

**BEFORE THE DANCE: “NASCENT” DANCE MOVEMENTS IN  
NON-DANCE PERFORMANCES: THE CASE OF *KOBIGAAN***

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**Introduction**

That’s all there is to it: a speck of behavior, a fleck of culture, and voila! - a gesture.  
(Geertz, 1973, p. 6)

The ways of approaching dance as performance are many and varying. The spectator’s approach towards dance as a mode of behavior within a given culture couples with a study of the gestures within dance as a practice. However, to think of dance as embedded in and an embodiment of our “everyday” gestures allows one to probe a little deeper into the question of movements within dance. Do we, then, view dance as a strict separate practice having little or nothing to do with related gestures in other modes of performance practices? Or, is there a probable way of studying dance-like movements within “non-dance” performances in specific cultures that nourish one’s understanding and way of viewing dance? The second interrogation is pre-emptive of the subject of concern within this paper as also with the thematic-problematic of approaching dance. Gertrude Prokosch Kurath (1960), in foregrounding her “broad approach” to dance writes:

Any dichotomy between ethnic dance and art dance dissolves if one regards dance ethnology, not as description or reproduction of a particular kind of dance, but as an approach toward, and a method of, eliciting the place of dance in human life—in a word, as a branch of anthropology. (p. 250)

The aim of this study is to extend this approach to those categories that are perceived and treated as “non-dance”: “To approach dance as one aspect of human behavior inextricably bound up with all those aspects that make up the unity we call culture...”<sup>i</sup>

The concept of “culture” in the anthropologist’s gamut of methodological employments and deployments has evinced constantly how it becomes a category that is not easy to grapple with. Culture has been defined—among a variegated series of enumerations—as a “precipitate of history”.<sup>ii</sup> Socio-cultural anthropology takes into account the totality of the lives of human beings as well as the social legacies that individuals acquire from their group. However, in understanding “culture”, it is important, within the purview of this study, to dissociate it from the analyses offered by experimental science in “search of law” and to analyze it, alternately, as an interpretative one in “search of meaning”.<sup>iii</sup> The “search of meaning” naturally leads one to engage, here, with “gesture” as a unit of behavior, both individual and collective within the reference frame of culture; for the latter contains a blueprint of the collective of life’s activities. As a web of scattered semiotic meanings, culture therefore emerges in the ethnography of a performance genre as offering possibilities of reflections through a related or diverse scope of selected category.

This paper probes into certain performance genres that are not dance per se and yet exhibit *nascent movements* and gestures that link them to the more pronounced gestures in dance proper. These performances, of which *Kobigaan*<sup>iv</sup> is the key example that this paper will engage itself with, have been viewed as part of field studies conducted in West Bengal (in India) and in Bangladesh. The aim of studying these performances within this paper is to detach the performing subject from the monoliths of performance genres and to re-locate him on the fizzy cross-roads of dance, music and theatre. In order to do so, this paper is segmented to give a brief overview of the genre(s) in question, why and how do they become necessary to be studied within the scope of dance movements/dance studies, comparative-descriptive analyses from field-studies conducted in West Bengal and Bangladesh<sup>v</sup> so far, linkages between “dance” and “non-dance” genres as they emerge from these analyses, and concluding with the scopes and possibilities of studying further nuances of these performances in their broader relation with dance studies.

The phrase—*nascent movements*—is a coinage here to differentiate and relate at the same time between dance and non-dance in this study of non-dance performance genre(s). Though the descriptive use of “nascent” can be debatable or replaceable with other adjectives such as “vestigial” or “imitative”, as the engagements further down this paper will show, it is used here in its greater relational dynamics with fully developed dance movements. “Nascent” can imply the miniaturization of dance movements within musical/theatrical representations thus signifying the intentional behavior of the performing subject. The “imitative” and “restricted” aspects of these dance-like

movements become significant in such a reading of the “nascent”. On the other hand, “nascent” can also signify the “growing” dance-like movements that allow greater comparative relations—not in the teleological historical sense though—between similar dance and non-dance genres. In establishing the various linkages between dance and dance-like movements, the performance genre in analysis within this paper needs to be read under certain pre-given categories: (i) the socio-political parameters involved in “exhibiting” performance genres; (ii) the space of performance—in this case, a rural village in Bangladesh and the annual winter fair (*Poush Mela*) in West Bengal—determining the extent of “exhibiting” dance-like movements in discussion; (iii) the role of the performing subject as involved in catering to the spectator, both rural and urban; (iv) the engagement with mythological and folkloric discourse enabling the enactment of dance-like movements within the rubric of performance; and (v) the role of Hindu and Muslim communities post-Partition in patronizing these performances.

The other important category of engagement within this paper is that of cultural memory without which it becomes difficult to contextualize the analyses of these dance-like movements. The obsession with memory in representation as differing from historiographical representation allows socio-political forces to engage in collective commemoration; collective commemoration stems on the other hand from a fear of “forgetting” and the hankering after “authenticity”. The readings arising from the descriptive analyses of the performances in question can be taken as representative of “embodied memory” that signals the “unconscious” use of movements by the performer. On the other hand, an acquired sense of memory might also emerge if such movements

are taken as deliberate and conscious enactments by the performer. In the latter case, the performance becomes a sort of souvenir embodying the distant, the antique and the exotic (as would be evident in the analysis of the winter fair performance). In between the cultural practices (of performances) and memory, experience becomes instrumental in shaping how the performers execute the dance-like movements and the spectator desirably assimilates these gestures. The following sections of the paper attempt to explain and validate the propositions stated so far.

### **A Performance Genre in Retrospect: *Kobigaan* in between Memory and History**

The "acceleration of history," then, confronts us with the brutal realization of the difference between real memory-social and unviolated, exemplified in but also retained as the secret of so-called primitive or archaic societies-and history, which is how our hopelessly forgetful modern societies, propelled by change, organize the past. On the one hand, we find an integrated, dictatorial memory- unself-conscious, commanding, all-powerful, spontaneously actualizing, a memory without a past that ceaselessly reinvents tradition, linking the history of its ancestors to the undifferentiated time of heroes, origins, and myth and on the other hand, our memory, nothing more in fact than sifted and sorted historical traces. The gulf between the two has deepened in modern times with the growing belief in a right, a capacity, and even a duty to change. Today, this distance has been stretched to its convulsive limit. (Pierre Nora, 1989, p. 8)

The thick line of difference between memory and historical memory underlines the question of “forgetting” as also of “remembering” a performance form like *Kobigaan*. Belonging to the genre of verse-dueling—a musical duel between two poetasters—historiographies so far have either done away with its presence or gone into the questions of its “origin” in the readiness of a Vaishnavite<sup>vi</sup> past. The genre of verse-dueling or musical battles has a certain ubiquity so as to find comparative structures and similar patterns within a number of other performance forms concurrent with *Kobigaan*. Added to their statures as modes of entertainment, these forms also continued as information media. Their onus lay in molding the information—deep-rooted philosophies, conundrums in scriptures, or a scandalous episode in a nouveau riche parlour—so as to cater to the audience that was once unaware of the nuances of black ink, the printed word and broadly, the newspaper. The “street” has sometimes been conveniently made available as the performance space and the space of interaction among these forms.<sup>vii</sup> However, the convenient use of “street” needs to be problematized in the light of the fact that in its pre-urban (also, chronologically medieval) status as in its urban existence, the performers were inevitably a group of travelling bards, mobile between the urban and sub-urban socio-geographies.

Archival dossiers from nineteenth century Bengal on *Kobigaan* and other such related performance forms have been limited and non-existent. Most often the arguments for the “undocumented” territories of such performances have been ascribed to the “vulgarity” of their content. What is this “vulgarity” associated with? Is it embedded in the text of the songs that were performed? Or, is it the performing body, in all its

gestures and postures that is marked as unfit of being written or archived. For example, The Baptist Missionary, W. Ward, saw such performances (specifically the *swang* or pantomime acts) as “obscene”. He said, “The Songs of the Hindoos, sung at religious festivals, and even by individuals on boats and in the streets are intolerably offensive to a modest person”.<sup>viii</sup> Again, depicting the apparently punishable “vulgarity” of the pantomimes on the streets, Sumanta Banerjee writes:

We hear of a *swang*, a live actor illustrating a proverb, during the Saraswati Puja (in honour of the Hindu goddess of learning) in February 1825. The Bengali proverb-“*Pathey hagey ar chokh rangaye*” (literally meaning: “He shits in public and threatens others”)- which was depicted by the *swang* was meant to lampoon the civic authorities who themselves violated all laws and yet hauled up the man in the street for the slightest misdemeanour. The display, quite predictably, annoyed the authorities. The police arrested the *swang* and his patron and brought them before the English magistrate, who reprimanded them for “vulgarity” and imposed a fine of Rs. 50. (1998, p. 124)

Both the cases stated above signal the obviousness and inevitability in the rapid containment of such performances, the bodily gesture first, the verbal a close second. It was, again, that break between memory and history (for historiographies would come up in the nineteenth century being written in the colonial format) that signaled an alleged “discontinuity” for such performances. In its place, a new search was started: that of collecting the remnants of songs and biographies of the *kobiyals* (songsters or

poetasters) and thus placing them in an “antiquity” that was a historian’s sense of antiquity stemming out of the memory-history break and thus employing new techniques of archiving.

Song collections and biographical sketches have continued over the twentieth century, over the major event of the political Partition of Bengal in 1947. Performers have then shifted geographically and sifted the performances suiting the political milieu to which they now permanently belonged. The 1960s and 1970s saw a number Bengali films, better understood as biopics, on a couple of better known *kobiyals* and a non-sequential inclusion of a *Kobigaan* performance within the narrative of the film.<sup>ix</sup> The “acceleration of history”, as Nora puts it forward, involves playing with the vestiges, ordering them in the process of “forgetting” (actual memory) and “un-forgetting” (documentations, memoirs, photographs, films and so on). How have the performances continued in the process of “un-forgetting” brings one to the issue of how the performers have retained the vestiges in their gestures and their acts. They dance or exhibit dance-like movements, termed here as *souvenir acts*<sup>x</sup>, in remembrance of all that has been archived for them. They mime and represent, at junctures of heightened philosophical exchanges for the audience to relate and retain: For every individual act of remembering is an act of archiving, every individual record a historian’s record. It is here, where ethnography of performances coupled with the available historical data<sup>xi</sup> allows one to probe broadly in to the body of the performance and specifically into the body of the performer.



## He Moves Dance-like: Notes from a Village in Chandpur, Bangladesh

One cannot present an estimate of the aficionados of this Nityananda.

*Gentlemen as well as the uncouth* in the nearby and distant villages of Kumarhatta, Bhatpara, Kanchrapara, Tribeni, Bali, Farashdanga, Chinsurah would be enthralled by the name and fame of Nitai. It was as if they gained godhood if Nitai won a contest. His defeat would grieve them immensely...some would even forsake food and slumber in melancholia. There have been ample instances in which physical fights took place among aficionados...The patrons of Bhatpara would address Nityananda as “Nityananda Prabhu”. His fans would whisper, “*Prabhu is occupying the stage*” as he would prepare for performance. (Bhabatosh Datta, 1998, pp. 181-82)

In 1855, the collector and revivalist, Ishwarchandra Gupta presented a *kobiyal* named Nityananda in his biographical sketches appearing serially in his newspaper, *Samvad Prabhakar*.<sup>xii</sup> Nityananda became “*prabhu*”, a divinity of sorts, thus mesmerizing his desiring audience in the imposed halo of a performer. In his crafted semblance with the colossal Vaishnav figure, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, he acted likewise by singing skillfully from the love-episodes of Radha-Krishna and maintaining the “sanctity” of a “sacred” space of performance.

The above anecdote from a document, nearly a hundred and sixty years old, leads us into a performance space in the village of Majumdarkandi in Chandpur, Bangladesh. On the eve of offering annual prayers to the Goddess Kali<sup>xiii</sup>, the village of

Majumdarkandi, who are majorly Hindu in population, organized a performance of *Kobigaan*. The performance space, which was an elevated platform, made of dried earth and covered by jute carpets faced the temple of the goddess; the temple dedicated to a fierce version of the deity associated with death and destruction, and having a crematorium adjacent to it. The festivities had significant markers such as, a fairground attracting the populace from adjoining villages, young boys dressing up in whites for an evening recital from the holy Hindu text (the Gita), and of course, *Kobigaan*. The performance began in the afternoon with an invocation known as *daakgaan* sung by the chorus (or *dohaar*). The sandal-wood smeared foreheads of both the performers and audience revealed that it was a Vaishnav village and the topic of debate or verse-dueling would have much to do with related episodes or philosophies. It did, as the audience emerged “trance-stricken”, the women ululated in devotion and the performer guised to become a “prabhu”.

Dance-like movements accompanied the high-scale singing of both the chorus and the central vocalists as the performance began. The invocation involved small foot movements in rhythm with the percussion (*dhol*). Hand gestures were employed at the height of emotional enactments with the *dohaar* breaking into tears and bowing to the audience in gratitude and with both the arms open, flung high signifying the role-playing involved in the process. The *sakhi-samvad* or song-narrations from the love episodes of Radha and Krishna were marked by uses of stereotypical gestures or movements so as to depict a deity playing the flute or his female consort taking cautious, silent steps for a night liaison. The feet movements became prominent with the change in the rhythm of

the percussion that changed from fast to faster, while the hand movements in association with facial expressions occurred as the chorus took over the singing occasionally in between.



The *dohaar*, Nirad Mondal, invoking the deities in the beginning of the performance

Majumdarkandi, Chandpur, Bangladesh,

13.11.2012).

[Photograph by author]

Performances such as these, which might be deemed as belonging to song-theatre genres, subsist on the profuseness of the “uttered word”. The exchanges are mostly impromptu, devised on-the-spot as questions are hurled one after the other. But before such a verbal duel begins, the *kobiyal* announces the role he is going to play.<sup>xiv</sup> For the twelve hours of the continuous performance, he declares that his “real self” retires into anonymity while he wears the garb of the character he is given to play. The audience reveres his “new self” as the “sacredness” of the performance space, a precondition which is now bolstered further by the act. In between stanzas in the songs, male members of the audience walk up to the stage with moistened eyes and hug the performer, while females ululate and hug each other within the audience. Arguments,

stretched and elongated with anecdotal references, often become prose narrations demanding song narrations immediately after. It is here that the performer engages in displaying small movements, gestures of hands and feet in accordance with the role that he plays in order to provide an in-between relief.



The *kobiyal*, Sanjay Sarkar, singing, questioning and answering in his turn

(Majumdarkandi, Chandpur, Bangladesh,

13.11.2012).

[Photograph taken by author]

Performance forms like *Kobigaan*, in Bangladesh, are mostly dependent on the tune rather than prose. These tunes for most of the repertoire are set before and often passed down in a certain master-disciple legacy so that words might be placed conveniently. The repetitiveness or monotony of the tunes brings one to the issue of repetitive dance-like movements within the performance. The dancing performer in *Kobigaan* exhibits two features: He acts dance-like as he plays his role, while he performs short repetitive dance-like movements to set tunes and rhythms. In a sense, then, the scope of his movements is limited, thus holding the performance back from becoming a dance per se in the strictest sense of the term. By midnight, the audience

demand extends to more popular numbers from *fakir* songs<sup>xv</sup> or those popularized by renowned earlier *kobiyals*. The performer switches over, his “real self” returning and with it the dance movements that are apt and appealing to a crowd nearly slumbering or awaiting a decision.

Dance or dance-like movements in the performance depicted so far jostle between being thoroughly crafted and spontaneous. However, the performance itself in its accommodating format makes room for “dance” to be included. It depends on how the performer chooses to accommodate those movements within his repertoire. The following segment describes another *Kobigaan* performance which was a three-hour show at the winter fair (*Poush Mela*) in Shantiniketan, West Bengal.

### **Dancing the Comic, Comically Dancing: At the Winter Fair (*Poush Mela*) in Shantiniketan, West Bengal<sup>xvi</sup>**

*Nityananda had the foremost ability of catering satisfactorily both the gentlemen and the plebeian.* The gentlemen would be catered to by the good songs while the uncouth commoners were satisfied by *kheur* songs... A popular incident is thus narrated—he had already enthralled the audience in a spring-time overnight performance by Sakhi-samvad and Viraha songs. The gentlemen, who were bowled over, were requesting him to sing more Viraha songs. An uncouth commoner, unable to decipher the depth of meaning in these songs, stood up in the middle of the performance and shouted, “Look here Letai!<sup>xvii</sup> If you start another of those seasonal songs of sorrow, we will run away. Sing a *khar*”.<sup>xviii</sup> On

hearing this, Nitai immediately began a *kheur* composition on the lines of an uncomplicated *bhajan* and pacified those irritated souls. (Bhabatosh Datta, 1998, pp. 181-82)

The nineteenth century dossiers on performers (like *kobiyals*) describe little or nothing about the performance proper. A reference, here and there, about some witty repartees between two contesting performers is all that one can rely upon as the archival source. However, song collections, compilations, biographical sketches, as mentioned earlier, have continued to be passed down to posterity. The above anecdote narrating a certain night's performance in a distinct suburb of Calcutta excites one's imagination and curiosity. How did Nityananda pacify the "irritated souls" by his singing of the *kheur*? Was there an added antic involved in the main act of singing? It is here, that one can turn to the winter fair performance of *Kobigaan* visualizing and relating how the performer of yester-years might have "pacified those irritated souls".

The annual winter fair (*Poush Mela*), held in the University town of Shantiniketan attracts the urban city crowd more than anyone else. In its attempt to continue the "tradition" begun by the Poet-Laureate towards the end of the nineteenth century, the fair still "exhibits" handicrafts by local artisans within and outside West Bengal as well as a line of performances termed as "folk". *Kobigaan* was included within this year's (December 2012) schedule of performances huddling with several others like the *Chhau* dance form, *Jatra* or indigenous theatre, singing epic narratives (like *Ramayangaan* or *Manasamanga*) etc. The performances are time-bound, mostly as restrictive as an hour each; the *Kobigaan* performance was allotted a slot of three hours.

Unlike the rural performance discussed in the earlier section, the topic of debate in this performance dealt with a more earthly theme than philosophical: which is better, the one who consumes (*bhogi*) or the one who sacrifices (*tyaagi*)? The audience, consisting of an odd mix of urban, sub-urban and rural members, gathered in front of the open stage; open on all four sides but being treated as that of a proscenium through the audience-performer interaction. Since the structure of this performance had to be curtailed to suit the fair schedule and format, it did away with one or two of the major contents of the form, especially the *sakhi-samvad*. Also, unlike the previous performance, it involved a fair amount of “dancing” by the performers in this performance.

Trivializing the opponent is one of the key weapons that the performers of *Kobigaan* make use of, especially in performances in and around West Bengal. Witty and acerbic remarks, scatological references, short comic digs that can be blatantly erotic at the same time as well as abusive insults are hurled on each other. In analyzing the extent of dance or dance-movements in this performance, thus, one needs to constantly juxtapose it with the “comicality” involved. Certain dance-like acts, like the firm tying of the *uttariya*<sup>xix</sup> on-stage by the performer, around his waist are imitative and borrowed from the biopics (mentioned earlier). How and why do such imitations work would be taken up in the proceeding section giving a comparative discussion of both performances studied in this paper. On the other hand, the actual dancing involves:

- vigorous waist movements
- shaking the upper half of the body
- pelvic thrusts along with hand gestures

There are limited or no rhythmic, synchronized feet movements. Eye contacts are maintained with the audience as well as the orchestra (especially the accompanying percussionist), while the dancing *kobiyal* moves a considerable length and breadth of the stage-space. The dancing is set as a prelude to the singing after the opponent *kobiyal* has finished performing his bit. In all its thrusts and shakes, it implies how it is crafted and fitted into the performance in order to belittle the presence/influence of the opponent (who has just finished performing) and to propel the audience attention to the current segment of performance. (See following photos.)



Hand gestures by *kobiyal*, Rajkumar Haldar as he sings (*Poush Mela* in Shantiniketan, West Bengal, India) Photograph by Arnab Ghoshal. Permission to publish this photograph has been obtained.





Hand gestures by *kobiyal*, Rajkumar Haldar as he sings (*Poush Mela* in Shantiniketan, West Bengal, India) [Photograph by Arnab Ghoshal. Permission to publish this photograph has been obtained.]

Most of the scholarship on *Kobigaan* available so far have either overlooked, or even negated any involvement of dance or dance-like movements in the performances. A potential reason for such inadequate treatment of such performance forms within the ambit of dance and dance-like movements can be accorded to the relation between dance and the “comic” being mingled in the performance repertoire. While the percussionist, standing and playing the *dhol*, occasionally dances along the beats and rhythm he produces, it is not the role that the vocalist is known to play. It is to be considered significantly that these performances involve long prose/verse narrations that are curtailed for a specific performance space. There is a challenge involved in its being time-bound as also in catering to the mixed audience amply.

Dance, and specifically a comic version of it, since the tune that induces such dancing bears a somewhat fair resemblance to certain popular Bollywood tunes that the audience might also be able to recognize and relate to, is then a deliberate inclusion that ensures an audience gaze that “curtailed” performances as these desire for. While these would be shunned one and half centuries earlier on allegations of “vulgarity” (and derogated as *kheur*), it is to be speculated as to whether dance-like bodily gestures were appended to the verbal bawdiness, that accelerated the containment of such performances. As the audience cheered and leered, broke into guffaws, or sat open-mouthed, bemused in their thoughts by the distant “rusticity”, the *kobiyal*, panting after a bout of dance, revealed, “Pardon me, since I couldn’t dance much this afternoon. I had a broken leg and am still weak. But if they were fit, I would surely have danced, and danced even more to keep you glued!”

### **Interrogating Dance Movements:**

#### **The Scope of Reading Non-Dance Performances within Dance Studies**

The relation between oral history as the resource and performance as product engages one in speculating the performing body as a key concern. Jeff Friedman (2005) writes that,

. . . the body never stops moving; there are subtle shifts of posture achieving balance and muscle tone beyond normal awareness of our limb and facial gestures. All embodied aspects...including posture shifts, limb gestures, facial

expressions and full body movements, provide additional and important information...<sup>xx</sup>

(p. 35).

In extending Friedman's argument about the interpretive stance in the study of performance<sup>xxi</sup>, one can engage in a comparative discussion between the performances described analytically above. If both performances are taken, in all their structural similarities and spatio-temporal differences, to signify a kind of "public memorial", dance/dance-like movements in them become emblematic of certain representational practices. The approach to dance or elements of dance in the performances discussed above are different; the difference ensued by virtue of complex communitarian experiences and means of reacting and relating to the performances. The question however remains as to how do they differ?

At this point, the speculation on the nature of difference in both the performances demands Adrienne Kaeppler's investigations on "structured embodiment" in dance and how does it differ pertaining to "occasion of the event when they would be embodied" (2001, p. 50). The term, "dance" according to Kaeppler cannot be ascertained generally to every culture universally. There are cultural, societal, and geographical differences that need to be taken into account in order to understand the phenomena. Kaeppler further advocates:

Structured movement systems can only communicate to those who have "communicative competence" in this cultural form for a specific society or group. Dance can be considered a "cultural artifact"-a cognitive structure-that exists in

dialectical relationship with the social order and that both are understandable. Relationships between dance and the social order are constantly modelling, modifying, and shaping each other over time. Dance has dynamic dimensions that help to move society along the roads of change. (2001, p. 50)

Both “communicative competence” and “cultural artifact” help to understand the audience-performer equation in the performance studied so far within the reference frames of socio-geography and community identities.<sup>xxii</sup> Both performances described so far are *souvenir acts* in their transmission and in the audience’s recognition of the “past” in its memorial existence. Both performances, being performed at special occasions (a fair and a religious festival) address a certain public desire, gaze and recognition through their content and context. For the performer in the village performance in Bangladesh, the movement motif and choreme<sup>xxiii</sup> of dance are repetitive drawing largely from the religious imagery embedded in visual culture and folklore- that of the Vaishnav figure—which remains in the public memory as a template. Dance movements, here, become an appendage to the main act of singing and narrativizing, thus helping to provide the clearer idea of the religious motif involved in the performance and trying to be transmitted. Undoubtedly, the consumption of such performance acts is thus limited to specific Hindu-major spaces within the minority identity of existence. Hence, the reproduction of such motifs helps to identify the contexts of space, the cognitive status of the audience, the social setting and the subjectivity of the performer in the performance itself.

Once a motif has been appropriated and carried forth in memory to be

reproduced and recalled later spontaneously or in pre-set choreography, it produces the “style” or the way of embodying a structured movement. Taking the winter fair performance in West Bengal into account once again, one might argue how the “style” of actual dancing in the performance is both spontaneous and pre-set from the choreographic point-of-view. Dance-like dramatic acts are simulated from the persona of the star performer in the films that are much popular still and circulated heavily, and incorporated in the pre-set choreographic manner for each of the performances. It is to be pointed out here that such an act does not feature in any of the performances in Bangladesh as the cultural-memorial markers are not recognized by the rural audience within their given socio-political and geographical located-ness. On the contrary, the act of “dancing” (the comic) brings to the fore the spontaneity with which the comic motif is disseminated to the motley audience. In a sense, then, coupled with the verbal answering that negates the repartees of the opponent, the act of dancing further forms a prelude and further bolsters the negation of the opponent’s presence, that is, humans assuming the cock-fight<sup>xxiv</sup> essence.

It is important to include at this point a certain aspect of the genders of the performer in a performance of *Kobigaan* and relating it to the difference of dance and dance-like movements highlighted above. *Kobigaan* is inevitably an all-male world with a handful of female performers engaged in the profession. This uneven ratio is also proven by the “absence” of even any names of female performers in the obtained archival resources. A probable reason for exaggerated hip and pelvic movements in *Kobigaan* performances in West Bengal under speculation might have to do with the

limited access of the female performer. Very often movements such as these are associated with dancing women, to remember Bollywood once again, setting them as the visual object of pleasure. A male *kobiyal's* act of exhibiting such dance-like movements however shifts the visual pleasure more towards the border of comic rather than the erotic. It is to be kept in mind how the present male *kobiyals* constantly claim that the genre is “purified” of its “vulgarity”, which if at all “vulgarity” is to be considered was more a hint towards the unacceptability of the erotic than the acceptability of the comic.



*A Manasamangal*  
performance troupe dancing  
with the song narration  
(*Poush Mela* in Shantiniketan,  
West Bengal, India)

Photograph by Arnab  
Ghoshal. Permission to  
publish this photograph has

To go back to the idea of “nascent” movement mentioned in the beginning of this paper, the performances discussed above present a more “restrictive” sense of the term in the village performance while a more “imitative” one in the fair show. However, both the aspects can be located in the performances together as well. Expressivity between

the words and the body movements in a performance of *Kobigaan* often occur through the use of dance-like movements. More than the movements directly associated with the literal or metaphorical translations of the words, it is the rhythmic movement that allows one to be speculative of the question of “nascence”. One can, thus, further probe into the process of “nascence”, in order to find its “growth” into dance movements per se in other related genres. In conclusion, it is crucial to underline again that the performances in analysis as *Kobigaan* within this paper are one among many such performance genres existing in West Bengal/India/Bangladesh in specific and South Asia in general. The challenge is that of reading dance, and dance or dance-like movements within such performances and including them under the broader umbrella of dance studies. In order to achieve that end, the onus lies on not reserving dance movements for the category called “dance” but to extend the idea of movement (in human beings) to performance practices that juxtapose the varied characteristics of music, story-telling, theatre, pantomime and dance. In so doing and in studying the performing subject closely in his/her relational dynamics with his surroundings, background, and “culture”, one is enabled to employ new methodological tools of inquiry namely, historical, ethnographical, literary, and performative. Stretching the possibilities of these methodological devices further, one might be able to include the performer’s own narrative, memoir, or take on his own performance; thus offering insights on how these movements can be studied according the understanding of the performer’s reflexes while performing, his subject position as also the other subjectivities that goes into the understanding of dance movements.

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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> In her discussion on the anthropological perspective of dance, Anya Peterson Royce writes about the need to recognize dance as a subject of anthropological enquiry, as a phenomenon that leads into a study of culture through its analyses. See, Peterson Royce, A. (1977). *The Anthropology of Dance*, pp. 17-37.

<sup>ii</sup> Clifford Geertz, borrows the phrase from Clyde Kluckhohn's definitions of 'culture' in *Mirror for Man* enumerating it as one of the eleven definitions of culture that Kluckhohn comes up with in his text. See, Geertz, C. (1973). 'Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture', in *The Interpretation of Cultures*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid. p. 5.

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<sup>iv</sup> Syed Jamil Ahmed in his section on 'Kavi Gan', in *Acinpakhi Infinity: Indigenous Theatre of Bangladesh* writes of the form: 'A popular form of debating contest, between two professional minstrels (*kaviyal* or *sarkar*) and their troupes, is known as *Kavi Gan*. The *sarkars* create their argument in extempore verse and lyric, with musical and choral accompaniment...It is usually performed during the Puja celebrations and in the *melas* (village fairs). The objective of the performance is to provide entertainment based on popular interest in deliberation on important social and religious issues...' However Jamil Ahmed's positioning of the performance as bereft of any form of dance or dance-like movements is problematized within the scope of this paper. On the hybrid performances like *Kobigaan*, see, Jamil Ahmed, S. (2000). *Acinpakhi Infinity: Indigenous Theatre of Bangladesh*, pp. 315-19.

<sup>v</sup> The fieldwork was conducted in Katwa (district Bardhaman, West Bengal, India), the village of Boro Sangra (district Birbhum, West Bengal, India), the villages of Majumdarkandi and Lamchari (district Chandpur, Bangladesh), the town of Pirojpur (Pirojpur, Bangladesh), at the Hay Festival 2012 in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and in Shantiniketan (district Birbhum, West Bengal, India). These included interviews of the performers and documenting performances at different occasions and venues. The field visits were undertaken in between July and December 2012.

<sup>vi</sup> See, *Bengali Vaishnava*. Retrieved from <http://www.everyculture.com/South-Asia/Bengali-Vaishnava.html>.

<sup>vii</sup> In *The Parlour and the Streets: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Calcutta*, Sumanta Banerjee designates the 'street' as the space of popular (at times, ribald) performances while the parlour remains reserved for elite cultural practices. I propose a third performance space—the courtyard—which is to be replaced with the 'street' proper, since *Kobigaan* performances (unlike a majority of the pantomime acts) did not take place on the streets but inside the house of the patron, before the temple and other such spaces of public gathering.

<sup>viii</sup> Quoted in Bandopadhyay, B. (1972). *Bangladesher Swang Prasange*, p. 5.

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<sup>ix</sup> A number of Bengali films, namely *Anthony Firingi* (Sunil Banerjee, 1967), *Nimontron* (Tarun Majumdar, 1971), *Phuleshwari* (Tarun Majumdar, 1974), *Balika Badhu* (Tarun Majumdar, 1976), *Bhola Moira* (Piyush Ganguly, 1977) etc. were being produced during the 1970s and 80s, sometimes solely on the figure of the poet-singer and sometimes with a situational inclusion of the performance genre within the narrative of the film. *Anthony Firingi* and *Bhola Moira* are films on the lives of the respective *kobiwalas* and provide the scope of being read as biopics since the material for the film narratives and the songs have been largely drawn from the biographies of the performers.

<sup>x</sup> I introduce and use the term ‘souvenir acts’ within this paper not only as a performer’s way of exhibiting dance-like movements in *Kobigaan*, but also to highlight the moment of an act in performance which directly addresses the cultural memory of the audience as they continually remember and refer to the role-model (historical resources like memoirs describing the performer or the ideal of a *kobiyal* presented in the films). The ‘souvenir act’, I argue feeds thereafter into the performance memory for the watching audience who might retain the vestiges of the full singular performance that are constituted of these dance-like movements.

<sup>xi</sup> In explaining the employment of historical and ethnological methods together to enable a cultural study, James Axtell writes: “...ethnohistory is essentially the use of historical and ethnological methods and materials to gain knowledge of the nature and causes of change in a culture defined by ethnological concepts and categories.” For further discussions on ethnohistory as a method of enquiry into cultures, see, Axtell, J. (Winter 1979). “Ethnohistory: An Historian’s Viewpoint”, p. 2.

<sup>xii</sup> *Sambad Prabhakar*, a brainchild of Ishwarchandra Gupta, began as a weekly newspaper on January 28, 1831 under the patronage of Jogendramohan Thakur of Pathuriaghata. After the latter’s death in 1832 it closed down, but Gupta revived it again as a tri-weekly in August 1836. With the Thakurs’ financial help, the *Sambad Prabhakar* became the first Bengali language daily on 14 June 1839. The newspaper began at the critical juncture, the competition on the question of abolition of Sati between the two popular contemporary newspapers—*Sambad Koumudi*, the Brahma Sabha’s mouthpiece run by Raja Rammohan

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Roy and Dharma Sabha's paper *Samachar Chandrika* run by Bhabanicharan Bandopadhyay. Situated between their radical and orthodox agendas, *Sambad Prabhakar* focused on general information. See, Datta B. (1998). *Kavijivani*.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Kobigaan* performances take place mostly during the major festivals of the Bengalis, namely Durga Puja and Kali Puja. The performance described here was organized by an organizing committee on Kali Puja, 13<sup>th</sup> of November, 2012. This was the second year of a *Kobigaan* performance on the eve of this festival in the village.

<sup>xiv</sup> The contest took place on the 13<sup>th</sup> of November, 2012 between the *kobiyal* duo Sadananda Sarkar & Sanjay Halder hailing from the districts of Khulna and Gopalganj in Bangladesh, respectively. While the latter played the role of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, the former took the guise of Balabhadra Bhattacharya, the Mahaprabhu's uncle-in-law. The topic of debate centered on the questions regarding the self of Radha-Krishna, whether love in Vaishnavism employs lust or not and how is reconciliation between Hindus and Muslims possible given their differences.

<sup>xv</sup> A demand was made towards the fag end of the performance by the audience to the *kobiyal* to sing one of the popular numbers ("Milan hobe koto diney" or "In how many days should we be united") from the collection of songs by Fakir Lalon Shah of Kushtia, Bangladesh. For an overview on Lalon Shah, see, [http:// http://lalon.org/](http://lalon.org/).

<sup>xvi</sup> The *Kobigaan* contest took place on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of December, 2012 between Rajkumar Halder and Subhash Chandra Das belonging to the districts of Bardhaman and Birbhum in West Bengal, respectively. Rajkumar Halder fought on the side of one who consumes while Subhash Chandra Das advocated for the sacrificing individual. Both *kobiyals* made prolific use of long narratives and the performance ended with a *milangeeti* (song of union) where both stood together and sang to the end.

<sup>xvii</sup> Ishwarchandra Gupta reproduces the speech of the lower orders, thus the distortion of the name 'Nitai' as 'Letai' as it was pronounced.

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<sup>xviii</sup> A distortion of the word 'kheur'.

<sup>xix</sup> The hanging piece of cloth that decks the front part of the *kobiyal's* body. Refer to the photograph from the *Pouch Mela* performance.

<sup>xx</sup> Friedman extends what the sociologist Erving Goffman states in his text, *Behavior in Public Places*: "the information an individual provides, whether he [sic] sends it or exudes it, may be embodied or disembodied. A frown, a spoken word, or a kick is a message that a sender conveys by means of his own current bodily activity, the transmission occurring only during the time that his body is present to sustain this activity." See, Goffman, E. (1963). *Behaviour in Public Places*. New York: Glencoe Free Press, p. 14.

<sup>xxi</sup> Friedman proposes an 'interpretive role' in reading performances. He arrives at this 'interpretive' (and creative role) through engagements with Johannes Fabian's *Power and Performance* (1990) and Elizabeth Fine's *The Folklore Text* (1984). While Fine argues for a deeper engagement with the semiotic and somatic content within the text, Fabian, in the words of Friedman, proposes travelling "from text to performance and back again, recycling through each interpretive format to gain greater depths of understanding for complex life- worlds." See, Friedman, J. 'Muscle Memory': Performing Oral History. *Oral History*, 33(2), 36-37.

<sup>xxii</sup> The Partition of Bengal in 1947 has still continued to be a 'lived reality' among inhabitants across borders, with Hindu and Muslim majorities in West Bengal and Bangladesh respectively. The Partition witnessed a vigorous geographical re-location of performers as well as re-structuring of performance forms. The Bangladesh War of Liberation and the struggle for "Bengali" identity through the Language Movement further added to the politics of identity which is crucial to understanding a performance in practice. See, Sarkar, S. (2011). *Kobigaan: Itihaas O Rupantar*. While in Bangladesh a "Hindu" performance form like *Kobigaan* has also been appropriated by Muslim performers (known as *boyati*) being performed in rural villages, international festivals in the capital of Dhaka, or media like Channel 9, performances in West Bengal reveal more "secular" and "Leftist" elemental changes within the form.

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These are some of the issues that will be detailed in my PhD project though they demand mention within the scope of this paper.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Adrienne Kaeppler defines a choreme as “a culturally grammatical choreographic unit made up of a constellation of motifs that occur simultaneously and chronologically...” (2001, p. 52).

<sup>xxiv</sup> The word ‘cock-fight’ is used here in order to analogically underline the spirit of fighting embedded in a Kobigaan performance and is not set in the same context as Clifford Geertz uses it in his book, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (1973).