SADI
SOUTH ASIAN DANCE INTERSECTIONS

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MISSION

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

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

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Cover Photo: Dr. Sudesh Mantillake "In Search of Ravana"
Photo credit: Gayan Rajapaksha

Editorial: South Asian Dance Intersections

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

The lengthy process of crafting a new issue is a humbling one. To see the enthusiasm of our scholarly collaborators, the rigorous research manifest in their submissions, often undertaken in insalubrious conditions, the new ideas that their work generates not only offers an energizing mosaic of intellectual engagement but also offers an instant corrective to any intellectual complacency that may have crept in. It reminds me. The interesting ways in which these fertile minds join the dots, the new equations that they uncover, the unknown areas that they shine a torch on, and the ways in which they highlight practices old and new that would remain invisible without their efforts: these are the rewards of the yearlong labor involved in bringing out the next issue of SADI. It is with *Shukrana* or gratitude that I pen this editorial.

Writing is a privilege. In today's world of constraints and restraints on speech, text, and action, compounded by the avalanche of opinions on social media, and the incubus of the ever-looming threat of trolling, it is a privilege to be able to think critically, engage in discourse and express freely, as encouraged on this forum. But, as Allama Iqbal stated in his poem 'Shiqva:' "Humnava, Mein Bhi Koi Gul Hoon Ki Khamosh Rahoon?" Or, in my translation: "O friend, am I a but a flower, to remain silent?". In this edition of SADI, we welcome the multitude of voices that inhabit its pages, which refuse to remain *Khamost* (silent and muted) about those aspects of dance and its ecosphere, which are important and dear to them. We insist that such expression is a human right, not a privilege and are delighted to present the largest number of voices since SADI's inception.

In far too many parts of the world even the act of dance, *Nach* or *Raqs*, is banned outright. Where permitted it is often stigmatized as evidenced by recent comments by politicians as part of political jousting. Even the Indian Prime Minister has not hesitated to refer to dance, especially *Mujra*, a traditional way of showcasing dance that required great artistry, in pejorative terms. Much of the stigma emerges from the belief that dance is intrinsically sexualized, that it is gendered, and that it threatens masculinity. This pejorative projection belies that dance and politics are *singular domains* in vogue with Jacques Ranciere's *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (2010). It is clearly evident that politics has exerted a negative power on dance, trivializing it in the domain of politics. This it does with scant respect for the unparallelled spiritual, transformative, and creative power of dance Today, when democracy is threatened globally and constitutional forms of governance are increasingly paralyzed, the healing, creative, and transformative power of the arts offers a critical avenue towards recovery.

Jacqui M. Alexander's interdisciplinary anthology of essays *Pedagogies of Crossings: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memories and the Sacred* (2005) served as the inspiration for this issue. The book was a startling revelation and its prognoses and issues continue to be extremely relevant even two decades later. Particularly significant is its urgent call to intervene in, interrupt, and interrogate the multiple sources and locations where knowledge is produced. Equally persuasive is the argument that no single crossing is sufficient to the ontological imperative of making the world intelligible to us. Consequently, crossings are never linear, neat, predictable or even familiar; instead, they demand repeated interrogation. But that is alright. As poet Walt Whitman asks in the poem

'Song of myself:' "Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself; I am large, I contain multitudes." Dance studies definitely contain multitudes of epistemologies, and worlds!

As if reflecting this fact, this issue of SADI brings to you fourteen essays and articles, the largest we have ever included in a single issue. Half of these essays speak directly to the themed section, while the rest are part of rolling submissions to the journal. Each article is augmented by visual media referencing powerful dance moments, digitally via photographs or video clips, allowing readers to experience dance directly as they read.

I would like to begin discussing this edition—that we subtitle 'Ephemeral Crossings'—with Feriyal Amal Aslam's "Spiritual Ecology of my Bharata Natyam Dance: A Peacebuilder's Reflections on her Guru's Pedagogies of Crossing." This is Feriyal's second piece to be selected for SADI and, in effect, presents the second part of her two-decade long reflexive journey of her own dance practice, body and spiritual path, aligning thereby with SADI's efforts to make visible subordinated knowledge that remained unarticulated and marginalized at the confluence of multiple sites of power. It not only highlights a pioneering dance scholarship project for Pakistan, but also showcases an ongoing process of the mindful dispersal of interfaith harmony and peace-building via deeper connection to the lands in its new home in Nusantara, Indonesia.

One of the most interesting crossings is effectively taking a step from the dark unknown on to the limelight of the stage. In a photo essay "Gone in a Breath: A Visual Ode to Unnoticed Dance Devotion," retired Bharatanatyam dancer turned photographer, Asif Musaddeque pays tribute to artists whose passion and commitment endures in the face of anonymity, neglect, and hardship, shedding light on the finesse, raw beauty, and perseverance that thrives outside and beyond the proscenium. In a culture that glorifies visible success, this photo essay serves as a poignant reminder of the challenges faced by artists, who are further marginalized by insensitive societal norms that deem then as inconsequential.

Continuing with the unpredictable trajectories and crossings of dancers, Siddhi Goel makes a case for lesser-known women dancers of Bombay cinema, in her article titled "Beyond the Holy Trinity of Vyjayanthimala, Waheeda Rahman, and Madhuri Dixit: A Case for Lesser-known Women Dancers of Bombay Cinema," which is part of her ongoing research on the presence of Kathak in Bombay cinema. While acknowledging Kathak's powerful imprint on the film industry and the ecosystem of dancers and choreographers who had trained in Kathak and entered the film industry for work opportunities in a new social and technological setting, she interrogates how the novel category of Bollywood dance, "a combination of Kathak, Bharatnatyam, folk, semi classical and mixed western forms" which engendered a hybrid form "greater than the sum of its parts." She argues that "the glorious tradition of dance in Bombay cinema has been built on the shoulders of not only a few star actresses and choreographers, but on these countless nameless faces of women dancers"….who even if trained in classical forms learnt to "open up their bodies!" Goel explores how the paradigm of who gets forgotten and who is remembered reflects a value system that prioritises certain histories over others.

Sanchita Sharma's piece on the "Crossings between Regional and National Culture" analyzes the work of Imphal-based choreographer, Surjit Nongmeikapam. Manipur is one of the most troubled federal states of the union of India, currently embroiled in what is probably its most intense period of conflict with the national center. An explicit manifestation

of the asymmetrical power between state and center is the Inner Line Permit which serves as a mode of surveillance as it restricts access to the state.. Despite the fact that the state borders of Manipur both frame and serve as center of violence, Nongmeikapam, a member of the Meitei community, has long seen his very presence as a dancer as a political act in Manipur's strife-ridden contexts. The author analyses Nongmeikapam's practice as choreosomatic—described as a "porous system of movement generation and organisation with varied crossings between them…from internal and external, local and global religious and indigenous", but "always in relation and in dialogue with his ethnic and regional context."

Canada-based dancer/choreographer Nova Bhattacharya joined hands with co-dancer and scholar Louis Laberge-Côté to describe both the original process of a collaborative work, and the process of revisiting it, twelve years after its premiere, and nine years after the same bodies last performed it together. Developing alongside their friendship, the piece worked itself out across geographic, cultural, and stylistic borders. Titled "*Akshongay*: Then and Now- Intercultural Artistic Duets and the Relational Practice of Collaboration," it demonstrates a willingness to take risks via a process of experimentation undertaken by Bengali and French-Canadian dancers. Entering the creative-scape with integrity and inhabiting the uncertainty of their trajectory together, become pre-conditions to a long-term collaborative work, the kind that *Akshongay* turned out to be. The passage of time and the inevitability of bodily changes required reassessment and adaptation of movement, while keeping intact the aesthetic of the piece. The layered emotional terrain grappled with the question of how we can coexist despite our differences in a way that is true, responsive and understanding, to their relationship.

Dancing and writing from three different diasporic locations, Leia Devadason, locates her essay "Traditional Dance/Mixed Genealogies: A Study in Diasporic Odissi," at the epicentre of a contested terrain discussing variegated issues around cultural identity, canonical repertoire, conservative codes, resistance to departure from guru lineage, conceptual choreographies, and experiments in "cross-generic couplings that can produce unforeseen hybrids" in a diasporic setting. The author focuses on how Odissi is being stifled by concerns about its identity and its canonical predilections butting heads with a lack of funding. She argues the possibility or escaping "this cyclic bind" if Odissi is approached "from a different staring point, one which is premised upon historicity but radically deprioritises the question of Odissi's non/alignment with its past". This way it could escape the quagmire of "value judgements of tradition, modernity, innovation, dilution, authenticity and hybridity". These arguments are prefaced in the context of a collaborative work, *Devotions* (2021). Produced and created in Singapore when a team of artists choreographed Western classical opera and oratorio songs with Odissi *Abhinaya* (expressional movement), this writing is embedded in the discourse that is growing around performance scholarship in diasporic settings, referencing artist/ scholars Anusha Kedhar's and Aparna Nambiar's work.

A thought-provoking essay by Nandini Sikand, "The Revolution will not be Exhibited" questions the ethics of presenting South Asian dance forms in a museum setting that displays "millions of objects, never destined for display in museal white walls…looted from the world, by different imperial agents." Sikand discusses a moment when during the South Asian month celebrations, the collection of the British Museum, acquired through questionable

means, was marked by a dance performance situated against the immovable heritage objects. The author asks pointedly what it means to sacralize stolen objects with immigrant bodies dancing dances from colonized lands. The economic, cultural, social, and psychological problems of imperialism and colonial injuries is well documented, but the author discusses how this juxtaposition of dance and objects extends the "deprivation of colonial plundering", and what role dance played in the decontextualised setting of the museum. In answer, Sikand takes after Alexander's *crossings* configuring ontological and epistemological pathways.

Under the framework of 'Epic Ecologies,' we include two pieces of writings: Sylvie Belleau's essay "Why Not Theatre's Mahabharata: Storytelling Using Dance as a Prominent Motif," and Maheshwar Kumar's photo-essay, "Dancing for themselves: Ritual celebrations of Chaitra Parva in West Bengal". Trained in Kathakali, Montreal-based performer and storyteller, Sylvie Belleau captures the majesty of the 2023 presentation of Indian epic *Mahabharata*. The author explains how artists of "Why Not Theatre", many of whom are part of the Indian diaspora, belong to a new generation of artists who are questioning their family heritage while seeking to create a theatre in their own image, "rooted both in modernity and in the traditions linked to their origins" explains the author. This involves many forms of storytelling, from ancient traditions of gathering around a fire to share tales, to contemporary methods. The telling of the stories is not restricted to the stage; thus, many stories that do not find place on stage, are shared with the guests while sharing a meal. The many awards won by this production and its sold-out box office records seem to suggest that new ways of telling stories, including a wall made up of screens lined-up on stage, along with the time-tested song and dance, may well be the way forward.

In "Dancing for themselves: Ritual Celebrations of Chaitra Parva in West Bengal," Maheshwar Kumar reflects on the dance festival in writing and photography that aims to visually capture how the *Chaitra Parva* festival embodies rural West Bengal's cultural landscape. It also sheds light on how the rituals and rites that are part of it, accompanied by dance and music, offer people a sense of belongingness while representing a specific cultural identity. In the district of Purulia in West Bengal, in the month of *Chaitra* (April) according to the Bengali calendar, there is a celebration of the continuum of life through rituals, many of which include dance and music, as well as extreme austerities like renunciation and self-mortification. What makes the festival even more significant is that it rejects caste and is celebrated by non-brahmans for the well-being of the community. The writing and the photos reveal an ecology that is relatively unknown and makes a compelling record and narrative of this annual event in a remote corner of India.

In a section on 'Critical pedagogies,' Sriradha Paul's essay titled "Memetic Disruption: How Internet Memes Challenge and Transform Traditional Power Hierarchies in the Guru-Shishya Relationship" addresses the foundational structure of dance pedagogy, including how this engenders abuse of power, including through sexual harassment. Paul then examines how graphic memes function as catalysts within the Indian classical dance community challenging entrenched hierarchies of caste, class, and authority embedded in traditional pedagogical structures. The essay does not advocate that in-person training be eliminated. Instead, it shows how the digital realm challenges the guru's singular role as the primary gatekeeper of knowledge. Also, how memes using humour and visual storytelling, often handle difficult subjects that ordinarily get swept under the carpet. Memes created and circulated by anyone with access to digital platforms, validate lived experiences, foster solidarity among users,

and offer an accessible yet subversive mode of resistance against pedagogical authority. In proposing memes as tools that both contest and reimagine modes of learning and belonging, the author raises a neglected issue, and augments conversations about power relations between gurus and disciples.

Using the example of Kuttiyattam—inscribed as a Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Knowledge by UNESCO in 2001—Ankita Nair's essay interrogates the idea that intergenerational transfer of complex arts continue an archaic, supposedly unchanged, pedagogy. She highlights the way in which various changes have resulted in subtle alterations of the teaching and learning ways over the last few decades, from gender inclusivity, institutionalization of Kuttiyattam training, shortening of training time, standardizing of stylistic differences, and curricular pressures that prevent in-depth training. While the core of traditional Gurukulam training may appear largely unchanged, Nair notes the subtle changes to pedagogy. Kuttiyattam contemporary pedagogical universe includes semi-traditional training and different kinds of peripheral pedagogies with knowledge being transmitted in small packages and capsule formats, almost in a fragmented fashion, including teaching and learning for youth competitions, research papers, and independent theatre-dance productions. The author argues that in the current pedagogical context, Kuttiyattam training is an amalgam or "coming together" of different pedagogies — a departure from the orthodox tradition, yet still rooted in it in some ways."

This edition includes a seminal segment that aims to shine the torch "On the top of the world" and in this we include three essays. Amie Maciszewski's "Dancing Cultural Sustainability at the Top of the World," which inspired the section heading, is about a rarely studied area of Gilgit and Baltistan surrounded by mountain ranges over twenty-one thousand feet high. This essay is part of a larger body of her decade long research on flows of migration—physical, discursive, and digital—of indigenous and its hybridized "modern" performance in Pakistan, including cultural sustainability in the face of climate change and irresponsible development. It looks at a specific ethnographic moment that occurred during fieldwork in the spring of 2024 while documenting a Hunza wedding. As in most South Asian cultures, a wedding is often an encapsulation of the cultural ethos of a community. Among members of the Burushaski community of Hunza, communal celebrations like weddings, comprising traditional music, and lively dance, is an integral part of their lifestyle and identity, of which there are multiple layers. The photos and video enhance the experience of the event that few of us are likely to witness!

The other two essays in this section, include a detailed examination of the past, present, and future of the folk theatre form of Bhand Pathar from Kashmir. The writing of both authors—one who lives in the diaspora and one in its cartographic mapping—confronts precarity and political brutality both from terrorism and the heavy hand of the state. One cannot escape the vision of Agha Shahid Ali's poem "Postcard from Kashmir" and "The Country without a Post office," carrying a memory "a little out of focus," where "the colors are not so brilliant." In a detailed and well-illustrated article titled "Bāṇḍɨ Pə̄thɨr – The Traditional Folk Theatre of Kashmir:: Past, Present and Future," USA-based Sadaf Mushi masterfully paints the subtle nuances of the art as seen over time on a papier mache artefact. Read Sadaf Munshi's piece for a lexicon of the art and as a dictionary for an understanding of the form's origins. His artistic fragility echoes the form's and its surrounding community's vulnerability; akin to papier mache in the rain.

Practicing artist Rayees Wathoori's, "Will the Chinar Smile Again? The Lost Art of a Wounded Valley" throws light on the centrality of dance in the performance of Bhand Pather and the lived travails and upheavals experienced by its current cohort of artists in an environment of violence. "It wasn't just entertainment, it was a way of life, a language of the people" writes the author. Some saw it featured in the film 'Haider.' Few realise that Bhand Jashn was part of Kashmir's rich and now mostly vanished Sufi culture. Performances were held during the Urs celebrations of saints. The author writes evocatively "The colourful traditions that once made our land so special have faded over years. …Violence stole the peace that art needs to grow". He also writes about the dance art of Bacha Naghma. This personal journey offers an inside view of the art and artists. On reading these two essays one realizes that this is not a singular memory framed in one crucible of a single mind. Rather it is multiple memories borne in many memories of those who migrated, those who continue to live there, and those who have merely visited and still have loved the Kashmir of yore. Powerfully, Wathoori writes "Art cannot grow in fear. Joy cannot bloom in mourning." Working close to the ground with the community, Wathoori brings an intimacy to his writing palette while pushing forth the idea of newer themes for old practices.

Our next issue will be a special issue edited by SADI board member Dr. Yashoda Thakore. Dr. Thakore is an accomplished practitioner of Kuchipudi and Devadasi Nrityam, and a brilliant scholar who has authored "Kaivalya: Joy in Yoga and Dance" and co-translated the significant thirteenth century text *Nritya Ratnavali*. The call for papers for this special issue is called *Marginalized Voices and Histories* that can be found at the end of the journal.

No issue is possible without the yearlong labor of a large group of scholars, academics, faculty, and administrative and technical specialists, who work in the spirit of giving back to the domain and investing in the future of dance discourses. I would fail in my duties if I do not thank particularly the board of SADI, a group of distinguished and incisive scholars of dance and South Asian studies, practitioners and activists of the domain located in the South Asian region, its diaspora and at prominent universities, globally. Many of them have offered their thoughts, ideas, and expertise to grow the journal and take time to mentor younger authors to develop and support the next generation of scholars. I want to thank the faculty at the Departments of Dance and History, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, for their continued support to this initiative to foreground the voices of South Asian Dance and its intersections. My deepest gratitude specifically to Wendy Fishman, Savannah Lake, Ritika Prasad, and Gretchen Alterowitz who have believed in the importance of this effort when it was just a dream for the team. SADI believes most strongly in intergenerational groups, a bit like South Asian family structures. The efficiency with which our younger colleagues help in holding the digital edifice of every edition, including this one, is indeed praiseworthy. Specific thanks go out to Dr. Rohini Acharya for her single-handed efforts on leading production and design. Finally, a shout out to Professor Kaustavi Sarkar of UNC Charlotte Dance who first floated the idea and who continues to burn the midnight oil to keep it on an upward turn, manage the daily grind, and fight any fires that may arise. SADI is finally ready to invest in another five-year strategic plan as we have accomplished with panache the first five years. This is the most diverse edition yet.

Happy reading!

Arshiya Sethi (PhD)
Editor-In-Chief
South Asian Dance Intersections

Dancing Cultural Sustainability at the Top of the World: A Hunza Wedding

Amelia Maciszewski

Abstract:

This brief article is part of a larger body of my research since 2016 on flows of migration--physical, discursive, and digital—of indigenous (and its hybridized "modern") performance in Pakistan, a most timely part of which is cultural sustainability in the face of climate change and irresponsible development. Here, I look at a specific ethnographic moment during my fieldwork in the spring of 2024, in Gilgit-Baltistan. This moment documents a Hunza wedding joining two prominent families residing in the provincial capital of Gilgit. As in most South Asian cultures, a wedding is often an encapsulation of the cultural ethos of a community. It is clearly apparent among members of the Burushaski community of Hunza, for whom communal celebration, comprising plenty of good food, live upbeat traditional music, and lively dance, is an integral part of their lifestyle and identity, of which there are multiple layers.

Hunza - A Contextual Snapshot

The remote, breathtaking Hunza Valley in northern Pakistan's Gilgit-Baltistan administrative territory borders China's Xinjiang province to the east and northeast, Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkwa province to the west, Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor to the north, Azad Kashmir to the south, and the Indian-administered territories of Jammu-Kashmir and Ladakh to the southeast. It has been invaded, occupied, settled since ancient times by diverse people, including Indic, Persian, Tibetan, Ladakhi, Turkic, Kashmiri, and the Mughal. Before the British annexed Hunza in 1891, it was an independent kingdom governed by hereditary autocratic rulers known as Thum in the local vernacular, or Mir in Persian. Upon annexation, the British made Hunza and the neighboring kingdoms Nagar, Gilgit, Skardu, Yaseen, Astor, and Chitral part of their Gilgit Agency, administered under the Jammu and Kashmir states but given full internal autonomy.[1] Following the partition of India and Pakistan, in 1948, the region was included in the area referred to as "Pakistan Administered Kashmir." In 1970, Gilgit-Baltistan became a separate administrative unit called "Northern Areas," an amalgamation of the former Gilgit Agency, Baltistan district, and the above-mentioned princely states, the largest of which are Hunza and Nagar.[2] The region was renamed Gilgit-Baltistan in 2009 and granted "limited autonomy." Hunza sits surrounded by the convergence of the towering peaks of the Hindu Kush, Karakoram, and Himalayan Mountain ranges; at least fifty-five of its peaks are over seven thousand meters (twenty-one thousand feet) in altitude. Its inhabitants, collectively known as Hunzakuts, are internationally renowned for their robustness and longevity, and, beginning in the late 1970s, their increasingly high literacy rate (currently 90%+), empowerment of women, and astute, intersectional engagement with international development. Gilgit-Baltistan, including Hunza, was very isolated from mainland Pakistan until the mid-1970s, when the Karakoram Highway was built, linking the region with lower Pakistan. While most of Hunza's inhabitants claim Burushaski, a language isolate, as their mother tongue, there are various other languages spoken in the valley: Wakhi, Shina, Balti, Kuar, and Domaki. Almost all Burushin

1 Sidky, M.H.,1994, "Shamans and Mountain Spirits in Hunza." In *Asian Folklore Studies*, Vol. 53: 67-96.
2 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gilgit-Baltistan

(Burushaski speakers) follow the Ismaili sect of Islam, while inhabitants of neighboring valleys tend to follow Shi'a Islam.

Oral and written sources offer contradictory information about when and from where Islam came to the Hunzakuts. Local tradition maintains that Shi'a Islam arrived in Hunza in the fourteenth century, when Ayasho, Thum (king) of Hunza, married the daughter of the King of Baltistan. There are narratives of Shia immortals, called Akhund, arriving in Hunza from Baltistan to disseminate the Asnahashari (Shia) religion.[3] According to other sources, Shia missionaries brought the sect from Baltistan and Kashmir in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[4] The Hunzakut converted to Ismailism, a Shia sect, in the late eighteenth-early nineteenth century, during the reign of Mir Silum Khan (1790-1824), or alternately, "during the fifteenth year of Mir Ghazanfar Khan (1824-1865).[5] Prior to Islam, the Hunza held diverse shamanistic and polytheistic beliefs and practices. Under the Islamic hegemony this rich indigenous knowledge has been stifled, either erased from sociocultural memory or minimized as quaint folklore. I will refer to this point later in the essay, pointing out how it still exists in performance practice.

Hunza Music and Performance Practice

The Hunza musical and performance practice consists of a lively, distinct blend of South and central Asian, Persian, pre-Islamic, and Ismaili Islamic elements. The iconic indigenous music of Hunza is Hareep—loud, upbeat celebratory instrumental music performed by ensembles. Ensembles consist of Dadang, a double-ended drum made of juniper wood and played with sticks; Dhamal, a pair of small metal kettle drums also played with sticks; and Surnai, a reed horn (shawm) made of apricot wood. Hareep music is so iconic of Hunza Valley that it is said people of all ages are unable to sit or stand still but are compelled to dance their version of the Sufi Raks (whirling dance) when they hear it.[6] Moreover, Hareep drumming, similar to other indigenous drumming traditions around the world, incorporates distinctly choreographed hand and arm gestures during its performance.

The rulers, or Mirs, of the princely states Hunza, Nagar, and Gilgit, were the principal patrons of Hareep music. In Hunza, the Mir family held direct rule until the 1970s, inhabiting the palaces of Altit and Baltit, one thousand and eight hundred years old, respectively. A Mir would have his court musicians create special rhythms, Dani-s, to honor an individual with whom he was especially pleased. Each specific Dani would bear the name of the individual being recognized or rewarded. Then people would dance in celebration as the Dani was played. Thus, a specific Dani came to be associated with a particular dance, to be performed by generally "prominent" people, not by the musicians. Each Dani came to be associated with a different clan and was connected to a historic event from which it was traced.[7] A Dani was also played and danced at occasions like weddings or festivals, spotlighted here. A Dani could also be associated with a famous love story, often named after its heroine. In former times, Dani-s followed the Mir's activities, like a polo match, to mark parts of the game: beginning, end, a goal made, a player's fall, etc.[8]

The traditional ensembles that played Hareep

3 Sidky, *op.cit.* p. 71
4 Staley, 1969, p.230, in Sidky, *ibid*.
5 Sidky, *ibid*.
6 Arieb Azhar, 2024, Sur Mein Rahe Video Blog
7 Personal Communication, Mujeeb ul-Rehman, July 2024.
8 Azhar, *ibid*., Willson, Stephen R., 1999: *A Look At Hunza Culture*.

music mostly belonged to the Bericho community, referred to in Burushaski as Bericho and in Shina, Domaki. In Hunza, they reside in the village of Mominabad (formerly known as Berishal), a short distance down the mountain from Altit, mentioned above. Although at the time of the Mirs' dynasties, the Bericho musicians were steadily employed in the royal court and valued for their musical work, they held an inferior position in society. At one point, Bericho were not allowed to speak their native language, Domaki, in the courts. Despite enduring discrimination and injustice, Bericho musicians remained the keepers of Hareep music, performing it at most occasions, both public and private. In addition to performing Hareep music, the Bericho were also master craftsmen who worked both as blacksmiths and instrument makers. Specific clans of Bericho specialized in crafting each type of instrument: Dadang, Damal, and Surnai.

By the 1980s, because of the lack of financial sustainability, Bericho musicians began leaving their profession to seek other means of earnings, so that the tradition almost disappeared, with only one group remaining in Hunza and one in Nagar. But in the 1990s, when His Highness the Aga Khan (the spiritual leader of the Ismaili community) visited Hunza and heard Hareep music for the first time, he decreed that this ancient music must be preserved. From that time, a revival began, which continues today. Hunza's Mir Ghazanfar Sahab was very involved in this revival. He is a member of the Aga Khan Historical Trust, Aga Khan Cultural Services, and Aga Khan National Council, who have been very involved in the revival of Hunza's traditional music and culture. In addition, in the early 2000s, the Karakoram Area Development Organization (KADO) launched an extensive upliftment project called Qasb-e-Kamal, focusing on young musicians belonging to the Bericho tribe, training them in their music, culture, and language.

Another initiative, currently viable and rapidly growing, is the Leif Larsen Music Centre (LLMC) in Altit, located in the royal gardens below the Altit Fort/Palace, a community institution opened around 2014, dedicated to promoting and preserving the traditional music of Gilgit-Baltistan. LLMC is mainly supported by the Aga Khan Cultural Services Program (AKCSP). Approximately sixty-five individuals aged nine to twenty-five, both boys and girls, attend and learn music there. Some of them go on to perform locally, nationally, and internationally. This is my main field site. LLMC's principal tutor, Mujeeb ur-Rehman, in his early thirties, is an astute, talented musician, educator, mountaineer, and cultural activist. He and his family hosted me in their home in nearby Aliabad during my entire stay in Hunza. I write about the work of LLMC in detail and issues of Hunza music and cultural sustainability in the face of climate change in a recent article.[9]

A Burusho Wedding in Gilgit

In addition to my work as participant (guest instructor)/ observer at LLMC, I was invited to attend two days of a three-day-long wedding of ur-Rehman's family friend's/co--musician's cousin in the provincial capital Gilgit. As an honorary family member on the groom's side of the wedding festivities, ur-Rehman played an important role in facilitating the organization of the musicians at the wedding. The musicians included the core Hareep ensemble, whose instrumentation consisted of the above-mentioned Dadang (barrel drum played with curved sticks or hands), Dhamal (a pair of small kettle drums played with straight sticks), and

9 Paramashivan and Maciszewski in LaRue and Romero. Routledge: 2025, forthcoming.

one, sometimes two or three Surnai (shawm). There is no singing in traditional Hareep music; it is only instrumental music, very often accompanying dance.

Despite the prominent socioeconomic positions of both families, the décor, although attractive and festive, was not particularly lavish by Indo-Pakistani standards—typical of the Hunza people's ethos of communality and simplicity. In traditional Burushaski style, a professional Hareep music ensemble played multiple Hareep-s, mostly in Botahri style (for entertainment at festivals), from around 5:00 pm, greeting the groom's party as they arrived at the bride's home, and then leading the bride, groom, and guests into the large tent that served as the reception hall. The musicians would continue throughout the night, until 4:00 am, only taking short breaks. Guests danced throughout, starting with men only at the bride's venue, dancing with the groom and separately to honor the new couple. (Video - Bride and Groom Arrive) After sunset, the wedding party, together with the musicians' ensemble, moved to the groom's home, welcoming the bride to her Sasural, her new home that she would share with her husband and his family. There, later into the night, besides boys and men of all ages, young women and men (mostly extended family of the groom), a few mature women, and children of various ages danced in circling groups to non-Hareep, mostly Hunza, and contemporary repertoire. In one distinctive case, a solo elder woman interpreted a very special Hareep.

Dancing to the Hareep or Dani

Giratas refers to "dance." Depending on which Hareep or Dani, the Giratas is performed with varying degrees of individual creativity. In some cases, the "choreography" is set and no variation is allowed. Moreover, certain songs (Dani) can only be danced to by certain people. Generally, one, sometimes two men begin a dance, quickly followed by as many as ten others, usually friends or relatives. They dance together in a wide circle. They strike a pose by raising one heel slowly off the ground and lifting their arms and hands to face level. They continue with a sort of hopping step that is surprisingly fluid. They pause at the end of a sequence of gestures (ideally coordinated with a rhythmic phrase), striking the beginning pose again, awaiting audience reaction.[10] (Video-Giratas)

The rhythmically prominent Hareep can change frequently, as one phrase transforms into another. The short pauses between phrases indicate that the Hareep or rhythm is about to change into something else. Different Hareep or Dani have different choreographic sequences, emphasizing the shift. The dancer's steps reflect the coordination between them and the musicians and the spectators. Through movement of their eyes, eyebrows, and hand gestures, and certain body movements, a dancer communicates to the musicians what tune or rhythm the musicians should play; where they should pause, speed up, or slow down; where they should change the tune; where they should change the dynamics, etc. In addition, through their gestures, the dancer communicates to the spectators their identity and mood/ state of mind (including trance).[11]

If a dancer wants the musicians to play a particular Hareep, they will communicate the request by means of, for example, a movement of their shoulders, or Zaldelas. At the same time, such movements communicate the dancer's power, bravery—in other words,

10 Willson 1999:110, Sidky 1995:72
11 Sajid Ali, personal communication on WhatsApp, May 20-22, 2025.

masculine bravado. Another important means of nonverbal communication from the dancer to the musicians is through winking, widening the eyes, and rapid raising and lowering of the eyebrows. Referred to as Bershin, this playfully challenging behavior is a favorite means of communication between dancers and musicians, in which one challenges the other to reply using their respective medium (i.e., music or dance).[12] During and after the dance, the dancers frequently approach the musicians, giving them money held in their fists as offerings of gratitude. During the groom's dance, soon after the beginning of the reception, dancers and spectators attached money to the rim of the groom's traditional round Hunza cap, encircling it like a band of feathers surrounding the single peacock's plume attached to the front center of it. (Video - Hareep Dance & Music Communication)

Giratas/Agiratas – Burushaski / Naachna/ Nachaana/Nachwanaa - Hindi-Urdu
Dancing/ Being Made to Dance

In the process of communication between dancers and musicians, the level of skill of each determines who has agency (or control) in the dyad. A skilled dancer *dances/Naachta Hai*. They steer the musicians' performance, indicating which beats to play and how, through their gestures/Deshing, which include the eye and eyebrow movements, hand gestures, shoulder movement, and (sometimes stomp-like) steps. Much of the time they do so in a jousting manner that indicates bravado. The audience members also get involved in the mood and energy created by the *Naachnaa* of this skilled dancer. They respond verbally with shouts and other vocalizations of approval or nonverbally with semiotic gestures and loud claps. Thus "*Naachtaa Hai"* indicates that the dancers are skilled, strong enough to lead the performance. On the other hand, *Agiratas/ Nachaana* or *Naachwaanaa* occurs when the dancer is weak, less skilled, in which case the musicians *make them dance*, leading the dancers in sequences that the dancers must follow as much as they are able.[13]

Rather late on the first evening that I attended, at the groom's home, a mature woman next to whom I had been sitting stood up and began to dance boldly. Her erect posture, mischievous smile, together with eye and eyebrow movements, and strongly executed arm movements and steps, indicated that she was very much in control of the piece, in Giratas. She was flanked by a very young woman who was obviously not familiar with the specific traditional dance that her elder was performing. She led the musicians through a section of a Hareep known as "Shireen Zabaan" in a rhythm called "Tajwaar." "Shireen Zabaan" is a popular Hareep in the repertoire of the Bitan, or shamans, people possessing special powers such as, direct communication with the fairies inhabiting the mountains. Although not a shaman herself, the dancer's steps, raising the feet high as if climbing a mountain, and gestures, pointing towards the mountains, asking to be connected with the fairies, identified this dance as part of the Bitan's repertoire. (See video clip "Hareep Bitan Dance.") The dancer's face has been obscured to protect her privacy. Normally, this dance can be done simply for entertainment, as in this case, but if a shaman performs it, its meaning and intention change to connect with the fairies. Significantly, there is no restriction against, or stigma attached to women in Hunza being Bitan. It is considered a "natural" occurrence; there have been several female Bitan documented in nearby town Karimabad,

12 Sajid Ali, personal communication on WhatsApp, May 22, 2025.
13 Ibid.

one of the centers of the Mir dynasties.[14] More information about Bitan can be found in Willson (1999) and Sidky (1995), among others.

Both nights I attended, the music began with the traditional "fife and drum" ensemble, its members performing traditional Hareep repertoire with only men of various ages dancing. As the night went on, they were joined by ur-Rehman on Daph (frame drum) and two Rabab players, the most advanced of the LLMC students, themselves preprofessional level performers and multi-instrumentalists. The Surnai players gradually stopped playing and either left the stage area or shifted to percussion. Finally, a skilled guitarist/vocalist specialized in modern Burushaski and Urdu songs joined in, performing contemporary repertoire. The dancers, too, shifted from mostly men, many of them mature, to considerably younger, mixed-gender groups, whose dance moves reflected a combination of Hunza, Punjabi, and Pashto moves, with even some Bollywood mixed in. The intensity of the drumming decreased, and the woody plucking of rabab began to dominate the soundscape, with the increasingly lyrical melodies such as Bazmi Hareep replacing the driving rhythms.

Although this contemporary repertoire is undoubtedly very popular among youth, I found in my fieldwork that there remains a strong interest in preserving the Hunza Hareep traditions in the context of community events. Such gatherings with live music and dance as an integral part exemplify how music mobilizes community in a layered, intricate manner, across generations and social groups, reinforcing, not always without contradiction, connection and identity—cultural sustainability--in the face of change.

14 Mujeeb ur-Rehman, personal communication through Whatsapp, May 27, 2025.

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Bāṇḍɨ Pəthɨr – The Traditional Folk Theatre of Kashmir
Past, Present and Future

Sadaf Munshi

Bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr [bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr] 'a play of the Bāṇḍs' (pronounced as such in Kashmiri but often spelt as "Bhand Pather" in the literature, and sometimes also referred to as "Bhand Jashna"), is a centuries old, highly endangered, outdoor theater of Kashmir (see Lawrence 1895:312 and Gargi 1966: 55, 183). *Bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr*, described as a kind of epic drama where the themes and situations are already familiar to the audiences (Aajiz, 2022), traditionally features in annually held Kashmiri festivals called *bāṇḍɨ jeśin* (meaning 'the festival of the Bāṇḍs") and events for honoring Muslim Sufi saints referred to as "Bāṇḍɨ Cōk"; the latter are held at Muslim Sufi shrines such as Ashmuqām (see Raina 2015, Mathur 1964: 14). Typically held in open spaces with large number of audiences and performed by professional troupes belonging to a certain community of Kashmir referred to as "Bāṇḍ" [bāṇḍ] (Singular/Plural) in Kashmiri, a defining feature of the *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* is the art of improvisation.

With its characteristic use of body masks and powerful satire, the tradition resembles the comic improvisatory theatre of Iran (i.e., *ru-hauzi*) and Turkey (i.e., *orta-oyunu*) and the *commedia dell'arte* (meaning 'comedy of the profession') of Europe. The latter is an early form of professional theatre which bears some relation to the character types and plot devices of Hellenistic and Roman comedic theatre, and originated in something close to its present form on the Adriatic coast of present day Italy after the breakup of the multi-ethnic capital of Constantinople in 1453 CE with its bands of Christian and Muslim performers and was popular from the 16th to the 18th century (see Lea 1962). *Bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* is believed to be part of a larger unified tradition of comic theater which extended beyond borders with links to several other similar traditions of South and Central Asia as well as Europe (Beeman, ms.).

This survey paper provides an overview of the status of *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* as a genre of performing arts, the ongoing efforts towards documentation and revival, and the future prospects of this art form. The survey also includes an account of the history and evolution of *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* in Kashmir as well as its historical connections with the ancient Indian dramaturgy and its characteristic features.

Etymology of Important Terminology

The term *bāṇḍ* [bāṇḍ] in Kashmiri, often used pejoratively in colloquial language, refers to a distinct group of folk artists whose primary occupation is singing and acting. The word is comparable to the Sanskrit cognate *bhāṇḍa*, which means 'jester' (Russell and Lal 1975 [1915] 1: 349). The Sanskrit word *bhāṇḍa* is a derivative of *bhāṇa* -- one of the forms of satirical and realistic dramas, usually a monologue, mentioned in the ancient texts on dramaturgy, denoting "a comic monodrama in which the actor plays many parts" (see Raghavan 1981: 40-41; quoted from Emigh & Emigh 1996; cf. Skt. **bhāna* 'speech', Pa. *bhāṇa* 'recitation of scripture' (see Turner, 1962-1966: 537). The word *pəthɨr* meaning 'a spectacle, scene or drama' in Kashmiri is a cognate of Sanskrit *pātra* 'an actor, a dramatis persona' (see Gargi 1966: 55).[1] The Kashmiri word *cōk* in "Bāṇḍɨ Cōk" is a cognate of Sanskrit *ćauka* 'square'

1 Interestingly enough the English word "band" also refers to a 'group of musicians' (among other meanings). It finds its first use in 1660's, referring to 'a company of musicians (attached to a regiment of the army)' and playing instruments which were used while marching (see Oxford English Dictionary for more).

(cf. Hindi *ćauk* 'square'). The term used for the 'joker' in the *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* tradition is *maskharɨ* and *maskhari* means '(the act of) jesting.' Other common terms used in the repertoire are: *hazɨl* 'mockery', *mazāk* 'joke (n.); joking', *ṭasnɨ* 'sarcasm.' The origin of some of these terms can be traced back to Persian and/or Arabic (cf. Per. *masxara* 'buffoon, clown', *tamasxar* 'mockery, ridicule,' Urdu *mazāq* 'joke (n.),' and Arabic *mazāh* '(act of) joking'), and must have become part of the Kashmiri vocabulary, and especially of the repertoire of the Bāṇḍs, owing to the Persian linguistic and cultural influence on the Kashmiri language (see Zutshi 2004).[2]

Background

In his 1895 book *The Valley of Kashmir*, Walter Lawrence gives an account of the various races and tribes of Kashmir, describing the Bāṇḍs that he encountered in the Akingam (Akangám) village of Kashmir in the following excerpt:

"The minstrels of Kashmir (*Bhaggat* or *Bánd*) can be recognized by their long black hair and stroller mien……With the curious exception of the Akangám company, which is formed of Pandits, the Bhaggats are all Musalmáns. They are much in request at marriage feasts, and at harvest times they move about the country……Their orchestra usually consists of four fiddles with the drum in the centre, or of clarionets and drums, but the company often contains twenty members or more…...Their acting is excellent and their songs are often very pretty….They are clever at improvisations and are fearless as to its results. They have songs in Kashmiri, Persian and Panjabi, but the Kashmiri songs are the only ones I have heard. The story of Akangám Bhaggats is peculiar. Brahmans considered acting to be degrading, and even now the Brahmans of Kashmir regard the Akangám players with contempt. But the Brahman players say they took to the stage by the express order of the goddess Devi."

Lawrence (1895: 312-313)

In a 1946 account of a *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* (play) which took place in a village called Drugmulla located at about 50 miles drive from Srinagar on an unmetalled road, Mary Margaret Kak, an English lady married to a local Kashmiri, writes in a hand-written letter:

"In the evening after dark a party of mummers came…….. Here it all was – a large loose semi-circle of people all coming and going without any marshalling or art. On one side a huge fire of pine logs, leaping and blazing, and standing around, forest guards holding brands of blazing pine wood. Above, the dark sky and the stars. Behind an amphitheater of mountains. The players are all men, and boys who take the women's parts. Their stage properties look as though they have seen better days, but they serve their purpose, and you see the great king and the ladies of the harem and the sturdy beggars who do the horseplay. The incidents are traditional and often, I imagine very much debased. The band is drums and pipes very shrill and crude. When they drop into dialogue the fun begins. ……. There is the usual horseplay – the sturdy beggar soundly and very noisily thrashed with a tremendous, long whip that explodes like a pistol and yet leaves him quite unperturbed. The charm is that apparently anyone can do anything they like and everything is there – song, drama, farce, comedy, dancing, chaos – but chaos pregnant with every potentiality!"

Excerpt from the original letter by Mary Margaret Kak (Oct. 25, 1946)

The performance was a satirical piece called

2 Note also that the Kashmiri word *sāng* meaning '(a fake) spectacle' or 'drama', could be traced back to Sanskrit *samānga* (lit. 'a similar body' which also referred to 'mimicking' or 'drama'(cf. Hindi *swāng*).

angrez pəṯhɨr 'the play of the Englishman' which "makes fun of English couples staying in guest houses" with their local servants and illustrates the evolution of new themes and situations over time (see Kak 1980). From this account, one can discern that the performers were not an affluent community but one with little means. For many years, the art form continued to survive in various parts of rural Kashmir. However, as the Kashmiri society raced towards progress and prosperity, the Bāṇḍs of Kashmir slowly entered a life of oblivion in a race against the stigma presented by a robust social hierarchy that kept the community at the lower rungs of the Kashmiri society. From the early 1990's, when Kashmir entered an era of continuing unrest and a strong influence of fundamentalist Islam, the oral tradition, viz., *bāṇḍɨ pəṯhɨr,* which the Bāṇḍs had inherited from their ancestors as an art form and a means of their living, entered a phase of an abrupt decline. Amidst constant political disturbances and continuing militant threats against involvement in any "un-Islamic activities," public performances of this dying art form became no less than a life-threatening activity. Musical instruments had to be either destroyed or hidden as the struggle for alternatives continued.

After almost a decade of inactivity owing to political tension and threats, attempts towards the documentation, revival, and revitalization of the tradition of the *bāṇḍɨ pəṯhɨr* started in 1999-2000. Noteworthy among these was an intervention by M K Raina, a theater director and cultural activist. Raina's family had left Kashmir in the 1990s with many other Kashmiri Pandits owing to political tension. Raina's efforts have found their place within the tragically contested social parameters of Kashmiri life, navigating between fundamentalist Islam on the one hand and state repression on the other.

Recalling the journey of his documentation and revitalization efforts in his memoir "Before I Forget," Raina writes:

> "The last time I had met them in their villages their economic condition had not been good. They had not performed for years and had had to hide their instruments. It was as if the community had melted away into oblivion."
>
> Raina (2024: 316)

The Bāṇḍs of Kashmir: Past, Present and Future

The Bāṇḍs of Kashmir form a distinct and tightly knit social group traditionally devoted to the profession of singing and acting. The current total population is estimated to be about 53,000 with roughly around 6000 families in different villages across Kashmir valley (Manzoor Ahmad Mir, p.c.).[3] While there are references suggesting both Muslim and Hindu Bhands (see Lawrence 1895: 312-313), the professional entertainers of contemporary Kashmir are typically Muslims. Although their primary religion is Sunni Islam, they are heavily invested in the Sufi saints of Kashmir and believe in the tradition of *Rishut* (the Rishi tradition of Kashmir). Each group has their own (Sufi) *pīr* (saint) (see Raina, 2015). During special occasions, they sing and dance all night (*shab*) performing what is called the *sufi sama*. The Bāṇḍs live on the periphery of their villages and form a socially stereotyped community who have often had to rely on door-to-door solicitations for sustenance owing to the social stigma associated with the performance. Traveling from one end of the Kashmir valley to another, the Bāṇḍs depict, in their dramas, the

3 Manzoor Ahmad Mir is an active theater director and artist belonging to the Bhand community of Kashmir. Mir has collaborated with M K Raina over many years on different projects.

village life in its most intrinsic nature. The acts are interspersed with a composite of historical legends and contemporary social criticisms.

In the older times, *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* used to be a full-time occupation for the Bāṇḍs. During most of the summer, the Bāṇḍs would make performances in Kashmir, and during the winter times, they would carry their costumes, instruments, personal items and other paraphernalia on their backs and travel, mostly on foot, to the plains of Jammu, Punjab and other places of the undivided India (see Kak 1981). This tour would take about six months to complete before they returned to their families in Kashmir. This practice, however, stopped over time and the Bāṇḍs found themselves restricted to perform only locally.

About twenty troupes were active in Kashmir in the late 1970s or early 1980s. During Kak's visit in 1979-1980, there were about twenty key centers represented by some 75 villages across Kashmir. It was a robust, vital, and a very popular and entertaining form of outdoor drama which continued to survive despite all odds. One of the most outstanding groups during this time fighting a rearguard action to preserve the art in its authentic form was Mohammed Subhan Bhagat's *Kashmir Bhagat Theatre* at Akingam as featured in Kak's documentary film (1981). Attempts by local performing artists elsewhere such as Ghulam Mohi-ud-din Aajiz (a senior member of the Bāṇḍ community with expertise on classical *sufiyāna* music and president of the National Bhand Theatre Wathora) have also contributed to the revival of the art form (Shahejahat Bhagat, p.c.).

Over the course of the last few decades, however, the Bāṇḍs of Kashmir seemed to have largely vanished from the public eye and many of them have shifted to other types of occupation. The number of active performing groups drastically reduced primarily due to the stigma associated with this occupation and modernization and significantly quickly due to the impact of militancy and militant threats. The militants, whose political ideology was primarily based in the religion (Islam), saw this secular tradition as a threat, and consequently attempted to impose strict restrictions on many cultural activities in Kashmir, which included *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr*. Currently there are just about three key active centers in Kashmir where *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* is performed, viz., Wathora, Akingam and Bomai. Wathora is a village situated in the Chadoora Block of district Badgam; Akingam is a village situated in South Kashmir in the Anantnag district; and Bomai is one of the largest villages in the Sopore district.

The current state of affairs in relation to the Bāṇḍs is grim. In absence of active institutional support, the number of trained performers has significantly dwindled over many years. Owing to the stigma associated with the occupation and the community, many Bāṇḍs have opted to shift to other means of living. With little institutional support, few means of sustenance, and the continuing social stigma associated with the performance as well as with this underprivileged community, breaking the stereotypes is a major challenge. There is an imminent threat of the loss of this ages-old oral tradition which can only be addressed by intensive long-term efforts towards documentation, preservation, revival and revitalization. This can be achieved through a multi-prong approach which includes a long-term program aimed at and employing education, training and innovation to address both the theoretical as well as the applied aspects of *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* as an art form.

Contemporary Research

Contemporary research on the history and origin of *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* as a folk-art form is

scant. In the early 1980's, anthropologists and theatre specialists on folk theatrical traditions of South and Southwest Asia, began their studies on this topic. These researchers looked at evidence pointing to a unified comedic improvisatory tradition in the region. Some noteworthy publications include Awasthi (1974), Mathur (1964), Kak (1981), and Aajiz (2022). Most of these studies are far from being comprehensive and are inadequate in addressing the larger goals of a historical study. An unpublished manuscript by William Beeman (1980) attempts to draw similarities between the "semi-improvisatory" nature of *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* and the *bhavai* theater of Gujarat. Both, Beeman argues, bear a close relationship to the concerns of the patrons they serve. There are also structural similarities as far as the principal satirical devices used and the process of the performance in achieving a comic effect are concerned (*ibid*.).

A documentary film titled "The Bhands of Kashmir", directed by Siddharth Kak (1981), was the first media production on the tradition. The film is a 35-minute video recording which gives a concise overview of the performance with live demonstrations accompanied by a commentary in English. Scenes from a fairly peaceful period of Kashmir are seen, with large gatherings of people thronging amidst a festive mood to witness a performance in a village located only a few kilometers away from the bustling summer capital of Jammu & Kashmir – Srinagar. This was a time when folk theatre was flourishing and perhaps at its peak in Kashmir's rural areas albeit sort of concealed away from the busy urban life.

A proposal by Siddharth Kak in collaboration with William Beeman to provide the first comprehensive interpretation of "Bhand Pather '' was submitted to and approved (in principle though never implemented in action) by Earthwatch in 1988. The project had two major aims: 1) to study Bāṇḍ Pəthɨr as a performance form of India which tells us a great deal about the functioning of comedy and the role of performance in the everyday life of traditional society; and 2) to establish the (historical) connections which link *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* to other performance traditions in South and Southwest Asia, and perhaps even to the comic theatrical traditions of Europe. However, with the onset of the armed insurgency and continuing political turbulence in Kashmir from 1989 onwards, the project was stalled prior to its launch.

With continuing militant threats and warnings against artistic performances and cultural activities, for many years Bāṇḍs suffered enormously and lived a life of invisibility, holding a low profile as the oral tradition was close to its decline amidst constant political disturbances. It was a time when most cultural and artistic activities were either put to a halt or saw a significant decrease in frequency as well as participation, a time when curfews were common in Kashmir and the city of Srinagar would often shut down for activity by the afternoon. In these circumstances, the Bāṇḍs simply could not perform, and in fact, in many cases, they even had to hide their musical instruments.

Documentation and Revitalization Efforts

Although they had been barred from performing *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* for a long period, there has been an enormous degree of enthusiasm towards its revival in the community members who had greatly suffered over the years. In 1999-2000, Raina embarked upon an academic and aesthetic project with an objective to "investigate the many aspects of the form – the use of space, acting styles, musical elements, costumes and crafts," (see Raina 2024: 316). Several meetings with community members led to a new endeavor with an objective to help

re-build the *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* theater. A series of capacity building efforts and workshops were to follow which aimed at revisiting, reviving/ revitalizing and reproducing some of the old and forgotten plays. A six-week training workshop had initially been conducted by Raina in 1982 at Akingam.

Earlier, in 1992, during the height of militancy and political tension in Kashmir, Raina had invited a team of Bāṇḍs for a two-month visit to New Delhi which resulted in a performance at the National School of Drama (NSD). The play was written and directed by Motilal Kemmu. The interaction led to a series of additional visits to NSD and tours across the country where the team performed and collaborated with trained mainstream actors from more established theater companies, such as Repertory. In 1997, Raina conducted a festival, "Saffron Field Kings," in New Delhi with the help of the Bāṇḍs of Wathora village. In 2003-2005, Raina worked with the Bāṇḍs on a training program to revive old plays, which culminated into a powerful performance of "King Lear" (Raina, p.c.). This wasn't a cake walk. During the performance, Raina and his team encountered an embittered Islamic militant who threatened the artists and ordered the audiences to leave the scene. However, due to the ardent support of the community members and villagers, who stood guard, the performance continued and so did the revitalization efforts.

King Lear blends the experimental with the traditional performance finding a place within the tragically contested social parameters of Kashmiri life – navigating between fundamentalist Islam on the one hand and the state repression on the other. The adaptation of King Lear and other recent performances serve as a powerful means of cultural revival by creating a social discourse within a once relatively harmonious and now fractured society.

From 2005, Raina started an informal training school for the Bāṇḍ children and youth with the help of the community experts and masters of the tradition. In 2007, Raina held a workshop with the Bhands in Kashmir to assess their status and revive their performances. The workshop was held with grant assistance from the *India Foundation for the Arts* (IFA).[4] This was followed by a detailed proposal for a two-year revival project prepared by Raina for revitalizing the local content, with an adaptation and translation of Shakespeare's King Lear as a new play which was called "Badshah Lear" in the Bhand lexicon. The project was successfully conducted with a grant from IFA Bangalore and led to a renewal of enthusiasm in exploring the art and craft of the *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* theater in Kashmir.

In April 2013, a three-day Festival on Bhand Pather was held at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA) in Delhi under the then ongoing Silver Jubilee Celebrations of the establishment of the IGNCA. Three plays, viz., *gosain pather*, *shikargah pather* and *badshah pather* were performed every evening in the amphitheater of the IGNCA. The plays were performed by the traditional artists of Kashmir. The festival provided an opportunity to scholars and performing artists to experience the academic, historical and cultural perspectives of this endangered art form and explore ways of rescuing and preserving it emphasizing an urgent need to document the dying cultural art forms of the state such as *sufiyāna kalām* and the *vākh* & *shrukh* genres of oral poetic forms.

Assisted by the Bāṇḍs, Raina's intervention received a very positive response from the community members, and more and more

4 See Raina 2024.

Bāṇḍs came forward to participate. The workshops and training sessions focused on both acting style as well as music. Two important documentary films, viz., *Mann Faqiri* (2015) and *Badshah Lear* (2019) resulted from Raina's many years of extensive documentation work. Funded by the Public Service Broadcasting Trust (PSBT), Mann Faqiri focuses on the *sufiyāna* musical traditions of the Bhands and their revival; the film was made possible with the encouraging participation of young women from conservative families participating in the classical training of *sufiyāna kalām*. Badshah Lear documents the progress of the folk theatre workshops, and the trials and tribulations of integrating and improvising the Shakespearean plays into the folk grammar of the *bāṇḍ* tradition.

Another noteworthy attempt on similar lines was made by Dr. Moti Lal Kemmu, an important figure in the contemporary Bhand Theatre movement. With the help of a grant from the Jammu & Kashmir Academy of Art Culture and Languages, a series of three workshops were held by Kemmu in collaboration with Natrang Theatre in 2011, 2012 and 2015 in which new themes were introduced for the folk plays (Kak, ms.).

Despite security concerns amidst intermittent disturbances and occasional threats by militants, several events were held over the years with increasing engagement and participation, primarily from the rural audiences -- the traditional base of the *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr*. Over the many years, the Bāṇḍs performed at various places and events, including some major Indian theater festivals at the national level (see Raina 2024). This is indeed promising. However, much more work is yet to be done in order to achieve the goal of documentation, revival, and revitalization.

A Look at the Performance

Bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr is a farcical or comic art form of improvised play or drama, often accompanied by musical performances employing various genres of poetry and poetic traditions including *ćhakɨr*, *rof*, *vanvun*, *laḍiśah*, and *sufiyāna* music.[5] These poetic traditions are a part and parcel of Kashmir's folklore and oral traditions (see Munshi 2012 and 2014). A form of traditional rural theatre, *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* is typically performed in the open, both in the daytime and at night often accompanied by a bonfire.[6] During a performance, the Bāṇḍs (plural of Bāṇḍ), including the lead performing artists accompanied by their entourage, gather in a wide-open space. Often emerging from a location behind the audiences, the team of characters advance into the arena, making way through the spirited audiences, often in rhythmic succession following musical beats.

Traditional musical instruments such as *surnai* and *ḍōl* are used to summon the audiences before a performance. Surnai, pronounced as [sornai] in Kashmiri (a compound word based on (Indo-Aryan) *sur* 'musical note' and (possibly Persian) *nai* '(reed) flute') is a wind instrument, akin to *śehnai*, consisting of a wooden pipe around 18 inches long with seven holes and a bell-shaped outlet at the bottom. *Ḍōl* (cf. Indo-Aryan *ḍhōl*) is a traditional double-sided barrel drum played with a pair of (often bow-shaped wooden) sticks. The two instruments, viz., *surnai* and *ḍōl*, are central to and accompany the performances which

5 Each of these songs or poetic compositions conform to a particular *maqām* or melodic mode. The term *maqām* is of Arabic origin (lit. 'place, location, or position'), but it is also used in Persian and various other languages. It is a system of melodic modes used in the music of the Middle East and parts of North Africa.
6 In this sense it is like the *Kariālā* of Himachal Pradesh (See Mathur 1964: 14).

have several musical interludes. Other musical instruments as accompaniments include *nagara* and *thalej*. Whirling *sufiāna* dances are frequently interpolated into the stories. Integral to a performance are two props – a long whip *kodar* which creates a pistol-like sound and is used to lightly whip a character, and a short, split bamboo stick called *baens* which creates a shrill sound evoking laughter (see Raina 2024: 329).

Figure 1 A look at some musical instruments used in the performance (Source: Shahejahan Bhagat)

An essential element of *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* is satire, concealing deep social and political truths. Traditionally, the performance starts with an invocation and ends with a *duayi khər* 'prayers of wellness' (cf. Per. *dua-e-ḵhair* 'prayers of wellness'). At the invocation, the players express a desire for the *dīdār* (divine revelation/ glimpse; cf. Ur./Per. *dīdār* 'glimpse') of the divine force (Allah). This may be followed by a mock *pūza-pāṭh* (cf. Hindi *pūja-pāṭh* 'worship-reading'), typically by two jesters, imitating a historical Sanskrit invocation (see Mathur 1964: 44 and Raina 2015: 41).

Figure 2 A *duayi khər* scene at a *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* performance in Kashmir (Source: Shahejahan Bhagat)

It is the broad farcical playing of the *maskharɨ* or the clown (cf. Per. *masxara* 'buffoon, clown, jester') which is at the heart of the form though. Each performing group is composed of about 5 to 10 jesters, sometimes dressed in rags or tattered clothing, signifying the common man, and at times in colorful costumes designated for specific roles during different performances on various themes. The most important characters are played by *Mahagun* (also *Magun*), a highly respected member of the troupe who is multitalented in acting, dance and more. Costumes are an essential component of the tradition, and include dresses of kings, ministers, village urchins and other characters. These are elaborate and rich costumes designed for the performances. Also, part of the wardrobe are masks and costumes depicting animals such as *hāngul* (deer), lion, and horse (see Raina 2024: 329). A traditional storage box is used by artists to carry their essential performance items such as makeup, costumes, masks and various props. This box is an important part of their journey when they travel from one region to another for performances.

Typical stage movements are quick, direct, circular, and curved, establishing a certain mood

Figure 3 Different types of masks used in the performance (Source: Shahejahan Bhagat)

Figure 4 Examples of masks used in a performance at IGNCA on 6/4/2013 (Source: Vinayak Razdan)

and rhythm in the performance, accompanied by a dialogue. The contents of a play can be a series of sessions – both narrative and poetic, the latter signifying various components and genres of Kashmiri folklore.

A characteristic feature of the performance is the breaking of the traditional division and the imagined wall between the actor and the spectators." A small earthen pot is often used by the performers as a "dark well" into which they talk as if "talking to a ghost in a well" giving the performance an abstract quality with diverse elements *(ibid*.).

Situations and Themes

A myriad of *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* situations and themes have been culled from various time periods over the history of Kashmir. Thus, the clowns may emerge as servants of an 11th century Dardic king or his wives, as wily peasants trying to survive the whims of the 13th century Persian overlords, as a haughty English family and their servants from the British colonial period, or as a contemporary town or city barber showcasing their skills. The dialogue spans a range of historical experiences and features multilingual puns using languages such as Kashmiri, Persian, Hindi/Urdu, Punjabi and Dogri. The broad farcical acting style serves as a vehicle for satirical comment as well as uproarious play and celebrates the endurance of the Kashmiri common man.

Figure 5 Visuals from a local performance in Chadora, Budgam, Kashmir (Source: Shahejahan Bhagat)

All roles have traditionally been played by male actors who also dress up as women to depict female characters. More recently, however, women actors have joined some performances, thus, leading to a possible shift and progress in the direction of a gender-inclusive art form.

Each traditional *pəthɨr* or play has a long history and is a combination of song, dance, mimicry, satire, and jest – not meaningless buffoonery but pointed satirical jesting with a social content and commentary. Each play falls under a category based on its theme and content with humor, often crude and coarse, as a central feature. Among the most vivid and compelling enactments of these ancient folk plays are the following plays: *śikārgah* or *śikārgah pəthɨr* is a play of the game preserves performed only at night (Per. *śikār* 'game of pray, a hunt', *śikārgah* 'the place of the game'); *rāzɨ pəthɨr* refers to the 'play of the king(s)' (K. *rāzɨ* 'king'); *bakɨrvāl pəthɨr* is the play of the shepherds (K. *bakɨrvāl* 'shepherd(s)'); *āram pəthɨr* refers to the 'play of the vegetable gardeners' (K. *āram* 'vegetable gardeners'), *darzɨ pəthɨr* is the 'play of the king's consort'; *baṭɨ pəthɨr* is about the Kashmiri Pandit community who are often referred to as *"Baṭɨ"* (<Sk. *bhaṭṭa*) in colloquial Kashmiri; *gosən' pəthɨr* is a 'play of the (Hindu) *sādhu* or ascetic' (*gosən'* refers to the 'ascetic' in Kashmiri); and *vātal pəthɨr* is the 'play of the *vātal* (cobbler) community' (vātul refers to the highly stigmatized cobbler community, historically treated as "untouchables"). In fact, *vātal pəthɨr* is one of the oldest folk plays of

Figure 6 Visuals from *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* performances on various themes (Source: Shahejahan Bhagat)

Kashmir. This play is over 300 years old and depicts the celebration of marriage between a grownup *vātal* girl and a child groom which ends in a fraud. The marriage procession arrives with the dowry – *a ćarkhɨ* or a spinning wheel. In this play, the groom's horse is substituted by a log of wood (see Raina 2015).

Tracing the Roots: History of Folk Theater in Kashmir

The literature originating from the Vedic period attests a continuous tradition of folk theater in India (see Vadarpande 1987: 8). The origins of the different regional forms of modern folk theatre in India could be traced back to an ancient Indian folk theater the influence of which is indicated in the Prakrit and Apabhramsa songs and passages in Sanskrit dramas. In fact, theatrical arts of antiquity are even attested from as early as the period of the Indus Valley Civilization (*ibid*.). It was during the 15th to 16th centuries, however, that folk theater saw a forceful impact in different regions of ancient India. These were primarily divided into two different but parallel categories – religious and secular. While the two forms functioned side-by-side and continually influenced each other, it was the secular folk theater which took upon itself the task of entertainment and emerged as the folk theater for entertainment in future (see Varadpande 1987: 4-8). Quoting Bharata, Varadpande mentions the "fun loving folk audiences and their crude humor" described by Bharata as "women and men of inferior type" who are "delighted by" these performances (see Varadpande 1987: 8), thus, indicating a class or caste-based hierarchy attached to occupations, including folk entertainment.

The earliest mention of open-air performances in and around the (present-day) Kashmir valley is found in an ancient Hindu (Indic) text, Nīlamata Purāṇa – one of the oldest sources of cultural history on Kashmir which covers history, geography, religion, and folklore of the region. The text mentions festivals, "crowded with ever sportive men," "gardens and pleasure groves….resounding with the sounds of drums and lutes" (see Kumari 1994: 6). The custom of *bhāṇḍ nāṭya* 'Bhāṇḍ play' or *bhāṇḍ nṛtya* 'Bhāṇḍ dance' also finds mention in the 10th century writings of Abhinavagupta. There are references to *nātak maṇḍapa* 'theatre enclosure' – a covered platform in the premises of a temple (but away from its sanctum sanctorum) during the 11th to the 14th centuries in Northern India (see Mathur 1964: 8). Some of the forms of drama (referred to as *rupakas*), such as, *dima*, *vyayoga*, *prahasana* and *bhana* (the latter possibly pronounced as [bhāṇa]), Bharata claims, were popular in ancient India. While "comic is the chief sentiment" in Prahasana, in the "mimic monologue of Bhana, oblique humor is inherent." (Varadpande 1987: 10).

Several attempts have been made in previous studies to define and analyze the etymology of the term "Bhāṇḍ" (Devanagari भांड; Urdu ڈنڈاھب; Gurmukhi ਭੰਡ) and trace the history of the various communities referred to by variants of this term. Varadpande (1987) describes "Bhānds" as the traditional folk entertainers of India, Bangladesh, and Nepal engaged in folk entertainment as their hereditary profession. Patronized by the royalty and by people, they are claimed to be the most popular of the medieval folk entertainers who continued to linger on the Indian scene till the modern day. They performed small skits, improvised jokes, and presented humor laced with social criticism.

In an account of the Bhāṇḍs of Awadh, Crooke (1896) remarks:

"The Bhānd is sometimes employed in the courts of Rājas and native gentlemen of rank, where he amuses the company at entertainments with buffoonery and a burlesque

Figure 7 Scenes from a *śikārgah pəthɨr* at IGNCA on 6/4/2013 (Source: Vinayak Razdan).

of European and native manners, much of which is of a very coarse nature. The Bhānd is quite separate from and of a lower professional rank than the Bahrūpia. The bulk of the caste are Muhammadans, but they have exogamous sections, some of which, as Kaithela (Kāyasth), Bamhaniya (Brāhman), Gujartha (Gūjar), Nonela (Lunia), and so on, are derived from those of Hindu castes, and indicate that the caste is a heterogeneous community recruited from different sources. There are two recognised endogamous subcastes -- the Chenr, which seems to mean little (Hindi, *Chenra*), and the Kashmīri. The former trace their origin to the time of Tamarlane, who, on the death of his son, gave himself over to mourning for twelve years. Then one Sayyid Hasan, a courtier of the emperor, composed a humorous poem in Arabic, which gained him the title of Bhānr. Sayyid Hasan is regarded as the founder of the caste. Though he was a Sayyid, the present Bhānrs are either Shaikhs or Mughals; and the difference of faith, Sunni and Shiah, is a bar to intermarriage. The Kashmīri Bhānrs are said to be of quite recent origin, having been invited from Kashmīr by Nasīr-ud-Dīn Haidar, king of Oudh."

(Crooke 1896; cited from Russell & Lal 1975 [1915])

As noted earlier, Lawrence (1895) mentions a group of Pandit Bhāṇḍs in Akingam (Akangám) which is regarded as a curious case, although these were perceived with contempt by the Brahmans of Kashmir.

Regarding the social norms and practices of the Bhāṇḍs, Russell & Lal (1975 [1915]) wrote:

"The Bhānds perform their marriages by the Nikāh form, in which a Kāzi officiates. In virtue of being Muhammadans they abstain from pork and liquor. Dr. Buchanan quaintly described them as "Impudent fellows, who make long faces, squeak like pigs, bark like dogs, and perform many other ludicrous feats. They also dance and sing, mimicking and turning into ridicule the dancing boys and girls, on whom they likewise pass many jokes, and are employed on great occasions." The Bhānd, in fact, seems to correspond very nearly to the court jester of the Middle Ages."

(Quoted from Russell & Lal 1975 [1915])

Notice a sense of disdain and stereotyping of the Bhanḍ community in Buchanan's statement quoted by Russel & Lal above. Russell & Lal (1975 [1915]) define "Bhāṇḍ" or "Bhāṇṛ" as a "small caste of storytellers and buffoons," tracing the origin of the word to Sanskrit Bhānda [bhāṇḍa], a jester. The caste is sometimes also referred to as "Naqqāl" in the literature. The latter is a term of Arabic origin often used for 'actor' in the Persian tradition (cf. Arabic *naql* 'copying, mimicry'). The term *naqqāl* is also used to refer to the Muslim (Bhand) community found in the state of Uttar Pradesh and Delhi in India. These were a community of mimics at the court of the Nawabs of Awadh (now the state of Uttar Pradesh in India) (see Singh 2001). Naqqāls, Bhands and Behrupis (a *behrupi* is a trickster who plays various different roles) were among the various types of entertainers in the court of Awadh's Wajid Ali Shah (Varadpande 1987: 137).

According to Emigh (1996), an inquiry into the art and function of the now vanishing *bahurupiyas* and Bhands of Rajasthan, "the ancestors of the present-day Bhands are said to have entered India from Persia with the Muslim courts and are especially associated with Timur-leng (Tamburlaine) who invaded India in 1398 (Russell and Lal 1975 [1915] 1: 349)". Emigh (1996) attributes the "substantial concentration of Bhands in Kashmir" to these historical movements – perhaps the reason

why many of the celebrations are held around the days of various Islamic saints. There are also claims that many of the Bhands presently in north India have "come down from Kashmir at a later date" after the initial migrations (Russel & Lal 1975 [1915] 1: 349, quoted from Emigh 1996). But Emigh further notes:

"The existence of Bhands in the region seems to be of considerable antiquity. G. N. Sharma (1968: 149) quotes the *amyaktva* of Taruna Prabha Suri, written in 1354, as already mentioning "bhands and troupes of professionals of both sexes performing buffoonery and farce, accompanied by music, dance, and dialogue." The *A'in-i Akbari* of Abu'l Fazl 'Allami makes note of Bhands playing percussion instruments, and "singing and mimicking men and animals" in sixteenth-century India (1978 [1894] 3: 272). In a 1983 conversation, Professor Sharma expressed his belief that Bhands played a vital role in developing the dramatic aspect of the *bhavai* theatre in Gujarat, as well as much of the popular theatre of Rajasthan."

(Quoted from Emigh 1996)

Most Bhands of northern India, Pakistan and Nepal are Muslims, primarily Sunni Muslims although there are exceptions. For example, Varadpande (1987) notes "an endogamous Hindu community of the Bhand in India and Nepal but these are no longer involved in their traditional occupation of folk entertainment, and include actors, dancers, minstrels, storytellers and impressionists. According to Crooke (1974 [1896] 1: 259; quoted from Emigh & Emigh 1996), "over 14,000 Muslim Bhands" as opposed to "only fourteen Hindu Bhands" lived in Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Haryana in the late 19th century. The trend was different in Rajasthan, however, where a separate Hindu caste (which included the ancestors of the then famous Hajari Bhand) emerged due to "a strong resistance to the spread of Islam."[7]

A number of different communities of Bhands are currently attested in India, Pakistan and Nepal. In India, besides Jammu & Kashmir, Bhands are primarily found in the states of Uttar Pradesh (total population: ~ 22,000), Bihar (~7000), Madhya Pradesh (~1300), Maharashtra (~1100) and Uttarakhand (~200). In Pakistan, Bhands are primarily located in Sindh (~2300) and Punjab (~1300) (see Pammant 2017).[8] And in Nepal, Bhands are found in several hitherto administrative zones, such as Kosi (~2800), Sagarmatha (~2000), Janakpur (~2000), Mechi (~200), Lumbini (~200) and Bheri (50).[9]

Note that many scholars have suggested a connection between the performance traditions of India and Iran, largely basing their claims on the historical accounts of migrations of "gypsy" musicians and dancers from India across Iran during the Sasanian period (see Beeman 2017). This includes a well-known excerpt from Ferdowsi's long epic poem *Shāh Nāmeh* ('book of kings') which was written between c. 977 and 1010 CE. In this book, often referred to as the national epic of Greater Iran, the Persian monarch, Bahrām Gur (AD 420-38), asks the king of India ("Shankal" or "Shangul") to send ten thousand gypsy (luri) men and women master lute players to Iran. Note that the gypsies, as the ancestors of

7 Hajari Bhand's ancestors served as jesters in the courts of Mewar (Emigh 1996).
8 Pamment (2017) explores the Bhānd performances in Pakistan, tracing their genealogy to Brahmin jesters such as Tenali Rama and Raja Birbal, and the Sufi wise fools like Bahlul and Mullah Nasruddin. She classifies the bhands of Pakistan into three categories: the wedding bhands, the stage show bhands and the television bhands.
9 The numbers cited here are based on a project called "Joshua Project" and are to be ascertained. The link to the project is: https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/16423 (date of access: September 23, 2021)

the (present-day) Roma, also found their way into Europe via the Byzantine territory and the Balkans as a consequence of the wars by the Seljuks, the Turkic tribes that invaded southwestern Asia in the 11th century (see Fraser 2006: 33, 45). While direct historical connections between the ancestors of the various "gypsy" populations around the world are well established, it is yet to be seen if these are also related to the Bhands (and the various itinerant populations) of South Asia, and, consequently, to determine any direct connections between the various performance traditions of India, Iran and Europe.

Concluding Remarks

Bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr as an oral tradition is a treasure which defines a certain cultural group of Kashmir and is a part and parcel of its folklore. As Kashmir's traditional school of drama, it has its own characteristics of stage, music, and the unfolding narrative, which are passed on from father to son (see Raina 2024: 328). It is, therefore, important to not only document, but also, for the community, to reclaim, restore, and revitalize this tradition. As a powerful means of social and political critique, *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* has prospects of revival and revitalization with a renewed interest among the educated younger generation. The art form could be a means towards promotion and revitalization of various dying verbal arts of Kashmir, such as *ćhakɨr, rof, vanvun, vacun, laḍiśah*, and *sufiyāna kalām,* which have continued to be a principal component of the performance. Despite the stereotyping of the community and the fact that *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* was more popular in the Kashmir of yore than it is today having undergone a period of great decline, efforts towards its revival have already started and are bound to bear fruit. Through revisiting what was done in the 1980's, early 2000s and onwards, researchers can work with the community and government institutions in an effort to build collaborations and pursue the work on *bāṇḍɨ pəthɨr* studies for a larger goal of research and training on the one hand, and documentation, preservation and revitalization on the other. Consequently, research, training and performance can go hand in hand with documentation and revitalization. Similarly, experimentation through engagement with the mainstream contemporary Indian theater can work well, and new themes and topics can be brought in and the old ones can be revived and recreated. A formal training program and institutional support can ensure community recognition and help break the stereotypes as well as counter the social stigma traditionally associated with the community.

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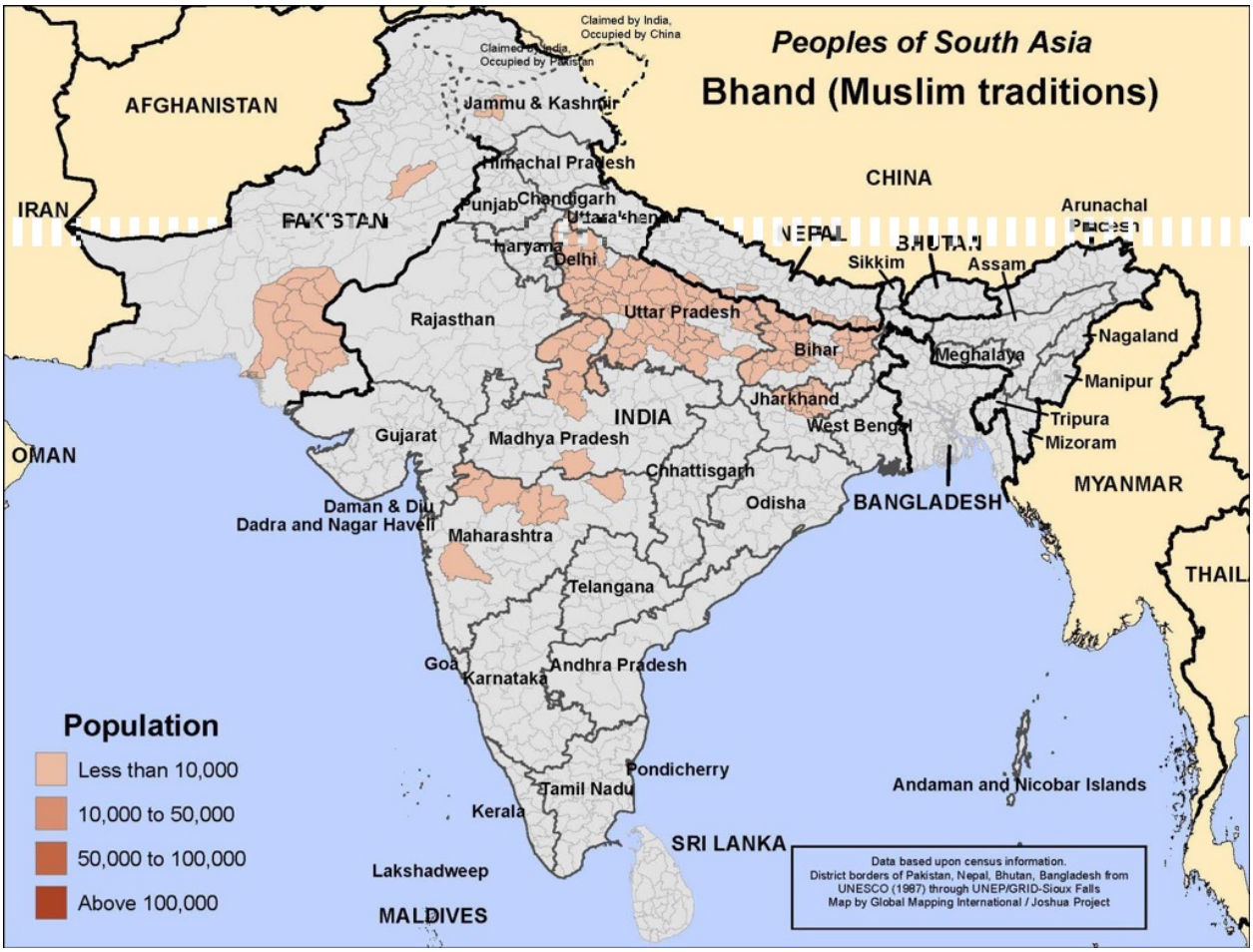
APPENDIX 1

(The following map gives an estimated number of different populations of Bhands in South Asia. Note that these figures may not correctly reflect the actual numbers)



(Source: https://joshuaproject.net/assets/media/profiles/maps/m16423.pdf (last accessed Oct. 21, 2021))

Will the Chinar Smile Again? The Lost Art of a Wounded Valley

Ravice Rashid (Rayees Wathori)

Kashmir the land of snow-capped mountains, peaceful rivers, green valleys, and deep spirituality could have been a home for flourishing art. It had beauty, culture, and soul. But instead of becoming a land of music and dance, it became a land of conflict. Violence stole the peace that art needs to grow.

Art needs space to speak, to breathe and to move freely. The colorful traditions that once made our land so special have faded over years. Since the late 1980s, violence has reshaped our land. It was not only about lives lost, it was about the loss of culture, the suppression of joy, and the silencing of the voices that once celebrated life through art.

One of the most heartbreaking losses has been that of *Bhand Pather*, a centuries-old art form that mixed music, dance, and acting. It was not just entertainment, it was a way of life, a language of the people.

My grandfather, Mum Kak (Ghulam Mohammad Bhat), was a legendary *Bhand* artist. He often told us about the days when village squares turned into open-air stages. "Each performance started with dance," he would say. "Steps, rhythms, satire, mime, poetry it was all there, in one act of dance.

That art brought people together. It taught lessons, made people laugh, and reflected the soul of the community. But it faded with the arrival of the unknown gunmen. The dancers stopped dancing. The voices grew quiet.

Ama Kak, an elderly *Bhand* from Wathora, smiles gently as he remembers. "There was no TV or internet. We were the media. We shared news, morals, and laughter through performance." People gathered around like it was a festival. Now, open spaces are fenced, gatherings are rare, and joy is scarce.

Mum Bachi, once a lead dancer from Budgam, says, "I had long hair, and I led our *Bhand* Chowk. There were eight dancers lead by me. The footwork, emotion, energy—it was my job." People waited for them for hours under the Chinar trees. "Today, those trees don't shade performers. They shade silence." The sound of Dhol and Nagara has been replaced by gunshots. "Back then, there was no fear," he adds. "Now, a gathering could mean surveillance."

Azi Begum old and frail now, speaks of her late husband, Ab Rehman, a dancer whose energy lit up crowds. "He made people laugh, dance and feel alive. His dance was pure joy". I stood beside him like a queen," she says. Today, she lives alone with her memories. "Those days are gone now the situation has changed," she whispers.

Few know that *Bhand Jashn* was part of Kashmir's Sufi culture. Performances were held during *Urs* (celebrations of saints), often in shrine courtyards and under the vast Chinar trees that stood like guardians of the gathering. These shows began at night, lit by oil lamps and the stars, and carried prayers in their rhythm and devotion in every step. People wrapped in shawls would gather under the open skies—men, women, children—waiting with joy and reverence. The Chinar trees not only gave shade but a sacred stage to these soulful expressions.

After the *Bhand Jashn* at night, a different magic would unfold the sound of the Sarangi would rise gently like a whisper to the heavens, followed by the Rabab, Matka, Tumbaknari and

Figure 1: A Bhand Pather troupe performing in an open-air

Figure 2: Bhand Jashn during night under the Chinar Tree at the Shrine of Rahim Sahib at Safapora (R.A). Artists performing Shikargah pather.

Harmonium. Then comes the Bacha a male dancer—dressed in feminine attire. The dancer would lead the troupe, performing throughout the night with graceful footwork, expressive gestures, and an unmatched devotion to the art. He would place a glass of water on his forehead, his eyes gazing towards the sky and still dance. He would move to different rhythms, climbing a tree even, never letting the glass fall. People would watch breathlessly, expecting the glass to topple but only the sweat of his effort would drip down. These moments were not just performances; they were sacred expressions of happiness, resilience, and human excellence. That dance was not just art it was a skill, grace, and devotion. But now, even this tradition is fading. *Bach Nagma* of that era is now rare. Its performers are often mocked or ignored.

Bashir Ahmad, a celebrated Bach Nagma dancer, shares his pain: "We have modern dances and DJ music. But where are we? It's like we were never here."

These artists dedicated their lives to this craft. They did not go to schools. They did not learn other trades. They were born into it. From childhood, they held instruments instead of books. Dance and music were their only skills.

No one told them that someday, they would have to leave the art and sweep streets, carry bricks, or sell vegetables or utensils. The same hands which played the *Surnai* or danced with elegance would be used to sort scrap. They never imagined such a life.

The tragedy of Kashmir is layered with countless events that have scarred its soul. Among them are the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits that left an irreparable scar on the Valley's shared heritage the Pulwama attack, where many brave soldiers were martyred, and the recent attack in Pahalgam, where innocent tourists were targeted and it was another cruel blow to a land already in pain. Each act of violence chips away at its spirit. Art cannot grow in fear. Joy cannot bloom in mourning.

Today, nearly eighty percent of Kashmir's traditional artists are elderly. Most live in poverty, forgotten by the world, too tired to perform the art they once carried with pride. The intricate footwork, the powerful movements, the sacred rhythms are being buried with the old.

In many families, *Bhand* and *Bach Nagma* artists have asked their children to walk away from the art. Not because they do not value it, but because they want them to be treated with dignity, not laughed at or cast aside. And so now, the question stands still and heavy, who will perform when the elders are gone? Now, while things are improving and youngster are no longer interested in it. There are small efforts happening, festivals, workshops, and cultural shows but too often, they feel like flowers placed gently on a battlefield. The wounds are still too fresh. The pain runs deep. It is hard to laugh when your soul is weighed down by grief.

Still, I try through my Tulkul Arts and Media Collective to support young artists and revive *Bhand Pather* and *Bach Nagma*. I have no donors or major support but I try, because this land remembers. The dust, the trees, the sky, they all remember the rhythm. The silence is deep, but memory is deeper.

Art does not die in a day. It fades. It waits. And maybe one day it will dance again, when the land is free from the shadow of violence. Will the Chinar smile again? In here, I pen a call to action.

Figure 3: An open-air Bach Nagma gathering beneath a Chinar tree at Manishah Badshah shrine. Community elders sit in attentive rows, recalling the collective spirit and shared memory of Kashmiri folk traditions.

Figure 4: Artists of Karam Buland Folk Theatre presented Derzeh Pather and people are enjoying the glimpse late night

Why Not Theatre's Mahabharata: Storytelling Using Dance as a Prominent Motif

Sylvie Belleau

Initially planned to be released in August 2020 at the Shaw Festival, the Why Not Theatre's mega production Mahabharata was almost ready to be launched, when Covid hit in March 2020 closing every rehearsal space and theatre venue in Canada for quite a long period. The play was finally premiered at the Shaw festival Theatre in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, on March 9th 2023. Later that year, it was presented at the Barbican Theatre in London, England, in October. In 2025, after a stretch of rehearsals in January, the team presented an open rehearsal at the Banff Center for Arts and creativity in Alberta before flying to Australia. The play was presented in February at Perth Festival in Australia, in April in Toronto, in May in Ottawa and at the end of June in New York. The team is Directed by Ravi Jain with Associate Director Miriam Fernandes. Set design of the play are by Lorenzo Savoini, costumes by Gillian Gallow, lighting by Kevin Lamotte, projections by Hana S. Kim, with associate projections designer Ann Slote. The original music and sound are created by John Gzowski and Suba Sankaran, traditional music consultant Hasheel Lodhia. The dances are choreographed by Brandy Leary. Mahabharata Production Manager is Crystal Lee and Mahabharata Lead Producer is Kevin Matthew Wong.

Mahabharata has been familiar to me as I discovered the epic as a kathakali student in Kerala in the early 1980s. I have seen different scenes performed in the dance theatre form of Kerala from the disrobing of Draupadi to the fury of Raudra Bhima killing Dushasana and washing Draupadi's hair in blood, as promised earlier. I read and listen to different adaptations of the epic. I had seen Peter Brook's film and also his play Battlefield in Montreal in 2017.

Well known French director Ariane Mnouchkine in her play *Une chambre en Inde* created in 2016 integrated two scenes of Mahabharata performed by a Terukkuttu group: the disrobing of Draupadi with the divine intervention of Krishna and the death of Karna. Terukkuttu is a traditional folk dance and song theatre from Tamil Nadu.

In 2019, from the moment I heard about this ambitious Mahabharata project around the celebrated Indian epic, I was looking forward to seeing the production. In 2023, I was unable to assist in the March presentation. In October, as I was traveling to Europe, I had the chance to see the two performances and to participate in the community meal, at the Barbican Theatre in London, England. I was enthused by the production then and the way the team blended dance, acting and multimedia to make the ancient epic of actuality. I was looking forward to seeing it again in Toronto in April 2025. And I was not disappointed! The team had gained in fluidity and precision and it was flawless. Once again, I was mesmerized by the smooth integration of Indian dance movements to the theatricality of the performance and by the beauty of the Sanskrit opera. The visual set up was rich and elaborate use of multimedia made the whole performance quite interesting.

The co-writers and co-directors Ravi Jain and Miriam Fernandes offer their adaptation of the epic tale in three parts: *Karna, the life we inherit*, *Khana and Kahani*, a community meal and storytelling session, and *Dharma, the life we choose*. The authors drew inspiration for their adaptation of the epic from *Mahabharata, a modern retelling* by English poet Carole Satyamurti. Divided in three parts, the whole play lasts around 6 hours. With 18 actors on stage, 6 musicians and an impressive

Figure 1 *- The cast of Mahabharata (Shaw Festival, 2023). Photo by David Cooper.*

technical support for video and projection, the production is a vibrant piece of hybridity, from the stage production to the artistic team.

With the multiplication of migratory routes, the mobility of artists, curiosity and openness to other cultures or to one's own roots, a new generation of hybrid artists is emerging. The artists of Why Not Theatre, many of whom come from the Indian diaspora, belong to a new generation of artists who are questioning their family heritage while seeking to create a theater to their own image, rooted both in modernity and in the traditions linked to their origins. The actual performing team is composed of artists who've grown up in India, Canada, the UK, Malaysia, Australia, and more.

The diversity of training of the artists is a rich aspect of this production. Coming from different artistic backgrounds, some actors have trained in Western acting schools and at the Paris based physical theatre school Jacques Lecoq, while some others have received traditional dance training in Odissi, Kathakaḷi or Kalaripayaṭṭu, or both. Another interesting aspect of the play is the distribution of the roles. The theatricality allows a non-realistic approach to the distribution of roles. An actor can personify a diversity of characters regardless of his age and sex. The plurality of postures goes above the traditional genders. In this Mahabharata, some male characters are played by women, and vice versa. For example, Arjuna is interpreted by Anaka Maharaj-Sandhu, Karna by Navtej Sandhu, Bhisma by Sukania Venugopal when the character of Amba is performed by Emmanuel Jay.

In the first part, *Karna, the life we inherit,* the story starts around a circle of red dirt on the ground recalling the first ways humans shared stories around the fire. The storyteller, performed by Miriam Fernandes, brings the audience to a key moment that triggers the whole way the epic is retold. As the story develops, traditional ways of storytelling merge with classical dance forms from India, as well as street theater, contemporary technique and cinematic images. The storyteller evolves from a narrative storytelling to embodying certain characters during the different scenes back to the narrator. She guides the audience through the complex timeline of the story. The epic is told in a variety of manners, from the telling around a circle in the night to the intimate acting demanded by the camera around the table, evolving through song, rhythms, dance, opera, martial arts and multimedia. The first part begins with the encounter of Arjuna and Agni, the fire god, and the destruction of the Khandava forest and the curse of the last snake. It then goes back in time with the origin of the Pandavas and the Kaurava. It ends with the game of dice between Duryodhana and Yudhisthira.

In the interview *Reimagining 'Mahabharata':* Fernades explains:

"We weave various storytelling forms, from ancient traditions of gathering around a fire to share tales, to contemporary methods. Four thousand years ago, our ancestors passed down stories around a fire, a practice we celebrate today. Our Mahabharata begins with a storyteller and an audience, where actors create a circle, and I transform into the king with a stool and the queen with a scarf. These street-style techniques are still seen in India, where a simple circle in the sand can become a powerful narrative" (Kapoor).

The first part is followed by *Khana and Kahana*, *Khana* meaning food, and *Kahani*, storytelling. The community meal presents another aspect of the storytelling. It evokes the way in which Jain and many other members of the cast first started to know about the epic with an elder talking through one of the stories over a meal.

The community meal tries to recreate this other way of telling stories around the table with the audience. In the middle of the tables where guests are eating, Miriam and Sharada discuss storytelling and eventually Sharada retells one of the numerous stories of Mahabharata which is not included in the play. In the Yaksha story, the thirsty Pandavas encounter a strange lord of the lake that questions them. In their hurry to drink, they don't answer his question and die. Only Yudhishthira resisted his thirst and answered the Yaksha lord successfully. Yama, the death god in disguise, reveals his true identity to him. The story stirs up a whole discussion around *Dharma*, that provides a segue into introducing the second part of the production.

Dharma, the life we choose, plunges the audience in a totally different experience. It begins with a modified set. A table is set on the left side of the stage with cameras that enable us to follow the action with cinematic close up broadcasted on a wall of 24 television screens. With the support of splitters and computers, manipulated by the character of Sanjaya, the images of the actors are redistributed in various manners, reproducing the images in numerous ways. The discussion between Krishna and the Kauravas is presented almost like a reality show. The way images are manipulated recalls propaganda mediatic strategies. The acting is realistic. The use of both black and white and color add to the manipulation of the images. The naturalistic interpretation style goes along with the situation: a discussion around the table. The realistic acting, technological effects, cinematography approach, contemporary set up contrast with the storyteller approach and the more evocative acting of the scenes around the fire. Soon after, on the battlefield, Arjuna refuses to fight his masters and cousins in the opposite clan and thereby starts a philosophical discussion between him and Krishna, his charioteer. This conversation between a human and a god results in the Bhagavad Gita, the song of God, a sacred book of Hinduism, one chapter of Mahabharata. The voice of Krishna is sung beautifully by opera singer Meher Parvi.

In the video *Bhagavad Gita Opera* Jain explains that he questioned himself on how to present such a conversation theatrically and select "the most epic form of storytelling that we have" which is for him opera. The selected verses of the Sanskrit text have been adapted to music by John Gzowski and Subha Sankaran who blend beautifully western classical colors with Indian classical music. When the war explodes, Sanjaya describes to blind Dhritarashtra the battlefield where destruction is happening. As in the first part, Jay Emmanuel's dance expresses fight and destruction using the gestural language and steps of Kathakali and Kalaripayaṭṭu, this time through the character of Śiva. Śiva, becomes the fury of the battle, describing with *mudras* the clashing of the armies, the arrows flying and the Earth covered with blood.

The role of dance

In the short video *Movement*, Jain explains that because the production explores the evolution of storytelling. He absolutely needed to go back to the original way stories were told through dance in the temples of India. For him dance expresses how humans do astonishing things and become like gods. In an interview with Devdutt Pattanaik on JLF Toronto 2020, Jaïn explains that one of performers, the actor and dancer Jay Emmanuel, who initially trained in Kathakaḷi and Kalaripayaṭṭu, has also studied theater in Australia and then theater of the body in Paris. Assisted by Kathakaḷi artist Kalamaṇḍalam Thulasi Kumar, Jay choreographed several elements of the show and introduced his acting partners to certain gestural elements of Kathakaḷi. In *Karma*, he

Figure 2 - Krishna, by Neil D'Souza, and Arjuna, Anaka Maharaj-Sandhu, with the opera singer Meher Pavri, embodying the voice of Krishna. Photo by David Cooper.

Figure 3 - The training of the Pandava and the Kaurava. The cast of Why Not Theatre's Mahabharata (Shaw Festival, 2023). Photo by Michael Cooper.

plays several characters, including Drupada, for whom he uses Kathakaḷi gestures. In *Dharma*, he plays Śiva, the god of dance, who describes the fury of combats on the battlefield in a choreography rooted in the fundamentals of Kathakaḷi and enriched with choreographic elements inspired by the tricks and jumps of Kalaripayaṭṭu.

"In this show, we are using Kathakali language, but also combining it with Kalari, which is a martial arts affiliate, and using both to create a new language for this show" explains Emmanuel in a short interview posted on the Instagram account of the company. "How we tell this story most efficiently has been the major driver for what movement we choose. And in the process, we've tried to use gestures and emotion that people can come into. When you perform such a form outside of India, I felt that we needed to find a way to let our audiences in from around the world."

Major dance elements are found in both parts of the production. Dance movements enable the team to perform poetically non-realistic scenes and to give life to mythological figures. Here are the most explicit moments of dance use in the show.

King Pandu loved hunting. As he walks in the forest, he sees two deer making love. The actors enact the deer by using *mudras*. When the arrows of Pandu hit them, they curse him that the moment the king will take his wife in his arms, he will die immediately. Unable to father children to his wives, he abandons the throne to his blind brother and goes into the forest.

Kunti, performed by Ellora Patnaik, reveals to Pandu that as a young woman she received a mantra from the gods which can be used to have children. Through Odissi dance movements, Patnaik expresses the way Kunti invokes the gods Dharma, Vayu, Indra to give birth to Yudhishthira, Bhima and Arjuna. She shares the mantra with Madri who calls the Ashwini twins and becomes the mother of twin brothers. The princes Yudhishthira, Bhima and Arjuna become young men and train with their cousin Duryodhana under the supervision of their masters Drona and Bhisma, Kalaripayaṭṭu movements are used to perform battle movements, fights and the use of armaments.

Emmanuel interprets two choreographies combining Kathakali and Kalaripayaṭṭu movements. As Drupada, at the end of the first half of *Karma*, he moves around the red circle destroying the perimeter and scattering the red dirt in all directions. His three children rise through the dance. As the circle is getting erased, he invokes Siva.

In *Dharma*, after the conversation between Arjuna and Krishna portrayed through Opera, Krishna gives universal sight to Sanjaya to enable him to describe the battlefield to the blind king Dhitharashtra. As he describes the battle, Siva, embodied by Emmanuel, appears on stage. With the support of Kathakali *mudras*, he gives another dimension to the text.

One of the great qualities of this production is how the team blends harmoniously the different styles of dance and brings together techniques of acting. In addition to the vision and hard work of Jain and Fernandes, such a consummate performance is only possible with the team's dedication and the high quality of the actors' training. To achieve such a production that awes everyone, it is important to understand the quality and the diversity of the training of the interpreters of the story. Each artist makes good use of their talents and is presented with his full capacities. The dance aspect is supported by three artists who hold a dual training both in Indian classical dance and western acting or contemporary dance.

Figure 4 - Ellora Patnaik as Kunti with Jay Emmanuel as Pandu. Photo by David Cooper.

Figure 5 - Emmanuel Jay as Shiva. Photo by David Cooper.

Led by Brandy Leary, the choreography team was composed by her, both Jay Emmanuel and Ellora Patnaik who largely contributed to the research and the creative process.

Jay Emmanuel has trained in kathakali at Kerala Kalamandalam, the prestigious art academy of Kerala, in south India. He also trained in Kalaripayaṭṭu the ancient martial art of Kerala. He has also studied theater at Edith Cowan University (2010-2012) in Australia and then theater of the body at Lecoq (2013-2015) in Paris. He performs Amba, Drupada, Pandu and Siva.

Canadian born actress and dancer, Ellora Patnaik started Odissi dance in the early seventies. She received teaching from her mother who was her first dance guru. She has taught Odissi dance since the mid-1980s. In 1986, she was selected to study at the Odissi Research Centre in Orissa, India. In the early 1990s, she took over as the executive director of the Chitralekha Dance Academy in Toronto. She attended the American Academy of Dramatic Art (1992-1994) in New York. In Mahabharata, she performs Kunti and Drona.

Brandy Leary is a contemporary dance choreographer from Toronto. Her artistic journey includes two decades of practice of Kalaripayaṭṭu, the south Indian martial art, and Chhau, a dance theatre of from East India.

With the 2025 production, the play has reached full maturity as evidenced by the awards and nominations received this spring. In May, the 12th edition of Toronto Theatre Critics proposed 17 categories for which there were 22 winners. Mahabharata received 3 awards: Best New Canadian work, shared with another production, Best production of the play, and Best sound design and music.

Toronto Alliance for Performing arts (TAPA) presents every year the Dora Mavor Moore Awards which celebrates excellence on the Toronto stage. It is the oldest and largest professional theatre, dance and opera awards program in Canada. For 2025, there are 225 nominees for 43 categories. Mahabharata has received 15 nominations in 9 different categories. On June 30th 2025, the Dora recipients were announced. Mahabharata: Karma (Part 1) won five awards in the General Theatre Division: Outstanding Production; Outstanding New Play by Miriam Fernandes and Ravi Jain; Outstanding Direction by Ravi Jain; Outstanding Performance by an Individual for Miriam Fernandes and Outstanding Sound Design / Composition by John Gzowski and Suba Sankaran.

Hopefully, these awards and nominations from the Canadian performing arts critics will encourage the producers of the world to present Why Not Theatre's Mahabharata again and again and to give it a long life. With the rich vision of this new generation of artists, we can hope for other very interesting productions where East meets West. A third path of creation emerges in the respect of the traditional art forms and the creativity of contemporary media.

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Traditional Dance/Mixed Genealogies: A Study in Diasporic Odissi

Leia Devadason

Abstract:
This article reflects on a collaborative project entitled *Devotions* (2021), in which a small team of artists choreographed Western classical opera and oratorio songs with Odissi *abhinaya*. As dramaturg, I delve into the process of creating a choreo-musical language for this project and the ethical, stylistic and practical factors made among our desires, stakeholders, and extant performance possibilities. Finally, I offer a reading of our staged performance in relation to discourses that frame diasporic Indian dance today.

Through *Devotions*, I propose a framework for understanding practices of diasporic Odissi beyond the familiar binaries of tradition/modernity, classical/contemporary, authenticity/inauthenticity that arguably impose a limit on the collective imagination of the form's evolution. Instead, drawing from diaspora's queer, nonreproductive and impure energies, I insist on Odissi's existentially mixed genealogy and bring this to bear upon how we understand new works. Thus, I offer *Devotions* (in theory and practice) as an attempt at performing mixed genealogies – an act which subverts the racialized logics guarding dance's (re)production by celebrating the existentially mixed and open-ended nature of all artistic genealogies.

Key Words:
Odissi, Mixed Genealogies, Queer Diaspora, Performance Ethnography, Music and Dance

PART I

If traditional Indian dance in Singapore is tending toward death, I believe this event will more closely resemble a snake shedding its skin than the extinction of a species. Before crossing to different shores, dances born in the Indian subcontinent had already undergone stages of forced disappearance and surrogated rebirths—even if this jagged *longue dureé* history has been obscured by discourses of nationalism, cultural authenticity and civilizational heritage in which multiple stakeholders of Indian dance are invested. However, while the simulacrum of festival programs, travel brochures, and commercial advertisements may present the idea that the dance forms we know today have flowed through unbroken lineages from ancient India to the only-now fracturing present of the diaspora, there is a strange way in which fragmented histories congeal into dance aesthetics themselves. To the uninitiated, our dazzling costumes, *alta*-dyed hands and feet, and coded gestures seem to collude with our flattening into spectacle, but as one gets settled into the rhythms of this performances, keen attentiveness might adumbrate the ways that these dances—like viruses seducing, circulating, and mutating bodies in contact—also register and express their own historical r/evolutions.

For example, on the scale of *revolution*, the British's criminalization of temple dance and dance communities in various parts of the Indian subcontinent from 1892–1947 on the charge of sexual immorality has an *embodied* legacy in the dances reconstructed and awarded classical status from the 1930–60s: we glimpse it in caste- and other socially privileged actors, who, having rescued dance from its debasement, now represent it to the world; in the syncretic mixture of "folk" forms, western dance, ancient temple sculpture and aesthetic treatises in the "classical" dance languages; in the renaming of the dances,

such as in the case of Bharatanatyam (Sadir), and Odissi (Mahari/Gotipua dance); and in their sublimation of the once-maligned erotic elements into narratives of Hindu spirituality so deeply associated with India. As for *evolution*, the mark of learning from two different gurus of the "same lineage" expresses itself in divergent steps and *mudras* (hand gestures) that dancers articulate in even the most well-established of pieces, confirming the truism that two performances can never be the same. Thus, unlike bones, CDs, manuscripts, and all those materials "supposedly resistant to change" in the "archive", Indian dance constitutes a social and aesthetic "repertoire" of the intimate histories of presence that must necessarily exist through the bodies who, in their own contingent circumstances, inherited them, and in turn bring and re-bring its repertoire to life (Taylor 19).

Now, at the cusp of a (re)turn to fascism and imperialism rapidly accelerated by the United States from which I am writing, there also seems to be a renaissance in diasporic Indian dance. Of the many forces that have led to this, a dialectical pair takes centerstage. In multicultural and neoliberal metropoles, the flexible economy that proliferates gig-work and other forms of unstable labour in turn demands that South Asian dancers flexibly perform the "exotic and legible, particular and universal, different and accessible, other and not other" to access limited arts funding (Kedhar 3). Under the ethos of (economically incentivized) freedom and innovation, a wave of dancers is breaking the bonds of traditional Indian dance. Attempting to stave off this rupture with renewed force is the drive within dance communities to maintain hierarchical social relations and the aesthetic values these appear to preserve within these dance forms (Kaktikar 10). Whether informed by efforts to instill cultural identity or resist assimilation in the diaspora; by the rising wind of Hindu nationalism blowing from India; the love of canonical repertoire for its own sake or an intermingling of these and other reasons, the conservative position codes departure from guru lineage, conceptual choreographies, and experiments in "cross-generic couplings that can produce unforeseen hybrids" as harbingers of Indian dance's impending extinction (Nambiar 49).

As is becoming increasingly evident, the pressures to make-flexible or to preserve dance assemble in different formations to guard its evolution in different diasporic locations; they also cannot be so neatly affiliated with either the state or dance communities, arising as they do from complex intersections of agendas, positions and identities. However, I bring them to the fore of this paper because they represent an impasse—here—at the crossroads of a past, present, and imagined future of diasporic Indian dance that calls to be expressed both in the tradition of movement and of scholarship. I am invested, practiced, and researched in Odissi, a dance form which bears multiple labels within different artistic ecologies and economies and with these, specific meanings, roles, and levels of national and institutional support. In the 1960s, Odissi was named a "classical dance" by the Sangeet Natak Akademie (Citaristi 115), a mantle it wears wherever it goes. Additionally, it is a "traditional Indian dance" in Singapore, a "South Asian dance" in Britain and the United States, and in some corners of the anglophone academy, a "classi*cized* Indian dance."

Dancing and writing from these three different locations Odissi has traveled and being captured by its net of significations in these diasporas each time, I attempt to theorize diasporic Odissi beyond the neoliberal demand for flexibility *and* the conservative demand for preservation against predicted loss. How can we avoid reading diasporic Odissi through the well-worn lenses of tradition/modernity, stasis/change, and classical/contemporary,

and in doing so produce points of discussion beyond value judgements on *tradition, modernity, innovation, dilution, authenticity, and hybridity*? While these terms are part of a dialectic that has driven Indian dance to its rhizomatic blooming today, they impose a limit on the collective imagination of its evolution that transposes itself onto every generation. What if, to escape this cyclical bind, we were to approach Odissi from a different starting point, one which is premised upon historicity but radically deprioritizes the question of Odissi's non/alignment with its pasts?

In *Impossible Desires* (2005), Gayatri Gopinath appropriates heteronormative logic to draw the analogy that "queerness is to heterosexuality as the diaspora is to the nation"—a "debased and inauthentic" imitation of the original. If diaspora does the much-needed work of detaching the notion of queer from homonormative standards, queer amplifies and recuperates the "impure, inauthentic, and nonreproductive" energies in diaspora for celebration and use (11). Taking this to artistic production, queer diaspora challenges the presumed imitative relation between diasporic and national cultural production and a striving-for-authenticity always set up for failure. If Gopinath's reflection on her "most important" intervention is the way her theory turns upon the site of "home" itself as a "[space]...permanently and already ruptured…by colliding discourses around class, sexuality, and ethnic identity", I argue that this has equally significant applications to the temporal and spatial site(s) of Odissi's "original" production (15).

An Orissa tradition which inherits Mahari Naatch, Gotipua, Ras Leela, Chhau and other regional forms, Odissi has always been mixed from multiple genealogies. Furthermore, as the Jayantika group of hereditary Gotipua dancers who codified its repertoire in the 1950s individually took on students, the form was carried through even more unique bodies, in the process acquiring recognizable distinctions—that allow one to say, for example, that one follows the style of Guru Pankaj Charan Das and not Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra—all under the still-same name of Odissi. While scholars and dancers are learned in Odissi's mixed genealogies, we have rarely brought all the implications of this mixedness to bear upon contemporary and diasporic Odissi-making, or the discourse around new works.

In this paper, I bring into conversation the un(re)productive energies of queer diaspora and the impure and inauthentic ethos of mixed genealogies in order to reroute conversations about diasporic Odissi. I ground my exploration in a work entitled *Devotions*, a collaboration that a fellow Singaporean artist and beloved friend Wong Yong En and I undertook in 2021. *Devotions* inherits and expresses 17th-century opera and oratorio singing (hereby called "Western classical" music, for ease) and Odissi *abhinaya* or storytelling language in performance. Performed by Wong Yong En and pianist Amanda Lee, *Devotions* was co-choreographed by Caroline Chin, a theater-maker and Odissi dancer trained in Western classical music, and advised upon by Raka Maitra, director of Chowk Productions, choreographer, and Odissi dance teacher. It is easy and even strategically beneficial to call this a "hybrid" or "fusion" work, especially in Singapore which places a premium on art which purportedly reflects the nation's much-belabored multicultural ethos. However, following and expanding upon Sara Ahmed's concepts of mixed orientations and genealogies, I choose to privilege terms such as "mixed" because of how *Devotions*—like the "mixed-race body"—only *typifies* in the most obvious and spectacular manner the mixed nature of all genealogies (Ahmed 143). The project to synthesize Odissi and Western classical song, then, with all its fragmentation,

friction, quirks, synchronicities and fluencies exposed to view, is a project of mixing genealogies that has already and is always occurring at different scales in every practice, every work.

Yong En conceived of *Devotions* in Singapore—where she was born, where she and I learnt (in this order) Western classical music and Odissi dance—a place which can be thought of as diasporas of both traditions due to its history as a British colony and a point of arrival for Indian merchants, traders, labourers, and their families in various waves of migration. Supported by the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music at which Yong En studied and eventually performed at Esplanade's free concourse stage, *Devotions* refracts discourses of flexibilization, preservation/conservation, and queer diaspora as they have emerged in performance scholarship. Anusha Kedhar's (2020) study of flexible bodies is set in Britain, a neoliberal and multicultural society which has a historic relationship and contemporary parallels to Singapore; meanwhile, Aparna Nambiar's work on the acclimated conservation of Odissi in the face of its "slow death" springs from the very arts ecology that cocooned *Devotions*.

Recently, Asian American scholar Cheryl Naruse (2023) called Singapore the crown of "Global Asia", a legacy left by British colonialism but which arguably stands upon the island's long pre-colonial history as a cosmopolitan trading hub of the Malay World. Singapore thus is, and has always been, a contact zone that inherits and creates mixed genealogies—a fact which in discussions of national heritage comes across as both our fortune and frustration (Ang and Stratton S67). I start here because it is the contact of social and artistic genealogies here in Singapore that has made me as a scholar, musician, dancer, and anglophone writer, and because *Devotions* is the product of social and artistic crossings that could only have happened within its particular—and particularly fertile—"microecolog[ies]" (Nambiar 52). Finally, inspired by Madhavi Menon's (2016) concept of queer universalism, I argue that performing mixed genealogies subverts the racialized logic of reproduction that hybridity discourse transfers onto to the arts by instead celebrating the existentially mixed nature of all artistic genealogies.

Weaving performance ethnography, theory, and art-historical analysis, I discuss the devising process and theoretical underpinnings of Yong En and my exploration of forms before explicating *Devotions* as its first concrete instantiation. Our intention to choreograph Western classical music with Odissi's movement language was not fixed to a particular performance setting; instead, it was the beginning of a process of creating an expressive language – one that would be developed according to the conditions of each future performance. Before I refer to *Devotions*, then, I bring you through its irreducible background or backstage, a place for preparation, excess trimmings, and the unseen in which lives the process of discovering and deepening our knowledge of forms; the ethical, stylistic and practical negotiations we had to make among our own desires, stakeholders, and extant performance possibilities; and of deepening stylistic and interpersonal intimacies through collaborative work.

PART II

Beginnings

> "Devotions came from a lightbulb moment I had about a year ago during a singing lesson. I was studying this song, or aria, called "V'adoro, pupille". In it, there were references in the text to Cupid's arrows, and a general feeling of romantic longing. At the

> same time at Chowk, I was learning this dance piece, or *ashtapadi*, called "Lalitha Lavanga", and it also featured Cupid's arrows, and Hindu goddess Radha longing for Krishna because he was away…." —Wong Yong En, 2021

The story that inspired our collaboration is one I know well, having played at a jilted, lovesick Radha by Yong En's side in our weekly dance class. While for me, this verdant scene of springtime longing precipitated a meditation on queer desire with/in Odissi, Yong En experienced a resonance between Radha and Cleopatra's moods, both of which she had come to know intimately by her body, her voice. How does one begin to do Odissi and Western classical singing, together? In the first instance, we did not hope to "reconcile" the forms (however magnificent that must be), but only to reconcile Yong En's body to styles of expression that she already, intimately, lived—one in the lessons that she took on weekdays as a conservatory student, and the other, the bright Chowk studio on Saturday mornings. Now in the same moment: Radha's search for Krishna in the groves of the forest meets eyes that strike lightning bolts into the heart—*"Take pity", Cesare, for I cannot bear this much electricity, though the wound smarts stronger if I don't find you, or you turn away*…

This frictive process of integrating forms to body necessarily translates here on the page. As I write these paragraphs, I am straining to describe both languages without always switching between hands, and instead mirror Yong En's bodily endeavor in bringing them home and speaking them at the same time. Though the audience may perceive Western music through their ears and Odissi movement with their eyes, Yong En, the source at the center of it all, troubles stratification—even the stratification that is done as a precursor to unification. Thus, I am also resisting dividing every sentence into two clauses. (Thus writing, with its monophonic linear procession, will fall short of this and every performance).

In the early days, our intuition that there were more synchronicities between the forms than we were conscious of led us to recordings, scores, training manuals and research papers. More than any technical, aesthetic or historical correspondence, early modern classical songs and Odissi repertoire shared a penchant for… devotion. That spring, we were preoccupied by arias from J S Bach's *Johannespassion* (1724), an oratorio based on the gospel of St John which dramatizes the lead-up to Jesus's death. As channels for the turbulent passions of devotional love, these arias became the starting point for our project and the core of our performance program. Born in 1685, Bach was a fervent Lutheran Christian who made his livelihood by composing music, conducting choirs, and playing the organ in church. In the spirit of Luther's idea that music "is the *viva voce evangelii*, the living voice of the Gospel", Bach professed that the "ultimate goal" of his music-making, too, was to glorify God (Leaver 20; Geck 29). In Odissi, the paradigm for devotion is given by the *Gita Govinda*, or Song of Krishna by Jayadeva. Jayadeva was a twelfth century poet from Orissa who advanced *bhakti*, "a religious movement of popular origin centered on the personal nature of the deity's devotion" in contrast to hierarchy-based forms of worship (Gomes and Duarte 166). According to a 1499 decree inscribed on the Jagannath temple in Puri, Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda* was the only text the Maharis (Odissi's temple dancer ancestors) were allowed to sing and dance inside the temple during Prataparudra Deva's reign from 1497 to 1540 CE (Citaristi 22). And around 400 years later, precisely because of its historic entwinement with dance in the region, the *Gita Govinda* was again privileged as the foundation of Odissi's repertoire. Hence, the Krishna-*bhakti* tradition in which the *Gita*

Govinda was composed indelibly shaped the style, poetics, and evolution of Odissi, as much as Odissi dance reaffirms this devotional mode in the present day.

It became clear to us that devotional love was that common, potent affect which could move a subject to singing and dancing both on the levels of the texts and the meta-level of embodied performance. But, rooted in two distinct theological paradigms, that love differed in structure, narrative, and significance in ways that powerfully shaped the aims of artistic expression and the aesthetics of Western classical music and Odissi respectively. This all the more elicited our curiosity about how these philosophies and aesthetics, devoted as they were to a shared purpose, might interact, confuse, or infuse each other in performance. Starting *Devotions* from the shared multiplicities of devotion, we thus asked how our project could honor and work with the flavors of devotional love in these traditions for an ecumenical expression. For the purposes of this paper, I attempt to unravel this question and other dynamics at play in the creation process through our work on the aria "Zerfließe, Mein Herze."

Starting from Bach inevitably situates our exploration at an awkward power geometry, given the primacy of music in most choreo-musical relations: in oratorio, all the body's resources are put in service of the song and in Odissi, *ashtapadis* interpret the content of Jayadeva's songs and *pallavis* elaborate upon the foundation of musical *ragas*. Ironically, then, it is precisely these prevailing dynamics that compelled us to start from music, and in this particular case, from Bach. But choreographing Odissi without traditional Odissi music—music literally bound hands-and-feet to a dancer's movement—suggests Odissi dance and music can, in the first place, be divorced and still retain their generic integrity. While this position deserves to be debated further, the fact is that as spectators, dancers and musicians, we have experienced how the bonds between Odissi music *and* dance have already been broken in diaspora under works that identify with Odissi's name. More than an autonomous aesthetic choice, this disjuncture could also be a result of the gendered division of labour between musicians and dancers, the differing prospects for South Asian men/musicians and women/dancers in the arts sector, and dancers' lack of access to idiomatically trained musicians and composers manifest in performance practice.

All this means is that *Devotions* is not the first work of diasporic Odissi to part with Odissi music, but neither should this decision set the tone for future instantiations. Like our beginning-from-Bach, this project too is only a beginning, and unlike the Lutheran composer, I do not believe in predestination, nor in clear-cut beginnings—as if Western classical music itself were not a product of intercultural intimacies, influences, and theft. Unable to revisit the past, we could do well to ask how an experimental and speculative approach to the forms could still bring these elements to perception. Thus, before attempting to create "Zerfließe, Mein Herze" in *abhinaya*, we asked: what would it mean for us to speculatively hear, think, and feel the aria *as*, or *as if it were already* an Odissi item?

"It wants movement"

"Zerfließe, Mein Herze" is the exquisite final aria of *Johannespassion* which proclaims the death of Christ to the world. In this somber F minor piece, the accumulated tension of the passion play is objectified, and in a cascade of sobbing figures swelled and released in the winds it is ritually purged, as the voice resounds the plea, "Dissolve, my heart, into floods of tears…" Sensing through Odissi, the song evokes a deep *viraha*, the mood of love-in-separation

that clings thickly to the Radha we had both danced in Lalitha Lavanga's introduction. In *viraha*, a sentiment which moves so many pieces of Indian music and dance, "the sweetness of possible union with a divine or human beloved is tinged with the bitterness of inevitable separation" (Chatterjee and Lee 60). Like *viraha*, the aria is long. It unspools time into a dwelling-place in which is so good and not-good to linger. Bach "understands" this—stretching out the four-line stanza that makes up Brockes's text into a luxurious 127 bars. The first two lines, "Dissolve, my heart, into floods of tears / To honor the most high" is stuttered until the persona can collect it into a sentence; to the warmer and gentler middle section Bach gives the following line, "Report to the world and to heaven the distress", which the persona also assembles in layers before the emphatic twice-made pronouncement, "Your Jesus is dead!" In a harmonically normative and formally symmetrical fashion, the first section with its two lines of text return as a closing refrain. In Bach's hands, "Zerfließe" is not a catalogue of action or development, but a melting of time into stream of affect, or perhaps *bhava* (mood or atmosphere) which, expressed effectively by a performer, may prick tongue-tips of the audience with a taste of *rasa* (essence, flavor).

Almost a century later, two towering German poets and orientalists would find an English translation of Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda* and appraise this precise quality of non-narrative languidness within it. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe would write in an 1802 letter: "What struck me as remarkable are the extremely varied motives by which an extremely simple subject is made endless." Friedrich Schiller, his addressee, would even consider it for the stage, only to give the final verdict that "the stage is directly opposed to it…[due to] its principal characteristic being tenderness" and the way that, because "the poet has taken a delight in spinning out sentiments with a certain easy-going complacency…it wants movement" ("Correspondence", Vol II).

Schiller's assessment interpolates historical Mahari dance as the "movement" which the *Gita Govinda* "wants" and contemporary Odissi as the movement that it would later "achieve"; but it also hails the antecedent music of Bach as sharing with the *Gita Govinda* songs certain vital qualities. While the *Gita Govinda*'s style of poetic elaboration was no longer fashionable for turn-of-the-19th-century European stage-singing—precisely due to the static nature of *both*—it recalls an earlier style of oratorio composition which was similarly steeped in the aesthetic of one basic affection (or as Schiller writes, "characteristic") according to the conventions of its own day. In the preceding century, German music that would become elevated as birthing the classical tradition was guided by the doctrine of affections following philosophers Spinoza and Descartes. Rooted in ancient Greece and explicated by European aestheticians, it attributed to music the power to arouse emotions through when artistic and emotional features were aligned. Thus, Bach's contemporary Johann Mattheson theorizes the evocation of "joy…by large intervals; sadness by small intervals; fury…[by] a roughness of harmony coupled with a rapid melody", and even associates musical forms and keys with different predispositions ("Doctrine of the Affections"; Mattheson and Lenneberg 234). These correspondences identified strategies for composers to create and sustain one affect of admiration, love, hatred, desire, joy, or sorrow in a piece.

At this point, a *rasika* or ideal spectator learned in the traditions in which we are dealing might tune in to a resonance—sounded across space and time—by *rasa* theory. Expounded by aesthetician Abhinavagupta and clarified to modern anglophone audiences by K C

Bhattacharya (1930) and Richard Schechner (2001) respectively, this theory of the Indian dramatic arts schematically links a set of *bhavas* with *rasas*, presiding deities, and colors, setting up representational conventions that could by means of performer-audience interaction ideally precipitate *rasa* (the goal of every performance!). Though Bach's aria "Zerfließe"' was guided by European affect theory of its place and time, could its expressive strategies—such as the trembling of constant semiquavers in the instruments and the melismatic text setting and descending, sigh-like figures in the voice—nonetheless be experienced as catalyzing rasa for us, *and for you, our imagined rasika*?

Let's leave this as a question for the near-future of performance and reception. Looking back, it is serendipitous enough that reading "Zerfließe" speculatively through Odissi leads us to find the very text that Odissi would be founded upon in the archive of *German* aesthetics, and to an intellectual exchange that unintentionally implies the not-yet-here dance form as a corporeal longing of a certain German music. This gives us but a glimpse of how the Western "classical" tradition, like Indian "classical" dance, is made and refined through its others in genealogies that mix ideas, poetics, and styles across space and time; how, despite the ethnic essentialism that sticks so readily to these forms, the crossings that become our project are already a hidden part of their histories which call to be performed.

The critical question, though, is *How*? Choreographing "Zerfließe", we felt the conduciveness of the aria to *abhinaya* in the way that it hailed *abhinaya*'s standard repertoire of poetic imagery: the heart, tears, flood, speech, oblation. Thus Caroline, Yong En, and I centred "Zerfließe"'s refrains around the dissolution of symmetrical, double-handed *hamsasyas* at the chest into flexed *alapadmas* descending on her body and outwards, beginning from a place of contained emotion that melts from within one's chest into a "flood of tears." In the next gesture, it flows diagonally with parallel *pataka* hands, compelling the dancer to travel its length with spread feet in *chowka* or follow its contours by placing one foot back in *prishta dhanu*. But even as the most obvious images and associations came readily from the surface of the text, we felt *sotto voce* (as an under-voice) a need for narrative movement: a thread that would like the instrumental accompaniment of this aria tie it all together.

In Odissi *ashtapadis*, "the relationship of [*abhinaya*] with the poetic text is not mechanical, but complex and articulated" (Gomes and Duarte 166). The translation of poetic word into poetic body occurs through a combination of "*padartha abhinaya*", which translates "song lyrics…into gestures, word by word" and of *sancari bhava*, a form of improvisatory movement which does not literally follow the meaning of the text but explores avenues for subtext and variation; this interplay is what makes Odissi "visible poetry"—and not prose—in action (167). Following this interpretive principle in *abhinaya*, then, we formulated a secondary narrative for "Zerfließe" beyond the poetic images it presents in the text. This is a song sung by a witness to Jesus's death, or perhaps the confirmation of his death in his lifeless body. How does the devotee register and process the death of the divine beloved, and how can their mutual intimacy implied by the musical and affective intensity of the aria be contextualized by and translated into poetic movement?

In the gospel of St John, a secret disciple named Joseph of Arimathea asks Pilate for Jesus's body so that he can bury him. He is assisted by Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council who had visited Jesus "at night" to seek his teachings. On the night of

the crucifixion, the two clandestine followers wrap the body with spices in strips of linen and lay Jesus in his grave. "Zerfließe" begins from this point of intimacy with the fallen beloved: a burial. Crouched on the floor, the dancer regards the imagined body. An unnamed secret devotee finally alone with her beloved, she solemnly stretches out a piece of linen to encircle the body as her warm tears, caught by the tightening folds, seep into its skin. In performance, Yong En would begin the aria at the right stage corner, crouched on the floor or the crypt which she finishes the last of her rites. Slowly, she would rise to train her grief upon "the world", moving diagonally across the stage. Reaching its front left corner, she would eventually return to a kneeling position, turning back to the scene of her beloved's body that spatially and narratively anchors this performance. This affirms the same emotional structure Bach gives the text through his musical arrangement: the movement from a reflection upon Jesus's death ("Zerfliebe, mein Herze…")—to an exhortation to the world ("Erzahle der Welt…")—and a return to the final, introverted refrain ("Zerfliebe, mein Herze…"). Beginning with *sancari bhava*, Yong En conjures an extra- or meta-textual narrative of mourning, before slipping into the song's text through the technique of *padartha abhinaya* that translates the text nearly word-for-word. Our choreography thus reflects an attempt to stir viraha-rasa—here greatly tilted toward the bitter—through principles of elaboration and choreo-musical interaction drawn from *Gita Govinda ashtapadis*.

Finding *Bhakti* in Bach / The Dancer's Voice

There are flavors of bittersweetness, as there are flavors of love, that do not translate even under the same linguistic sign, "devotion." In Lutheran theology, the love between God and humans is *agape*, the incomprehensible, unconditional, "spontaneous and unmotivated" love that creates value in its objects (Nygren 85). The distinction of *agape* from *eros* and *filia* relies on the implicit disembodiment of love from flesh, which in the Christian context is invested with value, interests, weakness, and temptation to sin. From the time of St Augustine, this phobic attitude has manifested in profound ambivalence toward devotional music, whose beauty and pleasurefulness can misdirect religious fervor (Outler and Augustine, Book 10 Chapter 33). Though Lutherans formed a denomination that largely honored and esteemed the role of music in god's service, the church community still frequently accused Bach of this kind of scripture-obscuring musical ostentatiousness – which would show up in his too-long organ improvisations or dense musical settings of liturgical texts "darkened by an excess of art" (Gioia).

Theoretically, this means that the devotional love animating the unnamed witness in "Zerfließe" belongs not on the registers of romantic or even familial love, but to reverential *agape* which (like the Kantian idea of beauty) legislates for itself in God's awe-inspiring presence. But when set to music, exactly how this devotion is represented—and particularly how it has been represented by Bach—augurs excess, sensuality and pleasure that can stir the passions in unpredictable ways so as to even blur distinctions among love's categories. In *Devotions*, we drew out this potential by (re)creating Bach in the language of Odissi *abhinaya*, which is "used to" figuring devotional love in a different way and carries over the baggage of this use here as heterodox. Within *bhakti*, the ideal relationship between devotee and divine is symbolized by that of Krishna (the male lover) and his consort Radha (the female beloved), whose erotic union "metaphorically emulates the devotional yearning of the…devotee to merge with the divine" (Sarkar 21-22). In

this mode of *sringara bhakti* (*bhakti* through eroticism), devotion involves a pleasurable, interested, and romanticized engagement with God—which dance, music, and poetry all help to stimulate. This is why Jayadeva introduces the *Gita Govinda* with the encouragement that devoted listeners allow the music to mold their desire for the divine into the shape of Radha's desire (Miller 69):

"If remembering Hari enriches your heart,
If his arts of seduction arouse you,
Listen to Jayadeva's speech
In these sweet soft lyrical songs."

What does it mean for us to have subtly modulated *agape* into the key of sringara bhakti through Odissi choreography? If overly graphic musical representation was suspect, the act of dancing to liturgical music was unthinkable in Bach's time. Today, when dancing to Bach has become extremely fashionable in various genres of concert dance (even enjoying treatment by Kuchipudi dancer Yamini Kalluri), Bach's liturgical music still remains untouched. *Devotions* not only articulates the composer's Passion music with movement, it does so through *abhinaya* layered with symbolism and associations accrued within the Vaishnava *bhakti* tradition, with its eroticized spirituality and spiritualized eroticism.

Like most genres of dance classicized by the Sangeet Natak Akademie, Odissi is strongly Hindu-coded: its narratives are dominated by deities and its metaphors of worship—such as giving blessings, lighting a *diya* for *puja*, and showing two palms pressed together in prayer—are actions shared with those of Hindu devotees in their everyday lives. A question that emerged for us in the choreographic process was whether to invoke a different god from Jesus entirely, with Odissi's characteristic worship gestures; to lend to our *abhinaya* specific actions of Christian worship (such as showing two interlaced palms, or representing Jesus's blessing hand as a "*mudra*"); or to favor nonspecific gestures of respect, honoring, and oblation that cannot be easily identified with any god or religion. In the end, we settled on the last strategy because we believed it could best convey an ecumenical expression, allowing for a more abstract and generalizable representation of the divine beloved that did not inhere in any gender, culture, or religion. Though our sung text affirms Christianity, our movement—and the ethos under which we moved—yoked to *bhakti* queers *agape* by liberating eroticism within and for spiritual devotion. Here, the erotic not only breeds connection between the singing voice and dancing body where in both Western classical music and Indian classical dance the two are conventionally kept apart; it also infuses gestures of devotion to assert that the devotee loves not only with their mind or their soul, but with their whole body—in all its mortal resourcefulness.

In *After the Party* (2018), Joshua Chambers-Letson writes about how Nina Simone's appropriation of Bach's inventions rescues what is "minor" in this towering figure of serious music by resignifying him as a proponent of improvisation and creative freedom. Perhaps our project also releases what was already adumbrated in the church community's critiques of Bach: the way that the heaped heavy-handedness of his rhetoric and thick sensuousness of his music leads his liturgical music off the straight path and touches the erotic. As an Odissi item, now, our rendition of this *Johannespassion* aria casts the faint shadow of Radha—the archetypal, feminised beloved—onto "Zerfließe"'s vocal persona, amplifying the minor in Bach that is *viraha*. Thus, *Devotions* did not so much draw two discrete traditions "together" as it (re)created each form in the other's image, such that what emerged was more like the Odissi-in-oratorio

Fig 1 - Still from official recording of *Devotions*

and the opera-in-Odissi, depending on one's point of view. . If the multiplicitous divine's "arts of seduction arouse[d]" both Bach and Jayadeva, they aroused us in turn to entwine their creations, in the hope that this resultant performance may too arouse the audience into faith—faith in the mix, a suspension of disbelief, a certain reverent irreverence for tradition, and perhaps a prick of devotion to all their own private and public gods.

PART III

Postlude: The Concourse

In September 2021, Wong Yong En and Amanda Lee would go on to perform *Devotions* on a free stage in the iconic durian-shaped Esplanade complex that conglomerates performing arts venues in the heart of Singapore's city center. On the second floor, the Concourse sits up a flight of stairs from the main entrance, in the middle of a pedestrian's path from one side of the building to the other, from the indoors to the outdoors, from train station to restaurant, from concert to washroom. In this land-scarce country, hardly any free space goes to waste (just look at the hanging visual art installation that makes up any performance's backdrop; or, conversely from below, let the leaking sounds of the half-visible performance condition your perception of the installation)—and this central foyer is "prime land."

With a stage front indicated by parallel rows of velvet cushions, a near-180-degree view of events, and a speaker system pouring sound into stray corners of the foyer, the Concourse is a thoroughly perforated space. The Esplanade's website also proudly introduces it as a "flexible" space that platforms "talented amateur, semi-professional and professional artists from Singapore and around the world", *as well as* dance troupes, standup comedy, ensemble music, poetry readings, jazz, singer-songwriter sets, and more—all for free ("Concourse")! But as performers, we know that it is *our* quality of flexibility—the flexibility which the space demands of us—that is projected as an attribute of the space itself. No matter the needs or staging conventions of our artistic practices, we all have to fit the construction, perceptual conditions, allowances and constraints of the concourse when given the precious opportunity to expose our work.

Let us go a little further back. For us, *Devotions* for the Concourse stage came about through a series of institutional affiliations. A year prior, Yong En had pitched an original performance from inception to staging as part of a class at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music where she was a music production major. Later, a Conservatory lecturer who doubled up as a programmer for the Esplanade offered three students the opportunity to stage their ideas at the Concourse. But it was only by turning this into a credited module for both herself and her pianist, and making good on free rehearsal spaces provided by both her dance studio and music conservatory was Yong En able to devote the time and effort required to make *Devotions* possible, and to pay her collaborators equitably, instead of relying—as we are wont to do—on free artistic labour.

Flexibility, according to Anusha Kedhar, is both a demand that capital thrusts upon labour under neoliberalism and an "array of bodily practices" such as "agility, versatility, speed, mobility, adaptability, and risk-taking" that rise to meet it (1). Captured by the official recording of *Devotions*, this double-edged flexibility forms the mise-en-scène at the picture's fringe: two floor lights and a huge speaker sit on the stage platform, occasionally hiding from the audience the intricate footwork so important to Odissi, and our performance. The headset mic

which almost mocks the projection techniques painstakingly cultivated by operatic training wraps securely around Yong En's head as a necessary compromise in this noisy and unbounded space. On the right, equipment is piled up as neatly as possible—but this does not stop a black leather case from spilling awkwardly onto the short platform, suddenly acquiring stage presence. And beyond the art installation that forms the performance's backdrop, vacillations of the automatic door bordering the night-washed forecourt garden add yet another rhythmic layer to what already requires so much concentration to grasp.

Clearly, the concourse was not made for this or any particular performance, and yet it invites all kinds of low-risk, low-barriers-to-entry, and low-maintenance shows that perhaps may not be able to secure ticketed seats in a larger venue. Returning a calculation of risk, profit, and exposure, Concourse performers make do with this proliferated space. Returning proliferation with proliferation, the "on-stage" of *Devotions* performs the mixing and making of artistic genealogies, while off-stage (which is also a foregrounded back-stage), conditions by which such "talented amateur, semi-professional and professional" performances exist cannot help but break its "fourth wall".

Is this kind of coerced flexibilization a harbinger of the "slow death" of traditional art forms, and our performance part of the "genre of acclimatization and adjustment" that emerges to feed on their decay? Inspired by the same artistic ecology that nourished *Devotions*, Nambiar's article documents "adaptive moves" practitioners of Odissi in Singapore make in a climate which renders traditional dance increasingly "untenable" within "governmental and ethical regime of value" (Nambiar 45). Extending the article's ecological poetics, I read in Nambiar's argument the idea that hybridizing Odissi is a last-ditch attempt to salvage species traits, given that saving the whole species is out of the question in Singapore's innovation-valorizing artistic climate. These attempts are read in relation to loss: Malaysian dancer January Low's refusal to perform mastery of Odissi in favor of quotidian rituals of self-sustenance in her work *reclaim-in-progress* is "a pause that augurs the losses imminent in pressing ahead", while choreographer Raka Maitra's *Pallavi* series is implied to scatter, and yet also remember, "the cohesive world in which Mohapatra's choreographies (Odissi's traditional repertoire) are rooted" (50).

Uniquely positioned to write the introduction or eulogy of my own collaborative work in diasporic Odissi, I argue that here, the incentive to acclimatize and adjust our practice of Odissi was most acutely felt when we had to coax this exploration into the Concourse's fixed opportunity and space, rather than in the processual "hybridization" of genres that simultaneously conserves "what is valuable" in Odissi and eschatologically stands for its imminent end. What *does* end? If anything, only a specific iteration of the art form invented and classicized—already a powerful insurance against the ravages of time—at a node in its long circuitous journey through bodies over time. Holding on to historicity, the opening phrase of this essay, I resist thinking of Odissi as having lived only in Mohapatra's "cohesive world" (of decolonization, nation-building, and artistic reinvention, no less!); thus, I resist thinking of Odissi as dying in ours, even shores away in cosmopolitan Singapore.

In what Jasbir Puar calls a "prehensive" (or self-fulfilling) timeline toward extinction, saving Odissi as-is at the time the pronouncement of endangerment is made becomes an ideal for which conservation via hybridization is a lamentable though necessary substitute (Puar 148). While postcolonial theories of hybridization figure hybridity as the shadow of

racial purity, then, I wonder if hybridity might also always be shadowed by—no matter how impossible or problematized—racial purity's ideal.

Here I briefly bring in Martinican intellectual Aimé Césaire and postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha to clarify the way that purity haunts hybridity in the registers of race, first, and then art. *The Discourse on Colonialism* (1950), Césaire shows how in the colonizer's formulation, mixed-race children in a white French school represent the dilution of Blackness, while the same mixed-race children at a "colored" family's dinner table now represent the dilution of whiteness (62-63). Whether in schools, homes, offices, or factories, Homi Bhabha (1994) would place these girls in a "third space of cultural enunciation"—of culture, language, social, racial, and political identities—created by the mutual though indisputably hierarchical participation of the colonizer and colonized (276). Lodged firmly within this dualistic colonial dynamic, the postcolonial concept of hybridity constructs a "buffer race" in the realm of cultural production; in doing so, it continues to associate mixing and mixedness, or what it calls hybridity and syncretism, with the liminal in-between that is as cosmopolitan as it is "homeless."

The language of hybridity is now frequently used by scholars, dancers, and audiences to describe experiments in diasporic Indian dance. But what is less apparent is how this parlance may surreptitiously and perhaps ironically invite the mapping of colonial ideas of race reproduction onto the arts, where ethnically marked artistic practices stand for racial identities that meet in a fraught "third space" that is the diaspora. Following this logic to its conclusion begs the question: are cross-cultural or even cross-generic artistic experiments about saving race traits in a new, eugenically-inflected hybridity, an outcome secondary only to the faithful reproduction of race and art that cannot be guaranteed in diaspora's splintering present?

It is here that I return to Gopinath's idea that the highly romanticized and yearned-for antidote to diaspora that is "home" is "permanently and already ruptured…by colliding discourses around class, sexuality, and ethnic identity" (15). The Esplanade Concourse visualizes this space of proliferation as also a space of collision—of peoples, traditions, styles, expectations and realities. However, as I have detailed here, the performance that was elevated on the Concourse platform is only a spectacular reification of the varying registers of contact already occurring among Bach, Jayadeva, Goethe, Schiller, the Maharis, Jayantika, Yong En, Caroline Chin, Raka Maitra, Amanda Lee, myself, programmers, and Esplanade technicians vibrating across time and space and irrevocably mediated by text, time, bias and desire, even though some—including us—might sometimes strategically call *Devotions* a mix of only "Western classical music" and "Indian classical dance." Nevertheless, in analyzing *Devotions* within the analytic of mixed genealogies, I intend to recalibrate our gazes, which are so used to identifying the borders between races, to a scale of difference so granular it would draw attention to the "the mixtures that are concealed in the lines of (even) the conventional family tree"—the family trees of every tradition—and turn what from the outside appears as an echo chamber into a contact zone (Ahmed 154).

Mixed genealogies thus rests on a notion of universality that resonates with Madhavi Menon's provocative concept of queer universalism, a theory against identity politics and the essentialist linkage of certain bodies with certain desires, identities, and politics. Why and how can queerness be universal? Menon argues that "we are all marked by a

superabundance of desire that might be termed queer." The fact that we are all black boxes of unpredictable and ungovernable desires—in this we are strangely equal, strangely humbled, and universally queer. As "no-thing—peoples, events, desires can achieve ontological wholeness", Menon advocates for a politics of indifference that breaks with the overcorrected poles of identity and post-identity politics to instead see difference *everywhere*. And yet, this observation of "the multiple differences within which we live" must not function to solidify identity, but "offer…a gap between difference and identity" and negate (the illusion of one fixed and coherent) identity as an ontological basis for defining a self (20).

In the highly racialized register of lineage, an attunement to mixed genealogies compels a similar indifference to purity and authenticity by reminding us that genealogies are *performative*: they do not simply become; they are made. And so, *performing* mixed genealogies can in turn refer to a practice of experimentation that unearths mixtures hidden in the proverbial family tree, tries out different points of origin and speculates upon future connections premised upon a radical and perhaps even controversial indifference to difference—a performance of parity. It is interesting that Menon uses *theater* to illustrate the way people are capable of partaking in the decimation of identity, how we readily submit to its mode of substituting essences for roles and people for personas actualized by impersonation, identification, suspension of disbelief and play. This reminds us that the performing arts have the unique capacity to defamiliarize fixities through the contingent particularity of bodies in action. That the "eternally vanishing" performing arts are famously problematic for the archive is a reminder that performances, too, are singularities that resist being appropriated for singular meanings.

I do not wish to affirm the neoliberal drive for "freedom" and "innovation" that indiscriminately breaks existent bonds of artistry and sociality within art forms, neither do I mourn the r/evolutions of Odissi from epoch to epoch, moment to moment for preservation's sake alone. Instead, by asserting the universalism of mixed genealogies, I attempt to slip through the bind created by these discourses in order to arrive at a (in) different understanding of diasporic dance—one that inspects its veneer of coherence for already-sedimented differences that could gesture toward a politics of the future. In explicating the devising process of *Devotions*, I highlight the collective labour which made this project possible, so that you may see how the performance of mixed genealogies on stage happens by mixing forms of artistry and wisdom "backstage", and in the case that our negotiations of the artistic, ethical, and practical in this process may be useful for your own.

In speaking of Odissi's life, we are speaking of the way that *people* take Odissi on with their bodies in all their particular assemblages of difference for the thoroughly imperfect reasons that provoke them to do so and the thoroughly compromised conditions under which they do. Refusing an ontology of Odissi based in any one time, place, or body, my guess is that Odissi "is most like itself" when it historicizes where we all were with fidelity, as it tends to do with the intricate translucency of a poem (not prose!). And how could it not? To dance in diaspora is to move nourished by the soil, the heat, and the air as it is organically composed here and nowhere else. And to dance queerly in diaspora is to claim the superabundant contingency of desire and let it take you far from—while already being, right at—"home."

Note on stylistic conventions

For the purposes of publication, this essay uses American spelling and italicizes all non-English words except the names of people, groups, artistic forms and social movements.

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The Revolution Will Not Be Exhibited

Nandini Sikand

"It is no secret that millions of objects, never destined for display in museal white walls, have been looted from all over the world by different imperial agents. It is no secret that many of them have been carefully handled, preserved and displayed to this day in Western museums as precious art objects. At the same time, it is no secret that millions of people, stripped bare of most of their material world, including tools, ornaments and other artifacts, continue to seek a place where they can be at home again and rebuild a habitable world. These two seemingly unrelated movements of forced migration of people and artifacts, as well as their separation, are as old as the invention of the "new world." (Azoulay, n.d., 1)

Early in the film from the Marvel Cinematic Universe, *Black Panther* (Coogler, 2018), Erik Killmonger Stevens (Michael B. Jordan) stands before a glass case of African artifacts at the "Museum of Great Britain," a thinly-disguised stand-in for the brick and mortar British Museum in London. In the scene, Killmonger informs the museum director of his intention to take back the artifacts. The puzzled director reminds him that the items are not for sale. Killmonger counters, "How do you think your ancestors got these? Do you think they paid a fair price? Or did they take it… like they took everything else?" The film and this scene draw our attention to, among other things, the theft of Benin Bronzes by British soldiers in 1897. It attempts to make visible how these museum holdings were transported in the hold of ships that had previously carried enslaved peoples, profiting from their bodies for centuries.

Colonial theft transformed the wealth of colonial powers, and the afterlives of colonialism continue to negatively affect countries often referred to as "post-colonial." According to a recent estimate, Britian stole a staggering $45 trillion from the Indian subcontinent between 1765 and 1938 alone. The British Museum opened its doors in 1759 and continues to display its spoils from various parts of the world. As an institution it receives tourists from all over the world — in 2024, over 6.5 million visitors came, breaking previous records. More than a site of breezy tourism, the museum exists as an ongoing site of exhibition, education, contestation, appropriation and theft.

In this essay, I try to understand what it means to stage an Indian classical dance performance at the British Museum and what is at stake. More specifically I query, what does it mean to sacralize stolen objects with immigrant bodies dancing dances from colonized lands. *Apotheosis*, a carefully-choreographed staging by several Indian neo-classical dancers, was performed in the storied museum's Sir Joseph Hotung Gallery of China and South Asia, in 2019. The performance's title which means "divinification," is the elevation of a person to the rank of a god or divine being, or, the ultimate expression or epitome of a divine quality. The question I ask is if and how this artistic performance, in this space, intervenes in or uncritically extends the well-established depravations of colonial plundering.

The video of the performance opens with a Bharatnatyam dance in front of a large Chola bronze Nataraja from 1100 A.D. Surrounded by deities, sculptures and artifacts from two of the most populous countries in the world, China and India, the virtuosic dancers perform four (of eight) Indian neo-classical forms— bharatnatyam, odissi, kuchipudi and kathak— to an appreciative crowd watching behind velvet ropes. The video alternates between the dancers in the crowded gallery and shots of

them performing to and around the sculptures with no people. This choice directs our viewing attention toward the presence and absence of audiences, witnesses to events both current and historical.

The filmed version premiered online during the pandemic in 2021 as a celebration of South Asia Heritage month in the UK. The almost 30-minute video is still available at the British Museum Events YouTube page and currently has almost 4.5 million views. Part of the description beneath the online video reads, *"Devised in response to the Museum's South Asia collection, it brought the objects to life and charged them with the life-force they were created to hold"* (italics mine). But precisely what response had been "devised" and what manner of "life-force" was transmuted into the long-displaced objects? Do the classical dancers provide the context or cultural "charge" from which the artifacts were formerly ripped, or do they simply reify their carceral status in the museum's galleries/galleys?

In an introduction to a special issue on *Dance and the Museum*, Franko and Lepecki ask, "What role might dance be fulfilling 'in the museum's ruins'" (Crimp 1995), as it operates through its crevices, cracks, and usually dormant spaces, to offer a spectacle of the living, and to bring live performance back to these ruins, after the strong institutional critique the museum had suffered throughout the late 1960s and the 1970s? Does dance serve what Tony Bennett (1995) has called the museum's "exhibitionary complex"? (Franko and Lepecki 2014, 2) Such questions are crucial but need to be answered anew within the colonial and contemporary context. These neo-classical dance forms suffered violences and critiques of concubinage and vulgarity by Victorian morality enmeshed in colonial power, and were policed, starved and eliminated. Post-independence in 1947, and reinvented for the proscenium stage in the 20th century, these dance forms found new audiences and a reanimated resilience. What better way to counter the rising critique of stolen goods and to ensure that they stay within the walls of the British museum than to "open" it to dancing immigrant bodies, nurtured by immigrant organizations dancing dance forms vilified and destroyed by colonialism?

It might seem that the museum has taken up Ariella Aisha Azoulay's challenge, cited at the beginning, by placing dancing bodies, many who are the living consequences of forced displacements and migrations, into a conversation with stolen goods. But museums, like universities, are subject to the same logics of colonialism, imperialism and capitalism, and although aesthetically, it may be a successful endeavor of feminine-presenting, virtuosic dancers who share their craft for a few hours, *Apotheosis* masks violent colonial histories. We must ask how does the acquisition of moving bodies—not only in a one-off performance to a live audience but in its video afterlife—provide tacit permission for other kinds of theft? Unlike Killmonger in *Black Panther*, the dancers do not leave with any of these artifacts, suggesting, as it might, a hope for a long-deferred justice or repatriation of objects. More to the point, they become artifacts themselves, joining the deep and complicated catalog of colonial piracy. To dance neoclassical dance forms amid stolen objects is to dance a complicity in the museum's perpetual colonial mission.

Akademi, the presenting company, is an institution based in the UK which has been dedicated to the study of South Asian Dance forms since 1979. They have navigated what it means to sustain these immigrant dance forms, teach and build communities around them, and function within the economy of South Asian dance in the west, jockeying mightily for funding, space, time and an audience. The bodies of the dancers in the museum belie the labour, training, injury, and the fragility of dance-

making (Srinivasan 2011). Yet art, specifically dance and film can do the work of being able to show us the horrors of colonialism. For example, Mati Diop, in her unique hybrid of fiction and documentary *Dahomey* (Diop, 2024) addresses this very issue of the complexities of colonial loot. Between 1872-1960, French colonizers took artefacts from Benin, formerly known as the Kingdom of Dahomey in West Africa. After an extensive campaign for repatriation, 26 items were approved for return from the Musée du quai Branly in Paris. The film anthropomorphizes object "Number 26" whose disembodied voice leads us through much of the film as they long for a return to their homeland. We hear (in Fon) "There are thousands of us in this night. Uprooted. Ripped out. The spoils of massive plundering. What awaits me elsewhere?" The journey of 26 objects is followed by a nuanced discussion with students at Université d' Abomey-Calavi about cultural theft and repatriation. It is a powerful film with the youth of Benin who model how to have these conversations and what is at stake.

In Fall 2022, I taught a semester abroad in London, offering a class titled *The Empire Strikes Back* (inspired by Stuart Hall's 1982 essay). I included a visit to the Tower of London to see the Crown Jewels. Among them is the famed Kohinoor, perhaps the most well-known of colonial treasures. When the students emerged from the exhibit, I asked them what they thought and a Pakistani student smiled wryly and said, "chori ka maal" (the stuff of theft). While our class centered around these issues and the ongoing resistance to empire, many of these responses do not always come readily from students in the West. Instead, colonialism and the material artifacts of colonialism—be they bronzes or classical Indian dance—are commodified, packaged for uncritical consumption by millions, yet again.

No doubt the performances at the British Museum were/are transformative for some. They created an opening, a breath, a possibility to learn even as the dancing bodies danced in the hold of the museum. M. Jacqui Alexander's *Pedagogies of Crossing*, the collection of essays that inspire this issue, intervenes in such spaces of knowledge production, especially those that are "imprisoned within modernity's secularized episteme"(Alexander 2005, 8). Alexander urges us to destabilize our current ways of knowing and engage in "the urgent task of configuring new ways of being and knowing and to plot the different metaphysics that are needed to move away from living alterity premised in difference to living intersubjectivity premised in relationality and solidarity"(Alexander 2005, 8–9). To take up her challenge, in the museum and beyond, what would such possibilities of living look like?

A productive response to this challenge might begin with a simple inclusion of a multiplicity of informed voices. The student at the Tower of London, for example, was able to cut to the heart of the matter not through a training in museum studies, but via the hard-won personal knowledge of someone from a conquered land. What if that voice were allowed the same level of platform exposure as the copy promoting the video? What if the voice of a museum professional from a plundered country who has been striving to convince brutish museums to return the objects they display were paired alongside the West's proclaimed nobility of purpose in protecting the world's treasures from risk and depravation? What if we asked the dancers themselves to speak to the complexity inherent in their positionality, as well as their devotional and artistic practice as it intersects with the fraught spaces of colonial exhibitionisms? Might such simple insistences be just one beginning to "rebuild a more habitable world"(Azoulay, n.d.) for all?

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

Feriyal Amal Aslam

Abstract

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

Introduction

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

SADI welcome submissions around the world with focus on: *interdisciplinary, intercultural, intersectional, and intergenerational* pedagogies embedded within creative departures from the canon in the worlding of South Asian Dance Studies.

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

It is also in the realm of *intercultural* and *intergenerational* as Indu's trail blazing pedagogies choreographed on Pakistani soil, passed on to the next generation who are now based in different parts of the world (namely United States, Indonesia, Germany and Europe[3]). SADI's emphasis on "processes and

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4 https://centreline.com.pk/2019/11/18/indonesian-artists-present-spell-binding-performance-pnca/
5 https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1311914-heat-hate-and-hegemony
6 Grateful to World Arts and Cultures (WAC), UCLA alumni and friend Eko Supriyanto for the call to contribute to this exciting international conference and to Professor Kim Anno's reflexive workshop in aiding these "*wild*" connections.

continue to use my art as peacebuilder tools and to collaborate with like-*minded*[7] ecology and earth focused others. My first steps in this direction are inward and reflexive and to encounter my "other" and as I do so in the process, I hopefully illuminate the path for others to do so for their respective "others". Ahead I return once again to a special space or "field" in the words of Sufi poet Mevalana Rumi, and then share ahead the next best steps that I have taken since then to embrace my "Hindu" other.

"Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing
and right doing there is a field.
I'll meet you there."

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

1. INCLUSIVITY AND SACRED SPACE: From Luminary *Saraswati*, to "*Muslim Garuda*"[8] to getting to know *Krishna*

Bandung, 2023

"So, I venture in that open field and embody the Devi Saraswati inspired from this mighty river, both forgotten in "The Land of the Pure," land of my birth as the other, a "Hindu goddess," but celebrated in my second home by love, Indonesia. It is here that I write these words and discover in Indonesian language even the word for "dance" is ***persembahan****, translated as "offering" rather than performance. So, this is my offering here ahead. As I begin to write and reflect on this dance, I discover what evaded me, and perhaps my generation, all this time and which was long known by elders of both the land of Indonesia and the subcontinent that what I saw as "Hindu God" stories are actually narrations of "luminaries" like Krishna or Devi Saraswati. My dance is my offering to the dried-out soul of the land of my birth, thirsty for the sounds and sights of the river full of layers of alluvial riches hidden to the casual passerby. Today Indonesia is the country with the largest number of Muslims in the world and Islam was spread in Java (the most populous island in Indonesia) largely by these famous* ***Wali Sanga*** *or Nine Luminaries and it is to their creative genius and mindful preaching that we owe this celebration of diversity here. I see here that Devi Saraswati is one of them, a female luminary, spreading her light filled with wisdom, beauty and aesthetics."* (p.16)

(Aslam 2023)

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

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

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

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

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

Magaleng September 2024

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

It was both perplexing and exciting to venture in this wild collaboration with Master Gamelan musicians Wibowo and his group from Jogjakarta and to choreograph with a Solo classical style trained dancer and cultural expert Nani Abdur Rahman, on this philosophical critique of state of Indonesia's socio-political problems on soul stirring poetry by Pa Hadi. Especially challenging for me as a secular bharata Natyam trained dance student from Pakistan with no such vocabulary in my repertoire, to create and reflect on what my "Muslim Garuda" (as my co-collaborator Nani called it to help my process), should look like.

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

KLG refers to communities living in the five mountains of *Magelang*, Central Java that from *Mount Sumbing*, *Merbabu*, *Andong*, *Merapi*, and *Menoreh* have come together to form one community. According to Adia and Ma'arif "*Sutanto Mendu*t, the president of KLG has built the community with the characteristics of what Victor Turner calls "communitas". Their research examines ideas of communitas and their results indicate that society emerges through ritual performances that create moments of liminality, in turn result of re-articulation of the anti-norms/social order structure. Sutanto Mendut, has rearticulated this sense of togetherness through the Land Oath (Sumpah Tanah) of KLG to become the Five Mountains Festival (FLG). Lastly KLG is the strength of the community as members learn are no longer dependent on established social structures and are free to feel the moment of togetherness.

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

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

Once again, I am dancing "Brinda Bun[9] Krishna's stories from maestro Indu Mitha's repertoire invited to share my Bharata Natyam dance

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sari) which I detail elsewhere[10] to the Kavita *bols* (recited Shloka type chant)[11] that Indu purposely choreographs in Urdu language and uses in her *kathak* repertoire which otherwise has virtually disappeared in Pakistan.

> The usage of *kavita bols* is a subtle transgression that may be lost on those unfamiliar with the available classical dance music and traditions available in Pakistan. Only people familiar with these *bols* in pre-Partition North India may recognize that these are one of the beautiful elements occluded and lost in classical dance repertoire in Pakistan after the Partition.
>
> (Aslam, 2012)

Similarly in classical music maestro musicians /*Ustads* are adding to the fire in the darkness of Partitions and divisions along communal lines. Recently I came across this online music concert[12] of our music Ustad from Indu's *Mazmun-e-Shauq* evening classes Ustad Ghulam Farid Nizami who is now based in the United States. Here he is sharing his ancestor, a muslim Ustad Ahmad Bakhsh Khan writing poetry with deep respect for Krishna. Thus, now in the US after seeking asylum he continues to preserve this shared Muslim-Hindu space which is almost extinct in Partitioned lands of Pakistan, India and Bangladesh.

2. STEPS TOWARDS THE SPIRITUAL ECOLOGY OF MY DANCE

> "The body becomes the site of weaving together research, memory, and imagination to invoke and create new collective memories and stories. . . . This practice of story-ing, where the tensions and resonances between multiple stories reveal an emotional map of the physical choreography and trace connections, puts us in conversation with various communities and in alignment with our commitment to decolonized knowledge production"
>
> (p.18, Chatterjea, Wilcox, and William)

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

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

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

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

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

I recall Indu's words in 2016 at the prestigious Islamabad Literature Festival (ILF) when her work was selected as the inaugural performance and I was Indu's dancer that night for her contemporary choreography[14] which started with the still began posture of this possibly oldest intact dance related figurine in the world. Indu in her introduction to the piece reminded the literary audience about the dance drama as culmination of all the arts and that:

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

I have written elsewhere (Aslam, 2012) on forgotten and occluded histories and cultural practices shared across the problematic borders of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. But SADI's earlier call[15] helped me articulate for the first time, which I continue ahead my embodied experience from another one of my lands by love. As resident of Nusantara blessed by the wisdom and hikmah of Java, and of the *Sunans* of this land a sustainable vision of peace inclusivity that the embodied practice of this dance form, and my moving bodily explorations continue to gift me with.

I initially found material on "Spiritual ecology of Bharat Natyam dance" in the Indian context from the mainstream literature on aspect. A recent paper by S. Pillai in the International Journal of Research Culture Society titled "*Eco-aesthethics awareness and bharata Natyam*"[16] connects nature and the environment aesthetically reflected in bharata natyam performances, hand gestures and movements and how bharata natyam can spread and present ecological awareness. Work of renowned dancers of bharata natyam namely Malavika Sarukai is mentioned and Geetha Chandran view on the two problems of today I want to highlight to zoom in ahead:

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

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

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

14 *Hum Gunahgar Aurtaen* we sinful women, poetry Kishwar Naheed a contemporary bharata natyam piece choreographed by Indu Mitha on the women's movement premiered 2016.
15 See https://journals.charlotte.edu/sadi/issue/view/143
16 https://ijrcs.org/wp-content/uploads/IJRCS202104012.pdf

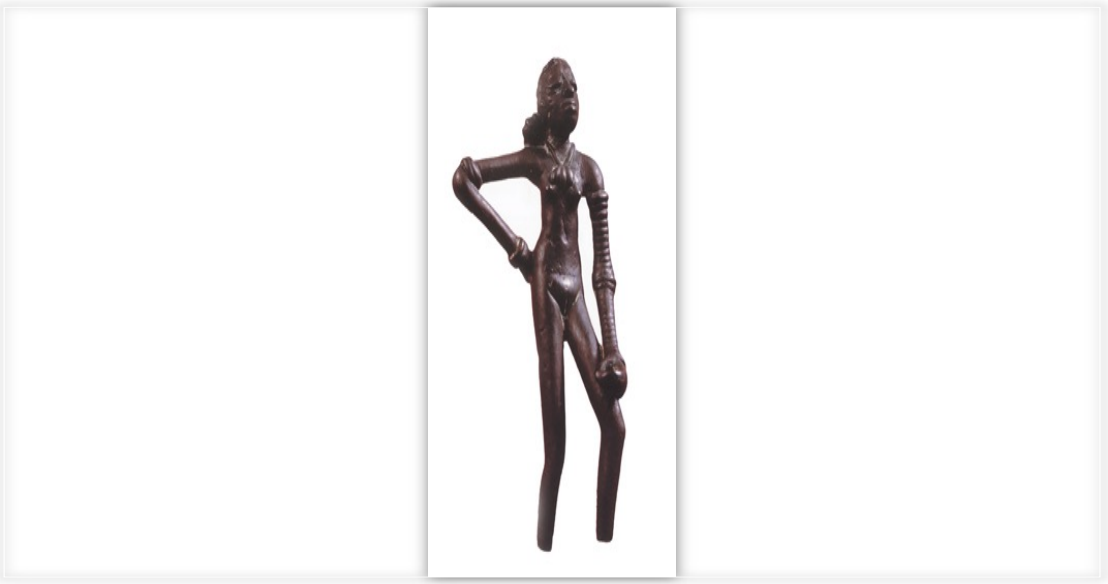

Figure 2: Delhi Museum "Dancing Girl of Mohenjodaro" (Used with Permission)

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

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

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

*"The rhythms of the **tabla** as my guide and the strings of the sitar too leading me, urging me from deep within my soul to the sacred geometry of the circle as I turn round and round with my right hand up, holding the light, just like the whirling dervish that holds his or her hand up to receive directly from the Divine. And in my left hand is the Book, my worldly means of sharing the messages I receive and means of service in the Path of Love. For the author, also the dancer in this piece, these open a space of interfaith harmony illuminating and blessing all creation. Indu's Qaseeda-i-ilm-Jamal narrates the humble process of discovery of beauty and aesthetics that leads to ascension of each soul when it follows it individual calling and journey. When one is grounded in one's unique indigenous land, committed to the honesty of the moment via one's practice and the discipline that it requires, one transcends to higher vistas."*

(p.20, ibid)

WISDOM OF THE MANDALA

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

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

Figure 4: The iPeace Mandala by Maja Apolonia Rode[18]

End Dance Salam:

From Peace to Spiritual Ecology of my Dance

"I stand upright feet together and hands in a titli (butterfly) mudra, which is made by holding three fingers, thumb, and two forefingers together but stretched out tightly. My other two fingers spread out from there. Both hands are held at chest level and face each other, almost but not touching. Elbows are up. Once ready in this position, feet are lifted to stamp in the first position of bharata natyam, where all of your body, including the legs, is held straight. First the right foot, then the left, is lifted and stamped to the beat of one and two. Next the hands and arms are stretched out in front of the chest with thumbs facing down. Bring them first away from the body in front center and then back closer to the chest towards the center, thumbs down. From this center position the hands start turning in a small circle with the thumbs slowly coming towards the upper side. The downward thumbs become upwards thumbs at the same time as the elbows are turned in and out again. It ends with the hands stretched out palms up in a horizontal line, parallel to the floor. Next I move to the third position in bharata natyam, while the outstretched palms complete their semi-circle to the front middle of the body as the body moves down, knees stretched outwards as the hands. Once again palms are down, and the earth is touched in reverence. From the earth the fingers touch the center of the forehead. Finally, I am back to the first position, but the hands and arms make a wider circular movement in the body's kinesphere and end in an arch framing the head as the palms touch."

(Aslam, 2012)

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

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

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

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

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

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Beyond the Holy Trinity of Vyajanthimala, Waheeda Rahman and Madhuri Dixit: A Case for the Lesser Known Women Dancers of Bombay Cinema

Siddhi Goel

"Me: Jeevankala ji, how do you feel when you *dance?*
Jeevankala : Kya maloom music sunte hi badan mein bijli si aati hai" (I don't know it feels like lightning enters my body when I hear music)

As she said this, her seventy-eight year old bent spine became straight, eyebrows rose and eyes shone. I was stumped to see this physical transformation unfold before my eyes. Trained in Kathak by Balasaheb Gokhale in Pune, Jeevankala was a highly sought after dancer-actress, working in 500+ films in various languages (personal interview, Jeevankala, 2022). Her famous dance songs include the massive hit '*hansta hua noorani chehra*', from Parasmani (1963), '*meri mitti mein mil gayi jawani*' , a duet with Helen from Khandan (1965) and the delightful all women qawwali '*sharma ye kyun sab pardanasheen*' from Chaudhvin ka Chand (1960) where she is seen right next to Waheeda Rahman.

To say that dance is an integral part of Bombay Cinema would be an understatement, it is its pulse, its beating heart. Working hand in glove with the film song, film dance exists less in abstraction but more in conjunction with lyrics, melody, rhythm, and most importantly in tandem with the storytelling of the film.

My research on the presence of Kathak dance and dancers in Bombay Cinema began with the premise that there is a deep and beautiful tradition of dance in Bombay Cinema, as much as there is a deep and beautiful tradition of dance in the Indian classical dance world. The use of the word 'tradition' is conscious, and carries within it generations of film dancers, directors, choreographers and actors who have enriched this tradition with their unique touch decade after decade.

The dance tradition of Bombay Cinema has an identifiable arc, an evolution nurtured by evolving technology and design and also shows a continuous flow that has reinvented itself time and again. This article however is not about analysing the dance sequences from this time period, but on the ecosystem of dancers and choreographers, who had trained in Kathak, and entered the film industry to work, with a special focus on the women dancers.

In Bombay cinema, especially from early cinema in late 1930s up to the 1970s, film songs contributed to the storytelling of the film by taking its story forward. The songs would come at an opportune moment, either expressing the emotions of the characters or where the story was headed. The accompanying dance was thus important, as it was attached to a larger purpose of lyrics and meaning making, apart from being a visual treat.

In this article, I will be focusing on the period from 1940s to 1960s in Bombay Cinema, with a little spillover to the 1970s. It is widely considered among film enthusiasts that the 1960s were the aesthetic peak of dance in Bombay Cinema, which had begun to take shape in the 1950s. In this decade, one notices the development of a distinct language of film dance that is identifiable as 'bollywood filmi dance', a combination of Kathak, Bharatnatyam, folk, semi classical and mixed western forms resulting in a hybrid form greater than the sum of its parts. Before that, in the 1940s and 50s while individual dancers like Bhagwan Dada or Kathak exponents Sitara Devi and Roshan Kumari had their signature styles, as a community the 'Bollywood' dance style was beginning to get formed.

Figure 1. Jeevankala in the song '*hansta hua noornani chehra*' from Parasmani (1963). YouTube screenshot

Figure 2. (L-R) Jeevankala and Helen in the song '*meri mitti mein mil gayi jawani*' from Khandan (1965). Youtube screenshot

During these decades, there was a trend of 'solo dancers', or dancer actresses whose primary work in the film was to dance. The dancer could be a village belle, a courtesan whose kotha is visited often by the hero (Minoo Mumtaz in Chaudhvin ka Chand ,1960), a court dancer if its a period film (Bela Bose in Chitralekha, 1964), a *banjaran* dancer (Aruna Irani in '*dilbar dil se pyare*', Caravan 1971) or part of an all female qawwali song (Shakeela Bano Bhopali in '*kehte hain jisko ishq*, Aaj aur Kal 1963) one of my favourite genres unfortunately extinct in Hindi language films now.

Depending on the skills of the dancer, they would often play a small acting role in the film as well. Figures such as Bela Bose, Minoo Mumtaz, Nimmi, Kumkum, were regular actors , while others such as Rani, Habiba Rahman worked more as dancers. Producers often insisted on putting their dances in films because they became so popular (personal interview, Jeevankala,2022). Not just active on screen, many of these women were also an integral part of dance performances in concerts of singers such Mohammed Rafi, Kishore Kumar, and toured extensively. (personal interview, Jayshree T., 2022).

Bela Bose, Minoo Mumtaz, Laxmi Chhaya, Helen, Sheila Vaz, Kumkum, Jayshree T, Padma Khanna, Rani, Jeevankala, Heera Sawant are only some of the absolutely stellar, electrifying performers who lit up the film screen from 1950s-70s. They also form our earliest association of watching film dance aka watching vivacious, vibrant and skilled dancers on screen. Some like Chanda, Meenaxi, Alka Noopur were also background dancers, and starred in small acting roles next to the heroine. Some doubled up as assistants to more well known dance masterjis, and some unfortunately remained uncredited.

Most of them had trained in Kathak and some came from hereditary song and dance lineage. Dancer actress Nimmi's mother Wahidan was a famous singer[1], Kumkum learned Kathak from Shambhu Maharaj of Lucknow, Rani from Ram Narayan Mishra of Kolkata and Krishna Maharaj[2], and Padma Khanna and Helen (briefly) had learned from Gopi Krishna.[3] Habiba Rahman had learned Kathak from Lacchu Maharaj, Sitara Devi, Mohanrao Kallianpurkar before becoming a regular dance partner of Gopi Krishna.[4] Anjana Mumtaz has been a disciple of Gauri Shanker.[5] Habiba Rahman's mother Bibi Almaas too was an actor in the silent cinema in Bombay and had learned Kathak from Lacchu Maharaj and Sitara Devi.[6] Gopi Krishna and Lacchu Maharaj both being Kathak exponents and popular dance directors in Bombay cinema, hailing from the Banaras and Lucknow Gharana respectively.

Most studies of Bombay film dance have focussed on star dancing actors like Waheeda Rahman, Vyjayanthimala, Madhuri Dixit, Hema Malini, Asha Parekh, etc. While their contribution to Bombay film dance is immense, I argue that the glorious tradition of dance in Bombay cinema has been built on the shoulders of not only a few star actresses and choreographers, but on these countless

1 Sharma, Shishir Krishna "Sitara Devi talks about actress Nimmi's mother Wahidan, a well known actress/singer in 1930s." YouTube, uploaded by Beete Hue Din, 12 June 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=39HF9Qok-3TM

2 Tabassum "Dancer Rani and her Life Long Troubles | Tabassum Talkies." YouTube, uploaded by Tabassum Talkies, 20 April 2020 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P2glmXtoi5M&t=235s

3 Kelkar, Jeevankala. Personal interview. 8 July 2022

4 Rahman, Habiba. Personal interview. 8 July 2022

5 Mumtaz, Anjana. Personal interview. 12 July 2022

6 Rahman, Habiba. Personal interview. 8 July 2022

nameless faces of women dancers. Faces that lit up the screens with their technical prowess, charm and *adakari*.

Who gets forgotten and who is remembered reflects a value system that prioritises certain histories over others. Eclipsed by the towering presence of their male gurus who define lineage, as well hierarchies within the film industry, these marginal histories need to be documented, for the sheer force of their artistic value and contribution to films.

Part 1: Training, Labour, Hierarchy

When one looks at them dancing on screen, it is clear that these are not untrained bodies. That these women dancers come from years of *taleem* (deeper word for learning in the Indian classical music-dance tradition), rigour and rehearsal. Jeevankala spoke to me about how she would train for hours during the day, attend night school, dance in Ganesh Utsav as a child in Pune, and also travel with group dancing parties for shows before coming into films.

Although there are countless examples of their dancing prowess, one quite relevant here is this electrifying dance competition duet between dancer Rani and established star actress-trained classical dancer Asha Parekh. It is the song 'dekho bijli dole bin badal' from the film *Phir Wohi Dil Laya Hoon* (1963).

Rani's agility, swiftness, and execution of complex, fast movements is in perfect tandem and in some places even better than that of Parekh. To each challenge from Parekh, Rani's movements give equal replies, a *jugalbandi* in which none is less than the other. Rani's beautiful face, expressive eyes lend her a pleasing screen presence as she is framed alongside Parekh.

Figure 3. Rani, YouTube screenshot

Figure 4 (above) and Figure 5 (below). L-R: Rani, Asha Parekh in the song '*dekho bijli dole bin dadal*' from Phir Wohi Dil Laya Hoon (1963). YouTube screenshot

Figure 6 : Fun spotting! Extreme left : Chanda (also seen in the song Chalte Chalte (Pakeezah, 1972) behind Meena Kumari) Extreme right : Saroj Khan, from the song '*dekho bijli dole bin dadal*' from Phir Wohi Dil Laya Hoon (1963). YouTube screenshot

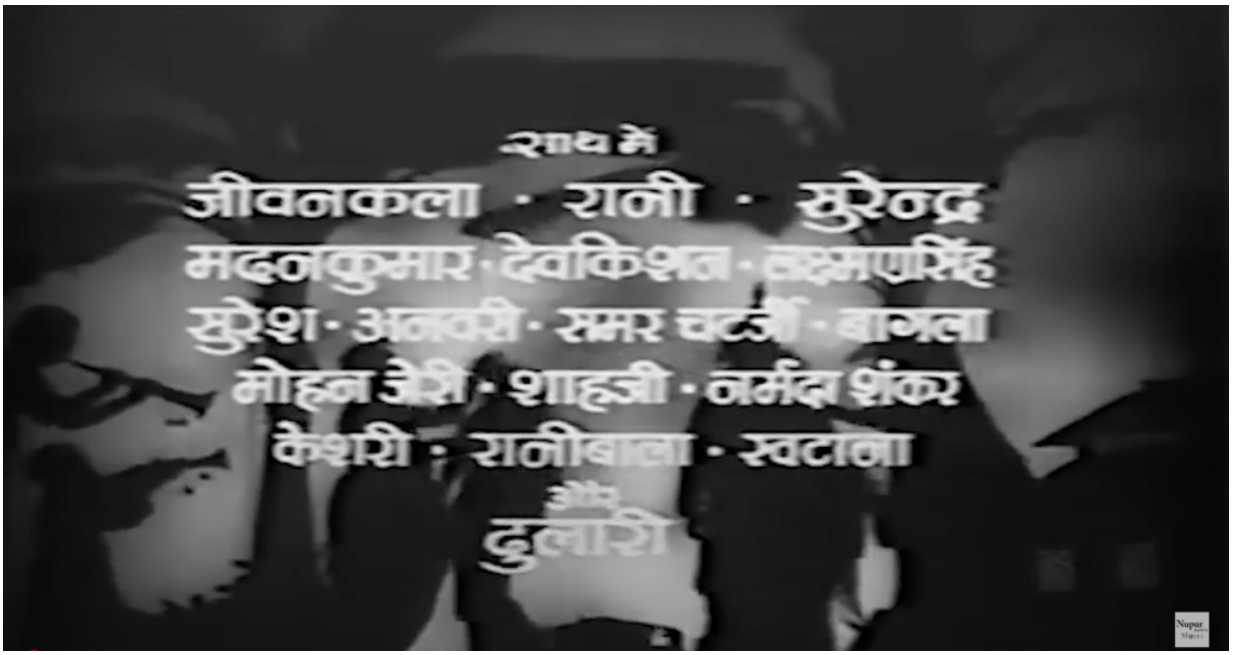

Figure 7. Jeevankala and Rani mentioned in the film credits of Sautela Bhai (1962), YouTube screenshot

Another notable song of Rani is the duet mujra *'ja main tose nahi bolun'* from the movie Sautela Bhai (1962) performed by Rani and Jeevankala, both trained Kathak dancers.

They flirt with and tease the hero, keep the space dynamised with their smooth floor movements and pointed expressions. There is a cleanliness in their hand movements (*haath ki safai*), hallmark of trained *riyazi* (dedicated practise) dancers. The charm, *nakhra* (flirty, playful), and *teekhapan* (spiciness) of their expressions show a familiarity with the lost world of intimate *baithaks-mehfils*, integral elements of *haav-bhaav* from the courtesan repertoire and Kathak, but remain very much rooted in the 'bombay-ness' of the film dance. Duet mujras can be hard to pull off, especially in the 1960s where you didn't have fast paced camera editing to enhance the effects. But it is to the credit of the dancers and choreographer (uncredited in the film) who hold the tension and keep passing the ball from one to another, never letting it drop.

Rani, her close friend Saroj (Khan), Padma Khanna, Habiba Rahman are working in close proximity in the film industry around the same time. While Rani, Saroj were also assistants to Gopi Krishna, Padma Khanna had previously learned Kathak in Banaras before training under Gopi Krishna after coming to Bombay (personal interview, Padma Khanna,2022).
During my interviews with Kathak trained dancer actresses Padma Khanna, Habiba Rahman, Jayshree T, Anjana Mumtaz, etc as they narrated experiences from their days of working, one witnesses what must have been a rich exchange of knowledge, tips and tricks between the artists, which existed despite possible competition among peers, and existed outside formalised learning spaces of *guru shishya parampara*.

Figure 8. Padma Khanna, image credit : unknown

Notably, Rani taught Kathak to Kamal Master, who not only became a big dance master but choreographed most of Rekha's songs including the massive hit '*salam-e-ishq meri jan*' from the movie Muqaddar ka Sikandar (1978). (personal interview, Habiba Rahman, 2022).

Rani and PL Raj too worked in proximity. PL Raj, who choreographed most of Helen's cabarets, was initially given shelter at Kathak & film dancer Habiba Rahman's home by Habiba's mother when he arrived in Bombay. Habiba tells me her mother Bibi Almaas was a mother hen kind of figure who would extend

Figure 9. Habiba Rahman in opening film credits of Abhimaan (1973). YouTube screenshot

Figure 10. (L-R) Amitabh Bachchan, Jayshree T., Habiba Rahman, Rajesh Khanna in the song '*sooni re sejariya*' from Namak Haraam (1973)

support to artists. "*We always had people in the house, some would be rehearsing on the terrace, some would be learning from each other*", she recalls.

PL Raj too received some Kathak training from his female peers, apart from learning Bharatnatyam and dance ballet with Guru Acharya Parvathy Kumar.[7] "*He (Raj) would often compose his film dances first on me," Habiba recalls* (personal interview, Habiba Rahman,2022).

Through working in close proximity with male choreographers as well as assisting some of them, the women dancers also became bodies on whom choreographies were made before they were taught to actors. Rani had worked as a dance assistant to Gopi Krishna in films, and is remembered by her colleagues as being strict, exacting, a problem solver and helpful in teaching actors on set (personal interview, Padma Khanna, 2022).

Figure 11. Rani's name as dance assistant in film credits of Khubsoorat (1980). Youtube screenshot

While actors and actresses, famously even Vyjayanthimala would sometimes arrive on set to shoot a dance song without prior rehearsal, long hours of rehearsal was the norm for these dancers.

"Pehle ke guru khade hoke bahut kam batate the. Assistant hi zyada batate the", (earlier gurus mostly taught while sitting, it was their assistants who stood and helped in their teaching), remarked Padma Khanna. Assistants would be responsible for first becoming the bodies on whom the choreography is made, learning it, and then teaching it to actors, conducting rehearsals, being at the receiving end of star tantrums, and being on their toes for long hours.

Lacchu Maharaj, who choreographed in Mughal-E-Azam (1960), Pakeezah (1972) among others, was often assisted by his partner and disciple Kathak dancer Rama Devi. Popular dancer actress Padma Khanna credits her understanding of camera based dancing almost entirely to a young Saroj Khan, her colleague at the time (personal interview, Padma Khanna, 2022). Khanna famously played Meena Kumari's body double in Pakeezah (1972) in the song '*teer-e-nazar*' and was famous for both her cabaret songs as well semi classical hybrid dances such as '*husn ke lakhon rang*' from Johny Mera Naam(1970) and '*ni main yaar manana ni'* from Daag (1973). She elaborates that while she had taken extensive training in Kathak in Banaras before entering films , dancing for the camera is very different from dancing on stage. In order to be a good film dancer, it was not enough to be a good dancer, but required reorienting how the body is supposed to move along with the camera. Understand how camera frames one's body, accentuate the bends, side profile, silhouettes, how to move, where to look, adjust the hand if the movement is getting cut from the camera frame- Saroj Khan understood the importance of all this as a young girl much earlier than many others

7 Ramnath, Nandini. " Flashback: PL Raj, the ace choreographer who helped the stars to find their feet", Scroll.in, 9 October 2023, https://scroll.in/reel/1057253/flashback-pl-raj-the-ace-choreographer-who-made-the-stars-find-their-feet

It was Saroj who taught Khanna how to adapt her dance for the screen. Khanna remembers Saroj as being a keen observer on sets often standing next to the cameraman, asking '*dada isko aise karein to*? (*dada what if we shoot it like this*?). "She always had her eye on the future", Khanna adds. Khanna also shares how many trained dancers struggled to 'open up their body' to the hybridity of film dance. Indeed, what happens when a restrained classical dance conditioned body meets the boisterous, open, rule breaking bollywood filmi dance. Bela Bose in an interview remarks that she saw many classical dancer actresses fall flat on their face when they encountered filmi dance, "*bade badon ki chhutti ho jaati thi*" she says. (Tabassum Talkies, YouTube 2020)

Padma credits Gopi Krishna, from whom she learned and was associated with for many years for 'opening up her body,' making it ready to embrace the film dance vocabulary. *'Gopi bhaiya ne shareer ki jhijhak nikaal di, body ke har joint ko khol diya'* (he removed the hesitation in my body and opened up all joints of my body for film dance). She remembers how they would dance for hours, and how the dance sequences required sitting, standing, jumping, leading to their knees and elbows getting bruised. Together with the male dance directors these women dancers created a language that set the tone for Bollywood dancing at one time. They had a participatory role in the process of movement production, choreography and the larger aesthetic of Bombay cinema.

As solo dancers in films, it was their ability to execute even the toughest movements that gave choreographers the freedom to devise challenging, hybrid and experimental movements. Any choreographer would agree that having a skilled dancing body opens up infinite possibilities and allows the choreographer to bring out his/her own creativity into the dance. A not so skilled dancer on the other hand would present limitations on what the choreographer can achieve. Thus, the presence of these women dancers, with their highly skilled, flexible and strong bodies is actually the carrier of the tradition of Bombay filmi dance. It is what allowed the influential male choreographers such as B.Sohanlal, Gopi Krishna to unleash their full creativity.

While some dancers could do it, others struggled. Dancer actress Anjana Mumtaz who trained in Kathak under Gauri Shanker, Mangal Master and Gopi Krishna recalled feeling very stuck once her classically trained body encountered the filmi hybrid choreographies in the 1950s-70s. While working on a particular '*mela*' song dance with fellow dancer actress Jayshree T. who could navigate the movements easily, Mumtaz found herself stuck. Masterji would scold her asking why she is not able to do it?

"*Tum to dancer ho na? Kholo body ko!*", he would say. (Why are you not able to dance? You're a dancer right? Open your body!)
"*Ab main khul kaise jaun*…?", (how do I open my body?) she would wonder. (personal interview, Anjana Mumtaz, 2022)

What did that mean? Viscerally? In her body? How does a classically trained conditioned body break out of the grammar it is used to follow? It is clearly not easy, and requires extraordinary labour of learning, unlearning and relearning to open up their bodies to embrace hybrid film dance. Thus, becoming a successful dancer in the film industry required a host of skills beyond the traditional repertoire of Kathak. Versatility was not just key, it was survival. In other words, an entirely new dancing persona had to be refashioned, one that could dance for the camera and not just for stage, and that could break the conditioning of a classically trained body.

Figure 12. Padma Khanna as Meena Kumari's body double in the song '*teer-e-nazar*' from Pakeezah (1972). Youtube screenshot

Figure 13. Dancer Actress Roopmala in the song '*Bajooband khul khul jaaye*' from Bazooband (1954). YouTube screenshot

Eventually, Mumtaz found an ally in comedian actor Mehmood, who helped her and she slowly found her footing in film dance. It is noteworthy that though Mehmood was no professional dancer, his father Mumtaz Ali was a highly established dancer of the 1930s-40s Bombay film industry.

Part 2 : Legacy

Who gets remembered and who doesn't is the slightly malicious nature of legacy.

With the revival of Indian classical dance in late 19th and early 20th century the symbol of legacy and upholders of tradition rested on the shoulders of male hereditary dancers.[8] They came to be regarded as the source of knowledge, the last word, and while there is no doubt about their expertise, it is the expertise of many lesser known dancers, musicians, courtesans that got undermined in the process. The names of male choreographers, such as Gopi Krishna, B.Sohanlal, B.Hiralal, Lachhu Maharaj, find a mention owing to their status as male *gharanedar* dancers, however it is the women dancers/dance assistants who get doubly marginalised as they are neither male, nor *gharanedar*, but they embodied a sensibility of dance that could embrace the classical as well as the experimental.

The Bombay film industry has perhaps the largest workforce of Kathak dancers outside of the classical dance world- yet, most mainstream Kathak dance institutes or higher certification bodies do not have a dedicated study in their curriculum or even regular open classroom conversations devoted to Kathak dancers in films. The conversations that do happen remain restricted to canonical topics such Mughal-E-Azam (1960), Pakeezah (1972), Umrao Jaan (1981), Sanjay Leela Bhansali, Madhuri Dixit, etc despite a huge body of work outside of these known names.

But apart from hierarchies of gharana, gender and lineage, there seems to be a lack of respect within the film industry regarding the status of dancers. When actor director Guru Dutt approached dancer Minoo Mumtaz to dance in the song '*saqiya aaj mujhe*' from Sahib Bibi aur Ghulam (1962), she initially wanted to refuse citing how she had stopped dancing in films and wanted to graduate to more serious acting roles.[9]

Baaje Payal, a highly popular and important TV Doordarshan series on dancers, choreographers and actors in Bombay Cinema (produced by dancer actress Asha Parekh) does not prominently feature these women Kathak/film dancers. Even as it has entire episodes dedicated to actresses such as Saira Banu, who is not the most known for her dance (Prasar Bharati Archives, YouTube).

However, the dancers themselves too, seem to leave their careers after marriage. Some got tired of working, some like Rani complained of relatives who used their labour for making money[10] and some like Jeevankala shared how their husbands didn't like their dancing post marriage.[11] Most resorted to a quiet family life away from the limelight or turned into teachers, and opened dance institutes such as Indianica Academy by Padma Khanna in the USA, imparting training in Indian dance styles.

8 Chakravorty, Pallabi. *Bells of Change: Kathak Dance, Women and Modernity in India*. Seagull Books, 2008
9 Raheja, Dinesh, and Jitendra Kothari. *Sahib, Bibi, Aur Ghulam: The Original Screenplay*. Om Books International, 2012
10 Tabassum "Dancer Rani and her Life Long Troubles | Tabassum Talkies." YouTube, uploaded by Tabassum Talkies, 20 April 2020 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P2glmXtoi5M&t=235s
11 Kelkar, Jeevankala. Personal interview. 8 July 2022

Working on women Kathak dancers of Bombay Cinema felt like accessing a part of my own history that was yet unknown to me. While the names and information about *gharanedar* dancers is relatively easier to find due to documentation of lineage and family trees (in oral and written history), it proved far trickier to find information about these women dancers. Official sources were scant, except for a few features here and there. I have mostly relied on watching a lot of films combined with personal interviews with surviving dancers, journalists, film industry members, to piece together narratives from what they remember about themselves and their colleagues.

For a long time, I wanted to find information on the background dancers in the song '*chalte chalte*' from Pakeezah (1972). I love their soft dancing in the song, as well as their presence, gentle and beautiful but never overpowering. In my fieldwork I was able to meet a lot of people directly/indirectly associated with the film, including Anjana Mumtaz, who spent a lot of time on the sets of Pakeezah, as a young girl. Mumtaz very kindly shared memories of her time at the set during my interview with her. Her Kathak guru Gauri Shanker was a choreographer in the film, and she would accompany him on set for rehearsal, along with her mother. She watched rehearsals for months very closely, and remembers the two background dancers as being very friendly. There were many background dancers in Pakeezah, if one looks at the 'Bazar-E-Husn' set from the song '*inhi logon ne*'. Each dancer in the background of Meena Kumari had a separate dance master assigned who would be directing her. It was a big group, and many young dance directors got informally launched into the film industry from Pakeezah, she remembers. She especially remembers the two background dancers, though details were hazy as she was very young at the time of shooting. "*The women dancers on Pakeezah sets took me under their wing. They would share their tiffin with me, play with me, teach me todas-tukdas (kathak compositions), they were all very sweet*", she says.

I asked her if she remembered their names. I asked Padma Khanna and many others who worked on the film if they remembered. From hazy memories, I got four names that repeated themselves- Sujata, Leela, Chanda, Meenaxi. Though no one could match the name and face with clarity.

Figure 14. Image compiled by the author

I went on Imdb, typed 'Meenaxi', and made a list of films that had 'Meenaxi' mentioned as an additional cast. I watched the credits and a few scenes of all those films. Eventually, I was able to correlate the name and the face. Films that had a common face and name of Meenaxi. The one on the right of the screen with the round face was Meenaxi for sure. I was so satisfied with myself.

Regarding the other one, I had seen her in Sahib Bibi aur Ghulam (1962) as Meena Kumari's maidservant Chinta and as per Prof Surjit Singh's book on background dancers her name is Chanda.[12]

But, the final word by Anjana Mumtaz sank my

12 Singh, Professor Surjit, et all. *Background Dancers in Hindi Films (1952-68)*. Notion Press, 2021

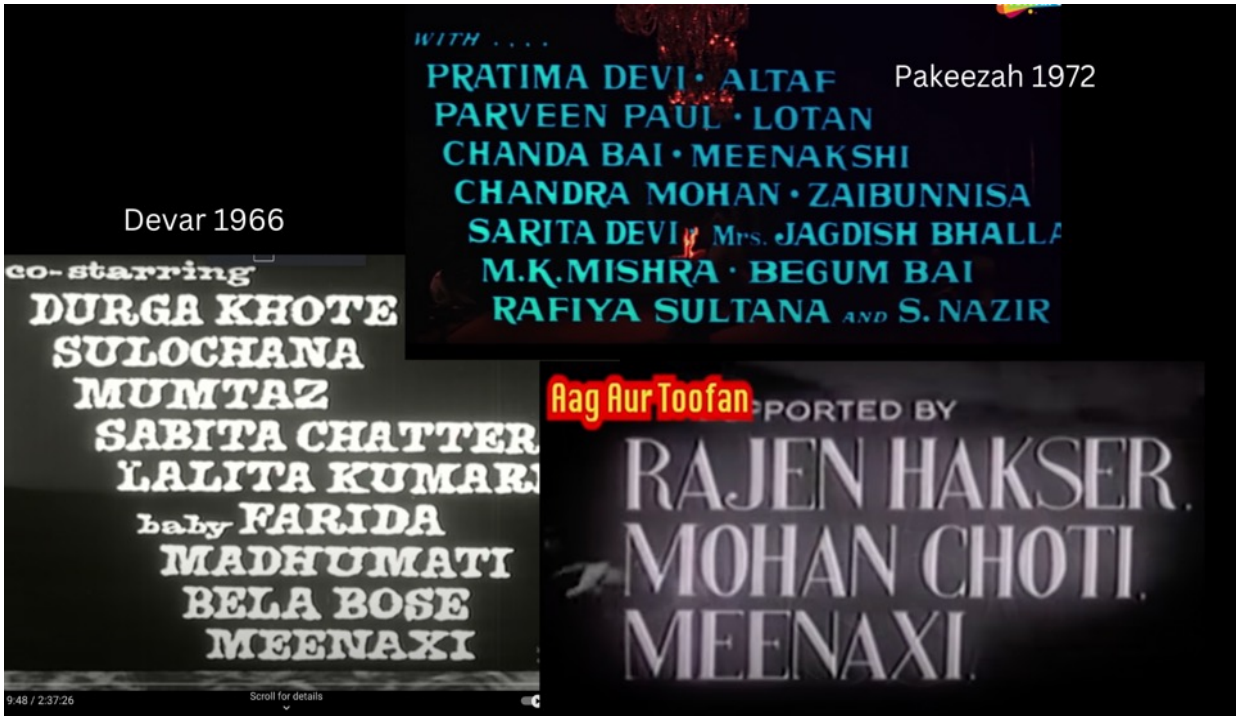

Figure 15. Image compiled by the author

Figure 16. Image compiled by the author

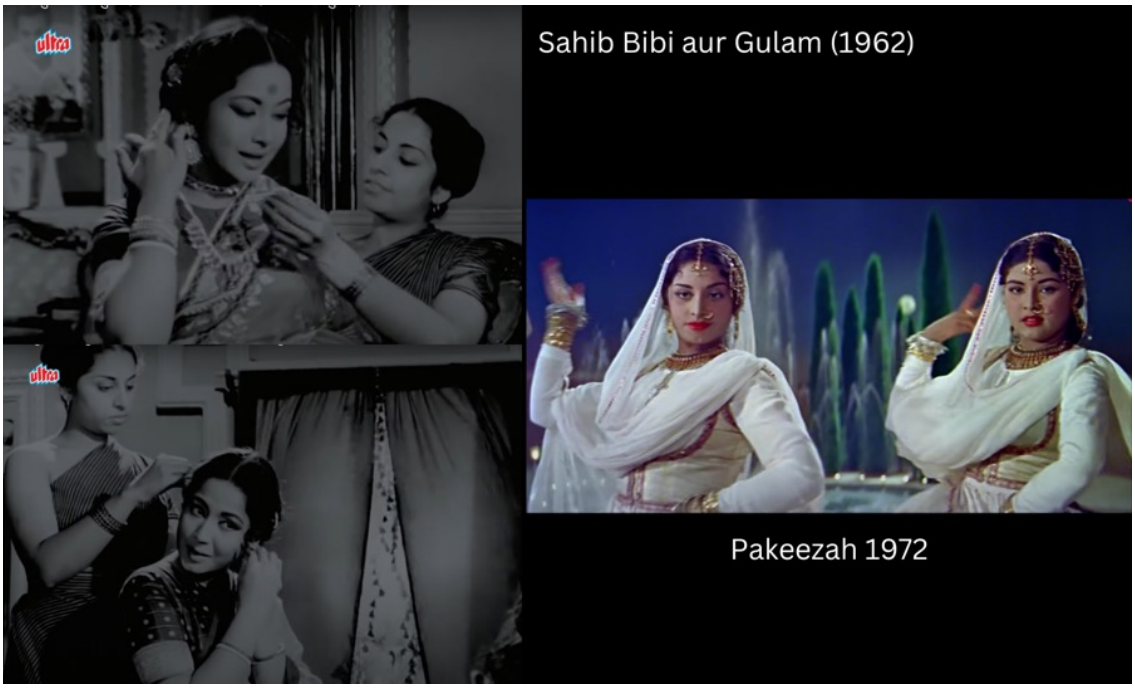

Figure 17. Image compiled by the author

enthusiasm. She said to me, "*they were likely Muslim women from Uttar Pradesh who had changed their name to work in films.*"

Oh, I thought to myself.
Will I ever know their real names now?
I don't know, I don't think so.

Regardless, a study of women dancers in Bombay Cinema takes one down an absolutely delightful road of beautiful dance, beautiful expressions, and a sense of primal joy and happiness one feels towards Bombay film song and dance. It is also a reminder of the many histories of dance in the world of Kathak and Bombay Cinema that are yet to be written, some of which I have tried to discover and write through this research.

Figure 18. (L-R) Minoo Mumtaz, Kumkum in the song '*reshmi salwar kurta jali ka*' from Naya Daur (1957). YouTube screenshot

Figure 19. (L-R) Alka Noopur, uncredited Kathak dancer, Amitabh Bachchan in the song '*apni to jaise taise*' from Lawaris (1981). Youtube screenshot

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Spelling of Mohanrao Kallianpurkar taken from the fascinating account of his name in : Sethi, Arshiya, et all. *Non-Gharanedaar Pt Mohanrao Kallianpurkar The Paviour of Kathak*. Sterling Publishers Pvt.Ltd, 2022

Memetic Disruption: How Internet Memes Challenge and Transform Traditional Power Hierarchies in the Guru-Shishya Relationship

Sriradha Paul

Abstract:
This paper examines how memes function as catalysts within the Indian classical dance community, challenging entrenched hierarchies of caste, class, and authority in traditional guru-shishya pedagogical structures. Using humor and visual storytelling, memes created and circulated by anyone with access to digital platforms validate lived experiences of exclusion, foster solidarity among users, and offer an accessible yet subversive mode of resistance against pedagogical authority. Memes are treated here as participatory digital artifacts that reflect and critique the power dynamics embedded within Indian classical dance pedagogy. In doing so, the study contributes to ongoing conversations about power relations between gurus and disciples, tradition, and critique—proposing memes as tools that both contest and reimagine modes of learning and belonging.

Keywords:
Indian classical dance, Guru-Shishya Parampara, Pedagogy, Memes, and Digital resistance.

Memes have been around longer than the digital age, but I recognize them in my research as powerful creative tools actively used in online cultures—as a means of imitation, critique, and even protest across various fields (Hartman et al. 68). However, memes have gained particular prominence at present in online social media cultures. Their expressive range is shaped by how they are published and circulated in digital spaces. This study deliberately focuses on the Instagram handle @cartoon_natyam, created by India-based movement artist Veena Basavarajaiah (Pulse).[1] As a dancer, I have followed this page for a considerable period, drawn to its cartoon-style illustrations, clever character names, and its ability to articulate what often remains unspoken within Indian classical dance spaces. The account uses humor and satire to highlight issues such as pedagogical hierarchies, institutional silences, favoritism, caste privilege, and financial gatekeeping.

My decision to center this particular meme account stems from lived familiarity—these memes resonate with the realities I have both witnessed and experienced in my own dance journey. Rather than rejecting tradition outright, the posts on @cartoon_natyam expose its contradictions and interrogate the normalized power structures embedded within classical dance pedagogy. In doing so, the memes become tools for critical engagement, community recognition, and epistemic resistance. Their use in this context is unconventional because they employ humor and visual storytelling to critique deeply entrenched issues—departing from the formal, often hierarchical methods of discussion within the dance community. By analyzing these memes, this study explores how Odissi dancers engage with and challenge pedagogical hierarchies across both offline and online spaces.

The digital presence of Cartoon Natyam connects with my lived experiences as an Odissi dancer for over 25 years. More importantly, it has linked me with a community of artists who creatively engage with longstanding issues in Indian classical dance pedagogy. This work emerges from my training within the guru-

1 To view the Instagram profile of Cartoon Natyam, visit: https://www.instagram.com/cartoon_natyam?igsh=NTc-4MTIwNjQ2YQ%3D%3D&utm_source=qr

shishya parampara (the Indian apprenticeship model) and the ongoing transformations in dance education through digital platforms such as Zoom classes, YouTube tutorials, and social media reels.

According to media studies scholar Limor Shifman, memes function as adaptable content that evolves through imitation, parody, and creative reinterpretation (Hartman et al. 68). This participatory nature—where users engage by creating multiple versions of memes or responding through likes, shares, and comments—allows memes to serve as tools for both humor and social critique. In the context of Indian classical dance, memes serve as an artistic response, providing dancers with a means to visualize and articulate their lived experiences, much like how drawing and artistic expression can help students engage with and construct meaning from texts (Hartman et al. 121). As Wilhelm argues, visualization "heighten[s] motivation, engagement, and enjoyment" while fostering deeper critical reflection (Hartman et al. 67). Similarly, the memes created by Cartoon Natyam act as a form of visual storytelling, allowing dancers to navigate complex power dynamics between gurus and students, gurus and curators, influential (in terms of economic status, social status, and caste and class) student families, pedagogical tensions, and structural hierarchies embedded in the traditional guru-shishya framework (Banerji et al.; Chatterjea; Prickett and Schippers).

Brief Historical Context

Odissi, a reconstructed classical dance form, emerged in the 20th century as part of a nationalist effort to codify regional dance traditions into 'classical.' Drawing from temple sculptures, Sanskrit treatises like the Natyashastra, and rituals such as the mahari and gotipua traditions, Odissi was shaped by both historical influences and modern interventions. While maharis, female temple dancers in the Jagannath cult, performed devotionally, the gotipuas—young boys trained in acrobatic and lyrical dance—became key influences on the contemporary Odissi repertoire (Banerji 8,12; Kothari & Patnaik).

This revival marked a significant shift, positioning Odissi not only as an artistic tradition but also as a political and cultural emblem. The mid-20th-century revival of Odissi was deeply tied to state-led cultural policies, where dance became a symbol of Odisha's heritage and India's postcolonial identity. However, this process reflected Hindu (religion) majoritarian impulses, privileging Sanskritized aesthetics—dance movements, themes, and narratives aligned with ancient Hindu scriptures—while marginalizing alternative histories and performers from non-dominant castes and communities. Institutionalization, led by male *gotipua* gurus, prioritized a refined aesthetic aligned with nationalist ideals, often at the expense of practitioners who did not fit this framework (Marglin & Thobani).

A significant consequence of the revival was the erasure of the *mahari* tradition. *Maharis* were stigmatized during British colonial rule due to Victorian perceptions of unmarried women in temple service (Banerji & Marglin). Nationalist reformers in the 20th century distanced Odissi from its *mahari* lineage, turning instead to the gotipua tradition—deemed more "respectable"—as a primary influence (Banerji; Marglin & Roy). This shift erased the contributions of female temple dancers and reinforced a hierarchical structure where male gurus became the primary custodians of Odissi's pedagogy. Moreover, the emphasis on Sanskrit texts and Brahminical narratives sidelined the influence of vernacular traditions (Banerji).

While *Bhakti* movements, which rejected caste hierarchies and embraced a more inclusive

approach to devotion, played a crucial role in shaping Odisha's cultural landscape, the reconstructed Odissi of the mid-20th century did not fully integrate these egalitarian aspects (Banerji). Instead, it reinforced existing caste hierarchies and male authority (Banerji 10, 11).

Guru-Shishya Parampara

While Odissi gained recognition as a classical art form, its reconstruction marginalized many of its historical practitioners and alternative narratives. The dominance of male gurus and the emphasis on Sanskritized aesthetics reflect broader patterns of cultural gatekeeping, dictating whose histories are preserved and whose are erased (Banerji). These historical hierarchies continue to shape Odissi's pedagogy today, particularly in the guru-shishya parampara, where power is determined by skill, seniority (years of training under one guru), social status, and personal relationships with the guru (Srinivasan et al.). In this system, questioning gurus is often discouraged, and access to knowledge is controlled through selective transmission, complicating the student's journey (Banerji 99; Banerji et al.; Chatterjea; Prickett; Schippers and Srinivasan et al.). The ambiguity in decision-making by the gurus further complicates the student's journey, as opportunities to perform or teach are distributed through mechanisms that remain largely unchallenged (Banerji et al.; Chatterjea ; Prickett ; Schippers and Srinivasan et al.). However, as Odissi moves from traditional in-person training to digital spaces, these dynamics have been reconfigured. While digital platforms offer new modes of access and critique, this paper does not propose a replacement for in-person training. Instead, it focuses on how memes—often circulated in these spaces—spotlight the exclusions and inequalities already embedded in classical training structures.

The digital realm challenges the guru's singular role as the primary gatekeeper of knowledge by introducing alternative sources of learning, such as online tutorials, workshops led by multiple instructors, and peer-to-peer exchanges. This decentralization of authority disrupts the exclusivity of guru-led training, raising questions about legitimacy, lineage, and authenticity in Odissi pedagogy.

My questioning of the *Guru-Shishya Parampara* is deeply personal, but it also speaks to broader concerns within dance pedagogy and education. My research approaches these structures critically, and I raise similar questions to those posed in the digital sphere through the production of memes. Who is recognized as an authority? How do power and access shape not just performance but the ways in which dance is learned and legitimized? These inquiries, whether presented through academic critique or humor, highlight the ongoing negotiation of hierarchy, tradition, and innovation in Odissi. Engagement with both traditional and digital Odissi training spaces, focusing specifically on the authority of the guru, the relationship between gurus and students, and the lack of dialogical learning. The *Guru-Shishya Parampara* enforces a hierarchical knowledge transmission system where learning flows in one direction, from guru to disciple, leaving little room for critical dialogue or collaborative exchange. This structure positions the guru as an unquestionable authority, limiting students' ability to engage meaningfully with their own learning process (Banerji et al.; Chatterjea; Prickett and Schippers).

To critically understand how memes function as both mirrors and interventions within the Odissi dance community, it is essential to consider how they communicate and circulate epistemic truths—truths that are felt but often left unsaid in traditional settings. These memes, through humor and visual storytelling, allow

practitioners to express lived experiences, structural critiques, and shared frustrations that may be difficult to voice within formal pedagogical hierarchies. As Shifman (2014) and Phillips (2015) argue, memes enable communities to articulate cultural knowledge and social critique in ways that are emotionally resonant and collectively validated.

Meme Analysis - Pedagogy, Power, and Epistemic Truths

Memes offer a powerful critique of the hierarchical and often opaque pedagogical structures in Indian classical dance communities. Through satire and visual storytelling, they expose how status, favoritism, caste privilege, and financial power shape learning experiences, performance opportunities, and institutional access. These biases are rarely named explicitly in dance classes, but they are deeply felt by many practitioners. In the meme format, such truths become both visible and shareable.

One meme asks, "A teacher in our institution is misbehaving with students. Where do I report this abuse?" (see figs 1 and 2) — a stark reminder of the lack of formal accountability or redressal mechanisms in many dance institutions. Here, humor does not deflect; instead, it confronts the silence surrounding abuse by mocking the very absence of a reporting system. This meme critiques not only individual behavior but also the structural culture of unchecked authority.

Another meme depicts a row of students whispering, "She got to perform because her parents sponsored the event." This points to how financial privilege becomes a gatekeeping mechanism in performance circuits, challenging the idealized notion of classical dance as a meritocracy (see figs. 3 and 4). The meme delivers a punchline that dancers relate to because it mirrors reality — an epistemological truth affirmed through collective recognition.

In another example, a tired dancer asks, "When do we get paid?" to which an organizer replies, "The exposure is your payment." This meme critiques the exploitation of dancers under the guise of visibility. It reflects how classical dance, while steeped in tradition, continues to operate within informal and exploitative labor systems — especially for younger or less established artists.

Memes such as these operate as epistemological dialogues. They either affirm known social truths, those lived but often unspoken, or challenge the dominant narratives that attempt to suppress dissent. The very act of laughing at these memes becomes an acknowledgement: "Yes, we know this happens." This laughter is not merely comedic; it is cathartic, communal, and often subversive.

Even though my own dance practice is rooted in embodied and pedagogical knowledge passed down through the *guru-shishya parampara*, I find that memes offer a parallel modality for critique. They help dancers, especially those without institutional power, to express frustration, build solidarity, and imagine alternative futures. The meme thus becomes a tool of passive resistance and a legitimate site of cultural critique. The normalization of biases such as favoritism, caste privilege, financial gatekeeping, and unchecked authority within classical dance pedagogy reflects broader systems of social exclusion. By exclusions I refer to socio-economic exclusion, where students from disadvantaged backgrounds are excluded from full participation due to the financial costs of training or access to resources, cultural exclusion when students are unable to fully engage with the nuanced traditions and dialects specific to a particular dance style, particularly if they come from different regional or cultural backgrounds. Additionally, gendered exclusion may occur, especially within a patriarchal dance

Figure 1. *Where do I report abuse?" — Questioning the silence in classical institutions.*

Figure 2. *No official response — a structural absence of accountability.*

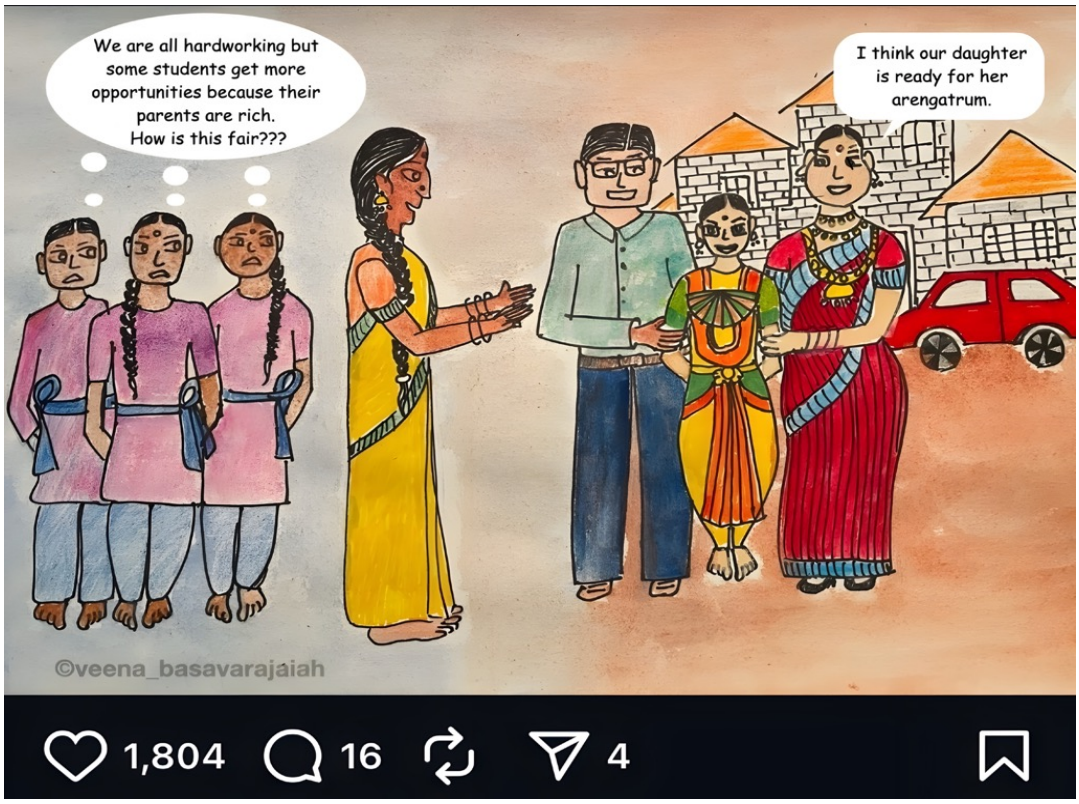

Figure 3.*"She got to perform…" — The politics of sponsorship and privilege.*

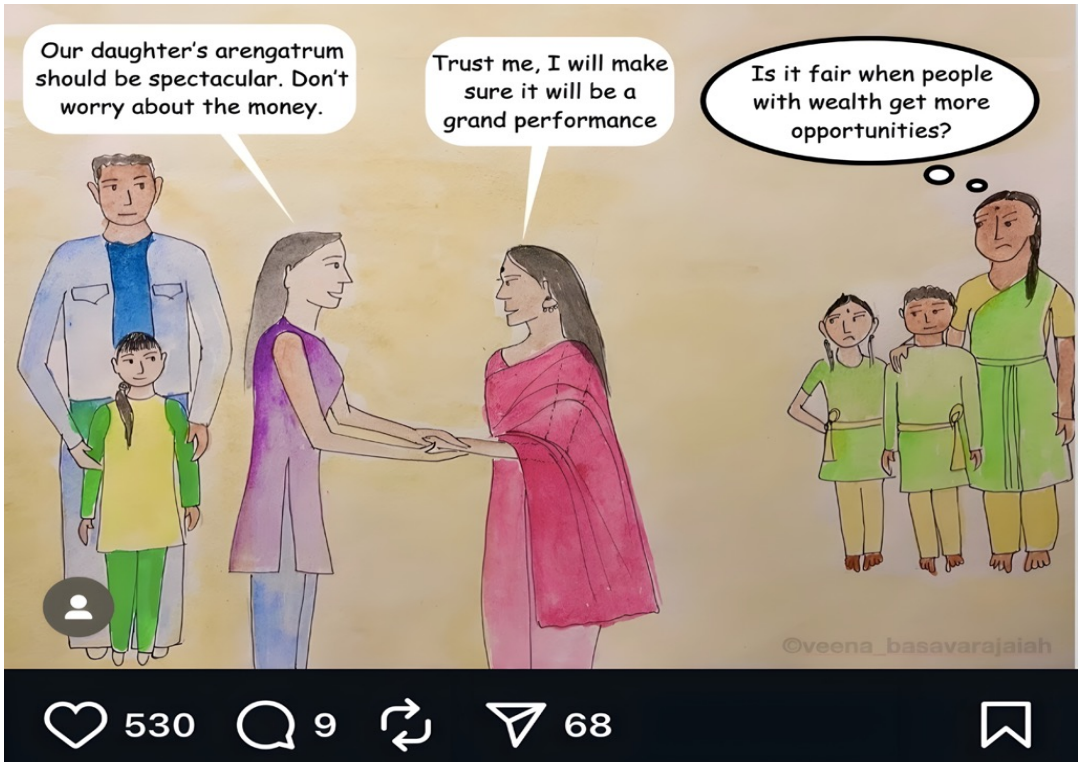

Figure 4 .*Favoritism disguised as merit in performance opportunities.*

community, where female dancers face limited access to advanced training or are subject to restrictive expectations regarding their bodies and performances. Memes such as those by Cartoon Natyam function as critical interventions, destabilizing these normalized hierarchies and fostering spaces for epistemological resistance and dialogue by encouraging practitioners to look beneath the surface of idealized pedagogical narratives and confront the hidden structures of power. Importantly, by circulating these critiques in humorous, visual formats, memes do not reject tradition outright but rather push it to evolve, expanding who gets to comment, critique, and reimagine the future of classical dance.

Looking 'beneath' through memes

Memes provide a means to interrogate these shifts by offering an accessible yet critical lens through which dancers can comment on emerging tensions. Through humor and satire, memes expose the contradictions between traditional notions of obedience and reverence toward the guru and the increasing agency of students who now have multiple learning pathways. They highlight frustrations with rigid hierarchies, the financial barriers to training, and the shifting power dynamics as dancers navigate both digital and in-person learning spaces.

While in-person immersive classes in Odissi remain deeply valuable due to the dance form's culturally embedded nature, my research explores the extent to which digital platforms can challenge or disrupt the steep hierarchies between gurus and disciples. Rather than positioning digital learning in opposition to traditional training, this paper situates meme culture as a parallel discourse, one that critiques entrenched hierarchies, not the medium of instruction itself.

The meme format, particularly through its use of juxtaposition and satire, creates space for nuanced thinking and discussion. As Patricia Dunn suggests, the act of placing ideas side by side forces a more discerning and critical representation of concepts, making memes an effective medium for engaging with the evolving landscape of Indian classical dance pedagogy (Hartman et al. 68).

Arabella Stanger's critique of dance pedagogy highlights the intricate relationships between performers, spectators, and the institutional structures that govern these practices. While dance has the potential to resist oppressive structures, Stanger notes that it can also perpetuate and legitimize systems of power, such as imperial, colonial, and white supremacist dynamics. This critique is particularly relevant to the *guru-shishya parampara*, which, despite its cultural and spiritual significance, can reinforce hierarchical power structures that perpetuate exclusion. These exclusions are compounded by how the *guru-shishya* system has been framed historically. As dance scholars like Anurima Banerji and Royona Mitra argue, these exclusionary dynamics are not incidental but are deeply embedded in the epistemic foundations of traditional dance pedagogy. Stanger connects this to the work of Banerji and Mitra, who call for dance scholarship to "unravel and unsettle" the epistemes that uphold imperial, colonial, and white supremacist systems (Stanger 4). In the case of Odissi, this unraveling is not merely an academic exercise but a necessary reimagining of the foundational narratives of the dance form itself. The urgency of this unmasking and looking 'beneath' intensifies as digital platforms expand access to Odissi dance pedagogy (Stanger 6, 11 and 15). Banerji critiques how Odissi's dominant narratives exclude marginalized voices (Banerji). Both Banerji and Mitra call for a recasting of its pedagogical structures, arguing

that entrenched hierarchies within the *guru-shishya* framework constrain the potential for more inclusive, dynamic, and accessible ways of engaging with the form (Banerji et al.).

Drawing from Stanger, Banerji, and Mitra's work, it becomes clear that the transmission of knowledge in dance is a deeply political act. For the *guru-shishya* system to evolve, we must critically examine its foundational narratives of authority, power, and access. This requires a shift toward a more dialogical, reciprocal relationship between teacher and student, where respect, agency, and inclusivity are prioritized and rigid hierarchies are dismantled (Sen-Podstawska).

My work reflects these observations, particularly how digital memes act as an effective tool for passive resistance and a vehicle for critique. By using digital platforms like Instagram, memes written in English reach broader audiences in India and across the transnational diaspora and challenge traditional dance pedagogies. These memes, with their humorous cartoons and illustrations, serve as a subtle yet powerful critique of rigid structures of authority, refusing full transparency and inviting viewers to "unmask" the process of knowledge transmission. This is closely related to how the digital landscape fosters a space for agency and subversion, inviting alternative, community-rooted ways of engaging with pedagogy in Odissi and more broadly, within the Indian classical dance community.

Conclusion

Memes, in this context, function as vehicles of epistemic truth, truths grounded in lived experiences that are often silenced in formal pedagogical spaces. As Limor Shifman (2014) notes, memes circulate affective knowledge through humor, repetition, and recontextualization, enabling collective validation and resistance. Through meme culture, individuals express shared understandings of injustice, discrimination, and exclusion, thereby generating a "low-cost protest culture" that is both participatory and politically charged (Milner). Through digital sharing, these memes become part of a subversive protest repertoire, amplified by audience engagement via likes, shares, comments, and follower networks. These interactions not only validate the meme's critique but also help diffuse it across the community, reinforcing its relevance and broadening its impact. While the protest may be quiet in tone, it becomes widely visible and socially resonant, supporting a cultural shift without overtly challenging.

In this sense, my work highlights the agency that digital tools offer in reshaping traditional dance pedagogies. These memes, through their humor and visual appeal, underscore how digital spaces can be harnessed to question the legitimacy of traditional authority while creating new ways for practitioners to engage with and learn Odissi. Though subtle, this form of passive resistance plays a crucial role in challenging established power structures and encouraging a more inclusive, reflective learning environment in the digital age.

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Puṟappāṭu : The Transforming Scene of Kūṭiyāṭṭam's Śikṣā in Kerala

Ankita Nair

Puṟappāṭu[1]: The Transforming Scene of Kūṭiyāṭṭam's *Śikṣā*[2] in Kerala

A Master Speaks

One evening, I was at the Śrī Rāma temple, Vellarkad, to watch an artiste's (Respondent 7*, personal communication, 20 December 2019) traditional performance of the Cākyars, the *Aṅgulīyāṅkam*.[3] After the performance, he generously offered to drop me at my temporary residence near Kerala Kalamandalam. On the way, he congratulated me on my short performance and complained that I had not invited him. I explained that as a novice in the field, I wanted to perform for my own experience and not put learned spectators through an amateurish performance to which he replied, "So you took six months to learn *Pūtana Mōkṣam*?[4] I would have taught you in five days." Astonished, I awkwardly giggled and asked him, "How?" He said, "Kūṭiyāṭṭam is similar to any other theatre in the world. There is nothing about the art which makes it greater than any other. The reason people are not attracted to Kūṭiyāṭṭam is because of the misbelief that its learning has to be arduous." Such an affirmation runs counter to the conventional wisdom that Kūṭiyāṭṭam training requires ten to fifteen years of rigorous training and has expectedly invited criticism from the fraternity.

Arduous or not, its training has undergone tremendous transformations in the contemporary times. By exploring these transformations from early medieval to the twenty-first century, this study demonstrates the shifting institutionalization of Kūṭiyāṭṭam training from the family structure to governmental and private organizations/ institutions open to non-Cākyār and non-Nampyār students, altering the training from a family vocation to a scholastic matrix.[5] Drawing from the data collected from my pilot study in 2017, fieldwork (June-December 2019), and brief training in Naṅṅyārkūttu,[6] the study also discusses the pedagogical

1 *Puṟappāṭu* means to "set out" but here, the author has used the term metaphorically, to illustrate 'setting out' to learn. (Note on Conventions: In this article, diacritics have been used for art forms, Malayalam, Tamil and some Sanskrit words, names of historical figures, historical geographical locations, names of languages, texts, and names of temples. There are no diacritics or use of italics for current geographical locations, or for Sanskrit words, such as Mudra, Abhinaya, Guru, etc., which appear in the Oxford Languages dictionary, and have therefore passed into the English language. For Sanskrit and Malayalam words, the standard schemes of diacritics based on ISO 15919 have been followed. Names of artists/ respondents have been changed or withheld as per research ethics and * this symbol has been used to denote the same. In parts of the article where names have been revealed, due permissions were sought from the interviewee. Structured and semi-structured interviews were carried out in Malayalam with Kerala-based artistes and scholars, which were later translated by the author.)
2 *Śikṣā*, usually translated as "education", refers here to the teaching by the Guru and the learning by the disciple or student.
3 "The Act of the Ring", i.e., Rāma's ring that Hanuman brings to Sītā in her captivity in a garden of Lankā.
4 The Salvation of Pūtana.
5 Both Cākyārs and Nampyārs belong to the Hindu fold. Traditionally, Cākyār men were a community of actors, and Nampyār men were a community of instrumentalists who played the Miḻāvu, the pot-shaped copper drum. Here, non-Cākyārs and non-Nampyārs include people from the Hindu fold not belonging to the Cākyār and Nampyār communities.
6 The wives of the Nampyār men were Naṅṅyārs who played the female characters and performed the solo Naṅṅyārkūttu or Naṅṅyārammakūttu (translated as performance or play by Naṅṅyār).

strands in Kūṭiyāṭṭam, and focuses on the "intergenerational transmission" across traditional, semi-traditional and non-traditional milieus. It also explores the present Kūṭiyāṭṭam scene, fraught with tensions regarding access to repertoire and textual sources, performance opportunities, patronage and even the art's journey to posterity. While analysing Kūṭiyāṭṭam's pedagogical scene through the tradition-modernity framework, this study derives a core-periphery model underlining the convergence of the core (Guru-*Śiṣya* traditional training) and peripheral (semi-traditional and non-traditional training) pedagogies that shape the Kūṭiyāṭṭam training scene in the contemporary times.

Kūṭiyāṭṭam's "unbroken tradition" of pedagogy and performance may be understood through the meaning of tradition argued by scholars, Glassie (1995) and Shils (1981). Tradition is that which is transmitted from the past to the present, and considered normative in its acceptance and practice: "it [tradition] is as vivid and as vital to those who accept it as any other part of their action or belief. It is the past in the present but it is as much part of the present as any very recent innovation" (Shils, 1981: 13). Here, those who accept a tradition can either be receivers or custodians; as insiders, they do not always recognize the minute changes within a tradition, so much so that they consider the practices central to the tradition as an unchanged inheritance from the past. Traditions, in other words, are far less fixed: as Glassie (1995: 405) argues, tradition's innumerable subtle changes "provide an illusion of stability". It is through these subtle changes that one may bring out the workings of modernity, as a "narrative category," and a "rewriting" of the past narratives and a bringing to light of new narratives … "a twofold movement, in which the foregrounding of continuities, the insistent and unwavering focus on the seamless passage from past to present, slowly turns into a consciousness of a radical break; while at the same time the enforced attention to a break gradually turns the latter into a period … bringing in a "new kind of time line" (Jameson, 2012: 24, 35). Modernity, in other words, always happens. If we are to bring together Jameson's concept of modernity and Milton Singer's argument of India's modernity that fleshes out "the continuing coexistence and mutual adaptations of India's cultural traditions — Great and Little — and modernity", the "break" generates a "cultural symbol" that could be either accepted or rejected. Thus, when "the enforced attention to a break gradually turns the latter into a period in its own right", the Indian tradition, through its "adaptive mechanisms" accepts or rejects innovations by traditionalizing or archaicizing these changes or innovations (Singer, 1972: 399-400). In the context of this study, we will see individuals bringing about transformations that will alter the collective narrative of the art.

Śikṣā in the early medieval and medieval eras

The learning of Kūṭiyāṭṭam can at first be traced from its literary sources. The first hint of an emerging system of pedagogy comes from the eleventh century Cera king Kulaśekhara Varman (978-1036 CE), who enriched the performance of Sanskrit dramas, and whose two composed plays, *Subhadrādhanañjaya* and *Tapatīsamvarṇa*, are still performed. The tradition of performance implied in his plays and their staging would not have been possible without a well-established system of teaching and learning by the then community of actors. While this system is not explicitly documented, it is fair to assume that it was based on the Guru-*Śiṣya* mode of transmission. *Naṭānkuśa*, the fourteenth-fifteenth century critique of Kūṭiyāṭṭam's prevalent dramaturgical techniques, offers further testimony to this Guru-Śiṣya tradition (1994: 187), which will continue well into the twentieth century.

By the 16th century, or possibly earlier, we see the appearance of *Kramadīpikas*, stage manuals written in Sanskrit and Malayalam, and *Āṭṭaprakārams*, production manuals in literary Malayalam, both of which become essential tools in the art's pedagogy and contribute to its formalization. Each Cākyar family has a unique and distinct *Kramadīpikā* for every play, which they religiously follow to this day that would have resulted in the family's distinct style of teaching and performing. The elders guarded the Kūṭiyāṭṭam knowledge system unique to one's family (Ammanur Madhava Chakyar in Pisharoti, 1996: 27). Towards the early 1900s, however, we find there were transformations in the Kūṭiyāṭṭam pedagogy, where different Cākyār families were coming together to gatekeep the caste's knowledge base.

It is clear that institutionalization of Kūṭiyāṭṭam teaching and learning had already crystallised in the early medieval era through the Cākyār and Nampyār family structure. In the decades that followed, Kūṭiyāṭṭam's institutionalization embraced new meanings with newer participants and training spaces.

Śikṣā in the pre-Independence era

While the different avenues of Kūṭiyāṭṭam training in the early twentieth century were accessible to the young boys of the families, daughters were often home-trained, giving a peek into why female characters were either absent or underrepresented on the Kūṭiyāṭṭam stage**.**

The Kūṭiyāṭṭam stalwart Ammannur Madhava Chakyar (1917–2008) in his essay, "My Training, My Gurus" (1994: 141-146) reminisces on his *Vidyārambham* or initiation to knowledge that took place when he was three, in accordance to the family tradition; by the age of seven, he started his training in Sanskrit and Kūṭiyāṭṭam. If his Guru, the maternal uncle, was unavailable, his grandmother or eldest uncle taught *Ślokās*. In such a traditional learning environment, knowledge of the art flowed from every side. His Guru instilled fear in students as part of the training process: if the taught lessons were not repeated correctly by a student, the latter would be beaten, or if there was "slightest slackness or lack of attention", the student may not be given food. Further, performing minor characters also ensured *Rangaparicaya* (stage experience). In addition, watching Kūṭiyāṭṭam performances after thoroughly studying the play was another important aspect of the learning process. His uncle used to watch performances by the revered Rama Chakyar of the Kidangur family and would later on teach those performance portions to his students. Besides, training was occasionally imparted to the Ammannur Gurukulam students by artistes from the other Cākyār families, such as Kidangur Rama Chakyar and Painkulam Narayana Chakyar (Senior), particularly on annual festivals.

Royal spaces were also centers of Sanskrit learning for several Cākyar students. For instance, Ammannur Madhava Chakyar joined the members of the Kodungallur palace who were experts in the Sanskrit language, *Āyurveda*, *Jyotiṣā*, *Yoga*, music and *Nāṭyaśāstra*, immensely benefitting Chakyar. He also further studied Abhinaya from Bhagavatar Kunjunny Thampuran, erudite in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (Chakyar, 1994: 144-145). Thus, the pre-independence era witnessed a transformed participation of the teachers and students who belonged to other Cākyār families, underlining the changing narrative of keeping the knowledge system within the close boundaries of individual Cākyār families.

The variety of training spaces for male Cākyār performers, however stood in stark contrast to the Naṅṅyārs, the women performers from the Nampyār community who were trained within

the family spaces and "… when nangiars travelled to a temple, where they would often stay for an extended period of time, they were chaperoned by their uncles, brothers, and cousins" (Daugherty, 2017:174-175). Kunju Kutty Nangiaramma (1915-1991) started learning in a matrilineal system and staged her debut performance at the age of 10. Like her mother and grandmother, she continued performing and teaching well into her senior years. Though young girls were taught in this social context, only a few continued performing as an obligation to their lineage, partly because of the reforms imposed on the system: in 1933, the colonial government passed the Madras Marumakkattayam Act, which led to the "division and partition of the matrilineal tharavadu"[7] (Arunima, 2003: 2); still, the system by and large persisted in practice until 1976, when the Kerala Legislature completely abolished the matrilineal system, causing many Naṅṅyārs to leave their natal households. Therefore, Naṅṅyārs received comparatively less attention towards their training which must have hindered their creative pursuits, on-stage innovations, and largely female representation on the Kūṭiyāṭṭam stage.

Eventually, announcing significant changes in the art's transmission, Guru Mani Madhava Chakyar decided in the 1950s to train his own children. Since he was married to a Naṅgyār, P.K. Kunjimalu Nangiaramma, and they followed the matrilineal system, his children were considered Nampyārs, who were supposed to be trained as *Miḻāvu* artistes, not as actors. The episode upset the Ammannur Cakyar family who "stopped inviting him to their Kutiyattam performances in Thrissur's Vadakkunathan temple" (Lowthorp, 2016: 102) highlighting how the art was adapting to the dawning era.

Thus, we observe the movement of Kūṭiyāṭṭam *Śikṣa* spaces from the well-knit family structures to *Maṭhams* or *Gurukulams*, and even palaces, where students from different Cākyār families were trained together, because specialized training at home had mostly disappeared.

The 1960s: Role and impact of governmental institutionalization

Alongside with these first attempts to depart from orthodoxy in pedagogy, traditional methods have persisted to this day. At the same time, winds of change blew in the post-Independence decades, affecting the way most Indian performing arts were taught and transmitted. Much of the change was triggered by trends of documentation, preservation, and institutionalization. As a case in point, Lakshmi Subramanian (2008: 112) fleshes out the trajectory of Carnatic music from an orally transmitted knowledge system to a vocation taught at organizations, where students would have to pass examinations to obtain their degrees; this meant training in all aspects of musicology in a formal context.

The shift in the institutionalization of Kūṭiyāṭṭam and the changing trends of patronage led to the emergence of a semi-traditional mode of Kūṭiyāṭṭam training, where training spaces, the training process, and its participants were undergoing a transformation, underlying a paradigmatic shift from a familial Kūṭiyāṭṭam learning to an academic setup. In addition, the semi-traditional learning and teaching started replacing the former traditional mode of teaching.

Kerala Kalamandalam

In Kerala, the feudal system of governance started breaking down in the early twentieth

7 *Tharavādu* or *taravāṭu* means "ancestral residence of landowners" or "house, chiefly of noblemen" (Gundert, 1962 :434)

century; the resulting shift of patronage from palaces to Central and State governments did not however happen overnight. This vacuum in patronage initially caused performing arts like Kathakaḷi and Mohiniyāṭṭam, among other classical arts, to sharply decline. The Malayalam poet, Vallathol Narayana Menon, with his friend, Manakkulam Mukunda Raja, established in 1929 the Kerala Kalamandalam at a patron friend's residence in Thrissur. Its mission was to teach and thus revive declining classical performing arts of Kerala.

Kūṭiyāṭṭam's revival journey vis-à-vis Kerala Kalamandalam, however, came much later. In 1943, Joseph Mundassery, a social reformer, literary critic and politician, convinced Painkulam Rama Chakyar that keeping Kūṭiyāṭṭam under wraps — that is, limited to the temple space — would eventually lead to the art's destruction (Gopalakrishnan, 2011: 69-70, translating from Paulose). Eventually, in 1965, Painkulam Rama Chakyar, after consulting Mani Madhava Chakyar and Ammannur Madhava Chakyar, established a Kūṭiyāṭṭam department at Kerala Kalamandalam into which, amidst vehement criticism from members of his own community, he admitted a few young non-Cākyārs and non-Nampyārs as students. This series of events marked the entry of Kūṭiyāṭṭam on the public scene, witnessing a movement from the familial to the non-familial spaces of training.

The new department was started with one Guru (Painkulam Rama Chakyar) and six new students. Three students, including a girl, belonged to the Cākyār and Nampyār families, and the others, including two girls, to other castes (such as, Mūsad and Nāyar). Out of them, five artistes were, after the completion of their course, recruited by Kerala Kalamandalam as teachers to train newly admitted *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* students. While Mani Madhava Chakyar had created a "break" in the training narrative of the Cākyār/Nampyār equation, the actions of Painkulam Rama Chakyar dismantled the Kūṭiyāṭṭam training narrative itself with a complete reorganization of both the Guru(s) and the disciples. The break(s) eventually led to a renaissance of the Kūṭiyāṭṭam's training scene.

The curriculum for Kūṭiyāṭṭam was planned and designed by the Guru himself, creating an "institutionalized *gurukulam*" (Moser, 2007: 209). It was structured into a six-year diploma course followed by a one-year post-diploma course; the *Miḻāvu* training into a four-year course and an additional one-year post-diploma course. Students were trained in dramaturgy and given Sanskrit and Malayalam lessons (Gopalakrishnan, 2011: 130, 131) from the crack of dawn to well into the evening hours.

However, the rigorous schedule underwent changes after the 1990s when Kerala Kalamandalam introduced a scholastic setup so art students may be exposed to subjects taught in "regular" schools. As K.G. Paulose told me (Respondent 30* □, personal communication, 2019), school education in Kerala Kalamandalam was an initiative to prepare students face an English-speaking, globalised world. As a result, afternoon training hours transformed into classes in which students were taught mathematics, sciences, Hindi, English, and social sciences, etc. In the 2000s, it became mandatory for art students to obtain an Art High School Leaving Certificate, which would enable them to pursue higher education elsewhere if they wished, either to other art schools or to completely different disciplines. In 2007, the University Grants Commission recognized Kerala Kalamandalam as a deemed University, upon which it introduced an undergraduate course in Performing Arts, as well as postgraduate courses and a PhD programme in Kūṭiyāṭṭam. Further changes

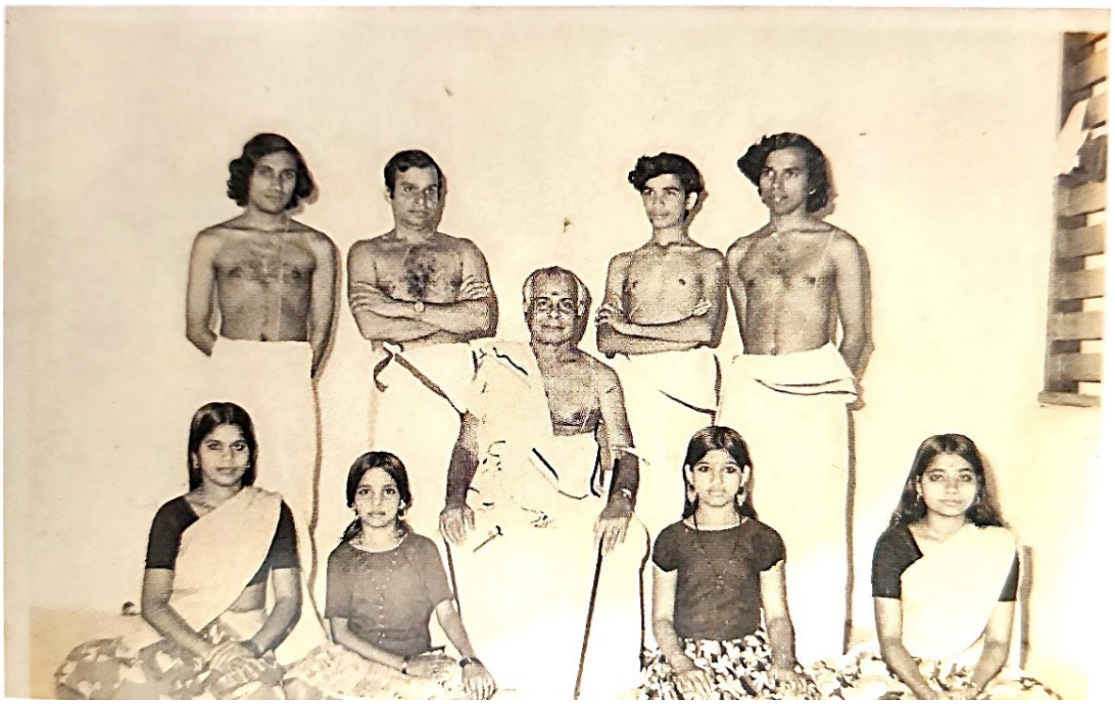

Figure 1. Guru Painkulam Chakyar with his first batch of Cākyār and Non-Cākyār students in the 1970s .
Standing from left: Kalamandalam Sivan Namboodiri, Painkulam Damodara Chakyar, Painkulam Narayana Chakyar, Kalamandalam Rama Chakyar
Sitting from left: Kalamandalam Girija Devi, Margi Sathi, Guru Painkulam Chakyar, Kalamandalam Devaki, Kalamandalam Shailaja (Courtesy: Śivakālam, 2015)

included the addition of integrated courses in Multimedia, Cultural Studies, Women Studies, Cultural Journalism, Mass Communication and Documentation (Gopalakrishnan, 2011: 137). Such programmes have been open to student-artistes from other institutions/organizations.

These changes did not go without criticisms. For instance, Margi, an organization dedicated to the revival of, and training in, Kathakaḷi and Kūṭiyāṭṭam, noted in its fortieth Annual Report:

> The main drawback of the time-bound course, as experienced in premier institutions like Kerala Kalamandalam, is that, on the completion of the course, the artistes have to fend for themselves to remain in the profession. Junior artistes are seldom offered stage venues, and thus most of them have to earn their livelihood from other jobs (Margi, 2010).

A Cākyār artiste trained at Kerala Kalamandalam (Respondent 7*, personal communication, 7 and 8 October 2019), told me that he had proposed to the Kerala Kalamandalam authorities to remedy this situation by admitting students every few years instead of every year, so they may end up forming a team of actors, instead of batches of individual actors with less specialized training. However, his proposal was never made functional.

This vast change introduced by the creation of Kerala Kalamandalam was especially impactful for the female students of the art, who could now freely enter this new learning space with new innovations in the Kūṭiyāṭṭam repertoire and costume, when they were earlier largely confined to private teaching in traditional homes.

With regard to shifting patronage from courts and temples to governmental initiatives, Sangeet Natak Akademi, India's national academy for music, dance and drama, in the 1970s, rolled out schemes and financial aids for Kūṭiyāṭṭam students and artistes. Following UNESCO's 2001 recognition of Kūṭiyāṭṭam as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity, the academy created in 2007 Kūṭiyāṭṭam Kendra, a center for the "preservation and promotion" of Kūṭiyāṭṭam, which started funding old and new Kūṭiyāṭṭam training institutions, organizing monthly performances and annual Kūṭiyāṭṭam festivals. Eventually, in 2017, the Kerala Government rolled out the 'Diamond Jubilee Fellowship for Young Artists' scheme that financially supported several Kūṭiyāṭṭam artistes, enabling them to teach students going to regular schools in their post-school hours, especially for the preparation of inter-school art competitions, popularly called Youth Festivals.

The Kerala Government initiated Youth Festivals for secondary and higher secondary students in 1956 to promote art education among school-going students; participation and winning these competitions meant extra scores that would aid their admission to state universities. In this regard, a Cākyār artiste (Respondent 7*, personal communication, 7 and 8 October, 2019) presents us with a unique approach to pedagogy. Now in his sixties, every year he trains many non-Cākyār and non-Nampyār students across Kerala for these Youth Festival competitions, who flock to his home from faraway districts of Kerala, where this art was not popular or even known. His objective, as he told me, was to create, if not practitioners, at least knowledgeable spectators for the art. Since each performance in these competitions is given a strict timing of twenty minutes, the training does not always involve the traditional rigour; neither are the expectations from these performances of a very high artistic calibre. Despite these limitations, an artiste's hope is that a few students, at least, will pursue their training beyond these competitions. Students

also approach non-Cākyār and non-Nampyār artistes for training for these Youth Festivals. A few Cākyār and Nampyār artistes are critical of these competitions though they are cognizant of the economic benefits that come in the form of tuition fees from the students (Binoy, 2019; Observational Fieldnotes, 2019).

Initiation and training

Through an analysis of the structured and semi-structured interviews with a few Kūṭiyāṭṭam students, I argue that specific training centers, largely comprising of non-Cākyār/ non-Nampyār teachers and students have generated a non-traditional mode of teaching, where training spaces have remained intact with a transformation of the training process and its participants.

Non-Cākyār and Cākyār students at Kerala Kalamandalam

Kalamandalam Shailaja, a non-Cākyār/ non-Nampyār artiste, reminisces about her journey through Kūṭiyāṭṭam. She joined Kerala Kalamandalam to learn dance in June 1974 after reading in a local newspaper an advertisement for admission at this institution. Her initiation consisted in receiving at the Mohiniyāṭṭam *Kaḷari* blessings from Kalamandalam Leelamma, a renowned danseuse. Unlike students these days, Kalamandalam Shailaja was at first completely unaware of Kūṭiyāṭṭam. One day, Painkulam Rama Chakyar spotted her and asked her to learn Kūṭiyāṭṭam, telling her that her "big eyes" were expressive. Her former dance teacher added that learning Kūṭiyāṭṭam would mean "learning everything" because *Sūkṣmābhinaya* (subtle acting) was central to this art. She eventually started her training at the Kūṭiyāṭṭam *Kaḷari* with her seniors, Kalamandalam Girija Devi, Kalamandalam Sivan Nampoodiri, and Kalamandalam Rama Chakyar. Seven students trained together under Painkulam Rama Chakyar. A calm instructor, he used to sit in his chair at the *Kaḷari* and gently instruct the students on body movements and gestures, rarely performing them himself. Though he was responsible for shortening onstage productions, he taught his students the complete production manuals and plays: an unsaid rule was that the training should be complete; a performance could be malleable. While his students performed on stage, to avoid making them nervous he would step away so as not to be visible to them. Besides, Kalamandalam Shailaja fondly remembers how her Guru refrained from praising his students while meeting them alone; yet, to members of the audience, he would freely express his contentment with their performance. He also trained them to create a team of performers: according to Kalamandalam Sivan Nampoodiri, his Guru allotted most of the royal male characters to the young Sivan and the *vidūṣaka* and Cākyārkūttu portions to the young Kalamandalam Rama Chakyar (Namboodiri, 2016), and created women-centric productions for his female students (Namboodiri, 2013).[8] Like other Gurus, Painkulam Rama Chakyar employed a mixed pedagogy in imparting the art. Apart from taking his students to his own performances, he would organize and fund his students' performances, and accompanied them like a caring guardian. After performances, he would playfully point out the corrections to his pupils.

While he sometimes reprimanded his pupils for shaping their behaviour and moral conduct, his commitment towards them was unwavering. Once, a group of temple managers visited the Guru to request a Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance. The Guru happily agreed to perform along with his students. However, the organisers

8 I translated into English these interviews available (in Malayalam) on the Internet.

did not want the young Kalamandalam Sivan Nampoodiri, a non-Cākyār, to perform. Angry, the Guru declined to perform.

As with many traditional arts, there was also constant peer-teaching and peer-learning. Kalamandalam Shailaja also remembers her senior, Kalamandalam Girija, who used to take care of her like a younger sister and treat her with great affection: "Girija Cēcci [elder sister] would always do my make-up before putting on hers. We do not see that these days." (Respondent 6*, personal communication, 24 July 2019). In the *Kaḷari*, juniors stood behind the seniors, practised with them and learnt from them under the same Guru. The juniors also watched several of their seniors' *Coliāṭṭams* (rehearsals with the musical instruments), which helped them learn all portions of the play, irrespective of whether the characters were female or male.

This Guru-*Śiṣyā* bond founded on benevolence continues to positively impact students of the art even today. During a debut performance, at his residence, of one of Painkulam Narayana Chakyar's (formerly trained at Kerala Kalamandalam) predominantly non-Cākyār and non-Nampyār students, I saw him affectionately greet all of them as well as their parents, eliciting much warmth and support from the audience. When I visited him for an interview, he explained how he had learned from his maternal uncle, Painkulam Rama Chakyar, to be benevolent towards his students, and how he was proud of his students addressing him as "Māma" (or *Amāma* means "maternal uncle" in Malayalam). He would not demand a fee from economically challenged students, who would simply give him what they could. He had also tied a swing to the mango tree in his courtyard, where students would often enjoy themselves after class.

In another instance, senior Guru Sivan Namboodiri, gulping back his tears, narrated to me an anecdote from one of his classes at Kerala Kalamandalam a few years earlier. During a rehearsal, he was enraged on seeing a non-Cākyār/non-Nampyār female student perform wrongly. He reprimanded her and walked out of the *Kaḷari*, making the student cry. He was scared there would be a student protest. Indeed, a few minutes later, he was summoned back to the *Kaḷari* by the Kerala Kalamandalam authorities. When the student was asked the reason of her sadness, she responded that her Guru was always gentle to his students and she was crying because her negligence had invited his wrath. Sivan *Āśān* felt pacified as well as humbled, and today, he remains one of most adored Gurus in the Kūṭiyāṭṭam fraternity. Perhaps he had imbibed these values from his Guru Painkulam Rama Chakyar. Irrespective of societal divisions, the Guru-*Śiṣya* relation and tradition, with its emphasis on love and compassion, has greatly contributed to the continuity of this art and its evolving pedagogy.

A counter narrative, however was brought out when a non-Cākyār/non-Nampyār *Miḻāvu* artiste (Respondent 23*, personal communication, 20 December 2019) regarded the project of teaching Kūṭiyāṭṭam to non-Cākyār/ non-Nampyār children as incomplete because they are denied access to textual resources like *Āṭṭaprakārams* and *Kramadīpikās*, or to temple playhouses that are considered practice grounds for Kūṭiyāṭṭam by the Cākyārs and Nampyārs. In addition, Kalamandalam Shailaja, a non-Cākyār artiste emphasized the importance of watching performances, an opportunity that non-Cākyār and non-Nampyār students at institutions like Kerala Kalamandalam often lack.

Later on, not all teachers were able to rise above caste discrimination. A few students told me how they sometimes noticed bias in

Figure 2. Guru Painkulam Rama Chakyar with student Kalamandalam Sivan Namboodiri, 1974 (Courtesy: John Steven Sowle collection, via Leah Lowthorp, 2020)

a teacher towards a student of a lower caste, for example by passing more negative or critical remarks on the student during training sessions. However, if a low-caste student was considered "beautiful" according to the performance standards, he or she might receive encouragement and performance opportunities. A few upper-caste teachers have also been noticed shunning lower-caste students, either as actors or instrumentalists (Respondent 31* , personal communication, 26 October, 2019).

Issues of Quality Dilution and Uniformization: The case of Kerala Kalamandalam

Over the years, experiences of learning and training underwent a major shift. My late-night return journeys after watching Kūṭiyāṭṭam performances were mostly at the mercy of kind artistes who would offer me a humble dinner and accommodate me in their vehicles. On one such July night in 2019, I was returning from the Ammannur Gurukulam (later called, Ammannur Chachu Chakyar Smaraka Gurukulam) Kūṭiyāṭṭam festival in Irinjalakuda. I keenly listened to the discussions among two *Miḻāvu* artistes and a senior Kūṭiyāṭṭam actor about the changing curriculum of the Kūṭiyāṭṭam department at Kerala Kalamandalam. The two *Miḻāvu* artistes expressed their apprehension towards the dwindling of well-trained *Miḻāvu* students: some senior students concealed their lack of familiarity with the *Āṭṭaprakārams* by playing the *Miḻāvu* with some hesitation and less vigour. In addition, there was a fall in the enrolment of male students, while others dropped the course after a few years of training, perhaps afraid of not being able to make a living from their art. My co-passengers also found that the new Naṅṅyārkūttu curriculum lacked depth: a variety of plays and *Āṭṭaprakārams* were omitted from it. A reorganisation and reduction of the Kūṭiyāṭṭam curriculum, together with the introduction of scholastic learning, not only resulted in a much reduced number of hours of training, but ended up omitting special classes of Sanskrit and Malayalam, a number of plays and *Āṭṭaprakārams*, and also earlier methods, such as the training of female students to play male characters — all of which formed part of the erstwhile curriculum designed by Painkulam Rama Chakyar, modified in the early 21st century.

On the other hand, undergraduate students at Kerala Kalamandalam told me that they were worried and helpless about the allotment of Kūṭiyāṭṭam teachers. Though all the teachers claim to train their students in the Painkuḷam School of performance, each of them actually has a distinct style and strongly adheres to it. Since in the present scholastic system, students get new teachers every year, they are in effect pressured to learn a new style — for instance, in executing *Mudras* and other *Meys* (postures of the body): a *Mudra* will be essentially the same in two different styles, but not its dynamic execution (Focused Group Discussion 1, personal communication, 4 November, 2019). Unavoidably, this arrangement of different teachers training students every year is a departure from traditional teaching, where a single Guru or a couple of Gurus train students.

Thus, even though the artiste-cum-teachers experiment with dramaturgical styles of other *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* schools, they are expected to teach their students the style of the institution they are working for. As a case in point, Kalamandalam Shailaja told me that her junior, Sathi (later to become a renowned artiste under the name of Margi Sathi), learnt Kūṭiyāṭṭam for nearly eight years at Kerala Kalamandalam. After she started teaching at Margi, her style of Śloka recitation and performance stances completely changed to the Margi style, which was borrowed from the Ammannur School. However, after a few years, when she returned

to Kerala Kalamandalam as a Kūṭiyāṭṭam faculty, she was strictly expected to teach the Painkulam style, despite having experimented and innovated during her public performances before rejoining Kerala Kalamandalam.

We witness here a phenomenon common to institutionalization of most Indian performing art forms, that of apparent uniformization: students emerging from any given institution will have been trained in the specific style taught there. This is, however, compensated by the freedom given to students to innovate in their performances, during their studies or, later, as artistes.

Teachers would often take them around for watching their performances or provide opportunities as cymbalists (only for female students) during performances. However, those performance opportunities are far too few for the number of Kūṭiyāṭṭam graduates and post-graduates, which has been steadily increasing over the years, partly because of the uniform system of admission, and partly because of a corresponding increase in the number of teachers for acting, from a single Guru in 1965 to eleven teachers in 2019, and in the number of *Kaḷaris* (traditional spaces for learning and practising). Separate *Kaḷaris* for every batch of students has therefore led to fewer opportunities to watch senior students perform on a daily basis. Moreover, the process of institutionalization also led to a uniform system of curfew. At Kerala Kalamandalam, female students, unlike their male counterparts, are only allowed to leave the campus for short visits during the day, but have to return before 6 PM. If they wish to watch late-evening performances elsewhere, they have to seek special permissions from their hostel wardens. Yet male students, for a variety of reasons, often fail to take advantage of their freedom to attend as many performances as are offered to them.

All these restrictions end up keeping students away from learning experiences and opportunities, lessening their interest in learning Kūṭiyāṭṭam. Besides, a lack of performance opportunities has also contributed to an increase in the dropout rate of male students before the end of their training period (Respondent 21*, personal communication, 29 September 2019). When I trained at Kerala Kalamandalam, there were, in all, 45 to 50 female students of Kūṭiyāṭṭam, against only 13-15 male students training to be actors. Another challenge thrown up by uniformization is the training of students in every character in the curriculum, which prevents them from acquiring in-depth knowledge and expertise, as a result of which many of them end up receiving hardly any performance opportunities.

While discussing the pedagogical structures of Carnatic music, Lakshmi Subramanian (2008: 110) brings out another dimension of uniformized pedagogy: “The operative features of the [post-Independence] project were scientific theory and systematization - values that derived largely from colonial modernity, and seen as critical adjuncts to any modern system of pedagogy.” Kerala Kalamandalam’s yearly admission system and academic framework was an attempt to build upon this “colonial modernity,” in contrast with the traditional system, which did not rest on any rigidly defined syllabus, did not confer academic degrees, yet was more successful in creating Kūṭiyāṭṭam performing groups. Therefore, in the context of Kerala Kalamandalam, we see a shift from semi-traditional *śikṣā*, where a single Guru or a couple of Gurus trained students from varied social backgrounds, to non-traditional pedagogy, where multiple teachers train students today.

The scene is somewhat different in other semi-traditional training institutions, such as Ammannur Gurukulam, Nepathya or Margi,

where students are admitted not on a yearly basis, but with the intention of forming teams where junior and senior artistes join and perform together. Although this is a richer model of pedagogy, Sooraj Nambiar (Respondent 14*, personal communication, 2 November 2019) explained to me it also suffers from a high dropout rate for a variety of reasons, including the non-residential character of these institutions (then, Kerala Kalamandalam is advantaged because a greater number of students are admitted here as compared to non-residential training centres), parallel studies in regular schools outside, the demands of rigorous training, and often an ensuing lack of interest.

To some extent, however, the post-Independence institutionalized avenue of pedagogy offers some compensation in being a better instrument of popularization, with those institutions' ability to organize more popular and academic events (although the semi-traditional institutions now function equally well on this front), in offering access to considerable documentation and archives, inviting and formally hosting researchers, and so on. Another positive contribution of institutionalized pedagogy has been that non-Cākyār and non-Nampyār students have acquired a better perception of Kūṭiyāṭṭam over the years. Initially (after 1965), they generally joined Kerala Kalamandalam for the institution's popularity or to learn Kathakali or Mohiniyāṭṭam, and were ignorant of Kūṭiyāṭṭam, but some of them ended up learning it. About 50 years later, non-Cākyār or non-Nampyār students often claim that they are cognizant of their interest in pursuing Kūṭiyāṭṭam training.

Cākyār and Nampyār students in family-based learning spaces

A few young Cākyār artistes explained to me that they had planned to continue their training beyond their debut temple performance or even their initial training for varied reasons. A Cākyār artist (Respondent 23*, personal communication, 28 September 2019) told me that he was not initiated into Kūṭiyāṭṭam as a child, as his family members were not performers and followed other occupations; he learnt Carnatic music while pursuing his schooling and a Master's degree in commerce. He started learning Kūṭiyāṭṭam as a teenager but left the training midway. Later, he started learning the *Miḻāvu* (normally the family vocation of the Nampyārs) out of sheer interest. Today, he works as a *Miḻāvu* artiste and teacher. According to him, in institutions like Kerala Kalamandalam, debut performances are scheduled as part of the academic curriculum, no longer as a ritual, as was the case in traditional families; he rhetorically asked whether this does not dilute the essence of training in the art.

Nepathya Sreehari Chakyar (Respondent 11*, personal communication, 28 September 2019) told me that his parents had video-recorded him as a little boy imitating *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* artistes. Anxious that the child might imbibe the art wrongly, his parents, both *Kūṭiyāṭṭam* artistes, started training him when he was 7 years old. His imitation skills led to a departure from the tradition of debuting Prabhandhakūttuas an adult: he did so as a child, before his Kūṭiyāṭṭam debut — a challenging and enriching journey in stark contrast with the troubled students at Kerala Kalamandalam, who lacked such exposure and opportunities to watch or perform Kūṭiyāṭṭam.

The young Kalamandalam Sangeeth Chakyar (Respondent 3*, personal communication, pilot study, 5 June 2017) had a very different reason to learn the art: as the sole male heir in his Cākyār family, giving up this profession would have meant an extinction of this family's style of performance.

Overall, Cākyār and Nampyār students have the advantage of performing in temple playhouses, sometimes entire plays over several nights. In contrast, since most of those temple playhouses are closed to non-Cākyār and non-Nampyār students, those have to fall back on their institutional spaces or invitations to public performances by their teachers, other artistes and organizers. Whatever the value of these criticisms of perceived limitations in the institutionalized space, the Guru-*Śiṣya* tradition within the Cākyār and Nampyār familial space gradually receded, and is today followed by just a small minority of students.

Kūṭiyāṭṭam's reach to international students

From the 1950s, with increasing performances outside the temple precincts by Mani Madhava Chakyar, Painkulam Rama Chakyar and their respective teams, along with the establishment of Kūṭiyāṭṭam training centres across Kerala, the art gained wider attention among foreign students and scholars of Indian art, and received growing interest from foreigners travelling to Kerala, some of whom came to learn the art under the tutelage of the stalwarts.

Maria Christopher Byrski, a Sanskrit scholar and Polish ambassador to India from 1994 to 1996, chanced upon a performance by Mani Madhava Chakyar in Kerala and started learning Abhinaya and Mudras from the stalwart, communicating through his son, T.K.G. Nambiar, a Hindi teacher; "Byrski, a polyglot, was fluent in Hindi" (Paul, 2021). Later, in 1990s, Tomoe Irino, a Japanese artiste started her journey of Kūṭiyāṭṭam training at the Ammannur Gurukulam. Michiko Uno (Respondent 4*, personal communication, 11 July 2019), another Japanese student of Kūṭiyāṭṭam, told me how Tomoe Irino went on to learn not only Kūṭiyāṭṭam acting but also the *Miḻāvu* — against conventions, since, owing to its *Brahmacarya* (celibate) status, female students from Kerala are never taught the *Miḻāvu*. While she has never played the drum in Kerala, she continues to play it in Japan to accompany performances of other Japanese students training in Kūṭiyāṭṭam. Michiko Ono herself was not initially drawn to Kūṭiyāṭṭam performances; her love for the art grew by watching Tomoe Irino's performances in Japan. This prompted her to travel to Kerala to watch, experience and learn the art, while taking several sabbaticals from her software professional career.

More students-cum-scholars like Heike Moser-Oberlin and Farley Richmond eventually joined the league of earlier scholars John Sowle, Clifford Jones and Diane Daugherty, in documenting and studying the art form. They continue to visit Kerala during Kūṭiyāṭṭam festivals.

I have also found Art or Humanities students from across the world learning Kūṭiyāṭṭam for their research projects and dissertations (Observational Fieldnotes, Pilot Study, 2017, and 2019). Such short-term programmes for researchers, theatre persons and dancers are either for gaining an emic view of the art or for adapting the unique features of Kūṭiyāṭṭam into their respective fields. For example, Joe*, a male American theatre artiste, learnt the female solo art Naṅṅyārkūttu at Kerala Kalamandalam under the tutelage of my Guru, after conveying to her his precise expectation from the art. This ran against convention on two grounds: first, male actors do not perform Naṅṅyārkūttu; secondly, a student's training is normally at the sole discretion and convenience of the Guru. My Guru acceded to his demands, thinking that perhaps they could have been part of a process of ideation for his own performances in his home country. Such Kūṭiyāṭṭam teaching and learning can be termed non-traditional as they completely depart from the spirit of a Guru-*Śiṣya* relationship in terms of what is

Figure 3. The author with third-year undergraduate students Kalamandalam Gopika, Kalamandalam Mrunalini and Kalamandalam Kalyani at a Kūṭiyāṭṭam Kaḷari learning Naṅṅyārkūttu at Kerala Kalamandalam, August 2019 (Courtesy: Kalamandalam Gayathri Devi)

taught and in what time-frame.

Overall, while some researchers and students, irrespective of their ethnic affiliations, come to Kūṭiyāṭṭam for a brief period, others opt to continue or to return to the art as students, professional performers, or loyal connoisseurs. In either case, we see some conventions being broken, though both Gurus and students exert prudence in letting such deviations become the standard praxis. Such reluctance, for instance, is seen in the limited use of electronic gadgets by students: during my Naṅṅyārkūttu training, I was asked by my Guru to learn the prescribed production manual with its Malayalam prose and Sanskrit verses (which are recited in specific ragas); since I was a novice, I audio-recorded my Guru and fellow students reciting the verses, and was allowed to use these recordings back during my homework, a privilege not granted to the "regular" Naṅṅyārkūttu students at Kerala Kalamandalam.

The spirit of the art's pedagogy

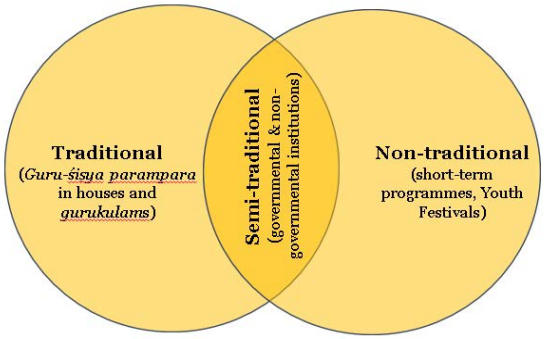

Figure 4. Diagram showing the existing kinds of Kūṭiyāṭṭam teaching: traditional, semi-traditional and non-traditional

Thus, Kūṭiyāṭṭam's pedagogical landscape consists of four avenues: the purely traditional one, now practised only in very few Cākyār and Nampyār households; the semi-traditional "post-colonial" institutionalized one; and the non-traditional capsuled training. From my field experience and that of many artistes, the second avenue appears to be, at the present time, the most successful of the three in producing professional performers.

In the above sections, we observed how Kūṭiyāṭṭam was already an institutionalized art with the Guru-*Śiṣya* mode of knowledge transmission enmeshed within the family structure, which shaped the core of Kūṭiyāṭṭam *Śikṣā* in the early medieval and medieval era. With the challenge posed by a limited number of experts within a family, Kūṭiyāṭṭam training at households slowly expanded to the system of *Gurukulams* and *Maṭhams* and thus, individual family structures expanded to community structures in the pre-Independence period. Therefore, there was a shift from the old narrative of keeping the family's knowledge system within the family to a new narrative of sharing the knowledge with the other families of the same vocation; in the process, Cākyār and Nampyār families came together for training their students together.

Eventually, in the post-Independence period, the new developments— the creation of the Kūṭiyāṭṭam department at Kerala Kalamandalam and other organizations— was a process in "rewriting" the narrative of Kūṭiyāṭṭam teaching and learning across different castes. Here, a larger community of students and artistes are exposed to the core of Kūṭiyāṭṭam training but do not necessarily become active participants of the knowledge system. The narrative was further rewritten in the mode of non-traditional teaching: teaching a Kūṭiyāṭṭam production in five days or learning a *Śloka* through audio recordings. And while such narratives continue to be rewritten, parts of the core of the knowledge system, as institutionalized by the Cākyārs and Nampyārs has remained untouched: "There are a lot of aspects in

the art form that have been preserved within the Gurukulams, which are not shown to the world" (Indu G in Binoy, 2019). This underlines two findings: the core of Kūṭiyāṭṭam knowledge largely remains intact with the Cākyār and Nampyār artistes living in Kerala; secondly, in the semi-traditional teaching process, knowledge is imparted to the non-Cākyārs and non-Nampyārs at the discretion of a few Cākyār and Nampyār artistes. We find that the semi-traditional mode of training is slowly moving towards the core of Kūṭiyāṭṭam *Śikṣā*, replacing the traditional Guru-*Śiṣya* training, as there is no student solely learning Kūṭiyāṭṭam without any alternative scholastic learning. This idea is in tandem with the shifting boundaries of the core, semi-periphery and peripheral areas, where the core element loosens up and incorporates the features of the semi-periphery to form the new core (Chase Dunn and Hall, 1991). Therefore, the unchanged core of traditional *Gurukulam* training, semi-traditional training and different kinds of peripheral pedagogies (knowledge transmitted in small packages and capsuled formats, almost in a fragmented fashion; teaching and learning for a few competitions, research papers and independent theatre-dance productions) are woven together in Kūṭiyāṭṭam's *Śikṣā* today. The process, then, as suggested by Singer (1972: 399-400), underlines Indian tradition's, and here, Kūṭiyāṭṭam's "adaptive mechanism", that accepts or rejects innovations by traditionalizing or archaicizing these changes or innovations. It is this adaptive mechanism that preserves Kūṭiyāṭṭam despite an evolving periphery. If we are to redefine *Kūṭi*-āṭṭam in the current pedagogical context, we can consider it as an amalgam or "coming together" of different pedagogies — a departure from the orthodox tradition, yet still rooted in it in some ways.

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Dancing for Themselves: Ritual Celebrations of *Chaitra Parva* in West Bengal (Photo Essay)

Maheshwar Kumar

Abstract

Chaitra Parva, a seasonal overlap between spring and summer, is celebrated annually through a series of ritual rites, many of which include dance and music, invoking Lord Shiva (a Hindu male deity). It is mainly performed by the ordinary non-Brahmans known as ritual bhaktas, who undertake perilous austerities, renunciation, and self-mortification to appease Lord Shiva. This four-day festival is known as – *Falhar* (fruit worship), *Jagaran* (night of awakening), *Bhakta Ghora* (wheel celebration), and *Balidan* (animal sacrifice). This reflection on the dance festival in writing and photography aims to visually capture how the *Chaitra Parva* festival embodies rural West Bengal's cultural landscape. It also sheds light on how those ritual rites, accompanied by dance and music, connect the people with a sense of belongingness while representing a unique cultural identity.

Keywords:

Culture, Ritual, Dance, Music, *Chaitra Parva*, West Bengal

Ritual, primarily considered a reflection of human nature, society, and culture, influences manifold performance traditions, and plays an "adoptive role in the course of both biological and cultural evolution" (Stephenson 2015: 21). The Bengali month of *Chaitra,*[1] a seasonal overlap between spring and summer, mirrors that performative tradition in the form of *Chaitra Parva*[2] (Spring Festival) by considering it for "acknowledging, celebrating, trumpeting the continuum of the life-death-life" (Khokar 1981: 75). *Chaitra Parva*, a four-day (April 11-15 approximately) festival, is celebrated annually through a series of ritual rites, many of which include dance and music, invoking Lord Shiva, the *Ardhanarishwara*[3] (the composite form Shiva and Shakti). This festival is directed at "world renewal" (Nicholas 2008: 1) and "fertility-compelling celebration" (Ferrari 2010: 102), aiming to bring rain – desiccated fields with crops, ponds with fishes, wives with children, unmarried with marriage, blind with sight, metaphorically reversing the relationship of life and death. The rituals are mainly performed by the ordinary non-brahmans known as ritual bhaktas,[4] who, to appease Lord Shiva, undertake perilous austerities, renunciation, self-mortification, and lead an

1 The transliteration "*Chaitra*" has been adopted here following its popular usage in English-language scholarship and vernacular references to the Bengali calendar. While the Bengali pronunciation tends closer to "*Choitro*" (চৈত্র), "*Chaitra*" is widely recognized in academic and cultural writing, allowing for both accessibility and fidelity to local enunciation.

2 The transliteration "*Chaitra Parva*" is used here in line with common academic usage, though in Bengali pronunciation it is often rendered closer to "*Choitro Porbo*" (চৈত্র পর্ব). "*Parva*" is a Sanskrit-derived term meaning "festival" or "occasion." Retaining "*Chaitra Parva*" balances fidelity to enunciation with accessibility for wider readership, while the gloss "Spring Festival" clarifies its seasonal context.

3 The transliteration "*Ardhanarishwara*" is employed here following its widespread usage in English-language scholarship, though Sanskritized spellings such as "*Ardhanārīśvara*" are also found. The term refers to the composite form of Lord Shiva and Goddess Shakti, embodying both masculine and feminine principles. This choice reflects a balance between phonetic enunciation and popular recognition in cultural and academic discourse.

4 The term "bhakta" (ভক্ত) derives from Sanskrit, meaning "devotee" or "worshipper." In the context of *Chaitra Parva*, it refers specifically to non-Brahman practitioners who undertake ritual austerities and devotional performances. The transliteration "bhakta" has been retained in its widely accepted form, consistent with both scholarly usage and vernacular enunciation, rather than the more Sanskritized "*bhaktaḥ*."

ascetic life throughout the festival for the well-being of the respective communities, their families, and for themselves.

This reflection on the dance festival, supported by a couple of photos, aims to visually capture how the *Chaitra Parva* festival embodies rural West Bengal's cultural landscape. It also sheds light on how those ritual rites, accompanied by dance and music, connect the people with a sense of belongingness and represent a unique cultural identity. The photos presented here were taken by me during the fieldwork conducted in April 2021 at the Lohoria temple in Barria village of Baghmundi block in Purulia district.

The first day, *Falhar*[5] (fruit worship) [Figure 1-2], begins with the ritual bhaktas symbolically emerging from a period of death or birth impurity and worship the goddess, Shakti, taking Her into the Shiva temple, followed by dance and music and chanting magical mantras. At twilight, the bhaktas take their ritual bath and then commemorate in the Shiva temple for the day's procession to offering *Falhar*, containing unripe mangoes added with brown chickpeas and jaggery.

The second day, *Jagaran*[6] (night of awakening) [Figure 3-6], unfolds with the journey of the wooden plank representing *Ardhanariswara* in every household of the village. The bhaktas then play with ash and dance with their *Gajan*[7] canes, charged with the music of a percussion instrument, the *Dhak* (a traditional barrel drum). While the principal bhakta carries the wooden plank, a few newborn babies, children, men, and women lie upright in his path to get Lord Shiva's blessings. After having peace water from the holy pond, all bhaktas reassemble in the Shiva temple, worship Him, get their sacred thread and garland and ritually enter the world of rigorous ascetic life. The bhaktas afterwards, at midnight, begin their bhakta-dance in unison and march towards the dancing arena where the folk performances of *Chhau*[8] take place throughout the night. The third day, *Bhakta Ghora*[9] (wheel celebration) [Figure 7-10], starts with the bhaktas' sun worship at the sacred pond, and the principal ascetic simulates death by lying upon the wooden plank studded with iron spikes, symbolising the life-death-rebirth cycle. On the other hand, a few devotees walk upon the hot embers to receive blessings from Lord Shiva to fulfil their vows. Finally, the wheel

5 The term "*Falhar*" is retained in its popular anglicized form, reflecting local pronunciation in rural Bengal. In Sanskrit, the closer transliteration would be "*Phalāhāra*" (literally, "fruit consumption/offerings"). The simplified "*Falhar*" has been chosen to remain faithful to vernacular enunciation and common cultural usage, while the gloss "fruit worship" clarifies the ritual context for non-specialist readers.

6 The transliteration "*Jagaran*" follows common Bengali and Hindi usage, though in Sanskrit the term is "*Jāgaraṇa*" (जागरण), meaning "wakefulness" or "keeping vigil." The simplified form "*Jagaran*" is widely recognized in popular and scholarly contexts in Bengal, and has been retained here to reflect local enunciation. The explanatory gloss "night of awakening" situates the ritual meaning for broader readership.

7 The term "*Gajan*" (গাজন) refers to the broader set of ritual festivities dedicated to Lord Shiva at the end of the Bengali month of *Chaitra*. The word is often traced to "*garjan*" (গর্জন, meaning "roar" or "loud call"), symbolizing invocation and collective expression. The transliteration "*Gajan*" is retained here as it is the most common form in both scholarly and popular writing. The phrase "*Gajan* canes" designates the ritual staffs carried by devotees (bhaktas) during processions and performances, integral to their vows and symbolic enactments.

8 "*Chhau*" refers to a traditional dance form originating in eastern India, including West Bengal, Jharkhand, and Odisha. The spelling "*Chhau*" is widely used in English-language scholarship and popular references, though regional pronunciations may vary slightly. In the context of *Chaitra Parva*, *Chhau* performances are often ritualized, combining martial movements, acrobatics, and storytelling, and serve as a medium for devotional and communal expression.

9 The term "*Bhakta Ghora*" combines "bhakta", meaning devotee, with "*ghora*" (ঘরা), meaning "to move around" or "circulate." The transliteration follows common usage in Bengali cultural studies. The gloss "wheel celebration" conveys the central ritual action—devotees moving or circling in a ceremonial manner—making the performative and symbolic aspects of this day of *Chaitra Parva* clear to English-speaking readers.

bhaktas begin the arduous hook-swinging ceremony by piercing their back skin with two sharp iron spikes tied with jute ropes. While dancing with other bhaktas, the wheel bhakta reaches the performing site, climbs the bamboo-ladders, ties up with the T-shaped *Gajan* pole, and starts moving ritually, folding his hands in homage to Lord Shiva. On the fourth day, *Balidan*[10] (animal sacrifice) [Figure 11-12], as an age-old custom of propitiation, commences when the bhaktas apply mustard oil mixed with turmeric powder on the stones of Shiva Linga and put the same on each other's bodies, followed by their final bhakta-dance of the festival. Afterwards, they take their last ritual bath and start their concluding worship of Lord Shiva. Finally, to break their ascetic life, the bhaktas and the ordinary people offer uncastrated goats, whose blood is allowed to seep into the earth as a symbolic act of purification, ensuring fertility for the life-death-rebirth continuum.

The following photos, arranged chronologically, will visually help the readers understand the ritual rites of *Chaitra Parva* and its legacy carried forward by the respective communities for ages.

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10 The term "Balidan" (বলদান) is derived from Sanskrit, meaning "sacrifice" or "offering." In the context of *Chaitra Parva*, it specifically refers to the ritual sacrifice of animals as an act of devotion to Lord Shiva. The transliteration "*Balidan*" is retained in its widely recognized form in both scholarly and popular contexts, while the gloss "animal sacrifice" clarifies the practice for readers unfamiliar with the ritual.

Figure 1: The bhaktas, accompanied by the music of the Dhol, carry the epitome of goddess Shakti into the Shiva temple.

This initial act of carrying Shakti establishes the festival's central union of divine energies. Through sound, movement, and collective devotion, the ritual announces its opening moment, preparing the space for offerings that connect fertility and renewal.

Figure 2: Worshipping of Lord Shiva during Falhar with His symbolic and seasonal fruit, unripe mangoes, added with brown chickpeas and jaggery.

From the arrival of Shakti, the rites transition to offerings that link agricultural cycles with divine abundance. This embodied exchange between people and deity shifts the ritual focus toward communal blessing, paving the way for acts of submission and surrender.

Figure 3 (Previous Page) : The children lie on the path of the principal bhakta, who carries the wooden plank and crosses over their bodies, bringing healing power with the blessings of Lord Shiva.

Here, the vulnerability of children signifies trust in divine grace, while the plank becomes a moving shrine of protection. This sacred object soon undergoes its own ritual consecration, deepening its role as a vessel of cosmic energy.

Figure 4: Ritual worship of the wooden plank takes place in the holy pond with vermilion, incense, wood apple leaves, rice, and lotus flowers (representing Shiva and Shakti).

By immersing the plank, bhaktas merge elemental forces of earth, water, and fire into ritual action. Once purified, the body and the community are readied for ecstatic dance, where devotion becomes performance.

Figure 5: The bhaktas, with their Gajan cane and garlands, representing Shiva's trident and snake on His neck, respectively, dance with great gusto and march towards the Chhau dancing arena.

This collective movement transforms symbolic objects into extensions of Shiva's power. The body in dance becomes both sacred and theatrical, naturally transitioning into the more stylized performances that mark the festival's nocturnal climax.

***Figure 6*:** The night of awakening's final ritual is celebrated by witnessing vibrant performances of the Purulia *Chhau* dance.

Through Chhau, myth and ritual converge, allowing artistic expression to carry divine narratives. As night turns toward dawn, the ritual gaze shifts from human enactments to celestial forces, aligning the community with cosmic cycles.

***Figure 7*:** The bhaktas worship *Suryadeva* (an incarnation of Lord Shiva) along with the priest, who provides access to the divine cosmic world by means of ritual acts.

In this moment, worship turns upward to the sun, reaffirming the interplay between light and shadow. From cosmic invocation, the bhaktas descend again into bodily ordeal, where the human frame becomes a stage for transcendence.

Figure 8: The principal bhakta lies upon the wooden plank and simulates death, which has the spiritual power of the life-death-rebirth cycle.

The body stretched upon iron spikes manifests impermanence and endurance. From this symbolic death, the ritual progresses toward fiery trials that test and purify both individuals and community.

***Figure 9*:** Ritual space for walking upon the fire of logs and pieces of wood is being prepared to pay homage to Lord Shiva to fulfil devotees' private vows.

Crossing fire becomes a passage through suffering toward divine protection. The intensity of this trial prepares the ground for the most dramatic ordeal—the suspension of the body in the hook-swinging ritual.

***Figure 10*:** The wheel bhakta begins his arduous hook-swinging ceremony by moving ritually both forward and backwards, along with the T-shaped *Gajan* pole, stranded above almost 30 feet from the ground.

Suspended between heaven and earth, the bhakta embodies Shiva's cosmic dance of destruction and renewal. After this spectacular apex, the festival shifts toward closure, guiding ascetics back into ordinary life through acts of preparation and cleansing.

***Figure 11*:** All bhaktas assembled in a queue for their ritual rites of paring nails, shaving beards, and preparing for the concluding celebration.

This grooming signals the transition from ascetic detachment back to communal reintegration. The body, once mortified, is now readied for a final act of purification and shared joy.

***Figure 12*:** To mark the end of *Chaitra Parva* and to leave the ascetic life and return to their everyday lives, the bhaktas put mustard oil mixed with turmeric powder on each other's bodies and start their final dance of reverence for themselves.

The *Chaitra Parva* festival concludes with dance, not as sacrifice but as renewal. Through ritual touch and colour, the bhaktas affirm continuity—of fertility, of social bonds, and of a cultural identity sustained across generations.

Gone in a Breath: A Visual Ode to Unnoticed Dance Devotion (Photo Essay)

Asif Musaddeque

"**Gone in a Breath**" ventures beyond the spotlight, delving into the world of artists whose dedication often remains unnoticed amidst society's fixation on grandeur. This photo essay is a tribute to artists whose passion and commitment endure in the face of neglect and hardship, shedding light on the raw beauty and perseverance that thrive beyond the proscenium arch. In a culture that glorifies visible success, this initiative serves as a poignant reminder of the challenges faced by artists deemed inconsequential by societal norms. The unrecognized dancers within our midst embody this struggle, navigating a path often devoid of recognition and support. Through their resilience, they exemplify the profound beauty and complexity of human existence, fostering connections that transcend the boundaries of acclaim. As a retired Bharatanatyam dancer turned photographer, this endeavor holds personal significance. It merges my lifelong dedication to movement with a profound understanding of the trials endured by artists in their pursuit of true expression. "Gone in a Breath" not only captures moments of artistic finesse but also offers a glimpse into the challenges and triumphs that define the dance community. Through a delicate balance between rehearsal authenticity and performance grace, this project aims to portray the art form while honoring the indomitable spirit of artists.

Photo 1: Freedom of Movement | Anandita Khan

Photo 2: Caught between society's grip and the weight of the dance floor | Sabbir Ahmed Khan

Photo 3: The myth of the artist vs. the reality | Arohye Islam

Photo 4: Dancers embodying the intricate ties between them | Anandita Khan, Arohye Islam, Mofassal Alif, Era

Photo 5: The way society is classified mirrors the dance scene — but only society gets the conversation | Mofassal Alif, Shakib Salehin

Photo 6: Veiled Vision | Madhurima Roy

Photo 7:

The Dancer within a Dream | Mofassal Alif

Photo 8:

Tug of Forces | Mofassal Alif, Shakib Salehin

Photo 9: Questions! | Anandita Khan

Photo 10: A feeling not invited | Md Hanif

Photo 11: Peril of Life | Era

Photo 12: Hierarchy | Arohye Islam, Shabbir Ahmed Khan, Ariyana Nitra

Crossings between Regional and National Culture in the work of Imphal-based choreographer, Surjit Nongmeikapam

Sanchita Sharma

Introduction

When I arrived in Imphal, Manipur, for the first time on August 16, 2022, I was asked to fill a form termed "Inner Line Permit."[1] The ILP (Figure 1) allows non-residents of Manipur a legal stay for up to fifteen days from the time of their arrival. This felt quite strange to me—taking a permit to visit a place in my own country and being called a "non-resident." I am used to being categorized as a "non-resident alien" in the United States and being asked to take timely visa permits to (re)enter the country, but I felt displaced when I was assigned a similar status in my home country.

Generally speaking, I am skeptical of permits. I see them as modes of surveillance, and that makes me afraid. Yes, they are required to keep us "safe," but they are usually used as modes of discrimination, segregation, and oppression. Artist Tania El Khoury (2021) urges us to "address borders as violence, which connects the right to movement with the responsibility and positionality of people who are border privileged, those who are not criminalized for crossing borders" (19). Likewise, how might we see this kind of border control as a right to self-preservation for the indigenous communities of Manipur?

Originally instituted "by the British under the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulations Act, 1873," writes Sumir Karmakar (23 June 2022) for the Deccan Herald, the ILP was re-introduced in December 2019 to distinguish "native residents" from "illegal migrants" in the state of Manipur. Later, I learnt that ILP was implemented after tensions and violence between the Meitei community and the Naga tribes, with the Naga-nationalist demand for "a greater Nagalim—the idea of a common homeland for people from various Naga tribes to be carved out of Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, and Myanmar, in addition to the territory of the real state of Nagaland."[2] I began to understand Manipur's need to establish its regional autonomy as a border state between India and Myanmar, along with the three other states in the Northeast that implemented ILP before Manipur—Mizoram, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh. I also started paying attention to the terms of agreement between Manipur's three main ethnic tribes—Meitei, Kuki, and Naga. However, I constantly wondered how India's forceful measures for "national unity" impacted Manipur's need for regional independence and contributed to the ethnic conflict in Manipur.

In this paper, I discuss and analyze the *choreosomatic* practice[3] of Imphal-based

1 Regarding Inner Line Permit (ILP), Sumir Karmakar (June 23, 2022) writes for Deccan Herald, "The BJP government in Manipur has decided to adopt 1961 as the 'base year' to determine the state's 'native residents' for implementation of the Inner Line Permit (ILP) system in the state." Read more at: https://www.deccanherald.com/india/manipur-adopts-1961-as-base-year-to-determine-native-residents-for-ilp-implementation-1120454.html.

2 Quoted from photo-journalist Nikhil Roshan's unpublished essay that he shared with me during my field-trip in Imphal, India in 2022.

3 I am defining and using the term "choreosomatic" in reference to Surjit Nongmeikapam's work to give an overview of his somatic, pedagogical, and choreographic practice. Essentially, I do not see them as separate forms of practice, in Nongmeikapam's case, rather porous systems of movement generation and organization with varied crossings between them. Throughout the paper, when I am emphasizing on one aspect of his work, I will clarify

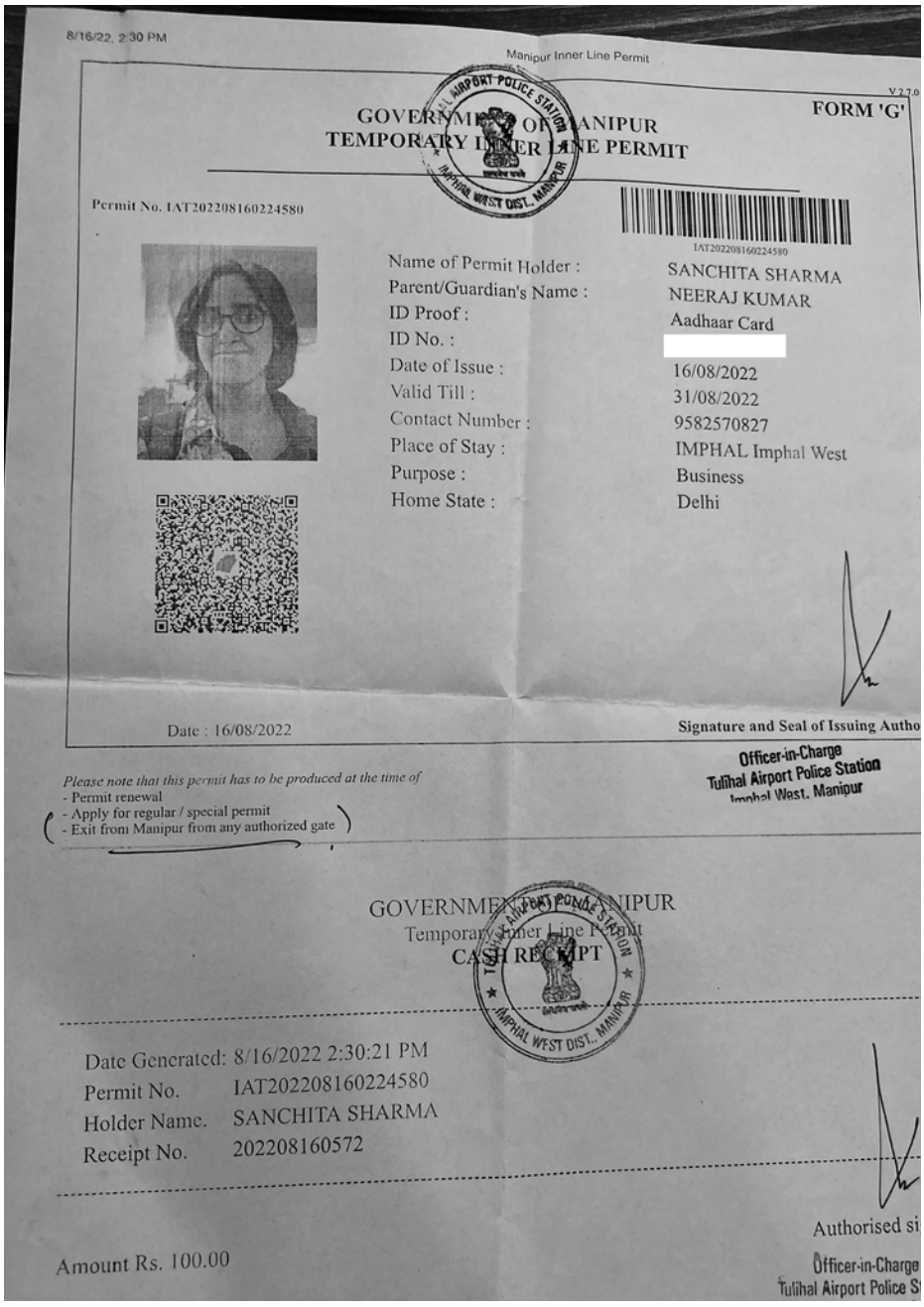

Figure 1. Photo of the first Inner Line Permit I received at Imphal Airport on August 16, 2022

choreographer, Surjit Nongmeikapam, who is a member of the Meitei community, one of the predominant indigenous communities and ethnic groups in Manipur, India. Nongmeikapam's choreographies address the conflict between the nation-state and the north-eastern region, and the psychophysical impacts State oppression has had on the indigenous people, especially the youth. Through my ethnographic observations, qualitative interview with the choreographer, and "thick descriptions" (Geertz 1973), in this paper, I suggest that Nongmeikapam's choreosomatic practice is an offering, a methodology for deep resistance towards the forced Hinduization and Indianization of the region. I show how his conception of the "natural body" empowers and foregrounds a culturally embodied regional identity (Manipuri) that is contemporary. The "natural body" becomes an agent of indigenous resistivity to undo the oppressive colonial and post-colonial conceptions of body, space, and sovereignty. By taking a closer look, as a participant-observer, at Nongmeikapam's improvisation-based pedagogical practice entitled the *Yangshak* Movement, I show how Nongmeikapam's work fosters harmonious, equitable, and reciprocal relations between the body and the land, building on regional philosophy and movement practices.

Making multiple crossings between internal and external, regional and national, religious and indigenous, and local and global borders, form, and culture, Nongmeikapam's choreosomatic practice not only reclaims regional representation but also produces a new framework for regional and ethnic autonomy and freedom. This process, I argue, could usefully be called *resistive hybridity*, because of the way it resists the exoticization of the north-eastern body in performance. Nongmeikapam's *resistive hybridity* integrates physical techniques from a diverse range of movement traditions, which I delve into more detail later in the paper, to create corporeal, sonic, and spatial landscapes that are rooted in local Manipuri sensibilities yet are both abstract and ritualistic in nature. Belonging to a marginalized state in India, *resistive hybridity* reflects Nongmeikapam's resistance to being engulfed in the category of "folk" dance, only to be recognized for the "diversity" he brings to Indian dance, without being credited for the innovation and originality that he brings to the field of Indian contemporary dance.

Theoretical Framework

In laying out the theoretical framework for this paper, I discuss two key concepts—"indigenous structural framework" (Premchand 2005) and "geo-body" (Winichakul 1994). In doing that, I aim to show the history of development of cultural art forms such as theatre and dance in Manipur as an act of negotiation between regional and (trans) national culture. In contrast to the mainland's customs and rituals which are primarily Hindu, Manipuri cultural art forms foreground a local and indigenous understanding of their customs, rituals, and movement practices that connected to their land. Seeing the resultant art form as a hybridized product,[4] in this section, "indigenous structural framework" (Premchand 2005) allows us to trace the exchange between the local and non-religious practices in conversation with myths and themes from Hinduism. The discussion on

by saying pedagogical and/or choreographic practice. Otherwise, when you come across the term "choreosomatic," it is meant to fulfill the purpose of looking at Nongmeikapam's work in totality—always in relation and in dialogue with his ethnic and regional context.

4 I will discuss this further in relation to Surjit Nongmeikapam's work, explaining how his pedagogical and choreographic practice engages in a process that could usefully be called *resistive hybridity*.

"geo-body" (Winichakul 1994), on the one hand, destabilizes the colonial notion of nation and territory and, on the other, shows how the performance culture of Manipur is rooted in its understanding of and connection to the land. Overall, these two key ideas help me critically examine Nongmeikapam's pedagogical and choreographic framework—his improvisational strategies and the spatial politics in his work—in the second half of the paper.

Manipuri scholar and theatre activist, Nongthomban Premchand (2005), argues for indigenous rituals and performance traditions of Manipur to be considered as theatre. Keeping in mind the social, cultural, and political factors specific to Manipur and how it has shaped theatre over the years, he draws a relationship between the changes in ritualistic performances and the dominating religion in the region. In doing so, Nongthombon writes, "The history of development or changes from *Lai Haroba* to *Shumang Lila* has been dictated by the changes which have taken place in the life of Manipuris, starting from the days of pre-Hindu indigenous religion continuing [to] the days of Hinduism and finally to the era of secularism" (3). In mapping these shifts in ritualistic performances from historical to the present moment, Premchand outlines the "indigenous structural framework" (4) as the base for traditional Manipuri theatre.

> This non-religious indigenous structure, which is composed of the elements of music, song, dance, body movements, costume, space, and even the relationship between the performance and audience, is the backbone or the central nervous system, which has transcended barriers of culture or religion, and which has drawn all the foreign materials into a process of interaction and final fusion with local Manipuri conditions and sensibilities. (4-5)

The unique usage of these above-mentioned elements in performance reflects the process of merging of "foreign" and "indigenous" practices. By foreign materials, Premchand refers to topics or themes from Hinduism that have merged with "local and indigenous materials and sensibilities" (4). The "fusion" between these two cultures has transformed the ways in which Manipuri theatre exists today. According to Premchand, "indigenous structural framework" is non-religious and has "transcended barriers of religion and culture" (4).

This process of interaction and fusion of Hindu and indigenous sensibilities in ritualistic performances can be further understood through the formulation of Manipuri Vaishnavism,[5] the synthesis of Bengali Vaishnavism and pre-Hindu Meitei religion. In his article "Sacred Geography,"[6] journalist and photographer Nikhil Roshan analyzes two major festivals of Manipur—*Lai Haroba*[7] and *Yaoshang*—to argue that their

5 "Manipur Hinduism gradually became a synthesis of the old Methei religion with its Gods and Goddesses and Myths, its Legends and Traditions, its Social Customs and Usages and its Priests and Ceremonials, and of Brahminical Hinduism with its special worship of Radha and Krishna" (Parratt 1980, x).

6 Photo-journalist Nikhil Roshan shared his unpublished photo-essay with me during my field research in India in 2022.

7 "Lai haraoba is a ritual celebrating the 'cosmic union between male and female deities' and an enactment of the creation of the universe, including the 'stars, sky, sun, moon, and the creation of men'. There are four versions; the one performed in and around Imphal is 'regarded as the core ritual [of the Meiteis], reflecting the Meitei belief systems and philosophy'. Lai haraoba was banned during the forced adoption of Hinduism, but in the second half of the twentieth century it has been performed more often as 'a means to remind the Meiteis of

current forms are a result of "The unique cross pollination of belief systems that is Manipuri Vaishnavism." Roshan foregrounds theatre director and scholar Dr. Lokendra Arambam's astute analysis and argument to look at these ritualistic performances as possibly "the Meteisation of Hinduism,"[8] which is similar to the process of "fusion" that Premchand refers to in the formulation of "indigenous structural framework."

Looking closer at these ritualistic performances, one can see the fusion between these two distinct religious and cultural philosophies and worldviews. According to Premchand, "indigenous structural framework" can be identified by studying "the use of the existing non-Hindu performance structures, which are abstract, non-realistic and ritualistic in character" (5). In these ritualistic performances, for example in *Lai Haroba*, their performance structures echo "a regional cosmology and worldview, in contradistinction to a 'mainland' world view, and a reminder about what is at stake in debates over regional and national culture" (Mee 2011, 122-123). In other performances, for example *Maha Raas* or *Rasleela*, Manipuris (Meiteis) kept their rituals, customs, and movement patterns and accommodated the themes of Hinduism, including only the storyline worshiping Hindu Gods, Radha and Krishna. In this way, *Rasleela* became "a hybrid genre designed to bring about cultural reconciliation" (Mee 2011, 124-125). Looking through the "indigenous structural framework," one can see the process of synthesis and negotiation between Hindu and Meitei belief systems to form a contemporary regional culture. Therefore, using "indigenous structural framework" to study Nongmeikapam's work, I analyze his strategic use of different belief systems and movement practices to create his concept of the body, his pedagogical practice, and choreographic structure that has regional origin.

As Nongmeikapam identifies as an indigenous member of the Meitei community, his work also embodies a politics of space and belonging. In the case of Manipur, modern geographical discourse of space and nationhood stands in contradiction to indigenous conceptions of space and sovereignty. This could be seen through the difference in the understanding of territoriality and boundary in modern and indigenous realms expressed through the notion of the "geo-body."

According to Thongchai Winichakul (1994), "geo-body" "describes the operations of the technology of territoriality which created nationhood spatially" (16). The modern concept of territoriality, according to Winichakul, "involves three basic human behaviours: a form of classification by area, a form of communication by boundary and an attempt at enforcing" (16). Through classifying an area and enforcing a boundary over it, the geo-body introduced the concept of bounded territories and altered the relationship between the space and the body. This was in contrast to the indigenous understanding of non-boundedness of human geography. The map became an "active mediator" between the body and the space instead of being a "transparent medium" (Winichakul 1994, 130). Through the technology of mapping, according to Winichakul, nations were created and people

[the] origin of their distinct cultural and political unity' and as a challenge to Hinduism. As one scholar put it: 'Lai Haraoba mirrors the entire culture of the Manipur people'. Clearly this is an embodiment, display, and reminder of a regional cosmology and world view, in contradistinction to a 'mainland' world view, and a reminder about what is at stake in debates over regional and national culture" (Mee 2011, 122-123).

8 In an interview with Rodney Sebastian on September 10, 2011, at Imphal, Manipur, for his PhD dissertation (2019), Lokendra Arambam "referred to this phenomenon as 'Meeteziation (sic) of Hinduism' instead of 'Hinduization of Meitei'" (176).

were transformed into "agents" that actualized the space being mapped (130).

In the context of Manipur, Vibha Arora and Ngamjahao Kipgen (2012) reminds us that "The physical boundary of Manipur has been fluctuating with historical changes in political power and intra-state and the inter-state boundaries" (430).[9] In contrast to these shifting borders, the Meitei people's pre-colonial notion of territoriality is based on the relationship between human body and geography of the land. According to Lokendra Arambam, the Manipuri people believe that the land forms an "anthropomorphic geobody" (Roshan). In his article, "Land and Ethnicity: A study of Manipur and its neighbourhood," Arambam (2018) writes,

> The Meitei concept of territoriality was also of a different cultural vintage. The hills and valleys, which constituted the geo-body of the pre-colonial nation state, were homologous with the body of a human organism. When the Meitei developed its polity in the eighteenth century, they had incorporated all the hills and plains as vital limbs of the human body that symbolized the geography of the land. Mythic beliefs were incorporated into their visions of land, people and cultures as an organic, moving national consciousness. The Meitei believed the hills of Koubru in the Northwestern sector as the head of the organism. The Lamphel marshes in the valley were regarded as the breasts. The Kangla (Imphal the Capital) was the navel of the organism, which gave intelligence and nourishment to the body. Loktak Lake in the Southwestern plains was regarded as the bowels and pelvic zone of the geo-body. The Imphal River at its rear-end and before it fell into the Chindwin in Myanmar was regarded as the rectum. The hills were the arms and legs of the organism. (130)

Indigenous spatiality is described in the ways in which indigenous people of Manipur imagine the land as a human body. Imagining the land or geography as one having human-like physiology and characteristics challenges the hegemonic and modern notion of space (and its division through boundaries and organization into territories) produced through the geo-body. For the people of Manipur, it also creates a "national consciousness" directly linked to the land rather than their forced inclusion in the modern nation-state (India).

Thinking through the indigenous concept of the geo-body helps me foreground the concept of the "natural body" in Nongmeikapam's work "as an organic, moving national consciousness" (Arambam 2018, 130). As I discuss later, the "natural body"—as a source of regional consciousness and ethnic autonomy—is depicted through Nongmeikapam's use of the spine. The spine maps and traces the movement pattern of *Pakhangba*, the God-king of the Meitei people and symbol of Manipuri nationalism, which in turn, links the "natural body" directly to the land and Meitei culture.

9 "Historically, Manipur was an independent kingdom ruled by the Meitei dynasty. The physical boundary of Manipur has been fluctuating with historical changes in political power and intra-state and the inter-state boundaries. At one time in history, the river Chindwin in Myanmar formed Manipur's natural eastern frontier. The boundary line between Burma (Myanmar) and Manipur was fixed by the provision of the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 (Sanajaoba 1995: 1; N.J. Singh 2002: 17; Phanjou bam 2003: 220). The Kabaw valley remained the disputed territory of two countries - Manipur and Burma (Myanmar) - until Manipur joined India (Sanajaoba 1995: 2). Manipur formally joined India as a 'C' state in 1949 and was administered by the President of India through the Chief Commissioner. In 1956, it became a Union Territory and, in 1972, it was given statehood (O.B. Singh 2007-08: i)" (Arora and Kipgen 2012, 430).

The Natural Body[10]

What is the relationship between borders, territoriality, and mobility? How does the concept of the "natural body" help us understand this relationship, especially, in the context of Manipur?

According to Winichakul, "a frontier or border is a zone which lies along *each side* of the boundary or interfaces a neighboring country—that is, a boundary is *in between* two sides of borders" (77). Contrary to the modern definition of boundary, in indigenous understanding of spatial relations, borders, margins, and frontiers are conceived as "shared" or "overlapping" (101). The boundary is not neatly placed between the two sides of the borders but rather converges and blurs these borders. It is through taking in consideration the bodily movement or body's mobility across these borders that borders can be perceived as overlapping between different nation-states (instead of dividing them in the modern understanding of the border/boundary).

Similarly for Noel B. Salazar & Alan Smart (2011), "Mobilities and borders are not antithetical" (iv). Borders prioritize mobility (Chalfin 2008, 525) and they also "promote immobility, exclusion, and disconnection" (Alvarz 1995; Tsing 2005 cited in Salazar and Smart 2011, iv). Salazar and Smart (2011) argue that "To assess the extent or nature of movement, or, indeed, even 'observe' it sometimes, one needs to spend a lot of time studying things that stand still: the borders, institutions, and territories of nation-states, and the sedimented 'home' cultures of those that do not move" (iv-v). Taking into consideration the stillness and motion across borders and territories, the natural body studies the relationship between mobility and immobility, deepening into the physical sensations of (the body in) flux vs. (the body in) stillness. In doing so, it blurs the distinction between the two—finding stillness and motion in both these physical states: flux and fixity.

In Nongmeikapam's work, the natural body embodies indigenous and regional cosmology and world views, the anthropomorphic understanding of the land, geography, and region. The label of the "natural" signifies an understanding of the local culture, knowledge, and sensibilities about the body and the land, a resistive tactic, that guides his pedagogical and choreographic process to uplift and foreground Meitei philosophy and knowledge of the body as tied to land, culture, and nature.[11] It counters the modern understanding of borders and territoriality, and how the body negotiates the rules of sanctioned mobility. Thus, the "natural body" becomes an agent of indigenous resistivity to undo the oppressive colonial and post-colonial conceptions of body, space, and sovereignty that forcefully includes and "others" the region and the people of Manipur. This is the body that can survive,

10 In contradiction to my analysis of the natural body in Surjit Nongmeikapam's practice, a study on the concept of the natural body has been done by Doran George (2020) in reference to late twentieth-century contemporary dancers' resistance to ballet and modern dance's oppressive training regime in the United States. Developing on the work of Susan Manning's (2004), Ananya Chatterjea's (2004b), and Brenda Dixon Gottschild's (1996) anti-racist frameworks, George argue how whiteness functions and/or is embodied in the construction of the "natural body." Although Somatics claimed itself to be an inclusive practice and liberatory for many white practitioners, George highlight that it marked, marginalized, and excluded people of color, non-western, transgender, and differently abled bodies and their ways of movement from Somatics' universal purview. However, I show that instead of using the "natural" to re-invoke a "pre-cultural body" in the case of 1970s US Somatic practitioners (George 2020), Nongmeikapam uses it to empower and foreground a culturally embodied regional identity (Manipuri) that is contemporary.

11 In an interview with Annette Leday (2021), Surjit Nongmeikapam shares that he "learns from nature" and that the "human body is nature too."

push through, and transform even though experiencing oppression from the authoritarian nation-state that racially discriminates against it. Furthermore, Nongmeikapam uses it to empower and foreground a culturally embodied regional identity (Manipuri) that is contemporary. Nongmeikapam believes in cultivating a hopeful future for indigenous people and claims that "we cannot forget our history" but we can configure how "we can start a new life" together.[12]

Thang-ta to *Yangshak*: Moving Towards *Resistive Hybridity*

Nongmeikapam significantly draws on the symbol of *Pakhangba* in creating his movement patterns and choreographic structures. *Pakhangba*,[13] the serpentine dragon, is one of Meitei's deities. He was Sanamahi's brother who was worshiped by the Meitei community before they were forced to adopt Hinduism. Sanamahism is the pre-Hindu religion that the Meitei community practiced, which is "a mix of shamanism, with female shamans in the forefront of the ritual proceedings; and animism, which holds all of earth, and especially the waters, sacred."[14] There is currently a youth movement in Manipur to revive Sanamahism.

The image of *Pakhangba* has become the image of the Manipuri nationalist movement (Figure 2). According to Erin B. Mee (2011), the image of the deity was "first used by the underground (those fighting for independence) and is now part of the state's emblem" (111). Nongmeikapam is inspired by the infinite continuity represented by the symbol of Meitei's deity, *Pakhangba*. The visual pattern of the snake swallowing its tail represents for him the concept of reincarnation where the journey of life (and in his practice, the journey of movement) has no clear beginning or end (blurring). The relevance of referencing *Pakhangba* in performance is a way to revive pre-Hindu Meitei religion and its cosmology and worldview. It is also a tactic to resist the forced Hinduization and Indianization of the region.[15]

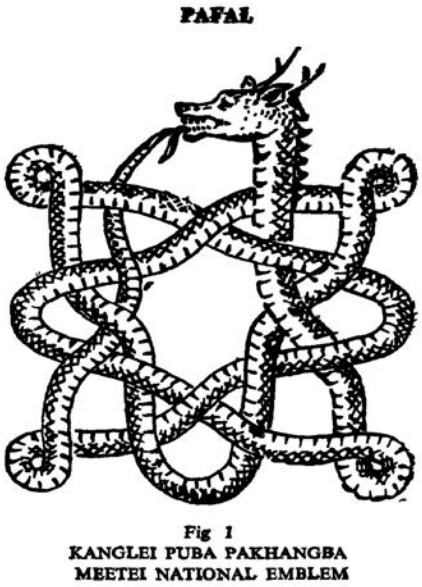

Figure 2. Image of Pakhangba. Accessed on May 29, 2025.

12 Annette Leday and Surjit Nongmeikapam, 2021, "Dance India Today: In conversation with Surjit Nongmeikapam," Narthaki Official, March 21, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4MGFqy7JrPI&list=PLawHnK-B4UjotvTtPFU7mD42FEq2ac_nDo&index=5.

13 "Pakhangba was the first ruler of Manipur, and is revered as kind, ancestors of the royal family the Meitei clan, and deity" (Mee 2011, 111).

14 "Sacred Space, the Maibis of Manipur," July 19, 2019, https://dharma-documentaries.net/sacred-space-the-maibis-of-manipur.

15 Scholars have theorized the forced inclusion of the north-eastern state, Manipur, in India where Manipur was seen only as a geographical region to be assimilated into the fold of mainland India for economic advantages (Arambam 2018; Arora and Kipgen 2012; Chawla 2023; D'Souza 2018; Singh 2011, among others). They also see a correlation between Manipur's forced merger into the Indian nation-state and rising ethnic conflict between the hill tribes, Kuki-Zo, Nagas, and the valley-residing Meitei community in Manipur that continues to shape the ethnic landscape in the region.

Another one of Nongmeikapam's strategies is to engage with one of Manipur's oldest martial arts forms, *thang-ta*. *Thang-ta* is a Manipuri martial arts form which was practiced in warfare before it was outlawed by the British. It means the "art of the sword and the spear" (Mee 2011, 120). According to Mee (2011), *thang-ta* "is embedded in a larger cultural context: it embodies and expresses ways of thinking and teaches an in-body understanding of Meitei culture" (120). As a movement practice, *thang-ta* foregrounds Meitei's way of thinking through the body. It theorizes and teaches bodily awareness as rooted in a somatic-based understanding of Meitei culture.

These are the physical principles that I learned from *thang-ta* during my field research in 2022—connecting with the body's center of gravity, grounded footwork, ability to switch spatial location, quick weight-shifts or weight-transfers, ability to take space, and rhythmic movements, from arm movements to footwork. These physical principles, attributes or qualities, are learned from deconstructing anatomical structure and studying the range of movement. According to Mee (2011), *thang-ta* exercises "teach control over the flow of energy in the body, coordination of inner and outer awareness, activation and coordination of all body parts, focus and concentration, opposition in the body, and kinesthetic response" (120). I saw the initial glimpse of the presence or influence of thang-ta in Nongmeikapam's choreosomatic practice during an improvisation session where he offered Bicky and me a movement phrase (Figure 3).

The phrase that this excerpt refers to combines movement principles from thang-ta and the curves and shapes etched by the symbol of *Pakhangba*. Feet are grounded, drawing up earth's energy through the soles. The spine is soaking up that energy to hint the head to move on a curvature (S) and arms join in and externalize these shapes (the s's and the infinity) through their movement—leading the rising, falling, and change of bodily orientation.

With *thang-ta*'s close and inevitable association and reading as a "symbol of Manipuri culture," (Mee 2011, 122), Nongmeikapam's usage of the practice strengthens his connection to his Manipuri roots. The use of *thang-ta* and *Pakhangba* creates a somatic and felt sense of his regional identity and autonomy. However, Nongmeikapam skillfully transitions from his embodiment of his regional philosophical and movement traditions towards an investigation of these forms and traditions to create his movement practice, *Yangshak*—core example of how he performs his *resistive hybridity* through his work.

In his pedagogical practice, *Yangshak*, the somatic and sensory knowledge that thang-ta imparts is still available and embodied by the dancers and so is the knowledge of incarnation from the symbol of Meitei's deity, *Pakhangba*. However, on a choreographic level, both the form and the symbol are abstracted to extend beyond a visual representation of traditional Manipuri culture. To clarify how this transition happens on a corporeal level, in the following section, I delve deeper into Nongmeikpam's pedagogical practice, *Yangshak*, adding in felt experiences and observations from my field-research in 2022.

Yangshak **Movement**

The description of the *Yangshak* Movement to promote the workshop on Instagram reads as follows:

> Yangshak movement is an exploration of the philosophy of 'Lairen Mathek' of the Manipuri martial arts forms, Thang-ta (Khuthek Lal Thek), and Dance (Jagoi).

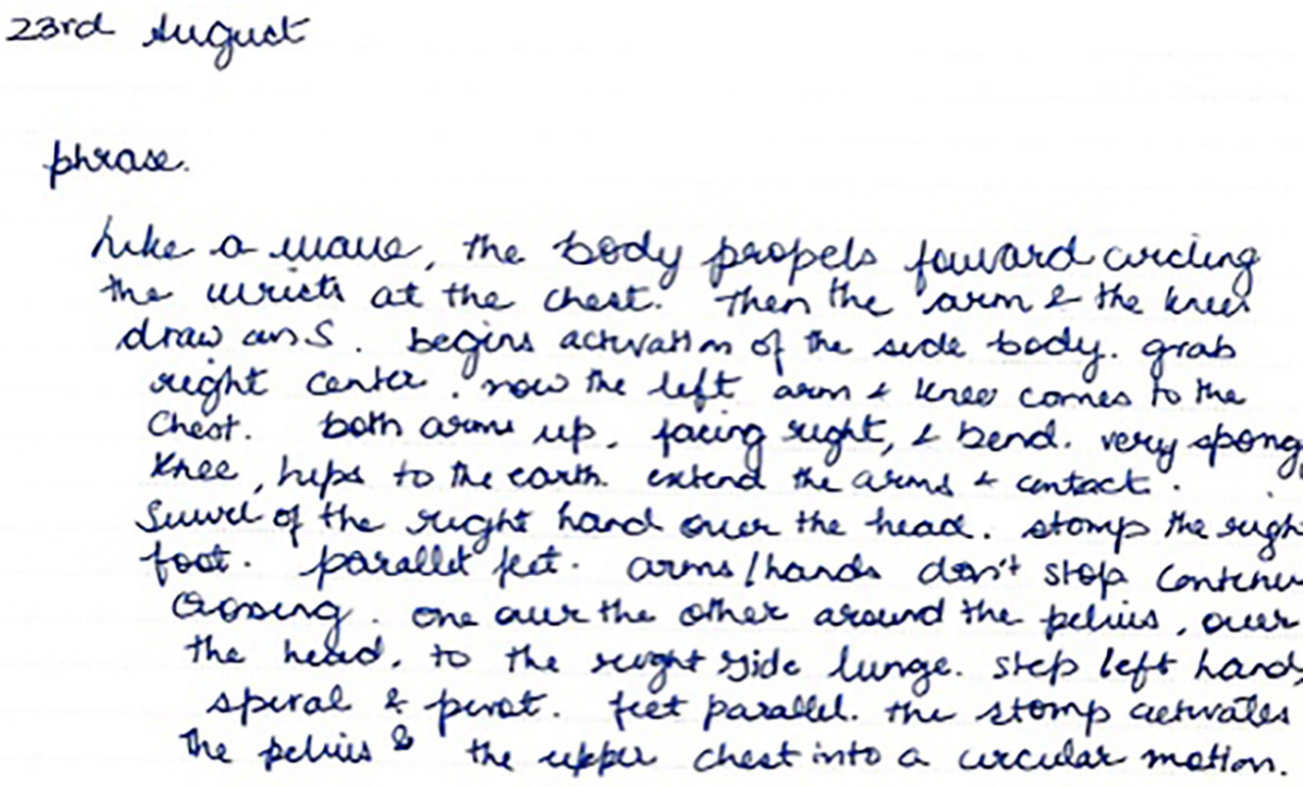

Figure 3: Excerpt from my field notes, written on August 23, 2022

> The workshop will focus on building an in-depth understanding of our body with the help of our imagination, resonance, impulse, and objects.[16]

I encountered Nongmeikapam's pedagogical practice during a week-long workshop he organized in Imphal in September 2022. During the workshop, Nongmeikapam shared that he is interested in bringing the inner form and the outer shape together, instead of creating a bodily shape that is fully comprehensible and hence, capturable. According to him, "Yang means Spine (internal) and Shak means image (external)."[17] In his practice, he focuses on developing a relationship between the external image (what we see) and the internal form (what we feel).

The questions Nongmeikapam is concerned with in this practice is: How to observe the body? How to cultivate awareness of the internal form? To discover answers to these questions, he has developed a two-way approach (inside-out and outside-in). Since *Yangshak* for him is the coming together of the internal and external, it is important to cultivate awareness inside-out on one hand (through training and warm-up exercises) and outside-in on the other hand (through working with an external object). In both these approaches, he focuses on improvisation as a tool to develop an anti-representational aesthetic and employs embodiment-sensitive (centered) language.

In cultivating crossings between internal and external form, Nongmeikapam's motto is to make unseen work visible.[18] He connects with impulses and sensations within the body to awaken (the natural) body's way of thinking. He rotates and breathes into every joint to show his "appreciation of each joint."[19] While learning to play with speed, slow and fast tempo, momentum, and quick weight-shifts, the dancing body becomes aware of its extremities, limitations, and movement possibilities in space. It learns to be responsive and care-ful to internal and external impulses and triggers, tapping into a sense of readiness and a willingness to change.

For Nongmeikapam, "Movement is body expression. It's a universal way. It is not about beauty. Every movement, simple movement, is so bold."[20] He focuses on "simplifying the movement,"[21] breaking a movement down to the smallest of its parts and bringing attention, energy, and aliveness to those parts. In this way, he moves away from a beautiful and perfected representation of a movement to enhancing the dancers' ability to sense and feel the movement from within. Improvisational methods that help generate this awareness in the body are a) (Un)balancing, b) Visualization, and c) Internalizing with the Object.

(Un)balancing

This practice tests one's knowledge of alignment. It involves learning to balance and build focus by imposing a physical restriction or challenge.

Tracing the right arm with our eyes, we pick up the right leg up and bring the knee to the chest. Focusing on a moving limb, balance is tested; the connection between the two—focus and balance—is ignited. On relevé, arms are raised

16 Instagram post (August 20, 2022): https://www.instagram.com/p/ChflCWQh8Fk/.
17 Interviewed by the author on August 24, 2022, in Imphal, Manipur.
18 In an informal conversation with the author on August 30, 2022, Surjit Nongmeikapam mentioned that he wishes to focus on "unseen culture."
19 Interviewed by the author on August 24, 2022, in Imphal, Manipur.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.

overhead. We focus on a point in front and close our eyes, still keeping an unwavering focus on that point. This strengthens the internal-external connection.

Later, with grounded and earthy feet, we tip our bodily weight to the edges of our feet. Experiencing the sensation of falling and then (re)organizing our internal systems to bring back alignment and stability, a new form is achieved. This form is not attained by a firm/rigid outward instruction or by following a codified technique. It is inspired by the concept of reincarnation, the continual and connected change in bodily form. It builds on the resonance of the previous movement and connects with the occurring impulses in the body to move into a novel direction/alignment. This process is constant and repetitive.

Visualization

In this exploration, we connect with physical sensations and geometric shapes that are imagined to move through our bodies.

During an improvisational practice in the studio prior to the workshop, Nongmeikapam asks us not only to focus on our breaths but also to "Think of each part of our body as if they were our lungs."[22] The shoulder breathes, the ribcage and the pelvis, and so does the calves, the back, the elbows, and the forehead. The entire body is expanding and contracting, like the lungs, filling itself with air one moment and emptying air out the next moment. Through this constant cycle of inhalation and exhalation, the movement feels continuous, like the movement of the serpent-God.

Then, we are asked to embody the geometrical shape of number eight (8), similar to the infinity symbol which is the base for Manipuri indigenous religious beliefs and martial arts, *thang-ta*. We envision it to move through our bodies and evolve into different shapes—from two interconnected circles to a rectangle, triangle, and so on. Nongmeikapam encourages us to trace the infinity symbol using the mobility of our spines while keeping the head and tailbone connection intact. Drawing different ranges of the number 8—small, large, growing out of our bodies—the design spills and integrates in the space around us, the room reverberates with our movement patterns.

Internalizing with the Object

To test our bodily awareness, towards the end of the *Yangshak* workshop, Nongmeikapam brings bamboo in the studio. For him, the act of holding an external object can help us connect with or become conscious of our alignment, internal feelings, and sensations, and bring us closer to the present moment.[23] Being born and raised in New Delhi and its chaos, I remember thinking, do I belong in the same space as the bamboo? Isn't it supposed to be in a faraway land, somewhere in a serene forest? I was just amazed to see how overpowering this object was and how, casually and unapologetically, it demanded, commanded, occupied, and divided space.

A breath later, I feel my anxiety rise as we begin to work with the bamboo—as it forces us to be present, attentive, and mobile in ways that we weren't accustomed to. The workshop participants stand on either side of the bamboo. One dancer in the center holds the bamboo

22 Interviewed by the author on August 24, 2022, in Imphal, Manipur.

23 "Since the bamboo is the external and the movement, the philosophy, is the internal. So external and coming together like that. Like, if I hold this is external thing, I'm connecting with my internal, inside the feelings. Then, you know, I'm moving, and I have the connection, the presence, the times, and conscious is here. I'm into the times and into the moment. The presence is very important" (Nongmeikapam, Interviewed by the author on August 24, 2022).

and turns on his axis slowly. Nongmeikapam asks us to enter the circle one by one and exchange the bamboo.

First things first, we think about how to handle the bamboo's weight, form, and momentum. I quickly observe and learn that when I go in to receive the bamboo, I need to tune into the momentum of the bamboo—this meant assessing not only the pace of the other person holding/turning the bamboo but also making simultaneous micro-adjustments in my own stride to move as close as possible to the bamboo holder. Then, make firm contact with the bamboo—grasp/clutch the bamboo with both hands—and continue to move on my central axis (avoid stopping/pausing) and keep the flow going to make the transfer as smooth as possible.

So now, as it is my turn to hold the bamboo in the center, I begin to turn on my axis, I feel disconnected, I feel disjointed; I feel as if my hands were turning the bamboo, and my feet are turning my body. Nongmeikapam reminds us that it is the spine that moves everything together. This helps me stay in center and not let the bamboo waver in space. My feet and the bamboo begin to move in coordination. I exit. The next time I run in, I run towards the edge of the bamboo, and it quickly catches up with my stride. It scares me, it suddenly becomes harder to catch up, especially when I start walking backwards and I can see it catching up with me rather quickly. I feel the panic sensations rise in my body. This realization that there is a real obstruction/obstacle moving my way and I need to do something about it immediately, otherwise I will get hit, changes something within me. I freeze for a moment. Then, I take more risks even if I am afraid. I try harder to further understand my bodily rhythm and that too of the bamboo and my co-dancers in space.

From this experience in the studio, I learnt that there is deep resistance and potential for cultivating hope and resilience, in being vulnerable, in facing danger, in crossing between internal-external worlds, which is what I believe Nongmeikapam's pedagogical practice aims to do. The body that he proposes is *retrained* in indigenous and regional knowledge. It learns to build focus and balance itself by exposing itself to a physical restriction. It connects with internal sensations and spatial patterns, most importantly as guided by regional, indigenous, and ethnic cosmology and worldview. I illustrate this further in the section below with my choreographic analysis of Nongmeikapam's earlier work, *One Voice* (2011).

One Voice: Processing Cultural Trauma and Resisting State Violence

As a dance movement therapist, after completing his certificate course from Kolkata Sanved in 2010, Nongmeikapam worked with various NGOs to help people who were HIV+ and people with mental health disorders. Through this experience—using movement to communicate with people experiencing trauma—Nongmeikapam learnt to work with movement in a therapeutic way, and it inspired him to create a solo-work, *One Voice* (2011).[24]

One Voice is a reflection on the experience of torture. Nongmeikapam addresses torture, as a material and tangible sensation, that has shaped the everyday reality of the people of Manipur for a long time. He choreographs various ways in which torture constricts and challenges body's mobility through manipulation, submission, and resistance. He incorporates philosophy from Meitei religion,

24 *One Voice* (2011) was created during Surjit Nongmeikapam's Gati Summer Dance Residency (GSDR) at the Gati Dance Forum and premiered at Shri Ram Center at Mandi House, Delhi.

Sanamahism, and a range of physical practices like Manipuri martial arts, *thang-ta*, Manipuri classical dance, kathak, improvisation, and butoh in his work.

Through *One Voice*, Nongmeikapam invites the audience to view the dynamic between the oppressor and the oppressed as one that is linked. He believes that the victim and the torturer "merge together into one body"[25] and have a shared experience of their trauma. The embodied crossings between the oppressor and the oppressed as well as the regional and transnational culture is where lies the politics of Nongmeikapam's work, which I discuss below.

Witnessing *One Voice*

Nongmeikapam, the Chair, and the Lamp (Figure 4):

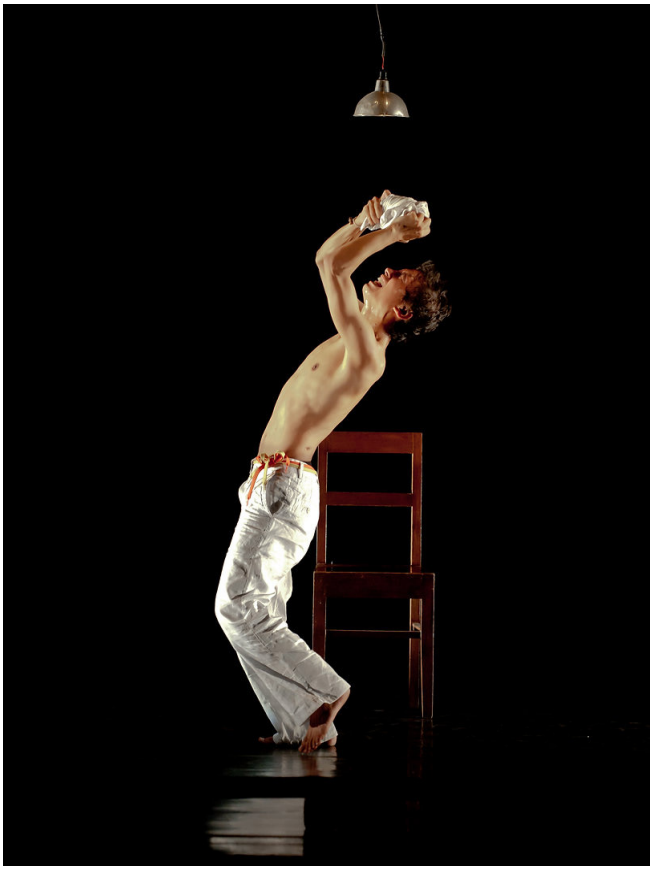

Figure 4: Surjit Nongmeikapam performing One Voice. Sri Ram Center, Mandi House, Delhi. Picture Credit: Soumita and Soumit.

He moves back to the chair, drags it to the center, the lamp drops down from the ceiling. He takes off his shirt stylistically, rotates it around and behind his body and clumps it into a tight ball in front of his face and then lifts it overhead. Eyes closed, he crunches the cloth with full force and exerts a loud cry, arching his back and then returning it to the center. He opens the creases in his shirt and places it on the back of the chair.

Nongmeikapam establishes a clear relationship with the chair as the piece progresses. Chair represents the place, position, and source of power, and at the same time, place of confinement. The piece begins with Nongmeikapam sitting on an empty wooden chair placed on the left downstage corner. He takes out a piece of paper, perhaps a passport-sized photograph, from the pocket of his pants. The audience does not see the photograph. The piece comes full circle, when in the end, he walks towards the center aisle in the auditorium and turns to sit facing the chair on the stage. Once again, he takes the photograph out of his trousers. He extends his hand, outwards and at an arm-length distance in front of his chest, his eyes staring at the chair on the stage. In doing so, he reverses the look of the victimized (performer) and returns it as the gaze of the oppressor (sitting in the audience).

Both these chairs where he takes turns and sits are placed in one line. The positioning of these chairs strengthens the connection between the oppressor and the oppressed. Power fluctuates when Nongmeikapam moves from one chair to the other. He embodies the identity of the one who watches and the

25 Nongmeikapam, Interviewed by the author on August 24, 2022, in Imphal, Manipur.

one who is being watched, being surveilled. Through this action, he ties privilege/power and oppression together.

Nongmeikapam's choreographic approach swings between his use and renunciation of stylistic movements from Manipuri and kathak dance styles. Inherent in this choreography is a somatics-based approach to play with the architecture of the dance form, its lines and the geometry, and its embodied physical and cultural resonances. For example, Nongmeikapam explores turning as a geometric principle deconstructed from the circular wrist and arm movements in both kathak and Manipuri dance styles. Leading with the elbows, his arm comes in and out of his center line, one hand always on top of the other. His wrist circles, the back of the palm faces forwards and turns to activate fingers. He picks something with his thumb and index finger, brings it close to his nose and smells, and releases the gesture a few times. Wrists dance in coordination with the opposite knee as it elevates up to the chest/belly. The other knee of the standing leg is deeply bent to ground his posture. He performs the wrist circles with the opposite knee lift one at a time and turns around himself while performing the hand gestures. This is where he performs a *chali*, a stylistic walk characteristic of Manipuri dance style, where his hips are low, one knee is bent and the other one lifts and touches the ground in front and side, as he travels in front and sideways. This gentle mobility, indicating moments of recovery, is contradicted with intense pressure on the body.

The association between socio-cultural influence on psychophysical states of the traumatized becomes stronger with this bodily movement. With his eyes closed, as his body shakes, Nongmeikapam unbuttons his shirt revealing the murmuring of the flesh underneath. Keeping his eyes shut, he points his index finger towards the audience and brings it back to place it on his lips. The one who silences and the one who is silenced are brought together in this moment. They are also entangled in this transaction. The shaking transitions into various modulations of his voice. As his entire body shakes from feet up, his voice begins to sound distressed until it reaches a point that his scream transitions into a folk rhythm associated with Manipuri classical dance (Nongmeikapam is singing *haiyaah-hey*). Through forced muting of sensations of touch, sight, smell, and kinesthesia, he shows how these capacities to hear, speak, and move are withdrawn or silenced in the experience of trauma, torture, and oppression. Here, his body is hyper mobile as every cell in his body is moving with intense rigor yet immobile as he is fixed to one location.

Trained in butoh, Nongmeikapam is inspired by its "philosophy of openness."[26] He stays attentive to impulses, sensations, sounds, and vibrations both within his body and space that lead him to make contradictory—impulsive and non-linear—movement choices. This constant disintegration of form is kinesthetically experienced and made hypervisible in Nongmeikapam's piece. Furthermore, Nongmeikapam's training in *thang-ta* lends him a grounded physicality as well as an agility to contort spine in non-neutral alignment and switch spatial location, inspired by the movement of *Lairen Mathek*,[27] the spine of the python. There are moments where the body is in pain and is collapsing, back is arching and spine is spiraling/twisting

26 Annette Leday and Surjit Nongmeikapam, 2021, "Dance India Today: In conversation with Surjit Nongmeikapam," Narthaki Official, March 21, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4MGFqy7JrPI&list=PLawHnK-B4UjotvTtPFU7mD42FEq2ac_nDo&index=5.

27 Central to Manipuri language, dance (*Jagoi*), and martial arts form (*Thang-ta*).

beyond comfort, to moments where the body is grounded (e.g., deep lunges), is balanced (e.g., one leg balances) and is light (e.g., Manipuri classical style dancing with light plies and curvilinear pathways of the arms).

Conclusion

These embodied contradictions in form, cultural influences, and psychophysical states represent the dancing body as the site for dissent as well as the site for contesting trauma and the site for healing. It is where mainland vs regional cultural politics are negotiated. Moreover, the use and deconstruction of different dance styles such as Manipuri martial arts, *thang-ta*, Manipuri classical dance, kathak, improvisation, and butoh, demonstrates an orientation towards a double-impulse of being local and global, being internally rooted and simultaneously reaching outwards in Nongmeikapam's work, which reflects a unique sense of cultural hybridity.

In being grounded in his religious philosophy and fluid in his treatment of different regional, transnational, and global movement practices and vocabularies, Nongmeikapam employs hybridity in two distinct ways—as an assimilatory and anti-assimilatory strategy. In theorizing hybridity, May Joseph (1999) has argued that "the modern move to deploy hybridity as a disruptive democratic discourse of cultural citizenship is a distinctly anti-imperial and antiauthoritarian development" (1). In using hybridity as an "assimilatory strategy," (21) as Anusha Kedhar (2020) theorizes in her work, Nongmeikapam not only sets up a transaction between regional, national, and global cultures, but also in doing that, he transforms hybridity into an anti-authoritarian and anti-assimilatory strategy to resist being enveloped into mainstream Indian (Hindu) culture. In this way, Nongmeikapam's synthesis of different dance styles to generate his choreosomatic language that is rooted in local Manipuri sensibilities could usefully be called *resistive hybridity*.

Nongmeikapam's *resistive hybridity* is both a strategy and a tactic to utilize the processes of assimilation and to disrupt them. Nongmeikapam assimilates cross-cultural movement techniques while constructing an aesthetic that is legible as *local* and contemporary in both form and content. For example, in *One Voice*, Nongmeikapam performs curvilinear pathways of the wrist and arms as representative of kathak and Manipuri dance, moves into deep lunges and one leg balances representative of his martial arts training in *thang-ta* while staying attentive to impulses, sensations, sounds, and vibrations, as influenced by his training in butoh, that lead him to make impulsive and non-linear movement choices. As he embodies the kinesthetic principles from these different physical practices, he foregrounds the core philosophy of his work—embodying the spine of the python as a symbol of Manipuri nationalism and resisting the forced Hinduization and Indianization of the region.

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Akshongay: Then and Now—Intercultural Artistic Duets and the Relational Practice of Collaboration

Nova Bhattacharya and Louis Laberge-Côté

Abstract:

This article reflects on the creation, evolution, and remounting of *Akshongay* (Bengali: একসঙ্গে, meaning "together"), a full-length duet that unites Bharatnatyam and Western concert dance, co-created by Toronto-based dance artists Nova Bhattacharya and Louis Laberge-Côté. Their collaboration, which began in 2000, has evolved into a decades-long creative partnership rooted in critical difference, trust, and sustained inquiry. Developed across geographic, cultural, and stylistic borders, *Akshongay* embodies the possibilities of intercultural duet-making within the broader context of Canadian diasporic performance. In what follows, the artists reflect on their collaborative process, the work's layered emotional and aesthetic terrain, and the embodied experience of revisiting and remounting the piece over a decade after its premiere.

In 2000, we met through dance, observing each other's performances and discovering mutual artistic interests. This creative admiration motivated us to begin a collaboration that has endured to the present day. From the outset, our partnership was not based on aesthetic alignment but rather on an openness to experimentation, risk-taking, and discovery. As Laberge-Côté reflects, "Because of its abstract nature, dance practice is often largely based on aesthetics. Interdisciplinary dance partnerships can easily fall into the trap of focusing solely on stylistic contrast, which often leads to a restrained hybrid vocabulary or the over-valuing of one form over the other. […] The dissimilarity in our dance backgrounds could have become a monumental obstacle on our shared artistic journey." (71) Instead, we found inspiration in Carl Jung's quote, "The meeting of two personalities is like the contact of two chemical substances; if there is any reaction, both are transformed." (49) Laberge-Côté adds, "Nova and I intuitively knew that our creative relationship was not about fusing, minimizing, or highlighting our stylistic differences. Instead, our collective aim was (and still is) to transcend these differences by cultivating play," (72&73) following Alan Watts' concept that "... existence is musical in nature, that is to say that it is not Serious; it is a play of all kinds of patterns." (69&70) By foregrounding relationality, musicality, and playfulness over fusion or stylistic compromise, we found our process and the very heart of our partnership while discovering moments of humour, trust, and a genuine connection within the nuances of our distinct backgrounds and methodologies.

After a series of short collaborative works (The *Yiri-Biri Birds of the Yago-Bago* , *Lingua Franca*, and *Romeo and Juliet before parting*) which premiered between 2003 and 2006, we recognized that we were ready to engage more profoundly in a significant creative initiative. This engagement culminated in the choreographic work we titled একসঙ্গে / *Akshongay* (Bhattacharya and Laberge-Côté). This full-length duet, which "acutely weaves mythologies from Bhattacharya and Laberge-Côté respective Bengali and French-Canadian backgrounds to tell a story of emancipatory love" (Jeyasundaram), marks the meeting of diverse bodies, cultures, histories, and imaginations. It delves into a rich tapestry of themes and emotional landscapes—harmony and dissonance, deep connection and poignant distance, elation and sorrow, as well as endings and new beginnings. Ultimately, the work embodies a vibrant, multifaceted world that we have collaboratively constructed and meticulously crafted through the shared

language of movement.

Akshongay was conceived through a lengthy creative process involving a dynamic amalgamation of unity and separation. The development and presentation history of *Akshongay* unfolded across a rhythm shaped by artistic momentum and life circumstances. The process began in 2008, grounded in shared time and space in Toronto. In 2009, we presented a ten-minute excerpt at the Kalanidhi Fine Arts Festival, just before Louis relocated to Germany, marking the first of many instances where the work was shaped by absence. Between 2010 and 2011, the creative process continued in fragments, interrupted by international distance but sustained through commitment. Louis's return to Canada in 2011 allowed us to resume deeper in-person collaboration, leading to the 2013 premiere at Enwave Theatre in Toronto. What followed was a presentation life marked by irregular rhythms yet deep meaning: performances at Kalanidhi and the Canada Dance Festival in 2014; the Burlington Performing Arts Centre and Prismatic Arts Festival in 2015; and a week-long run in 2016 at Citadel Live in Toronto. These engagements, though not continuous, reflected the work's core themes of love, friendship, separation and union, as well as the enduring pulse of shared artistic purpose.

Following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which made it impossible for us to be in the same physical space, we maintained our creative connection through weekly phone conversations—essential lifelines that preserved our bond and fostered the artistic process. It was during these significant dialogues that the idea of eventually revisiting and performing *Akshongay* once more began to subtly re-emerge, activating a renewed sense of potential and momentum. The 2025 remount, nearly a decade after its last performance, affirms the work's evolving life and the sustained bond between us. This rhythm of creation and presentation mirrors the duet's own emotional and structural architecture: not a linear unfolding, but an interplay of proximity and pause, of intimacy and interval.

The concept of distance—whether geographic, cultural, or temporal—resonates throughout the history of collaborative duets. For instance, in their concluding work, The Lovers, Marina Abramović and Ulay traversed from opposite ends of the Great Wall of China to meet and subsequently part, ritualizing rupture while embodying separation. Similarly, we acknowledge the bittersweet reality that all creative partnerships must ultimately reach an endpoint. Nevertheless, by revisiting *Akshongay*, we challenged the notion of closure, offering instead a continuity shaped by adaptation—formed by individuals who have recognized one another in youth and now in maturity.

As we re-entered the world of *Akshongay*, we found ourselves reflecting more deeply on the personal terrain that underpins the duet. Dance artist Mushtari Afroz observed, "I listened to Bhattacharya and Laberge-Côté recount their five-year creative process leading to the premiere of *Akshongay* over a decade ago—a journey of deep self-reflection on their personal fantasies, challenges, and struggles within their own relationship—and I couldn't help but view the couple on stage, who emerged organically yet was infused with artistic integrity and informed by those reflections, as the embodiment of two people who have catastrophically fallen in love. This 'catastrophic love,' as Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek suggests, echoing Alain Badiou, disrupts the very balance of life. It pulls one out of their ordinary trajectory and introduces a 'singularity'—a rare event that unsettles their comfortable, predictable rhythm of daily life in a way that completely shatters it. The couple

in *Akshongay* has 'fallen' into the abyss of this passionate catastrophe, losing control but determined to navigate the uncertainty that follows" (Afroz; Badiou and Truong; Žižek).

This continuity through change — what philosopher Brian Massumi describes as "inhabiting uncertainty, together" (214) — embodies a hallmark of the collaborative resilience that sustains long-term artistic partnerships. It is mirrored in the practices of duos such as Burrows and Fargion, who have engaged in interdisciplinary work across dance and music for several decades, allowing form to emerge through structure, repetition, and responsive play. Their unwavering commitment to shared authorship, where composition becomes a dialogue, performance a living memory, and the creative process a site of continuous unfolding of embodied learning, parallels the ethos that has informed our own collaborative journey. Akin to the partnership of Merce Cunningham and John Cage, we maintained our distinct creative expressions in parallel, thereby generating meaning through coexistence rather than conflating into unity. Such interdisciplinary and long-term partnerships encourage us to perceive the duet not merely as an artistic structure but as a medium for relational existence. As evidenced by collaborators such as Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane or Eiko & Koma, the duet can serve as a vehicle for creative intimacy, profound mutual trust, engagement in risk-taking, and shared authorship.

Revisiting the world of *Akshongay* twelve years after its premiere and nine years since its last performance has proven to be both a profound gift and a significant challenge. The passage of time has granted us an expanded perspective, enabling us to reevaluate the work's structure, impact, and emotional arc with greater clarity. At the same time, the inevitable changes in our physical bodies have required a reassessment of the movement, infusing the process with a new sense of experiential acceptance. Engaging with the work once more has evolved into a captivating blend of the refreshing and the familiar, akin to returning to a cherished house built long ago, only to discover new doors and windows that time has unveiled.

However, the creative realm of *Akshongay* is also sustained by the contributions of our esteemed collaborators. Marc Parent's lighting design continues to shape the environment we inhabit. Notably, Marc's role has expanded to include cueing the evocative sound score, reflecting the profound integration of design, music, and choreography that is central to the piece. This return to *Akshongay* is also influenced by the loss of three cherished collaborators: composer Phil Strong, artistic consultant Tedd Robinson, and rehearsal director Dan Wild, who each passed between 2020 and 2022. Their spirits remain interwoven with the work, and their profound influence endures through the nuances, silences, and breaths intricately woven throughout the performance. Their contributions exemplify Diana Taylor's concept of the "repertoire," (Taylor) which refers to a system of embodied knowledge conveyed through live, enacted performance rather than through archived documentation. Their physical absence does not signify erasure; rather, it constitutes an atmospheric presence that eludes full cognition while necessitating ongoing engagement and relational dynamics.

In their stead, we are both supported and challenged by exceptional artists, Marie-Josée Chartier and Andrea Nann. Their observations, insights, and generous provocations have facilitated a reconsideration of the work from novel perspectives, thereby expanding our creative horizons. These interventions do not aim to supplant what preceded

them but rather to reorient the possibilities. They embody Donna Haraway's concept of "making oddkin," (Haraway) fostering new kinship relations across differences to engage with the complexities of creative becoming. Sound designer Debashis Sinha, another pivotal remount collaborator, has approached Strong's sonic landscape with diligence and reverence. As we revised the choreography, Sinha made thoughtful adjustments that facilitated the preservation of Strong's enduring artistic legacy with quiet perseverance. The artistic contributions and unique perspectives of Chartier, Nann, and Sinha have proven invaluable in revitalizing and reimagining this work. Collectively, we navigated the intricacies of revisiting a piece from the past, allowing it to evolve and transform in unforeseen ways that honour its original spirit while opening new expressive avenues.

As we approached the conclusion of the rehearsal process, we reflected on the transformative effects of time on our physical bodies and inner spirits. This remount served as a sacred space to honour the passage of time—not merely the visible aging of the physical form but also the accrued wisdom, resilience, and tenderness that emerge from enduring life's challenges together. The return to *Akshongay* represents not simply a restaging of a past work, but a profound re-envisioning of our own identities and relational dynamics with one another, our audiences, and the artistic lineages we carry forward. Similar to the work of Karen Jamieson and Margaret Grenier, whose *Light Breaking Broken* interwove Coast Salish and contemporary dance traditions, our collaborative process affirms that meaningful intercultural exchange must be rooted in long-term memory, mutual consent, and a refusal to hastily navigate the complexities and uncertainties inherent in the creative becoming.

Performing this work at this stage of our lives compelled us to reflect on the ephemeral nature of our artistic endeavours. As we move closer to the inevitable conclusion of our stage careers, we remain acutely aware of the narratives and legacies we shall leave behind. *Akshongay* constitutes a multilayered tapestry intricately woven from the threads of memory, imagination, cultural foundations, and shared experiences—a performance that encapsulates both kinetic expression and stillness. Similar to the works of Jones and Zane, our duet encompasses both autobiographical and abstract components. The personal is not merely the subject matter but the very medium through which we navigate, shaping the terrain of our artistic exploration and expression. Afroz reflects on the lasting impact of the work across time, sharing: "Ten years have passed since I first saw *Akshongay* live in performance... A lot has changed over the past decade— I have matured philosophically in my thinking about dance and its transformative potential... and I have learned to more deeply embrace the many shades and complexities of love in my own life." (Ibid)

Throughout the years, multiple critics have responded to this terrain with insightful perspectives. Historian and scholar Sunil Kothari observed that *Akshongay* "succeeds in celebrating the power and beauty of abstraction" (Kothari) through a synthesis of dance vocabularies that, while rooted in Bharatanatyam and contemporary idioms, transcend them to create something wholly new and visionary. Brannavy Jeyasundaram underscores the political and aesthetic care embedded in the duet, noting that the work "deliberately avoids the fetishistic guise of 'fusion dance' or 'East meets West'" (Ibid), but instead emerges from an improvisational structure that bridges distinct movement vocabularies and personal histories, offering a

reciprocal exchange that defies exoticism.

In bringing this revitalized version of *Akshongay* to fruition, we welcomed audiences to explore the world we cultivated through our longstanding collaborative journey. This invitation encouraged them to reflect on their own narratives of love and loss, aging and evolution, and the profound beauty inherent in shared artistic experiences. Meaningful collaboration transcends the mere act of creating something together; it is a way of living in relation, nurturing responsiveness and mutual understanding, and rehearsing the kind of futures we aspire to witness. In *Akshongay*, we pose the query: How can we coexist, despite our differences? Our enduring partnership remains a testament to the resilience and transformation that can arise from prolonged artistic exchange, even as the nature of our collaboration evolves over time. Much like the choreography, our relationship has weathered phases of distance and dissonance, only to be revitalized in unforeseen ways. Through *Akshongay*, we honour the heritage we uphold while embracing the unexplored possibilities that lie ahead, guided by the intimacy, trust, and mutual learning that have sustained our creative journey across and beyond differences.

Jeyasundaram also observed the depth of mentorship and friendship in the duet's creative foundation. In her words: "When asked what advice they offer for emerging artists in search of meaningful collaboration Bhattacharya says: 'Creating is hard, it is very easy to get sucked up into the seriousness of it.' To which Laberge-Côté adds: 'Collaborate with people that will make you laugh.' And they do. Bhattacharya and Laberge-Côté are great friends with a sentient, emotional trust they have spent years building. Perhaps in the end, true artistic partnership is reminding each other of laughter." (Ibid)

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Image 1. Akshongay 2013 Poster

Image 2 : Akshongay 2013 Production Shot by John Lauener

Image 3-4: Akshongay 2013 Production Shot by John Lauener

Image 5: Akshongay 2013 Production Shot by John Lauener

Image 6: Akshongay 2025 Production Shot by Ed Hanley

Image 7: Akshongay 2025 Production Shot by Ed Hanley

Image 8-12: Akshongay 2025 Production Shot by Ed Hanley

Image 13: Akshongay 2025 Production Shot by Ed Hanley

Image 14: Akshongay 2025 Production Shot by Ed Hanley

Image 15-17: Akshongay 2025 Production Shot by Ed Hanley

Image 18-19: Akshongay 2025 Production Shot by Ed Hanley

Image 20: Akshongay 2025 Production Shot by Ed Hanley

Image 21-25: Akshongay 2025 Production Shot by Ed Hanley

Image 26-29: Akshongay 2025 Production Shot by Ed Hanley

Call for Papers: South Asian Dance Intersections
Special Issue: (2026–2027): Marginalized Voices and Histories
Guest Editor-in-Chief: Dr. Yashoda Thakore
Submission Deadline: March 1 2026
Publication Deadline: October 1 2026

What do we mean when we speak of the *margins*? Who constructs the boundaries of center and periphery—and who gets excluded from the narrative? This special issue of SADI – *South Asian Dance Intersections* invites submissions that explore marginalized voices and histories in dance, performance, and embodied practices across South Asia and its diasporas. In an era where global connectivity coexists with deepening borders—political, cultural, and disciplinary—it becomes critical to ask: whose voices are heard, and whose remain unseen or undocumented? This issue seeks to uncover those hidden or silenced presences, and to archive embodied resistance, resilience, and survival through multiple modes of storytelling.

We invite contributions from scholars, artists, practitioners, and cultural workers who interrogate marginalization through caste, class, gender, religion, ability, geography, and sexuality. We are particularly interested in work that not only analyzes marginality but emerges from within it—whether from within the South Asian subcontinent or the diasporic experience. Suggested Themes (including but not limited to):

- The politics of dance and marginalization in South Asian countries: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka
- Region-specific practices and hereditary performance traditions in coastal, rural, or forest areas
- Embodiment, caste, and resistance in dance
- Queer and trans perspectives in South Asian performance
- Post-conflict recovery, memory, and art-making
- Institutional exclusions: state recognition, funding gaps, erasure from archives
- Diasporic perspectives on marginality within South Asian communities abroad
- Critical reflections on how dominant narratives shape and silence community practices
- Interviews with artists from marginalized contexts, conducted with interlocutors and transcribed
- Autoethnographic or oral history-based narratives centered in lived experience

Submission Details:
- Word Count: 2,000 to 5,000 words (including notes and references)
- Style: MLA 9th edition format
- File Format: Word (.doc/.docx) or PDF
- Include:
    - Abstract (200–250 words)
    - Author Bio (150 words) with affiliation (if applicable)
    - Title of submission and short keywords (3–5)

We welcome:

- Scholarly essays
- Practitioner reflections
- Transcribed interviews with marginalized artists (with consent)
- Photo essays and videos with accompanying critical commentary
- Performative and experimental formats grounded in critical inquiry

Please email submissions to Kaustavi Sarkar: ksarkar@charlotte.edu with the subject line:
SADI 2026 Special Issue – [Your Title]

Timeline:

- Abstracts Due: [March 1 2026]
- Full Submissions Due: [May 1 2026]
- Peer Review Feedback Sent By: [June 1 2026]
- Final Revisions Due: [July 1 2026]
- Issue Launch: [October 1 2026]

This issue aims to be a space of radical inclusion—where unvoiced narratives are centered, archived, and amplified. We look forward to hearing from you. For questions, contact the editorial team at: yashahimsa@gmail.com