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Sensuality and Syncretism: Kathak's Marginalized Courtesan Tradition

The Indian classical dance form known today as Kathak is practiced widely across the subcontinent and the South Asian diaspora. A vibrant, entertaining dance, it has taken many shapes and forms across different stages and spaces. This paper is primarily interested in historicizing the form and exploring how the process was closely managed by Indian nationalism and British Anglicism. I draw on Margaret Walker's historicization of Kathak in her book *India's Kathak Dance in Historical Perspective* and Pallabi Chakravorty's invaluable Marxist anthropological study of Kathak in *Bells of Change: Kathak Dance, Women and Modernity in India* to investigate the different genealogies of the form and which histories were preserved during the nationalist reconstruction of "Indian culture" in the 19th century. I explore Kathak's rich syncretic, philosophical history – specifically the tawaif (courtesan) tradition and its subsequent marginalization, and show how despite concerted efforts to purge this tradition from the "official" history of Kathak, it lingers in the choreographic vocabulary of contemporary practitioners. I then outline the different relationships that these practitioners have with the tawaif tradition, and map how theories and experiences of sensuality and embodiment have shifted through the rise of Indian nationalism as well as contemporary efforts to "reclaim" or excavate the tawaif tradition.

However, before elaborating more on this project, it is important to give a brief outline of Kathak as it is known and performed today – the cadences of the movements and gestures and

the general repertoire. The form is generally understood as being taught and practiced in three different gharanas or schools: the Lucknow (in Uttar Pradesh) gharana, the Jaipur (in Rajasthan) gharana, and the Benaras gharana (also in Uttar Pradesh but further east). Margaret Walker describes how despite each gharana being named after a city, they articulate specific “artistic inheritance” and lineage in each region rather than invoking specific geographically situated performance practices (Walker 19). Each gharana emphasizes a certain set of skills, but to the lay person the differences are not always distinctly noticeable. The Lucknow gharana, for example, is famed for its subtle *abhinaya* (the dramatic enactment of narrative through emphasized facial and bodily gestures). But *abhinaya*, along with *nritta* (pure dance that showcases technical skill) and *nriya* (pure dance but with gestural elements and a loose narrative structure) usually coexist in performances across the gharanas. Nowadays, a typical Kathak performance is a progression of items that includes fixed choreography, improvisation, and *jugalbandi* (call-and-response) with the accompanying musicians. Dancers frequently interact with the audience and explain upcoming items, or reciting *bols* (the spoken notation of a piece). Most of the time, the performance begins with a *vandana* or a “choreographed evocation of a Sanskrit prayer,” and then progresses to faster, more technically complex sequences, and ends with a lengthy footwork sequence (*tatkaar*) that showcases the dancer’s sheer virtuosity and technical skill. Dramatic expression forms a large part of the dance, and in its storytelling repertoire the form shares a lot in common with “light classical” forms of North Indian music such as thumri and ghazal, where the dance is accompanied with the lyrics of a song (Walker 2). (In fact, “Kathak” is derived from the Sanskrit word *katha*, meaning story – and a “kathak” or “kathaka” is a storyteller). Walker makes sure to note that this particular performance layout is a contemporary one, originating in the 1950’s, and is one that is still loosely interpreted by many dancers (3). Kathak practitioners

and their students carry with them a narrative of what Kathak is and where it comes from – and it is this narrative that I am interested in exploring in this paper. As both Walker and Chakravorty show, the nationalist “revival” of the arts in the 19th century made a deliberate effort to establish the roots of Kathak in the ancient, Vedic nomadic storytelling tradition. We might question what is at stake in this arrangement of history – and in order to do so, we must first understand which systems of exclusion make this history possible.

SYNCRETISM AND THE TAWAIF TRADITION

The ways in which Kathak is organized, historicized, and practiced today have arisen from a complex, tangled history of syncretism, colonialism, and nationalism in the subcontinent. In India today, the “dominant narrative” as Chakravorty calls it, is that the dance is connected to an ancient lineage stemming from the nomadic Kathakas, who were supposedly storytellers who roamed the countryside using music and dance to disseminate Hindu mythology amongst the people in the Vedic ages. As a Kathak dancer myself, this is also what I was told – or rather, just what I heard around me. What I also heard was that somewhere along the line – specifically with the advent of Mughal rule and the import of Persian (therefore Islamic) influence on “Indian” art and culture – Kathak was “corrupted” from its pure form and became associated with deviance and decadence, especially of the sexual kind. It shifted from temples to courts, and the practitioners became female courtesans (tawaifs, who were later derogatorily termed “nautch” girls) rather than male nomads. Its contemporary form was made possible, as the story goes, by a vigorous effort to rescue the form from this decayed state in the late 19th and 20th century. However, it is interesting to see how imprints of the dance’s syncretic history remain in the form today, in costuming, religious gestures and motifs, and the Sufi-influenced pirouettes that are so characteristic of the dance.

Pallabi Chakravorty argues that the contemporary form of Kathak actually owes more to the nautch dancers of the Mughal period and the early 19th century than it does to the ancient Vedic Kathakas. Both Chakravorty and Walker seem to agree that “Kathak” as it is known now is an “amalgam of the folk and formalized court dances” prevalent in 16th to 19th century India (Chakravorty 26). In addition, the Bhakti and Sufi movements deeply influenced the trajectory of the form, and provided the rich syncretic philosophical base for the dance. The Bhakti and Sufi philosophies were popular in ancient and medieval India; the Bhakti movement arose in the 8th century in South India, and was marked by its anti-caste, anti-Brahmin stance against the “hierarchical, ritual-centered, caste-based, patriarchal regime of Sanskritized Vedic culture.” (Chakravorty 36) A particular sect of Hinduism called Vaishnavism arose from the Bhakti movement, which dedicated itself to the worship of Vishnu, his incarnation Krishna, and Krishna’s soulmate Radha. This worship was articulated through the aesthetics of romantic love as the ultimate unity with the divine – which is also the founding basis of Sufi philosophy. This common ground allowed for a rich, synergistic relationship between the two philosophies to develop, especially in the royal courts. Mughal royalty, who appeared on the scene in the 13th century, did not do away with the basic aesthetic concepts of Hindu ritual practice folded into Bhakti – namely rasa (the flavor of aesthetic experience), bhava (the mood or feeling evoked by rasa), and darshan (the witnessing of the divine). They secularized these ideas within the arts and added new technical complexities (37) – so the dance that emerged from this court tradition was a dense, layered expression of this syncretic philosophy.

In her chapter *From Nautch to Classical Kathak*, Chakravorty’s primary aim is to write a history of Kathak from the “inside out,” and to center the tawaifs as subjects articulated by the complex intersections of regional histories. She situates her work in 19th century Bengal –

specifically Calcutta, where many tawaifs and other artisans migrated after the dispossession of Mughal rulers across North India by British colonial forces. Vaishnavism was popular in Bengal, so the tawaifs found enthusiastic patronage there. The royal class had been the primary patrons of the arts, but after this decline, middle- and upper-middle class Bengali natives replaced the Mughals as patrons. Chakravorty details the development of Bengali gentry culture in the 19th century; this new comprador class, she argues, colluded with the British and imitated the cultural norms of Mughal royalty. They adopted North Indian music and dance as “symbols of aristocracy” and nautch soirees became “symbols of power and influence.” (28) Migrating dancers and artists found new patronage in the Bengali elite. In 1856, the arrival of Mughal ruler Wajid Ali Shah, a legendary patron of music and dance, added momentum to the establishment of Calcutta as the new center for arts patronage.

What is particularly interesting to note is the attitude of the British colonial authorities in Bengal towards tawaifs and native ceremonies in general. In the 18th and early 19th century, British officials partook in local ceremonies and even maintained troops of tawaifs for their entertainment. A new emerging group of British “nabobs” also mimicked the lifestyle of Mughal *nawabs*. They valued the dancers not only for their dancing, but also for their skills in vocal performance and poetry. The term “nautch” arose to describe the tawaifs – an Anglicized version of the Hindi word *nach*, meaning dance. Nautch remained within private spaces – British cantonments, or the drawing rooms of Bengali aristocracy. Chakravorty also takes care to note that while the patrons of the music and dance were primarily Hindu or British, the dancers and their accompanying musicians were almost always Muslim (31). In general, the practitioners and audience spanned a wide variety of ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds, and as a result the nautch repertoire was eclectic – including not just music and dance but also other

entertainment such as juggling and local folk forms. The tradition was a rich “mingling of elite and popular culture,” but was soon to be replaced by a classicalized, Sanskritized, Brahmanical “high culture.” (33) However, the zenana, or women’s space in the house, was a site where the intermingling persisted but was consistently invisibilized, which I will discuss later.

The term “nautch girl” ultimately gained a negative connotation. According to Chakravorty, available historical documents and literature show us that tawaifs were once respected and of high social status; they inherited land through a matrilineal line of property (33). However, there was a hierarchy within tawaifs as well – bais and jans were the top class who sang or danced (or did both) – and the kanjis’ and khankis’ practices came closer to what is now understood as “sex work.” But with the rise of anti-nautch sentiment in India, all tawaifs were stigmatized and recast as “common prostitutes,” regardless of wealth or status. Chakravorty locates this shift around the 1830’s, when bourgeois Victorian values of “morality” and “obscenity” were imported into the Bengali cultural milieu. Parallel to this, members of the Bengali middle and upper middle class were given access to British education, in line with the British colonial effort to create a class of indigenous bureaucrats to manage the day-to-day operation of the Raj. This created a general attitude of distaste towards native music and dance forms even among the Bengali elite – instead of remaining patrons of these traditions, they began to emulate Victorian bourgeois customs (43). Chakravorty describes this as “awakening to modernity” – a synthesis of Orientalist, Indological scholarship and Western education and a consequent intolerance for the performance of nautch that launched the nationwide anti-nautch campaign.

Before we examine the anti-nautch campaign and the rise of Indian nationalism, it is important to pause here and note that at this point in time – the early 19th century – the tawaif

tradition had been thriving for centuries. Many tawaifs were trained not only in dance but also in music, poetry, literature, even archery and other martial arts at times. The sons of nobility and upper class would often be sent to tawaifs to receive training on fine etiquette and the arts. Moreover, in the space of the zenana (women's quarters) of the court or the aristocratic home, women taught other women across class lines (Chakravorty 35). This rich tradition of knowledge production by women went unacknowledged in the public sphere, however. Tawaifs played a central role in culture and knowledge (re)production – they philosophized rigorously to create a form that drew on Bhakti and Sufi strains of thought, they wrote thumris and ghazals, and they actively enriched the arts tradition in India. Walker pieces together an imagination of what a performance by a tawaif must have looked like in the late 19th century from historical documents and travelogues. In a typical performance, the tawaif opened by singing thumris or ghazals while seated, using expressive gestures to intensify her vocal performance. She used these gestures and eye contact to plumb the depths of the poetic refrains of the thumri, performing an extended, multifaceted exploration of the layered, “suggestive” meanings (92). The lyrics were typically ambiguous and relied heavily on imagery and metaphor, leaving plenty of space for erotic readings. After this exploration, the tempo of the performance would increase, progressing from the vilambit (slow) or madhya (medium) tempo to dhruv (fast) tempo – this is when the tawaif would rise to dance. The expressive themes previously laid out in the performance then suffused her entire body and the postures she struck using her veil and skirt for dramatic emphasis (92). Many – perhaps most – of these aspects will sound familiar to anyone who has seen contemporary performances of Kathak, except the eroticism and the dancer actually singing on stage.

However, in what Chakravorty asserts was a painfully ironic turn of history, the anti-nautch movement deemed all tawaifs to be “mere” sex workers – and the resulting stigmatization and flurry of repressive legislation forced many tawaifs into actual sex trafficking. Many were forced to reinvent themselves as vocalists and not dancers to retain respectability, but faced hurdles there too (34). If a tawaif had not been trained by a reputable *ustad* (master) from an established *gharana*, she would not be allowed access to the mainstream performance spaces in the early 20th century musical market. As we have established, this knowledge was often transmitted from women to other women, so this strict requirement preserved the patriarchal *guru-shishya parampara* of Indian classical arts (35). Knowledge that had not been given to a woman from a man was discredited and delegitimized. This spelled, by-and-large, the end of the tawaif tradition, and the beginning of Indian nationalist and the reconstruction of a new, Sankrized, Brahmanical “Indian culture.”

INDIAN NATIONALISM AND ANTI-NAUTCH

Margaret Walker asserts that “a crucial feature of the [Kathak’s] history in the twentieth century is the creation of connections to ‘mythic ritual performance’ in the minds of practitioners and scholars.” (6) The creation of this connection – specifically to the nomadic Kathakas from a glorious Vedic past - was a process closely managed and influenced by both British Anglicism and Indian nationalism. Here it becomes especially important to understanding the organizing logics of 19th century Indian nationalism. As mentioned before, it was spearheaded primarily by elite middle- and upper-middle class Indians who received Western educations. The movement was tasked with nation-building – the creation of a national, “Indian,” culture in place of what was before a disparate, shifting, overlapping political, social, and economic field of activity and exchange.

In his introduction to the book *The Invention of Tradition*, Eric Hobsbawm writes:

“Invented tradition is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values or norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.” (1) He elaborates that these invented traditions, when possible, align with a “suitable historic past.” The project of early Indian nationalism was to do exactly this: create an “Indian” past in order to “reclaim” a history, culture, and pride as a movement to liberate colonized peoples and restore self-rule. Their first step was to refute the common British narrative that the indigenous peoples were debased and corrupted and therefore incapable of self-rule. Of course, we immediately see that the rubric for what is debased and corrupted is one that has been preset by the colonizer – but the leaders of 19th century Indian nationalism were mostly British-educated, and thus also ascribed to ideas of liberty, democracy, and good-ness that they absorbed from this education. Thus began the gradual trimming of threads from the fabric of artistic practice in the subcontinent – the classicalization of what were previously dispersed and diverse forms (such as Kathak), and what many Indian sociologists call the Sanksritization of these forms – the prioritization of Sanskrit texts in dance pedagogy and Sanskrit chants and motifs in the dance practices (and the subsequent erasure of Islamic motifs and local inflection). This moment is where we see the great Vedic past of Kathak emerge – this past rescues Kathak from the form it had taken in the hands of the tawaifs, and provides a new mode of restoration and salvage. The histories of Kathak are selectively organized and discarded and, as Walker points out, big gaps suddenly appear – the dance becomes firmly rooted in its origins with Brahmin male nomadic storytellers, makes a quick detour in the Mughal court, but then returns to the contemporary stage in a new, pure form – all in “giant steps,” as Walker describes it. Its current dominant form

firmly ignores Kathak's rich courtesan past – that phase of history is cast off as a mere “blemish” on an otherwise pure dance form.

So why was the tawaif so directly targeted by the rising wave of Indian nationalism? The cleansing project served not only to root a Kathak in a male-dominated, Brahminical Hindu past (thereby erasing its rich syncretic history with Islam), but also to strip the dance of its more sensual, erotic elements. The darbari (courtly) Kathak practiced by many tawaifs had a deep emphasis on the sensual, subtle, and seductive – which was precisely what garnered Kathak its bad reputation and association with “nautch.” As we have seen, this emphasis on the erotic stemmed from Bhakti and Sufi conceptions of divine union as romantic/sexual union. Here the gendered logic of nationalism becomes especially relevant – in his essay “Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonialized Women,” Partha Chatterjee shows how Indian nationalism organized around the woman – i.e. how the invention of a tradition is a process firmly lodged in gendered bodies. Chatterjee argues that this process first mandated a separation of the material and spiritual into two distinctly separate realms of life – and each became a gendered space, with the material coded as masculine and the spiritual as feminine. The material realm enfolded within it science, technology, and rationality – the systems that ostensibly gave Europe power. However, Indian nationalism maintained that the East was superior to the West in the spiritual realm (623). This notion created a nationalist movement that hinged on the selective appropriation of Western modernity. Chakravorty explicitly addresses this in relation to Kathak and the establishment of the new public sphere in India; she writes: “Ideals of modernity appropriated into anti-colonial nationalism and sovereignty in decolonized nations were asserted by inventing a national ‘imagined community’ to mark cultural difference from colonial

masters.” (63) It is this appropriation of modernity that dictated how “nautch” was reconstructed into classical Kathak.

Chatterjee elaborates on the material/spiritual dichotomy, emphasizing its gendered nature and further linking it to the outside/inside distinction. The inside is coded as true, where essential “Indianness” resides, in the people’s spirituality. The outside was where India would present its refashioned modern self to the rest of the world, to sustain its sovereign nationhood. However, given the gendered logic of this separation, spirituality became firmly lodged in femininity – so the home (inside) became the primary site for “expressing the spiritual quality of the national culture.” (627) The burden of this expression therefore fell on women. A new construct of womanhood emerged to signify “nation” – and the woman was elevated to be the ideal embodiment of Indian spiritual qualities such as “self-sacrifice, benevolence, devotion, religiosity ...” (629) Consequently, sexuality and sensual indulgence became radically opposed to this new feminine ideal, leading to the immediate marginalization of tawaifs from the public sphere – branded as immoral, debased, and a blemish on national pride.

Of course, this was not the end of dance – Kathak, along with other classical dance and music forms, was formalized, codified, and Sankritized to be practiced in a “correct” way that fit the aesthetic requirements of nation-building process before and after 1947 (when India gained independence from the British). Chatterjee notes that nationalism depended on the sustenance of an “essential tradition,” which was necessarily constructed on a logic of exclusion (632). Indian art was refashioned “in the realm of aesthetic and spiritual empathy,” as Chakravorty writes (47). For the upper-caste Hindu nationalist reformers and nationalists as well as British colonial authorities, the Indian eroticism (shringara) that the tawaifs embodied was the “root cause of immorality.” (44) Kathak had to be reconstructed into a “classical” form with a

Vedic devotional foundation. Increasingly more importance was given to the *Natyashastra* after its re-emergence (the *Natyashastra* is an ancient Vedic text dated to around 200 BC, a dramaturgical treatise written by the sage Bharata Muni). The Sanskrit dance-drama narrative form also re-emerged (54). The structure of the gharanas tightened – separating into Lucknow, Benaras, and Jaipur, and the Lucknow gharana gained the most visibility and prestige. This was because of its attachment to the Maharaj line of male Kathak dancers – the brothers Shambu and Achchan Maharaj and Shambu’s son Birju Maharaj (who is today considered by many the greatest Kathak exponent alive). This family provided the nation-state with the “civilizational lineage” necessary to link Kathak back to ancient male nomadic Kathakas (54).

The postcolonial Indian nation-state replaced the wealthy aristocracy as the main patron of the arts. The state created institutions to cement the gharanas as centers for legitimate instruction in Kathak – which led to the gradual invisibilization of forms of Kathak flavored with regional influence and different teachers’ idiosyncracies. The Sangeet Natak Akademi was established to manage the propagation of Indian classical art forms – it invited practitioners to serve on awards committees and disseminated government grants for dance instruction and performance (Chakravorty 68). Consequently, performing artists had to demonstrate their political alignment with the central government, and the state-sponsored artists were willing to collaborate and work to standardize Kathak. Needless to say, a hierarchy emerged that reflected already-existing regional political power structures. The patriarchal guru/shishya parampara (tradition) was reinforced and the form became more and more standardized. In 1993, the Kathak Kendra in Delhi held a seminar with prominent Kathak practitioners to codify the use of *hastas* – improvised hand gestures (70). State-sponsored media, namely the TV channel Doordarshan – also worked to build the modern nation-state through the dissemination of “national culture.”

While folk forms were also showcased, they were marginalized, and Doordarshan's programming was seen by many as the central government's attempt to impose North Indian Sankrized culture on the rest of the nation (74). The India Films Division, another state-sponsored media outlet, produced a 1970 documentary on Kathak, in which it credits the Mughal ruler Wajid Ali Shah for his patronage of music and dance and the role of his court in shaping the form that is still practiced today. But it never mentions tawaifs or any kind of courtesan tradition. After mentioning the Shah, the documentary skips forward to discuss the role of the dancer Madame Menaka in taking Kathak to the "global stage" – fast-forwarding right through the entire period of Kathak practice that was sustained almost solely by the tawaifs. According to Chakravorty, Madame Menaka's reinvention of Kathak infused it with a "spiritual" and "essential" Indian identity – and also distanced it from the tawaif tradition as she was not a descendent of one. Madame Menaka was among the first dancers to perform Kathak on a global stage, thus setting the scene for the establishment of a new Kathak tradition – upper class, non-hereditary, rooted in an emphasis on Brahmanical, Sanskrit, Vedic devotion, and de-eroticized.

SENSUAL BODY IN SANSKRITIZED KATHAK

Over time, as dance as a practice and experience gets increasingly more associated with spirituality, devotion, and the maintenance of a standardized "Indianness," Kathak is pulled further and further away from the tawaif tradition. Eroticism, even in the context of the Bhakti celebration of the Krishna-Radha union (still a common theme in Kathak performances today), is no longer compatible with the Indian vision of classical culture. So as Kathak is pushed into the category of "pure" or "spiritual," it simultaneously is wrenched away from the sensual bodies of its practitioners and even its audiences. With the establishment of the postcolonial Indian state, dance is recast as a devotional activity in which the body is simply a vessel for the enlightenment

and opening of the mind. The only tawaifs to persist in the public sphere are the ones who have succeeded in re-establishing themselves as poets and vocalists.

In their book *Engendering Performance*, Urmimala Sarkar Munsri and Bishnupriya Dutt argue that the body has become “absent” in Indian classical dance, never acknowledged as the source of the images and affects it creates. Margaret Walker describes this process in sort of the opposite way, framing it as a disembodiment of music as it was wrenched apart from dance (96). She argues that the biggest byproduct of the anti-nautch movement was the forced separation of music and dance, as Indian nationalism viewed music as one of India’s biggest “cultural assets,” – this mandated the separation of music from the sinful realm of female courtesan dancers. Furthermore, the separation of music and dance not only displaced and disenfranchised the female hereditary performers of each, but also invisibilized them and their performance tradition on the mainstream stage. The standardization of Kathak and its rigorous but selective dissemination by the Indian government opened access to non-hereditary, middle and upper-middle class women performers. The “repertoire and body language” of the tawaifs then reappeared in their reappropriated, gentrified, Sanskritized form, and they were danced by a new set of “non-hereditary female practitioners” – so it was easy to deny that there was a connection (Walker 97). The choreographic vocabulary of the tawaifs is only one of the ways in which their legacy persists in contemporary Kathak – Walker shows that the “swaying postures” and use of eye contact and movement are remnants of the tawaif tradition. Mughal costuming is still visible today as well: dancers often wear full skirts with tight bodices and long sleeves (also called anarkalis, a popular fashionable Indian garment for North Indian women that bears clear resemblance to the full skirts worn by Sufi dancers). A more unfortunate remnant is Kathak’s continued association with sex work and moral “deviance” – it is still dismissed in many

contexts as mujra, the “entertaining dance of the red-light district.” (Walker 97) Efforts have been made to purge these remnants from the repertoire of the dance; for example, the Islamic gestures of the dance such as the salaami (the Islamic salutation performed at the beginning of a show) are replaced by Hindu devotional gestures such as the vandana.

The Kathak exponent Nahid Siddiqui’s work proves useful here as an example of how contemporary dancers draw on tawaif repertoire and engage with those aesthetics. Siddiqui, a Pakistani dancer, has a style quite different from any other contemporary, mainstream Kathak dancer. On her website, her style is described as “imbued and informed by Islamic and Sufi aesthetics, sensibilities, and longing for ultimate union.” It is precisely these aesthetics that are less visibly present in Indian dancers’ repertoires because of the Sanskritization of the form in India. Siddiqui’s style is characterized by a fluidity of the neck, wrists, and shoulders – areas of the body that while still pliable, are far more contained in – for example – Birju Maharaj’s style, as well as the that of his students’ (one need only look as far as the work of Saswati Sen, one of his most prominent disciples, to notice this). Interestingly, Siddiqui did train with Birju Maharaj for some time, but over time developed a particularly Sufi-influenced style that became unique to her. In one particular performance, Siddiqui executes a movement that involves the shoulder-to-finger movement of muscles in the arm to create one fluid, wave motion – a sensuous movement that is essentially absent from the choreography of Indian performers. However, despite performing in a more Islamic tradition, Siddiqui does perform her own renditions of the Radha-Krishna fable, albeit while adopting a much more flirtatious, eroticized aesthetic than many of her contemporaries – and one that we can imagine to be closer to the syncretic tradition embodied by the tawaifs. In one of her performances of the myth, her performance as Radha involves swaying hip movements and an emphasis of Radha’s erotic and sexual allure,

especially when doused in water as Krishna throws a stone to break her water pot, or when she is caught in the rain as the monsoon begins. Siddiqui also utilizes the subtle side-to-side head shake movement often, as well as slight movement of her shoulders and strategic eye contact – all of which are methods derived from nautch repertoire (as detailed by Walker earlier in this paper). She expresses Radha’s joy at the coming of the monsoon with seemingly unrestrained, even somewhat ungraceful, leaps and jumps – highly uncharacteristic of “proper” depictions of the demure Radha in India.

This marginalization of eroticism in classical dance was not a process unique to Kathak. In fact, there is comprehensive documentation of and commentary on the similar “purification” of Bharatanatyam, a classical dance from Tamil Nadu in South India, and its elevation to a national dance in postcolonial India. The documentary “From Sadir to Bharatnatyam” directed by Viveka Chauhan, details the creation of contemporary Bharatanatyam from erstwhile Sadir, the dance of the devadasis, who were similar to tawaifs. The documentary features an interview with Dr. S. Anandhi, a professor of sociology at the Madras Institute for Development Studies. Dr. Anandhi says (reiterating some of the things already discussed in this essay): “Nationalists wanted to save dance as a pure art form and elevate it to a position of national art ... they identified devadasis as sensual subjects – whereas the art itself is not sensual, and the art needed to be a pure art ... being an ideal art which is performed by ideal women.” Later in the documentary, Bharatanatyam exponent Navtej Johar elaborates on this idea of “sensuality,” describing it as a sort of attuned-ness, which I find particularly interesting. Citing the famous Indian modern dancer Chandralekha, he explains how when sensuality as a mode of embodiment is forced into the realm of the visual and cosmetic, it becomes “grotesque,” inorganic – instead of a reflection of energetic awakening, alertness, and attunement. In other words, “sensuality” used

to be thought of as exactly that – a dynamic bodily energy richly connected to the senses, as opposed to a certain aesthetic or cosmetic visual template. This was precisely also why tawaifs were only understood as sex workers by Western-educated nationalists and British authorities – this embodied sensuality is fundamentally at odds with the rigid dualisms that underpin Western philosophies (the mind/body dualism being one of them).

So in this context, the nationalist construction of Indian classical dance as simultaneously devotional, spiritual, but divorced from sensuality reveals a paradoxical, difficult cultural understanding of embodiment – specifically female embodiment (given that this reconstruction was directly responding to a female-dominated dance tradition). Indian nationalism created a public sphere in which body and spirit were suddenly wrenched apart – or rather, that relationship was reworked in such a way that the body became a vessel for the spirit. Dancers like Chandralekha have attempted to wrestle with this binary and “rescue” the body. Some Kathak dancers, such as Manjari Chaturvedi, have even attempted directly to reclaim darbari (courtly) Kathak. In a 2015 retrospective called “Lost Songs of the Courtesans,” Chaturvedi staged a re-imagining of darbari Kathak. The performance was promoted as “dance re-lived and stories re-told,” and featured intervals of Chaturvedi performing and Neesha Singh narrating tales about famous courtesans and their achievements. At the end of the performance, Chaturvedi gave a short speech on the courtesans and the necessity of re-examining Kathak history. Interestingly, she frames the “reclamation” of tawaif tradition in the vocabulary of liberal feminism: “In today’s times when we are talking about women’s liberation and feminism,” Chaturvedi says, “we talk about Deepika Padukone [using] her own choice ... what about Hazarina Begum, who comes draped head-to-toe in a Benarasi sari and sings traditional compositions – where is her right?” Here Chaturvedi is less engaged in a battle to “rescue the

body,” but rather to establish a new rubric of respectability to propel the destigmatization of Kathak’s connection to tawaifs. She frames it as a matter of individual choice and expression of sexuality, rather than a reframing of sexuality itself. Other dancers, such as Chandralekha, while not operating in a strictly classical mode, have called for a rigorous philosophical rethinking of the body’s role in dance, or rather the role of dance in enriching embodiment.

IN CONCLUSION: RETHINKING BODY IN INDIAN CLASSICAL DANCE

Ultimately we see that the reinvention of Kathak, amongst other art forms in colonial and postcolonial India served to uphold the nation-building process and the creation of a new public modernity. With the acceleration of the globalized, transnational flow of commodity and images, a new age of media and cultural aesthetics is on the rise in India. Chakravorty argues that the Indian public sphere is no longer dominated by a “homogenous, bourgeois national domain” that selectively appropriates European modernity – rather, in India post-economic liberalization, the public sphere is shaped by nationalistic ideologies of the past and “heritage,” as well as a dynamic, rapidly growing market economy (76). As of today, Kathak has been understood in three different contexts: the ancient Vedic temple (characterized by devotion and storytelling), the Mughal court or the aristocratic home (characterized by sensuality and grace), and the contemporary stage (where “innovation” is now a leading buzzword). We can see that each context engenders a particular framework for understanding body, narrative, and the performer-audience relationship. In this paper I have shown how Indian nationalism organized around the woman’s body, specifically the regulation of her sexuality, produced a new classical form upon which to sustain its nation-building project. Through the selective appropriation of modernity and Indian classical dance, the state constructed a new womanhood within which to foster and nurture the spiritual essence of indigeneity. Today, many Kathak dancers are attempting to

highlight the form's lost tawaif tradition, and "reclaim" the eroticism that was stripped from the form – but of course this project of "reclamation" can be further complicated in a separate paper. Kathak proves itself to be a fascinating site of study to examine the collisions of gendered nationalism and syncretic history in India – these intersections create a host of interesting questions that can be asked about contemporary cultural understandings of embodiment, sensuality, and spirituality in the subcontinent.

As I have shown, the political processes involved in shaping Kathak also shaped a new regime for embodiment and sexuality in public performance. Following this we can ask: how can we complicate the notion of body as mere vessel for mental processes? Can the body ever "speak for itself"? How can "body language" be put to different uses? Indian classical dance theory in particular lends itself well to this line of questioning, as it details an elaborate theory of spectatorship using ideas such as *rasa* – a Sanskrit word used to describe the "juice" or "essence" of aesthetic experience. Body and poetry are many times collapsed in *rasa* theory; this collapsing opens up space to investigate "body language" and embodied metaphor. Even in this brief examination of Kathak, we see opportunities for this line of inquiry – what does it mean for a dancer to enact or "embody" a thumri or ghazal – or any lyrical poetry? Can we understand the physical embodiment of poetry with a framework that goes beyond "representation" to explore the full potential of metaphor as an aesthetic mode? And, most importantly – what are the political implications of these new questions? We can only begin to imagine how our relationships to other people and to art would change if our bodies become more porous, more communicative. The Indian classical tradition, with its rich philosophical base and practice, proves itself to be a fertile ground for these inquiries.

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