Bharatanatyam in Lucknow:

The Role of Cultural Enterprise, Mobile Telephony, and SNS Networks in Reframing a *Parampara*

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Abstract

This paper explores the growth of Bharatanatyam in Lucknow in the contemporary moment and how the art form uses Social Networking Service/Site (SNS) to recreate 'tradition' in the modern market. The paper identifies three cis-male Bharatanatyam dancers who are involved in recreating this tradition and bases the research on open-ended interviews conducted with them and with some of their students. The paper attempts to trace a very brief history of Bharatanatyam in Lucknow and also tries to chart the route it took post liberalisation. However, it is primarily concerned with how the use of SNS technologies have a) altered the aesthetics of performance, b) altered the class and gender-based identities of the dancers, and c) aided in cementing the tradition of Bharatanatyam within the framework of a *guru-shishya parampara*[1].

Key words: Bharatanatyam, Lucknow, Facebook, Cultural Enterprise, Dancer, Identity

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[1] Please do note that this paper has been written in the absence of any previous primary data available on the number of dance classes, a history of Bharatanatyam in Lucknow, or any related writings on the same. In a sense, it is also the attempt of a dancer herself to understand how a professional Bharatanatyam dancer negotiates his/her art, socio-economic context, and digital engagements today in Lucknow - a city that was never a stronghold of Bharatanatyam. It hopes to provide a sense of some past engagement between the dancer and technologies that were available to them then, and how that relationship today enables their lives as artists.

"Stage ke baad, real life me vaapas aa jaana chahiye, Facebook pe nahi le jaana chahiye[2]," remarks Naved, a Bharatanatyam dancer from Lucknow. He says this in reference to 'emasculated' dancers who, in his opinion, have permanently 'feminised' their bodies through dance. He believes that the subsequent emasculation is also at times reflected in the selfies of the dancers on Facebook. He contends that such representations can slander the image of other, more *masculine* dancers. This paper attempts to understand how the dancers build their dance livelihoods (which the paper attempts to understand by referring to them as cultural enterprises), and their identity as Bharatanatyam dancers under the influence of digital interfaces, particularly Facebook.

Facebook is a Social Networking Service/Site (SNS). Critic Zenyep Tufecki (2008) ascribes two functions to such an online space, namely an i) expressive function wherein the 'profiles' of users have 'high levels of self-exposure,' framed by semi-public comments from fellow users, and secondly, an ii) instrumental function which tends towards commercial and efficiency based usage of the website. The first function, the 'expressive' function surely has historical offline antecedents.

By historical offline antecedents I mean attempts at expressing one's identity without resorting to the online medium. However, older technologies like photography have always been instrumental in furthering artistic identities. An example of this is the attempt of dancer Ram Gopal to cement his identity as a hybrid dancer of Bharatanatyam and Western dance forms via his photographs. Despite these attempts, popular culture seems to have an amnesia remembering him as compared to remembering his contemporaries like Uday Shankar or puritan dancers like Rukmini Devi Arundale (Abraham and Sinha, n.d.). This amnesia has been ascribed to his failure at institutionalising himself -

> *Ram Gopal's attempt to create and control an archive of himself reflects a conscious effort to define himself as a historical figure within the history of Indian Dance. It is ironic that despite his self-eulogising, he is one of India's less remembered modern dancers. This historical amnesia could have occurred for multiple reasons. Perhaps more traditional dancers were so dismissive of Ram Gopal's hybrid aesthetic and his defiance of a technique-based notion of virtuosity that they did not include him in their own histories. Or perhaps, because Ram Gopal, unlike his contemporaries, never managed to establish pedagogy, he failed to institutionalise himself. His archive, then, does not expand on a history we already know. Rather, it begs us to piece one together from our ignorance. As Ajay says, 'Ram Gopal's archive points to the fissures, the gaps in history, through which he fell'* (Abraham and Sinha, n.d.).

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[2] After performing on stage, one should get back to real life and not on Facebook.

I believe this paper is an attempt at understanding how Bharatanatyam dancers use the online space to not only express their artistic identities, but also as a medium to structure and maybe digitally institutionalise their artistic practice, choreography, and identity; each of them in their own ways.

Popular Culture and Dance

The influence of television on dance is an instance of how new technology has influenced a change in the economic set up of dance classes across India. This in turn has resulted in ways in which their institutionalisation has changed. I frame this argument within the idea of a cultural economy (Du Gay & Pryke, 2002) wherein a vast array of research[3] has claimed dance to have been largely influenced by television, especially reality T.V. culture. The latter emerged alongside the rise of globalisation. Within the dance economy, if one were to use such a term, the influence of reality television has definitely increased audience exposure to different dance forms. This has partly provided impetus for newer dance choreographies and a mushrooming of classes (Das, 2015) even before Shiamak Davar and Ashley Lobo institutionalised Western and Bollywood dance in India.

Thus, in one respect, 'cultural enterprise' refers to artists seeking independence in their engagement with art through choreographic imaginations which are materialised by changing economic set ups inspired by versions of dance more easily available, accessible, and 'teachable' than rigorous 'classical' dance. Amrit Sinha once made it to the opening rounds of the reality television series *Dance India Dance*, which gave him monetary incentive and popularity in the city, which helped him expand his dance school.

This paper addresses such local dance 'enterprises' of three Bharatanatyam dancers in Lucknow. In a way, this idea of a global, almost cosmopolitan context of cultural entrepreneurs stands against State support of artists, which earlier, was the only way for 'classical' dancers to move up their career and social ladders. Cultural enterprise in dance today, then, is a negotiation made increasingly possible by the disruptive technologies of the mobile phone and internet which

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[3] 'Culture' is accorded a privileged position in this endeavour because it is seen to play a crucial role in structuring the way people think, feel and act in organisations. The idea that culture and economics are essentially different is challenged in such an understanding.

makes dance a permanent livelihood in a manner that was never possible before[4] when Bhatkhande Music College, established in 1926, was the only space in Lucknow that offered training in the classical, and later, folk arts.

The Dance Patrons

Earlier, learning at Bhatkhande Music Institute and acquiring a degree from there was the only option for aspiring dancers to make art of value in the 'real' world, with the value coming from the degree earned at the end of five years. This would largely fit with the State supported model of dance that has come up in post-independence India. With the advent of liberalisation, a new age patronage system of sorts arose, at least in Lucknow. Here, the dancer fresh out of Bhatkhande would seek employment at a pre-existing dance class, whose owner would not be a practising dancer in most cases, but would rather be a middle class Indian with sufficient monetary and social capital. Even in an age of increasing digital technologies (like cassettes, CDs, recording studios), some dance schools wished to maintain the digital capital divide and for example, not record music to distribute to the students. Now, some of these classes have lost out to the newer forms of dance enterprises.

One such owner of a dance class is Neha Chandra[5]. A student recalls her saying, "I am a businesswoman. You must not discuss any details of the payment made to me with your dance teacher. It is a breach of trust!" This comment is recalled by a student from *Divyanjali*, a Bharatanatyam dance class in Lucknow established in 1990. At *Divyanjali,* music records were analogue, and while these analogue cassette copies were available, they were never given to students or even to the dancers who were employed to teach these dances. In rare cases these cassette copies were given to 'best' students for school performances. In terms of any technical resources required to commence an independent venture, the artist remained handicapped. The

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[4] While the paper acknowledges the looming context of entrepreneurship in India in present times, it does not frame these dancers within this framework, though they can be easily viewed as entrepreneurs. Gyanendra says, "I don't call myself an entrepreneur, but what I do is like that." This is not to suggest that the dancers are only second-hand versions of their metropolitan counterparts who often fashion themselves as pan-Indian, new age Mark Zuckerburgs and entrepreneurs. The paper also does not intend to suggest a metropolitan and second tier city divide. While the dancers do not adhere to the image of metropolitan cultural entrepreneurs selling high art to the public, they have changed the manner in which the structure of Bharatanatyam classes have functioned in Lucknow.

[5] Name changed.

school is in decline as compared to its relative popularity in Lucknow in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Such a system could be called a new age patronage of sorts, or to use a buzz word, an 'enterprise.' However, the artist never had any autonomy, which was held by the owner/patron of the institute, because of their ownership on wealth and 'cultural capital.' "If you have (in Pierre Bourdieu's useful term) the 'cultural capital' to gain a tenured professorship at a university, play regularly in a major symphony orchestra or write mega bestsellers, you can earn an excellent living doing what you love. Short of that, you must pursue your passion on the side" (Gutting, 2013). In other words, Bourdieu extended the idea of power coming from land ownership to other kinds of possessions like social taste, clothes, mannerisms, or belonging to a given social class. In Lucknow, people like Neha Chandra enjoyed massive cultural capital. With regards to the paper, it would be helpful to see her as a person who had the power to define what socially desirable art would look like. The artists did not wield this power. They were mostly pursuing their passion on the 'side.'

The dancers concerned do not take on their dance classes as part-time engagements but as full-time jobs This paper describes the process of how this happened over time, through the use of varied technologies, and the changes it has brought in the structure/institution of the dance class, the image of the artist, the nature of their art, and negotiations of gender.

The process of acquisition of cultural capital was different for the oldest dancer amongst the three, Gyanendra who claims that during his time, he was never sure of taking up dance full-time. His career evolved through events he could not foresee in a way that is possible today. While the other dancers described in the paper were still at the stage of building their careers and identities in their twenties; Gyanendra incorporated the changes into his existing identity as a lecturer of Bharatanatyam. Interestingly, when asked if their lives as dancers had changed over the last five years, and whether access to digital technologies had a major role in the same, all three dancers answered with a resounding yes. The question arises, how is the artistic identity defined?

Self-Fashioning the Artist: The Dancer and the Image

One of the nascent foundations of the present day dance enterprises and dance classes lies in the imaginations of the dancing self, articulated both through a passion for dance, and a digital substitution for images of dance. Naved's negotiations with dance illustrate this. Naved locates

himself as an upper caste Muslim cis-male, and mentions the stringent opposition to dance which he faced at his locality in Aishbagh, Old Lucknow. His inspiration to pursue dance professionally came through email exchanges on Yahoo Mail. Naved reminisces about the importance of having a male Bharatanatyam dancer in the city as an example to look up to, and gives an early instance of how he found a digital substitute for it, when the sole male Bharatanatyam dancer in the city, Gyanendra Bajpai left for Tokyo to teach Bharatanatyam on a Government of India Scholarship in 2007.

He recalls, "*Sir mujhe photos bhejte the apne dance ki. Mai dance ke inspiration ka poora credit sir ko deta hu[6]*". Naved then located Gyanendra's Guru, Saroja Vaidynathan through searches on Google which he says gave him the gumption to leave the Bachelors of Science in Physiotheraphy which he was pursuing from Sitapur, a town near Lucknow, to leave for Delhi to learn dance much to the horror of his family. When Amrit had started his dance academy Rhythm Divine, he was not a Bharatanatyam 'guru' yet. Until then – that is the time when the three dancers had already started engaging with Bharatanatyam albeit in different capacities and over varying periods of time – digital technology had not pervaded cities in the way that it now does. 2010 was an interesting year for the dancers; not only were android smartphones finding wider audiences in India along with data packs on the mobile phone, but all the dancers, had also received an opportunity to perform at the opening ceremony of the 2010 Commonwealth Games in Delhi. For Amrit, this meant meeting the guru in Delhi for the first time. Naved had already conducted his arangetram under Guru Saroja Vaidyanathan.

Even post this success, their situation in Lucknow did not change drastically. However, along with such events, and a gradual percolation of mobile technologies and increased internet access, the digital divide was being bridged. Up until 2010, most dancers in Lucknow used a recording studio to edit songs, as access to software editing was not yet common. For example, even to merge two songs, one had to rush to the recording studio.

And this directly influenced the work of the dancers, since they needed to make a huge investment to set up a dance performance. Gyanendra - who happens to be one of the very few classical teachers who gave out classical music as MP3 files via email - notes how the analogue hardware was increasingly rendered unnecessary, and the cumbersome business of obtaining an orchestra, especially the *mridang* player from Chennai or Delhi, or the near impossibility of finding a Carnatic vocalist in Lucknow could be done away with. The easy availability of cheap

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[6] Sir would send me photographs of his dance. I give all the credit for my inspiration of dance to him.

mobile phones now sufficed to do the job of an esteemed orchestra, thus saving a lot of costs involved in procuring a traditional Bharatanatyam musical set-up. Now, in 2015, Naved comments, "I re-subscribe to my data pack 3-4 times a month. This (my profession) would be impossible without a mobile phone. *Ishtihaar se zyaada toh Facebook acha hai. Itna kharcha hota hai, aur classical dance ko Bollywood jaisi sponsorship bhi nahi milti hai[7]*".

However, while it makes their enterprise possible, there are some roadblocks which digital access does not help overcome. As Naved further comments, despite the presence of mobile telephony and data-packs, which dancers mostly use as opposed to Wi-Fi since they are always travelling, Bharatanatyam still requires a 60,000 rupees investment for a ten minute music piece on *Dashavataram* (10 avatars of Krishna). This is necessary to maintain oneself as a 'serious' dancer. Occasional visits by the benevolent guru from the metropolis, Delhi, are as important towards contributing to the dancer's cultural capital in the market, as is making that exorbitant monetary investment which Naved claims to bear out of his own pocket.

This brings into question the position of the artists on the kinds of choreographies dancers produce in the digital age, which is also co-terminus with late capitalism. Much has been theorised about it, including the prediction of post-modern, pastiche art, of mass production in art, its ability to defy ritual, to dissolve boundaries between high and low art. It is the innovations made in the musical score for Bharatanatyam that have brought about unprecedented change in Bharatanatyam in Lucknow. The choreographies are products of and respond to, a new kind of digital mash-up of music, which is unusual for dancers who claim to be serious, professional practitioners of Bharatanatyam. Proper Bharatanatyam comprises 'pure' classical music for many even today, and the existing gurus in the traditional centres of the dance form do not share music until senior disciples purchase it from them. Even their students refuse to share the music at times. As Anita recalls, one of the students of a famous guru in Delhi refused to share an MP3 file of a very common opening song, *Pushpanjali* which she procured later from a student in Lucknow.

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[7] Facebook is better than (regular) advertisements. Especially since classical dance does not get the same kind of sponsorship as Bollywood does.

New Choreographies?

Apart from digitally sharing puritan music, the repertoire in Lucknow is marked by how the dancers respond to a different digital mash-up of music, a kind of pastiche of different songs and therefore, differing choreographies to those songs. "We do not use the music as a program or instructional cue—we do not have an instrumental relation to it— for the music (situation) speaks to us directly and personally and to our bodies as a whole," writes Firth (2004). Interviews with the dancers suggested that the ability to create cheap, quick music online is reflected in the thematic choice of their dance, and the structure of their dance class; however, it does not uniformly correspond with their individual public personas as artists which they try to carefully craft on Facebook. The following discussions attempt to trace these assertions.

Gyanendra was initially not a part of this study since he is supported by the government and is a permanent lecturer in Bharatanatyam at Bhatkhande Institute, Lucknow. However, he has negotiated with changes in the dance economy the most. Since 2013, he has been choreographing ballets, using music procured through mobile internet. Earlier, he was against the notion that Bharatanatyam should be vilified by mixing it with other forms; semi-classical was an unforgivable realm. He narrates two important things in this regard, both of which would not have been possible in an age before SNS mobile telephony, namely that – i) via Facebook, he became cognisant of feminist issues, which he then incorporated into a modern-day Bharatanatyam routine because he saw these themes to be important and fashionable, and ii) the importance of the background score, the music which makes dance possible in the first place. Interestingly, he did not mention anything about the music or background score when I initially spoke to him.

This account resonates with a comment Maria Popova made on images that the Facebook algorithm barrages us with. "I recently witnessed a commenter on Facebook throw a rather unwholesome epithet at Sontag herself, in *reacting* solely to an auto-generated thumbnail image, rather than *responding* to the 2,000-word article about Sontag, which Facebook's mindless algorithm had chosen to 'interpret' by that thumbnail image — human and machine colluding in an especially violent modern form of 'interpretation'" (2015). This 'especially violent modern form of interpretation', the interpretation provoked by Facebook's mindless algorithm is seen in the thematic of the dancers' choreographies, which is not to suggest that the choreographies are mindless, but to suggest that social media, especially Facebook seems to be an important interface through which artists, here Gyanendra, derive a moral social responsibility to engage with socio-political issues by looking at images being circulated and not necessarily through

engaging with the larger more complex debates. A narration of Gyanendra's account of the thematic of his dance follows.

He recently choreographed a dance based on widow remarriage in Barabanki, where a Hindu child widow is rescued by a Muslim man. This was done to music played on the mobile phone. This ease of plugging in a mobile phone has increased the number of 'ballet,' 'dance-drama' like productions Gyanendra has done since 2010. Gyanendra posits that his presentation of the case of widows was taken up owing to the absence of this issue in feminist posts on media he sees through Facebook. While there are ample instances of child widow grievances online, there are very few instances such as the one he highlighted. Gyanendra claims he presents a fresh view.

This brings into question the artistic choreographic agency in face of technological determinism (Buckingham, 2008). Would these be very different artists if it were not for their online selves? The answer seems to be i) yes, dance as it is practised now is essentially a cybernetic one –it derives its theme from what seems viable and fashionable online and ii) artistic agency is enabled by the free availability of music online. What is easily available online, on new forms of technology is what drives new choreographies as opposed to existing modes of 'classical dance' choreographies which require a four person orchestra and an adherence to the rules of classical dance.

Nevertheless, about an hour after Gyanendra recounted the story of how he choreographed his Bharatanatyam ballet, his student and dancer Anuj entered the room, and spoke of his initiation into classical dance after a reality TV judge deemed him to be an incapable dancer since he did not know classical dance. Like Amrit, Anuj too started his professional dance career post rejection from a reality television show. However, Anuj is also known for mixing music for Bharatanatyam ballets and does so for Gyanendra.

This is the conversation which follows, on the uses of Western percussions to compose dance ballets. This is made possible by Gyanendra's collaboration with Anuj, who practises both Bharatanatyam and Western contemporary dances. Gyanendra points to Anuj, bowing his head in acknowledgement, and says, "Anuj was the master act behind my ballet production in Barabanki." Anuj elaborated upon this by saying that he used 'contemporary, Bharatanatyam, Hip-Hop, and Robotic' music to compose the background score. Mixing of songs easily available online can beguile listeners who lack musical knowledge. Gyanendra did not point out the use of Western music earlier, where he only emphasised on his Facebook-inspired social responsibility being transposed on his self-composed choreography.

However, it is argued that "when copies compete with originals, and when new works are produced with technology in mind, the old values of 'creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery' fall away" (Ross, Kirsch and Menand, 2014). The dancers though, do not view their works to be a copy, be it music or dance thematics and steps. Copying costume and jewellery design is acceptable. Naved remarks how browsing Facebook casually enables Gyanendra, Anuj, and Naved to encounter ideas which 'inspire' the thematics in dance.

When asked about their online browsing patterns and their Facebook use for choreography ideas, Anuj and Gyanendra, looked at each other, almost on the verge of taking offence it seemed, to assert vehemently in unison that "we only take inspiration, and never copy!" This foregrounds the importance that internet has in their lives. It opens up the idea that the Internet can be an object, a process, an imagination, and that each of these nuances adds to how we can study its techno-social existence.

The Dance without a Name

When asked, "Is there a name for your choreographies within the Bharatanatyam repertoire?" Gyanendra immediately replied, "This is not Bharatanatyam." "So is it contemporary?" I asked both Gyanendra and Anuj. They looked at each other, and said no, it was not contemporary either. The suggestion of the dance being contemporary was met by a sort of revulsion despite the fact that they actively use Western percussions. "*Iska koi naam nahi hai*,"[8] said Gyanendra.

His belief is reflected in the structure of his dance classes which offer all kinds of dances. As opposed to Amrit, Gyanendra and Anuj have a different dance set-up. Naved's dance school is different too. By day, he teaches Bharatanatyam in a government school. In conversation with me over the phone he said, "You must visit my class, I have done Western choreography with Bharatanatyam". The next day, even as he demonstrated his dances, which included *Bumbhro*[9] and Amitabh Bachchan's *Hanuman Chalisa*[10] amongst others, he insisted, "*Classical toh classical hi*

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[8] It has no name.

[9] Mahadevan, S., Noorani, E. and Mendonsa, L. (2000). B*umbro Mission Kashmir*. [Online] Mumbai: Tips. Available at: https://bit.ly/2KGqlQo [Accessed 6 May 2018].

[10] Sri Hanuman Chalisa. (2013). E Dharma. Available at: https://bit.ly/2jzpvIM [Accessed 6 May 2018].

hai. Steps me purity honi chahiye.[11]" In the evenings, he runs his own dance school which only teaches classical dance.

Amrit Sinha freely engages in mixing not only Bollywood music, but also music composed for the opening of national and international sports ceremonies, music from national dance festivals in India and with his students, performs Bharatanatyam to Bollywood songs like *Breathless*[12] and *Baaware* [13]. He now runs three branches of Rhythm Divine across Lucknow, with a total strength of six hundred students. Gyanendra, who uses mixed music but refuses to align himself with anything other than Bharatanatyam has taken to crowd funding online.

Gyanendra recounts his collaboration with Dream Wallets, an online crowd funding portal. Given that composing any music for a 'serious' classical dance concert requires a lot of investment, there is potential reason as to why Gyanendra has to work with Dream Wallets

unlike Amrit, who considers no difference between what is classical and what is not. "*Kuch farak nahi hota, dance me bas story zaroori hoti hai[14],*" says Amrit.

Gyanendra's tryst with Dream Wallets is intertwined with the concept of 'publicness' (Habermas, 1989) of the dancers in cyberspace. The internet thus becomes a catalyst for their choreographic dreams, and an able, much cheaper 'public relations officer' for their dancing selves. Gyanendra says, "Facebook is my public relations officer" because it enables him to connect with dancers and dance organisations he was not aware of previously.

Part of the publicity is ensuring visibility, for which massive self-promotion is undertaken by the all the dancers. Gyanendra says that with the mass use of Facebook, he has been able to reach out to dance communities in Assam and annually conducts month long workshops. He says, "I message new people constantly, exchange emails, and sometimes they revert, call me on my mobile and follow up with me." This is how Dream Wallets contacted him on Facebook, and the dance he had presented in Barabanki, transformed into a large-scale ballet production called

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[11] Classical dance is classical dance, steps need to have purity.

[12] Mahadevan, S. and Akhtar, J. (1998). *Breathless*. Saregama. Available at: https://bit.ly/2HVEfw3 [Accessed 6 May 2018].

[13] Mahadevan, S., Noorani, E. and Mendonsa, L. (2009). *Banware*. T-Series. Available at: https://bit.ly/2HUKf8l [Accessed 6 May 2018].

[14] It doesn't make a difference. Only the story is important in dance.

Komal Hu, Kamzor Nahi[15], a dance ballet on female empowerment. People who contribute to the production are offered awards in lieu of their payment.

The dancers embody many roles, with many publics across diverse spaces and in this event, Facebook profiles function as compressed geographies of the dancers' enterprises for they make possible a "social connection through spatial abstraction" which is initially "removed from physicality" (Gordon 2007: 890). For instance, the Facebook profiles of the dancers often best summarise their dance enterprise. Amrit posts a picture of his Rhythm Divine dance students, as he poses as Lord Shiva wearing a Mickey Mouse Jumper in New Jersey, USA where he was performing, all at the same time. Gyanendra's profile is even more complex as his ballet pictures, posts from Dream Wallets, pictures of his Bhatkhande Dance class, pictures of his workshops in Assam come together to define his engagements as a dancer. This only underscores the fact that sociality of dancers is largely networked online.

Then, this closed privileged group membership on Facebook is akin to being part of the dance elite which is the zenith for dancers in terms of social mobility through dance. Naved also proudly took me through a WhatsApp Group he was part of which also had his favourite dancer Rama Vaidyanathan. Despite these myriad socialities and compressed geographies (Papacharissi, 2009), the most important factor for the dancers is the self-fashioning of themselves as Bharatanatyam gurus. There is a constant hailing of them by their students on Facebook as 'Guru'. The idea of having a Bharatanatyam guru in Lucknow is not common as opposed to more landed, rooted dance forms like Kathak. Even Gyanendra initially did not use this appellation. Dance classes in Lucknow, unlike those in the metropolis or cities in parts of South India, never ever had the traditional *guru-shishya parampara*.

One of the first *arangetrams[16]* in the city after a haitus of 27 years, according to Gyanendra, was performed as recently as 2010 by Gyanendra. And as the artist says, one of the most important parts of such functions is to make them visible on Facebook. Amrit, who performed his *arangetram* in 2011 has already conducted a few *arangetrams* himself and pictures of the dancer performing are sparse. Not a single picture could be seen on his profile but his picture as a guru was very prominent.

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[15] I'm Tender, Not Weak.

[16] Maiden dance performance.

It can be said that the digital realm through such individuation enables the dancers to transpose a model of dance economy of exploitation that was essentially absent in the city; the cost of an *arangetram* is not hard to bear, the student performing the *arangetram* pays for everything herself/himself. Furthermore, as Naved says, most pictures he puts up are of dance, and he ensures that they are the best of pictures. The act of promoting themselves on Facebook is an assertion and affirmation of their identities and that of the guru, despite the disruptive technologies and the entry into informal economy of the dancers. Contrary to the fact that mass reproductions quell rituals, it seems to be promoting them.

However, despite the potential predetermination of independent artistic imaginations, the manipulation of the dancer as a pan-Indian traditional guru is an "experimentation with and development of new forms of bodily identity. New music whose kinetic power reflects and reinforces the new bodily identity can emerge; music and dance resonate with each other. What interests me here, in short, is the role of pleasure in fostering personal and social liberation" (Crease 2002: 106-120). The initial reasons given by both were that of their love for dance, and their fascination with how the body moves;. Naved, Amrit, and Gyanendra have successfully negotiated with religious, high art, and class boundaries respectively, adapting to changing media ecologies.

Naved's initial dance school had to be closed just a month after its inception in 2011. This was because of the opposition it faced – in the form of complaints and slanderous comments by the neighbours, for whom the practise of music and dance was viewed as an offensive – during the *Aazaan*. But the classes had to be continued for a month since the fees had been taken. Now, Naved has shifted his classes and does not practise from home. He teaches in Puraniya. He advertises his classes mostly through Facebook and Whatsapp. He showed me a list of groups he was on which were clearly very important to him, and served as a marker of his progress as a dancer. He claims, that the opposition he faces, both from his family and his locality, is absent on his life as a dancer on Facebook, where he feels accepted. "*Kehte hain India aage badh raha hai, badh raha hoga, par mentality sab vahi hai abhi[17],*" he says in face of the opposition he gets from his neighbourhood, his father's insistence of 'getting a proper job,' and the humiliation he faces as people slander him for performing a 'Hindu,' and '*ladkiyon vaala dance'.[18]*

[17] They say India is progressing. I am sure it is. But the mentality is the same.

[18] A girl's dance.

'Ladkiyon Vaala Dance'

An overarching, important, ubiquitous concern for all the four dancers – on stage, off stage, and on Facebook, is the representation of gender; an important component of self-fashioning for the artists. While their art does not always allow for a masculine assertion, their engagements online, on Facebook, reveal the emasculation anxieties. In his early career, one of the roles Gyanendra had to play most often was that of Draupadi from Mahabharata as part of a Shabdam choreographed by his guru. Some Bharatanatayam dancers argue for the transcendence of the gendered self in dance. Teaching Ardhanarishwara to students, Rama Vaidyanathan argues that dance is a way of transcending gender. This is not quite true when it comes to interviewing the dancers on this pertinent subject. Anuj says, "Yes, dancers, especially male dancers experience bodily changes, but that should not be left in the classroom. *Personality nahi change honi chahiye.*[19]" Moreover, he contends that even online, in digital spaces, this difference must be maintained. Naved adds, *"stage ke baad, real life me vaapas aa jaana chahiye."* He says, *"90% dancers apna haav bhaav badal lete hain.[20]"*

This anxiety is translated on Facebook. Essentially, they choose what is according to them the 'best of best' dance pictures so that their masculinity is never questioned. Anuj adds that it hurts to see adverse comments being posted on pictures of other male dancers, since it tarnishes the image of the male dancer. For Anuj – who dances both contemporary and Bharatanatyam – the difference is explicit when doing classical dance because it demands a lot of facial expressions. "While playing Radha on stage, *jo feel karte ho use stage pe rehne do, use apni personality nahi transform honi chahiye, aur aisi pictures Facebook to bilkul nahi daalni chahiye[21]."* There is this self-censorship against becoming like a woman, despite accepting that they experience moments of transcendence in dance. The transgression of gender binaries in dance remains in the moment of dance according to Naved, Anuj, and Gyanendra.

Towards a Cybernetic *Parampara*?

I have argued that the artistic enterprise of the traditional Bharatanatyam *parampara* in Lucknow is abetted by the possibilities of today's digital cybernetic culture which allows the artists to

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[19] The personality should not change.

[20] Ninety percent of dancers change the way they are.

[21] While performing Radha, one should leave the character on stage, and not feel it in real life.

perform online and offline. They perform their identities, and also source networks, advertise their dance in the market. This has given a specific characteristic to new age choreographies that use a digital mash-up of music and which often use popular feminism as a theme. These technologies have also allowed the artists to accrue not only wealth, but also cultural capital allowing them to pursue dance full-time, and thereby changing the prevailing market structure of Bharatanatyam. All of this, interestingly, aids the performance and economic possibility of making and shaping the very traditional *guru-shishya parampara* in Lucknow.

Innovation in music and easy access to video choreographies enables the dancers to use piracy to further their innovative streaks in lieu of traditional Carnatic orchestras. They would have been very different artists and professionals in the absence of digital technologies. Moreover, they dwell in the realm of the digital almost as much as they dance on stage, for they have created a niche public audience on Facebook, where every 'like' is an assertion of their success as artists, and being members of groups and communities like 'Indian Classical Dancers of the World' is a matter of pride for them, an achievement as great as one in the 'real' world. They have succeeded in pushing boundaries of religion and class, and are driven by narratives of social mobility through art which digital technologies make possible to some degree.

However, gender binaries remain stark in the images of themselves which they post on Facebook, which are carefully clicked, curated, screened to fashion themselves as masculine dancers; an attempt which only underscores how emasculation anxieties are transposed even on Facebook.. Dance is often considered to be rooted in the 'reality' of 'this world' since it is performed by the living body and not virtually created. However as is with other art forms in the digital age, so is the case with Bharatanatyam in Lucknow - "the online self is no longer a reflection of or departure from the off–line self (Wittkower, 2014)." The online persona of the dance and dancer is as important, sometimes more important that the offline persona especially when it comes to i) advertising for one's existence as a dancer/dance guru, ii) collaborating with fellow dancers and prospective students, and iii) finding the tools for both the content of the dance and material for its background score for free. This allows for a new kind of self-performance of classical Bharatanatyam, and consequently allows the dance form to re-form itself in a city where it was only a secondary cultural presence, free itself from the grip of owners of dance classes, and allow new-age practitioners of the dance form to take it forward in ways which would not have been possible without internet technology.

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