**MISSION**

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

**HISTORY**

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

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Kaustavi Sarkar
Welcome to the inaugural issue of SADI—South Asian Dance Intersections—a progressive, scholarly, blind peer-reviewed, open-access online journal. SADI was conceived during the pandemic as a transnational feminist project. It proposes a field-defining modality of looking at scholarship around South Asian dance studies emerging within the field across values, theories, and practices. It seeks to carry to newer and larger audiences, a unique blend of high-quality research in scholarly, theoretical, textual, choreographic, contemporary, social justice, and community-oriented, interdisciplinary, and intersectional writing. SADI explores the ecosphere of South Asian dance dance studies. It is a pushback against prevailing paradigms of power-predicated knowledge qualifiers. However, dance as a deeply meaningful and complex cultural practice in the region of South Asia, urgent need, and newer ways of reading. Therefore, the writings in SADI are inclusive, often self-representational, and frame alternative points of view to the exclusionary, singularized, unidimensional determinant, and prescriptive lens of knowledge. The alterity is reflected in the foregrounding of lesser-heard and, often marginalized, voices who live the practices, and is reflected in the disparate ways of writing. This scholarship prioritizes alternate artistic canons that root and nourish these regional practices. Decolonization today is a loaded term, strategically used to satisfy different, often oppositional, agendas. In fact, it is the key word deftly being used to satisfy different, often oppositional, agendas. In fact, editorial the unstated contract between generations whose time it is and generations whose time is yet to be uncovered and may interestingly segue into fresh writing—honest, bold, and interrogative, yet respectful. The flagship essay “Crossroads,” is a cryptic written by Urmimala Sarkar, Pallabi Chakravorty, and Priya Srinivasan. The challenges to the fullness offered by acts like the Citizenship Amendment Act, the exclusionary intent of the National Register of Citizenship, the strengthening of the already draconian Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA)—especially with the tightening of the bail clause—serves as the backdrop for “Crossroads.” It is a provocative piece that raises a red flag. In doing so, it argues that dance should be reflective of the present. Dance should not, it argues, glory or mitigate the ills of an imagined past by upholding a specific stacist agenda or relegating all South Asian dance to history. It disclaims the tendency of states to promote favored dancers and pleads for an expansion of the artistic and terpsichorean population, believing that many voices will be better reflective of the state of the arts and the State of the arts. SADI believes in multiple voices, not just the well-networked, as a way of articulating the realities of the dance studies field more accurately. It also makes a plea to find safe third spaces, which would allow dance, itself, to be a product of the dancer’s agency and not the product of a political/cultural/historical agenda. Finally, “Crossroads” serves as a clarion call for making dance studies a representative, reflective, rigorous, and robust field of study. Sri Lankan scholar Mirak Raheem, presently working on a large research project on the iconic Kandyan dancer Chitrasena, shared with us a piece, “Vajira: The Pioneering Female Kandyan Dancer.” Vajira Chitrasena is the first female professional Kandyan dancer, who, in 2021 at the age of 89, was awarded the Padma Shri by the Government of India, in recognition of her contribution to culture. This award came after a host of awards and honors had already come her way. Vajira, who was Chitrasena’s partner in life and on stage, has been her mentor and is the gender barrier. But her role and contribution are much more, including the fact that, in addition to being a performer, she has been a choreographer of traditional dance items and a co-creator of productions. She has also been a teacher to numerous dancers over the decades and, in this role, has developed her own influential pedagogy. This article is accompanied by a rich selection of photographs from the archives of the Chitrasena Dance Company, many of which have never been seen before and, in this, together, give a rich pictorial glimpse into a female dance pioneer’s life. Pakistan-based dancer-activist, Sheema Kermani, authored the essay, “The Truth of Male Dancers in Pakistan.” Kermani creates an argumentation that dance should not, it argues, glory or mitigate the ills of an imagined past by upholding a specific stacist agenda or relegating all South Asian dance to history. It disclaims the tendency of states to promote favored dancers and pleads for an expansion of the artistic and terpsichorean population, believing that many voices will be better reflective of the state of the arts and the State of the art. SADI believes in multiple voices, not just the well-networked, as a way of articulating the realities of the dance studies field more accurately. It also makes a plea to find safe third spaces, which would allow dance, itself, to be a product of the dancer’s agency and not the product of a political/cultural/historical agenda. Finally, “Crossroads” serves as a clarion call for making dance studies a representative, reflective, rigorous, and robust field of study.
to the intertwined dance histories between India and Pakistan. The writing is accompanied by a recent video interview with a male dancer, Asif, struggling to sustain himself through dance. The directness of the questions and the unfiltered lens of the camera create an intimacy between the subject and the consumer of this essay. The space available for dance is decreasing, especially for the male dancer in a society with pre-determined stereotypes of masculinity and stigma around the art of dancing. In fact, both the interviewer and interviewee acknowledge the soft politics and defiance of their artistic pursuit, which they see as in line with Pakistan's Sufi lineages and cultural productions.

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

Swaranamalya Ganesh investigates vernacular performative literatures, such as Abhyudayamu-s and Yakṣhagānamu-s, from pre-colonial Teljarvav, placing creative traditions as mnemohistory in re-framing South Asia’s historical consciousness. Raghunātha-abhyudayamu, a Telugu Yakṣhagāna genre, with song and dance as its central mode of expression, extols Raghunātha’s greatness through factual historic conquests, his administrative prowess, warfare accomplishments, processions and cultural activities, and romantic alliances. Performing it daily in open court can be read as layered ways of embedding historic memory in public consciousness. Thus, argues Ganesh, yakṣhagāna literature becomes an important historical intervention through the performing arts.

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

“Rethinking Endings: Amany’s Persistence,” by Yashoda Thakore, relies on reflexive ethnographic methods to theorize claims to artistic and creative ownership. It focuses on the performance, Encounters, an international production based on the life story of the “bayadere,” Amany, of the early and mid-nineteenth century. The author participated in the production — digitally, given the Covid restrictions — exploring the history of a group of Indian dancers from Puducherry and Yanam who were taken to Europe in 1838 to perform at numerous European venues. While Amany has been immortalized by the sculptor Jean Auguste Barre (1811-1896) and her story is somewhat known, the rest of the story is an eye-opener. By revisiting the repertoire performed by them and the representation of these dancers, Thakore argues that autoethnography revealed facts that make these women relevant to present-day performing artists, in particular, and society at large. The little-known histories of Amany and the author coalesce, brought together by the author’s guru, Annabattula Mangatayaru, whose ancestor—six generations removed—was Amany. Thakore’s style of writing captures effectively the thrill of the serendipitous discovery of the linkage.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Unruly Third Space
Priya Srinivasan

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

The rising power of social media and the “disinformation” emerging from it that proceeded the Trump and Modi years—and other governments which also then aided and abetted fascism to rise on the far right and the equally violent rhetoric of the so-called progressive left—deeply troubles me. Ultimately what I have realized is that academics are speaking in a language not accessible to those on the far right or left, let alone the lay person/artist/dancer. There was/is a chasm between these worlds. It is this binary that we need to understand and write slowly and those who write daily, quickly, and instantly. I believe there needs to be a bridge between rigorous academic thought—ideas that have been slow cooking— versus a new—and instant microwave thinking on social media. While I understand the power of social media to democratize representation, I also think when the body is reduced to texts, memes, digitized images, bits, and bits of video clips, Insta pics, likes, dislikes, comments, and critique, the body can disappear. Particularly vulnerable are female dancing bodies, just as they are today. Priya Srinivasan argues in this publication, all kinds of dancing bodies have been legislated against, stopped, silenced, and made invisible. We are now seeing a remapping of this policing from bodily to bits, from the body to bits, and the binaries claiming different marginal positions from both the far right and the left.

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

The binaries of the dancer versus academic, body versus mind, performing versus writing, classical versus contemporary, practice versus theory, purity versus pollution, to be ruly versus unruly transformed into a bricolage of many things layered one on top of the other, weaving strands between these many ways of being. At times, this jostling of being between things that have been is a way of being with some practices silencing others. These concerns helped me understand the problems inherent in and the simultaneous power of practice as research and paved the pathway for me to live a dual existence as a dancer and researcher. This both/and approach has helped me navigate my self both to the first and the third space. To move away from singularity/binary multiplicity. The privilege of living outside institutional structures has also made me simultaneously vulnerable symbolically and economically.

This is in line with the many women of color and women from the global South who have been writing the “back” to power by putting their bodies on the line. While these voices were emerging to speak back to power, the post structuralist turn in anthropology and in dance studies turned the body into a sign—a text that could be read for meaning—separating the practices of the body to legitimize dance studies in the academy. Similarly, the textualization that was prevalent in many fields in South Asian Studies, was something that deeply disturbed me. “South Asia” as a category emerged during the cold war, although it had its inception in colonial and oriental encounters earlier. The study of philology was something the CIA valued deeply as the US created its own various imperial orders. I found that I was again between and beheld with the textualization discourse of South Asia that removed bodies, particularly female bodies, and embodiment and lived knowledges. If the body appeared in South Asian Studies texts, often, it would be reduced to just the sign; the situated knowledges of the experiential body disappeared.

This idea of the third space and multiplicity is now more important than ever. As Chakravorty notes in this essay, until we understand that we are all part of an interdependent ecosystem, we will continue to exist in the me-versus-we debate. I realize that artists, organizations, producers, presenters, and audiences—both IRL and online—have to see unruled possibilities in order for meaningful and lasting change to occur. The arts can be a way of being with and for others. This means engaging with marginal subjects and marginal locations. As Chakravorty notes, “the scholarly/teacher/public intellectual creating work outside of institutions, universities, and being ‘in between’ in order to navigate power and in order to be the bridge that builds dialogue into silences to move toward that new space.” I am in conversation with my academic colleagues and former students from whom I continue to learn. Here is a small sample of the writers I use in my thinking about...
The museum curator, Annemarie De Wildt, was aware in the museum, leaving them feeling like they never settled in various parts of Holland but particularly Holland. However, after migrating many were unable to the Dutch and when Surinam got its independence in 1975, about 50% of the population migrated to Surinam, which was a British colony. The Indians from Bihar primarily speaking Bhojpuri as indentured laborers to Surinam, which was a British colony. The Indians were embedded in my body (although I did do that for some time while I was understanding the history of the form and my complicity in it) to explore different spaces, ask contemporary questions, and discovering through dialogic encounters. My work often begins at the level of practice first before the research question emerges. In Amsterdam in May of 2018, I worked with a Surinamese choir and the Moving Matters multidiplinary international collective started by Susan Osmani, to examine what it would mean to occupy the Hermitage Museum for four hours to take over the museum albeit temporarily. Surinamese people in the Netherlands are a syncretic ethnic mix of African, Chinese, and Indian backgrounds. The Indians that went there in the nineteenth century were taken from Bihār primarily speaking Bhojpuri as indentured laborers to Surinam, which was a British colony. The Chinese were also indentured, and many Africans were enslaved there. The British then sold the colony to the Dutch and when Surinam got its independence in 1975, about 50% of the population migrated to Holland. However, after migrating many were unable to assimilate because of race and class differences. They settled in various parts of Holland but particularly around the Hermitage Museum area. Ironically, until we did our collaboration, none of them had ever set foot in the museum, leaving them feeling like they never belonged there and that it was not for them.

The museum curator, Annemieke De Wildt, was aware of the lack of equity and enabled us to “take over,” temporarily, with museum goers not aware that we would be activating the space with music, dance, movement, and installations that would trouble the predominantly white male representation from the Dutch Golden Age represented in the exhibits. Uthra and I had worked remotely over Zoom for a few months with this in mind. When the Hermitage curator from where Thilaga, one of our key collaborators, originated. The performance at Adishakti drew a unique international and local audience reflecting the history of colonial Puducherry. It was met with a fantastic reception, as audience members who were accustomed to experimental work walked together from one space to the next. We were seated up in the Hackney Empire, Dakshina Chitra in Chennai, a living museum, reflected an audience accustomed to classical Indian dance and music and here, the work met with a mixed reception – the flashcards taken away from the museum used to move and walking. There were also problems with audio and sound in the performance. Mettumulluvi village, however, was probably the highlight of our tour. Thilaga was the first woman from her village to perform the male-dominated form of Koottu. Sylvia Nupritjini, who is of Yolnu background in Arnhem Land Northern Territory, connected with Thilaga immediately. We visited the village and stayed to be part of the nine-hour Koottu performance. All of us walked around the village meeting people and inviting them to the evening performance. We gathered the village en masse, creating a procession that met at the village center where the pandal was set up for the performance. We incorporated them into our practices and perhaps this is why, despite the experimental nature of the work, the performance was received with great enthusiasm. The performance became improvisatory and much more interactive compared to the structured form we were doing in other spaces. By the time the more than 1,500 audience members had gathered, we knew that, through performance, we were entering a completely different space/time. We were using folk, ritual performance in contemporary contexts to discuss water futures and climate change. A tour of South India for Australia Festival in India in 2019, the work enabled ancient and contemporary texts about water, land, and sky knowledges to be shared by dancers, musicians, and storytellers. This space we need to keep questioning the ongoing power shifts in these engagements and how we can serve those who are vulnerable at different moments in different contexts and spaces? To this end, we are in touch with each other via what’s app groups and continue building our allyship to support one another as we continue the fight for social justice in our different locales.

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

Based on my research that spans fifteen years, the Encounters performance tells the story of five South Indian dancers (known as Devadasis/Kalavantulis) and three musicians who toured to Paris in 1838—a time when India was colonised by France. They performed hundreds of shows in France, the UK, and throughout Europe, ending up in Vienna. During the tour, they met many European artists. One significant encounter occurred in Paris when a teenaged dancer called Amarni (a bronze statue of whom can now be seen in La Musée de Guimet) and the rest of the troupe met several composers in Vienna including Johann Strauss and Joseph Lanner. The dancers’ footwork and music inspired the composition of Indian-themed songs such as Strauss’s “Indianer Galopp” and Lanner’s “Malapou-Galopp,” which had a significant influence on classical music emerging from Vienna in the years to follow. The dancers and musicians disappeared from history after this encounter. Their practices also became banned in India in the twentieth century due to colonial, patriarchal, caste, and religious sentiments. The women were shamed into silence and invisibility. Encounters explored the material from that era through an experimental dance, live, and on-screen performance by myself and Yashoda, respectively, with Melbourne-based musicians accompanying them. Encounters merged with Strauss’s Indianer Galopp, arranged by Sivanesan and Alex Turley a young Melbourne Symphony Orchestra composer.

It is remarkable that the archival research, which had sat with me for so long and not come to life until I shared my story with Yashoda and then her guru, it was in a Zoom meeting when I shared...
and research on dance theory and practice. Schoenfeldt states that dance is a complex and multifaceted art form that requires a deep understanding of cultural and historical contexts. The practice of dance is not just about the physical movement of the body, but also about the emotions and experiences that are expressed through it. This raises questions about how dance is taught and how it is valued in society. It also raises questions about how dance can be used as a tool for social change and empowerment.

The author of this text argues that dance is not just a form of entertainment, but also a form of resistance and empowerment. Through dance, individuals can express their feelings and experiences, and can also use dance as a form of political expression. This is particularly true in contexts where dissent is not allowed, and where the bodies of women and girls are used to enforce the power of the dominant culture. The author of this text argues that dance can be a form of resistance against the power of the dominant culture, and that it can be used to express the experiences and emotions of marginalized communities.

The author of this text also discusses the role of dance in the construction of identity. Dance is not just a form of self-expression, but also a form of identity construction. Through dance, individuals can express their cultural heritage and their sense of self. This is particularly true in contexts where identity is constructed through a narrative of male dominance. The author of this text argues that dance can be used to challenge and subvert these narratives of male dominance, and to construct a more inclusive and empowering identity.

The author of this text also discusses the role of dance in the construction of power. Dance is not just a form of entertainment, but also a form of power. Through dance, individuals can express their power and control over others. This is particularly true in contexts where power is constructed through a narrative of male dominance. The author of this text argues that dance can be used to challenge and subvert these narratives of male dominance, and to construct a more equitable and empowering narrative of power.

In conclusion, dance is a complex and multifaceted art form that requires a deep understanding of cultural and historical contexts. The practice of dance is not just about the physical movement of the body, but also about the emotions and experiences that are expressed through it. Dance is not just a form of entertainment, but also a form of resistance and empowerment. Through dance, individuals can express their feelings and experiences, and can also use dance as a form of political expression. Dance is also a form of identity construction, and dance is a form of power. Through dance, individuals can express their cultural heritage and their sense of self, and dance can be used to challenge and subvert narratives of male dominance. Dance is also a form of power, and dance can be used to challenge and subvert narratives of male dominance, and to construct a more equitable and empowering narrative of power.
festivals and prestigious concerts. The stories of these women belonging to middle and lower-middle class/ caste backgrounds and their dissenting voices, their negotiations of patriarchy and Brahminical tradition in their everyday life, are narrated in my ethnography. But a critical and analytical narrative of Kathak dance as it is lived in contemporary India by women practitioners who are neither celebrities nor hereditary practitioners was not a subject that had much cachet then or now, as a result, Belts of Change did not create the much-needed intervention—or change—in the discourse of heritage politics. The larger issues the book tried to raise regarding questions of dance history, ethnography, lineage, and voice in relation to tradition and heritage, and how they are transmitted as "traditional/arrival knowledge" in the context of modern institutions of knowledge production, remained incidental.

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

We need to release these practices, whether they be Kathak, Bharatanatyam, Satriya, or other "classical arts" that are products of Brahminical patriarchy and the overdetermined category of hereditary lineage politics—to let them breathe the air of autonomy and democracy. The discourses of lineage, guru, Parampara, and inheritance, and the professional world to which it leads creates the rarified world of the classical arts. These bounded identities suffocate artistic collaboration and innovation. They ultimately deny artistic freedom of expression, access, and the right to question.

Voices

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

This is not to deny the serious issue of casteism and caste oppression in India or the caste/class power structure that control the classical arts. However, the historical facts of caste mobility, state support, and prestige accrued by certain Brahmin and non- Brahmin dance communities to construct their dance and musical pedigree are important if we are to be serious about democratizing the arts to make room for marginalized and unheard voices. I am referring here to the innumerable students of classical dance and music in Indian universities and schools—many from non-Brahmin groups—who do not belong to any prominent familial lineages nor have elite class status. These individuals are never able to enter any narratives of classical dance as historical actors/performers, whether it be in the prestigious circles of sabhas, festivals, sammelans, or academic writing. The insidious heritage politics and gatekeeping by the insiders tend to create "permanent outsiders." In the classical dance world in contemporary India, while, at the same time, the upper caste/class continue to consolidate their power through Hindutva propaganda and its communal and casteist rhetoric.

The Brahminical dominance of the classical arts gets further fueled by this majoritarian politics. Unsurprisingly, the negotiations of these complex conversations on the ground, where dance is a practice, are often deeply divisive and polarizing. These totalitarian ideological narratives of caste/class oppression in India or the caste/class power to let them breathe the air of autonomy and democracy. The discourses of lineage, guru, Parampara, and inheritance, and the professional world to which it leads creates the rarified world of the classical arts. These bounded identities suffocate artistic collaboration and innovation. They ultimately deny artistic freedom of expression, access, and the right to question.

The good news is that the guru-shisya system and its hereditary lineage politics, the elite Brahmin strongholds of dances, and the saffron forces celebrating them do not constitute the singular narrative of concert dances in contemporary India. There are other trajectories and initiatives. One such compelling trajectory of dancers who do not claim an hereditary politics, pedagogically or as an elite status is found in dance reality shows. A new generation of dancers claiming the stage has turned the narrative of guru, parampara, and tradition on its head (Chaudhury 2017). One could argue that they represent the category of "permanent outsiders" to the classical/ traditional arts I previously mentioned. These dancers have come forward from all walks of life—and caste, religion, class, gender, and sexuality—to participate in India’s cosmopolitan contemporary dance culture. They have swept away some of these questions of nepotism and inheritance and their participation in reality shows without any connections to important classical gurus (parampara kinship networks) or hereditary links to tradition. Although they have their own stories of hierarchies and discrimination, they are negotiating them without the social capital of tradition/heritage and, in many instances, without much
economic capital. These secular dance spaces have shown that we need democracy and more democracy to rebuild Indian dancing teaching and practice. I hope that we can seize this moment to usher in a different discourse of tradition and heritage that will not make us prisoners of the past. In the globalized world we live in today, there should be an acknowledgment that there are multiple communities of any dance practice, including the classical arts—both Brahmin and non-Brahmin—hereditary and non-hereditary—and that we all operate in an interdependent and dynamic ecosystem. Ultimately, the issues we select to highlight show our preferences, interests, and who we are and who we are addressing—that is, who comprises our audience and what is at stake for the researcher/researched in creating new knowledge.

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*c neither centered around rights to dance, as evidenced by the violent delegitimization of dancers from hereditary communities in parts of India. As a dancer who does not belong to any of the delegitimized communities, and has not practiced any of those forms, I see myself somewhat safe from the second discourse, though I have directly faced the brunt of the first one, along with women and men taking up dance as their career. Heteronormative understandings and expectations have made any non-conformity vulnerable and, therefore, restricted by self-policing by dancers who do not want to conform to strictures imposed by heteronormativity.

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

I reflect on the intersectional space many times like we occupy. As an example, I state my subjective position to expose my vulnerabilities of not knowing or being a part of the dominant discourse of the classical dancers. As a student who joined a modern non-hereditary dance institution in an urban center, I grew up loving dancing and performing on stage from the age of thirteen. I learned four classical styles as per the requirements of my institution, alongside choreography and movement generation in creative style, and eventually became a member of the performing troupe of Udyanakaran Indian Dance Center. I have danced with love, with excitement, and with respect for the styles, the histories—or whatever I knew of...
Dancers consistently assert aesthetic quality and inner gains, while claiming caste-like rights through their birth into a family of practitioners. Parampara crown. As I cannot claim any space of legitimacy the already unstable histories of the regional forms that claim a three-generation long hereditary practice post-of them. With systematic patronage, many classical as Bharatanatyam and Odissi, are the most popular. In the name of classicization, nationalized dance styles presentation, patronage, and audience expectation— in independence standardization of formats of learning, the basic demarcations in dance history, with a deeply being aware of the exploitative and forceful oppressions Dismantling hierarchies and patriarchy can begin by being aware of the exploitative and forceful oppressions of the past as well as the present.

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

Dancing as a Contribution to National Culture

One needs to stop and reflect before becoming too judgmental as a tool for identity creation. One of the post-classization generation and its complete lack of understanding of the complexities of appropriation that continue to plague dance history. For these practitioners, the theory of the dance because of the new aesthetics and embodied practice of the classical dances are the Indian nation-state and the Gurus. Again, one must stop and understand the role of patriarchal, caste-controlled dissemination of history—that the Gurus of today have learned from the Gurus of yesteryears. One way to for one to choreograph in an ideal world, where the moving space is never enough to accommodate all and there is no retirement age for Gurus growing older as they continue to perform and control the dancers’ micro-ecologies. The emerging/new dancing bodies do not replace older ones, they hover on the fringes hoping to be allowed into the restricted space, all the while terrified of disappearing without a trace. There exist forever in the threat of rushing and falling in the race of making the most of the restricted time they have to perform, or else….What might be the understanding of the teachers’ responsibilities? Here, it is important to understand how the Guru and Shishya often start competing to inhabit the same proscenium and to hold onto the same patrons and audience. In a comparison with learning dance, I refer to the time when I attended a German language class in a failed attempt to learn speaking in that language. I finished and passed the preliminary course and was given a certificate, but I understood my inability to speak fluently. If I had the patience or perseverance, I would have continued to learn and become proficient. I would have earned my right to speak and communicate in German and no one would have questioned my rights as long as I had the ability. By learning a language, I was not signing up for knowing or even respecting the history, and I was free to use the language for better communication.

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

Stereotypes and Control

In dance, decontextualized learning of grammar as a skill set is not encouraged because that would render the traditional practitioners powerless and without long-term economic support. The overemphasis on stereotypes of history, caste-based control, gendering, and performance ecology are all tools of control for restraining, perhaps even delinked from the other, the freedom that we all crave today, many dancers, in my experience, are more interested in both. And thus, dance could become a way of asserting identity, of belonging to a particular tradition, and even representing a history. Or, dance could be a tool or skill that the dancer uses for creating and choreographing. In an ideal world, the choice would be a prerogative of the young and emerging dance artists. In the twenty-first century, that choice must remain with these individuals as a part of their right to dance.

Dance history in India is all about creating stereotypes through propagating Natyashastra, enforcing a certain aesthetic, by ensuring propagation of myths and mytho- histories as real history of the origins of dances. This is done by creating demi-gods of Gurus, and even through telling stories of aesthetically empowered patrons who enabled them to move beyond the prescribed classicization process in each specific case. For example, the classical dance form Manipuri’s roots may also be found in Sankirtan/Raasleela of Baishnavite ritual practice and religious performances of the Meitei community. This amalgam now carries the name of the state Manipur and is known as Manipuri—referring to an authentic capsule of the past—which renders invisible the practices of several Adivasi communities of the same space. Contestations plague the practice and the theory of the dance because of the new aesthetics imposed on it. The dances have changed and the new ornamentation and ornaments that selectively highlight or obfuscate its past connections. In Manipuri, like in other classical forms, imposition Guru-Shishya Parampara is held in place through institutionalized and controlled process of learning. The hierarchy is complex with the Meitei being the numerical and economic majority and the most visible. Socio-political dispossession as well as cultural appropriation practices depend on the actual bodies of dancers to curve the female figures on the temple walls? Or, did these exquisite postures even need a woman to dance as an inspiration for the sculptor? Maybe these static representations were just perpetuated by the stereotypical representations. It may be useful to think of how dispensable the dancer’s body becomes once it is stereotyped into an aesthetic formula.

I would want to go beyond the stereotype of dance and mean representations. We do women’s bodies has stopped us from ever questioning why and how the regulations from the Devadasi Act to the present day bars dancers. Allowing dancers’ welfare by never considering asking the community of practitioners what they actually would like to change in their dance practice or representation or ecology is problematic.

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

In retrospect, the template of classicization appears to have been put in operation under the free will of a team of cultural engineers, seemingly adhering to the principles of the prescribed classicization process in each specific case. For example, the classical dance form Manipuri’s roots maybe found in Sankirtan/Raasleela of Baishnavite ritual practice and religious performances of the Meitei community. This amalgam now carries the name of the state Manipur and is known as Manipuri—referring to an authentic capsule of the past—which renders invisible the practices of several Adivasi communities of the same space. Contestations plague the practice and the theory of the dance because of the new aesthetics imposed on it. The dances have changed and the new ornamentation and ornaments that selectively highlight or obfuscate its past connections. In Manipuri, like in other classical forms, imposition Guru-Shishya Parampara is held in place through institutionalized and controlled process of learning. The hierarchy is complex with the Meitei being the numerical and economic majority and the most visible. Socio-political dispossession as well as cultural appropriation practices depend on the actual bodies of dancers to curve the female figures on the temple walls? Or, did these exquisite postures even need a woman to dance as an inspiration for the sculptor? Maybe these static representations were just perpetuated by the stereotypical representations. It may be useful to think of how dispensable the dancer’s body becomes once it is stereotyped into an aesthetic formula.

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

By privileging history as a mode of control, dance discourse in India largely continues to be the privilege of higher castes and classes. The classical dances continue creating the ideal reference to a patriarchally transmitted aesthetic that uses the notion of the feminine body as the carrier and transmitter—but NOT interlocuter—of cultural expressions. The stereotyping of the national culture is, of course, representational of Brahminic privileges, Sanskritic texts and contexts and concocted aesthetics projected through dresses, ornaments, and accompaniments depend on privileges available to persons of highest economic positions. But in recent times the nationalist fervour of post-independence years has been replaced by oppression through the “manufacturing of consent by controlling of patronage” —especially for performing arts. In the process, we witness delegitimizing of all solidarities and closing off democratic spaces, furthering far-right agendas rather than creating a healthy dance space that accommodates one and all. Simultaneously, the ongoing marginalization of living traditions carries on due to cultural appropriation enabling an ongoing accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 75 - 76). Meanwhile, the academic community continues to remain the avatars of the classic colonial ethnographers, often creating discourses based on trending issues without much ground-level engagement as a survival strategy in a tenure-centered world.

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

Works Cited


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

Lubna Marium

Abstract

The history of dances in Bangladesh reads almost like a history of the belief systems crisscrossing this deltaic plain, entrenched as these dances are within indigenous myths and philosophies. However, in the recent past, regional and global dance traditions have superseded indigenous dances by nearly erasing them from within mainstream, specifically, urban practice. This erasure is readily affirmed by the proliferation of high-profile Bangladeshi dance events showcasing young dancers performing to Tamil, Telegu, Hindi, and Meitei songs. Additionally, bodies perform jatis, toras, lukras, and even movement phrases from Western classical jazz, with not a few dance movements which have been part of this soil for centuries.

Even a cursory interrogation confirms that the historical hierarchization of dance in Southasia has spurred this divide between the evaluation of present-day manifestations of dance within local cultural expressions and, on the other hand, the dominant genres of classical and contemporary artistic representations of dance. It is this highbrow, selective notion of dance from beyond the borders that has led to a gradual decline and diminishment of their dances. At this juncture, a selective notion of dance from beyond the borders has been the large-scale migration of Muslims from India after 1947, who mostly settled in urban areas. In 2020, approximately 61.82% of the population in Bangladesh was urban, compared to 18.38% in 1941. Total urban population rose from 1.8 million in 1941 to about 2.6 million in 1961. The important factor behind this rapid growth of urban population was the rapid economic growth of the post-1947 period. After 1947, the urban population of Bangladesh has been increasing steadily. At this juncture, a combination of research and practical action, where "the researcher joins with and acts with practitioners to help improve practice and thereby build," is the need of the hour (Nielsen 419-428). Action research, or ethnographic activism, can be a form of ethical praxis that can overcome historical bias and safeguard these dances.

Introduction

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

In Bangladesh, the monsoons come after the scorching summer, and with it come welcome rains. In the Bengali calendar, this is the second month of the monsoons, and with it come welcome rains. Amazingly, this tale is performed every year on the rivers of the Tangail District of Bangladesh on Shrobon Shongkrant, the last day of the month of Shrobon, as a riveting performance on colorfully-decked boats. Nothing could be like Bengali community. In this epic day-long performance called Shaone Dale (the offering of Shan/Srobon), with actors dressed as Behula, Lokkhindor, and other characters of this tale of Manasa. Competing groups navigate these colorfully-decorated boats, making stops at seven ghats, emulating Behula’s journey. Eventually, each boat stops at a designated household where the jyonn, a last act representing a resuscitating from death, is performed to bring the helpless Lokkhindor back to life. The reality, though, is that there is no documentation or acknowledgement of practices like these within dance discourses and institutional programs.

The case of dance traditions in Bangladesh, the “wicked reality” is that indigenous dance and its “fascinating field of inner lives, narratives, and creativity do not reach our news or our universities. It does not reach our classrooms either because our theories are sometimes part of ‘epistemology of blindness,’ in that they allow us to see certain things but blind us from seeing other things” (Santos 237-238). To further clarify, the contention is that there is a rare acknowledgment of these embodied practices and their practitioners within dance discourse.

Dance Matters, a comprehensive anthology of dance in India, raises the question: “Can the subaltern dance?” (Chakravorty and Gupta 1). Can the non-subaltern see and acknowledge the dance of the subalterns? (Chakravorty and Gupta 1). Can the non-subaltern see and acknowledge the dance of the subalterns?

Resolution: Ethnographic Activism As A Means of Conservation

On another note, adverse socio-political circumstances of the communities at the “wicked end of power,” (Grant 629-641) who are the bearers of these cultural expressions, contribute to their endangerment and decrease. This adversity ultimately leads to circumstances where the transmission of these practices is at risk of becoming significantly destabilized. At this juncture, a combination of research and practical action, where “the researcher joins with and acts with practitioners to help improve practice and thereby build,” is the need of the hour (Nielsen 419-428). Action research, or ethnographic activism, can be a form of ethical praxis that can overcome historical bias and safeguard these dances.

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

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

The Genealogy of Hierarchy within Performative Traditions

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

Diagnosis of the Fissure

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

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

Two Conceptualizations of Representation Creating the Divides of Exclusion

Bharata very precisely points out the distinction as well as the interrelationship between these two practices: “While lokadharmi is the very svabhāva, or nature of things to be presented in a dramatic performance,
The capacity of *upākhya* makes it *vibhāva* to the “realism” of *loka* now gave a slightly more pejorative turn *mārga*. The nomenclature of *nāṭyadharmī*, meaning “compendium, the modes of practices were designated was devalued. Unfortunately, through the ages the conception of the term *loka* was devalued further, so that by the tenth century, in Dhananjaya’s *Āsaṅga* (291-581), the modes of practices were designated as *desī* and *mārga*. The nomenclature of *desī*, meaning “provincial,” now gave a slightly more pejorative turn to the “realism” of *loka*. *Mārga*, literally meaning “the path,” endowed idealized “art” as appreciated by the connoisseur possessing the knowledge of sixty-four skills with the power to “elevate the spirit, not to degrade it” (Arundale 1-7). Firstly, this was dismissive of the non-literate spectators of indigenous performances. Secondly, the world of good, which is related to wellness and good-health and delivered by indigenous arts performances featuring actors who are often also “faith healers,” does not even come into discussion.

**Problematization of the Aesthetics of Marginalization**

Aside from the above artistic and conceptual differences related to the modus operandi of the two genres of *dharmī*, Bharata posits two stages of the creative process within the practice of the *nāṭyadharmī* on the basis of which the “spontaneous” practices of the *lokadharmī* is said to be the first stage of *vyākhyā* the act of acquainting and equipping oneself with empirical knowledge. This is followed by the more reflexive stage of moulding the crude material derived by the processes of *mārya* and *upākhya*, the capacity of the artist to perceive and express into a beautiful and harmonious world absolved from the shortcomings of the world’s movable and immovable expanse. The concept of *śāstrāṇāṃ chandovyākaraṇābhidhānakośakalācaturvargagajaturagakhaḍgād ilakṣaṇagranthānām / lokasya sthāvarajaṅgamātmakalokavṛttasya / chatushashti Rupaka /* that enrich the plays with their own peculiarities. There are ten different *Rupaka* with the power to “elevate the spirit, by the connoisseur possessing the knowledge of sixty-four skills with the power to “elevate the spirit, not to degrade it” (Arundale 1-7).

The variance in the spatiotemporal presentations of agrarian events, or during “rites of passage” where there is engaged participation by the members of the community who value, own, and undertake responsibility for its enactment. Most of the time, the spectators and performers share a permeable relationship, co-creating the space through informal interactions. This differs from a connoisseur’s role as passive “observer” of the creative processes of *nāṭyadharmī* performances. Gender and identity issues, as passive “observer” of the creative processes of *nāṭyadharmī* performances, too, are dealt with flexibly within the *lokadharmī*. These issues are enhanced by performative “crosstowning,” with men playing female roles.

The temporality of a performance is fluid, with characters like the shong (*vīdāsaka*)—or the ubiquitous “jester”—often interpolating present-day political issues within the narrative—be it mythic or epic, spatially indigenous performances—situated within community, commons, under the sky open fields, on boats, in places of worship, or even the humble courtyards of households—are distanced both physically and socially from the connoisseurs and patrons of “art.” Furthermore, these presentations are organized either on the basis of a seasonal calendar of agrarian events, or during “rites of passage” where there is engaged participation by the members of the community who value, own, and undertake responsibility for its enactment. Most of the time, the spectators and performers share a permeable relationship, co-creating the space through informal interactions. This differs from a connoisseur’s role as passive “observer” of the creative processes of *nāṭyadharmī* performances. Gender and identity issues, too, are dealt with flexibly within the *lokadharmī*. These issues are enhanced by performative “crosstowning,” with men playing female roles.

The temporalities of a performance is fluid, with faith and belief lie at the heart of indigenous performances. Invocations to almighty Allah and to the Gods and Goddesses of Hindu scripture, pledges to deities to earn their blessings, faith-healing by chanting of mantras, efficacious ritual performances are all part and parcel of the performative traditions of the indigenous cultures. In the field of knowledge, abyssal thinking consists in granting the monopoly of the universal distinction between the true and the false to science, to the detriment of two alternative knowledges: philosophy and theology. This monopoly is at the heart of the modern epistemological dispute between scientific and non-scientific forms of truth (Santos, The Resilience of Abyssal Exclusions In Our Societies. Toward A Post-Abyssal Assay. How, then, does one reconcile the two forms of truth? “Rational” mainstream discourse has, by and large, relegated indigenous dance to the margins, except for acknowledging its value in maintaining cultural diversity and perpetrating inter-faith dialogue. However, there has been little effort to build an epistemology which acknowledges the beliefs, opinions, magic, idolatry, intuitive or subjective understandings which are an important component of indigenous performances. The seeming incommensurability of the task adds to the “wickedness” of the problem.

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

**Identifying Indigenous Dances**

Before embarking on a dialogue, there is a need to identify, document and inventory performances in Bangladesh to understand the processes of cultural formation and its modes of transmission to help situate the cultural practices.
Meanings are produced and shared through a representational system accessible to all within the same “circuit of culture.” All cultural meaning is produced through a series of stages, or “moments” which include its representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation (Hall 1). It is through these discursive discourses that meaning and knowledge of a particular practice are constructed to include “a cluster (or formation) of ideas, images, and practices, which provide ways of talking about forms of knowledge and conduct associated with a particular topic, social activity, or institutional site in society” (Hall 6).

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

Conceptual Framework for Understanding Indigenous Traditions in Bangladesh

Bengal has neatly documented written and oral histories of the transmission of its cultural practices over a couple of millenniums. From works of literature, such as Caryacarya-viniscaya—the medieval Buddhist book of songs—to redactions of the songs of Lalit Faqir—the rustic philosopher, mystic and minstrel from 19th century East Bengal—there is an unbroken history of the transmission of traditional performing literature. Therefore, in fact, the advent of the Colonial period ushering in the “modern” era caused a seminal cleavage between the social strata of Bengal and the way in which traditions were organized and understood.

The Performative Space

Within rural Bangladesh, performative spaces are wretched from the normative world to create an extra-daily and liminal platform where they are in an effective and, as social theorist Henri Lefebvre states, “generative relationship” with performing bodies (Lefebvre 411). Thus, “bodies and spaces, severely, co-produce one another through practices, gestures, and events” (McLennan 2). This is especially true for open-air, night-long performances of rural Bangladesh, where there is, often, a blurring of lines dividing the performers and the audience. Spectators all piled on rooftops in front of make-shift stages interspersing enactments with comments, impromptu participation, interactions with performers, applause, or slander, thus creating and recreating themselves and the actors. Spectators often walk or row boats for miles to attend these performances.

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

Occasions of Performances

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

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

The prevalence of these practices, for centuries, is corroborated by British Administrative records from the Colonial period such as one from 1877 which informs us that “Other indoor amusements consist of games of chance...while the weavers and other Vaishnava indulge in naughts and ilias or theatrical representations of the exploits of Krishna” (Hunter 81).

Dramatis Personae

Performance is mostly an alternate vocation for the performers who, in both rural and urban contexts, are often observed within the culture of the present-day Bauls and Fakirs—the initiates of a folk belief system of Bengal.

Rituals enacted against pledges, made to Hindu and Muslim divinities, are a common practice amongst the subaltern communities of both Hindu and Muslim populace. The performers are both actors and faith-healers of maladies like snake bites and diseases. Performance spaces are consecrated with a worship to that particular divinity, primarily the Hindu Serpent Goddess Manasa, beginning with a preliminary prayer to that particular divinity, primarily the Hindu Serpent Goddess Manasa, beginning with a preliminary prayer to Allah, concluding with the ritual performance of the exploits of Krishna (Nahas 17). Interestingly, in the pre-Islamic era the narratives were based on mangal-kayas and panchals, which are genres of Bengali-Hindu religious texts, composed more or less between the thirteenth century and eighteenth century, and consisting, notably, of myths of indigenous deities of rural Bengal in the social scenario of the Middle Ages. After the advent of Islam, this trend of narratives was transposed onto the newly arrived teachers and guides of Islam, which had given rise to many popular saints—or Pir—graced with divine power, and are called pir panchals. “If aspiration to come nearest to the ideal established in Nâylâstârâ’s grandeur to the classical performing arts, the need to appropriately and creatively respond to the sacred and non-sacred in varied circumstances lent variety to the folk performing arts” (Singh 18).

Dance Within Indigenous Traditions

It is worth remembering that all cultural forms gushed in Western academic texts as “Indian” became consistent with the equivalent traditional concept of nîch in Bangladesh. Seeking a political ontology of the
use of various kinesthetic continuum of movements, we come across some of the most radical and subversive epistemologies of dance within the folds of the inherited traditions of Bengal.

Kinesthetic Enactments of Belief

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

Movement as Martial Art

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

Symbiosis of Movement and Narration

Kinesthetic movements identified as dance are embedded within narrative performances and are rarely autonomous acts of performance. This is consistent with the comprehensive concept of nāṭya—or theatre—as described in the Nāṭyāśāstra, the extraordinary first-century CE compendium of dramaturgy. It states, “Theatre (nāṭya) actually encompasses all forms of art expressions. There is no knowledge, no craft, no lore, no art, no technique, and no activity that is not found within it” (Bharata 1.16).25 Dance, therefore, “cannot be understood in isolation” (Vatsyayan 9), rather it is a symbiotic concoction of music, theatre, and movement. These dances are marked by an informal spontaneity and fluidity which welcomes experimentation and assimilation (ii). Though lacking the formality of the śāstra—or science—each genre of dance has a basic formation, where rhythm and melody play a major role (iii). Notably, none of the dances within folk theatre of Bangladesh use the elaborate hand gestures of classical Indian dances (iv). Underlying eroticism, use of pelvic thrusts, and swaying of hips, albeit by male dancers impersonating the female, is an integral part of most forms. In fact, there is an ambience of Bakhtin’s “carnivalesque” within most indigenous performances, which celebrates “a transitory freedom from hierarchical ranks, privileges, norms, and prohibitions,” and a simultaneous renewal of hope (K. Singh 8).

Safeguarding and Strengthening Dance

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

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

Action Research

Most of the time, work with grassroots, indigenous dance and dancers results in contemporary, urban-based performers appropriating information from folk forms and enriching their own repertoire of movements. The same can be remarked about academics augmenting their own theoretical work with information from the field.
with little impact on the indigenous community itself. The challenge is to come up with a win-win situation for both groups. "Projects that are most successful in empowering community members in some way seem to be those in which professional researchers and community members work together as equals to decide on levels of community participation, the degree and type of action that is appropriate, setting goals, and other matters pertinent to conducting the research" (Wilmsen 135–146).

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

- **Phase One** was a brainstorming session. The idea was to bring practitioners from all over Bangladesh for a final brainstorming workshop in Dhaka where extensive documentation of each group’s performance was carried out. Also, "Sharing of the Local Knowledge" (SLK) sessions were organized to garner information from the indigenous knowledge experts through the "mapping of collective memory" still repositied in them in the form of myths, riddles, and songs about "lathikhela."

- **Phase two** involved follow-up workshops: Sharing interactions led to follow-up workshops where twenty young practitioners of "lathikhela" trained in body fitness, acrobatics, dance, martial arts, and pedagogy of Lathikhela and Dholbadon (drum playing) with the aim of extending, revitalizing, strengthening, and safeguarding the practice.

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

The riverine, a procession ritual performance of Shaone Dala, is also now supported by a few groups of cultural activists. The Cholo Poddar Gaan Ga project, also initiated by Shadhona, included: (1) arranging attendance of the yearly event by research scholars, heritage professionals, and government officials; (2) supporting the community of performers and (3) building an equitable relationship between indigenous performers and urban theatre/performance activists. The two groups co-produced a much-precipated production, "Podda Behular Akhyan,"28 which also traveled to India.

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

### Prioritizing Human Experience

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

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

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

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


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

Swarnamalya Ganesh

Abstract

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

Abhyudayamu is in the versified prose format of dvīpada (poetic metre). It enumerates the genealogy, lifestyle, events, people, and place, as well as the escapades of the King. It literally sequences the dawn-to-dusk life of the Telugu Nāyaka King. The Rāgnurthā-abhyudayamu, is written in the yakṣagānamu genre and has a distinct performing song and dance as its central modes of expression. Performing the yakṣagānamu, which extolls Rāgnurthā's greatness through historic conquests, administrative prowess, warfare, processions, cultural and romantic alliances was a way to report history. It is also the assertion of kinship and identity by the Bahujan (endeavouring to ideas of dynamic progress) and, seeing them merely as couched in some traditional unchanging despotic rule was limiting the ways we read the past. However, it is equally limiting to regard such texts as a reservoir in which traces of the past are gradually deposited by some ongoing spontaneous process (Thapar 326). It is, therefore, more useful to regard these products of vernacular mmemenotechniques and mnemonotechnologies, which range from commemorative rituals to historical writing (Rigney 326). Yuri Lotman, one of the initiators of the “cultural memory” concept, had already emphasized in 1985 that “memory is not for the culture a passive depository, but part of its mechanism of textual creation” (Lotman 670) (Tamm 501). The trio historians mentioned above, while analyzing the historiographical attributes of early modern South India, have used a lens of Jan Assmann that propounds that cultural memory stays long after the actual event has faded, and lasts in the society through collective consciousness. Cultural memory, in Jan Assmann’s definition, “comprises that body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose ‘cultivation’ serves to stabilize and convey that society’s self-image.” To further the argument that text and the performance of text embeds cultural memory, we shall use “reusable” as our operative word from the above definition and return to it in the section below.

Who Can Read these Texts?

Historiographical texts are written to invoke collective memory and consciousness and, without a sensible rooting to the culture, the name might just fade away. Therefore, in post-colonial India, invoking cultural sensibilities is often associated with the creation of a sense of pride and prestige, and belonging to pre-nation-state Kingdoms and the reader/viewer would experience his/her own identity through the reading/performance. In their modern reading, such identities and sense of belonging is often circled back towards nationalist pride. However, the question is in the context of different worlds, in the time when such literatures were written, who could read these texts? As Shulman and Rao point out, the hero or the central character (invariably the reigning King) would be compared to mythological figures whose virtues are superimposed upon the life of the living King, thus tracing his mythical genealogy to the race of the Divine. “He is divine and yet the paradigmatic devotee. The works showcase playing these roles explicitly, for without such highly dramatized prescriptions, the poems would truly be brought to life” (Velcheru Narayana Rao 118). The reader/viewer is then called upon to see the connections to the mythic pasts inscribed on the present. The works of Rān’s Kaifayatu-s, Vāchakam-s, and the Abhyudayamu-s, where liberties of expanding the scope of the past in ways that suited the present were taken, the reader was required to encounter the text as a continuation of the images, rituals, and values of their respective societies. Often, such an enterprise was made possible to all members of the courtly world and the larger kingdom, not only by the circulation of the text in work form, but as performance, a collective recitation and reading experience. Therefore, the readers of Abhyudayamu literatures were the actual readers, or the audiences who watched the work being performed every day, not the few who read it once or even a few times as a text. In watching, they get the actual event, and lose in passing the memory. As Assmann points out, “via texts, images, and rituals, unique to their world and helping cultivate their society’s self-image,” the viewer became the reader. It is through such readers who were also viewers and to whom I shall reference henceforth in this essay as reader/viewer that works like the Abhyudayamu-s became subjacent portrayals of what counted as real and as potential, literal memory.

Raghunāthābhyudayamu

Raghunāthābhyudayamu, the daily life of King Raghunātha Nāyaka who ruled between 1600-1634 from Tānlūvar, was written by his son and successor, Vijayarāgava Nāyaka, who was amongst the chosen works for this project. Much like his Telugu land predecessors, the Kakatias (Pratāparudra etc), Vijayarāgava brought within the yakṣagānamu recollection of the narrative of the classic aesthetic ideals enthused through the narratives of classical Kāyya characters like that of Rāma and Krīṣṇa. Further, he created an experience of this ideal as realities of the Nāyaka court. However, the loose distinction between patron, composer of the work, and the hero of the work makes for such memories of the classical artifacts to be reinvented and actualized in vastly different ways from their original contexts (Pratāparudra 1889). The prestigious image of Rāma that Raghunāthā plays, as seen in the Abhyudayamu, was almost always...
more glamorous in comparison to the classical version of Rāma. Thus, he takes the credit for enhancing these divinations in a contemporary image of the self he portrayed. As a conceptual device, Raghunātha becomes the experience of an "exemplary character both divine and human, an idealized construct and not merely a breathing King" (Shulman 122). Cultural memory, shaped by the necessity of relevance that gives priority to certain aspects of the past and sidelines others. Therefore, Raghunātha bhāvyaduyamānu focuses on the multiple ways in which images of a Nāyaka King are communicated to and shared among the members of their community, highlighting the importance of remembering certain parts of their past as real, and forgetting or ignoring others.

One example of a good work would be to consider their genealogy; the Tālāyūvī Nāyakas were adāyanā-s (chief and kingly family) of the Vijayānarāyaṇa kings. It was from this position that they rose to the rank of military leader, ultimately winning the faith of the Telugu emperors to found feudalities—indeed but subservient overlords (Nāyakas) in the Tamil lands. Different factions of the Nāyakas ruled from Gingee, Madurai, and Tānjaṉūr, and their subordinate branches, all Kṛṣṇaṭhāya (warrior clan) rulers and the Tamil country came into the hands of the Vijayānarāyaṇa kings by the fifteenth century. The chief ruler of the Vijayānarāyaṇa Kingdoms at this time, emerged from the Śṛūḍa (service clan) Tūlava dynasty, a so-called low caste order considered historically ineligible to rule. They, in turn, enabled the lineage of the Balijī community leaders—through Timma, his son Sevappa, and others—to rule Tālāyūvī. In all of the official chronicles, epistles, and inscriptions of the Nāyaka kings, they proclaim themselves as "gāturā gōtra putra," sons of the fourth varṇa/gōtra or class. They also often refer to their Kingship as "Mannūrā gōtra putra," sons of the King of Mannūrā (Vijayānarāyaṇa) on the Tālāyūvī Trākṣaṇa's family tree, which is a poetic, rhythmic meter and can equate to long poems, giving much scope for the composer to bring in many different moods with a choice of diction and changes of tone. Dvīpada also offers a collective reading/listening experience. Pandit N. Venkataramanayya notes in the copied volume of the manuscript of this work: "Song and dance were the principle preoccupations of the society of this reign—as a powerful mnemonotechnique, he cultivates a collective cultural memory and a self-image that would cement his own succession through kingship amidst the Nāyaka society.

The literary genre that details the daily life of a king and his personality and the courtly life ritualized performance in the various scriptures he reads, the sanctimonious bhakti he portrayed. As a conceptual device, Raghunātha was born to Achutappa Nāyaka and Mūrāmārāṇa, his consort, through the divine grace of God, who bestows upon this child great powers to rule the world. On one hand, Raghunātha is a metaphor for the Tālāyūvī Kshatriya and on the other, Raghunātha is elevated through divination, to the status which makes him desirable and a divine blessing coveted by any woman. Raghunātha's rise to fame and power and his military prowess and successes in the battle fields are literalized through metaphors that compare him to Lord Rāma.

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

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

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

That said, a question of concern is: If the past or, in this case, a single day in the life of a single king is documented in literature, and if that is inscribed as memory which represents the entirety of the cultural narrative, such an India that was pictured was unchanging, with despot kings spending far too much of their time in mery-making. Distanced from Raghunātha’s idealized, divinized image a few thousand years before, he was viewed as one of the last rulers whose extravagance and sensuous presence cost his descendants the throne. Ultimately, this later led to colonial capture and ruin. Secondly, works such as Raghunāthābhuyādyamu in vernacular languages were not in print or translation much after Independence. But by then, the torch to see texts under a parochial light, as belonging to different states with affiliation to a particular regional language, culture, historic, political, and aesthetic value, was ablate. So Raghunāthābhuyādyamu was tagged simply as a Telugu language literature written on a Nāyaka ruler of erstwhile Tamil country. Thirdly, and most importantly, the performance was irreversible, even in the realm of Raghunāthābhuyādyamu in print in later years, as it was permanently dismembered from its performativity. That is, in rereading back into pages of a publication, an essentially performative yakṣagānam, it remained static. The dynamic, spontaneous embodied performative quality was lost as were its many meanings from the older cultural memories that laced it. Hence, the demise of its performative cultural histories cannot be fulfilled by print. Fragmentation of such performance disenfranchises the performative literature, disallowing a present experience in a manner that it can be viewed as conceptions of the present, as the time of the viewer, aware of its past and imagine a future in the mind/experience of the viewer. After all, the essence of experience is not only about that moment, but is in knowing that it is possible for experience to repeat. Performance enables imagining a future for the historical text in a way that the decontextualized post-modern world cannot; the text stands alone.

Epilogue

In order to read Raghunāthābhuyādyamu in its larger frame as cultural memory, the performance of the yakṣagānamu has been carefully restored with the expertise of hereditary singers of other Ṭairāḷāvār traditions such as Prahlāda ċaṅṭarāmu, Ćakkaṇāru, and Kalyāṇāru, penned by Śri Venkatārāma Śāstri. Musicians and experts of the Bhāgavataśāstra Nāyaka Nātakams, Śri Narasimhan, and Śri Venkatesan—the Truvaiyāru brothers—have worked with me in the restoration of the musical rendering of the Raghunāthābhuyādyamu.

The performative aspects of the text such as the rendition of certain padam-s, daruva-s have been combined with my reconstruction of the dance aspects of Pērani, Jākki, Gōndhal, and other dances that are mentioned in this text as performed in the Nāyaka court. The restored performative text is embodied in a production I have created titled, My name is Citrarēkha which, through narrative performance, renders the entire Raghunāthābhuyādyamu as a dance, music, dialogue presentation in Telugu along with English commentaries to facilitate non-Telugu audiences to follow the narrative. In reactivating the performative elements of this text, we negate Raghunāthābhuyādyamu being a mere passive depository of cultural production and see it as a mechanism to cultivate historical memory in the viewer/reader—through performing histories.
Works Cited


Rethinking Endings: Amany’s Persistence
Yashoda Thakore

Abstract
This article relies on reflexive ethnographic methods to theorize artistic and creative ownership claims. It seeks to aggrieve for three women through writing and concrete production performance with a live audience. Focusing on the performance Encounters—a production based on the life story of the dancer, Amany of the early and mid-nineteenth century, I explore the history of a group of female dancers from Pondicherry (now Puducherry) that belonged to me and my ancestors. Today, I as a female dancer in French, Autoethnography revealed facts that make women at once relevant to the present-day performing artists in particular and society at large. This article is about women claiming of their little-known platform, as three histories of Amany, Mangatayaru, and I come together.

Eldu dăcukurdu ninu? Yemé setu nenu? Where do I hide you? What should I do?
I kept repeating this line with Sudha as she taught me to sing this song: “It is da...sa na da... sa. You now exude such beauty; it is impossible to hide you!”

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

“Akka! You are missing the notes! Ni ga ga ri...”

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

These dancing women are integral to the narrative of my life. I look at them and other ancestors in my subjective reflexiveness through my practice and dialogic engagement—with my teachers, families, the neo-classical dance form and texts of Kuchipudi, the dialogic engagement—with my teachers, families, the performance with a live audience. Focusing on the performance Encounters—a production based on the life story of the dancer, Amany of the early and mid-nineteenth century, I explore the history of a group of female dancers from Pondicherry (now Puducherry) that belonged to me and my ancestors. Today, I as a female dancer in French, Autoethnography revealed facts that make women at once relevant to the present-day performing artists in particular and society at large. This article is about women claiming of their little-known platform, as three histories of Amany, Mangatayaru, and I come together.

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These dancing women are integral to the narrative of my life. I look at them and other ancestors in my subjective reflexiveness through my practice and dialogic engagement—with my teachers, families, the neo-classical dance form and texts of Kuchipudi, the hallowed Sanskrit texts, and my fellow dancers. This multiplicity in my practice makes me consider the organic and deep connection of the human dancer to society as opposed to the idea that the dancer, like a goddess, is above mundane life! Academicians and performer Pallavi Chakravorty bursts this notion: “It is important to keep the historical footprint of the temple dancer alive. It is important because the temple dancer was not an imperial orientalist fantasy. She was real.”

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

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

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

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

Eendairendarin kātu? Eethani ne vinnathu?

This refers to a spurt of pure dance performed extempore to the percussion and violin, generally after the performance of the love songs called jāvalis. This is a significant aspect of the Kalāvantulu (as the Devadasis were refered to in the Telugu speaking areas) repertoire of South India, one of which I am trained to perform. So many other dancers learned with me, so many dancers are dancing, and hundreds, thousands, millions of them all over the world continue to do so. While some of them know that the source of their art is the Devadasis, others do not. Yet they continue to pillage the richness of the art that belonged to me and my ancestors. Today, I as a female dancer in French, Autoethnography revealed facts that make women at once relevant to the present-day performing artists in particular and society at large. This article is about women claiming of their little-known platform, as three histories of Amany, Mangatayaru, and I come together.

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

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

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

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

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

It was time to think of the dancing. I was excited to teach Priya, but she was hesitant: “I am not you, Yashoda! My body moves from the training of modern Bharatanatyam and Odissi to the karanas and kalāpantulu. It is, of course, sourced from the dance of the Devadasi originally, but I’m not sure if I should learn your dance, especially when you will not be dancing on stage with me.”6 Priya’s words repeatedly interrupted my thoughts as I tried to focus on the notes Sudha was teaching me. The literature I was singing interrupted my thoughts. As I sang Padilamuga nā jādanu baṭṭi kaju koṅdunā…” keep you with me, securely, Priya’s words, “I am not you,” hauntingly teased me. These interruptions seemed productive, and I allowed them to persist, much to Sudha’s perplexity. She did not understand why I could not grasp a simple note.

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

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

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

I could not travel to Australia because of border lockdowns due to Covid, so I would be projected on a large screen. She, Hari, and the other musicians would perform live but they would interact with me on the screen. As I danced on the screen, images of Amany and Amma’s followed, while the orchestra played the music from 1838. In the lithograph, we perused. The women seemed to have considered the god, Meesala Venkatateswara, as their king, and, reflexively, I chose to dance the Salām Daruʋu, praising and saluting the king. I am sometimes daunted by the history I carry in my body through my practice.

The repertoire I learned from Amma is truly a rich archive. My body bursts with deep-rooted information as I dance; the archive and the repertoire are forever in conversation (Taylor). Priya occupied the dialogic space as she danced a contemporary and experimental mix of Odissi, Bharatanatyam, and Kalāpantulu, but dressed in a costume that indicated the influence of the West through her tutu which was worn on top of parts of a sari. I encouraged Priya to perform a few movements from the kalāvantulu material. After all, the neo-classical dances are but an offshoot of the Devadasi repertoire.

There was Amany, Amma, and I “encountering” one another on an international platform once again. There was no morphing of identity, no hesitation or hiding. This situation left me with a feeling of fulfillment and hope.

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

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

8 Kalārantulu are often acknowledged as the most basic sequences of movement that characterize Indian dances. A karanas is a combination of the movement of the hips, legs, feet and hand. Kalāpantulu is a martial art form.
Bor, Joep. “Mamia, Ammani, and Other Bayadères: Europe’s Portrayal of India’s Temple Dancers.” Music and Orientalism in the British Empire, 1780s to 1940s, edited by Martin Clayton and Bennett Zon, Ashgate, 2007, pp. 39–70.

https://www.sunoindia.in/her-story-of-dance/.


The Hathi Trust Archives. The Spectator, vol. 11 June-December, 1838.
The Unchanging Reality of Male Dancers in Pakistan
Sheema Kermanni

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

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

Once, before partition, Lahore was an important center for dance—and not just the north Indian Kathak, but also for Bharata Natyam (Kothwar, 2013). One of the reasons for Lahore's ecletic dance life was the fact that it was an important center for film making as well (Ahmed, 2012). But the demographics and dynamics changed radically, as Mumbai grew in significance, and, after independence, dance even in Lahore was mostly restricted to Hira Mandi area. Its special offering was in the剧场化—the dance and drama productions of such as Kathak, thāṣī, and ghazal. It suffered from the stigma associated with professional dancing women, inevitable in a strongly patriarchal society, a pan-subcontinental phenomenon in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Brown, 2006). Regrettably, this continues even today, except that in many cases the dance is more filmic, fusion, western, and erotic, and has little resemblance to the classical dance practices that once flourished here.

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

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

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

It was in 1947 that India got partitioned and Pakistan was created with two wings, East and West Pakistan. A dancer known by the name of Bulbul Chowdhury had, by 1947, already earned a name for himself in the culturally-rich Bengal region, and had become quite famous in Dhaka. He had begun his dance training and career in unpartitioned India and was known to be close even to the poet Rabindranath Tagore. In 1948 he was invited by the Prime Minister of Pakistan Liaquat Ali Khan to Karachi. However here he very soon understood that politics of religious and ethnic identities had already taken over the dance world. He incorporated elements of his Bengali identity, he was unwelcome in West Pakistan. He passed away in 1954. His wife, Afroza Bulbul, continued to stay on in Karachi and set up the Bulbul Academy. In 1971 she left for Bangladesh.

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

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

A wonderful male student of Ustad Ghulam Hussain is the Kathak dancer Fasih ur Rehman. He had started learning at a young age and had soon become a soloist, but Fasih felt that he could not survive as a male dancer in Pakistan. In 2010 he had already moved away to live in the United Kingdom. The same year he wrote to me, “I just want to be in a dance environment which is not so stifling.” I am very interested in taking over the Rhythmic Art Centre where they created what seemed to me in those early years a magical world, which I longed to enter.

I joined the Ghanshyams and stayed with them as their student throughout my school life and then joined them as a teacher at their institute and as a member of their performing troupe as long as they remained in this country. They taught me and others the classical styles of Kathak and Bharatnatyam but also Manipuri and Kathakali as well as many dances that they had choreographed themselves. I worked with them to create their sets, design their costumes, and learned that when you are full of passion and love for your art form, you are willing to do anything and everything that is required for the sake of it. I realize now that it has to be a madness nothing that can keep one going because, given the circumstances under which one has to function, it is easier to give up than to continue.

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

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

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

Q. And why did you decide to stay on?

A. While I was working on the film it was around 1952—I had a performance and Mr. Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy who was the Prime Minister of Pakistan at the time happened to be the chief guest at this show. I had known Suhrawardy in Calcutta where he had been my neighbor when he was the Governor of Bengal. He recognized me and he invited me to stay in Pakistan. He suggested to me that I start a dance center in Karachi. He asked me to come down to Pakistan and right up to the 1980’s, the Government and the Ministry of Culture used to give you funds. Besides this, the industrialists and businessmen would also give a lot of financial support. I remember that the brochures printed for our performances in those days would be full of advertisements. Then, during General Zia-ul-Haq’s time, all government funding for cultural activity ended and so did all other support. Now, it is a very tough task to get any kind of funding for culture—especially dance. One has to literally knock on so many doors and often return empty-handed. I feel that when the state and the government does not patronize the arts, then others—philanthropists and industrialists—also do not give their support. Tell us about the time when you and your family started getting threats and you were forced to leave Pakistan.

A. That was, indeed, a very difficult time for me. First, the funding became erratic and then it stopped. I would write to the Government and to the Ministry to send me funds, but they would not respond. I didn’t have any connection, nor did I know any ministers, so I did not know how I could continue without funds. Then, the conditions started becoming really bad. I would hear shouts and abuses outside my house; they would scream at me saying, “Aye Hindu ka bacha yeh naach gana band kar”. I would not know what to do! I started becoming very frustrated and then sometimes I would react with defiance and say to them, “Yes, I am a Hindu. Yes, I sing and dance. Do whatever you want. Let’s see how you can stop me!” My wife, Nilima, would be very afraid for me. She feared that someone would kill me. It was a terrible, terrible time.

Q. This kind of harassment started soon after General Zia came into power in 1977 and you and Mrs. Ghanshyam left in 1983, the year when Zia brought in all these anti- women and anti-minority laws, like the Blasphemy law. Tell us: How did the problems that made you leave Pakistan start?

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

Q. You, remember the writings on your compound wall: “Jo bhi yahan aveya naach ganay kai lioy, un ko Islami nizam kay takh saza deyay”. (Whoever comes here to dance and sing will be given Islamic punishments). I remember that, every day, you would have to replace the bulb outside, as someone would have thrown a stone aimed at it.

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

Q. Mr. Ghanshyam, you know the same thing happened with me in the 1980s. I started to get threatening letters that said that I am spreading Hinduism and Indian culture, and that they will bomb our house.
A. But dance is a humanist art! It doesn’t belong to any religion. It is human action. You cannot stop action. Action is dance. If you stop action, then you die. (At this point Mr. Ghanshyam had tears in his eyes and became very emotional. We continued the interview a little later).  

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A. Well, I think I have always been made to feel uncomfortable because of my sex. In the eyes of the general public a male dancer is always considered not masculine enough and mocked. But yes, here, right from the very beginning, people looked at me strangely, as if they were trying to figure out whether I was a “proper” man. People who knew that I was a dancer would pass rude comments. I guess because I was married and had a family, I was more acceptable! Had I been a single man, then I think it would have been much worse.  

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

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

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

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

Next, I would like you to watch a recording of an interview (watch here, [https://youtu.be/XYVQ0d3-dnI]) I recently conducted—on November 7th, 2021 in Karachi—with my student, Muhammad Asif. It will reveal how little has changed for the male dancer in Pakistan.  

In conclusion, I recognize that there is need to study the field of dance in Pakistan, particularly male dance in Pakistan, through the theories of gender, identity, embedded performance, feminism, and hegemony. But at present, the field is bereft of any attention from the field of dance in Pakistan, particularly male dance in Pakistan. I also reiterate that the policies followed by Pakistan result in making its cultural wealth vulnerable and endangering the life of its cultural exemplars. Dance is being pushed to the edges of precarity. This is an attack on the patrimony of future generations of citizens. In the oliger of space that dance occupies in Pakistan where its music has been making waves globally, one finds a pastiche of dance forms, including hip-hop, suf, and modern, as exemplified by the Wahab Shah Dance company, for instance. It is hard to sustain a career with classical dance alone. For all practical purposes I am “the last classical dancer in Pakistan” (Pande 508). Regrettably, the hope that my Guru had of dance being a humanist activity is fast receding. Equally unfounded is his dream of a Pakistani dance. So, in Pakistan, dance is a smorgasbord of styles, singularly subaltern and sometimes subversive. Increasingly, it is being used as a political tool of resistance. For this reason, dance has featured frequently in my acts of activism.


Vajira: The Pioneering Female Dancer

Mirak Raheem

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

The inadequate manner in which Vajira’s contribution has been documented is not unusual. It is part of a wider problem of gendered and simplistic historiographies. In order to understand this gap, it is useful to look at how the history of traditional dance in Sri Lanka is understood. Kandyan dance claims a history of over 2,500 years with its roots in the pre-colonial times. The Kandyan, a Kokumbura, Kankariya, which is associated with Sinhala communities from and around the central highlands of the island. The tri-traditional dances are recognized as a representative dance form of the Tamil community of the island, is not often accorded the same status.1 In the contemporary period, Kandyan dance, at least in its ritual form, had no formal place for her. Vajira is a key figure in the history of the tri-traditional dances of Sri Lanka tend to highlight a lack of pioneering and downplaying their significance as the first female dancers on stage and summarizing their life stories. Their contribution in these narratives is presented as creating a space for female dancers on stage. Yet, these female pioneers emerged on stage at a critical point in the journey of the tri-traditional dances from ritual space to stage. Temporally, this overlaps with the early efforts of their male counterparts, both the gurunnanses and the stage dancers who were attempting to “break in” audiences. While one-off performances of traditional dance would have drawn an audience for their novelty, these early performers had to “create” audiences through repeated performances and developing methods of sustaining their interest, including through choreography and theatre craft. Rarely do these popular histories seek to account for the multiple and varied roles these female pioneers played beyond carving out a place for women on stage, and it is seldom acknowledged that the women artists also transformed the dance in other ways, including as performers, teachers, choreographers, troupe leaders, producers, and costume designers.

Vajira was precluded by individual female dancers, such as Miriam de Saram and Chandralakshmi (Hendra Hilda Karunatilake), who broke new ground in the early 1940s, including the wearing of a version of the Vē, the ritual attire of the gurunnanses. Although the female dancers had antecedents (as recorded in historical texts, literature, and on rock and wood carvings), and was found in specific contexts in the pre-independence era, Kandyan dance, at least in its ritual form, had no formal place for her. Vajira is a key figure in the history of Kandyan dance on stage as she is probably the first professional female dancer. Dance, for her, unlike for her predecessors, was a full-time vocation, not an amateur pastime. Her life story provides a useful template to better understand the development and contribution of the female dancer beyond that of a performer and teacher to a co-creator who questioned the boundaries of the tri-traditional dances on stage.

The Embodiment of Lasya

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

As part of the Chitrunasena Ensemble, Vajira went on to perform on stages in Sri Lanka and cultural capitals across the world, including Moscow, Berlin, New Delhi, London, and Sydney. She was considered the epitome of the female form of the dance and was referred to as the “primera bailarina of Kandyan dance.” While Kandyan dance is seen to be a more tandava (loosely translated as masculine) dance, akin to Kathakali, the advent of the female dancer was presented as the emergence of the lasya—or feminine—form of the dance.2 In the media, Vajira was described as embodying this lasya form of Kandyan dance: “I believe it was she who created out of this traditional tandava dance lyric a lasya dance of delicate beauty,” points out Bandula Jayawarden, art critic and visiting lecturer.3 Although Sri Lankan reviewers often highlighted her grace, they did not always recognize the underlying strength and weight that she brought to the dance and the efforts she made to challenge her male counterparts on stage and to match their steps and leaps.

It is only a handful of commentators, such as Ernest MacIntyre, Bandula Jayawarden, and Samson Aveyagunawardena,4 who, in short articles, have drawn attention to the breadth of her contribution. But a more detailed assessment of her work is lacking. Only one or two observers, including Sunila Abeysekera, have highlighted the personal challenges faced by Vajira and the enormous strength of personality she showed in defying social conventions.5 In addition to her multiple dance roles, Vajira was also a mother to three children: daughters Upekha and Anjaliya, and son Anudatta. She was determined to continue performing and touring despite the physical challenges of motherhood; in 1957, barely three months after giving birth to her son, she was part of a dance troupe that toured the USSR. As a female dancer, regularly performing on stages across the country and later internationally, she served as a role model for young women passionate about taking up dancing as a vocation.

The Creator

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1 Raheem, Mirak. “Chitrasena’s Mudra Natya: Embodying the Form.” The Sunday Times, January 24, 2021
2 Interview with Vajira
Failure of Rasa: Story of Indian Dance During COVID-19
Kaustavi Sarkar

What is the premise and promise of Rasa during a period of confusion, turmoil, and fear of human connection? “Rasa is the experience of a state of generalized stasis that results from an accumulation of empathetic responses to performed sequences of emotional experience” (Coorlawala 23). As a practitioner-scholar of traditional Indian dance, I negotiate with tenets of performative based on texts, such as the Natyasastra, Abhinaya Darpana, Sangeet Ratnakara, Abhinavabharati, Natya Manorama, and Abhinaya Chandrika, among many others that explicitly or implicitly deal with affective communication of narrative, musical, rhythmic, and metaphorical content. These texts in Sanskrit language and are embedded within a worldview that can be attributed to Hinduism. Bharata’s Natyasastra, approximately dated between 200 B.C. to 200 C.E., devotes chapters six and seven to Rasa theory noting that the primary goal of performance is to transport the audience to a transcendent realm while entertainment is only a mere consequence. Abhinaya Chandrika is the cornerstone on Rasa theory of the Natyasastra. While Natyasastra is considered to be the oldest treatise on performing arts, other texts, namely, Abhinaya Darpana, Sangeet Ratnakara, Abhinavabharati, Natya Manorama, and Abhinaya Chandrika are equally significant in propounding Rasa. Nandikesvara’s Abhinaya Darpana notes Rasa as the object of Abhinaya or theatrical expression. The chapter on dance in Sarangadeva’s Sangeet Ratnakara, a musico-lyric treatise, presents the Rasa theory. Raghunath Rath and Maheswar Mohapatra wrote Natya Manorama and Abhinaya Chandrika respectively. These texts belong to the eastern Indian state of Odisha and contributes to the development of Odissi dance with its distinct and particular regional flavor although adopting conventions from the aesthetic Sanskritic lineage of the Natyasastra. South Asian dance-scholars have written extensively about the obsession with the ‘classical’ in Indian dance referring to dance that aligns with the Sanskritic line. This lineage of dance has invisibilized numerous forms, dances, and choreographers who choose to steer clear of this narrow focus. This becomes essentially potent today as the ring-wing Hindu nationalist Indian state celebrates its seventy-five years of freedom from British colonialism with censorship. Dance-artist and scholar, Anurima Banerji writes about the conformity of the colonialism with censorship. Dance-artist and scholar, Dilip Dwibedi speaks about the minimal arrangements of the COVID-19 lockdown. In this article, I explore the complexities of Rasa during a complete lockdown of live performance. Rasa appears in ancient Vedic literature as lyric, ritualistic, and metaphor. The pandemic has been one of being “fed-up-of-COVID” (Sethi, Covid Creations). A conversation regarding Rasa’s efficacy in technological mediation is not restricted to the pandemic, given the role of film, social media, and other channels of artistic dissemination beyond the live-arts. The concert dance form of the Odissi repertoire as legitimate citizens, while others are discriminated against, and subjected to multiple marginalities” (2)

The concert dance form of the Odissi repertoire is called Abhinaya Darpana—of Mangalacharan (Mangalacharan) to salvation (Moksha) for the creation of Rasa. Reminiscing its ritualistic counterpart in the Maa Jagannath temple where Jagannath temple dance dancers performed to the lyrics of the Gitagovinda, among other pieces, establishes dance as a significant offering to the deity (Banerji 12). Speaking about Delhi-based Odissi, an eastern Indian traditional art form, dancer Kavita Dwivedi says, “He was playing the lights for me.” Dwivedi is referring to Lord Jagannath, the male Hindu deity who remains at the heart of Odishan (an eastern Indian state) religious and cultural fabric. Dwivedi speaks about the minimal arrangements of the recording of her dance-film Wooh 50 Din (translated as “those fifty days”). Made for artist/scholar Arshiya Sethi’s Danced Poems of Double Authorship, the work’s creation took place during the first fifty days of the COVID-19 lockdown. In this virtual event, dancers, Dwivedi and others choreographed to Sethi’s poems in Hindi and English. Dwivedi attributes metaphorical and spiritual agency to Lord Jagannath, noting that he ensured Dwivedi’s face was lit for the filmic capture. In the video, we see Dwibedi seated in front of a quanity visible Jagannath idol. Her gestural expressivity related to the honors of the pandemic infuses the receptivity with Rasa—an aestheticized portrayal of emotional tenor.

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

This article is embedded in the Indian arts scenario—aestheticized portrayal of emotional tenor. Its complicity in structural marginalization adhering to power dynamics in dance during the COVID-19 pandemic. In “Using Arts Activism and Poetry to Catalyze Human Rights Engagement and Reflection,” scholar Jane McPherson notes that arts activism has the potential to promote reflective engagement with a rights discourse. With the loss of live performance, emerged a culture of greater discourse—sharing of artistic and creative process alongside a greater call for creative action in times of COVID. Dwivedi, says, “One of the ways of connecting and rebuffing an otherwise culture of silence. For example, initiatives, such as the “Arts and the Law” series and “UNMUTE,” series, organized as training, workshop, and discussion events, directly address artists facing marginalization, harassment, and discrimination at their workplaces. While the Indian nation state reneged on contracts and delayed payments, individual artists rose to the challenge of the pandemic in philanthropic capacities by commissioning paid work, donating money and food, and creating, commissioning, and funding shows and connections. Artists, namely, Sanjy Roy of Teamwork Films and Anurupa Roy of Kalkatha—organized charitable donations of food and other basic necessities. Anteprerence Arshiya Sethi’s Kri Foundation organized donation to families comprising of dancers from all strata—folk, back-up show, and Jagaran. During the online premiere on YouTube Live of Danced Poems of Double Authorship, Sethi reminds us that the Sufiyah Bhava (dominant expression in the Rasa theory) during the pandemic has been one of being “fed-up-of-COVID” (Sethi, Covid Creations). A conversation regarding Rasa’s efficacy in technological mediation is not restricted to the pandemic, given the role of film, social media, and other channels of artistic dissemination beyond the live-arts. The concert dance form of the Odissi repertoire is more than 4,000 confirmed cases resulting from the pandemic. In “Using Arts Activism and Poetry to Catalyze Human Rights Engagement and Reflection,” scholar Jane McPherson notes that arts activism has the potential to promote reflective engagement with a rights discourse. With the loss of live performance, emerged a culture of greater discourse—sharing of artistic and creative process alongside a greater call for creative action in times of COVID. Dwivedi, says, “One of the ways of connecting and rebuffing an otherwise culture of silence. For example, initiatives, such as the “Arts and the Law” series and “UNMUTE,”...
Hypothesizing Rasic Intimacy

Moving in tandem with the viewer lays the primary charge of Rasa as reciprocity through a specific Indian worldview. Rasa, as first mentioned in the Rig Veda, refers to the nectar of immortality. Translated as juice or flavor, Rasa refers to sensuous savoring of performance. As experienced in my own practice, Rasa is generated through an embodied encounter of such Angika, Mukhaja, and codified hand gestures (Mukhaja), and codified hand gestures also known as Brahman. While at an empirical level, the blips can be experienced through unselfish individuality, R. Denean’s reception refers to a psychic component of the performer’s alchemical energy of the art work and the Rasika. Experience of Rasa in the Performer–Spectator Interaction,” artist-scholar Scheherazaad Cooper argues that Rasa is birthed between live performance and spectator within a performance. The experience of the performance is meant to function within a dialectical capacity grasped within the upstream and downstream flow of energy between the participants—the spectator and the performer. It is not reified in the imaginary, but a positive experience within the exchange. The scriptural basis of Rasa theory has led to its investigation as a spiritual experience. For example, Susan L. Schwartz notes how spirituality permeates Natyashastra performance. Schwartz writes that the transcendence of the ego by both the performer and the viewer remains the transformative premise and promise of Rasa. Real-time interpretation by the spectator of the performer’s Bhavas or day-to-day emotional experiences generates Rasa where the suspension of the performer’s ego allows for the audience’s apprehension of Rasa. The energetic foundation of Rasa performance and reception literally depends upon the nature of the knowledge base and respective interpretations. Not every artist is necessarily Hindu or spiritual, although it is impossible to deny the ritual-spiritual-philosophical-religious basis in artistic choice, training, practice, and performance. Implicit connections to Hindu myth, literature, and religiosity permeate the dance. Yet, interpretations enabled by the Rasic exchange within performers and viewers of multiple leanings and associations are also key to shaping and developing the art form.

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

Distilling the performance through a foundation of existing knowledge base creates the possibility of transcending the commonplace by a theory that operates beyond the current landscape of the performer and the Rasika. According to K.S. Shivkumar, “It is only when the devotee is ‘seen’ within performance theory and its spiritual associations. Rasa, as defined by K.S. Shivkumar, is the moment of relish, defined by T.S. Nandi as a philosophical encounter with the performer’s alchemical possibility as described below.
by the performer to illustrate an expressive nuance without repetition. Finally, pointing out the calmness within—a centering achieved through repetition and understanding of bliss—transcends the performer and the spectator. The dialogic accomplishment of non-verbal expressivity results in the generation and apprehension of Rasa in an act of transgression, reflection, and the subtext of the spectator transcending the self through an aesthetic distancing. While the performer transcends the self in the act of aesthetic negotiating across multiplicity, the spectator lets go of the self in identifying with the character. However, the receptive self does not stop at complete identification with the performer. Rather, the stytized possible is read in the reception toward aesthetic distancing from both the spectator's self as well as the performer's characterization. This distancing culminates in pleasure, also known as Rasananda, or bliss.

Religious studies scholar Kurt Heidinger notes how Abhinavagupta locates the transcendence in the union of the male god and the female goddess that bridges the distance “of question and answer, of word-thought and interpreter thought, of sensible and intelligible” (Heidinger 140). This notion of the transcedental signified has been investigated in South Asian sculpture by art historian Vidya Dehejia. She attributes the enlightenment within Saik, the eternal feminine principle of power flowing through the self as well as the spiritual world. As the embodiment of the ritual sexual union as well as being the epitome of Saik, or the eternal feminine principle, revealing the cosmos, my Odissi solo exploits power and pleasure as modes of transcendence. The acculturated spectator is left with Sakti, or the eternal feminine principle by art historian Vidya Dehejia. She attributes the accomplishment of non-verbal expressivity results in the pretension of the live to the screen?

Testing Rasic Intimacy

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

Considerations of space and time onstage vastly differ from their scenic perception. Performance studies scholar T.N. Cesare Schotzko notes how the film screen animates an intimacy based on visual proximity, prioritizing the invidis (Shamsu Naqvi’s professional company) dancers—Ameera, Avani, Shilpa, Ragini, Shivangi, Bhagvia, Neerja, and Esha—use the musicality of percussive syllables: Dha Thee Ta Dhee Thee Ta Dhe, to edit choices alternately with Sethi’s motto: “Lockdown, not lock-up.” These poems were chronologically organized with the growing number of days spent in the lockdown mode.

I began this article with Kavita Dwibedi’s Those 50 Days. In which her face and the idol of Jagannath behind her are both faintly lit by the sunlight, portraying the human condition in isolation. Unlike Dwibedi’s faintly visible Jagannath in the backdrop, iliana Citaristi creates her rendition of Jagannath with the presiding Odissi deity. Gestural invocation of relatedness across multiple planes of reality—that between Citaristi and Jagannath—weaves the natural horizon to establish a communitas. Nature plays a significant role in the poem, “Which Fork We Take,” various portions of which are enacted by ten dancers establishing various degrees of intimacy with gestural, postural, and metaphorical communication. The collage by ten artists, curated by Sattriya artist Anwesa Maahanta for her Pragjyoti International Dance Festival on Sethi’s “Which Fork We Take,” enacts a communal bonding across countries and embodied literacies. These danced poems generate degrees of intimacy that traffic predominantly with elements of Rasa while elucidating a phenomenon between the dancer and the audience in live performance.

Chakshu, quite contrarily, employs choreography in a mediated environment, obeying the logics of the making of a dance-film. The lens often frames the dancing bodies, showing a part of the movement, thus creating “a sense of absence” (Schotzko 120). Sethi’s History Will Remember This War, captures the spirit of resilience in the midst of struggle. Images of death alternate with images of public health workers interspersed throughout Saik’s Abhinaya-esque rendition of the poem. Sethi’s Umeed, meaning hope, performed by both Jyoti Srivastava and Mangla Bhat in Odissi and Kathak respectively, show two very different renditions of hope. While Srivastava’s Umeed treats the poem in facial expression and musicality, Bhat’s Umeed Udasi ka Virodabhasi Safar is a Sufi-esque surrender, walking amidst nature, desirous of change with a willful suspension of her artistic subjectivity. Rama Vaidyanathan’s integration of an iPad as an active performer and not just a tool of capture negotiates constant with multiple agents, prioritizing dual roles of both the see and the seen—the dancer is not just the seen but is also actively choreographing the logic of her presence, documenting her moving body. Similarly, Chakshu’s Umeed Udasi ka Virodabhasi Safar—We Are the Process of a transformation from this vantage point, I ask: Does Rasic intimacy and the promise of egotistic transcendence hold true in the meditative act of the live to the screen?

Screen generative for this discussion. I investigate two online festivals curated by Kri Foundation under the auspices of Arshiyaa Sethi. Danced Poems of Double Authorship remains an exception. The dancers bring their creative imagination to Sethi’s poetic through music, gesture, technology, and translation in regional languages. Shakespearean reading of his plays in a Sufi-esque manner, Sethi’s History Will Remember This War, captures the spirit of resilience in the midst of struggle. Images of death alternate with images of public health workers interspersed throughout Saik’s Abhinaya-esque rendition of the poem. Sethi’s Umeed, meaning hope, performed by both Jyoti Srivastava and Mangla Bhat in Odissi and Kathak respectively, show two very different renditions of hope. While Srivastava’s Umeed treats the poem in facial expression and musicality, Bhat’s Umeed Udasi ka Virodabhasi Safar is a Sufi-esque surrender, walking amidst nature, desirous of change with a willful suspension of her artistic subjectivity. Rama Vaidyanathan’s integration of an iPad as an active performer and not just a tool of capture negotiates constant with multiple agents, prioritizing dual roles of both the see and the seen—the dancer is not just the seen but is also actively choreographing the logic of her presence, documenting her moving body. Similarly, Chakshu’s Umeed Udasi ka Virodabhasi Safar—We Are the Process of a transformation from this vantage point, I ask: Does Rasic intimacy and the promise of egotistic transcendence hold true in the meditative act of the live to the screen?
pandemic-induced reality. Interestingly, use of space focuses on moving feet juxtaposed with Chatterjee’s Garuda Samyukta Hasta (both hands joined showcasing a bird), which she uses to experimentally communicate the feeling of a caged bird via intermittent flapping of the wings. Chatterjee’s Angika Abhinaya can be compared to Aditi Mangaldas’s Mukhaja Abhinaya in the latter’s twist with the body, which, Mangaldas, another Kathak artist, literally uses a golden frame to show an image coming into life from stillness. A newspaper review of Enframed by Chitra Swaminathan notes that “although the dynamics of a dance piece are expressed through the physical language of choreography, most often its essence is conveyed neither by narrative nor movements, but by the body of the dancer.” Mangaldas’s framing of corporeality, fleshiness, and sheer existence with minimal gestural motion with her face, hands, and torso layers the narrative meaning with a sense of eerie stillness that is occupied by the streaming Kathak dancer from the viewer’s imaginary. The working hypothesis for a dance-film relies on the supposition that the intention of the work deploys the camera lens to direct the audience to focus on her sunlit corporeal self, while audience to viewers’ perception of movement. Motility is life-breath for a mover.

Danced Poems of Double Authorship takes an organic approach to filming the dancing body maintaining corporeal integrity over and above technological gimmicks. The body gains precedence in Kavita Dwivedi’s Voh Pacchash Din, in which she forces the audience to focus on her suntli corporeal self, while exposed to auditory stimuli from Sethi’s recitation of the poem in Hindi and minimal percussive accompaniment. Dwivedi’s facial virtuosity in communicating a plethora of emotions, concepts, ideas, and experiences ranging across love, humor, kindness, death, struggle, despair, and anger presents a message of universal consciousness of humanity. Manav Manav Ka Raahak, translated as “humans protect one another,” summarizes the choreographic import of a world torn asunder by a pandemic of disease, mistrust, and hatred. The vibrancy of Dwivedi’s face and economy of hand gesture draws attention to her finely lit dancing body with the backdrop of the gnarly creepers, and peeking sunlight. Stylized meditations amidst the large trees, the curvilinear trails, the layered multiplicity and choreographing the viewer’s perception and engagement with dancers’ corporeality. The climactic Tihai on the Mardala communicates in metaphorical rhythmicity the need for friendship amidst the despair and death brought forth by the pandemic. Danced Poems of Double Authorship ends with a collage on Sethi’s Which Folk We Take by ten dance artists from Italy, Japan, India, Bangladesh, and Canada, curated by the Pragjyoti International Dance Festival. Artists visualize moments of crisis as well as hope through their Hasta gestural, Angika or embodied, and Nakha or facial expressibility. Dr. Arwessa Mahanta, festival director and curator, returns to the tactic of the Tihai as she appears last in the film asking the viewer “to do for another daily, unfailingly” and repeating the phrase, “something kind” three times for her audiences. Sethi’s Which Folk We Take makes hope surge creating communities across movement—one that is rooted in India’s Abhaya tradition.

The notion of hope becomes a catalyst of bringing together communities of practice across geographical distance. Sethi’s poem, “Unmixed, Unsaddled, Safar,” loosely translated as the journey between despair and hope, results in two very different manifestations by the dancers Mangla Bhat and Jyoti Srivastava. Bhat’s minimalist presentation taking refuge in Kathak’s tums, footwork, contrasts with Srivastava’s scripting of the poem into a fully produced musical piece within the Odissi repertoire. I argue that the notion of the Tihai, or the parasingal Pradhan flower—offering at the feet of Jagannath’s idol. The conventional salutation to the ground is replaced by Citaristi’s gestural exposition in which she brings her hand close to her ear as if to hear words spoken especially for her by the deity. Gajavesham, who is dressed as an elephant, inspires her to compose Jagannath Speaks to Me, bringing to fruition Citaristi’s desire to offer her dance as an offering to Rathayatra—a chariot festival in a Jagannath temple in Puri. The Arthapatti, that is, the meaning supposition to Jagannath’s exposition that Jagannath speaks to us, leads to her choreography exploring representation and abstraction across ritual, nature, and religious love. The camera focuses on her hand pointing toward the audience to one of the landmarks of the twirling Kathak dancer from the viewer’s imaginary. The working hypothesis for a dance-film relies on the supposition that the intention of the work deploys the camera lens to direct the audience to focus on her sunlit corporeal self, while audience to viewers’ perception of movement. Motility is life-breath for a mover.

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

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

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

In film studies, it has been established that the intervention of the camera compromises the possibility of a more phenomenological intimacy on and off stage. The willing suspension of the fact of exaggerated processing as a sensuous act leads to a loss of Rasic agency. Rasic intimacy that is possible in live performance, presupposes complete agency control of one’s aesthetic sensibility. Technological manipulation by the camera introduces factors—the particular viewpoint of the lens through which the viewer’s gaze is sieved—outside of the Rasic framework. There is also an unwanted possibility of a bias towards censored intention. The being laboring on a movement or a body part allows for the predominance of its concrete materiality in the spectator’s psyche. However, the promise of Rasa lies in the viewer’s ability of abstraction—aesthetic metaphorizing the material leading to a distancing of the self as well as the displayed subject.

Our experience of dance-film is implicitly marked by the viewer’s ability of abstraction—aesthetic metaphorizing the material leading to a distancing of the self as well as the displayed subject. There is also an unwanted possibility of a bias towards censored intention. The being laboring on a movement or a body part allows for the predominance of its concrete materiality in the spectator’s psyche. However, the promise of Rasa lies in the viewer’s ability of abstraction—aesthetic metaphorizing the material leading to a distancing of the self as well as the displayed subject.

The pandemic has seen a plethora of on-screen activity. Without a sound, a cry, even a whimper towards the things we endured they said the things we endured A few pushes, wounds, and heartbreaks are all part of the deal.

Sometimes the Show Must Not Go On,” emerges from a workshop on breaking the silence around a culture of sexual exploitation in January, 2021. Scholars, artists, and activists present a scathing critique of institutional unaccountability, raising a clarion call against all enablers who play a major role in creating a culture where sexual harassment is normalized and where it is extremely easy for the perpetrator to continue their behavior, unchecked. I borrow the timely phrase, “Reboot/Reform/Respond,” from another UNMUTE training on ethics and safe practices in arts practices and environments to identify the promise of the pandemic. Having experienced gendered and sexualized powerplay in my professional life as a performing artist in India, I perceive a sense of— a simultaneous decline in the radical potential of transcending one’s ego through Rasic Intimacy and raising the sensibility leads to a totality that is referring to as an unmuting of Rasa. For too long, Rasa has been deployed for patriarchal powerplay as Kalkh exponent Nisha Mahajan articulates succinctly in a newspaper interview. There was this notion that, in order to be able to present bhaav or abhinaya, if you wanted to dance were willing to make the compromise. Then there were others who just left.” (Kharuna 2020)

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

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


The international journal of South Asian Dance Intersections is a progressive, scholarly, blind peer-reviewed, and digitally available open-access journal which seeks to publish a unique blend of original high-quality research in scholarly, choreographic, contemporary, community-building, and technical explorations within South Asian dance and its interdisciplinary intersections. It aims to bring together emerging and established voices in the field to carry forward pressing areas of discourse. Its focus remains on South Asian dance and its many intersections with a wide range of areas, disciplines, cartographies, communities, and populations to present the field via a new integrated wholesomeness. Featuring the writings of iconic, established, and emerging scholars and stimulate ongoing debate and discourse, this journal seeks to capture the hitherto ignored, vernacular, neglected, languishing, and quieter voices, presenting them in an inclusive, decolonised, and self-affirming frame. It seeks to publish policy, theory, and practice articles, reflection essays, book and resource reviews, and arts-based works related to all aspects of dance appreciation in South Asian performing arts in both discursive and embodied contexts. It desires to make connections between the verbal and performative in live-performance, pedagogy, and creative interpretations through photographic representation and capture.

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

Areas of interest for this call include but are not limited to:
1. Censorship in dance and life
2. Political and activist embodiment
3. Questioning epistemic violence on the dancing body
4. Situated epistemologies decolonizing dance
5. Performative approaches in stand-alone geographies and linkages erasing borders as praxis
6. Performative approaches in stand-alone geographies and linkages erasing borders as activism
7. Performative approaches in stand-alone geographies and linkages erasing borders as pedagogy


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

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