Title of the article: Decontextualised Bodies in the Imaginary Worlds: Case Study of Kathak Dance in Lithuania

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Abstract

Nowadays, globalised world can be defined as the locale of multiple decontextualised bodies, moving within blurred borders, various embodied knowledge systems, and worldviews, making us "eternal migrants" shaped and carved by different spaces. From the perspective of these fractal / collage identities, this article investigates the multiple practises of neoclassical North Indian Kathak dance in India and around the globe through the example of my own experience as a Lithuanian Kathak dancer. As a researcher and practitioner, constantly moving between India and Lithuania and continuing practice and teaching in a dance form far from its cultural context, I am using multiple positionalities in this research. The questions of tradition, authenticity, transformation clearly stand out while looking into the different variations of evolvement of the form, being far from natural and unproblematic. Thus, the article delves into "ethnographic present" (Zarrilli, 1998: 48) of Kathak practice in this space and asks questions, highlighting certain issues of historiography, "socio-artistic organization" (Neuman, 1990) and changes in the dance tradition:

- How does Kathak tradition evolves in different contexts in India and around the globe, influenced by different circumstances and agencies, despite "dominant narrative" (Chakravorty, 2008, Walker, 2014)?
- How do the practitioners negotiate the relationship between traditional and contemporary?
- What are the main challenges of navigating personal artistic expression in the web of power dynamics, hierarchised institutional structures, mytho-historical contexts?
- How does the identity – or rather multiple identities - impact performance, pedagogy, and aesthetics?
- How do the dancers, even those outside the cultural context, "reappropriate" the tradition and create artistic reality with the "new meaning" (Rice, 1996: 117)?

Keywords: neoclassical Kathak dance, decontextualised bodies, multiple / fractal identities, tradition, transformation, multiple research positionalities.

Biography

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Introduction

Kathak[1] is a neoclassical Indian dance styles currently practiced in India and beyond. The dance style has developed from performing traditions of northern and central India. Being part of syncretic north-central Indian cultural environment, this dance style could not avoid different historical, social, political influences. Eventually, it developed as an extremely versatile, syncretic practice, revealing a mosaic of worldviews, identities, ethnicities, and belongings.

The classical[2] form of the dance was revived, institutionalized, nationalized, "purified" and "sanitized" (Morcom, 2013: 112) along with the other music and dance forms in the processes of reforms and freedom movement, while searching for authenticity and national identity towards the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century[3].

Nowadays, modern India is designated by terms as 'fast development,' 'globalisation,' 'mass media dissemination,' and 'spread of consumerism culture'[4]. Undoubtedly, such changes bring many influences on the art forms and their surroundings. Kathak is not an exception. Along with prominent changes in systems of patronage, audiences, performing spaces, traditional practises of nurturing, preserving, and transmitting knowledge, there has been many explicit shifts in dance vocabulary, such as technique, aesthetics of movement, literary content. These changes are also accompanied by challenges and tensions arising between past and contemporaneity, dominant discourses and artistic visions, tradition, and transformations. Further on, these challenges are even more complicated by one's individual position as a dancer / practitioner of Indian embodied traditions outside of India, in diaspora, either of Indian / South Asian origin or, even more complicated, when they are not. The ongoing change, evolution in embodied practice, influenced by volatile and ever-shifting environment and individual creative reality, are negotiated by ongoing evaluation processes, guided by patron / institution and audience that are constantly framing the art forms in between the dichotomies of classical or not, authentic or not, historical or not, timeless or not, which is in itself a very slippery terrain. The criterion for the evaluation is nothing, but the proportion of permanent and variable constituents of the artistic tradition. In other words, the examination always "results in the discussions of "what must be fixed"

[1] The etymology of the name comes from Sanskrit word *kathā*, meaning 'story,' 'narrative.'

[2] The use of the term *classical* is controversial in the context of Indian dance traditions. In the treatise on performing arts *Nāṭyaśāstra* (5th century BCE – 5th century CE), we can find terms *desi* and *mārgī,* which can be considered having approximate meaning of *folk* and *classical.* In addition, the term *śāstrīy* can be used, meaning *related to valid treatises on the performing arts*. It is important to note, that extensive use of these terms is problematic and conditioned by certain cultural politics, as is the claimed artificial connections of the reinvented dance styles with the Nāṭyaśāstra.

[3] An extensive research on the topic is available from the perspective of different traditions: dance studies- Urmimala Sarkar Munsi (2024); music – Janaki Bhakle (2005), Lalita du Perron (2014), James Kippen (1988); Kathak – Pallabi Chakravorty (2008), Margaret Walker (2014), Katarina Skiba (2017); Bharatanatyam – Janet O'Shea (2010), Avanti Medhuri (2009, 2018, 2020), Uttar Asha Coorlawala (2010), Davesh Soneji (2012); Odissi – Alessandra B. Lopez y Royo (2007, 2010), Anurima Banerji (2019); modern, contemporary dance and different regional embodied practices and Bollywood - Urmimala Sarkar Munsi (2024), Chakravorty (2010), etc.

[4] Appadurai A., Breckenridge C.A. Public Modernity in India // Consuming Modernity. Public Culture in a South Asian World. - Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1995. - p. 2,6,7.

versus "what can be changed", and "what has to remain the same as earlier" versus "what kind of innovations" could be made without violating the very "nature" of given art form (Ryzhakova, 2016: 100), that are by default biased and influenced by national cultural policies. In Kathak, as in any other art, the dance technique, the aesthetics of movement and proper visual representation of suitable content are the main indicators of value and triggers of polemics.

Nevertheless, while the friction between these binary spaces in art is constant, some artists can transcend the limits and deconstruct the very essence of this opposition. Borrowing some thoughts from Timothy Rice's Towards a Mediation of Field Methods and Field Experience in Ethnomusicology, we can explain this process:

> Rather than there being insider and outsider ways of knowing, all who place themselves "in front of" a tradition use the hermeneutic arc to move from pre-understanding to explanation to new understandings. (……) All individuals operating within tradition continually reappropriate their cultural practices, give them new meanings, and in that process create a continually evolving sense of self, of identity, of community, and of "being in the world." (1996: 117)

The object of the article is - the Kathak dance scenario in Lithuania. It places Kathak practice far from its cultural environment. Yet, in an ongoing dialogue with Kathak scene in India and diasporic locations, it looks closely into performing communities, their activities, pedagogies and self-representations in the overall dance picture. It aims to highlight the challenges by investigating the ethnographic reality of doing Kathak and maps it in the global Kathak dance ecology.

Drawing on conversations with artists and other members of "socio-artistic organization" of Kathak, performance observation and analysis, as well as ethnographic insights, the study incorporates material from fieldwork conducted between 2017 and 2020 in northern and central India, alongside with my own experience as a Kathak practitioner in Delhi (2003–2010). Additionally, it reflects on diasporic practices through ongoing training, travelling between India and other locations, as well as online research. Most importantly, the article contemplates on my own experience of practice and teaching in Lithuania. It is essential to acknowledge, that being both a practitioner and a researcher, and of an insider and an outsider, I embrace the perspective of multiple research positionality.

Mythologised history: looking for sacred origins of Kathak

The result of processes in the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, when cultural politics used dance and other cultural practises as tools, defining authentic Indianness and constructing history backwards led to a continuous but stagnant scenario of dance in India with marked by rigid borderlines and a very limited space for the creative innovations, especially in the neoclassical dance field.

Paying deserved attention towards neglected embodied practises and marginalised dancing

communities, Urmimala Sarkar Munsi's well-timed monograph Mapping Critical Dance Studies in India deals with hierarchisation of the system with its uncounted dispossessions as "multiple canonisations within the regional dance scenario that were facilitated by assimilations and appropriations of dance practices in the post-independence era, which robbed a large number of regional hereditary communities of their rights to claim their place in the Indian cultural scape as dancers" (2024: 213). The shadows of the past spread through time and space, further strengthening the exclusions, marginalisations and dispossessions among the practitioners of various dance forms. The dancers of neo-classical styles through their "hyper-aestheticized theatricality" carry the burden of responsibilities to represent authentic, unchangeable, pan-Indian, elite cultural abstraction and "a deeply conservative art ecology" (ibid :217, 52) in their bodies. The practitioners from the other side of the division, with their pasts and presents, would always appear as the hierarchised "others," unworthy of the space in the world of dance. In Dancing Odissi: Paratopic Performances of Gender and State, Anurima Banerji speaks about history of Odissi dance and different regional practises. She notes that these practice communities "have their own histories and refuse homogenization, but these different streams intermingle in the contemporary dancing body" and in this way "contest dominant narratives in which Odissi is presented as a discrete and hermetically sealed form, almost uninterrupted in its travels from Odra-Magadhi to Odissi", further negotiating "privileged place of Mahari Naach in Odissi's history", and seeking" to explore its imbrications and interplays with traditions established outside the temple" (2019: 17).

In Kathak, the dominant historical narrative, written on the pages of uncountable books — from the informational booklets to beautifully printed coffee-table books, told and retold by practitioners and teachers — place the origins of centuries-old Kathak tradition in the Hindu temples. The other turn in history sees Kathak in the Rajput and Mughal courts, from where hereditary male performers brought it to modern institutions and proscenium in the form of three main stylistic variations, later the defined stylistic schools – gharanas[5]. However, the evidence to prove direct connections of contemporary Kathak practice either with the dance illustrated in the classical Sanskrit texts or the performances in the medieval courts is not sufficient, and the history narrated this way carries a comparatively more mythological character. Opposed to this dominant narrative, there are critical observations which consider contemporary Kathak as an amalgamation and re-appropriation of a few North Central Indian dance practices which took place in the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century when important historical, political, economic, and socio-cultural changes occurred in India[6]. The segments of Hindu and Islamic, rural and courtly performing traditions were homogenised and standardised in the process of so

[5] The word *gharānā* comes from Hindi *ghar*, meaning home, lit. "of the house," and depicts "lineage' or "stylistic school."

[6] The writings of Margaret Walker, Pallabi Chakravorty, among others, are important to this discussion.

called Kathak revival. One of the influential strands to contribute to reinvention of Kathak dance was the traditional communities of male storytellers, musicians, and bards, traveling from villages to the courts, from markets to temple grounds performing on various occasions of religious festivals, rituals, and social gatherings. The other important strand comes from the practices of hereditary communities of female singers and dancers. Throughout the Mughal rule in courts of the northern and central regions of India, Kathak was mainly performed by hereditary women dancers, but accompanied and taught by guru or ustād, who were male teachers. The musical profession in that context was mainly occupied by Muslim hereditary performers. In British Raj, dance was degraded almost to the point of vanishing under the influence of Victorian anti-nautch policies, when dancers — devadāsī in the south and tawaīf in the north — were deprived of their traditional occupation as performers, marginalised and treated as simple prostitutes. The British ideas and policies were picked up and continued by reformists and freedom fighters. Along with the freedom movement, and later while building a new independent nation, Kathak and other performative traditions became an important field for searching for national identity, authenticity, and a great lost, ancient culture (Walker, 2014; Chakravorty, 2008; Bakhle, 2005). Under these ideological influences, some important gender, caste, and religious community shifts happened in the field of the performing arts. Alongside with the other dance and music traditions, Kathak was revived, institutionalized, and nationalized. It has been taken through the process of "Sanskritization." I would like to quote Sarkar Munsi at length:

> There are a number of examples of SANSKRITIZATION of dance forms before and after Indian independence, in an effort to 'save' dance forms from disrepute, or extinction, to move them from their small world of 'little tradition' to the urban 'great tradition', and to give a new legitimacy for survival by identifying and projecting their links with the historical past by linking the movement patterns to the temple sculptures. […] Sanskritization in the context of dance also means establishing a strong link with the predominantly Hindu historical past. (2010: 204–205)

Sanskritisation went hand in hand with purification, which, as Sarkar Munsi observes,

> […] has been sanctioned and backed by the cultural bureaucracy and brought into practise by the urban high caste/class elite practitioners, whose principle agenda was to create and establish forms which projected an 'acceptable' image of clean, aesthetically appealing body, which needed its distance in history and in actual projection from the impure nautch or the dance for private patrons that it came to be associated with in the nineteenth century. (Sarkar Munsi, 2010: 205)

From the field notes

I remember my initial years of learning the dance in Delhi. With everyday practise the beautiful tale of an eternal dance, practised by gods

themselves, ancient traditions, documented on the temple walls, 5000 years old treatises, which introduced the same body language and aesthetics, was told again and again without any possibility of critical thought or questioning. So, along with the technique, the dominant narrative was inscribed in the body and the kind of the embodied "fantasy" [7] was created. This fantasy, while being very individual, was kind of collective experience, supported by dance fraternity – cultural bureaucracy, dancers, academics, and teachers, nourished by ritualised behaviour in the class, space décor in the performance stages, "critical" reviews of the events. However, the fantasy started to fade away upon facing different situations from the ethnographic present, where I could observe certain disruptions of this carefully constructed "reality." Kathak dance field appeared to be hierarchized, competitive, politicized at times. These reflections stood as a sharp contrast towards the "imaginary" Kathak world.

Ethnographic reality in Lithuania

Lithuania is a very small country in the northern eastern part of Europe, on the coast of the Baltic Sea. It has scarce population in general, and a sparse South Asian diasporic community, mostly represented by students and corporate workers. Understanding of India and South Asian region is stereotypical, romanticised, limited to appreciation of Indian food, knowing Bollywood films by some, Bhangra dance through fitness craze by others, as well as observing ISKCON[8] devotees on the streets, mainly on Fridays. Indian diplomatic mission in Vilnius was established only in March 2023. The embassy is mostly interested in economic relations. In the cultural field, the mission is intensively propagating International Yoga Day and hyper-emphasising Lithuanian language connection to Sanskrit and mythological similarities of Hinduism and the old Baltic beliefs system.

The Indian dance scene is represented by only a handful of practitioners[9]. There are two institutions: Natya Devi Dance Theatre working with Kathak and Odissi styles founded in 2010 by me, and Rajyashree Ramesh Dance Academy – the Lithuanian branch of Rajyashree Ramesh Academy for Performing Arts, founded by Berlin based Bharatanatyam dancer from Bengaluru – Rajyashree Ramesh.

With the very recent establishment of the Indian Embassy, which presumably and hopefully will pay more attention to the various embodied cultural forms and the small Indian / South Asian diaspora to practice and promote the arts, the scenario of Indian dance is in quite a poor state of

[7] From the conversation with Malasia born, Belgium based contemporary, bharatanatyam, odissi and kathak dancer Sooraj Subramaniam after the collaborative dance project in Vilnius, Lithuania – "Leela-in search of Divine," on 27th June 2024. The word "fantasy" was his way of defining the seemingly natural space of neoclassical Indian dances, created by very strategically engineered national project in the past. The term can correctly express the discrepancy between the constructed and the real. It also diverts us towards the theoretical concepts of "imaginary," "fantasy" as a "social practice" in the "global cultural flows," developed by anthropologist Arjun Appadurai.

[8] International Society for Krishna Consciousness.

[9] During my Hindi language studies in Kendriya Hindi Sansthan (Central Institute of Hindi) in Agra in 1997 and 2000, I have had a brief introduction to the Indian dance world and I started teaching some dance upon coming back to Lithuania in 2001. It was basically the first occurrence of Indian dance here.

development and takes up only a very niche space even after working in the field, educating, teaching, organising events for more than 20 years. On the public level, it is little known amongst general population, and even nowadays the most usual question I get after introducing myself as an Indian dancer is, "Oh really, do you practice belly dance?", or sometimes even, "so you must be the devotee of ISKCON?". These questions illustrate the prevalence of stereotypical knowledge about the region. The second question also indicates a prevailing perception of Indian arts which is intricately connected to the religious sphere, which is again the result of the processes and India's pre- / post-independence policies. At the institutional level, the situation is no better. In Lithuanian dance ecology, any Indian dance form comes under the category of "ethnic," "characteristic" and "amateur." This proves to be problematic while acquiring funding, as academic (ballet), folk (national) or contemporary categories are always prioritised, turning the possibilities to secure any funding for Indian dance almost to zero.

The ritualised space of traditional knowledge transmission[10]

So, we can see that in Kathak a romanticized and mystified approach was used to rewrite dance history and aesthetics in accordance with a nationalist agenda. This resulted in highlighting certain concepts, such as connection to temple ritual and spirituality, authenticity, and ancient origins of dance. Guru-śiṣya paramparā[11] also found importance as an assurance of the "unbroken continuity of the system of oral transmission which was systematized with mathematical precision" (Vatsyayan 1982: 2). Along with the other concepts, the phenomenon of traditional knowledge transmission was fitted into a certain ideologically defined framework without considering problematic issues and the contemporary situation. The lack of evidence and the gaps in the discourse were filled with speculative and abstract presumptions, thus positioning history of guru-śiṣya paramparā on the fringes of mythology.

In the beginning of the 20th century, several educational institutions were established and supported by the state and private initiatives. The model used was, of course, borrowed from the Western (British) education system (Sangeet Natak Academy, Kathak Kendra New Delhi, Gandharva Mahavidyalaya New Delhi, Bhatkhande Music Institute Deemed University, Lucknow, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, etc.). The spaces of newly built music and dance institutional bodies were filled with predominantly male gurus / ustāds and upper- or middle class-educated śiṣyas (predominantly women), motivated reformers, and dance visionaries. It is in these institutions, where concepts of tradition and authenticity as well as the "upholding of codes of conduct (both gender specific and otherwise)" has been carried forward through the

[10] The sections of this chapter appeared previously in my article ""Who Is Your Guru?" Traditional Knowledge Transmission and Changing Institutional Setting in Kathak Dance Education" in 2020.

[11] *Guru*—"teacher," "guide," "spiritual preceptor," *śiṣya*—"student," *paramparā*—"lineage" in Sanskrit.

authority of the teacher / master, who is the embodiment of parampara and the "unquestioned submission" to the guru from generation to generation (Sarkar Munsi, 2010: 173).

Throughout the time of my own Kathak dance studies and practice in India, I always felt that unbreakable connection with the name of my guru, while being asked the same question repeatedly: "Who is your guru? ", echoing what Stacey Prickett rightly puts it in her essay (2007). The answer to the inevitable question of 'Who is your guru?' continues to shape dancer's identity, their genealogical heritage locating them in relation to dominant power structures of the stylistic schools, the gharana-s (Kathak) or bani-s (Bharatanatyam)" (Prickett, 2007: 25). The same is stated by Daniel M. Neuman in his very detailed study on North Indian musical tradition: "Whether a musician is considered great, good, or even mediocre, he will (in the absence of anyone else) establish - so to speak - his credentials as a musician on the basis of whom he has studied with and whom he is related to" (1990: 44).

It would now be the right time to mention the important concept explained in detail by Neuman – "socio-artistic organization" of performing communities. Guru-śiṣya paramparā, along with the factors of everyday practice and stylistic variations, form the basis of this organization, directly influencing the image and performance of its members. Through the vigorous dedicated practice and commitment to the authority of the guru, who is the embodiment of a certain stylistic school, the notions of continuity, lineage, tradition, authenticity, and preservation of intangible aspects of culture are highlighted. Thus, the identity of performer is established. It correlates with a particular community and is expressed explicitly in patterns of hierarchy, social status, and performative aspects. The construction of this certain identity is achieved through mind and body discipline. As observed by Pallavi Chakravorty in Kathak field:

> [...] dances were based on a model of durable and reproducible practise (inculcated through terms such as guru, riyaz, parampara), that created a sense of place or a habitus. (2010: 169–170)

The concept of "habitus" used in this citation is developed by Pierre Bourdieu and can shed some light on the importance of knowledge transmission in the performer's identity construction and its place in the social system. "Habitus" is a very fluid term, depicting the web of "dispositions," which acts as the "organising action" and "designates a way of being, a habitual state (especially of the body) and, in particular, a predisposition, tendency, propensity or inclination" (cited in Grenfell, 2008: 51). Habitus is both a structured and structuring system: structured by a person's upbringing and educational experiences and the structuring of such factors as practices, beliefs, perceptions, and feelings. It always acts in a relationship with the "field" and "capital." Used in the field of performing practices in India, particularly with respect to traditional knowledge transmission, the tools developed by Bourdieu depict the following picture. Particular practice, stated identity, or "way of being" results from performers' dispositions acquired through the guru-śiṣya

paramparā (habitus) and performers' position in the performing field (capital, both economic and cultural) in the current state of the socio-artistic organization or context of performing community (field). Or, in other words, through conditioning (the field structures the habitus) and cognitive construction or knowledge (habitus constitutes meaning to the field), there is an ongoing relationship between structures, the "active process of making history, but not under conditions entirely of our own making" (Grenfell, 2008: 52). In this way, the habitus here stands for ways of performance, feeling, thinking, and being in particular ways in the spaces of the everyday practice, stage performances, and social activities of the performer. It also captures the way the performer carries the history or lineage / tradition into the present circumstances and makes certain choices.

The concepts developed by Bourdieu serve as tools to understanding how the guru-śiṣya paramparā with its notion of authority and authenticity actively influences the performance practices and shapes the relationship between the performer's identity and the socio-artistic organization. This further leads us to ground the traditional knowledge transmission practices in the realm of theoretical discourse, developed by another influential thinker—Michel Foucault. One of Foucault's most important ideas is the relationship between knowledge and power. Guru-śiṣya paramparā—an educational institution—through the authority of the guru and notions of tradition and authenticity, constantly exercises power. For Foucault, the main arena of power is the body. Dance and other performative traditions are inseparable from the body as the main medium of performance, so the connection between knowledge and power revealed through the body becomes very explicit in the dance knowledge transmission scenario. The discipline of the body and, through the body, the discipline of the mind, becomes a method of control. It keeps the performer vulnerable and entangled in a web of anxiety and responsibility. It draws the borders of aesthetic, social and bodily norms and places the subject in a particular position in the hierarchical system or socio-artistic organization of the performative community. We must also acknowledge the concept of discipline as an idea that exists at the base of the teaching / learning process, whereby the automatic subjugation of the learner is ensured through a process of unseen and unquestioned submission, that is the abstract idea of knowledge, established as something the guru personifies.

In this discussion it is important to mention a dance teaching situation of the Indian diaspora and some adaptations of this model by practitioners and educators in the West. With the growing number of Indians living in such places as Europe, USA, and Canada, socio-cultural practices take up significant space in the life of Indian communities abroad. Notions of national sentiment, identity shaping, tradition, purity, and authenticity, interweaved into the tissue of performing arts from the time of independence, become crucially important for the diasporic community in their attempts to connect to their Indianness. As Sarkar Munsi observes:

> The museumization of certain dance forms from India manifests in many ways in the diaspora. Besides satisfying Indian diaspora parents that they are injecting a curated culture capsule into their second or third generation 'Indian' offspring, through a miniscule module of time-warp that allows an exposure to the culture of the roots, such trainings enable the offspring to create a presentable identity within their educational institutions and community functions. There is little idea, almost no interest, and in many cases no awareness regarding the existence of 'other' dances from India, or what a subject like the critical regarding dance studies might mean in the context of an embodied practice. (2024: 8)

This influences the existence of a considerable number of dance and teaching institutions in the diaspora. Some of them are established by diplomatic missions of India, but more are private initiatives. And all of them incorporate guru-śiṣya paramparā as the main model of teaching with the complete set of the above-mentioned features and patterns, emphasizing rituals, hierarchy, and authority even more, dedicated to the "preservation" and "promotion" of Indian culture. Through dance training, the dancers become enculturated in a certain way, and their bodies become inscribed with socio-cultural codes and behavioural patterns which suit the demands of the community. So again, previously mentioned "fantasy" appears, supported by dominant narrative, community need, and teaching methods. However, teachers cannot stay completely encapsulated in their own cultural practices and become influenced by the dance educational environment, new trends in pedagogy, and creative communication with other bodily disciplines as well as other dance forms, whether classical, traditional, or contemporary. This unquestionably extends the perspectives of Indian dance knowledge transmission in the diaspora (of course, it is necessary to mention the existence of the same tendencies in India, explicit in the dance creations and pedagogy of such Kathak dancers as Aditi Mangaldas, Kumudini Lakhia, Sanjukta Sinha, Shovana Narayan, to name a few). On the other hand, cultural interactions give fertile ground for the birth of initiatives in the West, influenced by guru-śiṣya paramparā. Theatre directors and educators Phillip Zarrilli and Jerzy Grotowski, to name a couple, borrowed many features and techniques from traditional Indian education and incorporated them into the actors' and dancers' training process. A lot of research has been done in the field of dance and music education, and there are many attempts to apply holistic, oral, and contextual notions of the guru-śiṣya relationship into schools, universities, and academies (see Sarrazin and Morelli, 2016; Schippers, 2007; Dalidowicz, 2015).

From the field notes

A usual morning class in Kathak Kendra[12] – one of the biggest state supported Kathak institutes

[12] Originally the department of Shree Ram Bhāratya Kalā Kendra, taken by the government in 1964. SBKK was founded as Jhankar Music Circle in 1947 by Mrs. Sumitra Charat Ram and acquired its recent name in 1976. A particularly important institution, which directly influenced the revival of Kathak dance and Hindustani music.

in India. A lot of students of a different age are gathered here; some of them are taking their first steps into the long and thorny path of Kathak dance practice, while others are already advanced, almost independent dancers. Although the classes have already started and the atmosphere is charged with eagerness and anticipation, the teacher is still not present. For the teacher being at least 15 minutes late is the gesture of importance and greatness. Finally, when the guru appears, all the students hurry to greet him by touching the feet of the teacher. After blessing all the students one by one, the teacher slowly proceeds to the far corner of the classroom, where the altar for the gods is placed. Multiple portraits of late senior gurus are also here. A short prayer is sung, and blessings of great masters are received, and students follow the teacher in prayer. After this small ritual, all students return to their places. The teacher settles down near the musicians. One of his senior disciples hands him a bowl of sprouted chickpeas for reinforcement. It is his honourable daily duty and gesture of dedication for the guru. The teacher goes on by blessing each student's ankle-bells - ghuṅghrū. Musicians do the same thing, while students approach and touch the instruments. After this ‘brief ‘welcome, the actual lesson begins. Not all the students get to dance immediately. The practise is done batch by batch according to the level of dancers, while guru shows, observes, and sometimes comments. The rest of the students also watch the ones dancing and some, the most junior ones, get only to observe and do only very basics in between.

While musicians start playing one of the rhythmic cycles, the most used 16 beat cycle - tīntāl, and the rhythm, initially slow, gradually accelerates, I think over and reflect on the beginning of the class, that I just saw. I have more questions. The initial part of the lesson was not like a regular lecture or a practice session in the dance educational environment, which I am familiar with. It was more like a ritualized act, transferring the participants into some ritualistic reality, a mytho-religious space for the class. The teacher looked more like an elder family member or a friend, but highly respected, almost of a divine status. Was what I had just observed a beginning of a usual lesson? Is the behaviour of the teacher and students a necessary legacy of the traditional system of knowledge transmission - guru-śiṣya parampara? Has the role and status of the teacher and the place of a disciple transformed in the shifting environment - social, economic, cultural and, most importantly, educational?

There was another incident during my fieldwork in New Delhi in 2018, which raised these questions even more vividly. A two-day Kathak dance festival, named “Duet Kathak Dance Festival 2018" was organised in Triveni Auditorium. I went to the event with the certain confidence of knowing what 'duet' meant in dance, and I was surprised to find out a totally different perception of the duet form. Five of the six performances that evening did not present anything I would consider to be duet, except a few minutes of dancing together here and there. Instead, these performing couples were bound together by teacher-disciple - guru-śiṣya -

relationship and they performed their compositions holding on to strict hierarchy of "who is who". It was interesting to observe how cultural peculiarities implicitly show up in unexpected situations.

My Kathak teaching experience in Lithuania

My own experience of learning dance in India was and still is positive. I have been incredibly fortunate to meet and become acquainted with very resolute and knowledgeable teachers, sharing, caring, and loving with motivation and vision. It was quite challenging, especially at the beginning of the learning process, to understand and commit myself to a tradition requiring so much dedication and commitment. And I am sure that many dancers meet the same challenges. But in its ideal form, this method has a prominent place in dance training, as it is holistic, contextual, oral, and intuitive, and able to reach the deepest layers of traditional performance knowledge, and to pass it to the generations to come. If not cherished and preserved, it may vanish and take some essential and unique features of embodied practices away. Nevertheless, without reflection and in its corrupted form, the system may expose questionable values created by hidden hierarchical structures and power relations, identity, and body politics, religious and socio-cultural dogmas, and economic factors. All these elements construct a cage of hegemony and stagnation of tradition, unquestionability, and authority that many dancers in India find themselves locked in, unable to be flexible, to be able to reflect and question, to create their own language of expression.

I started teaching Kathak as well as Odissi upon returning to Lithuania after almost 10 years of learning and practising dance in India. It was not easy for me to start just because Kathak was so far from its cultural context, endangered to easily become extremely exoticised and stereotyped. The fantasy, which surrounded me in India totally blurred, especially after starting my PhD research on the subject and teaching the course on performative traditions in South Asia in the Institute of Asian and Transcultural Studies, at Vilnius University. This made my dancing body totally decontextualised both in India and at home. I was left with only two possible options: to support the fantasy, holding on hyper-aestheticised, ritualised and mythologised notions of Kathak dance, or to let the fantasy disappear, internalising the tradition and giving it the chance to flow and transform. It was my conscious decision to not use empty terminologies, sham and fictive rituals in the teaching process, or in other words, to not sell mysticised, spiritualised, exoticized, packaged dance practise from the temples, along with promises of ancient wisdom and salvation. And, of course, this decision did not add a considerable number of students to the classes, because, it seems, this is exactly what people are looking for when they start practising embodied traditions from “mystical East.”

As Indian dance is not supported here by any institution, it was and continues to be challenging to promote it. This requires taking part in different events, city gatherings, festivals, etc. and initially attracts a lot of people, who usually disappear after realising how much time, vigorous body preparation

this practice requires, without offering the proper "socio-artistic organization" or context: no institutions to continue further learning and practice, no opportunities of jobs in the dance field, no community, even no competition. So, the learners and practitioners are left by themselves: to bring the community together, to organise events and festivals, to facilitate opportunities, to initiate creative projects, making separation, exoticisation and "otherness" fade and finding the place for Kathak tradition in Lithuanian dance ecology.

during the Festival of Indian Dance and Music - SurSadhana. The project revealed various stages of women's lives and explored problems in women's social circumstances. The project was based on different expressions of Indian traditional dance and music, but it also included the works of

. Fig 1. Krisitina L. Dolinina, in Stage project LauMes. Photo from the author's archive. Photo credit: Julia Kanstovic

Conclusion

As a concluding discussion, I would like to share my experience of conceptualising and creating the stage project LauMes in 2019[13]. It was presented

[13] In Lithuanian *laumė* means *witch*, *enchantress*. In the name of the project *laumes* this word is combined with the pronoun *mes*, meaning *we*. That denotes every feminine being a witch.

Fig.2. Stage project LauMes. Photo from the author's archive. Photo credit: @andru_tu.

contemporary Lithuanian composer Giedrė Pauliukevičiūtė, as well as elements of contemporary dance, which actualised and supported the issues discussed in the project.

LauMes received mixed reviews. Some viewers positively assessed the fact that the project, using different means of expression, revealed the issues of gender, exploitation, and aggression that are relevant in the modern world. Others were disappointed, because they expected to see just a colourful, joyful, exotic, and mystic performance of Indian dance and music traditions. These opinions reveal, on the one hand – the readiness by some to appreciate artistic vision and modes of expression which cross predefined borders of the perception of traditional art forms, and, on the other hand – the expectations of very defined, unchangeable, hyper-aestheticised performance, conforming to the element of mysticism tied to Indian arts. To cater to these different needs and expectations of spectators, there are different practitioners – ones, holding on to the fantasy and living in the imaginary world of ancient dance from the temples, and the others – looking for the ways to internalise and transform the tradition, understand and reflect on their own trained and decontextualised dancing bodies, and thus deepen the connections and reflections of the constantly changing world.

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