a survival strategy in a tenure-centered world.

At this moment, as dancer-scholars, we are caught between multiple identity assertions of inherited hierarchies and socialization as well as newer political ones that inevitably place us in binaries. The understandings of the binaries are complicated by the immense variation in micro-ecologies of dance, individual embodied experiences, and different levels of personal ambitions. In my opinion, critical dance studies in India cannot stereotype or hierarchize vulnerabilities and must let all vulnerabilities breathe. We need to make space for multiple discourses on religion, caste, and gender-based vulnerabilities so that we are not suppressing any form of marginalization based on caste hierarchies, Adivasi identities, religion, language, gendering, violence against women, electoral politics, citizenship issues, and economy. We also need to understand that all stereotyping discourses from above, below, in the stratified hierarchical ladders, or from left, right, and center need to have their spaces, but we (and here I dare to include myself) as dancers can consciously work on acknowledging and spreading the stories of all of those dancers, in India and all over the world, whose rights to dance were violated by experiencing their choice to dance (or not) being taken from them. One of the ways to continue the process of dismantling power sources is to be together with those who have been trying to relearn, unlearn, and break stereotypes, and question history through historiography and critical ethnography. In the academic space, the right to continue as a critical dance studies scholar can only be registered through the reclaiming of dance studies as a space for multi-disciplinary and practice-theory discourse on the yesterday, today, and tomorrow of dance. The ultimate claiming of the right to dance can be done only by continuing to dance.

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The “Wicked Problem” of Locating and Safeguarding Dance in Bangladesh

Lubna Marium

Abstract

The history of dances in Bangladesh reads almost like a history of the belief systems crisscrossing this deltaic plain, entrenched as these dances are within indigenous myths and philosophies. However, in the recent past, regional and global dance traditions have superseded indigenous dances by nearly erasing them from within mainstream, specifically urban, practice. Even a cursory interrogation confirms that the historical hierarchization of dance in Southasia¹ has spurred this divide between the evaluation of present-day manifestations of dance within local cultural expressions and, on the other hand, the dominant genres of classical and contemporary artistic representations of dance. This highbrow, selective notion of dance from beyond the borders has led to a gradual decline and devaluation of traditional dance, especially within the non-subaltern social classes, resulting in its “invisibility” in those circles. Therein lies the “wickedness” of the problem. Borrowing from theoretical notions in the social sciences, a “wicked problem” is a puzzle. Furthermore, adverse socio-political circumstances of the indigenous heritage-holding communities contribute to the endangerment and diminishment of their dances. At this juncture, a combination of research and practical action is the need of the hour (Nielsen). Action research, or ethnographic activism, can be a form of ethical praxis that can overcome historical bias and safeguard these dances.

Introduction

“...difference, be it racialized, gendered, sexed, nationalized, [hierarchized], et cetera, is constructed.” (Frazier-Rath)

“The communities, groups, and individuals who create intangible cultural heritage should benefit from the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from such heritage, and particularly from its use, research, documentation, promotion, or adaptation by members of the communities or others.” (UNESCO)

In Bangladesh, the monsoons come after the scorching heat of *grishsho*, or summer, and with it come welcome thunder, lightning, and pouring rainfall. But in rural

areas, with the downpour, comes the menace of snakes that spread a pall of fear. Thus, all over the countryside, amongst the marginalized communities, be they Muslim or Hindu, householders organize performative rituals to appease the mighty Goddess of Serpents, *Manasa Devi*. As the legend goes, she is the mind-born daughter of *Shiva*, whom the ill-fated Brahmin merchant *Chand Saudagar* refused to worship. *Manasa* retaliated by taking the life of *Chand's* youngest son *Lokkhindor*. Thus began the epic battle between *Lokkhindor's* newlywed bride, *Behula*, and the mighty Serpent Goddess. *Behula* resolutely carried her dead husband's corpse on a raft over the river to the great God *Shiva*, overcoming obstacles at seven ghats, or wharves, to finally compel *Manasa* to give back *Lokkhindor's* life.

Amazingly, this tale is performed every year on the rivers of the Tangail District of Bangladesh on *Srabon Shongkranti*, the last day of the month of *Srabon*,² as a riverine performance on colorfully-bedecked boats. Nothing could be more Bangladeshi than this exciting day-long performance called *Shaone Dala* (the offering of *Shaon/Srabon*), with actors dressed as *Behula*, *Lokkhindor*, and other characters of this tale of *Manasa*. Competing groups navigate these colorfully-decorated boats, making stops at seven *ghats*, emulating *Behula's* journey. Eventually, each boat stops at a designated household where the *jiyoni*, a last act representing a resurrecting from dead, is performed to bring the hapless *Lokkhindor* back to life. The reality, though, is that there is rare documentation or acknowledgement of practices like these within dance discourses and institutional programs.

The Premise: Marginalization of Indigenous Dances

Going back a few centuries, the history of dances in Bangladesh, such as *Shaone Dala*, reads almost like a history of the belief systems which have crisscrossed this deltaic plain, entrenched as they are within indigenous myths and philosophies. However, in the recent past, regional and global dance traditions have superseded indigenous dances, nearly erasing them from within mainstream, specifically, urban practice. This erasure is readily affirmed by the proliferation of high-profile Bangladeshi dance events showcasing young dancers

performing to *Tamil*, *Telegu*, *Hindi*, and *Meitei* songs. Additionally, bodies perform *jatis*, *toras*, *tukras*,³ and even movement phrases from Western classical jazz, with not a thought to dance movements which have been part of this soil for centuries.

Even a cursory interrogation confirms that the historical hierarchization of dance in Southasia has spurred this divide between the valuation of present-day manifestations of dance within local cultural expressions and, on the other hand, the dominant genres of classical and contemporary artistic representations of dance. It is this highbrow, selective notion of dance from beyond the borders that has led to a gradual decline and devaluation of traditional dance, especially within the non-subaltern classes, resulting in its “invisibility” in those circles. “Invisible” means not existing in any way of being significant or relevant. And therein lies the “wickedness” of the problem. Borrowing from theoretical notions in the social sciences, a “wicked problem” is a puzzle that's difficult or impossible to solve, generally because of its complex nature and its interconnectedness with other impediments. In the case of dance traditions of Bangladesh, the “wicked reality” is that indigenous dance and its “fascinating field of innovation, alternatives, and creativity do not reach our news or our universities. It does not reach our theories either because our theories are sometimes part of an ‘epistemology of blindness,’ in that they allow us to see certain things but blind us from seeing other things” (Santos 237-258). To further clarify, the contention is that there is a rare acknowledgment of these embodied practices and their practitioners within discourse. *Dance Matters*, a comprehensive anthology of dance in India, raises the question: “Can the subaltern dance?” (Chakravorty and Gupta 1). Can the non-subaltern see and acknowledge the dance of the subalterns?

Resolution: Ethnographic Activism as A Means of Conservation

On another note, adverse socio-political circumstances of the communities at the “weekend of power,” (Grant 629-

641) who are the bearers of these cultural expressions, contribute to their endangerment and decrease. This adversity ultimately leads to circumstances where the transmission of these practices is at risk of becoming significantly destabilized. At this juncture, a combination of research and practical action, where “the researcher joins with and acts with practitioners to help improve practice and theory building,” is the need of the hour (Nielsen 419-428). Action research, or ethnographic activism, can be a form of ethical praxis that can overcome historical bias through “a non-extractive approach of investigation, where subjects are not merely objects of research to be extracted, captured, measured, and quantified. Instead, ethnographers can recover alternative knowledge and (re)build new ones that developmentally change the action researcher and the external world” (da Silva, Sauerbronn and Thiollent 1-17).

Dance in Bangladesh: How the Visible Became Invisible

Bangladesh, the eastern part of Bengal, has primarily been rural in character with urbanization setting in only in the middle of the last century of the last millennium.⁴ The general populace, until today, are largely non-literate and agrarian. As an aside, though, literacy in no way defines wisdom. That having been said, the agroecology of the land has produced a fount of predominantly indigenous, embodied traditions practiced by communities of varied religious, ethnic, and regional denominations for over several centuries to date. These include: (1) performances during “rites of passages” (i.e., *dhamail*⁵ during weddings, *lathikhela* during circumcision, etc.); (2) rituals and celebrations of seasonal/agrarian events (i.e., *baha*⁶ of Santals celebrating spring, *jari nāch*⁷ during *Muharram*⁸); (3) musical debates (i.e., *kabi gaan*⁹); (4) ritual performances (i.e., *shaone dala* to appease *Manasa*); (5) martial arts (i.e., *lathikhela*); and (6) performances for entertainment (i.e., *jatra*, *nosimon* and others).

Unfortunately, rarely do these dances get any

¹ Usage of “Southasia” as one word is inspired by HIMAL *Southasian*, a magazine which urges us to rethink Southasia as a region beyond political dictum and geography, and to look at the historical and cultural bonds between its people. Using “Southasia” as one word is a result of “Southasian” activism which seeks to restore some of the historical unity of our common living space without wishing any violence on the existing nation states. This usage, spearheaded by Nepali journalist, Kanak Mani Dixit, believes that the aloof geographical term South Asia needs to be injected with some feeling.

² This is the second month of the monsoons in the Bengali calendar.

³ These are movement phrases from Indian Classical dances.

⁴ In 1901, only 2.43%, or about 0.7 million, of the total population of the Bangladesh areas of British India lived in urban areas. During the first half of the twentieth century, urban population growth was almost static. In 1941, less than 4% of the population lived in urban areas, and the total urban population was 1.54 million. Urbanization boomed after 1947, when the Indian subcontinent became free of the British rule, creating the two independent states, India and Pakistan, with East Bengal (present day Bangladesh) as the eastern part of Pakistan. Between 1951-1961, there was a significant growth in urban population (45.11%) compared with the 1941-1951 period (18.38%). Total urban population rose from 1.8 million in 1951 to about 2.6 million in 1961. The important factor behind this rapid growth was the large-scale migration of Muslims from India after 1947, who mostly settled in urban areas. In 2020, approximately 61.82% of the population in Bangladesh were residing in rural areas. (Urbanization, Banglapedia).

⁵ https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Dhamail_Gan

⁶ “Baha” means flower in Santali. It is the second biggest festival of the Santals after SORHAI, the harvest festival.

⁷ https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Jari_Nach

⁸ The “sacred month” is the first month of the Islamic or Hegira calendar.

⁹ Kabigan a genre of competitive folk songs performed by two groups of poetic singers.

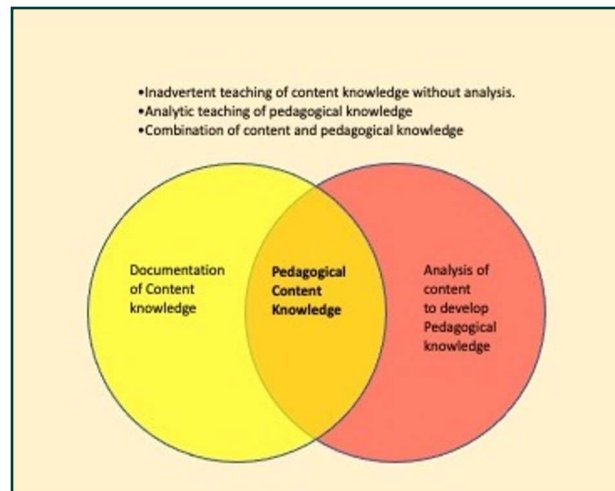


Fig. 8: Pedagogical Content Knowledge.



Fig. 1: Ritual performance of “Shaone Dala” based on the myth of Manasa, the Goddess of Serpents; August 16, 2017: Tangail, Bangladesh. Here the bride Behula is singing by the corpse of her hapless husband, Lokkhindar, while appealing to Lord Shiva to bring him back to life.

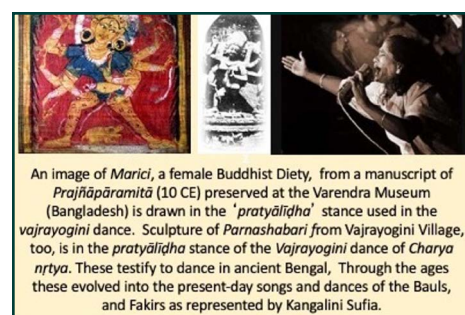


Fig. 2: Charya Dance in Bangladesh.



Fig. 4: The jester, or Shong (Vidusaka).



Fig. 3: Shaone Dala, a riverine, performative ritual on the Elega river in Tangail Bangladesh, 2015.



Fig. 9: A Display of Lathikhela By Girls of Bir Shreshtho Noor Mohammad Lathiyal Dol from Narail District of Bangladesh.

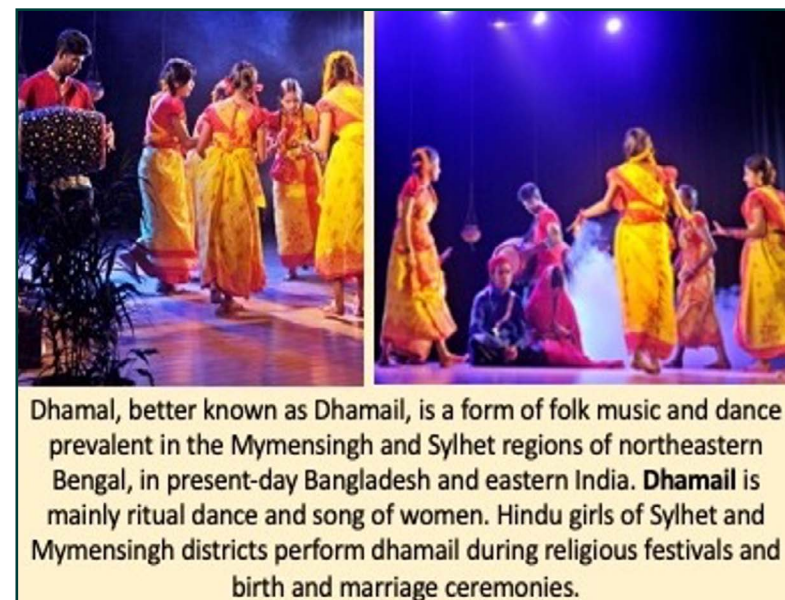


Fig. 6: Dhamail.

exposition apart from that within the practicing communities. Sadly, this “othering” of these indigenous performances has been debilitating myth-making cultural baggage that Bengal, like the rest of South Asia, has carried for centuries. This claim is corroborated by Indian poet, scholar, and folklorist, A.K. Ramanujan, in his statement, “Indian traditions are organised as a pan-Indian Sanskritic Great Tradition (in the singular) and many local Little Traditions (in the plural)” (Ramanujan 6-33). This dichotomy has, however, long been perceived as contested and constructed, just as “the writing of Indian history, even the colonial and postcolonial histories written by westerners, has often reflected the efforts of a restricted section of Indian society to define their own situation as normative and unmarked and those of others: tribal peoples, Dalits, Muslims, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, as variants” (Morrison 3).

The Genealogy of Hierarchy within Performative Traditions

Genealogy is the historical enquiry of an issue which begins with a question posed in the present. The issue at hand is the persistent “epistemological blindness” toward indigenous dance and dancers. Acknowledging hierarchy as the primary cause, it is then necessary to excavate its underlying features by “diagnosis, conceptualization, and problematization” (Garland 365-384) of the issue.

Diagnosis of the Fissure

Historically, the onus of this unwitting “hierarchization” falls heavily on the shoulders of venerable sages like Bharatmuni, the promulgator of *Nāṭyaśāstra*—the definitive first-century treatise and handbook on Indian dramaturgy—and Dhanañjaya, author of *Daśarūpaka*—the tenth-century landmark exposition on theatre.

Bharata presents dharmī as the *modus operandi* of

theatre, without which various concepts and aesthetic principles cannot be put into practice. He then goes on to categorize the two modes of practice. *Lokadharmī*—or realistic mode—portrays popular narratives wherein the performance depends on natural behaviour, is simple, and has no artificiality. *Nāṭyadharmī*, on the other hand, is a stylized mode of creative expression. Though Bharata’s derision of the folk is evident right at the outset,¹⁰ it is centuries of public usage that have given the term *lokadharmī* a negative connotation, representing the “pedestrian.” Kālidāsa uses the term *anyathā karaṇa*¹¹ for *nāṭyadharmī*, or craftsmanship, which corrects whatever is not right in the picture. *Anyathā karaṇa* is the way to transcend the mundane and the ordinariness of the loka to scale the heights of excellence. On another note, Bharata co-relates the *nāṭyadharmī* with *aṅgas*¹² and *abhinayas*.¹³ According to the tenth-century philosopher, mystic and aesthetician from Kashmir, Abhinavagupta, the very nature of the phenomena when represented through these *aṅgas* and *abhinayas* on the stage becomes the *nāṭyadharmī*.¹⁴ All of these usages affirm the labelling of *loka* performances as “mundane” and “ordinary” or relegate the abundance of kinesthetic movements within indigenous performances to the boondocks. Furthermore, *Lokadharmī* performances are seen as “crossing the bounds of *aucitya*, or appropriateness.” *Nāṭyadharmī*, or idealistic, on the other hand, are those representations which the “arts of dance and drama select, fix and refine out of real situations for an idealised or stylised presentation on the stage” (Arundale 1-7), (Zarrelli 85-86).

Two Conceptualizations of Representation Creating the Divides of Exclusion

Bharata very precisely points out the distinction as well as the interrelationship between these two practices: “While *lokadharmī* is the very *svabhāva*, or nature of things to be presented in a dramatic performance,

10 *grāmyadharmapravṛtte tu kāmalo bhavaśaṃ gate*/All engaged in rural religion became subject to lust and greed. | (NŚ 1.9)
 11 *yadyatsādhu na citre syātkriyate tattadanyathā* |
tathāpi tasyā lāvanyaṃ rekhayā kiṃcidanvītam || Abhijñānaśākuntalam (4.14)|
 Whatever is not right in the picture is done differently.
 yet her beauty is only partially represented by the delineation. (AŚ 4.14)
 12 Movement of the limbs
 13 Modes of histrionics
 14 *yaḥ ayam svabhāvaḥ lokasya sukha-duḥkha-kriyātmakaḥ.*
saḥ aṅgābhīnaya-samyuktaḥ nāṭyadharmī tu sā smṛtā...
yaḥ ca itihāsa-vedārthaḥ brahmaṇā samudāhṛtaḥ.
divya-mānuṣa-ratyartham nāṭyadharmī tu sā smṛtā.. nāṭyadharmī-pravṛttam hi sadā nāṭyam prayojayet.
na hi aṅgābhīnayaṭ kiñcid rte rāgaḥ pravartate (NŚ 13.0-83)
 The nature of the world is composed of pleasure, pain, and action.
 It becomes theatrical with acting, and thus remembered. . . .
 Meaning of the Vedas, which is history, is explained by the Brahman. Through stylization theatre is propagated. (NŚ 13-83)

nāṭyadharmī makes it *vibhāva*¹⁵—endows it with artistic beauty.¹⁶ “This brings us to the fundamentals of Indian aesthetics. The very phenomena of our own mundane world are taken up in art, but they are transformed” (Tripathi 1-11). The operative phrase here is “artistic beauty” with the implied allusion that there is a lack of it within indigenous dances. In fact, there is a categorical dismissal of dance within indigenous performances, even by later dramaturgists who locate dance only within *Uparupaka*—or minor *Lokadharmī* performances—and *Bhana*—a *rupaka*¹⁷ with strands of the *loka*. Unfortunately, through the ages the conception of the term *loka* was devalued further, so that by the tenth century, in Dhananjaya’s compendium, the modes of practices were designated as *deśī* and *mārga*. The nomenclature of *deśī*, meaning “provincial,” now gave a slightly more pejorative turn to the “realism” of *loka*¹⁸. *Mārga*, literally meaning “the path,” endowed idealized “art” as appreciated by the connoisseur possessing the knowledge of sixty-four skills with the power to “elevate the spirit, not to degrade it” (Arundale 1-7). Firstly, this is dismissive of the non-literate spectators of indigenous performances. Secondly, the world of good, which is related to wellness and good-health and delivered by indigenous ritual performances featuring actors who are often also “faith healers,” does not even come into discussion.

Problematization of the Aesthetics of Marginalization

Aside from the above artistic and conceptual differences related to the *modus operandi* of the two genres of *dharmī*, Bharata posits two stages of the creative process within the practice of the *nāṭyadharmī* on the basis of which the “spontaneous” practices of the *lokadharmī* are excluded. The first is *vyutpatti*¹⁹ the act of acquainting and equipping oneself with empirical knowledge. This is followed by the more reflexive stage of moulding the crude material derived by the processes of *prakhya* and *upākhyā*,²⁰ the capacity of the artist to perceive and express into a beautiful and harmonious world absolved from the shortcomings of

God’s creation (Tripathi). This rationale of exclusion is problematic, as all performative presentations have a certain measure of reflexivity, setting them apart from the empirical experience with merely the modes of expression remaining different. Once again, taking into consideration the performative ritual of *Shaone Dala* mentioned above, rarely do we see a more creative transformation of the empirical world than this riverine performance.

These were the discursive practices which defined the epistemic order of an era during which the discourses of hierarchization were written. Based on these discourses, the seemingly simplistic, spontaneous, fluid, and pastoral indigenous practices were relegated to the margins.

Socio-Political Dimensions of Exclusion and Marginality

The variance in the spatiotemporal presentations of the two modes of practice, yet again, sets them apart. Spatially indigenous performances—situated within community commons, under the sky in open fields, on boats, in places of worship, or even the humble courtyards of householders—are distanced both physically and socially from the connoisseurs and patrons of “art.” Furthermore, these presentations are organized either on the basis of a seasonal calendar of agrarian events, or during ‘rites of passage’ where there is engaged participation by the members of the community who value, own, and undertake responsibility for its enactment. Most of the time, the spectators and performers share a permeable relationship, co-creating the space through informal interactions. This differs from a connoisseur’s role as passive “observer” of the creative processes of *nāṭyadharmī* performances. Gender and identity issues, too, are dealt with flexibly within the *lokadharmī*. These issues are enhanced by performative “crossdressing,” with men playing female roles.

The temporality of a performance is fluid, with

characters like the *shong* (*vidūṣaka*)—or the ubiquitous “jester”—often interpolating present-day socio-political issues within the narrative—be it mythic or epic—with aplomb. This subjective positionality, in which “presence” and “non-presence” have a natural coevalness, contributes to the lived experience of folk performances. However, these very features, which allow the actors and spectators of *lokadharmī* presentations to treat with disdain—even if temporarily—the hegemonic oppression within their real world, designate the performances as “illogical,” “vulgar,” “irrational,” or “loud,” pushing them further into the peripheries of discourse.

The Colonial, Regional and Global Split

The urban-rural divide of the colonial era pushed the two modes of dance further apart. While urban centers in Bengal embraced a “Western” conception of culture, notwithstanding seething anti-colonial and nationalist dynamics, it was only within rural and indigenous communities that performative traditions continued to be quietly upheld and practiced. This rupture between tradition and modernity caused a fissure between what anthropologist James C. Scott, in his book *Seeing like a State*, calls “high modernism.” Or, it attempts to design society in accordance to scientific laws on one hand, and on the other, “mētis,” or practical, locally rooted knowledge (Scott 309). This rupture continues to be a reality in Bangladesh.

Aggression of dance practices from beyond the regional and global borders further exacerbated the distancing between the indigenous arts and the urban practices of classical and contemporary dance, driving the final nail on the exercise of turning the “visible” into the “invisible.”

Understanding and Resolving the Continuity of the Divide

Faith and belief lie at the heart of indigenous performances. Invocations to almighty *Allah* and to the Gods and Goddesses of Hindu scripture, pledges to deities to earn their blessings, faith-healing by chanting of *mantras*,²¹ and efficacious ritual performances are all part and parcel of the performative traditions of the indigenous recitals. “In the field of knowledge, abyssal thinking consists in granting the monopoly of the universal distinction between the true and the false to science, to the detriment of two alternative knowledges: philosophy and theology. This monopoly

is at the heart of the modern epistemological dispute between scientific and non-scientific forms of truth” (Santos, *The Resilience of Abyssal Exclusions in Our Societies: Toward a Post-Abyssal Law*). How, then, does one reconcile the two forms of truth?

“Rational” mainstream discourse has, by and large, relegated indigenous dance to the margins, except for acknowledging its value in maintaining cultural diversity and perpetrating inter-faith dialogue. However, there has been little effort to build an epistemology which acknowledges the beliefs, opinions, magic, idolatry, intuitive or subjective understandings which are an important component of indigenous performances. The seeming incommensurability of the task adds to the “wickedness” of the problem.

A resolution of this conflict is the constitution of a “post-abyssal ecology of knowledges” as visualized by social theorist Boaventura de Sousa Santos based upon the idea of the “epistemological diversity of the world” which entails the acknowledgement of the existence of a plurality of knowledges beyond scientific knowledge (Santos 45-89). This implies abandoning any general epistemology, while acknowledging that the epistemologies of the South, with their dialogical dynamics, derived from an inclusive atmosphere of the “infinite experiences of the world.” This idea, therefore, encompasses a “plurality of heterogeneous knowledges.” As outlined by Santos, given the crisis of modern values and the ongoing global ecological disaster, instead of privileging the West and its distinctive notion of progress and civilization, there is an urgent need for a dialogue between the various systems of knowledge. “This is a dialog between different cultures that are set on an equal standing, an intercultural dialogue in which knowledge is understood as interknowledge. A dialogue conceived in such wide terms cannot be termed anything other than an ‘ecology of knowledge,’ one that replaces the monoculture of the dominant epistemology of the North and that allows and promotes a real intercultural dialogue” (Barreto 395 - 422).

Identifying Indigenous Dances

Before embarking on a dialogue, there is a need to identify, document and inventory performances in Bangladesh to understand the processes of cultural formation and its modes of transmission to help situate the cultural practices.

¹⁵ Vibhāva refers to “determinant.” According to the Nāṭyaśāstra (NŚ), chapter 6.31 and chapter 7, the “the sentiment (*rasa*) is produced (*rasa-niṣpattiḥ*) from a combination (*saṃyoga*) of Determinants (*vibhāva*), Consequents (*anubhāva*), and Complementary Psychological States (*vyabhicāri-bhāva*).”

¹⁶ *lōkadharmī bhavāttvanāyā nāṭyadharmī tathāparā/* lokadharmī is the ordinary, and nāṭyadharmī, the other:

svabhāvō lōkadharmī tu vibhāvō nāṭyamēva hi /in fact, lokadharmī is literal, while nāṭya is suggestion alone (NŚ 21.203).

¹⁷ Sanskrit plays are usually termed as *Rupaka*. There are ten different *Rupaka* that enrich the plays with their own peculiarities.

¹⁸ *Kāvya-darśa* by Dandin, the earliest surviving systematic treatment of poetics in Sanskrit, enumerates the mastery of over sixty-four arts, called *chatushashti kalas*, as a prerequisite for a connoisseur (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kalā>).

¹⁹ *lokasya sthāvararajagamātmakalokavṛttasya /śāstrānām chandovyākaraṇābhīdhānakośakalācaturvargagajaturagakhadgād ilakṣaṇagrānthānām /kāvyānām ca mahākavisambandhinām /ādigrahaṇāditihāsānām ca vimarśanādvyyutpattiḥ*

Of the world’s movable and immovable expanse /Scriptures, verse, grammar, expression, dictionary, art, four classes, elephant, horse, sword, characteristic texts, and poems relating to the great poet and the derivation of the histories conjointly, and not singly, constitute the source, and not the sources, of poetry. (*Kāvya-prakāśa* by Mammāṭa)

²⁰ *Apurvamyadvastu prathayati vinā kāraṇa-kalām/jagad grāvaprakhyaṃ nijarasabharāt sārāyati ca/ /* The unprecedented is created without cause or reason by observing the world and then reconstructing it one’s own emotions. (Dhvanyalokālocana by Abhinavagupta)

²¹ Sacred text or speech, a prayer or song of praise.

“Circuit of Culture” and its Transmission

Meanings are produced and shared through a representational system accessible to all within the same “circuit of culture.” All cultural meaning is produced through a series of stages, or “moments” which include its representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation (Hall 1). It is through discursive discourses that meaning and knowledge of a particular practice are constructed to include “a cluster (or formation) of ideas, images, and practices, which provide ways of talking about forms of knowledge and conduct associated with a particular topic, social activity, or institutional site in society” (Hall 6).

Interestingly, in Bengal, knowledge and its inherent meaning has for centuries been disseminated through performance, both esoteric and candid, within both initiates and the lay, gaining honor as tradition. Transformation and reinterpretation of received material is central to the process of cultural transmission of traditions to ensure ‘continuing patterns of cultural beliefs and practices.’ Over centuries, transmission of cultural practices has taken place through enculturation and socialization within the rural communities of Bengal, as most cultural practices have been public and performative in nature.

Conceptual Framework for Understanding Indigenous Traditions in Bangladesh

Bengal has neatly documented written and oral histories of the transmission of its cultural practices over a couple of millenniums. From works of literature, such as *Caryācaryāvinīścaya*—the medieval Buddhist book of songs—to redactions of the songs of Lalou Fakir—the rustic philosopher, mystic and minstrel from 19th century East Bengal—there is an unbroken history of the transmission of traditional performative literature. Thenceforth, however, the advent of the Colonial period ushering in the “modern” era caused a seminal cleft within the social strata of Bengal and the way in which traditions were organized and understood.

The Performative Space

Within rural Bangladesh, performative spaces are wrested from the normative world to create an extra-daily and liminal platform where they are in an effective and, as social theorist Henri Lefebvre states,

²² “Mazaar” is an Islamic mausoleum or shrine dedicated to saint or notable religious leader and “mandir” is a structure which houses Hindu divinities where devotees pay homage.

²³ <http://www.thedailystar.net/showbiz/ode-the-serpent-goddess-134116>

²⁴ *Boyatis* are folk minstrels who explicate the tenets of beliefs, derived from the Arabic word ‘*bayan*’ or elucidation.

“generative relationship” with performing bodies (Lefebvre 411). Thus, “bodies and spaces, cleverly, co-produce one another through practices, gestures, and events” (McCormack 2). This is especially true for open-air, night-long performances of rural Bangladesh, where there is, often, a blurring of lines dividing the performers and the audience. Spectators sit crowded on floormats in front of make-shift stages, interspersing enactments with comments, impromptu participation, interactions with performers, applause, or slander, thus creating and recreating themselves and the actors. Spectators often walk or row boats for miles to attend these performances.

Spatially, folk performative cultural practices occur in (1) the “commons” or community spaces under open skies with easy public access, patronized by the community itself; (2) in the courtyards of householders commissioning the performances, and (3) in holy shrines such as Muslim *mazaars* or Hindu *mandirs*.²² The riverine processional performance to depict the journey of *Behula* in the myth of *Manasa* the Serpent Goddess during the ritual performance of *Shaone Dala*, or the “Gift of *Srabon*,” is a unique appropriation of the river as a community space.²³

Occasions of Performances

Most performative practices occur during: (1) rituals, commissioned against *manots*—or pledges—by householders; (2) auspicious occasions on the lunisolar Muslim and Hindu calendars, such as birth and death dates of sages and divinities; and (3) during rites of passages, such as births, weddings, and circumcisions.

Auspicious days are occasions during which the following are arranged and enacted to generate merit: (1) narrative-dependent presentations such as theatrically-represented myths of divinities and sages and performances of the epics and folk-tales; (2) popular musical debates on a range of topics by *boyatis*,²⁴ or folk singers; (3) processional rites and rituals; and (4) the supra-persona masked performances. A popular practice during rites of passage is the commissioning of skill-based presentations such as acrobatics and martial arts.

The prevalence of these practice, for centuries, is corroborated by British Administrative records from the Colonial period such as one from 1877 which informs us that “Other indoor amusements consist

of games of chance...while the weavers and other Vaishnava indulge in nautches and lilās or theatrical representations of the exploits of Krishna” (Hunter 81).

of games of chance...while the weavers and other Vaishnava indulge in nautches and lilās or theatrical representations of the exploits of Krishna” (Hunter 81).

Dramatis Personae

Performance is mostly an alternate vocation for the performers who are commonly from marginalized professions such as landless peasantry, masonry, and barbering. The extra-empirical space of performance, is an interstitial place which defies social structures by empowering performers and giving them agency.

Women rarely perform; men perform the roles of women. The remarkable absence of social participative practices, except for rare interactions during weddings, are worth noting and seem to reflect the insidious rise of patriarchal views and conservatism within the social strata of Bengal.

Unique Features

Aside from the above mentioned spatial and temporal diversities in cultural practices, some of the unique features of “*mētis*,” or inherited cultural traditions of Bangladesh, are its orality, community base, ritual nature, subaltern character, and inherent plurality of belief.

Orality

Julian Jayne, in his 1976 book, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, posits the thesis that these works are from an era of human pre-consciousness, when people were not yet conscious of their consciousness. As a result, Roger D. Abrahams proposes “a list of three imagistic universals in oral art: (1) overstatement and understatement, (2) concrete and specific language, and (3) translation of idea and emotion into action and symbol” (Lindahl 131), thus explaining the abundant use of kinesthetic movements in these performing arts.

Though redactions are available, practitioners are mostly non-literate and perform from memory. A big advantage is that these open-ended oral scripts allow greater freedom for cross-cultural transmission and intertextual incorporation.

Issues of Rituality, Plurality, and Community Base

The use of the performative body as a vehicle for spiritual realization during rituals is a trend that commenced with the seminal *Carya* culture of Vajrayana Buddhism in

the 8th-10th Centuries A.D. based on the philosophical concept of *sahaja*.

This later continued through different structures within other belief systems. Verily, underlying these performances is an entire cosmology known to both the initiated and the lay. Remnants of these kinesthetic practices, both in rituals and performances, can still be observed within the culture of the present-day *Bauls* and *Fakirs*—the initiates of a folk belief system of Bengal.

Rituals enacted against pledges, made to Hindu and Muslim divinities, are a common practice amongst the subaltern communities of both Hindu and Muslim populace. The performers are both actors and faith-healers of maladies like snake bites and diseases. Performance spaces are consecrated with a worship to that particular divinity, primarily the Hindu Serpent Goddess *Manasa*, beginning with incantations to *Allah*, *Rasul*, and *Saraswati*, all in one go. We learn from the 1920 book on folk literature by Dineshchandra Sen that, “A manual of these incantations and mantras has lately been published by Mir Khoram Ali from 155-1 Masjidbari Street, Calcutta. This writer says in the Introduction to his Manual that his name stands first in the list of those physicians who cure by charms and incantations” (Sen). This confirms the plurality of beliefs inherent in these practices. Furthermore, patronage of these practices is totally community based, with little or no acknowledgement or recognition by urban centers.

Interestingly, in the pre-Islamic eras the narratives were based on *mangal-kavyas* and *panchalis*, which are genres of Bengali-Hindu religious texts, composed more or less between the thirteenth century and eighteenth century, and consisting, notably, of myths of indigenous deities of rural Bengal in the social scenario of the Middle Ages. After the advent of Islam, this trend of narratives was transposed onto the newly arrived preachers and guides of Islam, which had given rise to many popular saints—or *Pirs*—graced with divine power, and are called *pir panchalis*. “If aspiration to come nearest to the ideal established in *Nāṭyaśāstra* lent grandeur to the classical performing arts, the need to appropriately and creatively respond to the sacred and non-sacred in varied circumstances lent variety to the folk performing arts” (Singh 18).

Dance Within Indigenous Traditions

It is worth remembering that all cultural forms glossed in Western academics as “dance” are not necessarily consistent with the equivalent traditional concept of *nāch* in Bangladesh. Seeking a political ontology of the

use of various kinesthetic continuum of movements, we come across some of the most radical and subversive epistemologies of dance within the folds of the inherited traditions of Bengal.

Kinesthetic Enactments of Belief

Sahajiya philosophy proclaims the individual's capacity to realize Truth—or *sahaja*—through embodied practices. It is this concept of *sahaja* that has, for centuries, fired the imagination of the people of this amazing deltaic land that is Bangladesh. Not just a confluence of rivers from the east, west, and north, this land also has witnessed the convergence of mystic beliefs from far and wide which have all converged into the ocean of *sahaja*. The *sahaja* culture rejects the inference of hegemonic textual religions and declares a firm belief that the finite body has the potential to realize the Infinite creative principle through corporeal practices, including dance. As this "discourse of protest was constructed within the cultural context of dominations" (Bandyopadhyay 37), it continued under various configurations as a popular practice. The polysemic nature of these practices makes it popular within the general populace, while retaining the double entendre significance for initiates alone.

Movement as Martial Art

The other exception is the martial dance, variously known as *raibeshe*, *lathikhela*, or *binoti*, amongst others. Martial dance is based on elaborate techniques and precision of presentation. Having evolved as an art of serious combat, using the bamboo staff as a weapon of both defence and offense, it is now merely a performative art due to its decline since the colonial era. This is when its practitioners were brought under the purview of the draconian Thuggee and Dacoity Suppression Acts (1836–1848) enforced by the British. Presently, it continues to be one of the most popular forms of entertainment in Bangladesh.

Symbiosis of Movement and Narration

Kinesthetic movements identified as dance are embedded within narrative performances and are rarely autonomous acts of performance. This is consistent with the comprehensive concept of *nāṭya*—or theatre—as described in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the extraordinary first-century CE compendium of dramaturgy. It states: "Theatre (*nāṭya*) actually encompasses all forms of art expressions. There is no knowledge, no craft, no lore, no art, no technique, and no activity that is not found

within it" (Bharata 1.16).²⁵ Dance, therefore, "cannot be understood in isolation" (Vatsyayan 9), rather it is a symbiotic concoction of music, theatre, and movement (i). These dances are marked by an informal spontaneity and fluidity which welcomes experimentation and assimilation (ii). Though lacking the formality of the *śāstra*—or science—each genre of dance has a basic formation, where rhythm and melody play a major role (iii). Notably, none of the dances within folk theatre of Bangladesh use the elaborate hand gestures of classical Indian dances (iv). Underlying eroticism, use of pelvic thrusts, and swaying of hips, albeit by male dancers impersonating the female, is an integral part of most forms. In fact, there is an ambience of Bakhtin's "carnavalesque" within most indigenous performances, which celebrates "a transitory freedom from hierarchical ranks, privileges, norms, and prohibitions," and a simultaneous renewal of hope (K. Singh 8).

Safeguarding and Strengthening Dance

Wemaywellaskourselves: In what way does this elaborate exercise of documentation, validation, elaboration, and refinement of ideas provide usable knowledge? A reasonable response would be an acknowledgement of the investigation in collaboration of activism as a step toward empowerment of communities who are the heritage holders of these traditions. We could even go on to state that action research is a step toward social and, potentially political, change. As succinctly stated by ethnographer Dwight Conquergood:

Whereas analytical interpretation and artistic creativity often are segregated in the academy (liberal arts/fine arts), I try to unpin these thinking/doing, interpreting/making, theory/practice oppositions and help students appreciate the productive dialectical tension between ideas and action. Theory is enlivened and most vigorously tested when it hits the ground in practice. Likewise, artistic practice can be deepened, complicated, and challenged in meaningful ways by engaging critical theory. (Conquergood 5)

Action Research

Most of the time, work with grassroots, indigenous dance and dancers results in contemporary, urban-based performers appropriating information from folk forms and enriching their own repertoire of movements. The same can be remarked about academics augmenting their own theoretical work with information from the field

²⁵ na tajjñānaṃ na tacchilpaṃ na sā vidyā na sā kalā /nāsau yogo na tatkarma nāṭye'smin yanna dr̥ṣyate./ Hence, I have devised the drama in which meet all the departments of knowledge, different arts, and various actions. (NŚ 1.116)



Fig. 5: Jarinach.



Fig. 7: Lathikhela.

with little impact on the indigenous community itself. The challenge is to come up with a win-win situation for both groups. “Projects that are most successful in empowering community members in some way seem to be those in which professional researchers and community members work together as equals to decide on levels of community participation, the degree and type of action that is appropriate, setting goals, and other matters pertinent to conducting the research” (Wilmsen 135–146).

In Bangladesh, several projects of ethnographic activism have achieved remarkable success. The project to revitalize *lathikhela* was aimed to combine “inadvertent teaching of content knowledge” with “analytic teaching of pedagogical knowledge,” while multisectoral practitioners participated in it. The *Cholo Lathi Khel*²⁶ project was designed in two phases, by Shadhona, a cultural organization in Dhaka, covering a fifteen-month period. The different phases were:

- Phase One was a brainstorming session. The idea was to bring practitioners from all over Bangladesh for a final brainstorming workshop in Dhaka where extensive documentation of each group’s performance was carried out. Also, “Sharing of the Local Knowledge” (SLK) sessions were organized to garner information from the indigenous knowledge experts through the “mapping of collective memory” still reposed in them in the form of myths, riddles, and songs about “*lathikhela*.”
- Phase two involved follow-up workshops: Sharing interactions led to follow-up workshops where twenty young practitioners of “*lathikhela*” trained in body fitness, acrobatics, dance, martial arts, and pedagogy of *Lathikhela* and *Dholbadon* (drum playing) with the aim of extending, revitalizing, strengthening, and safeguarding the practice.

This is a continuing initiative. As a corollary, the project actively supported the teaching of the martial art to young girls with the result that in Norail it is now the norm for girls to participate in *lathikhela*.²⁷

The riverine, a processional ritual performance of *Shaone Dala*, is also now supported by a few groups of cultural activists. The *Cholo Poddar Gaan Gai* Project,

also initiated by Shadhona, included: (1) arranging attendance of the yearly event by research scholars, heritage professionals, and government officials; (2) supporting the community of performers and (3) building an equitable relationship between indigenous performers and urban theatre/performance activists. The two groups co-produced a much-appreciated production, “Podda Behular Akhyan,”²⁸ which also traveled to India.

There are ongoing research projects to empower ethnic communities by strengthening their cultural practices through the four-goal approach of: (1) documenting Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) and living traditions in Bangladesh, (2) recognizing and celebrating ICH with festivals and commemorations, (3) supporting and encouraging the transmission of knowledge and skills, and (4) exploring the potential of ICH as a resource for community development and achieving the goals of safeguarding.

Prioritizing Human Experience

It can be argued that dance has a particular propensity to foreground cultural memory as embodied practice by virtue of its predominantly somatic modes of transmission. Indeed, in traditional forms of danced display, it could be argued that longevity of human memory is publicly enacted, demonstrating the ethereality of human existence and the continuity of human experience, as successive generations represent the dancing. (Buckland 1-16)

Given this context, recent acknowledgement of the “body pedagogics”²⁹ of human experience, on top of available literary and oral sources of knowledge, it is worth our while to explore embodied knowledge of cultural practices. Transmitted through “enskillment of” and “attention to” sensory inputs from the environment rather than through socialization and enculturation, ways of perceiving are the sedimentation of past histories of direct, mutual involvement between persons and their environments (Ingold 220-221). The body carries unique knowledges of its own—both known and unknown to us. To document, analyze, strengthen, and ensure its transmission to coming generations can only enhance our fount of knowledge.

To enable us to do this, it is imperative to acknowledge all knowledges and formulate a general epistemology, which overrides the geopolitics of both knowledge and culture, with the aim of embracing all.

The truth is that there is no one universal and evenly distributed knowledge construct, but many—differing conceptually and differing in their stages of critical and analytical development. Under the circumstances, the catchphrase “freeing ourselves of parochialism,” from Tagore’s quote and the concept of an “ecology of knowledge” could be actively examined to, at least, start a discourse about acknowledging all forms of performances sans hierarchy.

²⁶ <https://www.thedailystar.net/news-detail-136708>

²⁷ <https://m.theindependentbd.com/magazine/details/125036/Lathi-Khela-With-A-Message>

²⁸ <https://www.prothomalo.com/entertainment/%E0%A6%9A%E0%A7%8B%E0%A6%96%E0%A7%87%E0%A6%B0-%E0%A6%B8%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%AE%E0%A6%A8%E0%A7%87-%E0%A6%AC%E0%A7%87%E0%A6%B9%E0%A7%81%E0%A6%B2%E0%A6%BE-%E0%A6%B2%E0%A6%96%E0%A6%BF%E0%A6%A8%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%A6%E0%A6%B0>

²⁹ Body pedagogics emphasises learning as a physically embodied process. It illustrates how multisensory experience causes embodied changes which relate to the process of cultural transmission.

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Performing Histories of Abhyudayamu and Yakśagānamu: Reading Performance and Performative Literatures of Early Modern South India as Historiography

Swarnamalya Ganesh

Abstract

Scholars have established over the past decades that the tradition of historiography in South Asia was not altogether a Western import. This has allowed us to revisit South Indian vernacular literary texts in a new light. Historians A. K. Warder, Romila Thaper, Nicholas Dirks, and the trio of Sanjay Subramaniam, Velcheru Narayana Rao, and David Shulman have argued eloquently in their writing about seeing Indian literature as serious sources of historical evidence. For example, the trio identify sources such as Karanam-s (service gentry who were book keepers/accountants), Raya Vācakamū-s (chronicles of Vijayanagara Kings), and Tārikh-s (modern members of society who wrote history), all seemingly non-traditional sources authored by ministers, court chroniclers, accountants, army chieftains, and others as important materials. I further this argument to investigate the vernacular performative literatures of Abhyudayamu-s in the yakśagānamu style, from early Modern Tañjāvur. Raghunātha-abhyudayamu, a Telugu Yakśagānamu text written by Vijayarāghava Nāyaka in the seventeenth century, records the daily life of his father Raghunātha Nāyaka.

Abhyudayamu is in the versified prose format of dvipada (poetic metre). It enumerates the genealogy, lifestyle, events, people, and place, as well as the escapades of the King. It literally sequences the dawn-to-dusk life of the Telugu Nāyaka King. The Raghunātha-abhyudayamu, is written in the yakśagānamu genre and has a distinct performative quality with song and dance as its central modes of expression. Performing the yakśagānamu, which extolls Raghunātha's greatness through historic conquests, administrative prowess, warfare genius, processions, cultural and romantic alliances was a way to report history. It was also the assertion of kinship and identity by the Bahujan (historically serving class) Nayaka Kings. Performing the yakśagānamu daily in open court must be read as layered modes of embedding historic memory in public consciousness.

While some of the performative literatures have been brought to light in the past, through publications and discourse, it is in fact in the experience of performance that vestibules the past into the future that cultural memories are built. Parts of the performed rendition are embedded as videos in this article for illustrative purposes. This study, is therefore a reading of literature

complimented by embodied practice, that is rendered as performing histories: enacted literary performances imbuing the interpretive tools for cultural research.

Introduction

The performance of music and dance and the performance of text are discourses—verbal and visible representations of history. In the past few decades, many historians have argued emphatically to refute theories that assert that Indian society, in its past, is an unchanging consortium of villages ruled by despotic kings and all other theories based on the Hagelian dialectic. To counter the view, held by Orientalists and Indologists, that India lacked historicity, new evidence from archeologically-sourced reading materials, epigraphical data, as well as substantial historical data from literary sources such as *Kāvya-s*, *Itihāsa-s*, and *Purāna-s* was collected.

Scholars like Sheldon Pollock asserted that India's "ahistoricity" itself is historical (Pollock 1988) while the trio Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Velchuri Narayana Rao, and David Shulman established the firm presence of a historical consciousness among the early modern southern societies through readings of vernacular and local literary source texts as historiography (Rao, Subrahmanyam, Shulma 2003). In these readings, they persuasively argue to regard literary texts as intellectual history of the expansion of time and space—particularly, the time world. Although the two are inseparably connected, acquiring knowledge and accepting beliefs that enable people—not only historians—to find within it and be influenced by patterns of true or imagined events is key (Becker 222). Further they trace the components of historicity in literature via the following: (1) as the creation and activation of a regal, transcendental identity, (2) as the localization of this identity in time and space, and (3) as the aesthetic experiencing of this identity in court through poetic forms (Shulman and Rao 117).

In many of these literary works, a publicly-ritualized, partly divine and partly human identity is constructed of the hero and his courtly characters, who become generative sources and who enact events that include artillery battle, military and political successes (and occasionally failures and betrayals), cultural experiences at court and in the kingdom, and erotic scenarios. These texts often also image the hero's habits as well as the

values and meaningful norms of his society which are made visible through the works (Shulman 1989). To read, perform, or spectate on the performance of such literary/performative texts means a recollection of such values and norms of the society in which the hero was idealized. As pointed out by many reputed scholars, taking the James Mill route and disregarding such texts as entirely opposed to ideas of "dynamic progress" and seeing them merely as couched in some traditional unchanging despotic rule was limiting the ways we read the past. However, it is equally limiting to regard such texts as a reservoir in which traces of the past are gradually deposited by some ongoing spontaneous process (Thaper 326). It is, therefore, more useful to see such works as historical products of cultural mnemotechniques and mnemotechnologies, which range from commemorative rituals to historical writing (Rigney 326). Yurii Lotman, one of the initiators of the "cultural memory" concept, had already emphasized in 1985 that "memory is not for the culture a passive depository, but part of its mechanism of textual creation" (Lotman 676) (Tamm 501). The trio historians mentioned above, while analyzing the historiographical attributes of early modern South India, have used a lens of Jan Assmann that propounds that cultural memory stays long after the actual event has faded, and lasts in the society through collective consciousness. Cultural memory, in Jan Assmann's definition, "comprises that body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose 'cultivation' serves to stabilize and convey that society's self-image." To further the argument that text and the performance of text embeds cultural memory, we shall use "reusable" as our operative word from the above definition and return to it in the section below.

Who Can Read these Texts?

Historiographical texts are written to invoke collective memory and consciousness and, without a sensible rooting to the culture, the narrative might just fade away. Therefore, in post-colonial India, invoking cultural sensibilities is often associated with the creation of a sense of nationalism. But in the case of many such texts, particularly ones that emerge from courtly traditions, these texts were meant to invoke a sense of pride, prestige, and belonging to pre-nation-state Kingdoms and the reader/viewer would experience his/her own identity through the reading/performance. In their modern reading, such identities and sense of belonging is often circled back towards nationalistic pride. However, we are interested in the question: In courtly worlds, in the time when such literatures were written, who could read these texts? As Shulman and Rao

point out, the hero or the central character (invariably the reigning King) would be compared to mythological figures whose virtues are superimposed upon the life of the living King, thus tracing his mythical genealogy to the race of the Divine. "He is divine and yet the paradigmatic devotee. The works showcase him playing these roles explicitly, for without such highly dramatized prescriptions, the poems cannot be truly brought to life" (Velchuru Narayana Rao 118). The reader/viewer is then called upon to see the connections to the mythic pasts inscribed on the present. The works of *Nāma-s*, *Kaifiyatu-s*, *Vāchakam-s*, and the *Abhyudayamu-s*, where liberties of expanding the scope of the past in ways that suited the present were taken, the reader was required to encounter the text as a continuation of the images, rituals, and values of their respective societies.

Often, such an enterprise was made possible to all members of the courtly world and the larger kingdom, not by the circulation of the work in text form, but as performance, a collective recitation and reading experience. Therefore, the readers of *Abhyudayamu* literatures were the actual readers, or the audiences who watched the work being performed every day, not the few who read it once or even a few times as a text. In watching, they participated in the culling of cultural memory. As Assmann points out, "via texts, images, and rituals, unique to their world and helping cultivate their society's self-image," the viewer became the reader. It is through such readers who were also viewers and to whom I shall reference henceforth in this essay as reader/viewer that works like the *Abhyudayamu-s* became subjacent portrayals of what counted as real and as potential cultural memory.

Raghunāthābhyudayamu

Raghunāthābhyudayamu, the daily life of King *Raghunātha Nāyaka* who ruled between 1600-1634 from *Tañjāvur*, was written by his son and successor, *Vijayarāghava Nāyaka*. This is the chosen work for this project. Much like his Telugu land predecessors, the *Kakatiyas (Pratāparudra etc)*, *Vijayarāghava* brought within the recollection of the reader/viewer, the classical aesthetic ideals extolled through the narratives of classical *Kāvya* characters like that of *Rāma* and *Kṛṣṇa*. Further, he created an experience of this ideal as realities of the *Nāyaka* court. However, the loose distinction between patron, composer of the work, and the hero of the work makes for such memories of the classical ideals to be reinvented and actualized in vastly different ways from their original classical versions (Shulman 1989). The prestigious image of *Rāma* that *Raghunātha* plays, as seen in the *Abhyudayamu*, was almost always

more glamorous in comparison to the classical version of *Rāma*. Thus, he takes the credit for enhancing these divinations in a contemporary image of the self he portrayed. As a conceptual device, *Raghunātha* becomes the experience of an “exemplary character both divine and human, an idealized construct and not merely a breathing King” (Shulman 122). Cultural memory is governed by a logic of relevance that gives priority to certain aspects of the past and sidelines others. Therefore, *Raghunāthābhyudayamu* focuses on the multiple ways in which images of a *Nāyaka* King are communicated to and shared among the members of their community, highlighting the importance of remembering certain parts of their past as real, and forgetting or ignoring others.

A good example of this would be to consider their genealogy; the *Taṅjāvuri Nāyakas* were *adappam-s* (betel leaf box holders) and *vāsal-s* (door holders) for the Vijayanagara kings. It was from this position that they rose to the rank of military leader, ultimately winning the faith of the Telugu emperors to become feudatories— independent but subservient overlords (*Nāyakas*) in the Tamil lands. Different factions of the *Nāyakas* ruled from Gingee, Madurai, and *Taṅjāvur*. Though each of them trace their lineage to different Telugu-speaking communities, the seminal shift that happened for the Tamil country upon the arrival of the *Nāyakas* was the shift in the ruling class. Ruled by the *Cōla*, *Pāndya*, and their subordinate branches, all *Kśhatriya* (warrior clan) rulers and the Tamil country came into the hands of the Vijayanagara kings by the fifteenth century. The chief ruler of the Vijayanagara Kingdoms at this time, emerged from the *Sūdra* (service clan) Tuluva dynasty, a so-called low caste order considered historically ineligible to rule. . They, in turn, enabled the lineage of the Balija community leaders—through *Timma*, his son *Sevappa*, and others—to rule *Taṅjāvur*. In all of the official chronicles, epithets, and inscriptions of the *Nāyaka* kings, they proclaim themselves as “*çaturtha gōtra putra*,” sons of the fourth varna/*gōtra* or class. They also often refer to their Kingship as “*Mannāru gōtra putra*,” sons of the King of *Mannāru*. The King of *Mannāru* is the presiding deity of *Mannārgudi* in Tamilnadu-Sri *Rājagōpalaswāmy*, whose lineage is traced to the *Gōpala* or *Yādava*, cowherd community, again, of the *Sūdra* order. Through these assertions, the *Nāyaka* established the dominance of the bahunjan social, political, and aesthetic values in the society they ruled. Interesting is the fact that the performing artists who identified with the agrarian (*Isai Vellālar*) caste were a rung above the rulers in the *Nāyaka* court in caste hierarchy.

In the genealogical segment of the text *Raghunāthābhyudayamu*, *Vijayarāghava* is instructed by his courtier and *Guru Tatācārya* to invoke lineage from that of the divine as *Raghunātha*. *Raghunātha* was born to *Achutappa Nāyaka and Mūrtimāmba*, his consort, through the divine grace of God, who bestows upon this child great powers to rule the world. On one hand, *Raghunātha* is unapologetic about their bahunjan social status and on the other, *Raghunātha* is elevated through divination, to the status which makes him desirable and a divine blessing coveted by any woman. *Raghunātha*’s rise to fame and power and his military prowess and successes in the battle fields are literalized through metaphors that compare him to *Lord Rāma*.

One example, as seen in the Sanskrit work by the name *Raghunāthanāyakābhyudayamu* written by *Rāmabhadrāmba*, a celebrated poetess in *Raghunātha*’s court, where the author mentions the *yavanā-s* (Portuguese in this context) as *rākśasā-s* (mythical demonic figures) and *Raghunātha* as the savior of his subjects from these external forces (Shulman and Rao 120). This is a direct replication of a situation from *Bālakānda* of the *Rāmāyana*. *Rāma* and *Raghunātha* may be compared in the *Raghunāthābhyudayamu* at various instances, including *Raghunātha* being a paradigmatic devotee of *Rāma* by reading the *Bālakānda* every day and wearing the *Śrivaishnava symbols* on his body and forehead. But *Raghunātha* was portrayed as diametrically opposed to the image of *Rāma* who was considered a paragon of chastity. *Raghunātha* was the desirable king, a sight of beauty, and a promiscuous lover, much like another divine, *Krśna*, to whose lineage they trace him as *Mannāru gōtra*. “He was *Rāma* and *Krśna* in a de rigueur courtly form” (Shulman 122).

On the particular day that the *Abhyudayamu* is chronicled, he wakes up in the morning at daybreak and starts his day with an elaborate toiletry ritual that includes looking at his own reflection in a mirror, gazing upon a couple of *brahmans*, and a golden pot filled with milk and the eagle *Garudā* for prosperity. The first half of the day is filled with horse riding and sword combat practice, followed by a ritual decking up for *darbar*, including fastening the *gandapendarā* (an anklet with gems extracted from the crown of the *Pāndya* King). In the *darbar*, *Raghunātha* watches dance performances and renditions of various theatrical works, including the *Achutābhyudayamu* he composed for his father. He then checks the treasury accounts and later is seen spending time in the ladies’ chamber. Although he is seen bathing, eating, and taking an afternoon nap, much attention is paid to the ritual prayers he offers,

the various scriptures he reads, the sanctimonious offerings he makes, and the devotion he shows in doing all of this. These activities are followed by a grand procession where *Raghunātha* mounts his royal elephant, *Airāvata*, to the accompaniment of various instruments and he processions the streets where he is met with the cheers of his courtiers and subjects. It is here that *Citrarēkha*, a courtesan in the *Taṅjāvur Nāyaka* court, becomes lovestruck with *Raghunātha*. Her pining love is expressed, *Raghunātha* concedes, and they unite that evening in passionate lovemaking and unabashed coitus. *Raghunātha* walks back to his palace at the crack of dawn, hand-in-hand with *Citrarēkha*. The interplay between the sexualized and divinized images of the hero reflects on multiple levels, the double consciousness around a non-*kśhatriya*, *bahunjan* ruler establishing his kingship through legitimate bloodline. Further, between ideas of devotion and desire, *bhakti* and *bhōga* are epitomized as the tropes and values of *Nāyaka* life that are on public display. *Raghunātha* is divine, devout and desirable, all at once.

All of this is a play at courtly, kingly life. “This configuration of a prestigious image is, in fact, an erudite game—with great passion and intentness—played by the rules, as done by many predecessors across kingdoms whom he emulates. *Vijayarāghava* places his father in a reverential deified mold in order to be able to write such explicit erotic exploits” (Shulman 1989). He also uses the significance of a performative literary style of *yakśagānam*, replete with song and dance—a genre he would go on to hone to perfection during his reign—as a powerful mnemotechnique. Through this mnemotechnique, he cultivates a collective cultural memory and a self-image that would cement his own succession through kingship amidst the *Nāyaka* society.

Excerpt I
Performing Histories- Excerpt I

Excerpt II
Performing Histories- Excerpt II

(Please refer to the description box of the video on YouTube for context and meaning of the above excerpts).

The yakśagānamu: A Performative Literature

The literary genre that details the daily life of a king and his personality and the courtly life ritualized performance of their political, social, and cultural life. This genre was a format adopted to cultivate a sense of collective memory of the present, invoking through literary metaphors and comparisons, a mythical, idealized past.

These texts served the purpose of enacting the past in a contemporary world. The subjects whose identities are depicted in the text also evoke the cultural memory of their collective lineages alongside that of their ruler (Shulman 121). *Raghunātha*’s *abhyudayamu* was written by two distinct persons in his court. One of the *abhyudayamu* in Sanskrit was composed by *Rāmabhadrāmba* (Ramabhadramba and T. R. 1934) and a second and third work titled *Raghunāthanāyakābhyudayamu* and *Raghunāthābhyudayamu* were written by his son *Vijayarāghava Nāyaka*. Both works were written in Telugu. The first among the Telugu works is entirely in the *dvipada* literary style while the second work in the manuscript is an *abhyudayamu* in *yakśagānam* style. (Nayaka, Raghunathanayakaabhyudayamu and Raghunathaabhyudayamu, No 334 DCTM n.d.).

Both of these works deserve our attention because they establish an important link in the chain of historic chronicles of the period of *Raghunātha*’s court and courtly life. However, we are particularly focused on *Raghunāthābhyudayamu*, the performative *yakśagānam* text. *Yakśagānam* is a literary genre which developed to its pinnacle, during this era at the hands of composers like *Vijayarāghava*. The *dvipada* style, which is composed in two-line metrical units, can equate to long poems, giving much scope for the composer to bring in many different moods with a choice of diction and changes of tone. *Dvipada* also offers a collective reading/listening experience. Pandit N. Venkataramanayya notes in the copied volume of the manuscript of this work: “Song and dance were the principle preoccupations of the society that they (*Nāyakās*) ruled.” Therefore, *Vijayarāghava*’s *dvipada-s*, *padam-s*, and *daruvu-s* in this work have lyrical and poetic merit.

The work has a distinct performative quality as its mode of expression. Composed in many *ghana* and *rakti rāgāms* such as *bhairavi*, *sourāshtra*, *kalyāni*, *ghantāravam*, *sāvēri* etc the work begins with a *kaivāram* and then alternates between *vākyam-s* (dialogues), *daruvu-s* and *padam-s* (poetry sent to music and *tālam*). Let me redirect you to watch the two video excerpts shared with this essay, where you can listen to some of the exquisite poetry rendered in *dvipada*, *vākyam*, *padam* and *daruvu* in various *rāgams*. The first excerpt is the *Pravēśika daruvu* (entrance of *Raghunātha*) in *rāgam yadukulakāmbhōji*.

The *dvipada* which is a poetic, rhythmic meter and can be rendered as *vākyam*. It was considered a second-class literary meter as compared to say a *campu* and is often associated with non-brahmin authors (Rao 2016). Authors like *Palkūriki Sōmanātha kavī* rebutted with a

statement that “*dvi*,” meaning two, “*pada*,” meaning steps, is indicative of the reader/viewer’s assured place, one foot on earth and another to the door steps of heaven itself! Therefore, in authoring *Raghunātha*’s life history as a *dvipada* and in composing it as a *yakṣagānam*, the *Nāyakā*-s were, yet again, stating their *Sūdra* lineage.

In the court of *Raghunātha*, the *Raghunāthābhyudayamu* has been reported to have been performed every day in his very presence. Unlike any other literary work which would be read typically by any reader in their private time and, perhaps not more than once, performative literatures are, by nature, meant for public, collective reading/recitation/enactment through the process of performance. Like the re-reading of scriptures or important documents that need to be memorized, and just as Jan Assmann notes, the text, image, and ritual are important, and the reuse of these every day, via performance, becomes key in turning them into agents of cultural memory.

Therefore, I put forth through in this research a theory to further the argument that, we must weigh Indian literatures and their historiographical merit by including performative literatures such as the *yakṣagānamu*-s, *nātakamu*-s as substantial works. These texts perform upon repetition, upon rereading. The essence of performative literatures is in the compositional qualities of musical genres like the *padam*-s, *daruvu*-s, composed in the text, and in the enactment of them, or rather, the repetitive re-enactment of them. Repetition can emphasize the value of performative literatures and, hence, the everyday repeated performance of *Raghunāthābhyudayamu* in the court of *Raghunātha* himself. This is a very important historiographical factor to note because repetition is an apparatus that helps construct the text in the minds of every viewer/reader as memory.

That said, a question of concern is: If the past or, in this case, a single day in the life of a single king is documented in literature, and if that is inscribed as memory which represents the entirety of the cultural and social life of the courtly world of his time, how accurate is such a construction as historical? After all, it is a rather small and carefully cultivated sample. So, is the performance’s job to reiterate and simply re-narrate the same set of events day after day? Is there a looping sense of re-living the same day through memory, each time the performance is repeated? Is that how cultural memory is built? These repetitions that are made through performance of such texts many times over

are not meant to be seen like a narration of a single sequence of events. Much like the beads of a rosary stacked upon each other (Benjamin VII), we have to see them as conceptions of the present, as the time of the “now”—a now of a particular recognizability when the cause (intuitive memory of their cultural ethos) was/is still there. Therefore, even after the reign of *Raghunātha* was long over, the “performance” of the *yakṣagānam* would hold for the viewer a telescoping of the past, in the present. This way, performance becomes the manipulation of the past, present, and the future. Performative quality is understood as ephemeral-in-the-moment. But I suggest that it is rather in the realm of such an experiential moment, as opposed to the principle of ephemerality by a viewer, where traces of the past and that of the future are repeatable in the present. The performative text and the very performance of it become semiotic readings of cultural memory. So, while I argue that performative literatures such as the *yakṣagānamu*-s, *nātakamu*-s must be considered historiographical materials, the performances of these texts, which is essentially a dematerialized corpus, also need our careful attention, both for their presence and their subsequent and apparent absence.

Breakage in the Performative Text

As in the case of many other performative traditions, the *Raghunāthābhyudayamu* had a breakage in its performance. That is, after the reign of *Vijayarāghava*—in confirmation that this text was performed every day in *Nāyakā* court at least until his reign—and the end of the *Nāyakā* rule, the performance of this text was discontinued. One cannot imagine why the succeeding *Marātha* rulers would have continued it. After all, they had their own *ṣaritramu*-s to be performed. Hence, there was definite breakage. If indeed one is to argue that the cultural memory is embedded in the repetitiveness of performance, then what does or what did this breakage do to *Raghunāthābhyudayamu*?

By the time this text was found amidst a pile of vernacular literatures as corpus of *Nāyakā* rule, it had gained the notoriety of being part of the historical narrative of an India that was pictured as unchanging, with despotic kings spending far too much of their time in merry-making. Distanced from *Raghunātha*’s idealized, divinized images in the mold of *Rāma* or *Kṛṣṇa*, he was viewed as one of the last rulers whose extravagance and sensuous presence cost his descendants the throne. Ultimately, this later led to colonial capture and ruin. Secondly, works such as *Raghunāthābhyudayamu* in vernacular languages were not in print or translation

much after Independence. But by then, the torch to see texts under a parochial light, as belonging to different states with affiliation to a particular regional language, culture, historic, political, and aesthetic value, was ablaze. So *Raghunāthābhyudayamu* was tagged simply as a Telugu language literature written on a *Nāyaka* ruler of erstwhile Tamil country. Thirdly, and most importantly, the breakage was irreversible, even in the revival of *Raghunāthābhyudayamu* in print in later years, as it was permanently dismembered from its performativity. That is, in wiggling back into pages of a publication, an essentially performative *yakṣagānam*, it remained static. The dynamic, spontaneous embodied performative quality was lost as were its many meanings from the older cultural memories that laced it. Hence, the demise of its performative cultural histories cannot be fulfilled by print. Fragmentation of such performance disenfranchises the performative literature, disallowing a present experience in a manner that it can make its viewers aware of its past and imagine a future in the mind/experience of the viewer. After all, the essence of experience is not only about that moment, but is in knowing that it is possible for experience to repeat. Performance enables imagining a future for the historical text in a way that the decontextualized post-modern world cannot; the text stands alone.

Epilogue

In order to read *Raghunāthābhyudayamu* in its larger frame as cultural memory, the performance of the *yakṣagānamu* has been carefully restored with the expertise of hereditary singers of other *Taṅjāvuri yakṣagānamu* traditions such as *Prahlāda ṣaritramu*, *Uśā Parinayamu*, and *Ruckmini Kalyānamu*, penned by *Śri Venkatarāma Śāstri*. Musicians and experts of the *Bhāgavatamēla Nāṭya Nātakams*, *Śri Narasimhan*, and *Śri Venkatesan*—the *Tiruvaiyāru* brothers—have worked with me in the restoration of the musical rendering of the *Raghunāthābhyudayamu*.

The performative aspects of the text such as the rendition of certain *padam*-s, *daruvu*-s have been composed by R K Sriram Kumar, some by me, combined with my reconstruction of the dance aspects of *Pērani*, *Jakkini*, *Gōndhali*, and other dances that are mentioned in this text as performed in the *Nāyaka* court. The restored performative text is embodied in a production I have created titled, *My name is Citrarēkha* which, through narrative performance, renders the entire *Raghunāthābhyudayamu* as a dance, music, dialogue presentation in Telugu along with English commentaries to facilitate non-Telugu audiences to follow the narrative. In reactivating the performative elements of this text,

we negate *Raghunāthābhyudayamu* being a mere passive depository of culture production and see it as a mechanism to cultivate historical memory in the viewer/reader—through performing histories.

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Rethinking Endings: Amany's Persistence

Yashoda Thakore

Abstract

This article relies on reflexive ethnographic methods to theorize artistic and creative ownership claims. It seeks agency for three women through writing and concrete production performance with a live audience. Focusing on the performance *Encounters*—a production based on the life story of the dancer, Amany of the early and mid-nineteenth century, I explore the history of a group of Indian dancers from Puducherry and Yanam who were taken to Europe in 1838 to perform at numerous European venues.¹ By revisiting the repertoire performed by them and the representation of the dancers, I argue that these dancers were and remain misrepresented in the historical record as Devadasis (“servants of god”), generally misunderstood to be prostitutes. These Devadasis were termed “La Bayaderes” to mean “a female dancer” in French. Autoethnography revealed facts that make these women at once relevant to the present-day performing artists in particular and society at large. This article is also a narrative of women claiming their little-known platform, as three histories of Amany, Mangatayaru, and I come together.

Eṇḍu dācukonḍu ninnu? Yemi setu nenu? Where do I hide you? What should I do?

I kept repeating this line with Sudha as she taught me to sing this song: “It is *da...cu*, Akka. *sa ni da pa*. Try to sing the notes.” I was struggling with the word *dācuko* (*hide*). The heroine in the song says to Krishna, “Where do I hide you? Your face exudes such beauty; it is impossible to hide you!”

Krishna pervades my life and is not different from my art. They are one and the same to me. I could hear Sudha’s sweet and slightly frustrated voice echo while my mind kept asking where and how I should hide this Krishna/my art. Does it have any meaning if I keep it/him to myself?

Sudha decided to move to the stanza.

*Aṇḍiṇḍu tirugakurā ativalu nī toḷi
Pōṇḍu kori yeveḷa pōgarucunnāru.*

Do not wander around, my dear. Those women are waiting out there to make you theirs.

I thought of the repertoire of the neo-classical dances

of South India, one of which I am trained to perform. So many other dancers learned with me, so many dancers are dancing, and hundreds, thousands, millions of them all over the world continue to do so. While some of them know that the source of their art is the Devadasi, others do not. Yet they continue to pillage the richness of the art that belonged to me and my ancestors. Today, I with the rest of them stand, in Urmimala Sarkar Muni’s words, as agencies of responsible representation of history/tradition/identity/transition/dignity/modernity/and respectability.

“Akka! You are missing the notes! *Ni ga ga ri* *pōgarucunnāru* (waiting anxiously),” chimed Sudha. Of course, I missed the notes with these debilitating thoughts gnawing at me.

Priya² called just after class to continue a discussion we had started a few weeks earlier: “Yashoda! Did you know about the dancers from Pondicherry (now Puducherry) that went to Europe in 1838? You must have heard about them as a few people have written about them. A French impresario, E. C. Tardival took them to Paris and other places to perform.”

I did hear of this. I had read Joep Bor’s writing on their journey overseas. For some reason, it seemed like a myth back then—and I wasn’t paying attention. Nevertheless, even though these writings were interesting, I didn’t dwell on them too much, as they felt distant to me. Yet when Priya explained how she had been carefully gathering research around these women from 2001 to the present, and not published anything on it yet, I became excited. Somehow her sharing this with me became much more meaningful.

These dancing women are integral to the narrative of my life. I look at them and other ancestors in subjective reflexiveness through my practice and dialogic engagement—with my teachers, families, the neo-classical dance form and texts of Kuchipudi, the hallowed Sanskrit texts, and my fellow dancers. This multiplicity in my practice makes me consider the organic and deep connection of the human dancer to society as opposed to the idea that the dancer, like a goddess, is above mundane life! Academician and performer Pallabi Chakravorty bursts this notion: “It is

important to keep the historical footprint of the temple dancer alive. It is important because the temple dancer was not an imperial orientalist fantasy. She was real.”

“There were five dancers and three men who were the musicians,” continued Priya. “One of them was Amany. I emailed the details to you. Read when you can! You will love it!”

I read and saw the images and lithographs and all of the newspaper reviews she sent. Seventeen-year-old Amany, a Devadasi, was as graceful as my art. So beautiful was her dance that sculptor August Barre created a bronze statue of her which stands even now in the Musee de Guimet, Paris. Why did she go to Europe? Did Amany not think that people (“those women”) in Europe would strip her of her art, and take everything that was hers? Amany signed a contract for eighteen months! Did the troupe of eight artists benefit from this? The newspaper reviews showed that they performed at 150-200 venues!

This time the narrative of these Devadasis made me feel their presence.³ One part of me did not like that I did not take them seriously earlier. Perhaps it was my complacency! Perhaps it is because sometimes academic writing, especially from the West, can be very hard to understand. Another part of me lapped up—in awe—the pieces of evidence Priya uncovered. Yet, I was not willing to share them.

“The notes go higher, Akka,” said Sudha, singing it for me.

Eṇḍareṇḍarini kātu? Eṇṭani ne vinnaviṇṭu?

Paṇḍemāḍukonnāraṭa paṭṭuku poyēdamanucu

How many of them can I ward off? How much can I plead with them? I hear they are betting on taking you away.

Paṭṭuku poyēdamanucu!

That they will take you away!

Amany is now my art; she is mine. I needed my guru, Annabattula Mangatayaru (Amma) to say that to me. Priya suggested that we speak to my guru to ask her advice about the research. I took the lead and asked Amma to join a Zoom call. We listened while Amma

told us about the Devadasis going to Europe in 1838. Amma blew me away with her awareness. “Pondicherry was under French rule. So was Yanam closer to our Mummidivaram in the East Godavari district. One of our ancestors, Amany, is supposed to have travelled overseas. She should be from the early to mid-1800s because she is six generations earlier than I.” We were stupefied! As the magnitude of what Amma told us dawned on us, a positive power engulfed both of us. Amma recognized the sketch in the lithographs we showed her, as that of Meesala Venkateswara, the deity of both Yanam and my hometown, Peddapuram. As I translated to Telugu the description of the dance, she quickly identified parts of the dances from the pieces she taught me. The music Amany danced to, had inspired many European composers living in Vienna.⁴ These musical works were played on Western instruments and their written musical scores remain to this day. As we went through them, I discovered one which was identical to the *svarapallavi*⁵ and *gaptu varusa*⁶ I learned from amma! Amany—I could feel her on my skin!

“Let us sing the last stanza, Akka”

Mudamuto mā muddu muvragopālaswāmi

Gadigōṇṇa tamakamuna gūdi iddaramu

Nidura paravaśamuna vadaluno kaugillu

Paḍilamuga nā jadanu batti kattu kondunā

(O my dear Muvvagopala!)

When the two of us are spent and asleep in a happy embrace, I might lose my grip on you in a moment of weakness. So let me bind you to myself with my braid.

Can I really bind Amany? The only way I own her is through dance. I embody my art, my Amany, and stand confident. “Those women,” too, may have her now because she cannot be stolen from me if I also dance and write about her. So we now have Amany as she wished to be spoken about in writing, song, and dance.

Priya said the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra came to her and Hari Sivanesan, a Sri Lankan/British veena player and composer who was her collaborator, and asked them if they wanted to continue the partnership

³ Later, I read Priya’s account of the Nachwalis in Coney Islands (Srinivasan, *Bodies*). Academician Avanti Meduri, or Avanti akka, as I call her, made an important observation that the embodied involvement of Ruth St. Denis and Anna Pavlova in the exotic dances of the Orient stimulated the revival of Indian Classical Dance in India (Meduri). Dancer-choreographer Shobana Jeyasingh’s fascinating theatre work, *Bayadere: The Ninth Life* in March 2015 at Birmingham, U.K., also captured these Devadasis who travelled to Europe (Roy).

⁴ This was something Priya said really surprised her and yet she found over 60 pieces of orchestral Western classical music that were inspired by the encounter.

⁵ This is a phrase of solfa syllables repeated in various tempi while the dancer performed choreographed movements.

⁶ This refers to a spurt of pure dance performed extempore to the percussion and violin, generally after the performance of the love songs called jāvalis. This is a

significant aspect of the Kalāvantulu (as the Devadasis were referred to in the Telugu speaking areas) repertoire.

that had been created the previous year. They wanted to continue exploring the relationships between Indian dance/music and Western music.

“Let’s dance her story, Priya,” I said to her. “She is a global artist. Let us do this project with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. She belongs to everyone who wishes to know her. The world should see and experience her grace. Let’s dance her story.” So began the work. Melbourne-based musician, Uthra, transcribed the musical notes for “Malapou” and “Indianner Gallop,”⁷ into Carnatic svaras. These are two of the music pieces archived by the Symphony Orchestra. Uthra identified Indianner Gallop as *Bhairavi*. Another dance piece which found a place in the newspaper reviews was *The Salute to the Rajah*, *The Salām Daruvu*, or *Salām Śabdām*—an encomium with a salute which was an integral part of the Devadasi repertoire.

The description of the “Malapou” dance from the newspaper reviews brought a twinkle to Amma’s eyes. “They are *mallēpuvvu* (jasmine flowers),” she corrected. The dancer holds the garland of jasmine flowers and dances to music with very graceful, gliding movements. At the end of the piece, she winds it around the arm of the discerning spectator. She said the music could also be a *svarapallavi*. The description of the movements in “The Spectator” (1838) seemed like the movements I learned in a *svarapallavi* which was set to *Ānandabhairavi rāga*. I told Priya we should use *Ānandabhairavi* in this production because there are many pieces in my *Kalāvantulu* repertoire from earlier time periods in this *rāga*. Hari then composed a pattern based on the one I learned. But he tried to make it complicated. I told him to keep it simple and repetitive and not get into all of the gamakas (flourishes) present in the Carnatic music styles now. He listened and adapted it.

It was time to think of the dancing. I was excited to teach Priya, but she was hesitant: “I am not you, Yashoda! My body moves from the training of modern Bharatanatyam and Odissi to the karanas and kalaripayattu. It is, of course, sourced from the dance of the Devadasi originally, but I’m not sure if I should learn your dance, especially when you will not be dancing on stage with me.”⁸ Priya’s words repeatedly interrupted my thoughts as I tried to focus on the notes Sudha was teaching me.

The literature I was singing interrupted my thoughts. As I sang *Padilamuga nā jaḍanu baṭṭi kaṭṭu koṇḍunā*... *keep you with me, securely*, Priya’s words, “I am not you,” hauntingly teased me. These interruptions seemed productive, and I allowed them to persist, much to Sudha’s perplexity. She did not understand why I could not grasp a simple note.

I decided to use this interruption as a rhetorical device to write my experience in this article (Srinivasan, “Material”). This is because it allows me to bring my bodily knowledges along with the theoretical knowledges that come to me, so my writing can be understood by many people. I knew my family was expanding. It wasn’t just Priya; along my journey I met many who were sensitive to the crucial role of the *kalāvantulu* women, the stigma attributed to them and, yet, genuinely respectful and embracing of my art and people.

When we began, Priya, Hari, and the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra insisted on Amma’s opinion on the production. They would not hear of doing this without her consent. As we proposed to put her art on a global platform, Amma was in joyful tears as she recounted how she was not comfortable talking about her *kalāvantulu* background even ten years ago. And as she was to see the stories of her ancestors come to life once again, she proudly claims her *kalāvantulu* lineage.

“Nā vidya ökkate nāku gauravānni icchiṇḍi. Ammamagāru-Buli Venkataratnamma gāru ānāḍe annāru. Eppaṭikainā ī vidye rakṣistuṇḍani” (Only my art has given me respectability). My grandmother, Buli Venkataratnamma, told me in those days that the art alone would stand by me. Amma spontaneously blessed the project and the makers: “Mā pēddavāḷḷa āśīsulu,” she said, transferring the blessings of the elders. I was amazed at Amma’s reaction. She was aware of the changed context of the Devadasi. While she respected and treasured her ancestors and the art handed down to her, she also understood that today’s Devadasi pervades dancing space and bodies. She did not rely on texts for her facts. The memory and intelligence in her dancing body were her knowledge base. That was her text. Her dancing body was her discourse.

I could not travel to Australia because of border lockdowns due to Covid, so I would be projected on a large screen. She, Hari, and the other musicians would perform live but they would interact with me on the

screen. As I danced on the screen, images of Amany and Amma’s followed, while the orchestra played the music from 1838. In the lithograph, we perused. The women seemed to have considered the god, Meesala Venkateswara, as their king, and, reflexively, I chose to dance the *Salām Daruvu*, praising and saluting the king. I am sometimes daunted by the history I carry in my body through my practice.

The repertoire I learned from Amma is truly a rich archive. My body bursts with deep-rooted information as I dance; the archive and the repertoire are forever in conversation (Taylor). Priya occupied the dialogic space as she danced a contemporary and experimental mix of Odissi, Bharatanatyam, Karaṇas, and Kalaripayattu, but dressed in a costume that indicated the influence of the West through her tutu which was worn on top of parts of a sari. I encouraged Priya to perform a few movements from the *kalāvantulu* material. After all, the neo-classical dances are but an offshoot of the Devadasi repertoire. There was Amany, Amma, and I “encountering” one another on an international platform once again. There was no morphing of identity, no hesitation or hiding. This situation left me with a feeling of fulfillment and hope.

“Akka! You opened up your voice! That *Da...cu* was perfect!” said Sudha happily. Of course, it was! No more hiding! No more keeping Krishna or my art just to myself. It is a new beginning to a story we thought had ended!

⁷ These musical compositions are described in the above mentioned newspapers as some of those to which Amany danced.

⁸ *Karanas* are often acknowledged as the most basic sequences of movement that characterize Indian dances. A *karana* is a combination of the movement of the hips, legs, feet and hand. *Kalaripayattu* is a martial art form.

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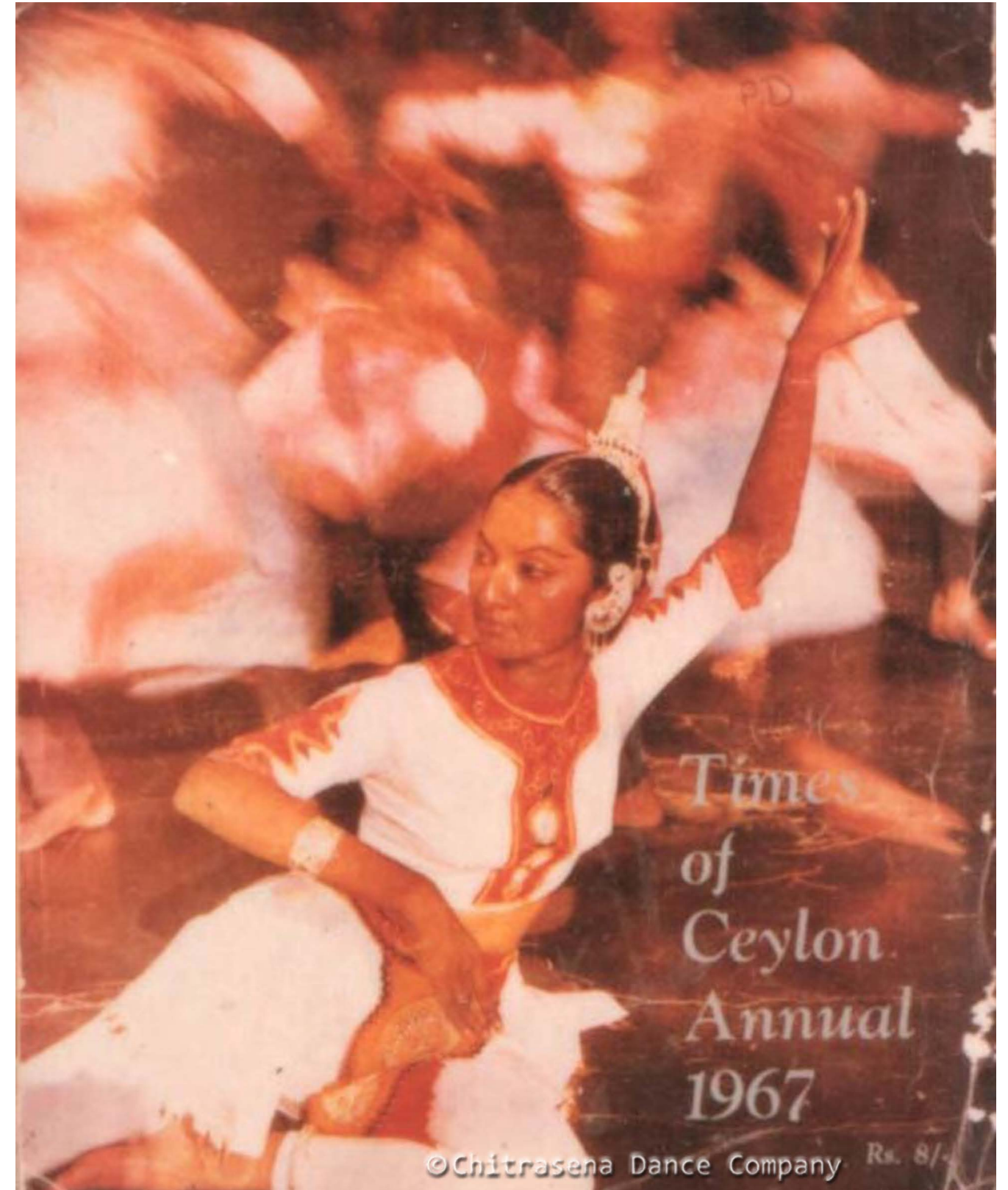
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The Unchanging Reality of Male Dancers in Pakistan

Sheema Kermani

The social status of male dancers in South Asia has been well-furrowed as a field of scholarly investigation. Since time immemorial, Shiva has been described as Nataraj and Bharata's Natya Shastra refers to both male and female dancers. Wajid Ali Shah, the ill-fated Nawab of Avadh, was not just a patron of dance, but also a dancer and choreographer who wrote several books on dance like *Najo*, *Bani*, and *Saut-al Mubarak*. A more recent history of male dancing began with the many books on Rabindranath Tagore and Uday Shankar. But the way male dancing found social acceptance in the different countries of South Asia is quite uneven. Post-colonial India and Sri Lanka celebrated dancers such as Uday Shankar; Kathak doyens such as Shambhu Maharaj, Lachhu Maharaj, and Birju Maharaj; the Manipuri Gurus such as Amubi Singh; Kathakali Asan's such as P.K. Kunju Kurup, T.K. Chandu Pannikar; and many more in the many dance styles of India. Patronage included the national Padma Awards, the National Performing Arts Awards (Sangeet Natak Akademi Awards), and performances and valences of many kinds. Sri Lankan dance flourished under the legendary Chitrasena; things in Pakistan were very different then.

I have been associated with dance in Pakistan for more than fifty years, first as a student, then as a practitioner and, since 1984, additionally, as a Guru. Due to a variety of reasons, including the lack of political patronage, the negative valence given to Raqs (dance) by some fundamentalists and the injuries of colonialism that questioned masculinity of the colonized populations, declaring them to be fundamentally effeminate (Sinha, 1997), the pursuit of dance in Pakistan for a male dancer has been challenging. Many dancers have been associated with training or lineages that migrated to Pakistan.

Once, before partition, Lahore was an important center for dance—and not just the north Indian Kathak, but also for Bharatanatyam (Khokhar, 2013). One of the reasons for Lahore's eclectic dance life was the fact that it was an important center for film making as well (Ahmed, 2012). But the demographics and dynamics changed radically, as Mumbai grew in significance, and, after independence, dance even in Lahore was mostly restricted to Hira Mandi area. Its special offering was of the "mujra," that incorporated elements of Kathak, *thumri*, and *ghazal*. It suffered from the stigma associated with professional dancing women, inevitable in a strongly patriarchal society—a pan-subcontinental

phenomenon in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Brown, 2006). Regrettably, this continues even today, except that in many cases the dance is more filmic, fusion, western, and erotic, and has little resemblance to the classical dance practices that once flourished here.

This essay consists of three parts (1) a background note on the state of male dancers in Pakistan, (2) a conversation with one of the dance pioneers, the late Mr. Ghanshyam, my own Guru, and (3) a conversation with a present-day dancer, Asif, who has learned from me. In this triptych lies a frank exploration of the state and status of male dancers in Pakistan today.

It is important to recognize that even though Pakistan has had male dance Gurus from the very beginning, there have been very few male dancers. The few that existed had a short lifespan as performers. Some of these were actually male folk dancers. The few male classical dancers have mostly been teachers, with the exception of Ghanshyam ji. Before I discuss the trajectory of Mr. Ghanshyam, I would like to mention the other male dancers who lived and taught in Pakistan because, through their lives and their struggles, one gets a very clear picture of the state of dance in Pakistan and the difficulties that male dancers have faced.

Before the partition of the subcontinent, Zohra and Kameshwar Seghal, both trained at Uday Shankar's Almora Centre, had set up The Zoresh Dance Institute in Lahore. Due to the political unrest that had started in Punjab it closed down and they moved to India just before partition.

It was in 1947 that India got partitioned and Pakistan was created with two wings, East and West Pakistan. A dancer known by the name of Bulbul Chowdhury had, by 1947, already earned a name for himself in the culturally-rich Bengal region, and had become quite famous in Dhaka. He had begun his dance training and career in unpartitioned India and was known to be close even to the poet Rabindranath Tagore. In 1948 he was invited by the Prime Minister of Pakistan Liaquat Ali Khan to Karachi. However here he very soon understood that politics of religious and ethnic identities had already started playing in Pakistan. Even though he himself was a Muslim he began to feel unwanted and realized that, because of his Bengali identity, he was unwelcome in West Pakistan. He passed away in 1954. His wife,

Afroza Bulbul, continued to stay on in Karachi and set up the Bulbul Academy. In 1971 she left for Bangladesh.

Rafi Anwer, born in 1929, had learned BharataNatyam and Kathak in Bombay. His conservative Muslim family did not approve of his love for dance and he migrated to Pakistan in 1956. Here he tried for many years to set himself up as a performer. However, it was very difficult for him and he was only able to teach a few students privately. He continued to teach, commuting between student's homes as long as he lived. For a short while I also had him coming to teach me at my residence. He died embittered, moneyless, lonely, and unremembered. Dr Faqir Hussain Saga was a veterinary doctor with a passion for dance. In 1958, he became a student of Madame Azurie and then got a scholarship to learn dance in India (Kermani, 2010). In around 1960 he went to India for a short period and took lessons in Kathak. He came back to Lahore and tried his best to set up a teaching and performing centre. Once on a performance trip to Lahore I went to meet him – this must be around 1983; he was a very sad man. He told me how he was laughed at, mistreated, looked down upon, only because he wanted to dance. He also died penniless and unknown.

Ustad Ghulam Hussain Kathak of Patiala Gharana came from Dhaka in 1949 and settled in Karachi where he lived for 20 years and then in 1969, he shifted to Lahore where he spent most of his time teaching Kathak. Ghulam Hussain earned a name for himself as a teacher rather than a performer.

A wonderful male student of Ustad Ghulam Hussain is the Kathak dancer Fasih ur Rehman. He had started learning at a young age and had soon become a soloist, but Fasih felt that he could not survive as a male dancer in Pakistan. By 2010 he had already moved away to live in the United Kingdom. The same year he wrote to me, "I just want to be in a dance environment which is not possible in Pakistan, I don't know what our future will be in Pakistan but for now I want to be out of that place."

In 1954, Mr. and Mrs. Ghanshyam were invited by Prime Minister G.H. Suhrawardy to establish an academy of dance and music called the 'Rhythmic Art Centre' which they set up in Karachi. Mr. Suhrawardy knew Mr. Ghanshyam from Calcutta and offered him and his institute patronage and funds. Mr. Ghanshyam and his wife Nilima had been students of Uday Shankar at Almora. They were trained by Uday Shankar the pioneer of modern Indian dance who believed that a dancer must learn many different classical, folk and traditional styles. For almost thirty years their troupe was the only

performing dance group in Pakistan and unfortunately in 1983 they were compelled to leave the country when the military dictator General Zia ul Haq banned dance on all national media. Ever since then dance has been a very difficult subject both for men and for women in Pakistan.

In 1963, my family moved to Karachi and my mother discovered the famous dance couple Mr. and Mrs. Ghanshyam and took me to meet them. They were located in a small house, teaching in a small dark room, where they created what seemed to me in those early years a magical world, which I longed to enter.

I joined the Ghanshyams and stayed with them as their student throughout my school life and then joined them as a teacher at their institute and as a member of their performing troupe as long as they remained in this country. They taught us not only the classical styles of Kathak and Bharatanatyam but also Manipuri and Kathakali as well as many dances that they had choreographed themselves. I worked with them to create their sets, design their costumes, and learned that when you are full of passion and love for your art form, you are willing to do anything and everything that is required for the sake of that love. I realize now that it has to be a madness nothing less that can keep one going because, given the circumstances under which one has to function, it is easier to give up than to continue.

Twenty years later in March, 1983 I was in Delhi where I had gone on an Indian Council for Cultural Relations scholarship to study dance, when I got a call from Karachi. It was Mr. Ghanshyam on the phone. He said he was leaving Pakistan and wanted to know if I would be interested in taking over the Rhythmic Art Centre their dance and yoga institute. Of course, I was interested, but by the time I got back they had already left. Their departure was sudden and hasty because they were being targeted by the Islamist General Zia-ul-Haq's military regime and were forced to, literally, run for their lives.

When I returned from India and held my first solo performance in 1984, there were hardly any classical dancers in the country. They had either left the country or disappeared into oblivion. For the next ten years, there were no other dance recitals aside from mine. Those ten years were certainly very difficult years of extreme cultural and political suppression. But interestingly, my performances were always packed, even though I was not allowed to advertise. It was in those years that the challenge of getting an NOC (no objection certificate) was both a horrendous task as well as an exciting one.

The tragedy of it all is that the acquirement of an NOC is still essential, and, after all these years, one still has to go through the horrendous ritual of the bureaucratic hassles of the government offices and excise and tax departments.

All of these male dancers who lived and performed in Pakistan tried their best to say, through their performances and choreographies, that dance can transcend the narrow religious divide. They created works that were truly secular in their content, but sadly these male dancers were never accepted in and by Pakistani society and the establishment.

Here I am adding an interview I did with Mr. Ghanshyam in 2010. He had returned to Pakistan after twenty-seven years on my invitation, as I wanted to pay him tribute. I held a festival dedicated to him.

Interview with Ghanshyam ji, an Associate of Uday Shankar and My Own Guru

Q. Ghanshyam Sahib, you were a student of the great pioneer of Indian Dance, Uday Shankar, who had set up a Cultural Centre at Almora. Please tell us how this came about.

A. It was while I was a young boy, perhaps about twelve or thirteen years old, studying in Bombay, that my father's friend, Professor G.N. Mathrani, who was a Sindh gentleman and a professor of Philosophy and Psychology, became my guardian and brought me to live with him in Shikarpur, Sindh. This is, of course, before the partition of India must be around 1936 or so. Here, I spent a great deal of time outdoors and close to nature. Professor Mathrani saw and recognized in me a spark for dancing, as I would climb trees and skip and jump and dance around outdoors, I was not really interested in going to school. He had heard about the legendary Uday Shankar who had recently set up this Centre for Dance at Almora and he decided that I should learn dance. He wrote a recommendation letter for me to Uday Shankar and, on the basis of the recommendation, I was asked to come and give an audition before I was given admission. I remember that I had to wait till I was sixteen years old before I joined the Dance School as that was the minimum age of admission. I spent four years at Almora.

Q. What was it like at Almora? What were you taught there?

A. Well, classes would begin at 7:00 a.m. There would

be a general class which comprised 40-60 students. Shankar Dada himself would give a lecture every day in the general class. Then he made us do improvisations. Sometimes, he would make us walk across the classroom, which was a huge room—sixty feet by forty feet. He would say, "Feel the ground that you are walking on; imagine yourself in different situations, imagine everything around you and recall all from birth to now." He made us do these exercises so that we could develop our imaginations. Imagination, improvisation, and creation were the cornerstones of Shankar Dada's teaching. Then we would have the dance exercise classes. We were taught different movements, different styles. We would have breakfast at about 9:00 a.m. Later, we would be given an hour to rehearse all that we had learned. I remember that, at all times, a teacher would be observing us and would suddenly ask us random questions. This, he did to basically ascertain our level of alertness.

Q. So, it was not just a dance school, rather it was an entire system of education?

A. Yes, you are right. We were expected to immerse ourselves in the dance and the movements so completely that it became a part of our system. Shankar Dada was a great artist and a wonderful performer. He was also an incredible teacher: taught us to put expression into all our actions, movements, and then create further actions. It was almost like weaving pearls into a necklace.

Q. How did you happen to come to Pakistan?

A. A very dear friend of mine from Calcutta, who was in the film business, George Malik, had obtained a large amount of money to produce a film in Pakistan called *Funkaar*, and he asked me to come down to Pakistan to do the choreography for his film. So, I came to Karachi to work with him. The film never got completed, but this is how I came to Pakistan.

Q. And why did you decide to stay on?

A. While I was working on the film it was around 1952—I had a performance and Mr. Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy who was the Prime Minister of Pakistan at the time happened to be the chief guest at this show. I had known Suhrawardy in Calcutta where he had been my neighbor when he was the Governor of Bengal. He recognized me and he invited me to stay on in Pakistan. He suggested to me that I start a dance center in Karachi. He was a great patron of the Arts and he felt that Pakistan needed artists and dancers and art

institutes.

Q. Did you have any problems in those early days in Pakistan?

A. Well, not really, except for certain occasions when some small petty officials of the bureaucracy would sometimes give us trouble. You see, I did not have a passport in those days and these officials would turn up and ask to see my passport.

Q. And why would they do that?

A. Oh, basically, to make some money. I went to Mr. Suhrawardy and complained to him and he immediately took action and demoted those officials. He told me to remain calm and unafraid and was kind enough to depute a police guard outside my place. And that's how I stayed on in Pakistan. Had he not supported me, I would have not been able to stay.

Q. Mr. Ghanshyam, while you were living in Pakistan and right up to the 1980's, the Government and the Ministry of Culture used to give you funds. Besides this, the industrialists and businessmen would also give a lot of financial support. I remember that the brochures printed for our performances in those days would be full of advertisements. Then, during General Zia-ul-Haq's time, all government funding for cultural activity ended and so did all other support. Now, it is a very tough task to get any kind of funding for culture—especially dance. One has to literally knock on so many doors and often return empty-handed. I feel that when the state and the government does not patronize the arts, then others—philanthropists and industrialists—also do not give their support. Tell us about the time when you and your family started getting threats and you were forced to leave Pakistan.

A. That was, indeed, a very difficult time for me. First, the funding became erratic and then it stopped. I would write to the Government and to the Ministry to send me funds, but they would not respond. I didn't have any connections, nor did I know any ministers, so I did not know how I could continue without funds. Then,

the conditions started becoming really bad. I would hear shouts and abuses outside my house; they would scream at me saying, "Aye Hindu ka bacha yeh naach gana band kar". I would not know what to do! I started becoming very frustrated and then sometimes I would react with defiance and say to them, "Yes, I am a Hindu. Yes, I sing and dance. Do whatever you want. Let's see how you can stop me!" My wife, Nilima, would be very afraid for me. She feared that someone would kill me. It was a terrible, terrible time.

Q. This kind of harassment started soon after General Zia came into power in 1977 and you and Mrs. Ghanshyam left in 1983, the year when Zia brought in all these anti-women and anti-minority laws, like the Blasphemy law.

Tell us: How did the problems that made you leave Pakistan start?

A. Well, as I said, I started getting threatening letters. Then, my house, which was also my teaching center, was attacked with stones. I reported to the police and requested that they help us, but they did not. It was my neighbors, my students, and my family friends who were kind enough to patrol our house, even at night. They were a great source of comfort and help to us, but all of this stone throwing and abuse did not stop.

Q. Yes, I remember the writings on your compound wall: "Jo bhi yahan ayega naach ganay kay liyay, un ko Islami nizam kay tahat saza dee jayegi". (Whoever comes here to dance and sing will be given Islamic punishments). I remember that, every day, you would have to replace the bulb outside, as someone would have thrown a stone aimed at it.

A. Humm . . . but actually, it's when they started to threaten my family, my children. That is when I knew that now I had to leave. Luckily, my children had already started getting scholarships and going abroad, one by one.

Q. Mr. Ghanshyam, you know the same thing happened with me in the 1980s. I started to get threatening letters that said that I am spreading Hinduism and Indian culture, and that they will bomb my house.



A. But dance is a humanist art! It doesn't belong to any religion. It is human action. You cannot stop action. Action is dance. If you stop action, then you die. (At this point Mr. Ghanshyam had tears in his eyes and became very emotional. We continued the interview a little later).

Q. I remember the Rhythmic Art Centre where I used to come as a child. It was a very vibrant place and parents would feel comfortable dropping off their kids [there].

A. Yes, we tried to create a family environment. The first teacher at the center that we hired was Ustad Shabbir Hussain, who taught music. Even though it was a small house, we had set it up in such a way that several classes could take place. In one room, my wife would teach dancing to the younger kids. In another, there would be a sitar class going on. In another room, singing. Then, we would also have lots of shows, performances, do dance dramas and I would ask my students to help me out in set construction. I remember you doing a lot of painting for our sets and helping to make the props, etc.

Q. Tell us about the time when you put up performances for various dignitaries, because I remember that I performed in your troupe in front of Chou En-Lai, the Chinese Premier.

A. President Ayub Khan was very supportive, and he often sent me and my troupe all over the world to perform. Even Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, when he was the foreign minister, would invite my troupe to perform in front of the ministers and dignitaries who were visiting from other countries.

Q. You left Pakistan in 1983 and went to the U.S. How has it been there for you?

A. Once we shifted, we set up a teaching place and I was surprised to see that many Americans were keen to learn dance, but relatively fewer Indians and Pakistanis. When I approached the local Indian and Pakistani population, they informed me that they were there to earn money not to spend it. I joined University of Indiana in Fort Wayne as a Professor of Yoga. I enjoyed my teaching stint there, but soon realized that American students do not want to put in the kind of effort that is needed to learn our kind of classical dance.

Q. Mr. Ghanshyam, after you and Mrs. Ghanshyam left Pakistan, I took over and started teaching dance here in Karachi. Now, I have been teaching since 1983 and I really want to set up an institute, but there are so many

obstacles.

A. Yes. I have told you several times that you should set up a center. I don't have that much long to live, but I truly want to help you in this venture, and I want to impart whatever I can to you and your students.

Q. Yes, I know, Mr. Ghanshyam. But you see, the situation here is very tough now. For a start: Where and how do we find the land to set up such a place? I have been trying for so long. Since after you left, my aim has been to set up an institute, but it all seems so difficult.

A. Why doesn't the government help you? You have a lot of courage my dear. I really appreciate what you are doing, and I know that you need a lot of support! I wish I could do something to help set up this institute.

Q. When we were learning dance from you, you taught us so many different styles and forms. We learned Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Kathakali, and Manipuri. Basically, we learned various classical dance forms. Now, it is the fashion to say that "so-and-so is a Kathak dancer and so-and-so is an Odissi dancer," and so on and so forth. What is your view about this trend of categorization of dancing?

A. I believe that classical dance is classical dance. You see, the layperson doesn't know what classical dance is; that is why I never taught my students one particular dance form. They learned all forms of classical dance from me. The aim was to draw from all these forms and evolve something called Pakistani dance. I was leading all of my students toward finding the dance of their country. I, myself, travelled to Sindh and Peshawar and did research on Ghandhara and Mohenjodaro. All of these dancing artifacts belong to you. I would say that you should take pride, do research on them. In Pakistan, people do not know what their culture is.

Q. We know that female dancers in Pakistan are looked down upon as immoral and are so-called "loose" women or women with bad character. Do you think that, being a male, it was easier for you or did you have to face more problems? Did you find any discrimination because you were a male dancer?

A. Well, I think I have always been made to feel uncomfortable because of my sex. In the eyes of the general public a male dancer is always considered not masculine enough and mocked. But yes, here, right from the very beginning, people looked at me strangely, as if they were trying to figure out whether I was a "proper"

man. People who knew that I was a dancer would pass rude comments. I guess because I was married and had a family, I was more acceptable! Had I been a single man, then I think it would have been much worse.

Q. You once told me that when you used to represent Pakistan, how warmly you would be received in other countries and how you used to get so much appreciation within Pakistan. But, you know, when I have performances here, even in front of government functionaries, they treat us and all performers like their servants. I wonder when that will change?

A. That's because now there is dirty politics and, unfortunately, it looks like this will never end unless people like you come into power. You see, in those days, there were people like Raja Tridev Roy, who was a Minister for Minorities as well Minister for Art and Culture; he was a very cultured and educated man- truly a gentleman! I remember that, once in a conversation, he asked me: "How long do you think you can survive here?" I laughed it off and said to him: "Well as long as I can!" But you see I had to almost run for my life.

Q. Mr. Ghanshyam, when you first came to Pakistan, did you feel discriminated against?

A. Well, perhaps not initially, so much. Initially, I did not feel discriminated against because of my religion. But as a male dancer, yes I did find that there was a great deal of prejudice and people would taunt and refer to me as "Hijra." This has been the case here in Pakistan and I felt it becoming worse with time.

Next, I would like you to watch a recording of an interview (watch here, <https://youtu.be/XCY2Q84JHe0>) I recently conducted—on November 7th, 2021 in Karachi—with my student, Muhammad Asif. It will reveal how little has changed for the male dancer in Pakistan.

In conclusion, I recognize that there is need to study the field of dance in Pakistan, particularly male dance in Pakistan, through the theories of gender, identity, embodied performativity, feminism, and hegemony. But at present, the field is bereft of any attention from scholars. The questions that need to be asked in the case of dance scholarship may need to transcend the familiar categories of research. The constant shadow of violence on dance compels the interrogation of dance to include theories of violence. And yet, the scholarship has to be sensitive and find itself capable of asking questions about the time when violence is not taking place. Maybe we need a new language and a richer vocabulary to encompass this dimension.

I also reiterate that the policies followed by Pakistan result in making its cultural wealth vulnerable and endangering the life of its cultural exemplars. Dance is being pushed to the edges of precarity. This is an attack on the patrimony of future generations of citizens. In the sliver of space that dance occupies in Pakistan where its music has been making waves globally, one finds a pastiche of dance forms, including hip-hop, sufi, and modern, as exemplified by the Wahab Shah Dance company, for instance. It is hard to sustain a career with classical dance alone. For all practical purposes I am "the last classical dancer in Pakistan" (Pande 508). Regrettably, the hope that my Guru had of dance being a humanist activity is fast receding. Equally unfounded is his dream of a Pakistani dance. So, in Pakistan, dance is a smorgasbord of styles, singularly subaltern and sometimes subversive. Increasingly, it is being used as a political tool of resistance. For this reason, dance has featured frequently in my acts of activism.

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Vajira: The Pioneering Female Dancer

Mirak Raheem

Vajira Chitrasena is regarded as a pioneer in the field of Kandyan dance, primarily for being the first female professional dancer. At nearly ninety, she was awarded the prestigious Padma Shri by the Government of India in 2021, in recognition of her art form and her contribution to dance culture in Sri Lanka. Vajira has received numerous awards from the state and private institutions in Sri Lanka, and she has been the subject of numerous articles over the years. Most of the popular writings on Vajira highlight her critical contribution in advancing the female form of a traditionally male dance, paving the way for successive generations of professional female stage dancers. These commentaries that appeared in print and, later, in online media, also document the aesthetics of her dance and the supporting role she played to the acclaimed Kandyan dancer, Chitrasena, who was her partner on stage and in life. These accounts have, however, tended to ignore her role as a multifaceted artist. In addition to being a performer, Vajira is a choreographer of traditional dances and a co-creator of numerous productions; she has also been a teacher to numerous dancers over the decades and, in this process, she has developed her own, influential pedagogy for teaching Kandyan dance.

The inadequate manner in which Vajira's contribution has been documented is not unusual. It is part of a wider problem of gendered and simplistic historiographies. In order to understand this gap, it is useful to look at how the history of traditional dance in Sri Lanka is understood. Kandyan dance claims a history of over 2,500 years with its origins closely tied to a healing ritual, the *Kohomba Kankariya*, which is associated with Sinhala communities from and around the central highlands of the island. The tri-traditional dances—Kandyan, Low Country, and Sabaragamuwa—are treated as indigenous dance forms of the island, while Bharatanatyam, although recognized as a representative dance form of the Tamil community of the island, is not often accorded the same status.¹ In pre-colonial times, the tri-traditional dances were used largely for ritualistic purposes by male practitioners to heal, to ward off evil, and to invoke blessings on individuals and communities. When Sri Lanka became an independent country in 1948, the fate of traditional dances associated with the island was in question, as over 400 years of colonial rule had altered belief systems

and weakened the socio-economic systems that supported the ritual and the traditional artists. During the later colonial period, Kandyan dance was treated more as an exotic spectacle to entertain visiting dignitaries, rather than an art form to be preserved and celebrated. It is only during the 1940s that it emerged on stage as stand-alone theatre entertainment, presented by both ritual masters (*gurunnanses*) and a new generation of dancers, including Chitrasena and, later, Vajira, who learned traditional dance for the purpose of performing on stage.²

Histories of the tri-traditional dances of Sri Lanka tend to highlight a handful of pioneering women, pointing out their significance as the first female dancers on stage and summarizing their life stories. Their contribution in these narratives is presented as creating a space for female dancers on stage. Yet, these female pioneers emerged on stage at a critical point in the journey of the tri-traditional dances from ritual space to stage. Temporally, this overlaps with the early efforts of their male counterparts, both the *gurunnanses* and the stage dancers who were attempting to “break in” audiences. While one-off performances of traditional dance would have drawn an audience for their novelty, these early performers had to “create” audiences through repeated performances and developing methods of sustaining their interest, including through choreography and theatre craft. Rarely do these popular histories seek to account for the multiple and varied roles these female pioneers played beyond carving out a place for women on stage, and it is seldom acknowledged that these women artists also transformed the dance in other ways, including as performers, teachers, choreographers, troupe leaders, producers, and costume designers.

Vajira was preceded by individual female dancers, such as Miriam de Saram and Chandralekha (Brenda Hilda Karunatilake), who broke new ground in the early 1940s, including the wearing of a version of the *Ves*, the ritual attire of the *gurunnanses*. Although the female dancer had antecedents (as recorded in historical texts, literature, and on rock and wood carvings), and was found in specific contexts in the pre-independence era, Kandyan dance, at least in its ritual form, had no formal place for her. Vajira is a key figure in the history

of Kandyan dance on stage as she is probably the first professional female dancer. Dance, for her, unlike for her predecessors, was a full-time vocation, not an amateur pastime. Her life story provides a useful prism to better understand the development and contribution of the female dancer beyond that of a performer and teacher to a co-conceiver who pushed the boundaries of the tri-traditional dances on stage.

The Embodiment of Lasya

Vajira chose dance rather reluctantly. Born on March 15, 1932 in Kalutara, a seaside town close to the capital city of Colombo, Vajira was one of seven children from a middle class family. As a child she tried to skip the classes at her home, which were taught by a striking young dancer, Chitrasena—who was then making a name for himself on stage. Encouraged by her mother, Vajira followed a series of dance classes in Kandyan and ‘oriental’ dance, a form of dance fusion sweeping across the Indian subcontinent and beyond—under various teachers. In 1946, she decided to join the Chitrasena Kalayathanaya, the dance school set up by Chitrasena, as a full-time student. She became a member of the troupe and, within two years, became a soloist.

As part of the Chitrasena Ensemble, Vajira went on to perform on stages in Sri Lanka and cultural capitals across the world, including Moscow, Berlin, New Delhi, London, and Sydney. She was considered the epitome of the female form of the dance and was referred to as the “prima ballerina of Kandyan dance.” While Kandyan is seen to be a more *tandava* (loosely translated as masculine) dance, akin to Kathakali, the advent of the female dancer was presented as the emergence of the *lasya*—or feminine—form of the dance.³ In the media, Vajira was described as embodying this *lasya* form of Kandyan dance: “I believe it was she who created out of this traditional *tandava* dance lyric a *lasya* dance of delicate beauty,” points out Bandula Jayawardene, art critic and visiting lecturer.⁴ Although Sri Lankan reviewers often highlighted her grace, they did not always recognize the underlying strength and weight that she brought to the dance and the efforts she made to challenge her male counterparts on stage and to match their steps and leaps.

It is only a handful of commentators, such as Ernest Macintyre, Bandula Jayawardene, and Samson

Abeyagunawardena,⁵ who, in short articles, have drawn attention to the breadth of her contribution. But a more detailed assessment of her work is lacking. Only one or two observers, including Sunila Abeysekera, have highlighted the personal challenges faced by Vajira and the enormous strength of personality she showed in defying social conventions.⁶ In addition to her multiple dance roles, Vajira was also a mother to three children: daughters Upeka and Anjalika, and son Anudatta. She was determined to continue performing and touring despite the physical challenges of motherhood; in 1957, barely three months after giving birth to her son, she was part of a dance troupe that toured the USSR. As a female dancer, regularly performing on stages across the country and later internationally, she served as a role model for young women passionate about taking up dancing as a vocation.

The Creator

Vajira served as a teacher to successive generations of dancers and continues to sit on the veranda of her studio apartment directly overlooking the dance studio to keep an eye on the classes. Beyond teaching sections of the traditional repertoire as taught to her by her teachers, Chitrasena and Lapaya Gurunnanse (who was also Chitrasena's guru), she developed her own pedagogy. Vajira took over effective charge of running the Kalayathanaya by the late 1950s, assisted by the more senior dancers in the ensemble. She developed a series of exercises for training dancers, which broke down Kandyan dance positions and movements. These exercises made the processes of teaching and learning much easier and ensured greater clarity and consistency in lines and stances. In doing so, she also expanded the range of movement in the genre, for instance, such as adding floor and kneeling exercises. This approach contrasts the ritual form, which has no movement in which the dancer lies at floor level. For inspiration, she drew from her exposure to other dance traditions, including classical ballet and contemporary dance. She utilized this inspiration during tours to Eastern Europe, the West, and Australia, or when artists, such as the contemporary dancer Martha Graham, visited the island in 1956.

While establishing herself as the principal female dancer in the Chitrasena Dance Company by the late 1950s, Vajira began exploring choreography. She

¹ Satkunarathnam, Ahalya. “Staging War: Performing Bharata Natyam in Colombo, Sri Lanka.” *Dance Research Journal*, vol. 45, no.1, 2013, pp. 81-103.

² See Mantillake, Sudesh. *Colonial Choreography: Staging Sri Lankan Dancers Under British Colonial Rule from the 1870s to the 1930s*. University of Maryland, 2018; Reed, Susan A. *Dance and the Nation: Performance, Ritual, and Politics in Sri Lanka*. The University of Wisconsin Press, 2010; Nurnberger, Marianne. *Dance is the Language of the Gods*. VU University Press, Amsterdam, 1998; Amunugama, Sarath. *Kohomba Kankariya, The Sociology of a Kandyan Ritual*. Vijitha Yapa Publications, 2021.

³ *Tandava* is a term used in the Indian subcontinent to describe masculine dance styles or forms. Its origins lie in the cosmic dance of Lord Shiva. *Lasya* is seen as feminine and associated with the Goddess Parvati.

⁴ Jayawardene, Bandula. “Vajira and the Ballet-art.” *Nrtya Puja, A Tribute to Chitrasena 50 Years in the Dance*. 1987, p.14.

⁵ Op. cit.; Macintyre, Ernest. “Towards a Biography of Vajira” *Vajira: A Dancer to Treasure*, 1996; Abeygunawardena, Samson. “Keeper of a Great Tradition.” *Vajira: A Dancer to Treasure*, 1996

⁶ Abeysekera, Sunila. “Conversations with Vajira: 1996.” *Vajira, In Celebration of Fifty Years of Dance*, 1996.

ventured into this area when creating productions for her child students. It is remarkable that, barely a decade after Chitrasena's attempts at devising mudra natya or Sinhala ballet, Vajira took on the challenge of exploring the medium for child performers in the early 1950s. Mudra natya emerged around the 1930s and 1940s, marking a transition from dance dramas; while the former used dance as the primary narrative tool, the latter used a range of media such as song, spoken word, as well as dance.⁷ Chitrasena's mudra natya, such as *Karadiya* (1961) and *Kinkini Kolama* (1978), are seen as some of the best examples of the medium. Vajira replicated his approach of using Kandyan dancing as the framework for choreography without being bound by it: while drawing from Kandyan dancing positions and steps, she integrated natural movement and mime.

Although Vajira's "children's ballets" employed simple story lines, they were often grand productions with large casts, original music scores, and fantastical sets and costumes. Her productions did not seek to compromise on originality or artistry, even while they provided space for children of different ages to perform. These productions often involved collaborations with some of the leading Sinhala musicians of the day, such as Amaradeva and Ananda Samarakoon, both of whom practiced and lived in the Colpetty school. This school was where Vajira taught, but was also her home. She created eleven children's mudra natya over her career. By the 1960s, she was able to use her choreographic skills to devise sequences in Chitrasena's mudra natya. One of her earliest efforts was the swan sequences in the 1963 staging of *Nala Damayanthi*, in which she also played one of the principal roles.

The subject of attribution can be a tricky issue in any art form that requires collaboration. Mudra natya required multiple artists to design and create the different elements, including the plot, choreography, music, and design elements. Understanding Chitrasena and Vajira's contribution to the mudra natya from the 1960s is to recognize the partnership they created and the ecosystem they fostered to unite fellow artists working in different fields. Vajira's role evolved over time from choreographing sequences to taking on more of a central role, including to develop the plot in the production *Shiva Ranga* (1986). "When I started to experiment with creative dance, Chitra[sena] did not try to stop me. With fifteen-minute ballets, I got more experience to do larger stories. I improved my experiences in creating movement and telling stories through dance."⁸

⁷ Raheem, Mirak. "Chitrasena's Mudra Natya: Embodying the Form." *The Sunday Times*, January 24, 2021

⁸ Interview with Vajira

Aside from mudra natya, her choreography extended to re-setting or creating new traditional items, including collaborations with the master drummer and composer Piyasara Silpathipathi, and staged productions devoted to presenting the tri-traditional dance forms.

Strikingly, from a global perspective, the role of choreographer, even in contemporary dance, continues to be male dominated in many contexts. But Vajira and her South Asian counterparts have created a strong and vibrant female tradition that continues to this day and is exemplified by the women who currently head the Chitrasena Dance Company and Kalayathanaya.

The material for this article is drawn from research carried out for a soon-to-be published book on Chitrasena by this same author.



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Failure of Rasa: Story of Indian Dance During COVID-19

Kaustavi Sarkar

What is the premise and promise of Rasa during a period of confusion, turmoil, and fear of human connection? “Rasa is the experience of a state of generalized stasis that results from an accumulation of empathetic responses to performed sequences of emotional experience” (Coorlawala 25). As a practitioner-scholar of traditional Indian dance, I negotiate with tenets of performativity based on texts, such as the *Natyasastra*, *Abhinaya Darpana*, *Sangeet Ratnakara*, *Abhinavabharati*, *Natya Manorama*, and *Abhinaya Chandrika*, among many others that explicitly or implicitly deal with affective communication of narrative, musical, rhythmic, and metaphoric content. These are texts in Sanskrit language and are embedded within a worldview that can be attributed to Hinduism. Bharata’s *Natyasastra*, approximately dated between 200 B.C. to 200 C.E., devotes chapters six and seven to Rasa theory noting that the primary goal of performance is to transport the audience to a transcendental realm while entertainment is only a mere consequence. *Abhinavabharati* is a commentary on Rasa theory of the *Natyasastra*. While *Natyasastra* is considered to be the oldest treatise on performing arts, other texts, namely, *Abhinaya Darpana*, *Sangeet Ratnakara*, *Abhinavabharati*, *Natya Manorama*, and *Abhinaya Chandrika* are equally significant in propounding Rasa. Nandikesvara’s *Abhinaya Darpana* notes Rasa as the object of Abhinaya or theatrical expression. The chapter on dance in Sarangadeva’s *Sangeet Ratnakara*, a musicological treatise, presents the Rasa theory. Raghunath Ratha and Maheswar Mohapatra wrote *Natya Manorama* and *Abhinaya Chandrika* respectively. These texts belong to the eastern Indian state of Odisha and contribute to the development of Odissi dance with its distinct and particular regional flavor although adopting conventions from the aesthetic Sanskrit lineage of the *Natyasastra*. South Asian dance-scholars have written extensively about the obsession with the ‘classical’ in Indian dance referring to dance that aligns with the Sanskrit lineage. This linear narrative has invisibilized numerous forms, dancers, and choreographers who choose to steer clear of this narrow focus. This becomes essentially potent today as the ring-wing Hindu nationalist Indian state celebrates its seventy-five years of freedom from British colonialism with censorship. Dance-artist and scholar, Anurima Banerji writes about the conformity of the dancer with the Indian nation even when artists from other genres choose to return their state-sponsored awards protesting the state’s curbing of artistic freedom. I also would like to point out to the recent repealing of

Ananya Dance Theatre’s performance from the roster of Erasing Borders Festival that is an important event organized by the Indo-American Arts Council in New York City (Ananya Dance Theatre). ADT’s work is vocal about white supremacy and brahmanical oppression in the same vein. I believe their transnational feminist activist approach was perceived as dissent and taken off the festival itinerary despite publicity and the signing of contracts and completion of hotel bookings in New York City. Dance studies scholar Urmimala Sarkar Munsri rightly notes that “the ecology of Indian dance continues to hierarchize dancers. Some of them are glorified as legitimate citizens, while others are discriminated against, and subjected to multiple marginalities” (2)

In this article, I explore the complexities of Rasa during a complete lockdown of live performance. Rasa appears in ancient Vedic literature as flavor, liquid, taste, and self-luminous consciousness, among many other meanings. Rasa theory is used across live performance, visual art, and new media. This essay focuses on artistic practice that is collaborative, socially-engaged, external to formal institutions of production, less prescriptive than say, the traditional repertoire in classical Indian dances, and that was produced during the COVID-19 lockdown.

The concert dance form of the Odissi repertoire is instituted as a progression from invocation (Mangalacharan) to salvation (Moksha) for the creation of Rasa. Reminiscing its ritualistic counterpart in the Jagannath temple where Maharis or temple dancers performed to the lyrics of the Gitagovinda, among other pieces, establishes dance as a significant offering to the deity (Banerji 12). Speaking about Delhi-based Odissi, an eastern Indian traditional art form, dancer Kavita Dwibedi says, “He was playing the lights for me.” Dwibedi is referring to Lord Jagannath, the male Hindu deity who remains at the heart of Odishan (an eastern Indian state) religious and cultural fabric.

Dwibedi speaks about the minimal arrangements of the recording of her dance-film *Woh 50 Din* (translated as “those fifty days”). Made for activist/scholar Arshiya Sethi’s *Danced Poems of Double Authorship*, the work’s creation took place during the first fifty days of the COVID-19 lockdown. In this virtual event, dancers, Dwibedi and others choreographed to Sethi’s poems in Hindi and English. Dwibedi attributes metaphorical and spiritual agency to Lord Jagannath, noting that he ensured Dwibedi’s face was lit for the filmic capture. In

the video, we see Dwibedi seated in front of a quaintly visible Jagannath idol. Her gestural expressivity related to the horrors of the pandemic infuses the receptivity with Rasa—an aestheticized portrayal of emotional tenor.

Dwibedi’s offering of Rasa is of a different kind. The primary message is that of freedom from the shackles of narrow-mindedness through Bhaichara, or friendship. Sethi-Dwibedi co-write and co-perform this danced poem as an appeal to the Indian citizen to prevent communalization of the pandemic. A Tablighi Jamaat religious congregation in Delhi’s Nizamuddin Markaz mosque in March, 2020 was considered a COVID-19 super-spreader event with twenty-seven deaths and more than 4,000 confirmed cases resulting from the event. This was an unfortunate event during which all participants, including international registrants with necessary government clearances, were clustered indoors in response to a sudden imposition of a lockdown. The ring-wing Hindu majoritarian instigation of a campaign of vilification against Muslims in India led to forced captivity, abuse, and othering (Mahuarkar; Ujjan). Standing against pathologization of a community and communalization of a pandemic for narrow political gains, Dwibedi’s offering of her embodied labor is a testimony of Bhaichara where humans protect one another at all costs: “Manav Manav Ka Rakshak.” Dwibedi’s maneuver reorients her movement toward social commentary through a conflation of the aesthetic and the performative, the mediated and the medium, and portrays the ontological, epistemological, and political possibilities of Rasa. Yet, Sethi’s choice of well-connected and established classical Indian dancers to choreographically explore her poetic expression is suspect. As an Odissi soloist, Dwibedi remains complicit in a culture of casteist gatekeeping, statist appropriation of artistic agency, and a world of dance that refrains from explicit commingling with the political under the garb of the aesthetic.

This article is embedded in the Indian arts scenario—its complicity in structural marginalization adhering to power and its activist potential—during the COVID-19 pandemic. In “Using Arts Activism and Poetry to Catalyze Human Rights Engagement and Reflection,” scholar Jane McPherson notes that arts activism has the potential to promote reflective engagement with a rights discourse. With the loss of live performance, emerged a culture of greater discourse—sharing of artistic and creative process alongside a greater call for rights, equity, standardization, and rebutting an otherwise culture of silence. For example, initiatives, such as the “Arts and the Law” series and “UNMUTE,”

series, organized as training, workshop, and discussion events, directly address artists facing marginalization, harassment, and discrimination at their workplaces. While the Indian nation state reneged on contracts and delayed payments, individual artists rose to the challenge of the pandemic in philanthropic capacities by commissioning paid work, donating money and food, and creating competitions through their foundations and connections. Artists, namely, Sonal Mansingh, Anita Ratnam, and Aditi Mangaldas created merit-based opportunities mainly for established dancers. Many artists—namely, Sanjoy Roy of Teamwork Films and Anurupa Roy of Katkatha—organized charitable donations of food and other basic necessities. Artrepreneur Arshiya Sethi’s Kri Foundation organized donation to families comprising of dancers from all strata—folk, back-up show, and Jagran. During the online premiere on YouTube Live of *Danced Poems of Double Authorship*, Sethi reminisces that the Sthyayee Bhava (dominant expression in the Rasa theory) during the pandemic has been one of being “fed-up-of-COVID” (Sethi, Covid Creations). A conversation regarding Rasa’s efficacy in technological mediation is not restricted to the pandemic, given the role of film, social media, and other channels of artistic dissemination beyond the live before COVID-19 hit. Nevertheless, the long, accidental pause of the live option, in my opinion, makes this question timely and significant. Rasa that presupposes an audience educated in the codes of performance does not have a disclaimer regarding the absence of viewership. The pandemic forced the artist community to rethink modes of expression as dancers shifted from in-person concert performance to dance-films. Live telecast through a profusion of online pivots does not make possible the reciprocal connection that brings alive the promise of Rasa.

Trained in expressional-theatrical movement-repertoire known as Abhinaya—the object of which is Rasa, according to *Abhinayadarpana*—I present a practitioner’s perspective on theorizing Rasa in live performance. Further, I comment on this theorization in on-screen departure from the live during the pandemic. Performer-choreographer Vikram Iyengar’s dance-film called *Water-Bodies* (2021) projects the grotesque as the ravaging second wave of COVID-19 hit India with victims floating down the Ganges River. I focus on the import of Rasa through technological mediation—that one could also term as *failure of Rasa*. I argue that the contextual unmooring of reciprocal communication, as envisaged by Rasa in live performance, opens up newer modes of relationality—modes that demand analytical inquiry into existing and new contexts negotiating Rasa. The Indian dance scene reels under hierarchy,

territorialization, hoarding of knowledge, patriarchy, sexual harassment, and lack of knowledge of artists' legal rights. Artist-organizer Sanjukta Wagh's poem, "Why Sometimes the Show Must Go On," is a visceral response to a workshop called "UNMUTE: Breaking the Culture of Silence." The workshop mobilizes against patriarchal oppression in the field. Pandemic-induced loss of performance creates more space and time to think through due process in pushing toward greater awareness of diversification and standardization in the field. Yet, change is excruciatingly slow and inundated with further pitfalls as noted in continuing censorship of artistic freedom. I want to bring attention to the banning of the filmmaker Sandeep Ravindranath's latest work, "Anthem For Kashmir" that shows state-sponsored oppression in the conflicted political territory of Kashmir in India (Bergen). Although the silent movie is brilliant for its nuanced handling of grassroots activism, it threatened the large Indian nation-state that wants to crush any dissent to its linear narrative dominated by a politically motivated Hindu right. Navigating across programming by artists and activists allows for a balanced view regarding the relevance of and need for revision of Rasic contexts. Simultaneously discussing political responses in aesthetics and organizing, I discuss steps taken in Rasic discourse during the pandemic, bearing an ever-fleeting promise of greater equity, awareness, and standardization.

Hypothesizing Rasic Intimacy

Moving in tandem with the viewer lays the primary charge of Rasa as reciprocity through a specific Indic worldview. Rasa, as first mentioned in the Rig Veda, refers to the nectar of immortality. Translated as juice or flavor, Rasa refers to sensuous savoring of performance (Schechner 29). In the sixth chapter of the *Natyasastra*, Rasa theory is explicated in theatricality. In his commentary on Rasa, Abhinavagupta writes how the experience of Rasa demands audience preparation and spiritual expertise, while dance scholars, Royona Mitra and Kapila Vatsyayan, delineate its universality outside of the everyday and the mundane. Rasa is extremely hard to define as a concept, practice, experience, or interpretation. There is vast literature on Rasa by Sanskrit scholars regarding the influence of Rasa in performance, spirituality, literature, and other fields. Rasa is the moment of relish, defined by T.S. Nandi as an experience different from "memory, inference, and worldly (sensation of) pleasure" (48). Yet, owing to loss in translation, knowledge of the Rasa emerges only to a qualified observer—one who is familiar with the gestural codifications and is perceptually able to

process sensitive information. Aesthetic stylization of emotive expressivity by the performer enables an abstract registering in the viewer. The narrative and thematic import of the expressive do not overdetermine audience receptivity. Rather, the viewer transcends the particularities of storyline and emotional valence towards a more personal landing of the performative. Such is the promise of Rasa that is said to be able to transcend the thematic purport toward a tailoring by individual viewers' coloring through their experiential understanding and resultant meaning-making. The meaning is not universal. Rather, it is particular to each person viewing the material and abstracting according to one's positionality, training, and access to this philosophy. Mitra theorizes an intercultural possibility of gestural communication within Rasa while analyzing UK-based choreographer Akram Khan's work across contemporary dance and Kathak, a traditional dance form from northern India. Mitra gestures towards possibility of Rasa of reciprocal meaning-making beyond the confines of the cultural or the aesthetic insider, similar to author Swapna Koshy who, in *Rasa Theory in Shakespearian Tragedies*, notes that Rasa has found a place in audience-centric communication.

Rasa activates an engaged viewing across postural, gestural, melodic, and percussive registers. Embodied analysis of choreographic material percolates my training and practice into my research. I am inspired by dance scholar Ann R. David's conceptualization of embodied ethnography among Gujarati communities in the UK through participation in social movement practices connected to religious festivity. Having Rasa as a sieve makes the process of absorption much more visceral and corporeal than just being restricted within the premise of the optic. While discussing a camera recording of a solo Odissi performance, Uttara Asha Coorlawala notices how perceptions of the performer, aesthetic codes, receptivity by the audience, and enframing by the filmic apparatus—camera angle, editing, and focus—influence meaning-making. She notes that the culturally-situated audience watches Mohapatra's performance through the principle of *Darshan*, meaning the manifestation of the divine for a religious insider. "It is only when the devotee is 'seen' (i.e., blessed) by the deity, that transformation occurs and the Divine Presence is experienced" (24). But *Darshan* also refers to philosophy. Thus, the viewer is engaged in a philosophical encounter with the performance noting the possibility of manifesting one's own worldview. This viewing is unlike the distant analytical and alienated viewing by a dance critic. Contextualized across the artwork as well as art reception, Rasa initiates an

alchemical possibility as described below.

As experienced in my own practice, Rasa is generated through a dialogical embodied exchange made possible through performance. In the article, "The Alchemy of Rasa in the Performer-Spectator Interaction," artist-scholar Scheherazaad Cooper argues that Rasa is generated together by both practitioner and spectator within a performance. The experience of the performance is meant to function within a dialogical capacity grasped within the upstream and downstream flow of energy between the participants—the spectator and the performer. It is not reified in the imaginary, but a positive experience within the exchange.

The scriptural basis of Rasa theory has led to its investigation as a spiritual experience. For example, Susan L. Schwartz denotes how spirituality permeates *Natyashastra* performance. Schwartz notes that the transcendence of the ego by both the performer and the viewer remains the transformative premise and promise of Rasa. Real-time interpretation by the spectator of the performer's Bhavas or day-to-day emotional experiences generates Rasa where the suspension of the performer's ego allows for the audience's apprehension of Rasa. The energetic exchange across performance and reception literally depends upon the nature of the knowledge base and respective interpretations. Not every artist is necessarily Hindu or spiritual, although it is impossible to deny the ritual-spiritual-philosophical-religious basis in artistic choice, training, practice, and performance. Implicit connections to Hindu myth, literature, and religiosity permeate the dance. Yet, interpretations enabled by the Rasic exchange within performers and viewers of multiple leanings and associations are also key to shaping and developing the art form.

The ideal spectator, or the Rasika, operates at the juncture of feeling and knowledge. Emotions and real-life concerns constitute the Rasika as much as literary and aesthetic foundations of Rasa, as noted by Ayal Amer in the analysis of the subjectivity of the Rasika within Sanskrit poetics. On one end, the Rasika relishes the psychic components of the narrative while empathizing with the artist's emotional contours. On the other, the Rasika interprets the performance based on existing conceptual knowledge and experiential investment within performance theory and its spiritual associations.

Distilling the performance through a foundation of existing knowledge base creates the possibility of transcendence of the egotistic self beyond the primacy of emotions, feelings, and thoughts. K.S. Shivkumar notes that for a spiritual seeker Rasa implies an

experience of undivided bliss of the pure consciousness also known as Brahman. While at an empirical level, the bliss can be experienced through unselfish individuality, a Rasika's reception of the performative co-creates meaning with the performer. The material embodiment of the artist mediates between the emotional tonality and alchemical energy of the art work and the Rasika. Embodied performance alongside conceptual and technical elements of the Bhavas (emotional moods) lead to the Rasika's entry into the meaning-making procedure. Physical movement (Angika), facial expressions (Mukhaja), and codified hand gestures (Hasta) are integral to the communication of meaning in Abhinaya or expressional dance. The first refers to Angika Abhinaya, the second to Mukhaja Abhinaya, and the third to Hasta Abhinaya. In addition to technical perfection, Abhinaya assumes an advanced degree of conceptual understanding of philosophy and character. Scheherazaad Cooper notes the "challenge, then, comes in the dancer transcending his or her own acquired physicality—a physicality inevitably mediated by the dancer's own sociocultural development within the specific time and space in which he or she lives—so as to represent the character whose movements are based largely on a poetic representation of myth" (344). The ideal Rasika, in that case, distills this meaning through an embodied encounter of such Angika, Mukhaja, and Hasta Abhinaya towards a non-egotistic interpretation of Rasananda, or pure bliss. According to Kalpana Ram, "to be a Rasika is to inhabit the time of the present in a very particular way," where time is slowed down for the right flavors to be released (161). From this experience of the Rasika, I define Rasic intimacy as one birthed between live performance and spectatorship transcending narrative import, physical virtuosity, and egotistic affiliation.

Audience receptivity is integral to the success of the artist's performance of emotional and conceptual elements as well as showcasing of technical mastery. The creation of an expression through internal states and physicality usually implies the predominance of a strong emotional tone, also known as the Sthyayi Bhava. Further, evoking emotions or aesthetic feelings due to a situation, a person, or an object, deepens the expressive interface. An example of this exchange, known as Vibhava, might involve portraying love among two individuals—called Alambana—alongside showcasing the spring-time beauty that enhances the feeling of love—called Uddipana. The emotional landscape of the performer is explored in depth as one exploits personality traits, physical sensations, and mental conditions for engaged storytelling. A variety of improvisatory emotional states are used

by the performer to illustrate an expressive nuance without repetition. Finally, pointing out the calmness within—a centering achieved through repetition and understanding of the subject matter at hand—gives the spectator the necessary pauses in order to transition within the narrative or expressive process.

While narrative understanding differs between audiences with varying degrees of cultural understanding, the sensitivity to respond to emotional stimuli is available across the board. Performativity and receptivity both enable experiential access to multiple characters, circumstances, and aesthetic parameters. The function of receptivity is woven within the expressive fabric. The location of Rasa is not locatable in any one entity—the performer or the spectator. Rather, the dialogic accomplishment of non-verbal expressivity results in the generation and apprehension of Rasa in an act of transcendence. The performer as well as the spectator transcend the self through an aesthetic distancing. While the performer transcends the self in the act of aesthetic negotiating across multiplicity, the spectator lets go of the self in identifying with the character. However, the receptive self does not stop at complete identification with the performative. Rather, the stylized possibilities of expressivity lead the reception toward aesthetic distancing from both the spectator's self as well as the performer's characterization. This distancing culminates in pleasure, also known as Rasananda, or bliss.

Religious studies scholar Kurt Heidinger notes how Abhinavagupta locates the transcendence in the union of the male god and the female goddess that bridges the distance “of question and answer, of word-thought and interpreter thought, of sensible and intelligible” (Heidinger 140). This notion of the transcendental signified has been investigated in South Asian sculpture by art historian Vidya Dehejia. She attributes the enlightenment within *Sakti*, the eternal feminine principle of power flowing through the material as well as the spiritual world. As the embodiment of the ritual sexual union as well as being the epitome of *Sakti*, or the eternal feminine principle of power animating the cosmos, my Odissi solo exploits power and pleasure as modes of transcendence. The acculturated spectator is left with *Rasic Intimacy*—one that transcends the notion of the self as identified with one's body-mind complex while achieving a sense of blissful transcendence, also known as Rasananda. Unable to perform nor to find bliss within the Odissi's harmonious symmetry during the pandemic, I repeatedly questioned the sheer discrepancy between the idealized Rasic world and my immediate reality—

one that had transmigrated to the screen. Speaking from this vantage point, I ask: Does Rasic intimacy and the promise of egotistic transcendence hold true in the mediation of the live to the screen?

Testing Rasic Intimacy

The abundant gestural, postural, and expressive communicative potential of Rasa has been explored in the traditional Indian dance canon by prominent artists, mainly for live performance. The promise of Rasa has been perfunctorily exploited in the screenic medium, although the pandemic saw a serious engagement with the medium. Author-editor Melissa Blanco Borelli, in the introductory chapter of the edited anthology, *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and the Popular Screen*, writes that “the choreography of the camera, the camera as a body unto itself, where it looks and where it gazes from, contributes to the reading of the dancing as it progresses” (16). Codes of the camera intersect with the aesthetic conventions of Rasa theory in analyzing the premise of Rasa. In the article, “Moved to Dance: Remix, Rasa, and a New India,” dancer-scholar Pallabi Chakravorty notes how traditional codes and associations with Rasa are being replaced by a consumer culture that goes hand in hand with the economy of song-and-dance sequences in Bollywood films. While discussing the neoliberal impact of Rasa is beyond the scope of my article, I want to point out that the importance of Rasa in understanding contemporary on-screen cultural production. While discussing her film *Nishi Dhombol*, that premiered in the online film festival called Ghorā—The Grotesque Goddess, Sangeet Natak Akademi awardee Sharmila Biswas urges dancers to place similar ritualized attention to the screen as a medium with its own aspirations, affordances, and limitations as enunciated in the *Natyasastra* for the stage.

Considerations of space and time onstage vastly differ from their screenic perception. Performance studies scholar T.N. Cesare Schotzko notes how the film screen animates an intimacy based on visual proximity, prioritizing the visual experience over and above other senses (270). Schotzko's presupposition of intimacy relies strictly on sensory presence and possibility of engaging with the mediated performing body. It precludes the alchemical possibility of *Rasic Intimacy*.

Here, I extend my quest to explore the alchemical potential of Rasa on screen. Is it possible to effectuate *Rasic Intimacy* through the filmic medium? I find the pandemic-induced transposition of the live to the

screen generative for this discussion. I investigate two online festivals curated by Kri Foundation under the entrepreneurship of Arshiya Sethi. *Danced Poems of Double Authorship* reflects the collaboration between leading dance artists and Arshiya Sethi. Sethi's poems penned over the course of the pandemic were translated to movement and varying levels of cinematography by eight leading dancers, namely, Shama Bhate, Rama Vaidyanathan, Sharodi Saikia, Kavita Dwibedi, Ileana Citaristi, Anwesa Maahanta, Mangla Bhat, and Jyoti Srivastava. I also investigate Chakshu, a dance-film festival that curates thirty Indian works from various parts of the world. In addition to showcasing these films, Chakshu also invests in panel discussions with the filmmakers and choreographers who share their creative process. These two events differentially exploit choreography and the dancing body's ability to communicate in the online medium.

It is rare that traditional Indian dancers choreograph in the spirit of social commentary, although Arshiya Sethi's *Covid Creations: Danced Poems of Double Authorship* remains an exception. The dancers bring their creative imagination to Sethi's poetics through music, gesture, technology, and translation in regional languages. Sharodi Saikia's gestural rendition in Assamese of Sethi's *History Will Remember This War*, captures the spirit of resilience in the midst of struggle. Images of death alternate with images of public health workers interspersed throughout Saikia's Abhinaya-esque rendition of the poem. Sethi's *Umeed*, meaning hope, performed by both Jyoti Srivastava and Mangla Bhat in Odissi and Kathak respectively, show two very different renditions of hope. While Srivastava's *Umeed* treats the poem in facial expression and musicality, Bhat's *Umeed Udasi ka Virodabhasi Safar* is a Sufi-esque surrender, walking amidst nature, desirous of change with a willful suspension of her artistic subjectivity. Rama Vaidyanathan's integration of an iPad as an active performer and not just a tool of capture negotiates constantly with multiple agents adopting dual roles of both the seer and the seen—the dancer is not just the seen but is also actively choreographing the logic of her presence. Naad Roop's (Shama Bhate's professional company) dancers—Ameera, Avani, Shilpa, Ragini, Shivani, Bhargavi, Neerja, and Esha—use the musicality of percussive syllables: *Dha Thei Ta Dhei Thei Ta Dhei*, to edit choices alternately with Sethi's motto: “Lockdown, not lock-up.” These poems were chronologically organized with the growing number of days spent in the lockdown mode.

I began this article with Kavita Dwibedi's *Those 50 Days*, in which her face and the idol of Jagannath behind her

are both faintly lit by the sunlight, portraying the human condition in isolation. Unlike Dwibedi's faintly visible Jagannath in the backdrop, Ileana Citaristi creates her rendition, *Jagannath Speaks to Me* as a conversation with the presiding Odissi deity. Gestural invocation of relationality across multiple planes of reality—that between Citaristi and Jagannath—weaves the natural horizon to establish a sense of vastness. Nature plays a significant role in the poem, “Which Fork We Take,” various portions of which are enacted by ten dancers establishing various degrees of intimacy with gestural, postural, and metaphoric communication. The collage by ten artists, curated by Sattriya artist Anwesa Maahanta for her Pragjyoti International Dance Festival on Sethi's “Which Fork we Take,” enacts a communal bonding across countries and embodied literacies. These danced poems generate degrees of intimacy that traffic predominantly with elements of Rasa while eluding the phenomenological encounter between the dancer and the audience in live performance.

Chakshu, quite contrarily, employs choreography in a mediated environment, obeying the logics of the making of a dance-film. The lens often frames the dancing bodies, showing a part of the movement, thus creating a sense of energy. The viewer is left to actively imagine the rest of the motion. Zooming in and out of the part to the whole body, the viewer gets the visual and the proprioception of the complete movement. This creates a much more engaged viewing, attending to and honoring the affordances of the filmic medium. Dance and video artist, Katrina McPherson argues that “very often, this type of shot will express much more about the movement than a wide shot featuring the entire body in motion would” (2019 53). Kathak artist Sangita Chatterjee's film, *Quest: A Lockdown Diary of a Dancer*, makes quotidian, domestic and non-performative spaces as crucibles for the creation of Rasa and Rasic worlds. The film focuses on Chatterjee's feet. The heel-toe articulations in walking, turning, and fast rhythmic footwork show the variegated efforts needed to manipulate spatial and temporal logic. Staying in place for a fast-paced Tatkar—or footwork—accompanying syllabic sounds in a rhythmic cycle is juxtaposed with pedestrian walking in linear directions. While the bottoms of the feet remain hidden during the Tatkaar, they are visible when the dancer is walking away from the camera, making visible the balls of the feet, the curvature of the arches, and the heel. One is left wondering about the sonic effects of the heel, toe, and flat footwork according to rhythmic accents, noting temporal progression and the visual scope of the feet meandering through space, perhaps in search of an escape from the lockdown mode of Chatterjee's

pandemic-induced reality. Interesting use of space focused on moving feet juxtapose with Chatterjee's Garuda Samyukta Hasta (both hands joined showcasing a bird), which she uses to experientially communicate the feeling of a caged bird via intermittent flapping of the wings. Chatterjee's Angika Abhinaya can be compared to Aditi Mangaldas's Mukhaja Abhinaya in the latter's tryst with a photo frame in *Enframed*. Mangaldas, another Kathak artist, literally uses a golden frame to show an image coming into life from stillness. A newspaper review of *Enframed* by Chitra Swaminathan notes that "although the dynamics of a dance piece are expressed through the physical language of choreography, most often its essence is conveyed neither by narrative nor movements, but by the body of the dancer." Mangaldas's framing of corporeality, fleshiness, and sheer existence with minimal gestural motion with her face, hands, and torso layers the narrative meaning with a sense of eerie stillness—one that breaks the momentum of the twirling Kathak dancer from the viewer's imaginary. The working hypothesis for a dance-film relies on the supposition that the intention of the work deploys the camera lens to direct viewers' perception of movement. Motility is life-breath for a mover.

Danced Poems of Double Authorship takes an organic approach to filming the dancing body maintaining corporeal integrity over and above technological gimmicks. The body gains precedence in Kavita Dwibedi's *Voh Pacchass Din*, in which she forces the audience to focus on her sunlit corporeal self, while exposed to auditory stimuli from Sethi's recitation of the poem in Hindi and minimal percussive accompaniment. Dwibedi's facial virtuosity in communicating a plethora of emotions, concepts, ideas, and experiences ranging across love, humor, kindness, death, struggle, despair, and anger presents a message of universal consciousness of humanity. *Manav Manav Ka Rakshak*, translated as "humans protect one another," summarizes the choreographic import of a world torn asunder by a pandemic of disease, mistrust, and hatred. The vibrancy of Dwibedi's face and economy of hand gesture draws attention to her faintly lit dancing body with the backdrop of the Jagannath. In this particular rendition, Dwibedi has no cognitive dissonance in sharing her craft in the medium of dance-film instead of live performance.

As if an extension of Jagannath, Dwibedi foregrounds her corporeality accented by emotion and gesture. Ileana Citaristi's *Jagannath Speaks to Me*, establishes a working relationship with Odissi's presiding deity. The film starts with Citaristi's Puspanjali Pradan flower-offering at the feet of Jagannath's idol. The conventional

salutation to the ground is replaced by Citaristi's gestural exposition in which she brings her hand close to her ear as if to hear words spoken especially for her by Jagannath. Gestural enactment of hearing also refers to Sruti—or scriptural wisdom—in the Hindu pantheon; this is considered to be a significant source of knowledge. Jagannath, in interesting ways, remains the source of the collaboration between Sethi and Citaristi. Sethi's pull towards Jagannath in Gajavesham, who is dressed as an elephant, inspires her to compose *Jagannath Speaks to Me*, bringing to fruition Citaristi's desire to offer her dance as an offering to Rathayatra—a chariot festival in a Jagannath temple in Puri. The Arthapatti, that is, the meaning supposition in Citaristi's exposition that Jagannath speaks to her, leads to her choreography exploring representation and abstraction across ritual, nature, and religious lore. The camera focuses on her hand pointing toward the horizon—one that is occupied by Sraddha, her faith and love for Jagannath. Her Sraddha (devotion) becomes her Arthapatti (presumption) that explores the corporeal connection between her embodied self and the object of her divine manifestation, Jagannath.

Douglas Rosenberg's "Dance/Technology Manifesto," as quoted by McPherson (250) in *Making Video-Dance*, critiques privileging of technology over dance, urging makers to reinscribe the body on the corpus of technology for a recorporealization of dance and technology. Odissi scholar Anurima Banerji (2012) argues for the distributed body of dance across ritual performance, the body of the Jagannath, and the architectural construction of the temple as a critique of human subjectivity as liberal individualism. Banerji's distributed corporeality illuminates Dwibedi's and Citaristi's corporeal interventions on film. *While Jagannath Speaks to Me* explores the relational, *Voh Pacchass Din* exploits the extension of the dancer's corporeal extensions in the dance-film exemplifying Rosenberg's manifesto against technocracy.

The notion of hope becomes a catalyst of bringing together communities of practice across geographical distance. Sethi's poem, "Umeed Udasi ka Virodabhasi Safar," loosely translated as the journey between despair and hope, results in two very different manifestations by dancers Mangla Bhat and Jyoti Srivastava. Bhat's minimalistic presentation taking refuge in Kathak's turns and footwork, contrasts with Srivastava's scripting of the poem into a fully produced musical piece within the Odissi repertoire. I argue that the notion of the Tihai, or a percussive segment repeated three times to return to Sama or the first beat of the Tala (rhythmic cycle with a

definite number of beats), plays an important culminating factor in the dance. Interesting interjections of Tihai by Bhat and Srivastava enforce the purpose of the arts not only in Sethi's words, but also in mnemonic syllables corresponding to the percussive accompaniment. Bhat's casual yet dancerly walk through a garden with occasional hand gestures and facial expressions is interrupted with a rhythmic section repeated three times as if journeying experientially from despair toward hope. While Bhat's Tihai acts as a bridge, Srivastava's Tihai leads to a climactic culmination as the Mardala (percussion used in Odissi) resounds with the following bols:

Dhane Dhane Dhane Dhane Dha Dhin Dha Tere Kete Gadi Ghene Dha

Dhane Dhane Dhane Dhane Dha Dhin Dha Tere Kete Gadi Ghene Dha

Dhane Dhane Dhane Dhane Dha Dhin Dha Tere Kete Gadi Ghene Dha

The camera aids in choreographing audience involvement as we see Srivastava's back reflected in a mirror, noting the importance of holding onto one another and having each other's back during these uncertain times. The back space is not explored in the frontal live performance of traditional Indian dances. So, exposing the back becomes not just an aesthetic choice but also one that is laden with the filmic possibility of layering multiplicity and choreographing the viewer's perception and engagement with dancers' corporeality. The intrusion of Srivastava's back makes an aesthetic intervention in corporealizing the dance on video. The climactic Tihai on the Mardala communicates in metaphorical rhythmicity the need for friendship amidst the despair and death brought forth by the pandemic.

Danced Poems of Double Authorship ends with a collage on Sethi's *Which Fork We Take* by ten dance artists from Italy, Japan, India, Bangladesh, and Canada, curated by the Pragjyoti International Dance Festival. Artists visualize moments of crisis as well as hope through their Hasta or gestural, Angika or embodied, and Mukhaja or facial expressivity. Dr. Anwesa Mahanta, festival director and curator, returns to the tactic of the Tihai as she appears last in the film asking the viewer "to do for another daily, unfailingly" and repeating the phrase, "something kind" three times for her audiences. Sethi's *Which Fork We Take* makes hope surge creating communities across movement—one that is rooted in India's Abhinaya tradition.

Abhinaya features through transposition in the dance-film avatar showcased by Chakshu. In Anwesa Mahanta's *Sakhi: An Emovere*, Sakhi means a friend. This work presents a brilliant example of spatial and conceptual swapping, especially in explicating

traditional contexts of Sattriya dancing that come from the Vaishnavite monasteries of Assam in northeast India. In the Vaishnavite tradition, the divine is compared to the Sakhi, one in whose presence "streams out our inmost thoughts unwaveringly." Mahanta's voice echoing these words are juxtaposed with her Alta-stained (Alta is a red pigment) foot submerged in clear and still water. The clear and still water is a reflection of the calm and focused mental state of the devotee who seeks the divine in the form of the Sakhi. "Who is a Sakhi?" asks Mahanta, while we see her gorgeous facial expressions infused with Sakhya—the expressive immersive state of a devotee seeking divine companionship. Transposing the notion of submergence and immersion across the mental state and the physical body portrays equity across the body and the mind as well as expression and movement. During the *(Hu)Manifesto: Possibilities for Screendance*, devised collaboratively at the *OpenSource: Video Dance* conference at Findhorn Foundation in Scotland in 2006, the possibility of an unfolding of a larger truth "through an accretion of images of bodies in motion" was noted (McPherson 254). *Sakhi: An Emovere* presents such a possibility where the Rasic Intimacy across Mahanta's face, foot, hands, and her surroundings—water, sand, earth, and sun—contextualize a larger manifestation of the world beyond the movement, the dance, and the expression. Such contextualized Abhinaya became a feature of the dance-films at Chakshu. Another such example is Nehha Bhatnagar's *Forest*, combining pedestrian and stylized in the same vein to create complex, potent, non-linear, and non-narrative storytelling. The camera pans in and out dancing with Nehha Bhatnagar's grounded, serpentine, and largesse geometries. We feel Bhatnagar's ecstatic joy as she walks, jumps, runs, and meditates amidst the large trees, the curvilinear trails, the gnarly creepers, and peeking sunlight. Stylized gestures and postures weave through the pedestrian traversing in and through nature bringing yet another example of Abhinaya as the theoretical transposition across expressive possibilities through moving images of the body on camera.

A deconstruction of the expressive through intersectional consciousness of social injustices is decipherable in the *Dastak* films called *Earth, Water, Fire, and Air* created by Darren Johnson of Northern Dawn Media with choreographer Ananya Chatterjea, who is trained in Odissi. *Dastak: I Wish You Me* is an evening-length work about one's personal and political belonging across the sense of home and public places. In Farsi, *dastak* means "knockings" and the dances—both in the films and in live performance—resonate with the percussive traces of global injustices on our

hearts through the materiality of four elements: earth, water, fire, and air. Mud-stained nails on parched earth pair with grounded large undercurves, running, and exasperated breath, forcing the viewer to attend to the injustices toward those people who were denied their share of the Earth. Similarly, the ethereal, wavering, and fierce are dealt through the lens of social justice in *Air*, *Water*, and *Fire*. *Fire* is shot at the same police precinct in Minneapolis where George Floyd, a forty-six-year-old African-American man was killed by a white police officer. Occasionally obscured with images of fire and smoke, this film shows the extent of material damage on the streets of Minneapolis. Such images of destruction are partnered with the sunlit bodies of Ananya Dance Theatre (ADT). Dancers move together during Floyd's struggle, tracing curvilinear asymmetries through their arms and spines. I see these as remnants of Odissi sieved within Yorchha (ADT's grounding in and instituting of the contemporary Indian dance-technique) drenched in Shawngram—meaning struggle or resistance in Bengali.

Quite distinct from the earlier video-dances, Vikram Iyengar's *Water Bodies* (2021) is a chilling capture of the pandemic. Adopting text from Parul Khakar's compelling poem, "Shavavahini Ganga" (meaning the Ganges River carrying dead bodies), Iyengar uses his corporeal virtuosity as the primary expressive conduit. Instead of deploying expressive repertoire—gestural, postural, facial—movement presupposes an expressive ethos of musculature and cellular consciousness that does not require neural translation. We hear voices in Bengali translating Khakar's poem and marking Iyengar's homebase in Kolkata, West Bengal. We feel the sweat, we hear the breath, we experience the slow decay, the impending disintegration of a nation-state refusing to let go of political opportunism in the form of religious appeasement, even in the face of death.

In film studies, it has been established that the intervention of the camera compromises the possibility of a more phenomenological intimacy on and off stage. The willing suspension of the fact of exaggerated proximity as manipulating one's sensibility leads to a loss of Rasic agency. Rasic intimacy that is possible in live performance, presupposes complete agentic control of one's aesthetic sensibility. Technological manipulation by the camera introduces factors—the particular viewpoint of the lens through which the viewer's gaze is sieved—outside of the Rasic framework. There is also an unwanted possibility of a bias towards concretization in the filmic medium. The belaboring on a movement or a body part allows for the predominance

of its concrete materiality in the spectator's psyche. However, the promise of Rasa lies in the viewer's ability of abstraction—aesthetic metaphorizing the material leading to a distancing of the self as well as the displayed subject.

Our experience of dance-film is implicitly marked by such exaggerations as well as fragmentations activated by the lens, even as we experience the dynamism, energetic transfusion, and affect intimately. While analyzing Hindi cinema, author Ronie Parciack argues that while the movie industry "relies on a distinctive aesthetic lexicon corresponding to *rasa* theories and its contemporary rendition within the realm of popular and visual culture, it eventually hinders the radical potential of *rasa* it nurtures" (119). Parciack makes his claim through the material handling of the subject at hand. Since rasic intimacy relies on the agentic abstraction by the spectator, I note that the close proximity and the desire to concretize impedes Rasa's potential in the filmic medium. Yet, this might generate an intimacy on other registers—those that are not necessarily of transcendental significance but have more contemporary social, political, and activist stance.

While discussing art work of the reputed queer artist, David Wojnarowicz, inspiring and inspired from the political organizing during the AIDS epidemic in the United States, feminist scholars Shannan L. Hayes and Max Symuleski note the necessary work of the intimate in maintaining a sense of vulnerability and openness afforded within the realm of the aesthetic (264). Bringing such an openness emanating from embodied practice to spectatorial labor indicates a "desire for a world in which sensible rejuvenation and doubt are embraced as necessary and valuable parts of collective world-building and political critique" (Hayes and Symuleski 271). Yet, such work is bound to entail further negotiation, conversation, and critique, as noted by Sarah Cascone's report on the protests by AIDS activists against Whitney Museum's memorialization of David Wojnarowicz's art drawing attention to the ongoing nature of the crisis. The point I make here is that artistic conduits of Rasa, though they fail in the traditional roster, might be potent in their relationality with the intimate and the concrete—both inspiring ongoing conversations that are absolutely crucial for social change.

Unmuting Rasa

The pandemic has seen a plethora of on-screen activity. While the radical potency of *Rasic Intimacy*, defined as transcending one's egotistic affiliation, is hindered due to the screen's allegiance to the concrete and

the proximate, the failure of Rasa has been rather generative in what is otherwise a culture of silence and oppression. The radical potency of the performative does not preclude the radical possibility in totality. There has been an explosion of imaginative use of social media through video conferencing for paid and unpaid workshops, talks, and performances among a large number of amateurs. A discursive movement began on issues related to copyright, plagiarism, and sexual harassment in the arts, directly aiming to empower the artist community. Kri Foundation's Arts and the Law webinars, premiering live on YouTube in both English and Bengali languages, is particularly noteworthy. These webinars present a number of topical panel discussion episodes such as: "The Abuse of Power, Harassment, and Sexual Harassment," "The Arts and IPR Protection of Traditional Cultural Expression, Classical, Fine, and Folk Art Forms," "Rights of All Artistes: The LGBTQ+ Artistes," "NDPS Act and Drug Use in the Arts," and "Obscenity in the Arts: Prescriptions and Parameters." There has been an active intervention in the creation of a safe space through closed-door workshops, trainings, online forums, and active vocalization by artists facing marginalization, harassment, and discrimination through the workshop series called UNMUTE, another offering by Kri Foundation and various partners such as beej with Sanjukta Wagh. Wagh's poem, "Why Sometimes the Show Must Not Go On," emerges from a workshop on breaking the silence around a culture of sexual exploitation in January, 2021. Scholars, artists, and activists present a scathing critique of institutional unaccountability, raising a clarion call against all enablers who play a major role in creating a culture where sexual harassment is normalized and where it is extremely easy for the perpetrator to continue their behavior, unchecked. I borrow the timely phrase, "Reboot/Reform/ Respond," from another UNMUTE training on ethics and safe practices in arts practices and environments to identify the promise of the pandemic. Having experienced gendered and sexualized powerplay in my professional life as a performing artist in India, I perceive a seesaw effect—a simultaneous decline in the radical potential of transcending one's ego through *Rasic Intimacy* and raising collective consciousness of what I am glibly referring to as an unmuting of Rasa. For too long, Rasa has been deployed for patriarchal powerplay as Kathak exponent Nisha Mahajan articulates succinctly in a newspaper interview: There was this notion that, in order to be able to present bhaav or abhinaya, if you don't go through certain experiences, it does not work. This was considered a part of the mentorship, of course, informally...There was this aura of hero-worship and personality cult. And not all students were compelled. Either the students gave in, some others who really

wanted to dance were willing to make the compromise. Then there were others who just left." (Khurana 2020)

In closing, I reminisce with Wagh's poem, "Why Sometimes the Show Must Not Go On," to concur and celebrate the UNMUTE-ing of Rasa:

It's not meant for all, they say this thing we call "art"
 this thing we call "art"
 You must be a fighter, they say, and you must be smart
 and you must be smart
 If you become part of the circle you are in a pact
 you are in a pact
 And if this pact's ever broken
 only you have your back
 only you have your back
 The field is full of competitors ready to pounce
 ready to pounce
 Best to have a godfather or mother to show you around
 to show you around
 How lucky you are to be chosen
 to at last be found
 to at last be found
 Worthy of this grand tradition bow down,
 kiss the ground bow down kiss the ground
 We must break you to make you they exclaimed and
 them you believed
 and them you believed
 A few pushes, wounds, and heartbreaks
 are all part of the deal
 are all part of the deal
 Your generation has had it easy,
 they said the things we endured
 the things we endured
 Without a sound, a cry, even a whimper towards the
 larger goal
 towards the larger goal
 Zip up now child and smile wide
 to be seen in the herd
 to be seen in the herd
 Now swallow those pills with your pride your fears and
 your tears
 your fears and your tears
 You sense your health and self shrinking, but the
 spotlight is on
 This is hardly the "art" you had dreamed of but the show
 must go on

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CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

INTERSECTIONS AND INTERSTICES: DANCE AND CENSORSHIP

The international journal of *South Asian Dance Intersections* is a progressive, scholarly, blind peer-reviewed, and digitally available 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 aims to bring together emerging and established voices in the field to carry forward pressing areas of discourse. Its focus remains on South Asian dance and its many intersections with a wide a range of areas, disciplines, cartographies, communities, and populations to present the field via a new integrated wholesomeness. Featuring the writings of iconic, established, and emerging scholars and stimulate ongoing debate and discourse, this journal seeks to capture the hitherto ignored, vernacular, neglected, languishing, and quieter voices, presenting them in an inclusive, decolonised, and self-affirming frame. 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 through photographic representation and capture.

The second volume is themed around the issue of censorship in dance and will include invited and openly sourced articles, interviews, book reviews, performance reviews, screendance reviews, and photographs. As a digital-only platform, it will include seminal performance excerpts as well, all of which will go through double-blind peer review and selection process. The range of contributions should aim at indicating theoretical, performative, and/ or activist intersections and interstices in South Asian dance. The contributions may hail from all geopolitical contexts where South Asian dance or its variants are practiced, nurtured, or consumed. All images, photographs or footages included, including personal, archival, performance, film, television and “found” footage, must be covered by the terms of copyright as covered in the journal’s ‘Terms of Copyright’ document.

Areas of interest for this call include but are not limited to:

1. Censorship in dance and life
2. Political and activist embodiment
3. Questioning epistemic violence on the dancing body
4. Situated epistemologies decolonizing dance
5. Performative approaches in stand-alone geographies and linkages erasing borders as praxis
6. Performative approaches in stand-alone geographies and linkages erasing borders as activism
7. Performative approaches in stand-alone geographies and linkages erasing borders as pedagogy

Final deadline: January 31, 2023.

Accepted formats:

1. Reflections on curated works (approx length: <1500 words)
2. Rolling submissions (theoretical reflections, poetic writing, autoethnographic notes) (approx length: <8000 words)
3. Media works on dance

Inquiries and submissions: Kaustavi Sarkar (ksarkar@uncc.edu).