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Date

“*Nāṭya* From Within”:  
A Practical Theology-Based Analysis of  
Classical Indian Dance Pedagogy in the United States

By

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Arthi Devarajan  
B.A., Emory University, 2001  
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An abstract of  
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Emory University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
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2010

## ABSTRACT

*Nāṭya* "From Within":  
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Classical Indian Dance Pedagogy in the United States

by Arthi Devarajan

This dissertation analyzes pedagogies of classical South Indian dance in the United States, to determine the ways that pedagogical practices create and inform theology, social organization, and religious and cultural identity for participating dance communities. The primary theoretical framework guiding the research of this dissertation comes from practical theology – namely, the study of religious practices as living, prescriptive negotiations of communal value. The dissertation features ethnographic research at three field sites: the Natyanjali School of Dance (a suburban, primarily South Indian community in Andover, MA), the Fine Arts Society *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam* (a residential summer camp in rural Virginia focused on *Bharata Natyam*, a classical South Indian genre of dance), and the Triveni School of Dance (an urban, ethnically diverse community of dancers in Boston). Through performance analysis and the study of dancers' narratives, I explore how embodied practice, discursive exchange, social organization, performance, and imagination combine to form frameworks of religious and ethical knowledge in these communities. I conclude that through teaching and learning dance, communities of dancers negotiate a practical theology – social values and hierarchy, ethics, and religious identity – particular to the American Hindu diaspora. Dance, in this context, creates a matrix of social and ethical principles informed by bodily practice, experience, and imagination, as well as traditional sources of Hindu religious authority such as religious narrative, ritual, sacred image, and canonical scripture.

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## NOTES ON DIACRITICS, TRANSLATION AND TRANSLITERATION

Throughout the dissertation, I have used diacritical marks to indicate proper spellings and pronunciations of Sanskrit words in the Devanagari script. These diacritics follow the standard conventions for transliterating Devanagari phonetics into Roman characters.

I have also provided diacritics for Tamil words, although it should be noted that there is not a standard protocol of diacritical marks for the Tamil alphabet. My system, however, should be easily understood to most Tamil-speakers upon brief review. In summary, hard consonants க, ச and ட are rendered *k/g*, *c*, and *p*, respectively; these transliterations are left undiacritized, as there is no ambiguity about the correct Tamil pronunciation when read in the Roman script. However, the Tamil “t” and “r” sounds would be slightly ambiguous in Roman script without diacritics. Therefore, the hard consonant ட appears as *t* or *d*, depending on the word; the Tamil hard consonant த is indicated by the undiacritized *t*, except for the word *thaṭṭukazhi*, as a field informant suggested I use “*th*” there to correspond with convention in the dance world. The retroflex ண is indicated by “*n̄*”; ட and ண are written simply as “*n*.” The letter ற is indicated by a capital Roman “*R*,” while the Tamil ற is depicted with a lowercase “*r*.” I have used *l* for the Tamil letter ல, and *ḷ* to indicate the Tamil retroflex ள. And, as is becoming convention, I have used “*zh*” to transliterate the unique Tamil ழ. Vowels are left short or provided macrons as appropriate for their length.

I have elected to refrain from using the plural forms of South Asian words as they appear in their normal context, and rather, affix the English pluralizer “-s” to the root

words for ease of English reading comprehension. Thus, the Sanskrit word *śloka* will be written as *ślokas*, rather than *ślokāh*.

Similarly, for Tamil words, I have affixed “-s” to root words when indicating a plural, instead of using the Tamil pluralizing suffix “-kaḷ.” Therefore, the plural form of the Tamil word *thaṭṭukazhi* will appear as *thaṭṭukazhis*, instead of *thaṭṭukazhikaḷ*.

A glossary of terms is provided at the end of this dissertation. The following lists provide guidelines for instances where I abstain from using diacritics or italicization to offset non-English words.

Terms that appear undiacritized but italicized:

1. Hindu sacred scriptures that are well-known in non-academic contexts (*Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, Mahabharata, Ramayana, Bhagavad Gita, Gita Govinda*)
2. Words used commonly in English among these communities for dress and food (*salvar kameez, sari, dupatta, kurta, sambar, rasam, murukku, vada*)
3. The words *puja, avatar, arangetram, ranga pravesham, and thali*, which are used commonly by dancers even when speaking English
4. The name of the dance camp, *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam*
5. the *soḷ kaṭṭu*, or syllables of dance footwork (*ta tai ta ha, dhigi dhigi dhigi*)

Terms that appear undiacriticed and unitalicized:

1. proper names, titles, and terms of respect or hierarchy (Jeyanthi, Kannan, Bina, Preeti, Dhananjayan, Shankaracharya, Swami Chinmayananda, Swami Satchidananda)
2. names of dance styles (Bharata Natyam, Kuchipudi, Odissi) and music styles (Carnatic, Hindusthani)
3. Indian languages (Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, Sanskrit, Hindi)
4. The names of the dance schools Natyanjali and Triveni
5. Names of community organizations, centers, temples, philosophical systems (Chinmaya Mission, Sai center, Sri Lakshmi Temple, Bal Vihar, Advaita Vedanta, Divine Life Society)
6. Names of Hindu deities (Shiva, Bhumi Devi, Padmanabha, Ranganatha, Lakshmi, Ganesha)
7. Place names (Tiruvananthapuram, Tamil Nadu)
8. Titles of dance pieces (often put into quotes “Sarasijakshulu,” “Battu”)
9. Telugu language song lyrics (“Sarasijakshulu” and “Satyabhama”)

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **Introduction**

My interest in classical Indian dance began in early childhood, and grew throughout my life as I continued my dance education into my twenties. Ironic, really, as I was never a great dancer. Dance did not come naturally to me.

As a kid, I was always extremely tall for my age – I was usually the tallest child in my grade, even taller than the boys in my classes. This fact astounded my parents and confused my dance teachers, as even today Indian girls anywhere in the world are not particularly known for above-average height. Additionally, I have always been somewhat predisposed to a more – shall we say – substantial body composition. While my South Asian peers inherited their ancestors' lightning quick, rice-eating metabolisms and remained lean throughout childhood and adolescence, somehow my genes seemed to work differently! My stature was a constant source of self-consciousness and perceived difference as compared to my friends and peers in the dance classroom. While, fortunately, my physique hasn't seemed to impede me in most aspects of my life, somehow in the dance classroom, it seems to have had an impact in unspoken, embodied ways. Even at age six, I quickly developed odd body comportment while dancing. I was constantly trying to “contract” myself, to be just as petite and spritely as my peers in dance class – this translated into me cramping my arms and fingers, when they should have been straight and taut; I hunched my back and curled my neck downward to match my friends' heights, when I should have stood straight and looked forward. These bad habits were unending sources of frustration for my dance teachers, who implored me to

hold my arms high, and stand tall. Even once I hit adolescence, and my peers caught up to me in height and stature, I never quite outgrew those habits of shrinking myself in the dance classroom, keeping my elbows bent in and slouching low.

From youth I was always relegated to the very back of the dance studio, since I towered over my peers and would obscure my teacher's view while instructing us in class. Then eventually, I would always be assigned the back spot on stage during our performances. This was unfortunate, because as luck would have it, I would be horribly nearsighted before my eighth birthday and resigned to wearing round, thick, plastic-framed glasses to see even two feet in front of my face. On stage, my dance teachers would confiscate my glasses so that the owl-like expression they gave me wouldn't obscure my face, or mar the costumes my mother so carefully had ordered for me from India. The result – my only facial expression on stage would be a constant, prune-like squint to make sure I would not trip over one of my fellow dancers, or fall off the stage. Needless to say, I was never much of a performer.

But somehow, despite these experiences of learning dance and experiencing dance from inside a body seemingly not made for it, dance became a defining entity in my life. From the very first dance class I ever attended, I learned about the respect, love and reciprocity that exist between a teacher and student. I became enraptured with the narratives and mythology of Hindu gods and goddesses, as I learned to depict these episodes through gesture and movement. I learned about conquering fears, putting on brave faces, and the fine art of “fake it till you make it” as I climbed onto stages (with severely blurred vision, of course) and fumbled my way through dance routines, sometimes quite well, and other times pitifully. I also learned how life goes on, even

when you (literally and figuratively) fall on your face, or get tangled up. Or, when the stage catches on fire.

Dance taught me how to put on a sari so that it will not fall off, and burned into me the valuable lesson that a woman should never go anywhere without a few safety pins in her purse. To this day, I can still comb, plait and pin a dancer's hair, head jewelry and flowers, apply her eyeliner, lipstick and *bindi* (traditional forehead marking), fasten the scores of snaps, belts, ribbons and buckles of her costume and ankle bells, and get her onto a stage within ten minutes.

But dance taught me so many other things. On the one hand, it taught me that there is such a thing as body knowledge. And with embodied experience and practices comes an embodied authority; dancers with years of training, astute practice, impeccable execution and precise physical recall become repositories of a canon of knowledge, a language of movement, and a culture of its own. I learned to embody the authority that comes with experience, and was taught along the way that certain values or ways of living are the “right” values, the “right” ways – or at least, more “right” than other possibilities.

But as the years went on, I would come to reflect on these thoughts, lingering on them and even questioning them. Dance eventually evoked in me a strong sense of independence and boldness to question certain hierarchies and values that I could not understand. Dance taught me to see multiple perspectives – of a stage, a body, of stories or actions, of a community, a world. Dance gave me lifelong friends and the occasional nemesis; it taught me civility and diplomacy, and presented me with both role models and mentees. I learned the meaning of family and fellowship, responsibility and continuity.

### **The Lessons Inscribed in Dance Pedagogy: Central Questions**

How do embodied practices teach dancers about themselves and their world, in ways that discursive practices cannot? And what is it about dance, as a specific body practice, that teaches us in unique ways? When one learns an Indian classical dance form, one learns how to hold the arms high, or to move an ankle or foot; one learns to walk across the stage with a graceful, stealthy, or vibrant gait. One learns that holding the *śikhara* gesture with the right hand atop the *mṛgaśīrṣa* gesture in the left hand symbolizes the Lord Shiva – but if you mistakenly hold the *mayūra* gesture with the left hand, it symbolizes Lord Murugan, and therefore alters the story you are telling.

But dance also teaches concepts like community, authority and respect. Beyond the physical movements, the embodied expressions and gestures – which are surely important – dance pedagogy and performance teach, reflect and create identity, selfhood, belief, and values.

Dance, as a practice, also allows for diversity in backgrounds, perspectives and identities in ways that many other practices do not. This assertion is born from recollections of my own South Asian American upbringing in New Orleans, when there were fewer than 100 Hindu families in my local area, but (eventually) three independent temple communities. By “temple communities,” I mean separate groups of families who organized under common languages, regional cultures and practices, held *pujas* weekly at members’ homes, held potluck lunches or social events in nearby parks and VFW halls, and collected funds over the years, with the intention of one day constructing a Hindu temple to serve the community. While in the early years, there was only one Hindu

community, over time fissures emerged between groups of members about the type of *pujas* to be performed, the type of temple to be built, the type of practices to perform and teach to the children.

Communities became fractured by their opposing views on appropriate practices, and the proper place, time, aesthetics, languages and authority figures involved in religious practice. Yet, the daughters of these diverse, separate communities were sent to dance class together each week. Each Saturday morning, Hindu families from all over town found themselves pulling their well-worn Toyota station wagons, Mercedes sedans, and cluttered minivans in and out of the driveway of our dance teacher's home – the only dance teacher in our area. A car would pull in; a child (notably, a female child, age ranging from six to 18 years) would hop out and slam the door, then dash into the apartment to meet up with her peers, age-mates and friends for an hour-long dance class. One wonders what our brothers and male age-mates were up to while we engaged in warm-up exercises, rehearsing rhythmic choreographies, and studying the facial expressions of our dance teacher in her cramped apartment; at that period in my community's history, there were no parallel extracurricular activities or classes that boys would attend to teach them a performance art or other form of cultural knowledge. I remember walking out to lots of impromptu and casual basketball games, held in my teacher's driveway, as parents would wait expectantly in the car with the windows rolled down.

Nevertheless, when reminiscing about my peers and friends' weekend activities in our childhood days, it occurs to me that though our backgrounds were often vastly different, as far as the diversity within our local Indian American community would



allow, it seemed that our parents who supported and patronized different temples and organizations, and who disagreed with each other completely about the right way to continue Hindu practices in diaspora, somehow agreed tacitly that it was important to expose their children – correction, their daughters – to the art form of classical Indian dance, as some manner of religious and cultural education.

This story stems from my personal upbringing in New Orleans, Louisiana in the 1980's, and might have been particular to that time and place. Yet, as I have moved through the country during my education and research and have met Hindus from other cities, regions and backgrounds, it seems this story repeats itself in some way again and again.

A key phenomenon that inspires this project is the fact that dance has often emerged as a common practice among Hindu Americans, who might have no other commonalities in their chosen religious and community practices. Though families may frequent different religious and cultural establishments, speak a range of Indian languages and associate with different organizations, they are often willing and eager to enroll their children in dance classes – here, these differences are not as important as the benefits that dance provides. I wondered, what the benefits of dance are, in terms of religious pedagogy, and also why dance, over other practices, gatherings and opportunities, emerges as a key part of Hindu American upbringing. Looking forward, I also contemplated the ways in which dance would continue to serve as an important medium for exploring, negotiating, and articulating diverse Hindu identities as communities grow and change.

Two predominant questions that this project aims to answer:

1. What does dance teach, besides dance? Aside from the gestures, movements, rhythms and expression learned in dance class, how does the study of dance teach Hindus about authority, devotion, religious imagination and self-perception?
2. What are the ways that dance provides its practitioners opportunities to explore, develop, negotiate, and publicly declare identity, world-view, and religious values?

It is my firm belief that the answers to these questions, formulated from field observations and careful, interdisciplinary veins of analysis, contribute two important shifts within the study of Hinduism, and the field of Religious Studies more generally. For one thing, the generations of dance students in the studio today will be the leaders and voices for Hindu and Indian-American communities for the next fifty years, and beyond; understanding their pedagogies of Hindu religious and Indian cultural values at this stage in their identity formation process is important for learning about the future of Hinduism in America. Secondly, this dissertation's research gives practices the authority and voice to change the study of Hinduism, and other diaspora religions in the United States. This dissertation offers a case study of creative possibilities when scholarly analysis of Hinduism in America starts with practices first, and proceeds from there to explore communities' views on pedagogy, authority, and identity.

### **Primary Frameworks for Studying Dance and Identity**

This dissertation is informed by the theories and writings of scholars of religious practices, and the way that practices order the physical, social, and value-based worlds of communities. My principal methodological framework comes from the field of

ethnography, and in my own scholarship I have strived to conduct fieldwork and ethnographic writing with a strong awareness about the field's wealth of insights on subjectivity, reflexivity, power dynamics between researchers and the researched, and the craft of translating field observations to written text with honesty and integrity. Studying various ethnographies of performance also provided me with examples of how scholars before me have approached the fieldwork experience in performance settings, particularly in the art of participant-observation; these examples proved of tremendous benefit, preparing me to negotiate the numerous tasks of recording ethnographic data in often busy and noisy environments, and circumstances when I would be participating in activities, and unable to pull away in order to take notes or control electronic recording equipment.

However, despite the tools that ethnography afforded to me in my work, I often felt that perhaps another scholarly resource or direction would be useful to me, in exploring the ways that non-discursive, community-driven activities and commitments often create a sense of meaning and authority for insiders. I found the direction I was looking for in 2005, when I had the opportunity to participate in the Initiative in Religious Practices and Practical Theology, a graduate student program at the Graduate Division of Religions, Emory University. The Initiative, a project in collaboration with the Lilly Foundation Grant for the Study of Religions, provided graduate students with the opportunity to engage in coursework and scholarly discussion about the ways that practice is a critical part of religious life in America; it also included a practicum, wherein students had the chance to combine their own methodological backgrounds with this focus on communities centered around practice, by developing extended fieldwork

projects over the semester. Through this opportunity, I found appropriate vocabularies, concepts and scholarly resources to provide context for the phenomena I was observing in the field, among communities of dancers. Dance, for these communities, is more than an event or part of daily life; it is a practice which is comprised of dedicated community engagement, reflection, and meaning-making.

“Religious practice” is a concept that I have come to relatively recently, and while I have eagerly studied theories and scholarship of this burgeoning category of exploration in the field of Religious Studies, it is a concept that to date has been primarily applied to and situated in Christian communities. Therefore, it has been at times a struggle, at times a pleasure, but always a learning experience for me to integrate writings and works about the study of religious practices into conversation with my ethnographic observations about Hindu communities in diaspora. I discuss the applicability of religious practices and practical theology to this project further, in Chapter Two.

### **The Gendered World of Dancers**

The numerous, multi-toned voices of classical Indian dancers are the life-blood of this study. Their voices are clear in my mind – some young, some old, permeated with clipped New England accents, Southern drawls, or Midwestern regional slang – or alternatively, with the intonations and vocabularies of Indian English. But one thing is certain – of the hundreds of voices that inform this project, male voices comprise only a meager handful. In the various places and communities I have researched, an overarching reality is that most teachers and students of classical Indian dance are in fact South Asian or South Asian-American females. It is not my intention to write an

ethnography that essentializes the experience of any particular group – and certainly not of South Asian-American females. Rather, I intend to talk about the way these particular communities, which all happen to be composed primarily of Indian-American female dancers, have created their own internal structures of meaning and ethics through their own social, aesthetic, pedagogic and performative practices. I wish to acknowledge these groups' broader locations and communities, and their various inspirations, motives and goals, as they perceive them.

While I have no hard statistics about gender among classical Indian dancers in America or the ratio of female to male dancers, I can certainly share that in the course of fieldwork in three separate communities, having interacted with nearly 75 dance students and teachers, I have only encountered about six to eight male dancers. Males comprised only about 10% of my entire research sample – but I imagine that the broader picture of male classical Indian dancers in America may result in a slightly lower or higher number. One male professional dancer and Indian national shared with me anecdotally that this statistic held true of his experience of gender among dancers in India as well. There is certainly a need for broader statistical study of gender among classical Indian dancers, in the United States and abroad.

Like their female counterparts, the male dancers I have met range widely in age, from 14 years to 70 years. Their personal journeys and narratives about becoming classical Indian dancers are as colorful, winding and introspective as those of their female peers. And like the female dancers I interviewed, while certain male dancers practice dance as a hobby or past time, others aspire to pursue professional opportunities in dance. In other words, the motivating factors for studying dance, and the eventual goals and

aspirations as practitioners and performers, did not drastically differ between the genders among my fieldwork informants. However, elements of narratives naturally differed, and males shared with me stories about finding acceptance as dancers, both among their peers in the dance studio, and broadly in mainstream American society, where dancing is often considered a feminine practice.

Having heard similar narratives from both male and female dancers, and coming to know of the diversity of backgrounds and intentions that dancers articulate, it became all the more striking to me that there aren't more male dancers in South Asian American communities. As stated earlier, dance appears to be a religious and cultural practice that families eagerly seek for their daughters, regardless of their views or opinions of other forms of religious practice in their lives. This raises the question why families are so proactive about exposing only their daughters to dance as a valuable practice. Shouldn't they desire the same opportunity for their sons?

While I often discussed these questions with my fieldwork informants during interviews and casual conversations, I did not take on gender as a driving factor in my research, and did not engage in a close feminist analysis of my fieldwork communities. There is a definite need for broader research of gender, particularly the application of feminist theory and analysis, among classical Indian dancers – in the United States, in India, and worldwide. I eagerly await the day that more scholarship on gender in dance is available to answer some of these questions. In the meantime, and specifically for this project, I have aimed to allow my ethnographic observations, writing, and analysis to speak to the genderedness of dance as a religious and pedagogic practice, and gender's role in the creation of authoritative structures in lived Hindu experience.

This project is also framed in several other ways. All of my fieldwork communities are located in the United States, and two out of three are located in Eastern Massachusetts. It is also bounded by ethnicity, religious and national background, socioeconomics, and culture. Most of my fieldwork informants are of South Asian ethnicity. Most are of Indian origin, though a few have roots in Sri Lanka, Trinidad, or East Africa. Most informants are middle class to upper-middle class; nearly all have family and social networks that support their endeavors as dancers, providing the funding for dance lessons, rehearsals, costumes, musicians, special workshops, and other needs. A final way that this project is bounded is by the practices it explores. I use the phrase “classical Indian dance” in describing this project, because it centers on three principal performative genres which originate in India: Bharata Natyam, Kuchipudi, and Odissi.

My framing of this project likely leaves out a vast range of Indian classical dancers whose experiences and practices also constitute important wealths of information about the transmission, negotiation, and articulation of identity. Most significantly, this study’s scope does not include practitioners of other forms of classical Indian dance, such as Kathakali, Mohini Attam, Manipuri or Kathak. As it focuses on classical dance styles, it also excludes individuals who solely practice and perform non-classical styles of South Asian performance, such as *garba-raas*, *bhangra*, and other folk dance styles – although these genres’ increasing popularity in American contexts certainly has an affect on the cultural milieu in which classical dance practitioners live and perform.

## Classical Indian Dance – Genre, History, and Current Trends

Bharata Natyam, Kuchipudi and Odissi are Indian classical performance genres, with origins in the Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Orissa, respectively. These dance styles date back perhaps centuries and developed largely as a part of Hindu temple economy and culture; thus, the genres are intimately connected to Hindu mythology and Indian sociology and politics. Their contemporary iterations, however, are the product of 18<sup>th</sup> -19<sup>th</sup> century symbolic and stylistic reforms connected to the Indian nationalist movement. Choreographies are set to Carnatic or Hindusthani music, classical Indian musical styles which date back to perhaps the 14-15<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>1</sup> The musical verses, often written in Sanskrit, Tamil or Telugu, are mostly devotional in nature, and are comprised around a highly codified and legislated system of *rāga* (melodic structures) and *tāla* (rhythmic patterns).

Practitioners of classical dance, drama, and other artistic genres in South Asia regard the *Nāṭyaśāstra* as an authoritative Sanskrit scripture governing various aspects of performance and aesthetics.<sup>2</sup> Composed between the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E. and 4<sup>th</sup> century C.E., the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (“Science of Dance”) is said to be gift of oral knowledge from Lord Shiva, who narrated the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, or sciences of art and drama, to the Hindu sage Bharata, who recorded its content in written form for the benefit of humankind.<sup>3</sup> The *Nāṭyaśāstra* provides chapters of information on casting and producing stage performances; notably for the study of dance, it also includes copious information about

<sup>1</sup> Indira Viswanathan Peterson and Davesh Soneji, eds., *Performing Pasts: Reinventing the Arts in Modern South India* (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Farley P. Richmond, Darius L. Swann, and Phillip B. Zarilli, eds., *Indian Theatre: Traditions of Performance* (Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> Richmond et. al., *Indian Theatre*, 33-35, and George Kliger, ed., *Bharat Natyam in Cultural Perspective* (New Delhi, Manohar, 1993), 19-20.



music, voice, embodied movement, gesture and expression, and theories of aesthetics in Indian art.<sup>4</sup> The aesthetic theory of *Nāṭyaśāstra* is principally concerned with two concepts and terms: *rasa* and *bhāva*.<sup>5</sup> A third term, *abhinaya*, is also integral to understanding the fundamentals of Indian aesthetic theory.

Often translated as “essence,” “relish,” or “flavor,” *rasa* is a quality inherent in all expressions of art and performance, that resonates with human emotion in the viewers and connoisseurs of art.<sup>6</sup> George Kliger describes *rasa* as the “aesthetic contemplation of an emotional situation”; it is an abstract or theoretical principle that guides performance.<sup>7</sup>

He writes:

...*rasa* and *bhāva* [are] commonly translated as “mood” and “emotion,” respectively.... *Rasa* literally means “flavor,” “sap,” “juice,” or “essence.” The term has been employed metaphorically in the context of aesthetics to indicate the joy, delight, or bliss of apprehending an emotional situation aesthetically. It is also used to refer to the emotional situation itself as the object of aesthetic experience.<sup>8</sup>

*Rasa* is aesthetic “flavor,” predominated by a certain human emotion. The theory of *rasa* in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* makes mention of nine basic *rasas*: comedy, eroticism, compassion, anger, heroism, fearfulness, disgust, amazement, and peace. Artists (be they dancers, actors, musicians or visual artists) have various capacities to imbue their art with *rasa* depending on their skill or experience through *abhinaya* – embodied expressions

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<sup>4</sup> Richmond et. al., *Indian Theatre*, 35-84.

<sup>5</sup> Kliger, *Bharat Natyam in Cultural Perspective*, 20.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 25-37, and B.N. Goswamy, *Essence of Indian Art* (San Francisco, Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, 1986), 17-28.

<sup>7</sup> Kliger, *Bharat Natyam in Cultural Perspective*, 24.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 22-24.

and gestures of emotion. In the context of dance, *abhinaya* might include frowns, furrowed brows, glances of the eyes, and gestures of the hands or body.<sup>9</sup> The emotional response, resonance or “mood” generated within an audience member by the enacting of *rasa* is called *bhāva*.<sup>10</sup> *Bhāva* is often translated as “mood,” or “emotional state;” it is “the churning of the heart” that occurs when one experiences an artistic creation designed to incite emotion.<sup>11</sup> In the aesthetic system of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, there is a coordinating *bhāva* for every *rasa*. Thus, for the *rasa* (aesthetic “flavor”) of eroticism, there is the coordinating *bhāva* (“emotion”) of love; for the *rasa* of comedy, there is the coordinating *bhāva* of laughter, and so on.<sup>12</sup> In short, if *bhava* is the audience members’ everyday experience of emotion, then *rasa* is that emotion aestheticized, taken out of its personal and daily context, and made both universal and performative.

The concepts of *rasa*, *bhāva*, and *abhinaya* have traditionally comprised an integral part of dancers’ training, as they learn to depict the emotional content of stories and myths through embodied movement. It is striking, then, that though these concepts certainly were present in the dance studios of my fieldwork sites, the words *rasa* and *bhāva* were rarely (if ever) mentioned discursively as teachers conveyed knowledge to their students.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 23-24, and Rajika Puri, “The Interpretation of *Abhinaya* in Indian Dance: The Communication of Meaning in the Medium of Movement,” in *Dance of India*, ed. David Waterhouse (Toronto, University of Toronto Center for South Asian Studies, 1998). Puri’s chapter provides a comprehensive introduction to the ways that dancers incorporate hand gestures, facial expressions, and other forms of movement in *abhinaya*. It also explores standard practices of composing *abhinaya* sequences in choreography.

<sup>10</sup> Kliger, *Bharat Natyam in Cultural Perspective*, 24.

<sup>11</sup> Goswamy, *Essence of Indian Art*, 477-478.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> While students routinely learned other Sanskrit terminology, verses and concepts during their dance education, often in the case of learning *abhinaya* (facial and embodied expression),

Other traditional aesthetic terms were routinely used in the classroom during dance pedagogy and in conversations about performance events. Dance teachers and students often discussed the concepts of *nṛtta*, *nṛtya*, and *nāṭya* in their conversations about choreographic items and embodied techniques. The word *nṛtta* signifies rhythmic, fast-paced movements of the arms, hands, body, legs and feet in dance. Colloquially described as “technical” movements in dance class, *nṛtta* usually conveys no overt emotional state or meaning.<sup>14</sup> *Nṛtta* movements are a chance for a dancer to demonstrate her skill and virtuosity in the dynamic, athletic movements involved in classical dance. *Nṛtya* is a term for expressive movement, and refers to the gestures, facial expressions, and lyrical body movements often employed in *abhinaya*.<sup>15</sup> The term *nāṭya* describes dramatic elements in dance – the processes of portraying characters and enacting narratives to tell a story through movement.<sup>16</sup>

A student of Bharata Natyam, for example, would commence her or his training with learning the series of *aḍavus*, or basic steps of *nṛtta* (rhythmic movement and footwork); *aḍavus* constitute the building blocks of full-length choreographed items. Once a certain mastery of the basic *aḍavus* is achieved, students learn simple, invocatory items such as *pushpanjali* or *alāriḍippu*, which entail stringing several *aḍavus* together to form simple combinations, set to music and beat patterns. Students then progress to more

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teachers and students communicated primarily using English words and explanations, perhaps to ensure that students would understand the goals and techniques needed in performance in the language most comfortable for them

<sup>14</sup> Richmond et. al., *Indian Theatre*, 40-41, and Mohan Kakar, *Traditions of Indian Classical Dance* (New Delhi, Clarion Books, 1979), 159-160.

<sup>15</sup> Richmond et. al., *Indian Theatre*, 40-41, and Kakar, *Traditions of Indian Classical Dance*, 159-160.

<sup>16</sup> Richmond et. al., *Indian Theatre*, 40-41.

complicated choreographies of *aḍavu* combinations like *jatīsvaram* or *tillānā*; these items highlight a student's aptitude for *nṛtta*. Students also must master *padam* or *jāvaḷi*, items which focus on *nṛtya* (expressive movement) and *nāṭya* (dramatic acting); in these pieces, *abhinaya* (expression and gestural narration) is the principal mode of performance.

There is a trajectory to dance education that includes the celebration or acknowledgement of certain milestones in a young dancer's life, as the dancer gains proficiency and moves along in her mastery of different techniques of dance. The lengths to which certain dance schools, dancers and families choose to highlight these milestones may vary; while some dance teachers and schools celebrate them with large-scale productions and ceremonies of graduation, others may choose to acknowledge them far more simply – if at all. Some schools highlight the *calangai puja*, or “*puja* of receiving the anklets,” at a certain stage (perhaps two to three years) into a dancer's training, or after the study and successful performance of certain key dance items. Most dance schools follow a particular *mārgam*, or established menu of dance items which start at the slowest, least intricate or performatively complex items. The culmination of the *mārgam* and often the most highly celebrated level attained by a dancer is effective learning and performance of a *varṇam* or similar piece, which is marked by its long duration, lengthy segments of expressive *abhinaya*, complicated storylines requiring advanced skill in both *nṛtya* and *nāṭya*, as well as vibrant sequences of *nṛtta* (rhythmic technique).

In many dance schools, the trajectory of a student's aesthetic development culminates in the presentations of the student for *arangetram* (Bharata Natyam and Odissi) or *ranga pravesham* (Kuchipudi), which is the event of a dancer's first solo debut

onstage, performing a full *mārgam* with all its compliment items. The *arangetram* has become an aspect of dance education in the United States that in itself is worthy of in-depth analysis; it is seen as the culmination of a dancer's training and is often invoked by dance teachers and parents discursively, symbolically, and imagistically, as a motivating goal for young dancers in the early part of their training, as a way of encouraging continued practice and investment in the learning of dance. Not every classical Indian dance student may have a *calangai puja* or *arangetram*; nevertheless, the progress through the various items of the *mārgam* still remains an important model and goal for dance students and teachers alike.<sup>17</sup>

The teaching and learning of classical Indian dance in the United States was first noted in the 1970's, and has increasingly spread and developed in subsequent decades.<sup>18</sup> In the last decade, Indian classical dance has become more visible in the United States as not only the visible cultural presence and expression of the South Asian community, but also as a creative partner in world dance collaborations and social outreach projects, and even as a performance genre recognizable on American reality television. In the summer of 2009, California-based Bharata Natyam artist Mythili Prakash appeared on NBC's reality game show, "Superstars of Dance," which featured solo, duet and group performers from eight nations competing in a number of episodes for both individual and

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<sup>17</sup> Susan Schwartz, "She Stands Before Us to Bear Witness: The *Arangetram* and the Bat Mitzvah," in *Rasa: Delight of the Seasons*. This chapter in Schwartz' book provides an analysis of the *arangetram* as a rite of passage, akin to the Bat Mitzvah, that Indian classical dancers (especially young women) undertake as both an opportunity for developing and exhibiting virtuosity in the dance form, but also as a social ritual and custom that affords them a shift in symbolic capital or status within their communities.

<sup>18</sup> For more information on the history of Bharata Natyam and other classical Indian dance forms in the American diaspora, a good resource is Janet O'Shea, *At Home in the World: Bharata Natyam on the Global Stage*, (Middletown, Ct., Wesleyan University Press, 2007). O'Shea estimates that there are over 250 teachers of Bharata Natyam in the United States.

overall titles.<sup>19</sup> Prakash, along with a classical Kathak performer, and two teams of Bollywood-style folk and pop dancers, represented the nation of India.<sup>20</sup> The presence of classical Indian dance alongside Indian folk dance on American television is perhaps significant, in that Indian folk arts have enjoyed a surge in popularity in mainstream American culture in recent years. Folk dance forms from India, notably the Punjabi genre of *bhangra*, have taken strong hold in American university cultures as a part of campus artistic expression and collaboration.<sup>21</sup> Also influential to the perception and popularity of South Asian dance were the success of independent film “Slumdog Millionaire” at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences’ 2009 “Oscar” awards, as well as the popularity of other South Asian-influenced movies, television programs, recording artists and other cultural elements.<sup>22</sup> The presence of Indian classical and folk arts in the media, and public institutions such as universities and colleges, perhaps demonstrate the ever-growing consciousness of Indian aesthetic forms in broader American culture.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> NBC, “‘Superstars of Dance’ 2009 Season,” <http://www.nbc.com/superstars-of-dance> (accessed October 28, 2009), and Mythili Prakash, personal home page, <http://www.mythiliprakash.com> (accessed October 28, 2009). More information on Prakash’s appearances on “Superstars of Dance,” as well as links to video clips, are available on her website.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Bhangra Blowout, official home page, <http://www.bhangrablowout.com> (accessed October 28, 2009). The George Washington University in Washington D.C. annually hosts “Bhangra Blowout,” an intercollegiate *bhangra* competition which has garnered media interest from outposts such as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and *Forbes* magazine as one of the largest South Asian events in the United States, and has attracted corporate sponsorships from McDonald’s, among other companies. Other folk dance styles from South Asia, including the Gujarati genres of *garba* and *dandiya-raas*, and the more contemporary trend of Bollywood dance, have also risen in popularity among American college students and broader American communities as well.

<sup>22</sup> “Slumdog Millionaire,” official movie web page, <http://www.slumdogmillionairemovie.co.uk> (accessed October 28, 2009).

<sup>23</sup> A B.A. honors thesis by Nora Kleinman offers a close study on the popularity, culture, and experiences of Indian dance performance groups at Emory University, in Atlanta, Georgia. See

### **South Asian-America: Notes on Population and Community**

According to the 2000 United States Census, Asian Indians living in the United States constituted approximately 1,678,765 people, or 0.6% of the total U.S. population.<sup>24</sup> The 2000 census statistics for the state of Massachusetts, and the city of Boston, roughly reflect the same South Asian presence by means of similar population percentages. In Massachusetts, Asian Indians comprised (0.7%) of the total state population, with 43,801 Asian Indians counted in a total statewide population of 6,349,097 persons.<sup>25</sup> In the city of Boston, the census counted 4,442 persons of Asian Indian origin out of a total citywide population of 589,141, translating to 0.8% of the city population.<sup>26</sup>

A demographic analysis prepared by the National Asian Pacific American Community Development Data Center (NAPACDDC) in 2005 provides more recent numbers, although it describes population statistics for “South Asians” rather than “Asian Indians,” as the U.S. Census does.<sup>27</sup> The NAPACDDC analysis reported 53,007 persons of South Asian origin living in Massachusetts, or approximately 0.8% of the total state

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Nora Joelle Kleinman, “Put Some Culture Into It!: Indian Dance Teams and the Creation of Identities and Communities at an American University” (B.A. thesis. Emory University, 2008).

<sup>24</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, “Profile of General Demographic Characteristics of the United States, 2000,” under “Demographics,” <http://censtats.census.gov/data/US/01000.pdf> (accessed February 6, 2010).

<sup>25</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, “Profile of General Demographic Characteristics of the State of Massachusetts, 2000,” under “Demographics,” <http://censtats.census.gov/data/MA/04025.pdf> (accessed February 6, 2010).

<sup>26</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, “Profile of General Demographic Characteristics of the City of Boston, 2000,” under “Demographics,” <http://censtats.census.gov/data/MA/1602507000.pdf> (accessed February 6, 2010).

<sup>27</sup> National Asian Pacific American Community Development Data Center (NAPACDDC), *South Asian Demographic Analysis* (Los Angeles: National Asian Pacific American Community Development Data Center and UCLA Asian American Studies Center, May 17, 2005). This report is available for review at the stable URL [http://southasianforum.org/pdfs/Census\\_Fact\\_Sheet.pdf](http://southasianforum.org/pdfs/Census_Fact_Sheet.pdf) (accessed February 6, 2010).

population. The demographic analysis also reveals that roughly 3,221,910 individuals within the total U.S. population of South Asians fall in the age range of 0-17 years of age – roughly 27% of the total South Asian population in the United States. Additionally, it reveals that in 2005, 37% of the South Asian ethnic population in the U.S. was native-born (i.e. born in the United States), while 63% were born in other nations; it also reports that 50% of South Asians had become naturalized U.S. citizens, while the other 50% still remained foreign nationals.

A private market research firm specializing in media strategies for ethnic niche communities in the U.S. claims that between the years 1990 and 2000, the South Asian community in the United States grew by 109.5%, making it one of the fastest-growing ethnic communities in the country.<sup>28</sup> The NAPACDDC survey states that there were nine major South Asian community organizations in the state of Massachusetts in 2005, though it does not specify the names of these groups or their primary objectives. In speaking with fieldwork informants anecdotally, I heard estimates that there were over 20 South Asian community organizations in the local area of Boston, each serving different goals and aspects of the community's needs.

The census figures and data surveys about South Asians in the United States, Massachusetts, and the city of Boston reveal a rapidly growing community with a large population of youth under age 18 years. While the scope of this project did not exclude dancers over age 18, all of the dance schools featured have large populations of children and young adults, and have as a primary objective the cultivation of awareness and appreciation for aesthetics, culture and identity rooted in South Asian heritage.

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<sup>28</sup> Allied Media Inc., "South Asian American Demographics," <http://www.allied-media.com/southasian/south%20asian%20demographics.html> (accessed February 6, 2010).



### **The Cast of Characters: Three Fieldwork Communities**

The ethnographic research for this project took place at three different field sites, each different in its rendering of dance practices, physical environment, interpretations of myth and narrative, and of course the colorful, vibrant personalities who comprise them.

The first context of field observation is the Natyanjali School of Dance in Andover, Massachusetts, founded and directed by Mrs. Jeyanthi Ghatraju. I first spoke with Jeyanthi when cold-calling dance teachers off of the Lokvani directory in the Boston area in September 2007.<sup>29</sup> I had noticed that she taught classes in Andover, a large suburban town with a significant population of South Indians; I was interested in including a suburban context of dance pedagogy in my research, and had called a few other dance teachers in the area before finally connecting with Jeyanthi. She warmly invited me to meet her the following weekend at her dance class in Andover. We spent a short period getting to know one another, and she took interest in my dissertation interests as well as the fact that I had spent time in Madurai studying Tamil in the American Institute of Indian Studies' language training program. Jeyanthi welcomed me to observe of her dance classes as much as I cared to as part of my research, and I promptly drove up to Andover for my first experience at her class on September 7, 2007. I continued visiting Jeyanthi's classes and conducting fieldwork there each Saturday from

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<sup>29</sup> Lokvani, directory of dance teachers in Boston area, <http://www.lokvani.com> (accessed c. September 4, 2007). Lokvani is an online directory and newsletter serving the South Asian community of New England; it features articles and calendars of local events relevant to the South Asian community, and has a detailed directory of dance and music teachers, beauty salons, insurance agents, doctors, tax preparers and other services that are run by South Asians in the local area.

September 2007 through January 2009, and periodically continue to drive the 30 miles to Andover to visit with Jeyanthi and her students when I can.

Andover is a small city around 35 miles north of Boston proper; the approximate population is 30,000. It is home to a sizeable community of South Asian immigrants, particularly from Tamil, Kannada, Telugu and Malayalam linguistic communities. Also noteworthy is the large percentage of Hindus from these communities who follow the tenets and principles of the Chinmaya Mission, a global Vedanta organization founded by Swami Chinmayananda. The large Chinmaya following in Andover is evident in the Chinmaya Maruti Temple, a new and attractive facility that serves as both a temple and community center, where Bal Vihar (Hindu “Sunday School”) classes and weddings, music and dance performances, and weekly *satsaṅgs* (teachings) are held. During my months of ethnographic observation at Natyanjali, classes were primarily held on weekends at rented space in the Chinmaya Maruti temple. When the temple suspended space rentals in May 2008 to commence renovations, Ghatraju moved classes first to a Sunday School classroom at the West Parish Church, and later to the preschool building of the Ballardvale United Church, both also in Andover.

Ghatraju has taught dance in Andover for nearly a decade, and has students ranging in age from five years to adult. She has approximately 25 students in total at the present time. Students primarily hail from suburban areas around Andover. While many of the students and their families who identify as Hindu are affiliated with the Chinmaya center and organization, others are not. There are also students who do not identify as Hindu at all, who identify instead with Christian religious backgrounds. These students

come to the center simply for dance class and do not participate in other activities of the center.

Ghatraju's students perform primarily at events held at the Chinmaya Maruti Temple in Andover, and the Sri Lakshmi Temple in Ashland, Massachusetts; they do not regularly perform at broader, more public or secular locations, unless invited specially to do so. This may be due to the relatively recent establishment of the Natyanjali School as an official "school" of dance in the area; it may also be on account of the comparative young ages and beginner skill levels of students as compared to other older, more established schools. Or it may also be a function of logistics, in that Hindu religious organizations to date have been the primary support and resource for dance classes and performances, providing space and opportunities for dance classes to take place. To date, nearly all of the Natyanjali School's performances have been free and unticketed, and are usually very intimate in nature, with minimal stage décor, and students dancing to their teacher's live singing and cymbal beats, rather than recorded music or live orchestra. The audience is usually comprised of the dancers' parents, siblings and relatives. Following performances, the dancers' families often provide a potluck meal or snack for each other, again indicating a closeness and intimacy that demonstrates the private nature of performance contexts. The Natyanjali School of Dance attracts new students and dancers primarily by word-of-mouth through the family members of other dancers. New students often hear of Ghatraju's dance classes when moving to the area, and choose to join her school because of her association with a particular *guru* (master-teacher) and lineage of dance in India.

The second context of dance instruction in this project is the Fine Arts Society *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam* (Bharata Natyam Dance Camp), a five-week summer camp for Bharata Natyam students across the United States, held in Buckingham, Virginia. To my knowledge, when it was begun in the late 1980's, it was the only intensive camp for Bharata Natyam training of its kind in the United States. Though other dance workshops are now held in various locations in the U.S. during the summer months, the Fine Arts Society camp in Virginia remains the only in-residence summer camp focused on classical Indian dance in the U.S.

The Fine Arts Society Camp is led by renowned Bharata Natyam artists Mrs. Shanta and Mr. V.P. Dhananjayan, alumni of the Kalakshetra Academy of Dance in Chennai, India, when it was directed by Rukmini Devi Arundale in the 1950's. The Dhananjayans are a husband-and-wife team of dance instructors and performers, and are citizens and residents of Chennai, India. They have toured the world, performing in and directing Bharata Natyam dance ballets and giving lecture-demonstrations about classical Indian arts since the late 1970's. They have also traveled to the U.S. each summer since 1989 for the explicit purpose of instructing American-born South Asian children and young adults in Bharata Natyam at the camp in Virginia. Mrs. Padmarani Rasiyah-Cantu, also a South Asian-born adult professional dancer, is the administrator of the camp and teaches dance alongside the Dhananjayans.

The Fine Arts Society camp is held on the grounds of the Sri Swami Satchidananda Ashram and Light of Truth Universal Shrine. Known as "Yogaville" to its adherents, this 1000-acre campus of dormitories, classrooms, assembly halls and sacred spaces was founded by Sri Swami Satchidananda, a spiritual leader originally from Tamil

Nadu. The ashram serves as a center for his devotees and spiritual descendents who follow the practices of Integral (*hatha*) yoga and meditation that he advocated. The physical space and location of the dance camp on the Yogaville premises is significant in that there is a clear understanding of space as sacred and religious; however, this religious space is not purely “Hindu” per se, but the religious space of an interfaith spiritual community with strong Hindu roots.

The Fine Arts Society summer camp provides a rigid schedule of classes and activities for its participants in its aim to strengthen their knowledge and skills in Bharata Natyam. Students range in age from eleven years to adult; they participate in many activities as a cohesive group regardless of age or skill level, whereas in other activities students are grouped according to skill and years of training. The daily schedule includes *hatha* yoga training, studio warm-up and exercises classes, training in *aḍavus* (basic steps), repertoire classes, dance theory, Carnatic vocal music, and nightly *bhajan* (communal singing of hymns). Students spend approximately six hours each day in the dance studio. The dance camp concludes each summer with a performance event, which the camp teachers prefer to call a “studio demonstration;” the show takes place in the students’ dance studio, the site of daily training and practice during camp, and is conducted with only simple décor and ornamentation. Students wear colorful but simple attire, minimal jewelry and ankle bells, rather than the usual full costuming seen in Bharata Natyam recitals. Dancers open the performance with a recitation of *ślokas* (Sanskrit prayers) learned at camp, provide brief demonstrations of dance theory studied in class, sing a selection or two of Carnatic vocal music, then perform a few dance items

to taped musical accompaniment. The campers' families and residents of the ashram comprise the small audience.

The residential aspect of this dance camp adds an important dimension to this study of dance and embodied learning. Students hail from across the U.S. (and in some cases, from abroad), and come together to live in dormitory-style housing. They share their meals in a communal hall and split responsibilities of cleaning and sweeping the dance studio each morning. The residential and geographic contexts of the dance summer camp provide an interesting contrast to the dance schools being studied in Boston, which are inherently tied to students' urban or suburban environments, and the structure and schedules of their daily lives in each setting.

I first came to know of the Fine Arts Society *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam* in 1994, when I was 15 years old; my mother, a former Carnatic vocal music student at the renowned Kalakshetra institute of classical arts in the 1950's and 1960's, was a contemporary of the Dhananjayans while they were studying dance there. She had kept abreast of their career and performances periodically through the years, and heard that they had initiated an intensive dance workshop in Virginia some years earlier. At the time, I was studying Bharata Natyam with Mrs. Padmini Chari, a student of Adyar K. Lakshmanan, a senior dance *guru* and classmate of the Dhananjayans at Kalakshetra. I became intrigued about the camp after my mother told me about it, and first attended the introductory camp session as a student in 1996; I returned in 1997 to the advanced session. When contemplating dissertation fieldwork, I recalled my experiences at the dance camp and knew that an ethnographic analysis of the culture of dance pedagogy there would be a valuable contribution to the study. I contacted one of the camp

administrators, who informed me that the only way to observe and research the proceedings at dance camp would be to enroll as a camp student, and participate in all activities alongside other dancers. I also sent an email to the Dhananjayans seeking their permission to conduct research; they remembered me and my family and were agreeable to the project. Energized about the research opportunity, but reluctant about the physical challenges of dancing alongside teenagers again, I sent my registration forms in, and frantically began a rigorous exercise program. I attended the beginner and intermediate/advanced dance camps in the summer of 2007 as a pre-dissertation research endeavor, and returned in the summer of 2008 to conduct dissertation research.

The third site of research for this dissertation is the Triveni School of Dance, a privately-owned dance studio and company housed in Brookline, a neighborhood in the heart of metropolitan Boston, Massachusetts. Mrs. Neena Gulati, founder and director of the Triveni School of Dance, immigrated to the United States in the 1960's from New Delhi; she soon afterward started Triveni as the first school of Indian classical dance in the Boston area. I met Neenaji in the same way that I met Jeyanthi – through a cold call to her school on August 19, 2007, after finding her number in the Lokvani directory.<sup>30</sup> I had identified three or four teachers who ran dance schools in the metropolitan Boston area, and was eager to include an urban site of dance education in my dissertation project. Neenaji happened to be the first teacher I called. I had hardly finished introducing myself and giving a brief description of my research interests before Neenaji enthusiastically interrupted me, informing me that she would be conducting an *arangetram* rehearsal that same afternoon with a full live orchestra, and that I was welcome to come by and

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<sup>30</sup> Lokvani, directory of dance teachers in Boston area, <http://www.lokvani.com> (accessed c. August 19, 2007).

observe. I quickly made my way to her home studio, and observed the full three hour rehearsal with excitement. Afterwards, I had a chance to chat further with Neenaji and explain the long-term nature of my research interests; she was once again supportive and welcoming, insisting that I come by anytime to observe classes, as practices at Triveni take place seven days a week, for six to nine hours a day. I was elated at my good fortune to find this bustling, dynamic site of classical Indian dance instruction within a two-mile distance from my home, and took advantage of the close proximity to conduct observation research there four days a week, from September 2007 till January 2009.

While decorated with many colorful pieces of religious art, Triveni is not associated with a temple or religious institution per se. Gulati teaches three styles of classical Indian dance: Kuchipudi, Bharata Natyam, and Odissi. Her school and its branches in Burlington, Massachusetts and Lowell, Massachusetts, provide dance instruction and education to over 230 students at the present time. During my sixteen months of research at Triveni, the staff consisted of Gulati herself, six student-teachers, and several assistant student-teachers. The students of Triveni range in age from five years to adult, and come from diverse locations within the Boston metropolitan area. Though many are of South Asian origin, there are several students who are from mixed heritage or who are not South Asian. There is often a waiting list for new students eager to join the Triveni School and begin studying dance.

Triveni students perform extensively in the Boston area, often with several performances a week at a wide range of locations. While students may perform in a temple or other religious space if invited, generally performances are held in secular spaces. During the year 2008, for example, Triveni students performed during festivals



and events at the Boston Hatch Shell amphitheater along the Esplanade, the Boston Institute for Contemporary Arts, the Boston Public Library, at several local schools, colleges and universities, and many other locations. While some events were ticketed, others were unticketed, publicized widely and provided free to the general public. Students additionally gave private concerts in invitation-only events, such as an *arangetram* (solo debut performances). There is a broad range of stage venues, décor, student costuming and fanfare at these performances; while some are simple in nature, others are full-fledged productions with carefully planned stage décor and matching, custom-tailored costumes. Students generally perform either to recorded Indian instrumental and vocal music or live classical Indian orchestra accompaniment, complete with Carnatic vocalists, percussionists, flautists and violinists.

As a result of the frequent and large-scale public presence of Triveni productions, and its apparent emphasis on the performance aspect of studying classical dance, the school has gained renown in both South Asian and general communities in Boston as training its students well in dance, providing structure, regularity and discipline through its classes, while encouraging creative and innovative applications of classical dance to new themes, musical selections, and performance contexts. Many new students of diverse backgrounds are attracted to the aesthetics of Indian classical dance after seeing a performance, and thereafter seek admission into the school to learn the dance genres they have seen.

## Chapter Summaries

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the theory and methods that provide the foundation for this research. It begins with a description of several key works in the study of religious practices and practical theology, including the work of Pierre Bourdieu and his concepts of *habitus*, *praxis*, and *doxa*. It continues with an introduction to the categories and terminology of practical theology – a field that has been of great influence to this project, in its manner of approaching the study of religious communities through their common, self-articulated goals and practices. Chapter 2 continues by outlining the critical works in the field of ethnography and anthropology that provide methodological direction to this project. In particular, it addresses the notions of reflexive and reciprocal ethnography, as described by Elaine Lawless, and also explores several models of “insider” ethnography, “ethnography-at-home,” and ethnography in the context of friendship.

Chapter 3 is an ethnographic study of the Natyanjali School in the suburban community of Andover, Massachusetts. This chapter describes the myriad practices that take place during an ordinary day of dance class at this intimate, close-knit community. In particular, it focuses on ways that the practices of teaching and learning dance contribute towards social organization, the negotiation of identity, translation and interpretation of sacred music and narratives, and finally the art of embodying Hindu devotionalism.

Chapter 4 is an ethnographic and participant-observation study of the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam*, or the Bharata Natyam summer camp, held in Yogaville, Virginia. The analysis in this chapter is framed by the notion that religious and cultural

summer camps inherently create imagined landscapes for their participants; the chapter also analyzes ways in which residential living and studio practices of dance create an environment and culture with openly-discussed and propagated normative authoritative hierarchies, behaviors of respect and propriety, and the embodied ethics.

Chapter 5 is an ethnography of the Triveni School of Dance in Boston's Brookline area. This chapter explores the ways that a dance community's decisions about performance, including the selection of music, movements and themes, the staging of productions, the interpretation of traditional narratives, and participation in collaborative projects in the mainstream community of Boston, all constitute practices of negotiating communal identity. Through performance, this community articulates its identity, and reflects on its own change and transformation over time.

Chapter 6 presents an epilogue to the dissertation, engaging in a brief comparison of the three fieldwork sites' differences and commonalities. It also provides a summarizing view on the stories and relationships within each fieldwork site, reflecting on the experiences of self-reflexivity and "ethnography-at-home."

Chapter 7 provides a concluding analysis to the dissertation; it explores the various practices that are shared between sites, while also enumerating the ways in which each community differs in its use, interpretation, and pedagogies of dance. The chapter summarizes the ways in which ethnographies of each community contribute to theories on religious practice and practical theology for immigrant, non-Christian communities, and suggests potential avenues for new research on dance that will help to fill lacunae for research on Hindu practices in diaspora, and beyond.

## CHAPTER 2

### **The Creative Margins: Theory and Method for the Study of Dance Practices**

In my first forays into the study of Hindu diaspora communities and their use of performance to express, educate, and negotiate traditional knowledge, I was instantly attracted to the resources that the field of ethnography provided me. Scholarship on participant-observation, field data analysis, ethnography of performance, and the relations between researchers and informants gave me guidance about fieldwork methods and seeking answers to my questions about performance and religious identity. But at times I wondered what other theoretical resources might exist to support my inquiry – resources which would provide frameworks to analyze communities who center their religious lives around non-discursive activities and rituals, rather than verbal discourse and teaching, and who consider these non-discursive engagements definitive of their collective and individual identities.

I was fortunate to find the resources I sought when, during my doctoral coursework, I received an opportunity to participate in the Initiative in Religious Practices and Practical Theology, a program at Emory University supported by the Lilly Foundation. This initiative has afforded me the opportunity to engage in conversation with scholars of religion who examine the ways that practices – lived engagements in religious communities – constitute an ordering and definitive experience for those communities. In the course of familiarizing myself with the theories and assumptions of practical theology, and finding a number of useful resources to provide language for the questions I wished to ask about dance in Hindu-American communities, it became

striking to me that I found this field of inquiry relatively late in my project design, and seemingly only with great difficulty. I began to wonder why this was the case. In my situation as a scholar of Hinduism, it took time and effort for me to be able to look beyond certain vocabularies and methods of practical theology that are heavily situated in Christian congregational culture and practices, and to find ways to apply the theories of the field to non-Christian theological, cultural and practical scenarios (perhaps an inductive application of practical theology in and of itself).

A second challenge was learning to re-envision and re-interpret the ways that non-Christian, immigrant religious groups organize themselves around beliefs and values. In many contexts – certainly, in the three communities explored in this project – the word “theology” is rarely, if ever, used to describe Hindu or Indian individual or communal beliefs, practices, or identities. Dance teachers do not use the word “theology” to describe their rendition of narratives about Bhumi Devi (the Earth Goddess), or the ten incarnations of Vishnu, even as they teach these stories and the embodied gestures that narrate them to young students. Certainly, the word “theology” is not invoked while teaching students about the ways to regard their elders, which hand to use while giving or receiving items to another, or how to sit modestly in the temple.

And yet, any of these examples can be interpreted as a theological teaching moment, a moment that conveys rich nuggets of social, cultural and religious information about core values, power structures, notions of authority, and sacred narrative. The field of ethnography provides the methods and analytical skills for recording these moments in the words and actions of field informants; but practical theology provided me with the theoretical impetus for doing so. This project’s experimentation with the application of

theoretical frameworks and vocabularies of practical theology to studying Hindu practices will hopefully give rise to other possibilities, opportunities, and benefits of exploring Hinduism from creative interdisciplinary spaces.

The Initiative in Religious Practices and Practical Theology provided me with a wealth of resources and theoretical material to guide my work; it gave me conversation partners to develop new ideas, and perhaps most significantly, with vocabulary to describe the events and phenomena that I observed in the field every day. My dissertation is organized around the range of religious practices of each of the communities in which I conducted fieldwork, and asks how these practices create value for practitioners' lives; in effect, a practical theology.

Religious practices are studied by practical theologians and ethnographers of religion alike, albeit with different goals and emphases, and this project benefits from the perspectives of both fields. Practical theology takes as its hermeneutic stance the notion that communities' engagement in specific practices speaks about their core values, beliefs, and ways of making meaning in the world. Ethnography provides methods such as participant-observation and frameworks of analyzing social hierarchy and voice. These two fields of inquiry, when used in conjunction with one another, allow us to explore the ways in which communities build, articulate, and operate around value systems through practices. Examining religious practices involves the ethnographic observation, research and analysis of practices in communities' lives, with the *assumption* of practical theology that lived, embodied, and communal practices are in

their own ways normative, imbued with meaning, constitutive of a worldview, and prescriptive of values and identity within communities.<sup>31</sup>

This project framed by the following principles: firstly, that religious communities engage in acts of lived faith and communal practice; secondly, that these acts are themselves authoritative, normative, and imbued with significance, independent of any authorizing written text, personhood, or outside force; thirdly, that the (inductive) study of these engagements by religious communities can reveal vital information about these groups' structures of value, faith, belief and identity; and lastly, that there is much to be gained by approaching the study of these communities with a sense of social responsibility, empathy and contextual awareness.

I now shift to a discussion of the primary approaches to religious practices that I have used in this dissertation, with an eye towards the foundational literature from which they have been derived.

### **Foundational Literature of the Study of Religious Practices: The Terms and Categories of Pierre Bourdieu**

The work of Pierre Bourdieu provides an important theoretical framework and vocabulary for the study of religious practices. The most important analytic term he offers is *habitus*, which he defines as “the universalizing mediation which causes an individual agent’s practices, without either explicit reason or signifying intent, to be none the less ‘sensible’ and ‘reasonable.’”<sup>32</sup> *Habitus* entails the rules and structures (both discursive/spoken and non-discursive/unspoken) governing practices within a

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<sup>31</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, transl. Richard Nice (Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 1977).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

community, that aren't necessarily "orchestrated" by one individual or authoritative body; they are communally-recognized, community-authorized structures of individual and collective practices that create their own normative order within a community.<sup>33</sup>

Alasdair MacIntyre, in *After Virtue*, argues a slightly different position: that individuals *do* have the agency and independence to choose to enter systems of communal practice and shared values, with their moral limitations. He contends that individuals do not find themselves in these communities automatically or against their will, although he acknowledges that their personal histories and locations of self amidst categories like family, clan, guild, and so on often influence their decisions to enter these groups. Nevertheless, once one enters into a community organized around certain set values of practice (a *habitus*, per Bourdieu), then certain social values and authorized power structures do create normative order, which the individual tacitly heeds through the very act of existing within the *habitus*. MacIntyre's view of personal agency as a factor of insider status within a *habitus* is significant in the study of dance communities, in that individuals seek out and choose to enroll in dance classes or continue their dance performance and training without outside restrictions or motivations; it also demonstrates their tacit acceptance or agreement (at least in part) to the social customs, pedagogic methods, and embodied forms of knowledge entailed in dance education.

Judith Butler's interpretations of the Bourdieuan *habitus* for the fields of performance studies and body theory are particularly relevant to this study of Indian dance.<sup>34</sup> She emphasizes that the normative culture of practices extant in a community's *habitus* are relevant not only to the cognitive, semiotic and value-centered experiences of

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<sup>33</sup> Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 72, 82-85.

<sup>34</sup> Judith Butler, "Performativity's Social Magic," in *Bourdieu: A Critical Reader*, ed. Richard Shusterman (Oxford, U.K., Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 113-126.



the community, but also to the experiences, expressions, and senses of the *bodies* of those therein.<sup>35</sup> She writes:

...Bourdieu underscores the place of the body, its gestures, its stylistics, its unconscious ‘knowingness’ as the site for the reconstitution of a practical sense without which social reality would not be constituted as such. The practical sense is a sense of the body, where this body is not a mere positive datum, but the repository or the site of incorporated history.<sup>36</sup>

Butler also discusses the ways that repeated performance, or “interpellation,” reify social position within the *habitus*.<sup>37</sup> Social position becomes a function not only of uttered, or linguistic, performance, but also social, or embodied, performance.<sup>38</sup>

A number of other Bourdieuan terms are important for this project. Bourdieu uses the term *doxa* to describe the normative practices and values within a *habitus*, endorsed by the group’s authoritative sect, its *orthodoxy*. *Doxa* is “consensus by common practice” – practices and values so unquestioningly normative, that the community is not even aware of them until confronted by “fields of opinion” which incite doubts and questioning of the existing norms.<sup>39</sup> The *orthodoxy* are individuals within the *habitus* who “[defend] the integrity of *doxa*,” they exist in opposition to the *heterodoxy*, who are dominated groups, attempting to push back the limitations of *doxa*, and discover alternative positions.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Butler, “Performativity’s Social Magic,” 113-115.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 113-114.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 114-116; 123-126.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 123-126.

<sup>39</sup> Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 164.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 168-169.

*Praxis* is Bourdieu's term for practice, which Rey glosses as, "what people do in society."<sup>41</sup> *Praxis* can be conducted individually or communally; when engaged communally, *praxis* becomes dialogical, requiring, in the words of Charles Taylor, "coordination, cadence, and rhythmizing," and is thus both discursive and embodied in nature.<sup>42</sup>

Bourdieu also writes at length about the concepts of *symbolic capital* and the *economy of symbolic goods*. For this study on dance, *symbolic capital* is an crucial concept; when, for example, a proficient dancer engages in the act of teaching, the dancer's own proficiency and reputation provide cues to the community that signal his or her pedagogy as authoritative and worthy of respect. Bourdieu's term symbolic capital refers to an economy of gift-giving that goes beyond a material or economic exchange; it is a transfer of social or symbolic value which is understood by both parties.<sup>43</sup> Rey suggests the formula "[*habitus*] (*capital*) + field = practice," to describe the relationship of social or symbolic capital with the *habitus* and individuals' experience of practice.<sup>44</sup> Bourdieu describes the economy of symbolic goods as a "game," played on a "field" (the

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<sup>41</sup> Terry Rey, *Bourdieu on Religion: Imposing Faith and Legitimacy* (London, Equinox Publishing Ltd., 2007), 39.

<sup>42</sup> Charles Taylor, "To Follow A Rule", in *Bourdieu: A Critical Reader*, ed. Richard Shusterman (Oxford, U.K., Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 35-37.

<sup>43</sup> Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 171-173. Terry Rey's analysis of Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capitalism actually reintroduces material value as an aspect of symbolic capital. Rey explains symbolic capital as "what is generated by pursuits, be it material or symbolic" (Rey, 39). He goes on to describe categories of symbolic capital as contemporary Western academic society might understand them, including items like "prestige, honor, professional titles" and the like; while these qualities have a value to their holder that is independent of financial value, Rey recognizes that they also work alongside material capital at times, stating that "Material and symbolic profit are thus often mutually reinforcing" (42)

<sup>44</sup> Rey, *Bourdieu on Religion*, 50-51.

symbolic site of struggle and action) that the agents all understand and tacitly agree to play with one another.<sup>45</sup>

Two final terms from Bourdieu's writings which are significant for this project are the terms *codification* and *euphemism*. The term *codification* relates to form; codes provide structure, genre, and universal systems of communication within a *habitus* which, according to Bourdieu, is a place that on its own is devoid of a form and order.<sup>46</sup> The benefit of codification to individuals within the *habitus* is decreased risk of "collision," or conflicts due to ambiguities, miscommunications or unintentional violations of the normative order.<sup>47</sup> Another benefit of codification is the establishment of form within the *habitus*, and therefore, notions of formality, discipline and propriety in practice.

Bourdieu contends:

To codify means to formalize and to adopt formal behaviour. There is a *virtue proper to the form*. And cultural mastery is always a mastery of forms. That is one of the reasons which make ethnology so very difficult: this cultural mastery cannot be acquired in a single day....<sup>48</sup>

This definition of code is of tremendous significance for studying the pedagogical practices of classical Indian dance. The notions of "a virtue proper to the form" and a "mastery" that takes time to achieve, are ideas that dance teachers imaginatively conjure

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<sup>45</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reasons: On the Theory of Action* (Cambridge, U.K., Polity Press, 1998) 97-98, and Rey, *Bourdieu on Religion*, 44. The rules and taboos of gift-exchange are one of Bourdieu's major research areas, and he has written prolifically about the same in numerous volumes of work. Chapter 5 of *Practical Reasons*, entitled "The Economy of Symbolic Goods," and Part II of Chapter 4 in *Outline* (1977) provide a good overview of Bourdieu's theories of gift exchange.

<sup>46</sup> Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 77-78.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

for students repeatedly, in an effort to convey the importance of gaining performative skill and mastery of movements through years of dedicated practice. And more broadly, dancers often discuss and adhere to codes that govern other aspects of dance learning, such as etiquette, interpretations of narrative into movement, music, and performance contexts. Dance classrooms are demarcated by systems of codification governing various aspects of dance learning.

*Euphemism* is the naming, tacit verification, and forward propagation of “unnamable” systems of understanding within the *habitus*’ symbolic exchange of goods.<sup>49</sup> Individuals often show support and endorsement of codification and *doxa* through euphemistic acts. Bourdieu relates euphemisms about the commonly understood culture and matrix of exchange to acceptability of form within that same culture. He explains, “Practical euphemisms are a kind of homage rendered to the social order and to the values the social order exalts....”<sup>50</sup> In other words, euphemism involves practical (often unspoken, enacted) ways of accepting and even propagating the rules, normative values, behaviors and structures within a community.

The concepts of *habitus*, *doxa*, *praxis*, symbolic capital and exchange, euphemism and codification emerge as valuable terms for analysis in this project on classical Indian dance as religious pedagogy. To provide an example of how these concepts might appear in the Hindu dance community and practices of dancers, imagine a scenario in which a senior professional dancer and instructor, nearly seventy years old in age and a lifelong practitioner of the art form, is teaching a young dancer of age sixteen to perform the *Aṭāṅā varṇam* (a lengthy choreography set in the *rāga*, or Carnatic musical key, of

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<sup>49</sup> Bourdieu, *Practical Reasons*, 98.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

Aṭṭāṇā). This item was choreographed by the Dhananjayans in the 1960's, and has been taught among their students and colleagues worldwide since then, in accordance with their original choreography. If we were to find disciples of the Dhananjayans from India, Singapore, Italy and Canada, theoretically the four dancers would (ideally) perform the Aṭṭāṇā *varṇam* in precisely the same manner, using the same rhythms, gestures, facial expressions, movements and step combinations to complete the intricate and fast-paced 23-minute item.

The dance studio in which the two individuals meet, the position of the teacher at the front of the room, facing the student; their modes of dress, body comportment, languages spoken, and other details would be just the start of a list of phenomena constituting the *habitus* of this dance tradition. The knowledge of movements, gestures, music and narratives that are conveyed through dance are all part of the *doxa*, or accepted authoritative knowledge, of classical dancers. The world community of dancers who have learned and mastered the choreographic knowledge of the Aṭṭāṇā *varṇam* are the *orthodoxy*, and the act of learning and mastering the piece is *praxis*. As our senior dance instructor guides her student through the movements and lyrics of the dance piece, she is exchanging more than just the enacted and discursive knowledge of the item; she also transfers symbolic capital to the dancer, inducting the novice into the *orthodoxy* of individuals who can claim proficiency and mastery of this dance piece. The dance piece, set to a particular music composition and taught from one generation to the next in near exact form, is an example of codification; there is “a virtue proper to the form” with this item, with little room for improvisation or change. Having learned the item to her teacher's satisfaction, the 16-year-old student might then choose to perform the Aṭṭāṇā

*varṇam* on-stage at her *arangetram* (debut) recital, and tacitly demonstrate her loyalty to her teacher's authority and the authority of her dance community by performing the precise choreography of Aṭāṇā *varṇam* without any intentional modifications; this act is a euphemism, where the student upholds the authority of practice and propagates it further through public presentation.

Of course, ethnographic observation discovers that changes do, in fact, occur in the transmission of code from one generation to the next. Dancers' varying levels of rote choreographic mastery, *rasa* (aesthetic virtuosity), personal attitudes towards the narrative and choreographic interpretations within dance items, and audience response may lead to intended or unintended modifications to the original dance text of Aṭāṇā *varṇam*. Choreographic innovation or reinterpretation takes place all the time, and fuels contentious debates in the dance world; nevertheless, within the scope of the Dhananjayans' pedagogic *habitus*, any deviation from their composition of the item would be considered symbolic violence to the code of Aṭāṇā *varṇam*.

The application of Bourdieuan vocabulary to dance pedagogy enables us to separate, analyze, and contextualize the diverse practices that take place, and the ways in which these practices convey value, authority, and power within the communities that adhere to them. Identifying the sources of knowledge, mechanisms of idea transmission, and social hierarchies within the rubric of Bourdieu's social theory allows us to gain a clearer picture about the power dynamics and processes of meaning-making within a dance school's *habitus*. The chapters to come, which present each of the three fieldwork sites and their range of practices, are an experiment in both Bourdieuan analysis of dance

practices, and an attempt to analyze these practices as practices of transmitting religious value and knowledge.

### **Practical Theology: Basic Concepts, Approaches, and Possibilities**

In *A Vision of Pastoral Theology: In Search of Words that Resurrect the Dead*, Stephen Pattison offers this definition of practical theology:

...pastoral or practical theology can be defined as a prime place where contemporary experience and the resources of the religious tradition meet in a critical dialogue that is mutually and practically transforming (Pattison with Woodward 1994).<sup>51</sup>

This concise definition perhaps speaks to the heart of why, as a field of inquiry into communities' religious lives, practical theology has special relevance to understanding American Hindus' classical Indian dance pedagogy and education. The classical Indian dance classroom in the United States is a living nexus of contemporary American immigrant identities, Hindu sacred myths and narrative, the social and cultural transformation of dancers, and the *Nāṭyaśāstra* ("Treatise on Dance," a c. 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E.-4<sup>th</sup> century C.E. compendium of Sanskrit scripture on aesthetics and performance).

Stephen Pattison and James Woodward's introductory text to practical theology provides a comprehensive background on the history and current aims of the field.

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<sup>51</sup> Stephen Pattison and James Woodward, *A Vision of Pastoral Theology: In Search of Words that Resurrect the Dead* (Edinburgh, Contact Pastoral Limited Trust, 1994); quoted in James Woodward and Stephen Pattison, eds. *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology* (Oxford, U.K. and Malden, Mass., Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2000), xvi-xvii.

Practical theology emerged in the context of German Protestant theological education in the late eighteenth century, as an effort to define, study, and implement theological principles driving religious practices such as worship, preaching, religious education and government.<sup>52</sup> As a part of their training for the duties of pastoral care within Christian communities, pastors undertook training in practical theology to study, observe, prescribe and guide the activities of communities that reflect religious tenets and values.<sup>53</sup> Initially, these pastors were trained in practices such as distributing sacraments, conducting marriage ceremonies, and performing funeral rites for community members.<sup>54</sup> Inherent in the history and development of practical theology is its Christian context; practical theology emerged out of cultures, authoritative texts, hierarchies, pedagogical models, and activities of (Western) Christian scholarship.

While the field continues to serve these functions for Christian communities and their leaders, practical theology has also expanded in a number of ways that now have applicability to broader religious and cultural contexts. In contemporary iterations, practical theology has developed a specific branch of inquiry dedicated study of religious practices in communities, which assumes that theology and value systems are not merely reflected and rearticulated in practice, but they are also created through these collective actions of communities. Rather than prescribing theology for communities from the top-down, so to speak, this new focus within practical theology attends to the ways that practices within communities are a means of negotiating, contesting, debating, and endorsing systems of value and belief. The things that communities choose to “do”

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<sup>52</sup> Pattison and Woodward, *A Vision of Pastoral Theology*.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*



provide us with rich, detailed knowledge about the priorities, ethics, and intentions of these communities from the ground-up.

These approaches, resources and models of practical theology, though developed primarily in Western European and American Christian contexts, have relevance and applicability to non-Western and/or non-Christian contexts of culture, organization, and value. This dissertation is a case study of applying the scholarly lens of contemporary practical theology as one mode through which to study Hindu practices, particularly the practices of classical Indian dance pedagogy, which reveal vital information about Hindu Americans' creation, negotiation and presentation of core religious and cultural values.

Woodward and Pattison write at length about practical theology's methods, intentions, and importance as a practice in and of itself, contending that practical theology is itself a "*transformational activity*," that it is "*confessional and honest*," "*contextual and situationally related*," "*dialectical and disciplined*," concerned with both "description (what is) and proscription (what ought to be)."<sup>55</sup> But perhaps the most important and specific comment on the methodology of practical theology is the discussion of its use of inductive methods of inquiry to explore the practical premises upon which religious communities build their systems of value.<sup>56</sup> Woodward and Pattison note that practical theology relies on an inductive methodology, wherein scholars observe communities' practices as a "text" that is equally, if not more important than tradition or (written) textual canons.<sup>57</sup> They write:

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<sup>55</sup> Pattison and Woodward, *A Vision of Pastoral Theology*, 13-16. The italics here appear as they do in the volume.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

One important methodological concept [for Practical Theology] that should be noted is that of induction. Often [analytic] thinking uses a deductive method whereby conclusions are deduced from authoritative principles or texts.... An inductive method proceeds the opposite way by looking at the reality of things as they seem to be and then formulating principles or general truths from this. While both induction and deduction can form part of the practical theological process, induction has a particularly important place. Practical theologians often assume that it is necessary to take the ‘text’ of contemporary reality as seriously as tradition and historically derived principles so that theology is addressed by and address contemporary concerns in all their multiplicity and confusion.<sup>58</sup>

A pivotal theoretical point for the study of classical Indian dance emerges from Woodward and Pattison’s description here about the use of inductive, rather than deductive, inquiry, to determine communities’ theological processes, authoritative ideas and systems of value. While it is true any form of (good) ethnographic research is inductive, in that it is directed by context, is dialogical with the communities it examines, and is attentive to data “on the ground,” I understand Woodward and Pattison’s definition of the inductive process in practical theology to be distinct in its attention to the prescriptive bent of theological practices within social circles – communities’ preoccupation with “what [they] ought to be”--and attempts to formulate communal

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<sup>58</sup> Pattison and Woodward, *A Vision of Pastoral Theology*, 10.

rules, codes, practices, and methods that communities use to achieve this ideal.<sup>59</sup> . The inductive research of a practical theologian, keeps the prescriptive aspect of communities' practices in mind as a primary and ordering factor in those practices. Inductive research in practical theology begins with observation of events and practices as a "text," providing authority and value to practitioners; in other words, *observing practices inductively, we intend to see how communities prescribe values and codes of behavior for their own benefit, and for the fulfillment of their own ideals of selfhood.* Practical theology generally, and the study of religious practices specifically, operate under the assumptions that communities' practices do not merely reflect existing theologies and systems of value in their actions, but they create and articulate new theologies and value systems through collective practices.

One may wonder how the inductive method of practical theology is different from the analytic methods purported by ethnography. In fact, ethnography and ethnographic techniques of field research, participant-observation, subjective positioning, writing, and analyses are vital parts of conducting practical theology research; the two go hand-in-hand, and the intersections of practical theology and ethnography will be discussed at length in the following section. But the two fields have slight distinctions from one another that are worth noting.

A first, key distinction is practical theology's focus on communities' prescriptions for fulfilling ideals, and the critical new value to the study of Hinduism that this attention to prescription might provide. Practical theology historically has a prescriptive bent, as it was initially developed among Christian leaders, by and with Christian authoritative

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<sup>59</sup> Pattison and Woodward, *A Vision of Pastoral Theology*, 13-16. The italics here appear as they do in the volume.

sources, for the use in Christian communities. In the application of practices for this study, I personally make no prescriptions about what these communities should be or should do, or how they should do it.<sup>60</sup> However, the communities themselves make these statements, and the frameworks and historical space within the field of practical theology for a prescriptive world-view is helpful in identifying the prescriptive nature of the practices of the community itself. In conjunction with practical theology, ethnographic observation of practices, activities, discourse and social structures reveals data about communities' ways of prescribing, questioning, or negotiating values for themselves. While attentive ethnography is a valuable asset to this project (a vital necessity, in fact), it is practical theology's focus on communities' prescriptive acts that has facilitated new insights on Hindu-American experience for this project.

The communities that comprise this project share two characteristics: they rely heavily on embodiment as a communicative and practical means of acting in the world, and they also are discursively and practically open in their prescriptive statements and values for their members and insiders. The study of religious practices provides an ideal framework with which to explore the ways that embodied prescriptive practices communicate theologies; that is, right modes of action, proper ways of moving, ideals of self-comportment and social hierarchy, and religious reasons for these ways of living.

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<sup>60</sup> While I envision myself as an insider to varying degrees at each of my field communities (and I explore this view later, in my discussion about ethnography), I do not extend my interpretations of these insider experiences toward knowingly making claims or prescriptive statements about their practices of choice. It should be noted here that the fact that I am not prescribing actions or interpretations for these communities could be viewed as a departure from historical applications of practical theology; however, emerging studies and scholars of religious practice take similar stances in their work, using the tools and methods of practical theology without personally assessing the value or efficacy of practices in negotiating theology.

A third way in which practical theology is a valuable approach to studying Hindu communities is its creation of bridges, both within the lived worlds of Hindu diaspora communities, and the scholarly world of religious studies. American Hindu communities, particularly the ones included in this research project, strive to find ways of orienting themselves towards religion in an environment that provides sparse external cues about Hindu practice; they choose to do this through practice. And simultaneously, living in a predominantly Christian society where acquaintances may inquire about their heritage, many American Hindus articulate a desire to be able to speak authoritatively about Hinduism, and to interpret their own sources of authority, knowledge, practice and culture in a way that translates across cultural boundaries. The field of practical theology interprets the things communities do as fundamentally correlated to the things communities believe, and developing scholarly research on this interplay will benefit American Hindus who are interested in understanding their religious lives and practices in relation to the traditions of others, in an effort to converse with religious communities around them.

The study of practices makes explicit a basic assumption about the relationship of actions and thought that undergirds research: *practices reflect and beget theologies*. The study of practices provides new vocabularies and modes of analysis for Hindu theology, ethics and values. These approaches have been long-standing facets of research in Christian communities and other Western religious contexts, but perhaps have not been a major part of parlance about South Asian or other non-Western traditions, which has often relied on textual, historical, anthropological and ritual studies as primary methods of study. The study of religious practices serves as a methodological spectrometer,

accounting for theological, prescriptive, ethnographic, embodied, discursive and non-discursive elements of Hinduism as it is lived in diaspora communities - and other religious diasporas, for that matter.

### **The Intersection of Practical Theology and Ethnography**

Mary Clark Moschella's guidebook, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice* integrates the assumptions and inductive stance of practical theology with the activities and methods of ethnography, providing a means of synthesizing numerous theoretical stances involved in this project: ethnographic observation and analysis, the interpretation of prescriptive practices, and conducting social research as a community "insider."<sup>61</sup> Moschella proposes that ethnography can be used to assist those engaged in pastoral work (or here, practical theology) to articulate the communal voice, engage with members' needs and aspirations, and reflect their decisions or changes appropriately.<sup>62</sup>

Moschella links her scholarship on pastoral ethnography with the theory of Pierre Bourdieu, calling religious practices within a group an expression of the group's *habitus*.<sup>63</sup> In contemporary religious communities, the *habitus* is experienced through the "sense-worlds" of practitioners, such as the ways individuals move in ritual, the spaces within which they engage in practices, etc. Moschella posits that participant-observation ethnographic research methods are most amenable to discovering the various aspects of a community's *habitus*, as the researcher can integrate with insiders as a fellow participant, to be present in contexts of practice and make meaningful observations. Moschella

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<sup>61</sup> Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland, The Pilgrim Press, 2008).

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-16.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

imagines that articulating the material, financial, social and expressive aspects of communities' practices can help communities gain insights about their verbally articulated priorities and intentions in relationship to their lived realities and practices.<sup>64</sup> Practices may develop from theological reflection, or practices may give rise to theology. In some contexts, theological rhetoric may lead communities in one direction, while their practices seem rooted in a separate or opposite frame of thinking. There are also times when practice transforms communities' ways of thinking and systems of value. Moschella suggests that participant-observation gives the ethnographer a unique perspective on the intersections of a community's practice, theological reflection, and core values.<sup>65</sup>

As a participant-observer, Moschella also discusses the ethical responsibilities and responsibilities of interpersonal relationship that a researcher should consider. She suggests that ethnographers have much to gain by demonstrating what she calls "interpathy," a concept taken from the field of pastoral and intercultural counseling; she explains:

Interpathy requires the listener to notice differences between one's own and the counselee's cultural experience, rather than trying to collapse them into a false bond based on the idea that 'we are really all the same.' .... Learning to recognize and honor differences, rather than either ignoring differences or trying to rule them out, is an important dimension of becoming a genuine community.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice*, 49.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 36.

It is useful to engage in a creative comparison of Moschella's notion of "interpathy" alongside discussions in the field of ethnography about the subjectivity of ethnographic researchers.<sup>67</sup> In a sense, both interpathy and subjectivity call for a recognition of power and difference inherent in relationships. Moschella's concept, which addresses the researcher in the position of pastoral counselor, describes a mutual process of "recognizing difference" with the "counselee" or field informant.<sup>68</sup> However, in that Moschella's notion of interpathy is drawn from a counseling context in which after the counselor listens for and honors difference, s/he is also, ultimately, in some kind of authoritative position (which the system itself accepts) to offer advice and feedback to the counselee.

Lila Abu-Lughod's feminist criticisms of anthropology explicitly question the possibility of both the objectivity of the ethnographer and equality between fieldworker and subject. She speaks about the notion of difference between fieldworkers and ethnographic subjects, asserting that if one can acknowledge the differences between "self and other," and also the ways in which these boundaries are often changing or in flux during the course of fieldwork, then "something will have shifted."<sup>69</sup> Ethnographic reflexivity calls for the researcher to attend to his or her own position, power and experience within fieldwork and the ethnographic writing process, while pastoral

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<sup>67</sup> Lila Abu-Lughod, "Can There Be A Feminist Ethnography?" in *Women and Performance* 5, no. 1 (1990): 12, 25, and Lila Abu-Lughod, *Writing Women's Worlds: Bedouin Stories* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993), 8-12.

<sup>68</sup> Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice*, 36.

<sup>69</sup> Abu-Lughod, "Can There Be A Feminist Ethnography?," 25.



interpathy involves a dialogic, cooperative process between fieldworker and subject to build trust, understand differences, and fostering “genuine community.”<sup>70</sup>

The concepts of interpathy and ethnographic reflexivity diverge in their contextual backgrounds and the kinds of power dynamics that order their applicability. However, both concepts have import in merging ethnographic study with an exploration of religious practices. In the course of participant-observation, the ethnographer has much to gain (both in personal experience and scholarly data) by including analysis of himself or herself as a fellow practitioner or community member with those whom he or she is researching. At the same time, research is strengthened by engaging in appropriate measures of discourse with research subjects about critical personal differences, and remaining honest about the goals of humanistic inquiry, but also the ways in which research is personally fulfilling and engaging for the researcher.<sup>71</sup> Moschella writes:

... Every time we are moved by the research or the relationships that are developing, we need not view the experience as problematic or as a detriment to the research. Rather, our responses – such as curiosity, excitement, or resentment – may be clues that we need to pay more careful attention to what is transpiring. We do well to record and examine our responses particularly carefully in such circumstances because they may be a sign of new insight or shared wisdom that is about to break forth, the truth that arises between us in relationship.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice*, 36, and Elaine Lawless, *Holy Women, Wholly Women: Sharing Ministries Through Life Stories and Reciprocal Ethnography* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 127-128.

<sup>71</sup> Research in the field of ethnographic theory concerning subjectivity and reflexivity are discussed in an upcoming section of this chapter.

<sup>72</sup> Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice*, 106-107.

Moschella writes that in composing a theological narrative about a community, the researcher should understand his or her role as one characterized by “humility;” that it is a vital responsibility of the researcher to share reflexively about what is learned from ethnographic study and writing, especially in moments of personal change, as they help “research partners” feel less uncomfortable about sharing their own moments of questioning and contemplation.<sup>73</sup> Moschella’s bridging of ethnographic theory with the languages of pastoral responsibility, morality, and even personal value (such as with the word “humility”) resonated with me as I engaged in my research, in that these qualities of morality and humility have meaning within the theological worlds of my field communities. Additionally, to be humble in the pursuit of fieldwork, and to share reflexively with communities, means to be honest about the moments of personal joy, excitement and curiosity when encountering new experiences, without being insincere or dishonest about the goals of ethnographic research. Moschella’s theoretical observations, situated in a system of theological value, propelled me toward further inquiry about ethnographic fieldwork within the context of relationships and mutual insider status within the communities with which I worked.<sup>74</sup>

Theologians Delwin Brown and Linell Casey provide background on historical developments, methodological intersections, and syntheses in the academic fields of theology, cultural studies, and ethnography, that perhaps provide directions for bringing together Moschella’s concept of interpathy, with its attention to shared values and cultural knowledge between fieldworker and research subject in pastoral settings, and

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<sup>73</sup> Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice*, 223.

<sup>74</sup> This research is reviewed in the second section of this chapter.

ethnographers such as Abu-Lughod who write about subjective, collaborative, and power-attentive methods in contemporary anthropology and social science research.<sup>75</sup> Cady's essay "Loosening the Category that Binds: Modern 'Religion' and the Promise of Cultural Studies" provides background about the historical shift of the fields of theology and religious studies toward the epistemological frameworks of cultural studies, as a way of gaining context specificity and moving away from certain essentializing and objectivizing trends that once were normative in the fields.<sup>76</sup> Her essay is an important reminder about the importance of certain scholarly assumptions and hermeneutics which are potentially taken for granted in contemporary times, and the groundbreaking nature of shifts in epistemology that have taken place in theological studies, allowing for new forms of interdisciplinary projects which encourage more collaborative and context-specific projects.

In the same volume, Delwin Brown's essay "Refashioning Self and Other: Theology, Academy, and the New Ethnography" continues from Cady's historical study in a more theoretical vein.<sup>77</sup> He first reviews the contributions of ethnographer James Clifford and his contemporaries to the "new ethnography," which Brown characterizes as disciplined, sensitive, self-conscious and self-critical, collegial and mutual in its analyses and reconstruction of selves (the selves of both fieldwork subjects and researchers), and

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<sup>75</sup> Delwin Brown, Sheila Greve Davaney, and Kathryn Tanner, eds. *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism* (Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>76</sup> Linell E. Cady, "Loosening the Category that Binds: Modern 'Religion' and the Promise of Cultural Studies," in *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism* (Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2001), 17-36.

<sup>77</sup> Delwin Brown, "Refashioning Self and Other: Theology, Academy, and the New Ethnography" in *Converging on Culture: Theologians in Dialogue with Cultural Analysis and Criticism* (Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2001), 41-55.

lastly, polyphonic.<sup>78</sup> Brown proposes that Clifford's "new ethnography" can also be understood as an important method in the field of theology, specifically a "practical historicism," or even an "academic theology," wherein researchers can collect vital information about communities' systems of belief and practice. He writes:

... James Clifford's quite expanded notion of ethnography is a useful model for understanding ... what I would call [an] 'academic' kind of theology. In Clifford's normatively loaded sense of the term 'ethnography,' one might say that academic theology is 'theography' or, more conventionally, the ethnography of religious belief, just as, for example, a certain form of political science might be thought of an ethnography of a particular political community's belief.<sup>79</sup>

Cady and Brown's essays serve as vital indicators and framing items of scholarship, putting the methodological writings of Moschella and Abu-Lughod into perspective with the interdisciplinary developments and histories of religious studies, theology and ethnography. The careful employment of ethnographic methods which are informed by interpathy and practical theological attention to (shared or divergent) prescriptive values between fieldworker and subjects, and the attentiveness to power, gender, and equivocality in the field, are important contributions toward furthering the development of cultural studies methods and data sets in the field of religious studies, and moving toward scholarly examinations of the local, context-specific nature of religious communities' practices and values.

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<sup>78</sup> Delwin Brown, "Refashioning Self and Other."

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

### **Lived Authority: Varieties of Religious Knowledge in Dance Pedagogy**

Conducting participant-observation ethnographic research in quiet, darkened performance halls, lively coffee shop conversations, suburban homes, and other diverse contexts has led me to understand the various ways in which religious authority is lived, practiced, and performed in ways amenable to various physical, social, and cultural locations, and amidst personal relationships. Ritual, dialogue, embodied communication and narrative combine, in these contexts, to create canons of religious knowledge that are shared and upheld by the dance communities in which I worked. The ethnographic works of Joyce Flueckiger and Leela Prasad has given me useful vocabularies with which to discuss and explore authoritative religious systems through plural practices.

Joyce Flueckiger's work *In Amma's Healing Room: Gender and Vernacular Islam in South India* explores the lives and community of Muslim religious healers in Andhra Pradesh, India, and the ways that written, canonical religious knowledge is often (re-)channeled through human relationships, verbal narrative, and ritual to create a vernacular religion shared by a community.<sup>80</sup> Flueckiger uses the term "vernacular religion" to identify religion "on the ground," religion as "mitigated through human relationships" – here, through the charisma and uniqueness of individual figures, whose personal love and compassion for community members helps to effect religious healing.<sup>81</sup>

I have used this concept of vernacular religion as an important framework within which to analyze authoritative knowledge in the communities of dancers, a unique vernacular site of practice shaped by time, space, and participants. The various

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<sup>80</sup> Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger, *In Amma's Healing Room: Gender and Vernacular Islam in South India* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2006).

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 235-237.

pedagogical contexts of classical Indian dance include concepts from Hindu philosophy, Sanskrit aesthetics, and written religious stories and epics; this information is often discussed openly and exchanged between teachers and students, without ever referencing or reading written materials and sources. Scriptural forms of knowledge are transmitted through the body and through oral communication; while isolated individuals may have experience reading written sources of religion, generally the communities I worked in are comprised of persons untrained in textual scholarship or reading of sacred text. The religion of written text, in dance communities, is communicated through individuals who often symbolize authority and knowledge *by their very person*; dance teachers, yoga teachers, housemothers and other individuals with some degree of authority, respect and seniority in their communities serve as examples of various aspects of “right living.” Their social position is additionally bolstered in that they may be seen as the “translators” or mitigators of scriptural religious knowledge as well. Teachers and elders, through the practice of discursive and embodied interpretation, serve as theological bridges within dance communities, engaging in an embodied practice of conveying traditional theologies in vernacular contexts.

For dance communities, religious knowledge may be comprised of textual knowledge, oral narrative, and ritual and dance embodied practices; another important category of knowledge in these communities is moral and ethical knowledge. Dance communities actively engage in the construction, enactment and negotiation of ethical knowledge through their numerous practices of dance, choreography, oral discourse, and narrative sharing. Ethics and moral propriety are discussed and negotiated from a complex and interwoven range of perspectives; dancers are surrounded by the normative

social values from Indian culture, Hindu religious knowledge, as well as American secular or social norms, etiquette and social practices, and also the values of other religions and spiritualities with which students have contact. Leela Prasad's book *Poetics of Conduct: Oral Narrative and Moral Being in a South Indian Town*, provides a useful theoretical approach for this task of analyzing traditional notions of authority alongside contemporary and creative embodied practices of religion in dance.<sup>82</sup> Prasad's concept of an "imagined text" takes into account that communities of people bring together memories and experiences, as well as formally taught-and-learned concepts, in order to create an overarching "imagined text" that informs moral decisions and practices.<sup>83</sup> Additionally, communities are often motivated by genres of performing religious knowledge that entail standards of personal, aesthetic and performative propriety, which in turn generates a "moral mood" reflective of the tone and ambience of the "imagined text."<sup>84</sup> While Prasad's framework accounts for oral texts and knowledge in her study of narrative ethics, exploring dance communities and their practices of ethical negotiation brings new forms of knowledge into conversations about how communities negotiate moral values. Body learning, sensory perception and non-discursive forms of communication contribute to memory, knowledge and experience, as well as to perceptions of aesthetic appropriateness and personal character – and ultimately, to ethical and theological thought.

Flueckiger and Prasad's works provide not only the theoretical notion that individuals are repositories of and channels for theological knowledge, but also models

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<sup>82</sup> Leela Prasad, *Poetics of Conduct: Oral Narrative and Moral Being in a South Indian Town* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2007).

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 144 and 227-228.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

for using ethnography to study theological practices as communities choose to define and implement them. Ethnographic research and writing for this project are informed both by practical theology's attention to prescription, as well as discussions about subjectivity and reflexivity within the field. The following section provides background on the ethnographic models for research.

### **Ethnography: Methodological Inspirations**

During the two-year course of fieldwork for this project, I amassed a virtual auditorium full of fieldnotes, digital audio and video recordings, photographs, emails and journal entries. Collecting and analyzing information on dancers' lives was an immense pleasure; I cannot deny the almost guilty feeling I revealed in while spending day after day surrounded by colorfully-clad bodies, dynamic and innovative choreographies, vibrant conversations, and the soulful *rāgas* of Indian classical music. But this period was also a time of anxiety and discomfort in many ways, as I questioned the very means and practices of ethnography itself as a method of analyzing these communities' experiences.

My approach toward participant-observation and fieldwork analysis are principally informed by the work of two ethnographers, Lila Abu-Lughod and Elaine Lawless. The writings of these two scholars, in some way or another, permeated my every thought during those long days of sitting cross-legged on hardwood floors, which vibrated with the rhythmic stamping of dancers' feet. From my first moment of fieldwork, I worriedly mulled over the ways in which I would eventually write about the tumbling currents of power, voice, and authority that I felt moving through these communities I observed.



Lila Abu-Lughod's work, particularly her book *Writing Women's Worlds: Bedouin Stories*, offers the notion of feminist ethnography as a method sensitive to domination in various communities and interactions, the specific relationship between scholar and subject, as well as to the very process and product of ethnographic writing itself.<sup>85</sup> My work with dancers has many times entailed observing power dynamics between teachers and students, or parents and children – where age, experience and social cues render a clear picture about relative power and authority in relationships. However, more often than not, my work involved the ways in which power and authority are negotiated between peers in numerous contexts - through discursive and embodied acts, in learning contexts and casual or social contexts, in situations guided by both Indian and non-Indian frameworks of conduct, and on topics related to dance and broader involvements. However, while instances of emergent power struggle, negotiation and domination did occur, often collective participation in many power dynamics and authoritative hierarchies created a parallel, meta-structure of power that was also significant. Unanimous, collective participation in a hierarchy gives the hierarchy a certain social acceptance, or social capital, among participants – and becomes another layer in the interplay of power in a community.

However, the study of practices can also bring attention to “cracks of resistance” within a community – ways that the *heterodoxy* works within the boundaries of accepted communal practice, toward undermining or reinscribing the unquestioned dominance of *doxa* within a *habitus*, and promoting new objectives or beliefs.<sup>86</sup> Chronicling the ways

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<sup>85</sup> Abu-Lughod, *Writing Women's Worlds*, 5.

<sup>86</sup> Judith Okely, “Defiant Moments: Gender, Resistance and Individuals,” in *Man* 26, no. 1 (March 1991): 8.

practice can be used to further the goals of resistant strands of a community is important, not only for documenting the diverse methods and goals toward which practice is implemented, but also as a preventative measure for ensuring that in writing about a community's dominant practices and interpretations, they do not become crystallized as isolated, uncontested world-views. In *Writing Women's Worlds*, Lila Abu-Lughod makes a case for "writing against culture" – employing careful ethnographic research as a means of resisting the ways that "culture," as an analytic term and concept, has often taken the place of "race" in anthropological literature as a way of essentializing communities, without sensitivity to time, location, or other contextual particulars.<sup>87</sup> Her approach reflects my own interest in moving away from crystallizing the experiences of my fieldwork communities as somehow representative of other communities that, from outside appearances, might be assumed similar.

As an effort to record field communities' reflections and perspectives in their own words, Elaine Lawless proposes an ethnographic research and writing process she calls "reciprocal ethnography," wherein the ethnographic "subject" takes part in the creation of his or her own representation in ethnographic research and writing. In this process, the subject not only shares his/her own narrative, but participates in interpreting that same narrative, thereby sharing a stake in its interpretation.<sup>88</sup> In *Holy Women, Wholly Women: Sharing Ministries through Life Stories and Reciprocal Ethnography*, Lawless shares and develops two key concepts for conducting ethnography that entails the perspectives of both ethnographers and their objects of study. Her term *reciprocal ethnography* describes a process of "give-and-take" between ethnographer and subject, where not only

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<sup>87</sup> Okely, "Defiant Moments," 8-19.

<sup>88</sup> Lawless, *Holy Women, Wholly Women*, 62.

is the production, interpretation and presentation of ethnographic data a goal, but reciprocal ethnography also includes an open presentation of the dialogic process itself.

Lawless writes:

Reciprocal ethnography demands the acknowledgment that a neatly packaged product is not the goal.... In ethnography, where the interior dialogue must give way to the external dialogue, the dialogue itself must become a part of the presentation and the process laid bare. Our goal is understanding, but attaining one level of understanding is only to acknowledge that yet another level of understanding lies just beyond our ken. Through reading, thinking, and dialogue, then, we aspire to that next level of understanding. Understanding is not realized here as generalized fact or conclusion but rather as a celebration of the multiplicity of experiences and points of view that are present in the group.... Of course, as ethnographer I include my strand among those of the individual women and acknowledge my place, my role, and my biases as I perceive them and my hand in presenting this interwoven and overlapping picture.<sup>89</sup>

Lawless contends that this mode of ethnographic methodology provides a check on the ethnographic writer, so that he or she cannot “confiscate the material and run away with it.”<sup>90</sup> She proposes that committing to such a methodology at the outset would allow the fieldworker to be open and honest about personal background and potential biases in

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<sup>89</sup> Lawless, *Holy Women, Wholly Women*, 127-128.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

the scholarly consciousness, and help clarify the integrity of intention with which an ethnographer enters the field.<sup>91</sup>

Lawless advocates ethnography through discourse and shared knowledge between ethnographer and subject. The subject participates in formulating his or her own representation in ethnographic research through a process of shared telling, retelling, and interpretation of narrative.<sup>92</sup> Lawless' reflexive ethnography resonated with my own desired research dynamic; aside from being a more inclusive and multivocal approach, I also felt a personal affinity for these methodologies because of my "insider" status to the world of dance. Having studied Bharata Natyam since childhood, it was easy for me to put myself in the shoes (or in this case, ankle bells) of my own fieldwork subjects, who spent long hours together in rigorous rehearsals, or studying *hastas* (hand gestures) while seated around their teachers, or drawing eyeliner onto younger dancers' faces backstage before a performance. And in some cases, my personal relationship with these communities also carries certain obligations, loyalties or connections – to dancers as well as the ideals or principles of their dance world. I realized that to proceed in my fieldwork and writing without soliciting the interpretive frames of my subjects would be more than a methodological oversight to me – it would be a personal ethical failure. I committed to the task of remaining reflexive in my ethnographic approach, and made every effort to include in this dissertation the contributions, interjections, interpretive discourses and continued conversations of my fieldwork informants.

However, I soon learned the difficulty, and potential impossibility, of truly reciprocal ethnography. In the end, what is written here is my own experience and

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<sup>91</sup> Lawless, *Holy Women, Wholly Women*, 283.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 59-62.

interpretation, and no one else's; thus, is this ethnography truly reciprocal? Lawless addresses this same concern in her own work, summarizing that "the methodology of reciprocal ethnography [exists] as a check on the writer's tendency to confiscate the material and run away with it." In her purview, to be conscious from the outset about this inherent power dynamic in ethnographic research *is* to be sensitive. Her subjects requested that she simply make clear in her writing that her interpretation was her own – implying that they had a basic understanding of the power of interpretive frameworks. After all, her fieldwork informants were ministers, graduates of seminary, and therefore not only aware of such frameworks, but trained specifically in them.<sup>93</sup>

In my research, however, I often engaged with individuals untrained in social science analysis methods, for whom the question of interpretation was not only confusing, but did not even have relative resonance with other experiences. My field subjects include some college-educated individuals, familiar with Western social science and humanities research methods, and able to understand the basic principles of interpretation. But it also includes children as young as twelve years of age, individuals educated in non-Western or alternate modes of learning, and with others unfamiliar to humanistic inquiry. I developed ways of explaining my research goals to them, on a lay level easily understood and in accordance with the requirements of institutional review boards; nevertheless I often wondered to what extent my interests were truly understood. I explained myself and my interests to my fieldwork participants so frequently that perhaps I began to sound like a broken record; I would hear amused affirmation that, "yes, I understand," or "okay, that's fine" –indicating that perhaps I had made myself

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<sup>93</sup> Lawless, *Holy Women, Wholly Women*, 283.

clear. However, doubt lingers in my mind: perhaps they didn't understand at all. Perhaps they understood something entirely different from my actual objectives, but something that resonated with other experience, knowledge or questions that they themselves have. Or maybe they just did not have the vested interest I did in the actual end-product or form of this dissertation. I suppose I will never be sure.

Additionally, in an effort to be truly reciprocal, I would invite my informants to ask questions of me, of the project and about my intentions, and in turn, they would indeed offer questions or topics that I had not brought up or considered during our discussions. I followed leads and advice, spoke to certain individuals on the recommendations of others, listened to songs which were suggested to me as explanations of concepts, or watched choreographies that demonstrated certain ideals. When my fieldnotes were neatly collected and transcribed, and I had completed drafts of my analyses, I presented copies of these to my fieldwork communities. In some cases, I had lengthy discussions over coffee with their opinions, got pages of feedback, and excited phone calls praising some elements of my writing, and calling other segments into question; several of my fieldwork informants were patient but firm in correcting my misinterpretations or incomplete portrayals of events. In other cases, I got no response at all – perhaps a sign that my informants had things to say, but were not sure how to say them; or perhaps they had neither the time nor the inclination to read my lengthy reports. In any case, I had done my job by providing the products of my interactions with them.

But had I truly? Was this enough? Of all the individuals I spoke with, not one was an ethnographer or anthropologist. In the end, only I knew what I was “really” doing. Only I came in with an armful of methodology and ethnographic theory. Can

ethnography ever be truly reciprocal, if the subjects are not completely “in on it?” In light of my research experiences, I would argue no.

There are specific conditions under which ethnographic research might be able to be truly reciprocal, but for many researchers, those conditions are not realistic, attainable, or even desired for the line of inquiry. Ultimately, reciprocal ethnography can only truly take place between an ethnographer and a “subject” community of ethnographers, trained in anthropological research methods, aware of the canon of literature on ethnography, and invested in the manner in which research is interpreted for a particular (usually academic) audience of readers. Therefore, while Lawless offers a crucial and pivotal concept to ethnographers by advocating a dialogic, interactive method of inquiry, and proceeding with awareness of the inherent dominance of the ethnographer’s interpretive lens in writing, I would contend that among a community of fieldwork subjects untrained in these methods of scholarly inquiry, such ethnography may be responsible, sensitive, and honest, but despite an ethnographer’s best intentions, it can never truly be reciprocal.

### **Encountering Fieldwork**

Prior to starting fieldwork, as I formulated the central questions and assembled the necessary background materials that would guide my work, I allowed myself to indulge in aspirations about collecting lively audio data, colorful photographs and vivid, dynamic video clips of pedagogic moments as they unfolded before my eyes, to share with my fieldwork communities and hear their commentary on their daily practices. I hoped that in the course of dialogue, things would come to light to demonstrate to me the delicate tapestry of values, personalities, beliefs and priorities which make these

communities who they are. And I hoped, in the end, to create interpretive bridges in my writing so that my fieldwork subjects could understand my intended project and it in my depictions of their lives.

The reality of my project was an entirely different portrait altogether, as it probably always has been for ethnographers throughout the ages. For one thing, despite my use of the most advanced digital technology available on the market that I could afford (the quality of which, I must say, is quite incredible), the hundreds of hours of audio recording I gathered were, nevertheless, along with clear, valuable conversations and narratives, replete with muddled noises, foggy voices, and long, animated conversations about important decisions and teaching points which sadly, were undecipherable to my ears once I got home and tried to transcribe them.

Capturing photos and videos never truly became comfortable to me. Certainly, I had the opportunity to collect quite a number of wonderful photographs and video clips of studio rehearsals, conversations between teachers and students, and stage rehearsals before large productions; these images depict the vibrant creative and pedagogic energies of my communities, as well as their unique and dear personalities. But on most days of fieldwork, I realized that the camera would alter the behavior and conversations of the community I was with, no matter how nonchalantly and cheerfully I might implore them to “just ignore it, and do whatever you’d normally do!” Particularly in the presence of children and adolescents – even those whom I had full IRB clearance to include – I felt heavy with doubt. Watching these youngsters dawdle reluctantly into dance class each week instantly brought back memories of myself at their age, with my unkempt jet black hair, thick coke-bottle glasses, rumpled dance practice attire (which by definition, at that



age, was unfashionable), and gawkiness while learning steps and choreographies. I intuitively imagined the self-consciousness they would feel while being videotaped during dance class, a context which for many already seemed to elicit a great deal of discomfort and self-doubt. On these days, my camera would never even made it out of my bag.

As part of the Institutional Review Board process for acquiring informants' consent, I informed my communities that I welcomed their input, suggestions, modifications or deletions from any part of my data collection, recordings, or write-ups. My efforts to fully inform participants and clearly explain their rights and opportunities for sharing, however, were received in a mix of ways; most community members were playfully dismissive about the seriousness of the IRB process, reassuring me that they trusted my intentions, even if our opinions differed. Others were somewhat put-off not by the act of securing informed consent itself, but by the highly legalistic, formal, structured manner in which they were being approached to talk about practices which were constitutive of their daily life, which they saw as simply too mundane to be in need of such protection. To witness these events, participate in conversations and let someone watch them dance – these are simple things; why complicate it with jargon and formal procedures? The IRB process, for many field informants, seemed to be somewhat over-the-top or a case of much ado about nothing.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Barrie Thorne, “‘You Still Takin’ Notes?’ Fieldwork and Problems of Informed Consent,” *Social Problems* 27, no. 3 (Feb 1980): 284-297. Thorne’s article discusses circumstances under which sometimes the IRB informed consent procedure can be somewhat inappropriate or unnecessarily technical for certain settings – to the point of affecting researcher-field relations.

I would be remiss not to share that the IRB process itself, particularly the standard procedures of obtaining informed consent, were a source of great frustration to me in this project. Even though I was working with English-literate, U.S. residents and citizens for the most part, many of whom have experience in higher education and with certain standard concepts of

Being present in the dance studio day after day, developing lasting friendships with and deep affections for the dance teachers, students, parents and community members with whom I shared many hours brought me squarely face-to-face with a serious crisis of ethics. There is no one incident or experience which instigated this moment for me; “nothing happened,” per se. But being in the weighty position of an ethnographer, who knows the precise questions and motives that drive my research, and the myriad ways that said research can be honed, interpreted, assembled, and presented to the world intellectual stage – made me suddenly face the heavy reality of being the sole individual negotiating and (re)creating worlds for a scholarly readership, whether or not the inhabitants of those worlds would agree on its portrayal.

During the course of participant-observation research, I attempted not to elicit information by asking explicit questions unless I was in an interview context, or the natural course of conversation signaled it as appropriate. I also shared information about my own dance and performance background during conversations, describing certain practices, choreographic decisions, or events from my own dance upbringing, as a way of

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conducting academic research, the highly technical forms, with their numerous contingencies and disclosures, naturally seemed very off-putting to my fieldwork informants. Most of my informants would initially chuckle in surprise and disbelief when I explained the forms and presented them to be signed; they wondered why a girl like me (read: insider and friend) would need to follow the rules of such a rigorous, legalistic system in order to sit in on simple, harmless activities like dance classes, rehearsals and performances. As a friend and community member, they seemed to imply, it was my right to be there, and to have whatever opinions and say whatever I wished about them. The IRB process managed to put distance between burgeoning relationships of fictive kinship and dialogic sharing – which, is one reason why IRB is important, to protect such friends. However, it was somewhat deflating in my case, and for some field informants, was detrimental enough to change their opinions of scholarly research as something that seems too “technical” and incompatible with their visions for their own communities. While IRB exists for crucial reasons of protecting research subjects, and while I am grateful that my fieldwork participants, as cherished friends and colleagues, were indeed protected – I have never forgotten their initial adverse reactions to the IRB process, and wondered how a different ambiance might have resulted from alternate methods of obtaining consent that may be less legalistic, text-oriented and alarming to fieldwork participants.

explaining my lines of inquiry through example. I hoped this would make for a dialogic process, and in fact, my fieldwork communities did guide my writing and analysis when I asked them for feedback and comments to ensure that I was honoring my commitments to the community, and sharing important analyses without divulging information that would make fieldwork participants uncomfortable or upset. But at some level, their contributions of feedback never did feel entirely spontaneous - another dilemma in and of itself. I often felt that whatever feedback I received or editions I was asked to make were only due to my repeated suggestion or imploring. In the end, this just felt like another way in which I as a researcher was reifying old models of ethnographic domination of my community, even though my very intention was to be balanced, dialogic, and interactive throughout my research.

I mused about how, as an ethnographer, I could not turn off my tendency to interpret even simple, mundane disagreements between dancers as reflections or renegotiations of authority structures in the room – and fretted at these moments, because I knew I was allowing scholarly interpretation to trump the reality of mundane interpersonal differences that are a part of life anywhere.<sup>95</sup> At other times, I would cringe knowing that a certain incident or episode clearly had one symbolism or understanding within the community, but would certainly be “read” differently (and in a possibly unflattering way) by outsiders to that community. In particular, I worried about ways of describing the simple ways that teachers may discipline students when they are aloof, inattentive or lax with their practice. On a logical level, I knew that my readers would be able to contextualize the events – after all, in schools, churches, dance classes and other

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<sup>95</sup> Incidentally, had some of my fieldwork participants known that I was so wrought with anxiety over such events, they probably would have either laughed about my triviality, or even considered me a rather odd duck for letting such small matters bother me!

places worldwide, children act out every day, and are in some way or form corrected by their teachers every day – a fact of life, of childhood and learning, no matter the context. But I worried anyway about the way my analyses of such events would be seen by the communities I worked with, and by readers unfamiliar with their lives. Though my motives for doing such research came from a place of deep respect, love and reciprocity, my ways of processing mundane, everyday events indeed had the power to alter insiders' views of them, and practices henceforth.

And yet, I knew precisely how valuable my research (and research like it) can be not only to the academy, but also to the histories and legacies of these hard-working, passionate communities who work tirelessly to preserve, teach and further their artistic traditions. In the end, I had to take an intellectual leap of faith – and remind myself constantly of the fact that while I identified with my community and saw myself as very much an insider in certain ways, that I was most assuredly *not* an insider at all times. While on the one hand this required a bit of self-alienation; on the other hand, it was the thought that eventually liberated me from my own fears. Once I could put my fears and anxieties into a clear framework – of an insider who now is approaching these communities with a scholarly purpose that made me at some level an outsider– I could then process my own experiences within the context of ethnographic analyses. I found inspiration and models for addressing these concerns through the work of other ethnographers (Abu-Lughod, Lawless, Flueckiger, and Prasad). I realized why ethnography and participant-observation were appropriate methods to studying the intimate, symbiotic relationships and involvements of dance teachers and students; it is

because ethnography provides space and modes of writing to account for the friendships that blossom in the field.

### **Fieldwork and Friendship: Analytic Frameworks and Ethnographic Models**

Two analytic frameworks emerged for me during the fieldwork experience, and while examining ethnographic models that account for the relationships between fieldworkers and informants:

1) *Friendship can become an important part of the experience of ethnographic fieldwork* – particularly in a context such as dance communities, where nearly all relationships are characterized by some degree of friendship, fictive kinship, or interpersonal connection. Responsible ethnography must, of course, acknowledge, process, and interpret friendships and relationships that emerge within the field. Ethnography appropriately addresses the daily aspects of teaching and learning dance, and the ways both cultural practices and practices of friendship bracket moments of identity negotiation, personal expressions, and discursive and non-discursive communications involved in both.

2) *With friendship comes more than just reciprocity* – there come numerous matrices of ethical responsibility and guardianship. While the ethnographer's obvious responsibilities include being forthright with fieldwork subjects and securing their consent, providing readers with accurate and unsensationalized depictions of communities' lives and activities that account for researcher subjectivity, and being honest about the implications that certain activities or beliefs might have for the power dynamics within a community – there are also obligations to share with readers the values

and priorities of field informants, and to protect these values and priorities *for* informants. Moschella's discussion about ethnography as a pastoral practice articulate these priorities. Subjectivity and self-reflexivity in ethnographic provides a more accurate, complete, and interesting compendium of data and analysis than making an effort for "objectivity," which is, in the final analysis not possible with living subjects. But reflexivity is also the responsible thing to do not only for research's sake, but also for the sake of relationships and fellowship within communities; the "humble" way, as Moschella would put it. Communities themselves entail various levels of insider and outsider identity, and there is a degree of indigenous discourse and cognitive awareness about these differences. One's insider or outsider status in a dance community affects the level of responsibility that one takes for the well-being of the community at large. Long-standing members of dance communities protect their teachers, peers and students, and defend traditions or beliefs that may be a part of their experience as dancers. Perhaps insider ethnography should, to a degree, acknowledge these leanings openly, and without apology.

Reflexive ethnography provides opportunity for interpreting the ways that friendship and human relationships in the contexts of everyday life intersect with other practices and values. Indian classical dance classes are "everyday life" contexts, where individuals come together on a daily or weekly basis, spend time socializing and catching up on the events and developments in each others' lives, and then engage in practices of dance while continuing to interact socially and within the margins of friendship. Dance classrooms, and the interactions therein, entail a unique setting where both ritual and textual prescriptions about dance and movement are assembled alongside new traditions

and codes of friendship, community and membership. In dance classes, dancers choreograph and rehearse, and friends express their feelings or opinions to each other about various issues. While the practices of dance themselves are the primary topic of this study, the bonds of friendship and fictive kinship between dancers bring with them coexisting values, priorities, social organization and hierarchies. The ethnographer must find ways both of interpreting these relationships, but also finding a personal, ethical way of honoring these relationships and participating in the internal culture, values and reciprocity of friendship.

Several ethnographers have analyzed fictive kinship as a category of human relationship which characterizes ethnographic experience, creating affinity between the researcher and fieldwork communities, helping the two parties to see commonalities in their lives, and providing a way of relating to each others' worldviews through mutual participation in ordinary life activities and practices. Jeffrey Kaufmann and Annie Phillippe Rabodoarimiadana discuss ways that fictive kinship influences the ethnographic experience, observing that, firstly, fictive kinship is often (and most appropriately) initiated from field communities who take in or "adopt" researchers into their lives, rather than researchers seeking a place or position in society.<sup>96</sup> Secondly, Kaufmann and Rabodoarimiadana argue that through declaring a researcher to be fictive kin, fieldwork informants are often able to obligate the researcher to them, by including him or her in their own moral fold:

Fictive kinship helps make the point that similarities, and not differences, are the crux of fieldwork.... Without romanticizing this point, it is worth

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<sup>96</sup> Jeffrey Kaufmann and Annie Phillippe Rabodoarimiadana, "Making Kin of Historians and Anthropologists: Fictive Kinship in Fieldwork Methodology," *History in Africa* 30 (2003): 182-186.

noting that using fictive kinship toward their ethnographer enhanced their moral authority. Fictive kinship operates on the very basis of moral symmetry; it implies a ‘single moral community.’<sup>97</sup>

Kaufmann and Rabodoarimiadana observe that not only do field communities often make the first move vis-à-vis forming fictive kinship bonds with ethnographers, but secondly, they seem to seek actively a way to understand researchers on a common moral ground, and to gain a better understanding of what it is that researchers are observing or analyzing from their lives that is so interesting and worthy of study.

The mundane or daily activities in life that often serve as the background for ethnography are important confluences of practice and friendship, as described in Nigel Rapport’s article “The ‘Bones’ of Friendship: Playing Dominoes with Arthur of an Evening in the Eagle Pub” . Rapport provides a keen perspective about the ethnographer’s relationship with a man named Arthur, and his community of friends who meet in a local pub each night to play “bones,” or dominoes. Rapport lived and worked alongside members of Arthur’s social circle while conducting ethnographic fieldwork about lower-middle class British values, playing dominoes with them each evening and experiencing first-hand the ways that the game of dominoes serves as a backdrop and safe space for negotiating friendships, allegiances, and common interests. Rapport also highlights the ways that dominoes becomes a context for engaging in commentary on ethics, membership, and other social values: “For Arthur and co., the game of dominoes ushers in a milieu, a space, within an ethos of its own, safe from the flux, noise and

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<sup>97</sup> Kaufmann and Rabodoarimiadana, “Making Kin of Historians and Anthropologists,” 182-186.



entropy of other worlds, without direct consequence upon those worlds and yet with a view on them.<sup>98</sup>

For classical Indian dance communities in the United States, while dance is hardly just a cordial social space and backdrop for the formation of relationships, it is nevertheless an activity that provides context for the formation of community, and the choices and decisions made about inclusion and the rules of conduct in that community. As in Rapport's observations about dominoes, dance provides for its members a world of its own that may have little consequence on certain other worlds, but certainly has a view on them.<sup>99</sup> Friendship with practitioners allows ethnographers to gain an understanding of that world, and the way it views other worlds.

In Rapport's view, friendship provides something of a revolving door in and out of a glass-walled world of practitioners. The ethnographer can experience this world from the inside, entering the glass-walled world as a fellow practitioner and friend, but also exiting through the same revolving door to present these experiences to the outside world. And while walking through that revolving door, the ethnographer represents on some level both worlds. Friendship within fieldwork contexts can afford ethnographers fluency between perspectives and means of communicating. However, it is only one model. Other anthropologists present differing views about the ways friendship affects the fieldwork experience.

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<sup>98</sup> Nigel Rapport, "The 'Bones' of Friendship: Playing Dominoes with Arthur of an Evening in the Eagle Pub," in *Anthropology of Friendship*, ed. Sandra Bell and Simon Coleman (Oxford and New York, Berg, 1999), 100-101.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

Maria Elena Garcia writes about the ways such relationships bind researchers with notions of cultural propriety, accountability, and loyalty.<sup>100</sup> She writes:

Whatever our roles and/or responsibilities as anthropologists, these are inextricably tied to those local individuals with whom we develop professional, academic, friendship, and sometimes familial ties. . . . whether we want to or not, our work – our simple presence in the field – contributes to local change. And as our work increasingly merges with that of local intellectuals and scholars, our responsibilities as ethnographers – not only toward those scholars but also toward the communities for which they are advocates – are continuously amplified... the reality of our impact exists, and so should our accountability.<sup>101</sup>

In *Strangers to Relatives: The Adoption and Naming of Anthropologists in Native North America*, Sergei Kan and Mary Rodgers-Black both write about some of the more cautionary ways of contextualizing friendships between ethnographers and research participants in the field. These scholars share their personal experiences of being “adopted” by longtime fieldwork contacts in Native American communities, while conducting ethnographic fieldwork within these communities over years and decades.<sup>102</sup> Kan comments that while it can be a touching experience to be adopted into a host community, anthropologists should not mistake this show of friendship and hospitality as

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<sup>100</sup> Maria Elena Garcia, “Ethnographic Responsibility and the Anthropological Endeavor: Beyond Identity Discourse,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 73, no. 2 (Apr 2000): 89-101.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>102</sup> Sergei Kan, ed. *Strangers to Relatives: The Adoption and Naming of Anthropologists in Native North America* (Lincoln, Ne. and London, University of Nebraska Press, 2001).

endorsement or support of their work.<sup>103</sup> Often the community accepts ethnographic research and interpretations of their lives, and learns to accept and even like the anthropologist's skills or methods, merely because they support the *person* doing the research, not what the research aims to prove.<sup>104</sup> In other cases, community members are happy to share aspects of their lives, beliefs, personal narratives and life stories with anthropologists because they are the only individuals they have ever encountered who are interested in hearing these thoughts. Anthropologists may become surrogate siblings, children or grandchildren in these cases, absorbing stories that often have no other audience.<sup>105</sup> In other instances, fieldwork communities befriend ethnographers as a means of getting to know their personal views, and controlling any information collected during research that may be presented to the public; research participants may work within the boundaries of friendship to ensure that any public presentations of research about their lives will not be done in a detrimental or hurtful manner.<sup>106</sup>

Additionally, with adoption comes various obligations and loyalties among ethnographers and their fictive kin families.<sup>107</sup> Rodgers-Black describes the commitments she and her adopted family made and maintained to each other over decades in order to make their fictive kin relationships "real."<sup>108</sup> She shares that adopted ethnographers may feel limited to constantly arguing their communities' points-of-views and seeing things from their perspectives, rather than exercising their own analytic lenses.

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<sup>103</sup> Kan, *Strangers to Relatives*, 8.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-9.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

Becoming friends and adopted family to fieldwork communities is a powerful experience that changes ethnographers – and the processes and production of ethnography itself.

Perhaps then, Kan and Rodgers-Black's model of friendship in the fieldwork experience would be best visualized as having two separate doors into communities' worlds: one door for "enter," and one door for "exit." When an ethnographer enters the world of friendship and fictive kinship with fieldwork informants, he or she becomes an insider, and participates in all the aspects of relationship – community, hospitality, and also responsibility and obligation. But when walking out of that world through the "exit" door, the ethnographer cannot shed the obligations and commitments easily, lest he or she completely sever certain understandings constructed within the relationship. To do so is a complete "exit," a complete break from the margins of insider status.

Kirin Narayan shares a poignant episode in her article "Shared Stories," in which she discusses her research experiences collecting narratives and life stories with Urmilaji, a village woman from Kangra, North India.<sup>109</sup> In the course of fieldwork, a deep friendship blossomed between Narayan and Urmilaji, and Urmilaji entrusted Narayan with a number of intimate, personal details about her life. However, she asked that Narayan not include these details in any written or public presentations of her research. Narayan discusses her feelings and reactions to receiving this request from Urmilaji:

In becoming Urmilaji's close friend, I had been taken backstage, entrusted with confidences not meant for public consumption. Later, when I had returned to Madison, one of Urmilaji's first letters to me said, 'I gave you all my secrets to put into your shoulder bag and take away with you.' She

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<sup>109</sup> Kirin Narayan, "Shared Stories," in *Bridges to Humanity: Narratives on Anthropology and Friendship*, ed. Bruce Grindal and Frank Salamone (Long Grove, Il., Waveland Press, Inc., 1995), 95.

was reminding me, I thought, of the moral responsibility of being entrusted with these secrets. They make good anthropological data, yes: they would certainly enrich my book on her folktales by showing how the themes to which a teller is drawn may match events in their own lives. Yet, Urmilaji has emphatically stated that I should not put personal details that implicated others into my rendition of her life for my – our – book. A strong friendship, then, can lead an anthropologist toward an empathetic understanding of a culture from within; yet also, personal loyalty can seal off these insights, hiding them away from the project of anthropology.<sup>110</sup>

Here, Narayan in many ways echoes the sentiments of Kan and Rodgers-Black, pointing out the ways that loyalty, friendship, and insider knowledge of personal secrets can be a barrier to anthropological sharing and contribution. However, I choose instead to focus on the other conclusion she makes here. Part of anthropology’s mission is to develop empathy, understanding, and bridges across human experience. And while it may be a lamentable thing that such understanding often must be kept from public presentation because of the bonds of friendship and trust, the decision does not take away from the fact that understanding does, in fact, enrich the practice and writing of ethnography, and in itself builds bridges between the academy and local, living communities. Additionally, friendship can help to foster interest among burgeoning generations of “insider scholars,” and provide frameworks so that field communities can understand the intentions of their own members who choose to learn the ways of

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<sup>110</sup> Narayan, “Shared Stories,” 95.

scholarship as a means of sharing and preserving culture, while also contributing to greater circles of humanistic study.

### **“Insider” Ethnography: Models**

As the weeks and months of fieldwork passed, I found myself ever more drawn into the communities, events and lives of the dancers with whom I spent time. Initially, dancers would invite me to their weekly rehearsals on a Wednesday evening, or their Saturday morning review sessions. But as we came to know each other more, share stories with each other and become friends, I’d often be invited to attend additional rehearsals, or be asked to help proofread the text of the recital program brochure, or go visit a theater with a dancer to determine if it would be an adequate space for a show. I spent some afternoons helping to organize the costume closet, folding and unfolding the tiny, candy-pink silk costumes worn by the five-year-old group every year at the annual recital, or carefully hanging up the peacock blue saris donned by the professional troupe during their fundraiser performance each year. I volunteered backstage before productions, braiding hair, applying dark eyeliner, pinning blouses, and giving whispered but enthusiastic pep talks to nervous young dancers waiting in the wings for their cue to enter the stage. While reflecting on these experiences of being an “insider” to the communities, I realized I needed to search for more models of ethnographers who navigated the waters of doing “research at home,” or research in contexts where they were insiders to some degree. I hoped to learn from their ways of balancing their loyalties and affections for their newfound friends in the field, but also honoring their

anthropological training and contributing valuable observations to the art and craft of ethnography.

The first thing I learned from the work of “insider” ethnographers is that communities have various circles of membership, and understandings of what it means to be an insider or outsider. This is certainly the case for communities of dancers, who define insider status based on numerous criteria: length of time one has studied dance, and whether or not under the same teacher or school of instruction; language knowledge, age, teaching experience, physical and verbal demeanor, and many other criteria. Sometimes, the presence of an ethnographer in insider circles alters the existing definitions of the community and membership, but not necessarily in a negative way; an individual’s identity as an ethnographer at times has its own place in communities’ hierarchies and notions of identity and inclusion. Also, having an ethnographer among their ranks often affords communities the opportunity to envision themselves alternatively. Insider-ethnographers, whether seen as total insiders, total outsiders, or somewhere in between, may serve as a catalyst for communities’ development of internal discourse about identity, values and tradition.

In his article, “Ethnicity and the Anthropologist: Negotiating Identities in the Field,” Takeyuki Tsuda shares his experiences of conducting ethnography among communities of Japanese and Brazilian migrant workers employed in Tokyo factories.<sup>111</sup> As a Japanese-American, Tsuda’s personal background includes total fluency in Japanese, and an upbringing where from a young age he imbibed, both in mind and body, Japanese traditions of etiquette and culture. But as an ethnographer, Tsuda also

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<sup>111</sup> Takeyuki Tsuda, “Ethnicity and the Anthropologist: Negotiating Identities in the Field,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (July 1998): 107-124.

underwent advance language training in Portuguese, and gained an intimate familiarity with Brazilian life, society and customs (especially the culture of Brazilian blue-collar factory workers) after spending months conducting field research in Japanese-based company factories in Brazil.<sup>112</sup> These two linguistic, cultural and embodied worlds came together for Tsuda when he arrived in Tokyo, hoping to be hired as a factory worker so that he could continue ethnographic fieldwork about the experiences of selfhood of both Japanese and Brazilian laborers.<sup>113</sup> Tsuda confesses that he imagined his Japanese ethnic identity and cultural fluency to be assets to him, as he went in search of work in Tokyo; he followed his intuition to adhere to Japanese customs of workplace etiquette, formal body comportment, and consultation with the appropriate figureheads of the company, in order to gain employment in and access to the factories.<sup>114</sup> However, in the end, he experienced major obstacles in the hiring process, despite (or perhaps, because of?) his use of the traditional Japanese channels of etiquette and self-presentation. Ironically, the question of Tsuda's employment was then handed over to a Brazilian executive of the company living and working in Tokyo.<sup>115</sup> Once this came to pass, it was Tsuda's familiarity with Brazilian language, workplace culture, and typical social interaction that ultimately opened doors for him, securing his employment in the company, and providing social capital, greater ease and access to fieldwork participants than his Japanese identity and self-presentation.<sup>116</sup>

Chou Chiener's article "Experience and Fieldwork: A Native Researcher's View" discusses her experiences conducting ethnography among a traditional Taiwanese

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<sup>112</sup> Tsuda, "Ethnicity and the Anthropologist," 107-113.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 113.



ensemble of *nanguan* (traditional Chinese string orchestra) musicians.<sup>117</sup> Though Chiener was conducting fieldwork in this community alongside other outsider ethnographer-musicians, her existing identity as a Taiwanese woman and musician in another genre immediately gave her social capital with the older musicians in the community, who regarded her as more of an apprentice musician and youngest member of their group than an outsider. Chiener's identity cues automatically meant that she would be assigned to the duties and tasks of a novice member, such as making tea for the more seasoned artists, while the other ethnographers were treated more like guests and observers.<sup>118</sup> But in her experience, Chiener also found that at times, the community of performers would at times use their relationships with researchers to "steer the tradition in desired directions" – making cases for certain practices while opting not to highlight others, seemingly for the sake of the tradition itself, but really, as Chiener notes, as an indication of their personal objectives as artists.<sup>119</sup>

Tsuda concludes his article by sharing how he was troubled by his experiences of divergent treatment based on his Japanese and Brazilian identities. He writes, with palpable unease, about this experience of "identity prostitution" – shifting between his two identities for ethnographic gain, "selling [himself] for instrumental advantage."<sup>120</sup> But he also points out that anthropologists only have partial control over managing their personal identities, and the fieldwork communities retain the right to interpret ethnographers' identities however they will. Field communities may be familiar with researchers' identity cues, and have of their own favorable or unfavorable regard of those

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<sup>117</sup> Chou Chiener, "Experience and Fieldwork: A Native Researcher's View," *Ethnomusicology* 46, no. 3 (Autumn 2002): 456-486.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 464-465.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 481.

<sup>120</sup> Tsuda, "Ethnicity and the Anthropologist," 116.

categories.<sup>121</sup> Their process of interpreting the identity, intentions, and production of research of ethnographers gives communities a chance to consider their own selfhood and collective identity.

### **Studying “Others,” Studying Friends**

While I feel fortunate to have developed intimate friendships with my fieldwork communities, and to have enjoyed the benefits of insider identity that were part of my experience doing “ethnography at home,” I soon began to face the challenge of how to honor my obligations to the community as a protector of insider knowledge and guarded information, while also being thorough and honest in my analysis of power structures and social categories within my communities. Colby Hatfield writes about the “mutual exploitation” that takes place between researchers and the communities within which they work, saying that if symmetries in human relationships are impossible even in regular life, it is even more challenging to find a balance in scholarly contexts: “within the relationship of ‘stranger’ to ‘insider’ are inherent tendencies toward unjust (asymmetrical) transactions or simply exploitation, with the stranger often as the loser.”<sup>122</sup> While certainly, the leaders and administrators of the communities with which I worked called the shots with regards to the events and practices I could observe, I never felt that I was the “loser” within the contexts of our relationships. On the contrary, I enjoyed free access to nearly any event I could squeeze into my schedule; and beyond mere access to events and conversations at whatever time and place, I was invited into the lives of my fieldwork informants, made into a friend, a family member, a confidante.

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<sup>121</sup> Tsuda, “Ethnicity and the Anthropologist,” 120.

<sup>122</sup> Colby R. Hatfield, Jr., “Fieldwork: Toward a Model of Mutual Exploitation,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 46, no. 1 (Jan. 1973): 16.

My status as fellow practitioner of dance, as a woman, a South Asian-American, an age-mate, a Bostonian, a person interested in philanthropy, etc. were often major factors in my acceptance into these worlds, and I would be remiss not to share that while I never forgot my ethnographic persona or my objectives for getting to know these communities, at times, I inevitably let my ethnographic “guard” down. I embraced this friendship and became a member of these communities.

Robert B. Everhart’s article “Between Stranger and Friend” extols the virtues of an “abrasiveness” between fieldworker and subjects as an important part of the ethnographic experience; he writes about the perils of the “nothing happened” syndrome, wherein the ethnographer, fitting in perhaps too comfortably with a fieldwork community, finds himself thinking much like the community he studies.<sup>123</sup> I would go beyond Everhart’s caution here to confess that not only did I simply “find myself” thinking like my fieldwork informants – in fact, on a personal level I savored the moments where we shared common perspectives, or could relate with one another about shared experiences. I often imagined that if I were not a scholar of religion and South Asian immigrant communities and had moved to the area under different circumstances, I would in fact have sought out their company for personal, social reasons.

But to my great fortune, not only did my ethnographic training keep my personal affinities in check, but additionally, they served as the major reasons that certain types of information or practice were revealed to me openly. My “outsider” credentials and the identity cues I presented to my communities as a scholar, a writer, an anthropologist, an outsider to specific dance practices, or a new transplant to Boston, opened numerous

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<sup>123</sup> Robert B. Everhart, “Between Stranger and Friend: Some Consequences of ‘Long Term’ Fieldwork in Schools,” *American Educational Research Journal* 14, no. 1 (Winter 1977): 12.

doors for me in enabling me to ask more honest questions and hear the personal inclinations of informants. There are times that individuals seek an outsider with whom to share, confide, or seek advice, because they cannot or wish not to share information with people close to them, within their own communities. I listened to these stories carefully – at times to *my* own discomfort – and again mused about the challenges ahead in analyzing this information. My fieldwork informants were certainly informed about my project and repeatedly assured me that they understood my intentions and goals; they still chose to share certain information with me, and emphasized their trust in me while doing so. Quickly, I realized that though I was indeed an insider to these communities, and had been an insider to these communities long before I ever became an ethnographer or scholar – the reality was, I was a scholar *now*, and forever changed because of my training and humanistic processes of thought.

### **Conclusion: Fieldwork In the Creative Margins**

The theoretical and methodological challenges of this project were also the driving force that made it a compelling and enjoyable experience, one only continues to influence my approach to the study of religion on the whole. Conducting research in Hindu-American communities with the categories of Bourdieu, and the lenses of practical theology, has been an ongoing lesson on the creative opportunities that interdisciplinary inquiry provides to liberal scholarship. It has also been engaging to revisit theories and methods from ethnography, which provide both ways of analyzing power and hierarchies within communities, while also providing models and frameworks for honoring the friendships and fictive kinships that often emerge during research. In observing the

multifaceted ways that communities define themselves, demarcate insider status, and negotiate identity, I recalled Diana Eck's language of plurality in discussing Hindu ritual, practice and imagination.<sup>124</sup> The plural capacity of Hindu imagination and practices seems, to me, a fitting context for the development of creative and plural intersections in interdisciplinary research on practice and the construction of meaning in diaspora contexts.

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<sup>124</sup> Diana L. Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1996).

## CHAPTER 3

### The Religious and Social Education of Dance:

#### Pedagogic, Interpretive, and Devotional Practices at the Natyanjali School of Dance

... I do have to say that anything to do with expressions will only improve every single time you do it. Even today if I do the *śabdām*, I have done it many many times, but still I feel that I did it better every time I do it... At the same time we all have different personalities. So it will *not* look the same. In fact, it *should not* look the same. It should be your own original one. Right?... So, don't compare yourself like that. *Be yourself*... what I want you to do is, you want to interpret the meaning in your own way. Okay? We can give you the structure, but it has to be done in your own way. What happens otherwise is, you're restricting yourself ... That's *not* the way to perform the padam. It has to flow. From yourself. From *your* within.

<sup>125</sup>

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It is a crisp Saturday afternoon in September 2008, and I find myself driving along winding rural roads in North Andover, Massachusetts, about forty minutes from Boston. The lonely, one-lane highway is lined with trees aglow with golden and vermillion-colored leaves. Houses, situated on massive lots, periodically appear on either side of the narrow road; many have children's bicycles, wagons and skateboards strewn on the long driveways. As I turn right at an intersection, I immediately spot the West Parish Church of Andover, with its elegant white steeple and picturesque brick church building perched in a stately manner on a gentle grassy hill, with autumn leaves strewn all around.

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<sup>125</sup> Jeyanthi Ghatraju, personal communication observed in dance classroom, Andover, MA, September 27, 2008.

The pale, worn wooden floors of a church's Sunday school classroom dully reflect the sunlight streaming in from arched windows as I walk into the room now transformed into a dance-practice studio. Colorful bulletin boards adorn the walls, featuring cardboard cutout images from a Bible study workbook – a smiling Joseph with his colorful robes, and a benevolent, bearded Moses holding a white lamb. Students' completed assignments are also tacked up, with shiny stars or smiley face stickers pasted prominently at the top of the pages. Toys and foam mats are neatly arranged in the corners. The desks, chairs and furniture are pushed to the periphery of the room, against the walls. At one end of the space, several women sit cross-legged, observing the proceedings on the opposite side. A few wear *salvar kameez*, while others sport dark blue jeans with *kurti* tops, t-shirts, or warm fleece pullovers; most of the women are wearing plain gold bangles on their arms, and simple round *pottus* (forehead markings) on their faces. Some mothers seated in the room use camcorders to record the new steps or movements that the teacher is imparting to the students; others observe intently, then jot notes furiously into notebooks in order to help their children practice the lessons at home. Other mothers sit absent-mindedly, chatting quietly with each other or checking their cell phones and PDA's for missed calls. The children continue dancing, practicing the steps according to the teacher's instructions, admonishments, or advice. On occasion a child is accompanied by her father, who either records the class dutifully with a camcorder, sits attentively with arms crossed, or reads the news on his BlackBerry.

A group of girls, ranging in age from five to twelve, stand in a staggered formation in the center of the room, sporting ponytails and *salvar kameez*, silently paying attention to the woman seated at the head of the room. She is surrounded by her

accoutrement – a weathered, white portable stereo player that tends to skip a little, a SpongeBob Squarepants CD wallet, a *thaṭṭukkazhi* (wooden block and long dowel, which the teacher raps upon to keep time and rhythm for students), and the *tālam* (small pair of cymbals, also for keeping time). The dance teacher sits with ramrod-straight posture, her gaze traveling among the students as they execute the basic steps to the beat of her *thaṭṭukkazhi* and clear vocal syllables. She smiles in acknowledgement at me as I walk through the door, and without losing a beat as she raps her *thaṭṭukkazhi*, calls out to me: “So, did you find the place alright?”

I smile back and quietly nod “yes,” not wanting to disrupt her from the lesson and her students. She returns her gaze to the students then, and continues teaching and directing them as they practice Bharata Natyam movements. Occasionally, the teacher singles out a student for corrections, calling out the child’s name and reminding her to lift her arm higher, flex her foot more sharply, or to bend her knee deeper. The student’s mother then awkwardly shifts in her seat, and in a tense whisper, hisses to her child to obey the teacher. The student at this moment glances back and forth at her teacher, then her mother, and back again, attempting to rectify her mistakes or errors in movement. Occasionally the teacher asks an older or more advanced dance student to demonstrate a step for the younger or more novice students, or to correct their arm position or movements. Other times, the teacher rises from her seat and demonstrates steps herself, or teaches a new combination to students. Moments arise when the teacher shares a funny story or a laugh with her students and their parents, as they reminisce about events of the week or upcoming performances. These activities continue till the end of the hour, when



the students conclude their lessons and exit the room with their parents, boarding minivans parked in the lot outside, and take off for home.

As I seat myself on the floor, whispering hellos to the mothers next to me, I am struck at the similarities of this scene on this particular Saturday afternoon, in this church classroom, to the scenes I have witnessed nearly every other Saturday afternoon over the past year – the familiar people who mouth “hi” to me as they enter the room, the children who are in front of me, bending the fingers of their small hands into different gestures, the sound of stamping feet in rhythm with the *thaṭṭukkazhi*. The only difference on this day is our location. Prior to September 2008, the classes of the Natyanjali school which I had been observing took place every Saturday afternoon at a small classroom located in the Chinmaya Maruti Temple, a Hindu temple and community center just a few miles down the road, run by the Chinmaya Mission of Andover, Massachusetts. This building, constructed in 2003, is a beautiful structure, with a gleaming copper rooftop and a brilliant white stucco exterior; the insides were painted a smooth, buttery color with veined reddish-copper granite tiles laid in elegant patterns throughout. The center features several classrooms where Bal Vihar, or Hindu “Sunday School” classes, are held each weekend in well-appointed classrooms and spaces; other community groups also rent space here to teach children various enrichment courses such as classical Indian music, language classes in Tamil or Malayalam, and various styles of Indian classical dance. The classroom where the Natyanjali dance school usually met was not unlike the church classroom where we found ourselves currently seated – I recall that bright, cheerful bulletin boards on the classroom walls featured cut-out figures and colored-in workbook pages of Hindu figures such as Krishna, Rama, Hanuman and Lakshmi. Toys

and foam mats were usually stacked on the floors near the walls, and at the rear of the room stood three large brass *mūrtis* (sculptural figures) of Hindu deities. Due to planned construction and renovations at the Chinmaya Maruti Temple, which would render the dance classes' normal rented space unusable for a few months, the classes had been shifted to rented space at the West Parish Church. It was nice to see, though, that despite the shift in location, the dance classes – and the usual interactions between teachers, students, and parents – seemed to be continuing as usual.

This chapter focuses on the Natyanjali School of Dance, a small community of Bharata Natyam practitioners who live and practice in a suburb 40 minutes north of the Boston metro area. The fieldwork excerpts and analysis in this chapter will explore the ways that dance communities, through pedagogical and performative practices, also engage in *practices of social order and religious knowledge*, which a) structure social hierarchy and social interaction, b) serve to translate and interpret knowledge across languages and idiom, c) negotiate various components of private and public contexts of dance, and d) foster the learning and embodiment of faith and devotion according to Indian cultural norms.

### **History, Community and Identity: The Natyanjali School of Dance**

The Natyanjali School of Dance is comprised of a community of approximately 30 students, ranging in age from five years to adult. It was founded and is run by Jeyanthi Ghatraju, a software programmer by profession, who happens to be a Bharata Natyam dancer trained in the Vazhuvoor style of the art. Originally from Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, Jeyanthi studied Bharata Natyam under the guru Sri Madurai Muralidharan.

She began teaching dance upon immigrating to North America for professional purposes; she taught in Toronto for nearly ten years before moving to Massachusetts and establishing Natyanjali.

Andover, Massachusetts is a town of population 32,000, located approximately thirty miles to the north of Boston in Essex County, which lies adjacent to the southern border of New Hampshire. It is the site of numerous infotechnology corporations, including Exact Software North America, Omtool, Sentillion, and I-Logix. Other major IT corporations such as Raytheon, Exa Corporation, and branch offices for Lockheed-Martin, Xerox, and Symantec are located in nearby towns. Andover has a sizeable community of South Asian immigrants who, trained in various IT professions, comprise an important work force for these corporations. While also home to earlier generations of South Asian immigrants, a large number of South Asians in Andover originally came to the United States during the 1990's and 2000's, under the provisions of the H-1B or H-4 visa programs, which authorize highly skilled persons and their families from non-U.S. nationalities to reside and work in the United States.

The H-1B and H-4 visa programs were created as a modification to employment immigration categories outlined in the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act. The 1965 immigration law and laws preceding it outlined six to seven categories under which immigrants to the United States would be admitted; these categories defined various relationships between visa-seekers and personal connections and family ties with U.S. citizens and permanent residents, and guaranteed employment positions in the U.S., and/or refugee status. Within these seven categories, the third category admitted special professionals and their families, while the sixth category admitted skilled and unskilled

workers in high demand for the U.S. labor force.<sup>126</sup> Subsequent iterations of these laws established caps on the number of skilled foreign workers who could enter the United States annually, and set a one-year time limit on the length of stay. Additionally, workers who wished to apply for permanent residency or U.S. citizenship were not permitted to remain in the U.S. while awaiting the status change.<sup>127</sup>

The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1990 modified and expanded the prior system of visa granting which depended on six or seven categories, streamlining the process somewhat so that categories 1-4 were considered “family sponsored immigrants,” and the remaining categories included “employment-related immigrants” (refugees from this point onward would be handled under entirely different immigration procedures).<sup>128</sup> The law essentially increased the total level of admitted legal immigrants, increased the number of admissions for employment-related immigration, and gave higher priority to professionals and skilled workers than prior immigration guidelines had done.<sup>129</sup> Additionally, the act repurposed the H-1B visa as a “dual intent” visa, meaning that workers would be permitted to apply for U.S. permanent residency or citizenship and await the decision in status change while living and working in the United States under an H-1B visa.<sup>130</sup>

The changes heralded by the 1990 Immigration Act were significant in terms of attracting educated and skilled foreign nationals who were interested in living

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<sup>126</sup> Philip Q. Yang, “The Demand for Immigration to the United States,” *Population and Environment* 19, no. 4 (March 1998): 360-363.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 360-361.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 364-365.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 363-364.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.* To clarify, the H-1B visa is issued to immigrants who have sponsorship by an employer in the United States; the H-4 visa is issued to non-working spouses and children of H-1B visa holders, to allow them to accompany the H1-B visa holder while living and working in the United States.

permanently in the United States – including Indian professionals, in particular. In 1990, over 51% of professionals admitted to the United States hailed from Asia, whereas Western nations only supplied about 25% of immigrants; the largest Asian source countries for immigration were (and continue to be) the Philippines, India and China.<sup>131</sup> Professionals and highly skilled workers who fit this demographic include those with university degrees and extensive experience in certain fields of knowledge currently being expanded on a global scale, such as the STEM fields (science, technology, engineering and mathematics).<sup>132</sup> The 1990's saw the meteoric rise of the information technology field worldwide, and major financial regulatory change in India – leading to the boom of IT industry workers in India, whose skills and expertise would be marketable worldwide.<sup>133</sup> By the end of the 1990's, Chinese and Indian engineers represented 29% of information technology work force in Silicon Valley, an industry accounting for nearly \$19.5 billion in sales and over 72,000 jobs.<sup>134</sup> Technology corporations and special interest groups continued to put pressure on the White House through the late 1990's to increase the number of H-1B visas granted to skilled professionals in the IT industry.<sup>135</sup> Conditions were more ideal than ever before for South Asians educated in the software industry to migrate to the United States, if this was indeed their wish.

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<sup>131</sup> Wilawan Kanjanapan, “the Immigration of Asian Professionals to the United States: 1988-1990,” *International Migration Review* 29, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 15-20.

<sup>132</sup> Robyn Iredale, “Migration Policies for the Highly Skilled in the Asia-Pacific Region,” *International Migration Review* 34, no. 3 (Autumn 2000): 883-884, and Yudhijit Bhattacharjee, “U.S. Immigration Bill Would Extend Warmer Welcome to Highly Skilled,” *Science* 316, no. 5829 (June 1, 2007): 1268.

<sup>133</sup> AnnaLee Saxenian, “Brain Circulation: How High-Skill Immigration Makes Everyone Better Off,” *The Brookings Review* 20, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 28-29; and Marilyn Fernandez, “Asian Indian Americans in the Bay Area and The Glass Ceiling,” *Sociological Perspectives* 41, no. 1 (1998): 120-127.

<sup>134</sup> Saxenian, “Brain Circulation,” 29.

<sup>135</sup> Iredale, “Migration Policies,” 895.

The South Asian community of Andover, Massachusetts is largely made up of families who directly availed themselves of these aforementioned opportunities in immigration legislation and global changes in economics and industry. Most of the individuals arrived in the United States between the late 1990's and early 2000's, settled down, and began families thereafter; their U.S.-born daughters comprise the student body of the Natyanjali School of Dance.

The South Asian community in and around Andover, Massachusetts, is for the most part South Indian in heritage and language orientation; members of this community primarily speak the South Indian languages of Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam, and share a number of cultural practices, symbols, and traditions as a result. The Natyanjali School of Dance likewise draws students from families who speak these languages. During dance classes, social events and performances, conversations often easily slip between languages as students, parents and the teacher all draw from multilingual expressions and vocabulary best suited to their stories. Often, performances are staged in honor of Hindu festivals such as *Mārgazhi* or *Ōṇam*, which, while not “mainstream” in terms of being celebrated broadly across India, are important regionally to various South Indian states. Performances often end with a social gathering around refreshments or a light meal; here, too, the regional preference for South Indian snacks and food items is evident. The cultural connection shared by common geo-linguistic identity is noteworthy among members of the Natyanjali School of Dance, and figures prominently into the way that Indian cultural cues and elements at Natyanjali are (intentionally or unintentionally) often South Indian in nature.

Religion is another category that orders relationships and events at the Natyanjali School of Dance. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the majority of students and families involved at the school are Hindu in personal religious background, as is Jeyanthi Ghatraju, their teacher. However, several South Asian Christian students of various backgrounds and denominations also participate in classes and events. Accordingly, decisions on events and venues for performance are often consciously made to include those students whose Christian religious beliefs may preclude them from participating in outwardly Hindu establishments or festivals. Therefore, while the students of Natyanjali School accept invitations or offers to perform at functions held in Hindu temples or at functions honoring certain Hindu deities, the school's annual recital is always held at a non-religious or secular location, such as at the auditorium of a public library or public school.

Among the Hindu families who comprise the Natyanjali School, it is essential to note that despite an overall common background as South Indian Hindus, there is wide diversity regarding personal religious practice and theology. Many, if not most, families mention having a household shrine or *puja* shelf in their homes, dedicated to home ritual and worship. A number of families in Andover are active members of the Chinmaya Mission, an international organization offering spiritual, social, and educational guidance and resources to its adherents in accordance with the principles of the traditional Hindu philosophy of Advaita Vedanta.<sup>136</sup> Defined within the Chinmaya Mission as “the knowledge of Universal Oneness,” Advaita Vedanta is a system of philosophy and knowledge dating back to the teachings of Sri Shankaracharya, a 14<sup>th</sup> century Indian

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<sup>136</sup> Central Chinmaya Mission, official home page, <http://www.chinmayamission.com> (accessed December 2, 2009).

thinker who advocated a monist philosophy, a nondualism of human and divine.<sup>137</sup> The practices of Chinmaya Mission adherents are derived from the teachings of Swami Chinmayananda (1916-1993; born Balakrishna Menon), a spiritual descendent of the Advaita Vedanta tradition who received degrees in law and English literature, participated in India's Freedom movement and worked as a journalist before turning to the meditative lifestyle. Swami Chinmayananda attained initiation in the Vedanta philosophical tradition of Swami Sivananda and the Divine Life Society in 1949, and inspired a worldwide following centered around his teachings and interpretations of Vedanta concepts for a postcolonial, modern, and English-speaking age in India and abroad.<sup>138</sup>

A number of families whose children learn dance at the Natyanjali school engage in a personal religious practice as espoused by Swami Chinmayananda; often, families practice meditation, yoga, religiously enjoined public service, and attend *satsaṅg* (community gatherings, where Swami Chinmayananda's and other leaders' discourses are played by audio or videocassette for group reflection and discussion). A large Chinmaya community center and temple to Hanuman exists in Andover, where many of

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<sup>137</sup> Central Chinmaya Mission, official home page, <http://www.chinmayamission.com> (accessed December 2, 2009), and Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), 239-243. Flood's chapter in this volume, "Hindu Theology and Philosophy" (224-249) provides an excellent background to Vedanta and its relationship to sacred scripture such as the *Vedas* and *Upanishads*, to embodied philosophical practices such as *yoga*, to historical developments in India, and to the growth of interfaith movements worldwide. Advaita Vedanta is a philosophical system derived from the teachings of Shankaracharya (c. 14<sup>th</sup> century CE). At its heart, the Advaita Vedanta philosophy contends that all existence and beings are one, and that the worshipper and the worshipped are in actuality two components of a singular, unified entity. Advaita Vedanta as a system of thinking has been invoked and interpreted by a number of social, political, philosophical and theological thinkers and groups to strengthen rhetoric of unity and solidarity; it has a pivotal role in the development of interfaith philosophies that draw from Hindu cultural and practical life.

<sup>138</sup> Central Chinmaya Mission, official home page, <http://www.chinmayamission.com> (accessed December 2, 2009).



the dance students also enroll in Bal Vihar classes and other activities; as mentioned earlier, Natyanjali's dance classes were held at the Chinmaya center until construction on a new phase there rendered their normal classroom unusable for some time.

Some students' families participate in a Sai community, which similarly holds events, classes and activities for children centered around the specific philosophical teachings of Sri Sathya Sai Baba of Puttaparthi.<sup>139</sup> Many families also frequent the Sri Lakshmi Temple in Ashland, Massachusetts, a temple constructed primarily in honor of the goddess Lakshmi (although other deities' images are also present), and sustained in accordance with the *Śrī Vidyā* tradition, scriptural knowledge prescribing temple building and worship of goddesses.<sup>140</sup> While some families patronize one organization or institution exclusively, a number of families participate in more than one of these forms of religious practice without a sense of conflict or hierarchy between them. Thus, while the Natyanjali School and its membership is in many ways closely knit through shared South Indian customs and identity markers, a number of variables demonstrate its subtle diversity and multiplicity, particularly in terms of religious life.

Across these differences, the pedagogy, practice, and performance of dance at the Natyanjali School of Dance transmits and embodies *practices of social order and knowledge*, from a predominantly South Asian American Hindu context. *Practices of social order and social knowledge* is a phrase I use to analyze practices wherein knowledge is created, embodied, and transmitted. In the case of classical Indian dance, the knowledge in question includes not only knowledge about appropriate actions,

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<sup>139</sup> International Sai Organization, official home page, <http://www.sathyasai.org> (accessed December 2, 2009).

<sup>140</sup> For more information about *Śrī Vidyā* and the worship of Lakshmi, consult Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, 187-189.

gestures and bodily comportment, but also knowledge of religious phenomena (sacred figures, stories, mythologies and symbols), appropriate social interaction and hierarchies, the translation and interpretation of music, negotiations of space, time and context, and ways that faith and devotion are expressed vis-à-vis embodiment.

### **Practices of Social Organization: The *Guru-Śiṣya* Relationship in Scripture and History**

The pedagogical practices that take place within Natyanjali's dance classroom can be seen not only as teaching dance, but also providing order and structure to the social interactions within the Natyanjali community, and transmitting knowledge about appropriate social hierarchies within a broader Hindu context. At any given moment, dance classes at the Natyanjali School entail several categories of persons: the teacher, Jeyanthi Ghatraju, is obviously the authority figure of the classroom. The dance students range in age from five years to adult, and the young students' parents often also attend the class and sit against the walls to observe class proceedings. Several matrices of power and authority crisscross the room during each class session; this section explores the directionalities of power, and ways that social interactions are ordered and embodied.

The relationship between dance teachers and their students falls into the Hindu social convention of *guru-śiṣya parampara* (teacher-student lineage). This relationship, often discussed in Hindu Sanskrit scriptures, is an important convention of human relationships and carries the weight of both symbolic value, and actual, lived mutual obligations. The *guru-śiṣya parampara* is literally a pedagogical lineage, wherein the *guru* (teacher) offers tutelage to the *śiṣya* (disciple) in a particular discipline of study; the

teachings, practices, and pedagogical techniques of the *guru* are carried forth by the *śiṣya* when he or she becomes a *guru* to the next generation of students. The *guru-śiṣya* relationship is ordered first by a sense of mutual obligation and reciprocity, as the teacher has certain expectations of the student, and the student has many needs of the teacher. It is also a relationship characterized by a sense of sustainability and forward movement, as the *śiṣya* prepares not only to demonstrate competence in a particular field of study, but also in its pedagogical nuances, so as to emulate them with future generations of disciples.

Many Hindu scriptures offer proscriptions on the appropriate conduct, responsibilities and expectations of each side of the *guru-śiṣya* dichotomy. Though the texts provide restrictions and stipulations for teachers about the nature of their duty and the means of carrying it out, for the most part, students remain on the receiving end of advice and strict regulation about ideal behaviors and manners of honoring and respecting their teachers.

The *Dharmasūtras* of Apastambha (“Law Codes” composed c. 3<sup>rd</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E.) provide a somewhat even-handed picture of the *guru-śiṣya* relationship and its reciprocal obligations.<sup>141</sup> The teacher is advised explicitly in the *Dharmasūtras* on the right and virtuous way of treating his student:

Loving him like a son and totally devoted to him, the teacher should  
impart knowledge to him without holding anything back with respect to

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<sup>141</sup> Patrick Olivelle, trans., *Dharmasutras: The Law Codes of Ancient India* (New York, Oxford University Press Inc., 1999), xxi-xxxiv. Olivelle provides histories and reviews of scholarship about the *Dharmasūtras*, noting the extensive debate and challenge that has accompanied the task of dating such texts.

any of the Laws. Except in an emergency, moreover, he should not employ a pupil for his own purposes to the detriment of the pupil's studies (1.8.24-26).

A pupil ceases to be a pupil when he is inattentive to his teacher and so becomes a dolt. A teacher, likewise, ceases to be a teacher when he neglects teaching (1.8.26-27).

When a pupil does something wrong, the teacher should always correct him. Instilling fear, making him fast or bathe, and banishing him from his presence are the punishments and he should apply them according to the severity of the offence until the student has completed his studies (1.8.28-29).

When he has completed his studies and finished his period of studentship, the teacher should dismiss him with the words: 'From now on attend to other duties (*dharma*)' (1.8.30).<sup>142</sup>

When someone asks him for instruction, he should not spurn him, provided he does not see any fault in him. If by chance he is unable to complete his studies, subservience does indeed continue with respect to that teacher. (1.14.3-5).<sup>143</sup>

The teacher is advised, in the *Dharmasūtras*, primarily about behavior and interpersonal relations with students, rather than issues of ritual purity or action; the proscriptions pertain to actions and intentions in and of themselves, rather than carrying

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<sup>142</sup> Olivelle, *Dharmasutras*, 17.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

symbolic import beyond their overt, literal meaning, as in the case of certain ritual applications. The *Dharmasūtra* rules for a student, however, entail both social and hierarchical advice on elder-respect and intentional action, as well as ritual proscriptions. Students' behavior towards a teacher is guided by principles of ritual purity as specifically applied to the *guru-śiṣya*. For example, the student is often required to consume his teacher's leftover food as a measure of respect.<sup>144</sup> While under other conditions, the consumption of another individual's food leavings would be considered grossly polluting, within the parameters of the *guru-śiṣya* relationship, the action is considered ethical and virtuous – as a result of the association of the *guru* with the divine, within the relationship.<sup>145</sup> As a devotee eats the food having been offered (and consumed) by the deity (*prasāda*), indicating his relative position in the divine-human hierarchy, as well as implying an intimacy between the two, so, too, the student may associate with the *guru* in ways that would be polluting in other social contexts, indicating his devotion and the intimacy of the *guru-śiṣya* bond. This relationship can thus be seen as drastically reordering and reconfiguring of everyday traditional purity rules, as a result of the *guru's* divine status within the relationship.

The *Manusmṛti* or *Mānava Dharma Śāstra* (“The Codes of Law of Man,” composed c. 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E.-3<sup>rd</sup> century C.E.) differs from Apastambha's writings, in that it provides little information on the standards of an ideal teacher, or the various facets of pedagogy.<sup>146</sup> Several phrases can be found which place restrictions on the types of students a teacher is to take, and address issues ranging from more philosophical (for

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<sup>144</sup> Olivelle, *Dharmasutras*, 10-11, 15.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 11, 15.

<sup>146</sup> Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, 63.

example, an innate sense of morality within the student), to the physical or sociological (the student's caste or class lines).<sup>147</sup> Students, on the other hand, are the recipients of boundless advice from the *Manusmṛti* regarding the ideals of being a student, including respectful behavior towards teachers. The advice is predominantly concerned with ritual purity and social conduct in relation to living alongside the teacher and his family, and philosophical justifications for the importance of the teacher in the student's life.<sup>148</sup> In fact, the *Manusmṛti* discusses an individual's transformation from a carefree child, into the initiated stage of celibate scholarship known as *brahmacārya*. In the *brahmacārya* stage of life, the individual is transformed into a *śiṣya*, or disciple, and thereby outfitted with a new set of duties and responsibilities – primarily, in this text, towards the *guru*. The *brahmacārya* must respect the *guru* for, in a sense, bringing him to life, as according to Vedic proscriptions, the *guru* is his true parent, giving “birth” of the student into ritual society:

According to the command of the revealed canon, the first birth of a twice-born man is from his mother, the second is in the tying of his belt of rushes [investiture of the sacred thread], and the third is in his consecration for a [fire] sacrifice .... They call the teacher the father because he gives the Veda, for one cannot engage in any ritual until the belt of rushes is tied (*MS* 2.169-2.171).<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, trans., *The Laws of Manu* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991), 29-31.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 30-31.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-35.

The *Nāṭyaśāstra* (“Treatise on Dance,” composed c. 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E.-4<sup>th</sup> century C.E.) also discusses laws, restrictions, and behavioral codes between members of Sanskrit theatrical communities, specifying the duties, functions and roles of various personnel and performers, both on-stage as actors and artists, and off-stage as administrative, spiritual and religious leaders.<sup>150</sup> Within a performance community, several members (named by position title in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*) hold positions that correlate to the duties of a *guru*. The *nāṭyācārya* (dance teacher) performs tasks and ritual functions that approximate those of a *guru*, as a full-time instructor and adviser who must possess expertise in vocal and instrumental music, as well as movements for various rhythms; he offers instruction and guidance to the various technical aspects of dramatic performance and *bhāva* (emotive expression) for actors, much like a *guru* would do while guiding students in the study of dance and performance.<sup>151</sup> Another *guru*-like figure is the *sūtradhāra* (“one who carries the string”), a narrator figure, who on-stage and off-stage serves the role as theatrical director, adjusting the actors’ performances and gestures to most accurately capture the meaning, essence and plotline of the story.<sup>152</sup> Though in many ways the *sūtradhāra* appears to be a powerful leader and resource for actors in performance contexts regulated by the injunctions of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the *nāṭyācārya* is a more instructional and morally infused figure in Sanskrit drama.<sup>153</sup> As dramatic productions and dance were both conventionally supposed to start and end with

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<sup>150</sup> G. H. Tarlekar, *Studies in the Natyashastra, With Special Reference to The Sanskrit Drama in Performance* (Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 1975), 208-210.

<sup>151</sup> Anupa Pande, *A Historical and Cultural Study of the Natyashastra of Bharata* (Jodhpur, Kusumanjali Prakashan, 1992), 26-27.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 208-209.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*

rituals to different gods and goddesses, the *nāṭyācārya* also served as spiritual leader and ritual enactor for the dramatic company immediately before performances.<sup>154</sup>

Concerning traditions of honor that a student of *natya* (drama/dance) must uphold and bestow upon his teacher, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* indicates that respect and homage within the *guru-śiṣya* relationship of the stage exclusively flow from student to teacher, and generally from the younger to the elder. Ethical ideals of students' behavior according to the *Nāṭyaśāstra* depends not on the talent, promise, or charisma of young actors, but rather on the seniority, experience and dignity of seasoned artists that come with age.<sup>155</sup>

Though the contexts and culture of dance pedagogy have changed over time since the era of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*'s composition, it is significant that contemporary performers and artists continue to enact and embody the *guru-śiṣya* relationship. This intimate relationship still holds a special place in the Indian cultural and social imagination, and is imbued with symbolic capital and weight, as made evident by the writings by contemporary Indian classical musicians and dancers. Ravi Shankar, world-renowned sitar maestro and theorist on South Asian artistic pedagogy, writes extensively in his book *My Music, My Life* about the *guru-śiṣya* relationship, offering insights into the student's ethical and moral responsibility towards the instructor and vice versa. He notes that the student must demonstrate love, respect, obedience and even fear for the guru, and the *guru* must not be unreasonable, harsh or haughty, and should love the student "almost as his own child."<sup>156</sup> He identifies a quality known as *vinaya*, or humility, as integral to a

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<sup>154</sup> Pande, *A Historical and Cultural Study of the Natyasastra of Bharata*, 27.

<sup>155</sup> Richmond et. al., *Indian Theatre*, 38.

<sup>156</sup> Ravi Shankar, *My Music, My Life* (Bombay, Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., 1968), 11.



student's respect of the teacher, in order to establish a virtuous directionality of respect and reverence commensurate with the teacher's experience.<sup>157</sup>

The continuity of the *parampara* is regarded as integral to the *guru-śiṣya* relationship, according to Shankar, in order to ensure a direct and accurate continuity of the tradition from “master to disciple.”<sup>158</sup> Shankar identifies the deity Shiva as the one “whose movements are the source of all movement.”<sup>159</sup> The image of Shiva here evokes the image of a divine link to the idea of *guru-śiṣya parampara*, particularly in the arts, as Shiva was the first “teacher” of arts, bestowing the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (and performance arts generally), on humankind vis-à-vis his disciple, Bharata. Shankar identifies the tradition of pedagogy within Indic arts as intimately linked to a religious experience; an imitation of the divine's bestowal of knowledge upon humans, and continuation of creation through divine movement.<sup>160</sup>

The *guru-śiṣya parampara* is analyzed in detail by Daniel Neuman in *The Life of Music in North India*. He characterizes the intimate relationship of *guru* and disciple as necessarily entailing a mutual respect for other, as well as a symbolic demonstration of proper respect for the material being studied.<sup>161</sup> The intimacy of the relationship is a measure of the value of the knowledge being handled – knowledge which is often esoteric in nature, and thus considered special. The *guru-śiṣya* relationship, which involves high levels of trust, unique forms of personal communication, and a shared value for esoteric, protected knowledge, is inherently an intimate, almost sacred,

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<sup>157</sup> Shankar, *My Music, My Life*, 11.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-14.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>161</sup> Daniel M. Neuman, *The Life of Music in North India: The Organization of an Artistic Tradition*, (Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1980), 53.

relationship.<sup>162</sup> Neuman regards the belief in the divine origin of knowledge, as well as the notion of respect for the experience of elders, as cohering in the sacred institution of *guru-śiṣya parampara*. The relationship simultaneously guards and protects the art forms, ensuring that their fundamental tenets and authoritative practices are not modified or altered in transmission beyond the boundaries of what might be thought of as “artistic license” by members of the *parampara*.<sup>163</sup>

With this background about the traditional *guru-śiṣya* relationship in mind, we can analyze the ways in which teachers and students interact at the Natyanjali school, and ways that knowledge is transmitted and received therein. In the process of transmitting of traditional knowledge about Bharata Natyam, another category of knowledge is also created for the students of Natyanjali: the students learn the structure, parameters and behavioral conventions that are integral to the *guru-śiṣya* relationship, and to other social structures in traditional Hindu contexts of learning. And simultaneously, this symbolic institution is being reimagined in innovative ways – through practices of social interaction, pedagogy, and performance – to convey and negotiate new forms of knowledge, identity and value representative of religious and cultural life in a new environment.

### **Practices of Ordering Relationships: Teachers, Students, and Location of Authority**

In the course of teaching movement, gesture, expression, repertoire and technique, dance teachers knowingly and unknowingly also instruct their students about traditional South Asian and Hindu conventions of social relationships between students and

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<sup>162</sup> Neuman, *The Life of Music in North India*, 53.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

teachers. This instruction about social order provides students with a number of sources of authority on dance, Hindu mythology, ritual and belief, and general principles for living. While, depending on context, students may hear the referencing of a number of textual or canonical sources such as the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the *Vedas*, Hindu epics and *Puranas*, often authority is conveyed by references to particular persons and communities. Some such references to people may be simply “imagined” – conjured from idealized or exemplary figures and communities in Hindu myth or history. At other times, the references to people are physically and recognizably real – a pivotal figure in the Bharata Natyam world, an actor, musician, or public figure seen in media sources, or even a member of students’ own local communities. Perhaps the most influential source of human authority that students learn about is the dance teacher herself – and her own repository of views, interpretations and thoughts about religion gleaned from experience.

Susan Schwartz writes about the pedagogical atmosphere in Indian performance contexts, noting the ways in which the interchanges between *guru* and student involve few discursive explanations, and more “oral/aural/kinesthetic” transmissions of knowledge.<sup>164</sup> She writes:

...when the transmission is experienced physically, as sound enters into the body through the ears and movement is physically internalized, it is more active, more engaged, and it is immediate, that is unmediated. Those who learn physically learn differently, and experience their knowledge

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<sup>164</sup> Susan L. Schwartz, *Rasa: Performing the Divine in India* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2004), 5.

differently as well. It becomes ingested, becomes, like food, part of one's cell structure.<sup>165</sup>

Ethnographic observation of the pedagogical practices at Natyanjali reveal that much as dance knowledge is learned through the body and senses, so is knowledge about culturally-appropriate social action and authoritative hierarchies. And on the other hand, non-traditional, "American" modes of pedagogy that find their way into Jeyanthi's dance classrooms become new practices of fostering awareness of traditional knowledge and authority. Several examples of interchanges between students and teachers in the classroom demonstrate the nature of authority as it is transmitted through dance pedagogy.

In one class session, Jeyanthi Ghatraju, teacher of the Natyanjali School of Dance, was instructing a class of young students to recite and enact a *śloka*, or verse, which celebrates the Hindu deity Shiva. During this *śloka*, the students, ages six to twelve years, seated themselves on the floor in a semicircle facing the teacher; the *śloka* is sung orally and enacted using only the hands, arms, and face; the body and legs are not used as the students are seated cross-legged on the floor. While practicing this item, a six-year-old student made an error in her gestures, by enacting the gesture for the wrong deity at a particular point in the song lyrics. The student's mistake provided Jeyanthi with an opportunity to speak about the importance of knowing which deity is being described in a particular *śloka*. Jeyanthi addressed the student's error gently but emphatically,

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<sup>165</sup> Schwartz, *Rasa*, 5.

conveying to the group through her emotive tone and insistent vocabulary the importance of performing religious knowledge correctly:

[Jeyanthi is singing the song as the students perform in class, but interrupts herself when a child falters]

“*Shivam, Shivam*” – *Shivam?!*” [tone changes to surprised when she sees the wrong gesture being used; she addresses the child] What do you mean?! [gentle laughter, as the bewildered child tries to change *hastas*, or hand gestures] You see, what is important is to *understand*. Where did that come from? What [do] we mean? We’re talking about *who* here? Shiva. And who’s this? [demonstrating the *hasta* which the child was using incorrectly] Where does that come from? [speaks gently, but emphatically] *No*, you *cannot* confuse.

[pauses to reflect, then describes one common point of confusion for students]

The one confusing thing, I’ll tell you – it’s between Ganesha and Lakshmi. Right? Ganesha is way, way, way down here [demonstrates the *kapita hasta*, held at hip level], and Lakshmi is chest-level [demonstrates the *kapita hasta* at chest level]. You *cannot* confuse. If you do, then we have no idea who you’re talking about. Right? It’s very important you understand *every word, and the meaning*, right? Okay, Anushiya\*? Do we understand every word of it?<sup>166</sup>

While teaching the Shiva *śloka*, Jeyanthi expressed the importance of not only performing the accurate gestures for a particular context, but also understanding *which deity* is being described in the music or *śloka* being performed. Performance and understanding go hand-in-hand, and Jeyanthi encourages her students to gain not only a performative knowledge, but conceptual knowledge of the Hindu deities being described. Her tone towards the students was not formal or stand-offish; on the contrary, she spoke in a familiar manner with the students, indicating her intimate relationship with them as a

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<sup>166</sup> Jeyanthi Ghatraju, personal communication in dance classroom, Andover, MA, May 17, 2008. Throughout the dissertation, the names of certain field subjects (indicated with an asterisk) have been changed to protect their privacy, particularly in the case of minors and others who have requested to be assigned pseudonyms.

teacher and advisor figure. Whether her inclination to speak in this gentle, didactic manner with her students stems from her personal manner of speaking, from modes of traditional pedagogic speech learned while a young student in India herself, or from her experiences in the U.S. teaching young American children who seem to respond more positively to gentle tones of voice – it is difficult to say. While her manner of speaking is emphatic, it was not condescending or chastising; she spoke in a way that ensured that the youngest students of the class would understand the importance of her message. Jeyanthi built rapport with the students by acknowledging the inherently confusing aspects of performing *hastas* for particular deities – she described the similarity of the *hastas* for Ganesha and Lakshmi, and demonstrated them for the class so that they could also understand the similarities and distinctions between them. Nevertheless, she did not detract from her point in doing so; she continued to encourage students that understanding the deities being described in devotional songs and poems is important for performing the items correctly.

In this lesson, the students learn that their dance teacher is a valuable resource for learning more about the different hand gestures and their meanings; that there *is* in fact a deep meaning for each gesture, and it is important to know it, and that their teacher could be consulted as an approachable, knowledgeable authority source for more information on these various gestures. The social structure and power dynamic of the room, while clearly composed of an authority figure (teacher) and subordinate figures (students), are also ordered in a somewhat conversational and collegial way, where students can regard the teacher as an approachable resource to gain knowledge. Knowledge itself is something attainable through the act of personal inquiry; students are encouraged to

understand the religious concepts behind dance movements with questions such as “who are we talking about?” and “why do we do this?”

At other times, however, the teacher’s interactions with the students are quite different in nature. While the dance classroom is at almost every moment a site of noteworthy pedagogical moments (as far as the ethnography of culture and practice is concerned, in any case), it is inherently also a site where the boring and grueling work of rehearsal is done. The average dance class, at its very core, entails a number of activities that are quite honestly mundane and repetitive to most anyone, even to the teachers and students themselves – activities such as the drilling and repetitions of movement sequences over and over again; the repeated verbal corrections and reminders that a teacher must deliver for her students, like a broken record; the painstaking process of assembling basic body postures into steps, then into sequences, and finally into cohesive dance pieces. Especially with young children, due to their lack of relative experience and coordination (and at times, a critical lack of interest in learning Bharata Natyam at all), students require a number of repetitious corrections, lectures, even chastisements, from their teacher, who sits in exasperation at the slow progress of her students. The teacher, in most instances, is likely not truly angry or disappointed in her students, though she may be frustrated at their pace of grasping or general attitudes in the dance studio. But at times, the verbalization of this frustration and disappointment can be used as a teaching tool or pedagogical decision in the classroom. Different lessons on authority and knowledge may come across in such an instance, but they are nonetheless important as far as gleaning information about the way such episodes generate models of social organization for students and teachers alike.

The following excerpt is taken from a 16-minute segment of transcribed recordings, taken from a dance class in April 2008. During this session, Jeyanthi was reviewing a *puṣpāñjali* (literally “an offering of flowers;” a short, basic invocatory item) with several young students.<sup>167</sup> The two oldest students, Ritu\* and Mallika\*, were eight years old, and had been studying dance with Jeyanthi for two years at this point; they had already learned the *puṣpāñjali* and were supposed to be merely doing a “run-through” of the item for review. The other students were six years old at the time, and had just completed learning the *puṣpāñjali* a week prior. Mixed level classes were the norm in Jeyanthi’s pedagogy, and a means of establishing a hierarchy of age and experience in the classroom, thereby demonstrating the trajectory and goals of continued dance practice over time. On this day, Jeyanthi had the younger students run through the *puṣpāñjali* while standing behind the two older students, perhaps hoping their more experienced execution of the dance item would be an inspiration for the younger girls to keep practicing it in order to perform with the older girls at some later time.

The run-through did not go according to Jeyanthi’s plan, however, as Ritu and Mallika encountered problem after problem with the steps and movements of the *puṣpāñjali*, and required numerous corrections at every stage. Their difficulty with the *puṣpāñjali* was perhaps due to a long hiatus from practicing and performing this item, or more likely, a result of a rather apathetic attitude towards Bharata Natyam in which they

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<sup>167</sup> *Puṣpāñjali*, which literally translates to “an offering of flowers,” is a term for a dance repertoire item that generally serves as an invocatory piece to start a dance program. *Puṣpāñjalis* are generally choreographed from short, easy sequences of *aḍavus*, or basic steps, and are set to music comprised of sung syllables and beats, rather than verbal lyrics that convey meaning. Toward the end of a *puṣpāñjali*, there may often be a short *śloka* in praise of Hindu deities. A *puṣpāñjali* is often a popular item to teach to young children who are still learning the *aḍavus*, as the choreography is usually simple, and the duration of the music brief.



seemed temporarily mired at that time. Even I had noted that in recent weeks, the two girls had been frequently absent from dance classes, or had run late and therefore missed the entire portion of dance class devoted to reviewing *adavus*. Their scheduling difficulties appeared to be due to other commitments and obligations on Saturdays, such as schoolmates' birthday parties or soccer tournaments; on many days, the long-faced girls, dressed in party dresses or shorts and t-shirts would rush into dance class late, herded in by their harried mothers who carried folded *salvar kameez* and *dupattas* in hand for the girls to change into before starting to dance. I sensed that the girls were often less-than-thrilled to have left their prior engagements to come to dance class. Jeyanthi's frequent interruptions and corrections, the range of her tone of voice from frustrated to angry to disappointed, the variations in the way she addresses certain students over others—all these components convey a different set of ideas about authority and knowledge on dance than in the previous episode where she discussed *ślokas*, hand gestures and meaning:

[Jeyanthi is singing the *puṣpāñjali* music, and tapping her *thaṭṭukkazhi* as students dance; she stops herself to call attention to Ritu's mistakes]

Jump down! That is – I just said that, please don't do that. This hand should never come like this! When are you ever going to understand? This and should always be like this, right? Have you ever seen anyone do like this? [Ritu shakes head "no"] Why do you do that then? You have to do it again. Jump down, keep your "vee."<sup>168</sup>

[Jeyanthi resumes singing and tapping the *thaṭṭukkazhi*.]

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<sup>168</sup> By "vee," Jeyanthi is referring to the V-shaped position of the feet during the *araimaṇḍi* posture held in Bharata Natyam. In *araimaṇḍi*, the dancer must keep her heels together, with her toes turned outward, away from each other, in a straight or V-shaped formation. The knees are bent till the dancer reaches close to half her normal height. The back is held straight throughout. Jeyanthi frequently calls out, "keep your 'vee!'" to her young students as a colloquial reminder to watch their foot positions. She also uses the phrase, "one-two-three," to signal students to assume the *araimaṇḍi* position.

[A few moments pass; then she addresses Mallika, who is crowding out six-year-old beginner student Bina\*, despite the room being large enough for everyone. She also corrects her arm position, which is drooping] Move over. Move over, if she's not having enough room. Put your hands out, don't do this. It looks *ugly*, actually. Left side!

[Jeyanthi sings again, and continues tapping the *thaṭṭukkazhi*]

[Moments later, in a frustrated tone – Jeyanthi speaks] Again, one-two-three. Why is it that we cannot do *araimaṇḍi*, when I say 'one-two-three.?' One-two-three!

[Students snap back to attention; Jeyanthi sings again, tapping the *thaṭṭukkazhi*]

[A few moments later, Jeyanthi stops again; she is more frustrated than before]

That's not what it is! Anytime we jump, we jump on our toes like that, right? Do it! And please have your hands out, I do not want to see this one more time. Sit. One-two-three.

[Jeyanthi sings again, tapping the *thaṭṭukkazhi*. Moments later, she stops again; her voice drops to a lower register, conveying her disapproval about students' lack of attention to her corrections]

Mallika, I just corrected you on that. Show me how you're supposed to jump.

[Mallika jumps again, using proper form this time; Jeyanthi approves] Aaah, that's how you're supposed to do it! Go.

[Jeyanthi sings again, tapping the *thaṭṭukkazhi*. The students continue dancing for a few moments. Then suddenly – Jeyanthi is irked as the students spontaneously stop dancing; they've forgotten the sequence of steps]

What is it? Why do you stop? Why do you *stand* like this? I don't want you to stand like this! And, if you keep doing this, I'll keep saying that! Because I *know* you can do much better job, and you're not doing it. I *have* to say that, and I *will* say that. *Sit properly, jump properly, do it properly, focus!* Okay? That's what I'm expecting from you, in the class. One-two-three.

[Jeyanthi sings again, tapping the *thaṭṭukkazhi*]

That's *not* what I said, Mallika! You just showed me, didn't you? Then why are you not doing it?! I just told you to do it, jump on your toes, keep your hands out – those are the only two things I'm looking for, and the only reason I'm making you do it. Why aren't you doing it? Sit! One-two-three!

[Jeyanthi sings again, tapping the *thaṭṭukkazhi*. Moments later – again, a pause as she addresses Ritu and Mallika on their errors in executing the “*ta tai ta ha*” basic step.]

What is that standing? What is that throwing the hands like this? How are you supposed to do ‘*ta tai ta ha?*’ [Jeyanthi gesturing toward the younger students] They're going to pick it up from you! Is that what you want them to do? What kind of throwing hands is this? How are you supposed to do ‘*ta tai ta ha?*’ Show me!

[Jeyanthi sings again, tapping the *thaṭṭukkazhi*. She shouts out reminders about the steps.]  
Turn! Turn!

[Jeyanthi sings again, tapping the *thaṭṭukkazhi*. Bina, one of the younger novice students, performs the turn on cue, but accidentally turns the wrong way. Jeyanthi is certain to correct her, but doesn't linger on her mistake; with a disappointed tone of voice, she uses the moment to admonish the older girls for their rusty performance, and address her wish to teach them something new.]

[to Bina, who has turned the wrong way] No, this side. [directs misguided younger student to turn the other way, then turns and addresses older girls] Right. I mean, she's still learning. But at least she has the structure.

[then, her tone of voice getting more intense – ] Where is your structure in *your aḍavus*, both of you? What do you *practice* at home? I'm not very happy, okay? I am very disappointed. I keep saying the same thing over and over and over, and I still don't see any improvement of any kind. It's actually getting worse and worse. You don't come to *aḍavu* class, and you don't practice at home, and what am I supposed to do with you then? Right? I have to correct the same *aḍavus* every time, and this is not what I want to do. I want to teach you something new.

[Jeyanthi sings again, tapping the *thaṭṭukkazhi*, as lesson continues]<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Jeyanthi Ghatraju, personal communication in dance classroom, Andover, MA, April 26, 2008.

There are many frameworks with which to interpret this *puṣpāñjali* rehearsal; here, we can observe how the discourse and embodied practices of dance pedagogy allow for diverse forms of communication of knowledge and authority between teachers and students. Here, students learn that the teacher has authority, and that long-standing, well-known dance items such as *puṣpāñjali* must be performed with rigid adherence to their choreography, with no room for hesitation or improvisation. The teacher likewise clearly detects the reluctance of her students to adhere to this authority structure, as the students clearly show their disregard for some of its principles – namely, practicing *aḍavus* and rehearsing at home. While the teacher embodies authority and power in the classroom, her authority does not extend to their homes; and the students' failure to practice at home renders her in a precarious situation, as she is unable to teach new dance items to students who have yet to master a basic piece of repertoire.

The power dynamics in this situation are more polarized and distinct than in the previous episode. Jeyanthi stops students time and again for improper execution, sloppy movements; her tone of voice conveys not only that the students' movements and memories are incorrect, but also that they are personally disappointing their teacher. While students were aware of their subordinate position in this situation, through the ambience and mood created by Jeyanthi's vocal tone, students also learned that their teacher has a personal, emotional investment in their dance education, and that they were expected to meet her expectation through correct practice and whole-hearted participation in dance class.<sup>170</sup> In this situation, students were reminded that dance knowledge has

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<sup>170</sup> I would liked to have interviewed the students here directly, to find out their thoughts on their teacher's tone of voice and what it conveyed to them. However, the students in this particular lesson all fell in an age group too young to be interview candidates according to my own

been imparted to them at prior lessons, and that it was their responsibility to master this knowledge through rote memorization of dance sequences and home practice. They were chastised for their failure to do so, but were also reminded that without mastery of this particular dance item, that they would not be progressing forward to learn something new. The trajectory of dance knowledge, as an entity that builds upon prior knowledge, is symbolically reconjured through this reminder.

In this bright church classroom of American-born students, Jeyanthi negotiates the challenges of mixed motivations and levels of investment in dance that her students bring to class each week. Susan Schwartz's description of Indian performance pedagogy portrays a totalizing experience; a primarily non-discursive, "oral/aural/kinesthetic" *habitus* of learning, wherein the teacher strives to inculcate knowledge not only for rote regurgitation, but to transform the student's very person. *Praxis* in the traditional setting is primarily silent, but embodied. Here, however, the students may bring different pedagogical models into the classroom, derived from other educational contexts – grade school, for example, or soccer coaches, where verbal direction is a key aspect of keeping their attention, providing motivation, and reaffirming correct learning. American-born dance students live in a different *habitus* than the one that is advocated in "ideal" modes of Indian performative learning; their *habitus* is characterized by discursive practices, Thus the meeting-place of these two worlds results in some disconnect, and need for negotiation.

The students' expectation or need for the teacher to provide discursive direction while learning dance transforms the experience of pedagogy. However it also creates

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parameters. Here, I merely focused on observing Jeyanthi as the teacher, and her methods of teaching.

new modes of *praxis*; new methods by which Jeyanthi can reinforce traditional models of authority. Though the Indian pedagogic model may not ideally involve so much discursive explanation or direction of dance, the opportunity that Jeyanthi receives to provide her students with discursive knowledge subsequently reaffirms her authority in the classroom, by giving her chances to demonstrate her personal knowledge of dance, and more importantly, the exacting standards that the art form itself requires.

### **Practices of Translation and Interpretation:**

#### **Teaching Language, Meaning and Action for a Diverse Community**

Another aspect of pedagogy in the dance studio entails practices of translation and interpretation. The dance classroom is a locus of linguistic exchange; numerous languages are spoken and incorporated into dance lessons, as students communicate with their dance teacher and each other in English (or occasionally, South Asian mother tongues), learn dance terminology in Sanskrit, and hear and learn song lyrics in other Indian languages such as Tamil and Telugu. In Jeyanthi's classes, students come from primarily South Indian linguistic backgrounds, with families who speak Tamil, Telugu, Kannada or Malayalam. The adult students are fluent in their own mother tongues, while the Indian-American younger students vary in degrees of fluency; some are able to speak conversationally, while others speak haltingly but seem at ease understanding conversational language. A small handful of children do not speak or understand Indian languages as they come from non-South Asian family backgrounds and upbringings. The presence of South Asian languages in the dance classroom is an important part of its *habitus*, and knowledge of or familiarity with South Asian languages constitutes a code –

an aspect of proper communication within the *habitus*, that has in and of itself a correctness or propriety. Knowledge of the code, that is, knowledge of South Asian languages, characterizes members of Natyanjali as imbued with symbolic capital. Those who demonstrate a fluency, comfort, or proficiency in speaking and understanding languages (or even an ability to pick up language quickly, though one does not know it outright) are regarded as more attune with the structures of authority and knowledge involved in dance.

The diversity of linguistic knowledge in the classroom, the importance of language as a code in the *habitus* of dance pedagogy, and the need for students to understand lyrics in order to render them performatively makes explicit teaching and explaining of song lyrics a vital part of dance classes. In order to guide students on how to interpret music through their dance movements, dance teachers must give concise verbal translations of Carnatic music verses. While this may be an easy or uncomplicated task for certain compositions, other songs may prove more challenging due to the time period of the songs' composition and variations in language, the complexity of narratives and stories within the songs (some simply referred to by use of a particular deity's name that references the narrative), the various ways of understanding the secondary-layer of tone or sentiment conveyed beyond literal meanings, and other issues. For certain teachers, the task is also complicated by their own relationships to the languages of the songs they teach. Teachers are at times conscious of the fact that they are not linguists or literary experts, and in some cases, teachers are not truly fluent in the languages of the songs they teach, having learned those particular vocabularies and phrases as dance students themselves, simply for the sake of performing. Thus, teachers may have

moments of difficulty explaining expressions or vocabulary that is unfamiliar to them. In many instances, a dance teacher may not be fluent in the language of a certain song, but must understand it well enough or be familiar enough with its narratives to explain the music – or, at least, *an interpretation* of the music – to students. And at other times, dance teachers defer to others in the community – students, parents, or others – who may be more capable of explaining words or ideas.

I observed Jeyanthi as she instructed several groups of students in a well-known expressive dance item, set to a Telugu song. The item was a *śabdham*, which is a category of Bharata Natyam repertoire characterized by a four-verse structure, an emphasis on *abhinaya*, or emotive facial expression, and short *jatis*, or *aḍavu* sequences, which punctuate each verse. *Śabdams* are almost always composed in *miśra cāpu tāla* – a seven-beat rhythmic cycle. The *śabdham* that Jeyanthi was teaching is entitled “Sarasijakshulu,” and is in praise of Lord Padmanabha Swami, a form of Vishnu whose well-known temple is located in Tiruvananthapuram (Trivandrum), Kerala. There are many ways of interpreting “Sarasijakshulu,” and one way of understanding the *śabdham* is to interpret its prevailing tone as a “knowing irony.” The speaker of the poem is a *gopī* or *gopikā* – a traditional Indian milkmaid; the image of *gopikās* in Krishna narratives is common, as Krishna was said to have been born into a community of cowherds and milkmaids. The first three verses of the song address the deity in his *avatar* as Krishna, and narrate various episodes of Krishna’s life that focus on the prankster ways for which he is so well-known.

In the first verse, Krishna is depicted as a mischievous boy, who waits furtively along a riverbank, watching the *gopikās* (milkmaids), undress before dipping into the



river for their morning ablutions. Once the milkmaids are in the water, Krishna stealthily gathers up their saris and garments, bundles them together, then throws them high into a tree, out of the *gopikās*' reach. The *gopikās* quickly realize their garments have been stolen by the impish Krishna, and first scold him, then plead desperately for the return of their clothing as they stand on the riverbank, naked and ashamed. Krishna is unfazed, and laughs heartily at the comedy of his own prank. The *gopikā* speaker of the poem asks Krishna, "Is this fair of you?"

The second verse of the song takes place in the home of a *gopikā*, where she has worked laboriously to churn butter, store it in earthen pots, then hang the pots high out of reach from an *uṭṭi* (macramé net) from the ceiling. Despite her best efforts to keep the butter-pots safe, the prankster Krishna secretly enters her house and is immediately tempted by the delicious butter hanging high from reach; he finds a pebble on the ground and hurls it mightily, cracking a pot and spilling butter to the ground. Krishna cups his hands and catches the buttermilk flowing down, and drinks it with relish. The *gopikā* reenters her home to this scene, and is irked. She questions Krishna again about the rationale of his behavior.

Verse three describes a *gopikā* who looks on disapprovingly as she spies Krishna (here no longer a child but a strapping youth) flirting shamelessly with cowherdesses who are far too advanced in age for his antics. The *gopikā* is disgusted by Krishna's behavior, and again wonders why he chooses to act this way.

Verse four marks a significant change in tone; while still articulating a lack of understanding about the lord's intentions, the speaker now addresses not Krishna, but Lord Padmanabha – the all-powerful Vishnu himself, of whom Krishna is a human

incarnation. The *gopikā* humbly offers praise to the Lord’s omniscience, and subtly acquiesces that his the actions are beyond human comprehension. She confesses that despite all these naughty antics performed by Krishna, she longs to be united with him as his devotee. Yet, Krishna has hidden himself within the cosmic form of Sri Padmanabha, who is always depicted reclining on a serpent in a deep slumber, and whose well-known temple is located in the hills of Kerala. The *gopikā* once again muses on the unfairness of the situation – that her desire to see her lord is unfulfilled because of his mysterious, playful tendency to hide.

A noteworthy point about the rhetorical tone and aesthetic construction of the song is the *gopikā*’s repeated question, “*Dharmamaa?*” at the end of each verse, first in shame and annoyance, then later in a curious amazement. The song’s verses present this repeated rhetorical question, describing actions that the lord has taken as seemingly unethical or morally wrong, then asking the deity “*Dharmamaa?*”: “Is this fair, O Krishna?”

A translation of the song from Telugu to English is presented below.<sup>171</sup>

*Śabdām*: “Sarasijakshulu” (*rāga*: Rāgamālikā, *tāla*: miśra cāpu)

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<sup>171</sup> The long “a” sound, transliterated as “ā” in Sanskrit and Tamil, is transliterated as “aa” for this Telugu language song. For information on the transliteration of Telugu song lyrics, please consult the “Notes on Diacritics, Translation, and Transliteration,” on page viii of this dissertation. My thanks to Harshita Mruthinti Kamath for translating this song from Telugu into English. This rendering is not the translation used by Jeyanthi or her students; I asked a colleague to translate it from the Telugu in order to compare the interpretations of the class with other interpretations. Jeyanthi’s translation of this song for her students varies slightly from the translation provided here, and was at the outset provided in a conversational context rather than in writing (though later she emailed a typed version to her students). When relevant, I will provide clarifications on the areas where there is a difference in meaning between the translation I have printed here, and the translation Jeyanthi teaches to her students.

**Telugu Lyrics to “Sarasijakshulu”****śabdām****1<sup>st</sup> verse**

Sarasijakshulu jalakamaade  
 Tarunamuna neevu accatiki chane  
 Sariga cheeralu mella chaikoni  
 Taruvu neekitu chusutunduta  
 Dharmamaa

**2<sup>nd</sup> verse**

Utti midanu petti unde  
 Setti palanu atta kanukoni  
 Kotti cheetula patti tagina  
 Gattitanamidi kaddayya

**3<sup>rd</sup> verse**

Alla Lakshmi Vallabhudavai  
 tolli alare palla lopala  
 golla bhamalu kooditivi idi  
 chellu nikkidi chellunaa

**4<sup>th</sup> verse**

Ilanu ninumadi talachi choodaga  
 Nalugurunu ninnu navaturunu chunu  
 Lalita malayalamula rahita  
 bhali bhalire Sri Padamanabha namosthute

**English Translations**

*To the place where lotus-eyed girls were  
 bathing,  
 you, who are youthful, came.  
 Having slowly stolen their beautiful silk  
 saris and watching them in this manner –  
 do you think it suits you?*

**2<sup>nd</sup> verse**

*When I hung the butter-pots up high in a  
 mesh net,  
 you noticed it.  
 Breaking the pot and cupping your hands,  
 you drank all of my buttermilk.  
 Being mischievous – do you think it suits  
 you?*

**3<sup>rd</sup> verse**

*Though you are the husband of the great  
 goddess Lakshmi,  
 you are playing pranks in this small  
 village.  
 Harassing the cowherd-women –  
 do you think it suits you?*

**4<sup>th</sup> verse**

*In this way, my heart longs for you and  
 wishes to see you.  
 All the people laugh and joke about you,  
 who hides in the beautiful mountain.  
 Oh Lord Vishnu, I offer my prayers to you.*

On a grey, March afternoon in 2008, Jeyanthi began teaching a mixed level classroom of students the gestures for the first verse of “Sarasijakshulu.” Though she is of Telugu heritage herself, Jeyanthi grew up in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, and studied in Tamil and English mediums throughout her education; she openly shares that formal, poetic forms of Telugu sometimes contain elements that are unfamiliar to her own knowledge of Telugu, which comes mostly from speaking conversationally at home with her family. On that day, the students learning “Sarasijakshulu” included Suman, an

Indian-born adult student from a Tamil-speaking Hindu background; Thara, an Indian-born adult student from a Malayalam-speaking Catholic background; Janaki\*, a precocious nine-year-old U.S.-born child who fluently speaks and understands Telugu; Preeti\*, a seven-year-old U.S.-born child who understands Tamil but speaks only English; and finally Kruti\* and Kavita\*, 12-year-old identical twins who, while born in India, were adopted at a young age by a Caucasian-American family and speak only English. Jeyanthi had the task of translating and interpreting “Sarasijakshulu” in a way that helped each student not only understand the literal meaning of the song based on popular Krishna narratives known to many Hindus (but not all of the students), but also the subtle irony, rhetorical questions and philosophical implications that song’s speaker asks Krishna with each verse.

[Jeyanthi is seated facing her students, with the *thaṭṭukkazhi* in front of her, and the stereo to her side. She often sings and gestures the song to her students, mirroring them by using her left hand for the things their right hands should do, and vice versa. The students are standing staggered in the room before her, and mimicking her gestures as she sings the music]

Jeyanthi: [gesturing] This is just doing the pleats, right? [imitating a woman pleating her sari, a movement simply used to mean “saris”] *Jariga chiralu* – but you see, what did you do? *Mela chakuni*. What does it mean? He has it in a cloth, put them all together, tied it in a pile, [gestures swinging pile onto shoulder]. *Mela chakuni*. *Taruvunekita chusutunduta*. *Dharmamaa?* [addressing Krishna] “What do you think? Don’t you think this is, like, silly?” [now addressing students] That’s the way. [pauses, then comments] And I’m going to tell you this, it will look silly the first time. You’ll think that, “Oh my god, I’ll never get this.” You know what you’re going to do? You’re going to go home, practice in front of a mirror. That’s the best way. Only then you’ll know how beautiful *you* can make yourself. Right? We all feel that. In any *abhinaya*, you know, you have to work on it looking at the mirror. That’s the best way. Alright? Kriti and Kavita, especially? So, first one – [starts to sing and simultaneously show the gestures]

*Sarasijakshulu jalagamade,  
Tarunamuna neevu acchadikijani*

*Jariga cheeralu mela chakuni*

*Taruvunekida chutusunduta*

[interrupts herself to encourage expression from students] Angry, right?

[resumes singing] *Dharmamaa?*

The first one, it's sung four times. You wanna write it down, so you can think about it?

Suman: I do think we wrote it down last time, it's just we don't have the meaning, word-by-word meaning . . .

Jeyanthi: That's what I'm saying. Let's write it down? . . . So . . . [sings slowly, enunciating, so students can transcribe] *Sarasijakshulu*.

[interrupts herself]

Maybe *I* should write it down. You wrote down here something, right?

Yes. You have it there.

[Takes youngest student's notebook and begins to write the lyrics transliterated into Roman characters. The other students crane their necks and lean forward, so they can copy the words into their own notebooks]

*Sarasija* – *Sarasija* means lotus. [humming] *Aksha* means eyes.

*Sarasijakshulu* – those women. [keeps writing] I don't know, the

*acchadikijani* – I don't, I can't – I mean, it's somewhat of different

Telugu, I can't figure it out. But it's just, some sort of mischievous thing.

[addresses a student's mother, who is a Telugu speaker and studied in

Telugu medium] I don't know. You should know better than me, because

I never studied Telugu! But I've asked my Telugu friends, but they don't

seem to understand. You know, sometimes different time periods, it's

hard. . . . If I ask them for the literal meaning, some words you cannot find.

Yeah. And even Sanskrit also, it's a little bit twisted, not direct Sanskrit

really, so you cannot find the meaning.

[resumes humming/singing of lyrics while writing into student's book]

Suman: *Taruvu?* [asking meaning of the word]

Jeyanthi: *Taruvu* means tree.

Suman: [confused about the sequence of the lines] But that is after *ja-jaliga chiralu*.

Jeyanthi: [correcting Suman's pronunciation, by emphasizing the syllable "ri" as she speaks] *Jariga*. *Jariga* means "*jarigai*." [using the Tamil

word, which would be familiar to Suman as a Tamil speaker] *Chiralu*

means "sari." [trying to help student get lines in order] No, no, hold on:

*Sarasijakshulu jalagamade,*

*Tarunamuna neevu acchadikijani*

*Jariga cheeralu mela chakuni*

*Taruvunekida* - [interrupts herself to enunciate and split words for students] *Taruvunu ekida*.

*Chutusunduta*.

*Dharmamaa?*

[pauses from helping students to comment on another young student of hers, who is of Romanian descent. She had performed the item a few weeks prior at a temple gathering, where many of us were present] You should see how Stefania\* does it. She has no clue! [laughter] She just goes by the meaning, okay? She's never heard any of these words ever. It's so great! And it's so cute. Somebody had the recording, right? Can you make a copy?

Arthi: She did it well that day. And what did [the program's emcee] say? "This must be the first 'Stefania that's ever done 'Sarasijakshulu *śabdām!*" I was cracking up!

Jeyanthi: [erupts in laughter] Yes, she said! "The first 'Stefania ever to do it!"

Ranjani! [recalling the emcee's name; laughs]

[focuses back on students] Okay. Now, *sarasijakshulu* means "lotus-eyed women." If I write this one, what's this called – cursive – you can understand, right? [young student nods "yes"]

*Jalaga* means water, bathing. *Taruna* means "moment." *Neevu* means "you." *Acchadikijani* is "a very mischievous look." Mischievous-looking. Or . . . I mean, it's a little bit of a weird thing [translation], but you just have to put it all together. And, *Jariga cheeralu* – *jariga* means, you see, the border here? [turns up the border on her *dupatta* to demonstrate]. *Cheera* means sari. Collect, and [gestures swinging onto shoulder] *mela*. *Mela* means on top. *Taruvu* means tree. *Ekida* means climbed. *Chusutunduta* means "watching." *Dharmamaa*. "Is it fair?" See if it makes sense to you guys.

[Jeyanthi gives students a moment to review, before continuing the lesson]<sup>172</sup>

Jeyanthi's manner of teaching her students this song went as follows: firstly, she sang and recited the lyrics to her students, enunciating the words so that they could copy

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<sup>172</sup> Jeyanthi Ghatraju et. al., personal communication in dance classroom, Andover, MA, March 15, 2008.

the spelling. Then, while singing the words, she explained the meaning of each word through both embodied and discursive means; she enacted the various gestures for each word with her facial expressions and upper body while seated on the floor, but also provided an English language rendering for them one after the other. She did not translate the lyrics into coherent sentences, opting instead to give students each word's meaning, and then allowing them to assemble the words into sentences with semantic meaning. But she did provide clearly to her students an embodied, gestural explanation of each word and its interpretation. With every word Jeyanthi spoke, she demonstrated the precise expressions and hand gestures that the dancer would enact, in order to convey the story, naturally ending each verse with a gesture dedicated to the word “*Dharmamaa?*” – the *gopika*'s frustrated and bewildered question to Krishna, asking, “Is it fair?” On this day, Jeyanthi conveyed the code of Telugu lyrics to her students in a mix of embodied and discursive pedagogy.

Jeyanthi did not, however, rise from her seated position to demonstrate the full-embodied motions for each word and phrase of the verse with accompanying footwork and full-body postures. Rather, she chose to show these during later lessons, so that students could break down the movements and understand them in parts before assembling them into a whole. The code of linguistic competence, then, is often pedagogically transmitted in solely embodied ways. But Jeyanthi opts to privilege discursive *praxis* here, due to the complexity of the student body she was addressing. During this lesson, not only did Jeyanthi have to engage in translation from Telugu to English – she also had to negotiate between various ways of phrasing her English translations, so that they could be understood and incorporated into the cognitive analysis

of her diverse body of students, who differed from each other in age, language identity, and fluency with the narratives of Krishna.

At dance class a few weeks later, I observed Jeyanthi as she continued instructing students on this item. On this day, the class consisted of only the adult students, Suman and Thara, and Janaki, the nine-year-old student fluent in Telugu. Aside from their Indian language knowledge, these three students were seemingly well-versed in other codes, including knowledge of narratives about Krishna and other Hindu figures. The three students reveled in the stories narrated in “Sarasijakshulu” as they learned the actions for each one, demonstrating a familiarity with and enjoyment of even minute details in the narratives such as the *uṭṭi* (Telugu) or *uRi* (Tamil) – the “mesh net,” where the butter-pots were kept, as described in the second verse of the song. Additionally, all three students had been studying Bharata Natyam intensely for a number of years, practiced regularly at home, and therefore were adept at the *praxis* of learning more complex choreographies in a shorter time than in the class observed earlier, which included students at the beginner level. Janaki, at nine years of age, was particularly known at the Natyanjali School for her fluency in Telugu and for practicing dance very devoutly at home. Despite her young age, she had an uncanny ability to pick up choreographies in a short time, especially for Telugu songs where she could understand the lyrics.

Perhaps due to a degree of familiarity with both South Asian languages and Krishna narratives that these students shared, or perhaps due to their more advanced fluency with the gestures and body movements of Bharata Natyam, on this occasion Jeyanthi’s pedagogical technique changed slightly, through which she directed students



to enact the verses of “Sarasijakshulu” by providing them with first-person discursive “prompts.” She encouraged the students to put themselves in the place of the speaker of “Sarasijakshulu,” and to feel the sense of injustice and disgust with Krishna’s behavior as he wiles away his time, flirting inappropriately with older cowherd women:

So, now the third one. Okay. What are we trying to show? He has beautiful Lakshmi in his heart.

Why? . . . You have Lakshmi in your heart. Why are you even flirting around with the cowherd ladies? Of Repalla? <sup>173</sup> That is the meaning of that. So what is the point here? Okay.

[at this point, Jeyanthi rises from her seat, then sings each word or phrase of the verse slowly while simultaneously demonstrating the gesture, body movements, and expression that must accompany each portion]

*Alla Lakshmi* [Jeyanthi demonstrates the gesture for Lakshmi with *śṛṅgāra bhāva*, or expression for beauty]

*Vallabhudavai* [Jeyanthi demonstrates the gesture for “in your heart,” cupping her left hand around her right, which is pointing inwards with *kaṭakāmukha*, the gesture indicating “heart”]

*tolli alare-* [gestures for a town or city with hands in the *alapadma hasta*, crossed at the wrist]

*palla lopala* [she walks in a full circle, her right arm extended with hand in *patāka hasta* pointing outward, palm up, to indicate “the whole village”]

*golla bhamalu* [gestures for cowherds using her right hand in *sūci hasta* and her left in *siṃhamukha*, to indicate cows being herded with a stick; then gestures *kaṭakāmukha bheda* with her right hand to show “women”]

*kooditivi adi* – [shows *karkaṭa hasta*, with the tautly spread fingers of both hands interlacing, to signify “intermingling with” or “flirting with”] . . .

[Jeyanthi ceases singing here, sits back down, and simply provides her students with direction on the *abhinaya*, or facial expression, for the next

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<sup>173</sup> Here, Jeyanthi translates this portion of the third verse in a different way than the version printed above. Rather than conceiving of Krishna as playing pranks in a small village (unspecified), Jeyanthi explains to her students that the village where Krishna plays pranks is named “Repalla.”

line of “*chellu nikkidi chellunaa*”) – see, the expression is, “You have such a beautiful Lakshmi in your heart. Why are you even *bothering* to flirt? Is it even fair for you? You know? Such a man? *Che!* [disgusted sound] Go away, I’m very disappointed in you!” *That’s* the expression here.

You see the difference? Before [in verses one and two], that was a child [being addressed]. [The tone that dancers should take there is] like, “no, you can’t do that.” This one is here [in verse 3], “Hmph. Such a man. I’m so disgusted with you, I’m so disappointed with you.”

[singing and demonstrating *abhinaya* again for each word and phrase]  
*golla bhamalu kooditivi adi*  
*chellu nikkidi chellunaa* –

Yeah. See, “Such a big man, such a holy person. Why would you do that?” These are all the questions that should come in your mind, so the expressions will be right.

[sings] *chellu nikkidi chellunaa*. [demonstrates a final time]

[starts tapping *thaṭṭukkazhi* to indicate end of expressive segment, and transition to *nṛtta* ]  
*Adi chellu nikkidi chellunaa*. Alright?<sup>174</sup>

In this second lesson dedicated to “Sarasijakshulu,” Jeyanthi’s pedagogical method focused not on word-for-word translation of song lyrics, but rather paraphrasing the lyrics’ meanings while also providing an interpretive framework. In this process, her pedagogic technique turns not only to rote understanding of the narrative, but relishing the speaker’s subtle emotions and incorporating them performatively. She cues students to approach the stanza (and its depiction of Krishna) differently than in previous stanzas; here, Krishna is no longer an impish child, but a vigorous youth who is lascivious in his behavior toward respectable older women of the village. Jeyanthi’s verbal direction for her students of “*Che!* Such a man!” indicates her interpretive framework of judgment,

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<sup>174</sup> Jeyanthi Ghatraju, personal communication in dance classroom, Andover, MA, September 27, 2008.

disapproval, and disgust in a way that students could understand easily and co-opt into their own interpretations. Also noteworthy is Jeyanthi's use of the pedagogy of embodied demonstration here to teach her students; unlike in the previous lesson, here Jeyanthi rose from her seated position on the floor to enact the movements and gestures used in this stanza. Her decision to use embodied demonstration as a teaching technique may be based on several things. Firstly, at this point the students have greater familiarity with the narratives and stories in the song, whereas in the first lesson, students were just getting acquainted with the lyrics. Secondly, in the previous instance, the students were younger and less experienced in Bharata Natyam, and benefitted from separate demonstrations of expression, gesture, and footwork so as not to get confused. In this case, the students had more experience, and found learning expression and movement simultaneously to be more natural and easy. Jeyanthi, in turn, works with their ability here, by teaching the choreography as a cohesive unit.

Practices of translating and interpreting music, narratives and choreography vary with context, and are shifted to accommodate students' varying relationships with the codes that comprise dance education. Students' personal backgrounds, relationships with sacred narrative, and fluency with embodied dance techniques subsequently factor into their individual experiences of planning performances and events with their teacher; students learn that while their teacher is an authority figure, their own personal agency and categories of identity also play critical roles in their experience of dance pedagogy and the development of skills.

### **Practices of Negotiation: Prioritizing Personal Autonomy, Experience, and Sources of Authority**

From outside appearances, the dance classroom might primarily appear to be a space marked primarily by music, moving bodies, rhythmic foot stamping, chatter, taps on the *thaṭṭukkazhi*, and instruction, in its many forms. But it is also an important locus for careful negotiations between individuals, and the corresponding social conventions of respect, deference, social hierarchy, experience, scheduling and the like. At the Natyanjali school, dance teachers, students, and parents can be found each week hashing over a number of details about class scheduling, home practice, upcoming performances, costuming, and numerous other issues involved in the pedagogy of dance.

In these moments of negotiation, many social cues emerge that show clearly individuals' needs to balance their identity and decision-making personas as dancers against their non-dance identities and commitments: teacher, student, child, adult, mother, schoolgirl, software programmer, volleyball team member, wife, daughter, temple committee member, Girl Scout, daughter-in-law. Each moment of negotiation entails consideration of social structure and authority within it. The dance teacher's opinion, advice and insights carry as the most authority in issues regarding dance education and performance. But how does her authority function regarding the myriad responsibilities and identities of her students and their lives outside of the dance studio? While within the classroom her insights may be paramount, moments arise when her advice, though well-intended, may conflict or go against the wishes, desires, opinions and capabilities of students and parents and their lives outside the dance studio. Several

fieldwork vignettes provide insight on this intricate balance of authority and power, and how negotiation of these elements constitutes another vital practice of dance pedagogy.

In the fall of 2008, the students of Natyanjali were facing a number of upcoming performances. The stress levels for students and Jeyanthi alike were higher than usual; the students had been invited to perform at numerous venues – the public library, the temple, an elementary school, and other locations. While students and teacher alike were honored by these generous invitations, the normal procedure of practicing basic steps and learning new items was being placed on the backburner, in favor of scrambling to rehearse older pieces for performance.

This situation proved tense especially for a class of three adult students at Natyanjali: Suman, an IT professional in her early 30's who was married and had a four-year-old son and elderly mother-in-law to care for at home; Rama, a homemaker in her mid-30's, who lived with her husband, elderly father-in-law, and daughters aged 12 and seven; and Thara, a married business professional in her mid-30's, and mother of two daughters, a six-year-old and a two-year-old. These busy women constantly made references to the numerous responsibilities in their daily lives – work, maintaining the household, taking care of children, spouses and families, overseeing their children's participation in school, sports, tutoring, dance class, and other community activities, as well as keeping up with their own dance classes. On many occasions, after class and in the parking lot, I stood with these women and listened as they described the hectic demands on their schedules, their self-perceived ineptitude at juggling all their responsibilities thoroughly, their feelings of wistful regret when they thought about how little time they spent with their children, and their eager wish to continue learning and

practicing dance. Their intentions were not to establish themselves as great performers or stage names at this point in their lives, but rather to practice the art form they had learned as children in India for exercise and enjoyment, and to some degree, to share each others' company as a social outlet. They missed the normal routine of the dance classroom, and the opportunities to practice basic steps or previously-learned items without the pressure of a performance looming over them. The anxiety about performing also made it difficult to share relaxed, conversational moments with each other, which they enjoyed doing each week. The frantic push to rehearse for performance also affected their opportunities to socialize with Jeyanthi during dance class. As a married woman in her early 40's, mother of a busy teenage son, caregiver to her own elderly parents living with her, and professional software programmer, Jeyanthi often shared in the women's conversations about juggling responsibilities and negotiating scheduling demands, and the three adult students seemed to enjoy Jeyanthi's insights as someone slightly elder to them, and more experienced not only in dance techniques and performance, but also in parenting, providing elder-care, and negotiating the demands of the workplace.

As a peer and fellow multitasker, the women often conversed informally with each other; but as dance students with their *guru*, the older students adhered to different conversational practices and interactions with Jeyanthi as a measure of respect. During dance class, when Jeyanthi informed the adult students about invitations to perform around town, they were often faced with a dilemma: while they wished to honor their teacher's passion for sharing dance with the community, they worried about the additional demands on their schedule, for something that they weren't very keen on doing in the first place – performing publicly. Often, the adult students seemed to agree to

perform at various venues not out of a personal enthusiasm for doing so, but rather to honor their teacher's wish. While they may have had a choice to refuse these invitations to perform, the students felt awkward doing so; their *guru* was requesting that they perform and demonstrate for others the knowledge they were acquiring in class, and in compliance with tradition, it was their duty to do so. But the adult students were conflicted about how this duty fit in alongside the copious other responsibilities they maintained, and seemed to wish at times that they could merely enjoy their dance classes for the sake of dancing and as a getaway from their hectic lives, rather than to spend them in preparations for performances.

During class one day, one of the adult students, Suman, was away on a business trip. The two students in attendance, Thara and Rama, were often more vocal than Suman about their hectic schedules and conflicts at other moments in dance class; and this day, they took the opportunity to negotiate with Jeyanthi about the dance selection that they wished to perform at a particular performance. Normally Jeyanthi, as teacher, would choose the item for students to perform, and then inform students that they would be required to attend an additional rehearsal prior to the performance day. The adult students were nervous and uncomfortable with both these expectations; firstly, they were faced with the reality that Suman would be unable to attend rehearsals that week due to her business trip. Secondly, they themselves had little time for an extra rehearsal during the week. They seemed unenthusiastic about the performance on the whole. Rama commented that she had not even known about this performance until it was committed to; she had missed the prior week's class when the event had been discussed, and

therefore had not herself actually agreed to participate. Yet plans had gone forward for all three women to perform anyway.

Rather than withdrawing their names from the performance schedule, confronting Jeyanthi directly about the lack of communication about the event, or explaining the difficulty of rehearsing and performing, Thara and Rama chose to go forward with the performance as per Jeyanthi's wishes. However, they took the opportunity to negotiate some of the details of the performance with Jeyanthi. Though she had indicated her wish for them to perform an expressive item at the venue (the *padam* "Alurulu," or a *śabdham*), the students were against this idea, feeling that these items were difficult for them to coordinate with one another without time for numerous rehearsals. They hoped that she would approve their choice to perform an older, more practiced item (*Rāgamālikā jatīsvaram*) involving more rhythm and less expression, in order to accommodate their inability to rehearse as a group and thereby alleviate some of the demands on their schedules.

Jeyanthi: But both of you, if you're going to do *śabdham*, make sure you can do it with Suman. Because she can't change anything, that's the point.

Thara: No, I already agreed with her, because I asked her.

Jeyanthi: No, but I have to see you next week. I mean, besides them.

Thara: I had asked her, because of the same reason. It's mostly *abhinaya* [expression], one will go here – exactly. We will end up . . . And also to remember, like, "don't go keep on doing this five times." We *have* to practice and come to a point, right?

Jeyanthi: Then, what we will do is, whoever is doing will get together with Suman. But at least she should do it with one of you.

Thara: [hesitates] Yeah. I don't think I'm coming.

Jeyanthi: Friday evening?



Thara: I'm not free on Friday. And, she's taking the day off. So she said, anyway, she's taking the day off ... [trails off]

Jeyanthi: [interrupts] No, no, no – but that is the rule. At least once, everybody should get together. So otherwise, let's leave the *śabdham* for now. Just focus on the *jatīsvaram*, You've done it before, so it's okay. That way, from here on what we have to do – one thing we do well, is important. Right? So let's keep it that way.

Thara: Yeah, I had told her, let all three practice “Alarulu.” Because I am the only one who has not performed, and you both have done.

Jeyanthi: Yeah, but she has not practiced.

Thara: She said *śabdham* is a little bit easier. Because otherwise, “Alarulu” her *tāla* [rhythm] is off, and she has to practice, and she won't get time to do that.

Jeyanthi: [decisively] Okay. Well you both are doing, and we'll see how it goes, and we'll take it as such. And we'll stick to Rāgamālikā *jatīsvaram*.

Rama: [chiming in hesitantly] The other thing is, I didn't even know about this [performance] till now, and quite honestly I didn't practice. If I get back into the routine and practice, I should get it.

[Moments later, the women discuss costumes for this performance. The two students continue their effort to make their schedules and responsibilities as streamlined as possible, even with regards to costuming. They want to wear their hair in simple, neat braids for this performance, rather than in the elaborate style traditionally worn for Bharata Natyam performances, which entails intricate head jewels, hair extensions, and other measures that take a long time to prepare.]

Rama: [unenthusiastically] ... I just don't want to do the entire thing.

Jeyanthi: [decisively] No. If you want to do a braid, do it nicely, do it properly [meaning, with the full accoutrement of jewelry, extensions etc.]. If you don't want to do a braid, do a bun.

Rama: [reluctantly] A bun looks like – you know, my face for some odd reason, with my length and everything, I look like a *kutti* [child-like] face, mommy hands! . . . I know, my face is young, but it's just not proportionate! [The other two students and Jeyanthi dismiss Rama playfully as they usually do in class, teasing Rama for having such a

youthful and pretty face; Rama feebly continues to defend her view on the bun, complaining that it doesn't suit her features.]

Jeyanthi: [with a firm tone] No. Do the braid. I'll tell you the worst case scenario. You're gonna tie it here, okay? And the worst case scenario is, you're jumping up and down, turning around and what not, and the false hair and the *kuñjalam* [decorative hair jewel] will fall off. Right? They're not going to fall off because you're going to put them here. Your braid is not going to dangle like that, okay? If you put it tight enough here, and put [pins] wherever –

Rama: [indecipherable – still hoping Jeyanthi will agree to a simpler hairstyle]

Jeyanthi: It looks really odd when it's halfway done. It needs to be nice and long, up to here. So, I mean, if you're doing it, do it right.

Rama: [reluctantly conceding] Okay.

Jeyanthi: [offering an easier alternative] Or, put it up in a bun. I don't mind. A lot of people are doing it. I don't put it in a bun, because I have very little hair. It doesn't even stay. So – a long answer. But yes. [laughs]<sup>175</sup>

Perhaps because of my awareness of these women's feelings about public performances and their busy schedules based on our prior conversations, I was able to recognize the hesitation and reluctance in Rama and Thara's voices as they negotiated the item, rehearsal, and costuming details with Jeyanthi. However, I found it remarkable that, busy and overstretched as they were with the various responsibilities that they had in their families and careers, they were willing to go forward with the performance – and all the preparation it would take, from rehearsals to costuming – though it was not a major priority for them or a principal reason for their participation in dance classes. The willingness to negotiate with Jeyanthi – to play the role of dutiful students by honoring

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<sup>175</sup> Jeyanthi Ghatraju et. al., personal communication in dance classroom, Andover, MA, September 20, 2008.

her wishes and instructions as a teacher and mentor when it came to performance decisions, while preserving aspects of their own autonomy as independent adults and their myriad responsibilities outside the classroom – was striking. The women made the choice to adhere to the traditional authority structure of *guru-śiṣya*; their willingness not only to contest their teacher’s decision, but to go forward in participation, is euphemistic, in the Bourdieuan sense – an unspoken, practical decision to go along with the rules governing the *habitus*. Their act of negotiating the terms, however, was an act of exercising their own symbolic capital as dancers, adults and active agents, to ensure their interests in performing a well-rehearsed item would be honored.

The weekend after most performances, students and teacher alike take some time out of regular practice to discuss the experience of performing the previous week. Depending on the venue, the items selected for dance, the students participating in the event and other factors, these conversations sometimes become lively and animated as individuals share their thoughts, observations and feelings about how the event had gone.

One day, I walked into the dance classroom a few moments late, just as a children’s dance class was getting underway. There were several people in the classroom: Jeyanthi, her adult student Rama, Rama’s 12-year-old daughter Sarita\* (a dance student in this class), a 16-year-old student named Nitya\*, and Nitya’s mother. Nitya’s mother and Rama sat cross-legged on the floor facing Jeyanthi, also seated on the floor at the head of the class. The two girls, Sarita and Nitya, stood at the center of the classroom, an arm’s length apart from each other, awaiting the start of their dance lesson. I hurried into the room a few minutes after class had started, to find that the girls and women were engaged

in a lively discussion. As I took a seat next to Rama, Jeyanthi paused from her remarks to catch me up to speed on their conversation:

Sarita, Nitya, and several other young students had just performed the previous week at a cultural show hosted by a large South Asian cultural organization in the Boston area. Instead of a traditional, “true” Bharata Natyam piece, Jeyanthi had chosen to choreograph what she referred to as a “light item” – a Hindi folk song with Bharata Natyam-inspired movement – as it seemed to coordinate better with the theme of the cultural event. The students had learned the piece and practiced to taped music, but for the show, they were provided with live vocal accompaniment by a large group of very young children (some only four years old).

While this arrangement had been established by Jeyanthi and the vocal teacher and a rehearsal with live music had in fact taken place, for some reason the night of the show proved problematic. Several miscommunications between the leader of the children’s chorus, the dancers who were to appear onstage, and the cultural show’s staff ended up affecting the performance negatively (in particular, the dancers). Firstly, the staff persons who were supposed to provide the dancers with a signal to enter the stage failed to do their duty; worse, they mistook the dancers as mischievous kids from the audience who had just come to the common area outside the stage entrance to play while their inattentive parents sat inside watching the show. The dancers were stopped from entering the stage and admonished for being in the backstage area which was solely for performers. It took several minutes for the dancers to convince the staff people that they *were* in fact performers, and that they were supposed to be on the stage at that very minute! A second mishap occurred when the leader of the children’s chorus got carried

away by his performers' singing, and decided to have them repeat a refrain of the song over and over again, as the audience was responding enthusiastically to it. The dancers, however, had practiced their choreography as it was sung on the audio tape. They were not prepared for this repeated refrain, and were at a loss as to how to continue their dance with this musical embellishment happening before their eyes. Despite the fact that they felt foolish, self-conscious and lost on the stage at this moment, they managed to coordinate with each other silently, through glances and subtle movements, and complete the item as smoothly as they could, according to Jeyanthi and other onlookers. The girls executed their planned choreography to their best ability, given the change in music, then lined together, bowed in unison, and exited the stage calmly and gracefully, holding the *añjali hasta* (folded palms) and walking in time with the rhythm. The girls' mothers and Jeyanthi, while irritated by the program coordinators' disorganization, were amazed at and proud of the students' poise in the face of these repeated obstacles and sudden, unforeseen changes in the music. The girls themselves, on the other hand, were horribly embarrassed and frustrated with the entire ordeal.

Jeyanthi discussed this event with her students and their mothers, using it as an opportunity for positive feedback and recalling analogous events in the past where mishaps occurred, to emphasize the importance of dancers' gaining experience with live accompaniment and the many things that can go wrong. While the students were not entirely comforted by her assurance that all went well and that there was value in this experience, Jeyanthi's deft negotiation of the discussion, and positive, encouraging interpretation of this event, proved to be a noteworthy teaching moment – and the

students began to respond slowly with a more humorous outlook on the events, rather than a shamed or disappointed tone. The conversation about this event follows:

Jeyanthi: You know, everybody is entitled to their own opinion. And that is what someone said this morning. The morning group. I mean, it was a fiasco otherwise. But the kids did so well – I mean, the music started, and they were not even onstage.

Nitya's mother: Every time this happens! I don't know, like [speaking Tamil: "this other program that you had done"] – ? [trying to recall a prior program, where the live vocalist accompanying the dancers made an error in her singing, which in turn impacted the dancers]

Jeyanthi: *Mārgazhi*? [offering suggestion to Nitya's mother about which program it might have been – perhaps the *Mārgazhi* program, which had taken place the previous December]

Nitya's mother: Not *Mārgazhi*. Ah, [it was] "Thanthanana." [remembers name of the item where the mistake occurred] [The vocalist] was singing, right? [irritated and in disbelief] She started *before* the kids even came to the stage! They [the kids] were so confused!

Jeyanthi: Yeah! [returning to discussion about the recent event] And the thing is, that was the *only* item I went out to change costume. I wasn't there, because I was doing the *tillānā* next. But I would say, except Stefania and Kruti and Kavita, they were all under eight [years old]. We've had like 12 or 13 kids. [in happy disbelief] You know how nicely they picked it up?!

Nitya's mother: [in same tone of delight and amazement] How did they manage that?!

[The two women glance proudly at Sarita and Nitya, who are standing in the center of the room in their typical positions for dance class; the girls are gazing at the floor somewhat embarrassedly, and are quietly listening to the conversation, without offering any personal insights about their perception of the event. As the conversation progresses, they both start looking up, losing their embarrassed expressions; they begin smiling, and even giggling at the ridiculous sequence of events as they are recounted.]

Jeyanthi: And, this one [program], the same story. And they're tired. We're performing at like 9:30 at night. From that point of view, it was very poorly done [organized]. [here, tone changes from irritation to amazement] But then, all they did! – they could just go into it right away! [complimenting kids for picking up on the song and performing]

Rama: [incredulous, frustrated] And one of the volunteers had *stopped* them from going to the stage!

Jeyanthi: But that was *their* song! They're *supposed to go!*

Rama: It's *their* song! And everybody is like "we gotta go, we gotta go now!" And the volunteer is stopping, saying "no, you can't go right now!"

Arthi: Oh, she didn't know *they* were the performers? She thought they were just running around?!

Rama: Yeah!

Jeyanthi: But what I'm saying is, in spite of that, they came back *so well!* And if you have to think about it, that is –

[finally, Sarita comments about her experience at this point in the program]

Sarita: [humbly] Oh, I just faked it! We were like, "yeah, we're supposed to run onto the stage like this!" [laughter]

Jeyanthi: Yeah, I know! Do you understand? How was the experience, right? You don't care what happens, you don't care what they said! You wanted to go into the dance right away! And you did not feel a thing, you didn't show any bit of it on your face when you performed. See, that is important. And if at all I am willing to go through, whatever, to teach the kids –

Sarita: And apparently, I mean according to Nitya, I didn't realize – but they sang an extra [line] for Nitya. So she was standing like this! [humorously imitates Nitya's frantic and impromptu choreography to cover the musicians' mistake. The girls both laugh]

Nitya's mother: [changing from laughter to a didactic tone] See, that happens with live music.

Jeyanthi: [with a didactic tone] See, that is what I'm saying. It was a great experience for these kids from that perspective. The total thing was only six minutes.

Rama: [The leader of the children's chorus] was a person who was very very hyper in dictating to like 50 or 60 young kids. They were the live musicians for the dance, and he kept going, "Come on! Go on! Go on!"

Go on!” He kept on saying [for] the kids to sing, and the kids kept singing, and singing, and singing, and singing! [laughing]

Jeyanthi: And you know what? Our kids are at least in the middle range. *They* had like four year olds singing! *So little!* And every time he would do this [gestures], and they would all sing, “*Hoi na!*” They would say! They know the song so well! See, *that’s* what matters to me. There must have been like 70 kids. And all of them waited until 9:30 to perform, and they put up such a wonderful show. And what more do we need? [turns to Sarita, and speaks with a proud, encouraging tone] And you’re internalizing the dance, and that’s what is needed, Sarita. Just keep it up!

[brief pause, then turns focus to resuming dance class]<sup>176</sup>

In this episode, as in the vignette presented above involving the adult students and their busy schedules, Jeyanthi is socially positioned as the experienced, knowledgeable teacher who presumably knows what is best for her students. In this instance, however, there are several differences: firstly, the students became involved in a spontaneous situation which was out of Jeyanthi’s control, and Jeyanthi’s role as teacher was to come up with a reasoning or lesson from this experience to help the students process their experience. Secondly, the age difference between teacher and students created a different ambience to this event than the prior one. In the earlier instance, Jeyanthi negotiated with her adult students Rama and Thara about their schedules for rehearsal and performance; these women, of relatively the same generation and similar family backgrounds and duties, were in this sense of equal social footing and symbolic capital, although Jeyanthi’s status as teacher certainly created a palpable directionality within the matrices of authority and power between these women. In the instance of the problematic performance, on the other hand, Jeyanthi’s students were children who are of the same

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<sup>176</sup> Jeyanthi Ghatraju et. al., personal communication in dance classroom, Andover, MA, May 31, 2008.



age range as her own child. Their symbolic capital was different on account of their youth, and therefore, Jeyanthi's tone towards them was both didactic and maternal.

On the surface, there would seem to be little that is particularly interesting or important in these conversations between women of a community. In one instance, women are debating about an upcoming event, deciding on an item to perform, and the hairstyles they should wear as they perform it. In another instance, several grown women marvel over the accomplishments of their daughters and encourage the girls to be proud of their ability to navigate a difficult situation with poise. But these conversations reflect ways in which authority, experience and respect order these interactions. In both cases, Jeyanthi as teacher embodies authority; her interpretations and opinions, therefore, emerge as central for the actions and decisions that come out of these various conversations. On the other hand, the students, both children and adults, are voluntarily participating as students and actors in this social network, and negotiate their places in the network through behaviors, actions and responses appropriate for their positions. Could Rama and Thara have declared themselves unwilling or unable to perform or rehearse for the upcoming show? Most certainly. Rama could have insisted – even respectfully and politely – that she wear her hair in a simple style of her choice, rather than the bun or braid that Jeyanthi was recommending. And contrarily, Jeyanthi could have deferred to Rama – a grown adult – that she could and should wear her hair in a comfortable style, versus the style traditionally displayed during Bharata Natyam performance. Regarding the disastrous stage event, Sarita and Nitya could have continued pouting about their botched performance and stormed out of the room in anger at having been put into such a situation; Jeyanthi could have chosen to remain silent

about the experience, or interpret the performance in a way that neither assigned blame to third parties, nor made the girls feel better about their responses to unexpected obstacles. But in both of these cases, the individuals chose to participate in a system where the teacher's interpretations, opinions and decisions remain integral to their actions – a commitment of both embodied action and internal behavior that honors the traditional role of the teacher and accepts their own place in the *guru-śiṣya* nexus. In honoring their traditional role as students, Rama, Thara, Sarita and Nitya engaged in practices of traditional relationships and sources of authority; Jeyanthi, too, committed to this practice of social order by playing her role in disseminating opinions and insights based on her experience with the traditions of the art form and with practical concerns of costuming on-stage. Practices of social order in this context of dance pedagogy entail the commitment toward honoring the teacher's authoritative opinions and interpretations, although each actor would have had other options available to her.

### **Practices of Embodied Devotion: Honoring Tradition, Education, and the Self**

Participating in dance classes each week, committing to the daily regimen of practice, learning the words and meanings of Carnatic vocal music, and attending to details of performing onstage at various venues, the members of the Natyanjali School of Dance also each learn and teach lessons to one another about practices of personal devotion (*bhakti*). In this diaspora context of dance, however, the concept of devotion seems to extend further than traditional semantic understandings of *bhakti*, or religious devotion to central Hindu figures such as gods, goddesses, teachers or saints; devotion also can be understood as the parental and familial devotion to dance education for their

children. Parents go to extraordinary lengths to facilitate their children's dance training, in the hope and belief that , as an art form and repository of cultural knowledge, will benefit their children and provide them with identity cues to connect them to their Indian heritage. Devotion at Natyanjali can also be seen as Jeyanthi's ways of interacting with her students in new idioms that transcend the traditional relationship of the *guru* to the *śiṣya*; Jeyanthi's pedagogies of dance appear to prioritize fostering a devotion and level of personal comfort and intimacy with dance as an expressive medium, so that students can find their own autonomy in dance and Hindu devotional stories to claim them as their own. While the *guru's* role traditionally is indeed to guide the student into an increased deep knowledge and proficiency in the art, Jeyanthi's manners of doing so can be understood as merging Indian idioms of teaching with encouraging students' creative self-expression – perhaps a more “American” or new objective in her dance pedagogy that differs from the cultivation of *bhakti* (devotion) and *rasa* (“essence” or “flavor” – aesthetic richness) according to traditions of the art form.<sup>177</sup>

Bharat Natyam is traditionally understood as a devotional art form, with a focus on Hindu narrative and devotion. Bharata Natyam inherently entails the embodiment of devotion, through gesture, expression, and movement, in depicting religious narrative, cultural behaviors and social ways of being. This devotionism is certainly espoused in dance pedagogy to students, not only through learning choreography set to devotional music, but also in the embodied practices that give structure and frameworks to the dance class. At the start and end of every dance class, students (not only at Natyanjali, but at

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<sup>177</sup> For further discussions of *bhakti* and *rasa* in dance, consult Kakar, *Traditions of Indian Classical Dance*. A dissertation by Katherine Zubko also offers interesting readings of *bhakti* and *rasa* in contemporary dance communities; see Katherine C. Zubko, “Embodying Bhakti Rasa: Dancing Across Religious Boundaries in Bharata Natyam” (PhD diss., Emory University, 2008).

most classical dance schools both in India and elsewhere) must perform the *namaskāram*, a short series of movements of the hands, arms, body and feet which invoke asking forgiveness of the earth goddess Bhumi Devi, on whom dancers are forcefully stamping, and honoring other deities, teachers, parents and the audience.<sup>178</sup> At the second dance class of a group of beginning six-year-olds, I observed Jeyanthi as she reviewed the movements of the *namaskāram*, as well as its interpretation, with one little girl,

Nandhini\*:

Jeyanthi: Nandhini, do you remember? [demonstrates *añjali hasta* held high above head, arms outstretched and joined at palms] When the hands are up above your head, we are praying to the . . . gods and goddesses, right? Everybody, whoever we believe in. It doesn't matter. Ganesha, Jesus, Allah, whoever it is. And then – just above your head, who's that? [moves hands in *añjali hasta* to right above forehead] That would be me. And not just me, *all* your teachers, everybody. Whoever you learn from. Including your parents, your grandparents, uncles and aunts – everybody. Whoever has taught you anything at all. [moves hands in *añjali hasta* to chest level] And this one is to whom? Who did we leave out?

Nandhini: Everybody else.

Jeyanthi: Everybody else! That's right! Whoever else we left – our friends, our – everybody else. So it's important that we do that. Get the permission from Mother Earth, salute to the gods and goddesses, all your teachers. And when do we do it, just so they know? In the beginning, as well as at the end. Even if you practice at home, you're supposed to do that, okay? Before starting, and when you finish. Alright?<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> The word *namaskāram* is used to signify a number of different embodied practices, depending on context. Here, the *namaskāram* is a choreographed series of dance movements done at the beginning and end of class. *Namaskāram* is also the term for the respectful gesture of prostrating or touching the feet of an elder; this gesture is seen not only in dance classes, but other contexts such as weddings, auspicious family occasions, and festival days. When one stands with palms folded at the chest in a more simple, everyday form of greeting, the gesture is also called *namaskāram*. And in many South Indian languages, “*Namaskāram*” is often uttered in daily contexts as a verbal greeting to elders or respected persons.

<sup>179</sup> Jeyanthi Ghatraju et. al., personal communication in dance classroom, Andover, MA, March 15, 2008. Of note here is Jeyanthi's interpretation of the *namaskāram* performed at the start of dance class, wherein the dancer's gesturing of the *añjali hasta* (folded palms) overhead is a measure of obeisance not only to Hindu deities, but also Christian or Islamic figures, or any divine figure held sacred to the dancer.

But aside from traditional notions of devotion to divinities, teachers and elders, a different concept of devotion is also learned and performed in the actions and didactic techniques of dance education—that is, the devotion of parents towards their children’s dance education. The parents of students at Natyanjali seem motivated by a number of factors in enrolling their students at dance class, and devotedly ensuring that their children learn and practice dance over the years.

As mentioned earlier, dance classes are primarily filled with young girls and women; males, if they are present at all, comprise a dramatic minority in most dance studios. During my fieldwork at Natyanjali, there were no male students learning dance. While many specific factors may contribute to the dominance of females and stark absence of males in Natyanjali’s classroom, one potential reason emerged during ethnographic fieldwork and conversations amongst my dance student informants and their parents – particularly, their mothers. For some mothers, having their daughters learn dance appears to be partly an effort towards fulfilling their own nostalgic dreams of learning dance themselves when either financial or social circumstances prevented them from studying dance as youngsters. Several mothers of Natyanjali students wistfully recounted stories for me about their own childhoods in conservative South Indian towns, wherein they had a chance to observe classical dancers performing in their local community. The women narrated that they instantly became mesmerized by the beautiful artistry, costumes, and stage presence of the dancers, and begged their own parents to allow them to study dance. A few women explained to me that tight financial constraints or family circumstances prevented them from attending dance classes. But most of the

mothers shared with me that in their conservative South Indian families, dance was regarded as an inappropriate practice and pasttime; families felt that daughters ought not to engage in such free and visible displays of embodied expression in public venues, especially onstage and in the plain view of strangers and the community at large, while wearing “pant” type attire (the loose *salvar*-type trousers used in both dance practice and performance contexts). Many times, families would explain to these women that their values and beliefs entailed young girl children behaving in conservative, demure fashions, remaining more sedentary and composed when in the public eye (versus moving dynamically and engaging in expressive embodied performance onstage), and wearing *pavadais* (long skirts) or *saris*, regarded as more feminine and gender-appropriate than the “pants” worn by dancers. In most cases, these women had no choice as young children than to heed their parents’ wishes, and abstain from learning dance. A few women share that their parents willingly allowed them to learn vocal or instrumental music, considered a more appropriate form of artistic expression and education in that it could be enjoyed while seated conservatively, and wearing traditional feminine styles of clothing that suited their parents’ tastes.

Today, these mothers demonstrate a vibrant and palpable enthusiasm in encouraging their American-born daughters’ study of dance at Natyanjali, in an American environment and culture where the old, conservative understandings of dance as overly public or gender-inappropriate no longer dominate their daily lives. These mothers revel in their children’s dance classes, attending regularly and seating themselves in the dance studio to observe the students’ lessons, and help them review at home during daily practice. Dance performances and recitals provide the women with opportunities to

adorn their children in beautiful silk costumes and jewelry, which they themselves admired as youngsters and wished to wear. The mothers attend Natyanjali performances with eager anticipation, cameras in hand and smiles upon their faces, enjoying their daughters' performances on stage in all their finery. In short, Natyanjali mothers, who went on to grow into college-educated, English-speaking professionals, and married and moved to the United States, clearly remember the disappointment and regret of their childhoods, because of traditional, conservative notions of gender propriety and social customs. They revel in the freedom from these limitations in the American landscape, and appear to channel their enthusiasm for dance in encouraging their daughters to make the most of an opportunity once denied to them.

A broader impetus appears to drive parents toward ensuring their children learn dance, one that is relevant not so particularly to gender as to parents' desires to create and transmit Indian cultural identity and religious knowledge. That being said, it is still significant that it is primarily girls who are considered to be the ideal participants in and carriers of these traditions. Natyanjali parents perceive dance pedagogy as an overall pedagogy of broader Hindu religious and South Asian cultural values. Dance, with its inherent focus on traditional body comportment and embodied gestures of respect, Hindu mythological narratives and stories that are integral to choreography, and its sonic relationship to Indian languages, Sanskrit *śloka* and Carnatic musical aesthetics, teaches a number of different forms of traditional knowledge in one comprehensive practice. Parents appreciate the ways that dance seamlessly integrates a number of different sensory and embodied lessons that otherwise are difficult to convey to students through home instruction in religion, language or behaviors. Most parents do attempt to speak to

their children in Indian languages, discuss Hindu festivals and ritual at home, and generally attempt to teach their children about Indian culture and customs in the home; but parents recognize the facility of imparting these multiple lessons through the medium of dance, and therefore, make tremendous efforts and sacrifices toward ensuring that children have the opportunity to learn dance.

The participation and dedication of parents in their children's study of Bharata Natyam is an integral part of the overall experience of studying dance and culture. Week after week, students' mothers (and fathers, at times) not only carpool their children to dance class, but sit through the hour-long lessons, observing the proceedings in order to oversee children's practice at home. Many of them hold younger children – siblings of the dance students – in their laps, shushing them and bouncing them on their legs to keep them calm as older siblings concentrate on the lessons as the teacher instructs them. Some parents dutifully record the entire lesson on camcorders, capturing the new choreographic elements taught in class so that the students can refresh their memories at home when practicing. Parents often sit together, talking about their children and ways to help them improve their dance techniques; they strategically consult datebooks and PDA's, and exchange phone numbers, email addresses and home addresses so that they can plan get-togethers for children to practice together.

The integral participation of parents in dance classes is important to Jeyanthi; she relies on the parents' support and assistance in all aspects of the dance classes' proceedings, from scheduling future meetings to planning the details of performances. She remembers many of her students' parents from throughout her career as a dance instructor. On several occasions during my fieldwork at Natyanjali, while observing



something happening in the dance classroom between students and parents, Jeyanthi felt compelled to share a memory her very first student, Kriti, and Kriti's father Santosh\*, a parent who made a tremendous impression on account of his tireless, enthusiastic dedication to his daughter's dance training. Jeyanthi described the often surprising ways in which he as a parent would engage himself in his daughter's dance lessons:

[students have a new small *śloka* with choreography to memorize. Jeyanthi has them write down words/steps in a notebook. The younger students often ask their mothers to write in the notebook, while they perform the steps behind the teacher. Jeyanthi comments on how the parents often know as much, or more, dance knowledge than their students]

Jeyanthi: [to one of the younger students in the class, who has pushed her notebook and pen to the floor space in front of her mother, seated cross-legged next to her; Jeyanthi smiles at the child's carefree assumption that her Amma, or mother, will do the work of writing notes for her without complaint]

So Amma is going to write? Amma can write! [laughter] No, I don't know if I told you. My very first *arangetram* student's father, just by bringing her, you know – we only had one car, and my husband used to work late. So they used to come pick me up. Forty minutes, driving back and forth. And then we would talk, and what not, and then I would go to their house, and then we'd work on it and what not. The next time – he knows it all! I honestly used to tell him, “Santosh, you are my back up! In case Kriti goes hay-way [haywire], we have you! So don't go anywhere!” [laughter] He knew *every bit of it!* And he knew exactly what dialogue I used to say. Because he was *so* into it. *So* into it! Amazing. Anyway. [taps *thattukkazhi* once, signaling the end of conversation]

Alright? [cuing students to get ready for class; the sound of the *shruti* [tritone drone in Carnatic music] and vocalist's voice begins to play]<sup>180</sup>

The story about Kriti's father Santosh appears to be fresh in Jeyanthi's mind, and on many other occasions, when Jeyanthi talked with a parent about a student's lessons or addressed a parent's concerns about a student's progress in dance class, she retold this

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<sup>180</sup> Jeyanthi Ghatraju, personal communication in dance classroom, Andover, MA, June 21, 2008.

story. On another occasion, a mother was sharing with Jeyanthi the difficulty of helping her student practice dance at home, when she herself had never learned Carnatic music and therefore could not sing the music for the child very well. Jeyanthi chuckled at the mother's dilemma, and to encourage her, shared the story about Kriti and Santosh again:

Student's mother: [sharing the difficulty of helping her daughter rehearse, when she isn't proficient at singing the Carnatic song for her to practice] . . . it's very hard. And then I'm sitting, and I'm singing *for* her, to practice with her. It's very hard. [chuckling]

Jeyanthi: [laughter] No, my very first *arangetram* student, right? The father used to bring this girl. And we didn't have a camcorder or anything, but this man knew every single bit of what I said. And, I said "Santosh," – and he's not South Indian, you know, he's not grown up with this sort of music or dance or anything like that. They were from Bengal, and more into film music. That's all he's grown up with. But this man. I said, "Santosh if ever Kriti needs a backup, I can always [call on you]." . . . He knew every bit of it. *Amazing*. And think about it – we're all at least watching the camcorder. This was what, 18-19 years ago. This man was amazing. Only because he was paying attention to every bit. And he would say exact same thing what I'd say. Alright? [taps *thattukazhi*, signaling end of conversation and start of dance lesson]<sup>181</sup>

Another conversation stands out in my mind that illustrates parents' devoted efforts to encourage their children to study dance. On a cold day in February 2008, I was observing Jeyanthi as she began a dance class for two of her intermediate students, nine-year-old Janaki and seven-year-old Preeti.<sup>182</sup> Janaki was standing in the center of the room, beginning her stretches and basic steps, but Preeti had yet to arrive and both Jeyanthi and Janaki kept glancing expectantly at the door, hoping she would burst in at any second. Moments later, the door swung open, and Preeti's mother, Rukmini\*,

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<sup>181</sup> Jeyanthi Ghatraju, personal communication in dance classroom, Andover, MA, September 27, 2008.

<sup>182</sup> Observations in dance classroom, Andover, MA, February 9, 2008.

entered the room in a flurry of apologies and frustration. She was simultaneously shedding her heavy winter coat, finding a seat on the ground, and powering on her Sony handycam to record the dance lesson; however, oddly enough, Preeti was nowhere to be seen. Jeyanthi immediately asked, “Where is Preeti?” at which point a visibly embarrassed and flummoxed Rukmini began to offer an explanation.

The background on this event is that over the last few weeks, Jeyanthi and others at the dance classes had observed that Preeti seemed to be losing self-confidence and interest in her dancing due to some difficulties she was having in learning a complicated choreography – a rare experience for her, as usually dance came to her easily. Suddenly intimidated in this environment where she normally felt competent and capable, Preeti had seemed anxious of late; she had been coming to class late, and reluctantly at that. Yet when asked by Jeyanthi if everything was alright, and did she understand the lesson, Preeti would nod silently, perhaps uncomfortable with voicing her questions and uncertainties about the dance piece.

On this day, it seems that Preeti and her mother had gotten into an argument at home; Preeti had shouted that she did not want to come to dance class today and refused to change into her *salvar kameez* from her play clothes. Rukmini was adamant that dance class was important, scolded Preeti, and demanded that she go to class; Preeti, however, stood firm in her refusal to attend. Frustrated, and now running late, Rukmini then informed Preeti that no matter what, *she* planned to attend the dance class and record everything on videotape so that she could force Preeti to learn it at home. And if Preeti wouldn't accompany her, then she would tell Jeyanthi and everyone else exactly how stubborn and naughty she had been. Preeti had seemed unfazed by the threat of shame

among her dance teacher and peers, so Rukmini decided to make good on her promise; she then grabbed her camcorder, and took off to the dance class, so that she could teach Preeti a lesson about exactly how much of a serious priority learning dance was to their family. In narrating this story, Rukmini, though mortified about her daughter's behavior, did seem capable of laughing self-deprecatingly at the bizarreness of her own actions.<sup>183</sup> She sacrificed her own appearance before the community and prioritized the lesson for her daughter (both the dance lesson she would videotape, as well as the more symbolic lesson about the importance of learning Bharata Natyam) over her own personal embarrassment. Rukmini's objective was simple: her actions of abandoning Preeti at home and attending the dance class even in her absence would convey the message that dance class was of utmost importance, and should be viewed with devotion and respect as a place to learn cultural and religious values, not merely skipped for the personal reasons of not feeling enthusiastic about dancing.

Parents' deep commitment and involvement in their children's dance education is often fueled by a devotion to ensuring that children learn about Indian (South Indian, in this case) cultural heritage and religion while living in the United States. Their

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<sup>183</sup> Ironically, rather than generating shame and embarrassment as she might have expected, Rukmini received nothing but wholehearted sympathy and poignant smiles by everyone in the room, as she narrated her story. Jeyanthi and I consoled Rukmini, relating personally to the situation that had transpired between herself and Preeti, and we shared stories and memories about childhood arguments with our own mothers about dance class. Janaki and Janaki's mother also chimed in, first looking at each other with smiles and knowing glances, then sharing that they, too, had sometimes argued about dance class at home. When Preeti returned with head hung to dance class the following week, Jeyanthi pulled her aside with hugs and smiles, then offered her special encouragement to continue learning dance despite any difficulties or worries she was having. She explained to Preeti that she had a "God-given gift" for dance, and that she should never feel ashamed to ask questions. When, after completing fieldwork, I returned to Natyanjali in the fall of 2009 for a visit, Preeti was at the front of the room, demonstrating steps for her peers in dance class, and seemingly enjoying her time in the studio again. Her mother greeted me warmly and though we did not speak of the prior incident, the mirthful wink she gave me indicated that perhaps the conflict in the home had resolved itself for now.

participation is so vital, it can be considered a component of the *orthodoxy* of the dance pedagogical experience, wherein parents, teachers and other elders continually reaffirm the *doxa* of cultural, performative and social knowledge that makes up dance education. The measures that the parents take to facilitate their children's dance curriculum often goes beyond the measures they might take for their children's participation in other extracurricular activities, or for other family activities and experiences, reflecting the symbolic value of dance and culture in their lives.

S. Uma Devi's article, "Globalisation, Information Technology, and Asian Indian Women in the U.S." offers critical insights and parallels into the ways women and families often engage, sometimes to surprising levels, in preservation of culture and traditions.<sup>184</sup> Devi's research explores the home lives of the wives of software industry professionals living in suburbs north of Boston in the late 1990's to early 2000's. Most of the women interviewed in her article have advanced degrees in technology fields, but as they do not work, hold H-4 visas as spouses of IT company-employed husbands.<sup>185</sup> They express concerns and anxiety about preserving Indian culture among their children, and dedicate themselves to maintaining traditional practices of cooking, keeping house, conducting home worship and *puja*, and visiting local Hindu temples – according to Devi, often exceeding the traditions and customs that they or their families engage in "back home" in India.<sup>186</sup>

Here, too, at the Natyanjali school, parents – mothers, especially – seem to be going beyond the expected measures of support for their children's extracurricular

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<sup>184</sup> S. Uma Devi, "Globalisation, Information Technology, and Asian Indian Women in the U.S.," *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 43 (Oct 26-Nov 1, 2002): 4421 and 4424.

<sup>185</sup> Devi, "Globalisation," 4421-4424.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*

education as far as Bharata Natyam is concerned. Beyond driving them to class, offering encouragement, assistance and support for lessons and performances as needed, and checking in with the teacher about progress, parents of dancers at Natyanjali school engage in a degree of devotion toward dance that extends to internalizing their children's lessons in body, learning steps and songs, and even attending classes whether or not their children care to do so.

What stands out about parents' practices of devotion, in the context of dance education at the Natyanjali school, is the fact that children observe and mentally register their parents' efforts to encourage their study of Bharata Natyam. Further studies with the students of Natyanjali as they get older would be valuable, once students can reflect more introspectively about their parents' role in their dance education specifically, and their knowledge about practicing devotion towards cultural pedagogy more generally.

A final manner in which devotion emerges in the dance studio can be observed in Jeyanthi's manner of encouraging students to find their individual modes of expressing themselves through dance, specifically in depicting *abhinaya*, or expression. Jeyanthi's pedagogy of *abhinaya* highlights her view that expression is an opportunity for personal discovery and imbibing of the emotional content of traditional narratives; she teaches students to allow expression to "flow" and "come from within," rather than emphasizing the specifics of how to move facial muscles, eye muscles and lips as other Bharata Natyam teachers might do according to traditional pedagogies. Perhaps an "Americanization" of traditional pedagogical methods in its attention to self-discovery, perhaps simply an articulation of her own views of *abhinaya* developed over years of

experience, Jeyanthi's pedagogic method instead placed emphasis on cultivating self-confidence and *bhakti* (devotion) through autonomous experimentation with expression.

In many dance lessons, I observed Jeyanthi giving her students advice on how to practice *abhinaya*, to become comfortable with their own facial and embodied expressions, and to find ways to channel their confidence onstage when performing *abhinaya*. In many cases, students became singularly concerned with the fact that their expressions did not match each others', or that their individual ways of portraying expression while dancing would be perceived by the audience as uncoordinated or out-of-sync with one another. Jeyanthi attempted to address their concerns, advising them to shift their attention away from the audience's experience of their performance and towards their perceptions of themselves, as they brought choreography and song lyrics to life through personal, embodied interpretation.

Prior to one performance, Jeyanthi's adult students voiced concerns about their synchronization when performing a piece in praise of the goddess Lakshmi. The piece, a *padam* titled "Alarulu Kuriaga," emphasizes *abhinaya* as it offers devotional praises to Lakshmi's beauty and powers. *Padams* differ from other types of choreography such as *nṛtta*, which emphasize quick-paced, more rhythmic movements with angular lines and simpler expressions. The students asked Jeyanthi to help them control the portions of the *padam* where their synchronization seemed incorrect, and Jeyanthi responded by advising them to shift their attentions from group synchronicity to individual interpretive experience:

Jeyanthi: *Don't* restrict yourselves, saying, "Oh, this is the right way." It has to come naturally. Even if you did differently, I don't care.

Thara: [interrupting teacher, with apprehension and anxiety] But, we feel like when we [perform together], this is something that we probably can improve.

Suman: [echoing Thara's worry] It's a catch-catch situation.

Jeyanthi: [dismissing the students' worries, reassuring them] You should let go of that. You know, you can only do –

Thara: [still unsure] But Jeyanthi, when we three are doing together . . . ?

Suman: In some performances . . .

Jeyanthi: [interrupting Suman to pacify the group] But the point is, *it's okay*. But then what's happening is, in every single thing, it's becoming like a very strict routine. [makes robotic arm movements, to show how unexpressive and mechanical the students seem when they're worried] *Padams* should *really* flow, free-flow. Even if you three are performing together, it's still okay. You don't always have to look the same. I just want you to *get over* that. *Nr̥tta* is very different from – even *śabdā*, right? Chances are, you won't perform together. My point is, just get over that. It's okay, [speaking as a student in a hesitating, anxious way] “Oh, she does something” – [returning to her own pacifying voice] There's nothing wrong with it. Don't get hooked to the point that it has to be done the same way. You have to let go. [in calming tone] Just let go, it's okay, it's alright. And what you want is, you want to interpret the meaning in your *own* way. Okay? We can give you the structure, but it *has* to be done in your own way. What happens is then, otherwise, you're restricting yourself, and even when we watched your “Alarulu Kuriyaga,” you can tell that you're thinking, “Okay, this is next, and I'm doing it.” That's *not* the way to perform the *padam*, it has to flow. From *yourself*. From *your* within. So even if it went a little haywire, it's alright. It's okay. Just don't restrict yourself and don't get too hooked on “doing it right.”

[plays music loudly, signaling the end of conversation and the start of rehearsal; students understand that this is the end of their questions, and nod silently, appearing to mull over Jeyanthi's words]<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>187</sup> Jeyanthi Ghatraju, personal communication observed in dance classroom, Andover, MA, September 27, 2008.



While every Bharata Natyam teacher may teach *abhinaya* differently, Jeyanthi's technique of doing so seemed to strike a special chord with these adult students, as each one silently listened to her advice and nodded in understanding. At these moments, Jeyanthi's didactic technique focused not on the appearance of choreography to the audience, but rather the dancer's own internal processes of expressing herself and bringing the song lyrics to life. Her advice to students was to prioritize the act of devotion – not only to the words of the song or the narratives of the story, but also a devotion to individual interpretive liberty within *abhinaya*. Her advice and example – to commit to a practice of devotion towards self-expression and individuality – perhaps is counterintuitive to many of her dance students who have experienced learning dance elsewhere, from other teachers, who primarily emphasized the rote memorization and replication of other, more seasoned dancers' movements and techniques. Here, however, Jeyanthi invites her students to adopt a practice which provides them with interpretive freedom and personal creativity.

... I do have to say that anything to do with expressions will only improve every single time you do it. Even today if I do the *śābdam*, I have done it many many times, but still I feel that I did it better every time I do it. And also, it is the same choreography, right? At the same time we all have different personalities. So it will *not* look the same. In fact, it *should not* look the same. It should be your own original one. Right? The way I say 'go' is so different from the way you say it. Right? So, don't compare yourself like that. *Be yourself*. That's important. And it has to come from you, as a person. That's important.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> Jeyanthi Ghatraju, personal communication observed in dance classroom, Andover, MA, September 27, 2008.

### **Conclusion: Social Order's Gift of Individual Experience**

As dance class draws to a close this Saturday afternoon, the students' parents discuss their lists of errands for the day— grocery shopping, picking up siblings from sports practice, or popping in to visit friends on a weekend evening. They wait expectantly, as their children gather up their *dupattas*, bags, notebooks and coats before piling into their respective minivans parked outside and heading home. The time spent at dance class each Saturday, though only consisting of a few brief hours each week, convey vital lessons about social order and cultural knowledge that critically impact the home lives of these students and their families. Forms of social order in dance contexts include the inherently hierarchical dialectic of *guru-śiṣya* (teacher and student), and also other orders such as age-based hierarchy, seniority of dance experience and skill, and the power dynamics that come from a difference in cultural fluency between first-generation (Indian-born) individuals and second-generation (U.S. born or raised) members. In learning and enacting these models of social order and hierarchy during dance class, and in gaining access to traditional knowledge each week, students gain social position and capital within the dance class, and find ways of experiencing dance autonomously. Traditional practices of social and pedagogic relationships, hierarchy and propriety, language and narrative, and embodied experience all serve toward providing students with the knowledge for autonomous creative self-expression within dance – in Jeyanthi's words, the opportunity to “be oneself,” and let dance “come from within.”<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> Jeyanthi Ghatraju, personal communication observed in dance classroom, Andover, MA, September 27, 2008.

## CHAPTER 4

### **Building Imaginative Landscapes through Practices of Dance:**

#### **The *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam* (Bharata Natyam Summer Camp)**

I am awake before my alarm rings, the time: 5:10 a.m. I can see the dark silhouettes of my six roommates asleep in their bunks. I sit up in my bed stiffly, silently groaning as I descend the ladder from my bunk bed; my knee joints are assaulted by sharp pains with each and every rung. Tears spring to my eyes, against my will, as the grating ache in my knees from yesterday's vigorous dance rehearsal registers in both body and brain – the result of bursitis, a new and painful experience for me, and a consequence of my enthusiasm for participant-observation fieldwork. Yet, something inside me soars with excitement at the prospect of a day of dancing, learning something new, and absorbing the instruction of my teachers. Just the start of another typical day here, I realize with mixed dread and anticipation, as I stagger to the changing rooms to get ready.

I approach the main section of the house; no other students are awake yet. The halls are quiet, unlike during day when they echo with the chatter and giggling of girls. The *puja* room – a large, blue-carpeted space flooded with light, appointed with no furniture or décor except for huge picture windows overlooking the rolling green mountains, is filled with pindrop silence at this hour. The only sound wafts from the kitchen, where a house mother is already preparing for lunch, emptying twenty-pound sacks of potatoes into an enormous basin for washing. A pressure cooker whistles sharply in the stillness of early morning, and in the background I hear a muffled

recording of an M.S. Subbulakshmi's elegant vocal rendering of the *Śrī Venkateṣvara Suprabhātam* joyfully droning on.<sup>190</sup> I am reminded of the sounds of morning I'd hear early in the day in Madurai, during my year-long stay there studying Tamil. But I am not in Madurai; I am in Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountain country.

The house mother spots me from the corner of her eye, as I peer into the kitchen. Though I was hoping to go unnoticed, I realize she sees me, and it is contingent upon me to greet her first, as she is elder to me and therefore should be shown this courtesy: "Good morning, Akkā," I call out. Though she is old enough to be my grandmother, I address her as Akkā, or "elder sister," as is customary here.

She responds cheerfully: "Good morning darling! Would you be a sweetie and please ring the bell? It is already 6:15 and these silly children are going to run late!" I agree to her request, but cringe inwardly, knowing how much the seemingly innocuous brass cow bell is hated by the camp students at this early hour, as its loud clang signals imminent departure from warm beds.

I pad bare-footed into the halls, lugging the bell along – a heavy brass object weighing several pounds, engraved with a horned bull and Malayali phrase on its bulbous form. I swing the bell back and forth once or twice – loudly enough to send the message that it is time to get up, but briefly, so as not to irritate its intended audience more than necessary. I hear perceptible whining and grumbles coming from the dark rooms – the signal that my job is done. I replace the bell on its shelf and scurry away, no one the wiser that I am cursed individual who woke her up.

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<sup>190</sup> A *suprabhātam* is a hymn or series of *shlokas* recited in the early morning, invoking a Hindu deity to "wake up" and bestow blessings on the day. M. S. Subbulakshmi's recordings of *suprabhātam*s are famous throughout Hindu India and the Hindu diaspora.

This quiet, pre-dawn scene is situated in Yogaville – a tight-knit community in a rural, unincorporated town in Virginia’s Blue Ridge Mountains. That a rural Virginia town could be named “Yogaville” may seem strange to some; indeed, the history of this location is told with some humor and a great deal of wonder by its residents and acquaintances. Yogaville is the realized dream of Swami Satchidananda, a Hindu renunciate and philosopher born and raised in Coimbatore, India, who advocated a universal religion based on Advaita Vedanta philosophies of Hinduism, but welcoming of people from all faith traditions.<sup>191</sup> After attaining a large following of devotees in India and Sri Lanka, Swami Satchidananda’s renown in the United States began to rise after he delivered an address at the Woodstock outdoor music festival in 1969, to rousing praise and applause.<sup>192</sup> He developed a dedicated American following, which urged him to build an ashram in the United States where his yogic principles could be applied to daily living. Yogaville was inaugurated in 1986, and currently encompasses a 700-acre area which houses a community hall, libraries, dormitories, facilities for yoga, meditation, ayurvedic healing, and spiritual discourse, and the Lotus Conference Center (a mini-campus of dormitories and meeting space available for rent by private groups. Yogaville also incorporates the Light of Truth Universal Shrine (LOTUS), an enormous facility constructed in the shape a lotus flower, which houses meditation space, a museum of religious articles and sacred paraphernalia from world religious traditions, and a small

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<sup>191</sup> For a concise introduction to Advaita Vedanta philosophy and its relevance to interfaith movements, see Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, 224-249. The Advaita Vedanta philosophy was also mentioned in Chapter 3 as an influential philosophical system in the development of the Chinmaya Mission.

<sup>192</sup> A *New York Times* article published shortly after the swami’s death provides further details about his participation in Woodstock, and his enthusiastic American following that began in the 1960’s. See Douglas Martin, “Swami Satchidananda, Woodstock’s Guru, Dies at 87,” *New York Times*, August 21, 2002.

exhibition area which contains a photographic tribute to Swami Satchidananda and his life works.

During his lifetime, Swami Satchidananda developed a love for classical Indian arts such as dance and music (his followers maintain that Swami Satchidananda is still with them in spirit, though he left his physical body in 2002). His interest in the arts was furthered through association with several devotees and adherents who practiced classical Indian dance and music. Mrs. Rukmini Rasiah, a lifelong devotee of the Swami who committed her life to his service following the civil war and exile from her native Sri Lanka, moved with him to Virginia after the inauguration of the Yogaville ashram. Several of her children were classical dancers and artists, including her daughter, Padmarani Rasiah-Cantu, who moved to Virginia with her and co-founded the Fine Arts Society of Yogaville, an institution dedicated to furthering Indian classical arts in the Yogaville area. Beginning in 1989, the Fine Arts Society has hosted the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam*, a summer camp dedicated to instructing American students of Bharata Natyam, the classical Indian dance form native to Tamil Nadu, South India. Referred to informally as “dance camp” by its students, the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam* adheres to a traditional *gurukulam* style of pedagogy, wherein dance students reside on premises with their *gurus*, learning from them, sharing meals and helping with chores, and adhering to traditional modes of conduct and social organization. The dance camp has hosted hundreds of students in its twenty years of operation, and has invited several known *gurus*, or master-instructors, of Bharata Natyam to visit Virginia and serve as its principal teachers during the few short weeks of camp. Its most long-standing *gurus* are the world-renowned Dhananjayans, a husband-and-wife pair, and colossal

figures in the world of Bharata Natyam. Having trained at the famous Kalakshetra institute for fine arts in Chennai since their early childhood, the Dhananjayans founded their own academy of dance, Bharata Kalaanjali (also in Chennai), now an iconic institution in its own right.<sup>193</sup> They have taught thousands of students in their decades of experience, and have choreographed and performed across the globe alongside leading artists and at world-famous venues such as the Moscow Ballet, the London Philharmonic, and Radio City Music Hall in New York. At a time before the effects of globalization had impacted India's visibility in the West, the Dhananjayans were traveling to the U.S. and other nations, performing, giving lecture-demonstrations, and offering a glimpse of classical Indian arts to novice audiences, in accordance with their ascetic, uncompromising, and exacting traditions of practice.

Students at the camp hail from throughout the United States, and occasionally abroad. Currently, the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam* is run in two sessions each summer – a three-week course for beginner and intermediate dancers, running from late June till mid-July, and a two-week course for advanced level dancers which commences immediately after the end of the first session, and ends in early August. In 2008, a cumulative fifty-five students attended the two sessions, with the majority coming from different parts of the U.S., and four international students from Mexico, Great Britain, Indonesia, and India. Campers benefitted from the expertise of their *gurus* as they lived, ate, practiced and learned communally in the bucolic surrounds of the Yogaville ashram.

The physical and temporal space of the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam* camp constitutes an imagined landscape, a *habitus* in which shared religious, social and cultural

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<sup>193</sup> S. Sarada, *Kalakshetra: Rukmini Devi* (Madras, Kala Mandir Trust, 1985). Sarada's book provides a comprehensive overview of Rukmini Devi Arundale's life and work, and the foundation of the Kalakshetra Institute.

practices give order and value to the community. The *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam* is a “manufactured” environment, where the organizers and dance teachers enforce unique customs, rules and standards of dress, food, daily practice, and social behavior, to provide dance students with an immersion experience in an imaginatively constructed landscape of Hindu and Indian culture.<sup>194</sup> The camp is a temporary place, in that it exists as a living, inhabited community only during a short period in the summer months; it is not the home environment of participants throughout the year. Its teachers, students and other personnel hail from various geographic locations across the U.S. and other parts of the globe; few, if any, are permanent residents of Yogaville. The residential camp, with its own codes of time, landscape, performative and social practices, is an alternate scenario to the pedagogical and organizational choices made by more “permanent” schools of dance, which are established and operate year-round in other American cities and communities, and where students spend just a few hours each week studying dance, before returning home to their everyday non-dance lives. The pedagogical decisions made in every aspect of the dance camp’s scheduling, organization, and implementation, are arguably decisions made to create a particular imaginative landscape that teaches religion, culture and identity as much as it does dance. The various activities and engagements of both camp students and teachers are *praxes* of ordering physical and

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<sup>194</sup> Abigail Ayres Van Slyck, *A Manufactured Wilderness: Summer Camps and the Shaping of American Youth, 1890-1960*, (Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 2006). I am borrowing Van Slyck’s application of the word “manufactured” here, to describe a cultural and social landscape that is imaginatively constructed through the adoption of social, embodied, and ideological practices. Also, it is important to note that at times, the categories of “Hindu culture and “Indian culture” are used interchangeably, in the discourse and imagination of the camp organizers and teachers. Though not all Indians are Hindu, and not all students at the dance camp are of Hindu or Indian backgrounds, the teachers often make reference to the prevalence of Hindu themes, narratives, social customs and traditions as depicted in dance, and therefore encourage students of all backgrounds to learn about Hindu and Indian culture as part of dance pedagogy.



symbolic space, constructing social relations, articulating authority, and fostering particular imaginations of environment so as to transmit religious and cultural values based on Hinduism and Indian identity.

### **Ordering Time, Space and Practice: The Daily Schedule of Dance Camp**

Over the next half-hour following my covert bell-ringing operation, a host of bleary-eyed, girls shuffle into the dining room, still wearing pajamas and rumpled t-shirts, and clutching rolled beach towels. They sit quietly, talking in low voices to one another, or resting their sleepy heads on crossed arms. Before long, a cheerful singsong voice is heard in the distance: “*Hari Om!* Good morning!” And in walks a tall, white-haired woman clad in a long orange robe, with *rudrākṣa* beads around her neck and a clipboard in her hands.<sup>195</sup> Her impeccable posture and swift movements through the corridor belie her age of over 80 years. The girls suddenly scramble to their feet, and with folded palms, together utter, “Good morning, Mataji!” Their *hatha* yoga instructor has arrived.<sup>196</sup>

A former Vatican nun of nearly thirty years who discovered Swami Satchidananda when she was sent by Pope John Paul II as a liaison to Swami Satchidananda’s ashram in India, Guru Charanananda, lovingly known as Mataji, now

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<sup>195</sup> Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, 151. Gavin Flood makes mention of *rudrākṣa* garlands as an integral part of the iconography of Shiva. *Rudrākṣa* beads are garlands (*mālas*) of dark brown, rough-textured beads which are made from the seeds of the *rudrākṣa* tree – an evergreen grown in the Himalayan foothills. These garlands are often worn and used by practitioners of meditation, and are used in *japa*, or recitation of sacred syllables, names or *ślokas*, in order to keep count of the number of repetitions (similar to the way a Rosary would be used in Catholic prayer, or a *tasbe* in Muslim practice).

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 94-100. *Hatha* yoga is a form of yoga that emphasizes physical discipline of the body; at the dance camp, *hatha* yoga classes centered on physical postures, control of the breath, and vocalized sound to heighten students’ abilities to concentrate on dance lessons, and to make the muscles limber and supple in preparation for dance.

serves as a senior *sannyāsin* (monastic) and leader of the Satchidananda Ashram, juggling administrative duties with teaching. During the summers she leads the dance camp students' *hatha* yoga classes each morning, in accordance with the practice espoused by the Integral Yoga Institute, with which the Satchidananda Ashram is affiliated.

The girls file into the *puja* room and spread their towels in three neat rows. For the next hour, students' tired, sore limbs are gently stretched and warmed in preparation for a full day of dancing.

Following yoga class comes breakfast; the seemingly quiet and timid young girls morph into barracudas as they descend upon the breakfast offerings of cereal, toast, milk, and bananas, devouring every crumb. Mealtime is always lively, and here at dance camp everyone always has a voracious appetite, a testament to the long hours of vigorous physical activity.

As the clock nears 8:30 a.m., students quickly finish their breakfasts and scramble to their rooms to get ready for dance class, their house mothers chasing them to their rooms in a flurry of Tamil and English chides to hurry along. The camp usually has three or four house mothers – motherly and grandmotherly women who, clad in simple nylon saris, keep the camp and its approximately three dozen attendees well-fed and cared for during the entire session. House mothers cook and serve all meals, keep the campers on schedule, attend to the personal care needs of the youngest camp participants, tend to those who fall ill or get injured, and generally manage any unexpected problem or situation that might arise over the camp's several weeks. As quick with a finger-wagging and irritated scolding as they are with hugs, stories and terms of endearment, the house

mothers work alongside the camp *gurus* and assistant teachers to create the campers' total experience in cultural education.

Back in their rooms, students transform themselves as they adorn the traditional practice clothing for the Bharata Natyam studio classes that will occupy the bulk of their time during the day. Bed-headed, pajama-sporting girls shed their attire for a significantly different aesthetic of dress – an important and ordering transformation that is part of the dance camp experience. Hair must be neatly pulled back into a braid or tight bun, with a razor-sharp center parting. The forehead should sport a large *bindi*, a forehead marking preferably dark red in color. As for attire, the younger girls (those under thirteen years of age) have it easy, simply slipping into a neatly ironed, colorful cotton *salvar kameez* (long tunic with loose-fitting drawstring pants) with a brightly hued sash tied tightly around the waist. The older girls, however, have more extensive preparation on their hands, as they are required to wear colorful, starched cotton practice *saris* for class. For the long-time students of camp, tying the practice *sari* into a pleated, tight-fitting bodice and skirt-like garment is second nature; to newcomers, however, the *sari's* six yards of brightly-dyed handloom cotton are a daily source of anxiety and challenge. Learning to make the necessary pleats, tucks, pins and folds to keep one's sari neat, modest and comfortable is an art form which is perfected only with time – and the help of one's roommates. The occasional male student at camp (and over the last few years, there have been quite a few) also must learn a new and complicated mode of dress, wearing the cotton *dhoti*, or a rectangular, unstitched seven-yard long garment, which is pleated, tucked, passed around and between the legs as a lower body garment. Male students at camp are permitted to wear plain colored t-shirts on their upper bodies during

practice. Inevitably, a student will be late to class each morning because her or his attire was inappropriate or improperly tied, and inevitably, that attire will be corrected by a senior dancer in a discreet corner of dance class, much to the student's sheepish shrugs.

Nine o' clock arrives; by now, everyone should be in the studio – a building containing a single 50-by-50-foot room, outfitted with a smooth, expansive concrete floor and a wooden stage complete with theatrical sound and lighting systems. Students engage in daily dance practice on the concrete floor, while the teachers sit on the elevated stage, overlooking the group. At the final performance that concludes the camp session, students perform onstage, and the studio's huge floor is filled with folding chairs to accommodate the audience.

Each morning, a group of students hurriedly sweeps the studio's floors, while the remaining students sit together joking, laughing and playing games until someone suddenly calls out, "Aṅṅā and Akkā are coming!" Immediately, everyone jumps to their feet, lining both sides of the walkway from the front door into the studio. Students dash to the supply closet to cast off the brooms and cleaning implements, then race back and take their place in the lineup. As the front doors swing open, in walk two figures.

They appear to be in their 60's, yet walk with a graceful ease and impeccable posture. The gentleman's gleaming smooth skin and high cheekbones give his face a radiant look. He wears a creaseless plain white *kurta* with matching trousers, wire-rimmed glasses, and a large *tilaka* on his forehead.<sup>197</sup> His black and grey hair is slicked back neatly. The woman wears a poly-cotton printed *sari* – simple, but pleated to

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<sup>197</sup> *Bindi*, *poṭṭu*, and *tilaka* are words for forehead markings. Although the words can be used interchangeably at times, in daily conversation at the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam*, the words "bindi" and "poṭṭu" generally refer to the round or teardrop-shaped marks that adorn females' foreheads. *Tilaka*, by contrast, seems to remain gender-neutral in conversation. Here, V.P. Dhananjayan's *tilaka* is a long, neatly-drawn line of sandalwood and vermilion pastes.

perfection. Her hair is pulled into a neat low bun, and a huge, round dark red *bindi* beams from her forehead. Her expressive eyes are rimmed with a thin line of dark kohl. She carries the *tāḷam*, a pair of small cymbals, in her hand. The students line either side of the studio entryway and with palms folded, greet the pair respectfully, and in unison, “*Namaskāram Aṇṇā, Namaskāram Akkā.*” With gentle smiles, both the man and woman respond, “*Namaskāram.*” The Dhananjayans have entered the dance studio to commence their long day of guiding, advising, and instructing students on the art of Bharata Natyam.

Who are these individuals? “Aṇṇā” refers to Sri V. P. Dhananjayan, and “Akkā” refers to Smt. Shanta Dhananjayan.<sup>198</sup> To ardent practitioners and connoisseurs of the art form worldwide, this husband-and-wife team is synonymous with Bharata Natyam itself. In this rural Virginia dance studio in the year 2008, where young students greet their teachers with folded palms, it is notable that most of the Dhananjayans’ accomplishments

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<sup>198</sup> The words “Aṇṇā” and “Akkā” mean “elder brother” and “elder sister” respectively in Tamil (and a number of other South Indian languages). Students refer to Shanta Dhananjayan as “Shanta Akkā.” V.P. Dhananjayan is most commonly referred to as “Aṇṇā,” though in my writing I often refer to him as “Dhananjayan Aṇṇā” to distinguish him from other individuals. More rarely, Dhananjayan Aṇṇā may be called “Sir” or “Master;” these English words are often used in Indian English as terms of respect for a dance teacher in India. Students call Padmarani Rasiah-Cantu, an administrator and dance teacher at the camp, “Padma Akkā.” They address their house mothers by their first names followed the term “Akkā” (i.e. house mother Valli Gopal is addressed as “Valli Akkā”). Though these teachers and staffpersons are old enough to be the parents or grandparents of many camp attendees, the terms “Aṇṇā” and “Akkā” have significance in the Dhananjayans’ culture of dance pedagogy both among their Indian students and students abroad. A junior teacher, Kannan Rasiah, is referred to by students under age 21 as “Kannan Aṇṇā;” students older than Kannan simply call him by his first name, as he is younger to them and therefore need not be addressed as “elder brother.” And among camp students, younger students generally address older students with the kinship terms “Akkā” or “Aṇṇā” as is appropriate for gender. I was generally called “Arthi Akkā” by my younger roommates and fellow campers, and even today receive emails addressing me as “Akkā.”

were achieved before this group of students was even born.<sup>199</sup> In this room, the students range in age from ten to 19 years old. While a few are conversant in Indian languages, most are not. Some students have been to India once or twice to visit relatives and grandparents; a handful has never been to India in their lives. Though the students demonstrate respect, devotion and affection toward their teachers, in many ways these feelings and actions are embedded in a naïveté about their teachers' lives and accomplishments beyond the studio walls. Love for the *guru* is born almost entirely out of a personal relationship with them as disciples; the *gurus*, likewise, seem to embrace this intimate connection, allowing their interactions with students in the dance studio, and their expectations of discipline and rigor in practice, to guide the relationships.

For these girls, Dhananjayan Aṅṅā and Shanta Akkā's roles are simply as their *gurus*, or master-teachers of classical dance. And the roles of their *gurus* and other teachers are nuanced every hour, depending on the day's schedule. From nine to ten in the morning, Aṅṅā and Akkā exist for the purpose of leading the students through strenuous physical exercises and basic steps. The students assemble themselves into

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<sup>199</sup> Bharata Kalaanjali, official home page, <http://www.bharatakalaanjali.org> (accessed February 4, 2010). Scholars and critics of dance often tout the Dhananjayans' greatest contribution to Bharata Natyam as their intrepid experimentation with music, themes and stylistic collaboration to produce a number of feature-length dance ballets. Some of their most critically-acclaimed ballets include "Ramanatakam" (1976), "Sanghamitra" (1981), "Jungle Book – The Adventures of Mowgli" (1984), "Sri Thyaagaraaja Vaibhavam" (1992), and "Nandanaar Charitram" (2003). While remaining firm in their use of traditional Bharata Natyam steps, sequences and choreographies, the Dhananjayans opted to interpret non-traditional stories into dance, including stories from Buddhist and Christian history, Western literature, and Indian stories not normally presented onstage. They also collaborated with dance companies and musicians in different styles from around the globe, most notably with Hindusthani sitarist Ravi Shankar, the Birmingham Opera House in England, and classical ballet companies in the United States, Russia and France. Through their career of dancing, choreographing and producing dance ballets, collaborating with artists in different countries and performing on world tours the Dhananjayans enhanced Bharata Natyam's visibility and accessibility in new geographic contexts. The Dhananjayans have received numerous awards and titles for their artistic contributions in their lifetime, most notably, India's honorific title of Padma Bhushan, granted by the Indian president in 2009, and the G. D. Birla International Award for Art and Culture in 2010.

rows, the youngest and shortest students in the first few rows, with taller, older students toward the rear of the room. Together, the students begin the lengthy Sanskrit class prayer in unison with a euphonic, sustained “OM.”<sup>200</sup> The prayer complete, Akkā then cues the students to do the *namaskāram*, a series of movements done at the start of dance class, to invoke the blessings of the Earth Mother, Bhumi Devi. She does this with several rhythmic raps of her *thaṭṭukkazhi*. After the *namaskāram*, exercises begin. To the steady beat of Akkā’s taps on the *thaṭṭukkazhi*, the students begin fast-paced stamping of their feet, gradually increasing speed until their feet merely vibrate off the ground; they swing their arms in large circles, they stand with feet spread and twist from the waist to the right, then the left. After loosening up comes the real hard work: exercises to develop students’ basic Bharata Natyam position of *araimaṇḍi*, or the “half-seated posture” as it is often called by the Dhananjayans; *araimaṇḍi* is a sustained demi-plie, formed by joining the heels, spreading the feet into a straight horizontal line, and bending at the knee to nearly half one’s height, to form a diamond shape with the legs. The position is held throughout the execution of *nṛtta*, or technical dance steps and sequences, and without it, the dance form loses its aesthetic appeal. To improve *araimaṇḍi*, the Dhananjayans lead the class in a number of demanding exercises. Students spread their feet to a wide base, and then do large demi-plies till their knees are at a ninety-degree angle to the floor; they hold this plie position for a slow twelve-count before gradually rising to a standing position again, only to repeat the movement dozens more times. This exercise effectively strengthens the legs over the duration of camp –

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<sup>200</sup> The class prayer and translations, as provided to students by the Dhananjayans, appears in the appendix.

however, it puts tremendous pressure and discomfort on the knees, ankles, quadriceps, hamstrings, and the shin and calf muscles. The students' displeasure is not lost on Aṇṇā and Akkā, as groans and grumbles fill the air, and beads of sweat break out on foreheads. Akkā simply smiles, and subtly reduces the pace of tapping on the *thaṭṭukkazhi*, making the students hold the demi-plie even longer – a fit of laughter erupts in the studio when the students realize Akkā's fitting response to their complaints is to demand more from them. Knee problems are not uncommon among even young dancers; many of even the youngest dancers in the room sport elastic knee braces and supports under their dance practice attire, to help alleviate the strain on their joints. The students spend plenty of their time away from dance classes making good use of ice packs and muscle liniments, in efforts to recuperate from one day's rigorous work and prepare for the next.

While Shanta Akkā keeps time with her rhythmic taps, Dhananjayan Aṇṇā and Padma Akkā stride slowly and deliberately around the room, between rows of dance students, examining each one intensely, correcting the alignment or position of students' arms, legs, backs and necks as they do exercises and basic steps. Students watch with nervous anticipation as Aṇṇā or Padma Akkā nears their row, and they focus harder, aiming to be as perfect as possible when they walk by, to minimize corrections and demonstrate their desire to improve skills.

Following a half-hour of conditioning exercises, the *aḍavu* class begins. A basic step and movement combination of Bharata Natyam is called an *aḍavu*; there are approximately sixty-five basic *aḍavus* in the Kalakshetra style of Bharata Natyam, but an infinite number of variations and potential new *aḍavus* depending on the choreographer's style and innovation. The *aḍavus* are an important code within the Dhananjayans'



pedagogy of dance, wherein each *aḍavu* is a building block imbued with “a virtue proper to [its own] form.”<sup>201</sup> Rote memorization and physical mastery of the *aḍavus* is an absolute requirement; every student of the Dhananjayans must learn the sixty-five basic *aḍavus* in their early training in order to move forward along the traditional progression of dance technique. The *aḍavus* are so important that few students attend camp without having learned all sixty-five *aḍavus* from their home teacher first.

At camp, students continue drilling and reviewing *aḍavus*, with the intention of gaining aesthetic mastery of their execution. There is no age limit to perfecting *aḍavu* technique; in *aḍavu* class at dance camp, all students, from ten-year old novices to forty-year-old seasoned dancers, stand side-by-side and rehearse together. By the end of dance camp in three weeks, each student will have reviewed the sixty-five *aḍavus*, leaving Virginia with cleaner lines, crisper movements, and more engaging form as they perform the steps.

After a quick and much welcomed break for juice and refreshments, students return to the dance studio and take seats on the cool cement floor, forming a semicircle around Aṇṇā, Akkā and Padma Akkā. Slowly smiles spread across faces and excited, hushed whispers are shared among the students, until finally a brave, impetuous voice from the crowd excitedly inquires, “Aṇṇā, will you tell us a story?” For a few minutes, the students are regaled with funny and memorable events from Aṇṇā and Akkā’s long career as performers touring the world: the story about the time a gigantic crystal chandelier crashed down onto the stage during a performance, sending glass everywhere, much to the horror of the barefooted dancers onstage. Another story involves a dancer’s

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<sup>201</sup> Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 78.

ankle bells snapping off in the middle of an intense dance sequence, and catapulting wildly into the audience, nearly smacking someone in the face. By the end of the three week camp, students will also finally hear the story of how Aṅṅā and Akkā met, fell in love, and married – but only after weeks of pleading. Delighted gasps, raucous laughter, and starry-eyed “awwws” fill the room for these brief moments – and the *gurus* too smile and laugh along, during this performative break in the day’s rigorous activities. Other times, Dhananjayan Aṅṅā will use this moment to teach students a story or episode from Hindu mythology, or to share an anecdotal story that teaches something about Hindu culture or ethics. Narratives, both lighthearted and didactic, constitute a formative part of the pedagogy and cultural landscape of the day’s dance curriculum.

All too soon, dancers are summoned back onto their feet, and divided into several groupings based on dance skill level and experience. The young beginners are led to a separate practice area to begin work on a dance item: items such as *alārīppu* or *pushpanjali* are short, invocation pieces which string combinations of *aḍavus* together, providing the opportunity to develop basic dance skills while learning to count out rhythms in Carnatic music. Slightly more advanced students are grouped to learn items such as *śabdham*, *kīrtanā* or *jatīsvaram* – items focused on particular dance skills, such as facial expression or faster, more intricate *aḍavu* sequences, and afford the learner a chance to gain virtuosity in the subtler points of the art. Senior dancers work on items such as *varṇam*, *padam* or *tillānā* – repertoire selections which demand a certain level of

technical and expressive skill even to learn, but provide students with a chance to hone skills while experiencing choreographic innovation.<sup>202</sup>

After an hour and a half of repertoire class, the morning session breaks for the noon meal. Students excitedly line up for lunch, which begins with a lengthy *śloka*, or prayer verse to the Goddess Annapurna, bestower of food. This lengthy prayer to Annapurna may not be an element of students' daily mealtimes in their normal lives while in their school cafeterias among schoolmates, or at local restaurants with their parents on weekends. At camp, however, all activities stop for this moment of communal chanting before each meal – and returning campers each year take pleasure in teaching the Meal Prayer, with its complex Sanskrit words and intonations, to newcomers at camp. The younger, more boisterous campers are encouraged to the head of the line to receive their food first and move away from the cramped kitchen, while the older, more patient students place themselves at the rear of the line, getting their meals last. Once they have received their plates, students repair to a room colloquially called the *puja* room, whereupon a few of the older students spread large, washable sheets across the carpet so as to protect it from food spills. The campers then sit cross-legged on the sheets in a

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<sup>202</sup> The Dhananjayans seek to replace certain conventional terms for Bharata Natyam repertoire items with Sanskrit-derived terminology that they see as more fittingly descriptive of the items' general ambience and intentionalities. For example, they ask their students to use the word *nṛtyopahāram* rather than the traditional *varṇam*, contending that the Sanskrit words, which translate as "Offering of Dance and Mime," fits the general structure of the *varṇam* and describes the way that dramatic, emotive segments are linked together with more technical dance, like a garland. For the item traditionally known as *tillānā*, the Dhananjayans offer the term *nṛtyāṅgahāram*, which means "A garland of limb movements," which speaks to the *tillānā*'s conventional format of several fast-paced, *nṛtta*-intensive segments linked together to form a cohesive dance piece. For more information on the Dhananjayans' terminology of Bharata Natyam choreographies, consult Bharata Kalaanjali, <http://www.bharatakalaanjali.org>.

large circle, and eat communally.<sup>203</sup> The lunch menu usually consists of traditional South Indian vegetarian foods – fresh, steamed white rice, *rasam* (a peppery, tamarind-flavored broth), *sāmbār* (a lentil-based vegetable stew), yogurt, and vegetables stir-fried with traditional spices. Students savor their meals while enjoying time to chat, joke and socialize with their fellow campers. After lunch comes a brief repast, where students have time to relax, socialize, review dance material and prepare for the afternoon classes. The camp syllabus resumes at 1:30 p.m., when students convene for *saṅgītam* class, a course on the theory and practice of Carnatic vocal music. Students learn to sing and simultaneously count the *tāla*, or rhythm cycle, of simple Carnatic music selections, striking their right hand and fingers on their thigh while seated cross-legged before their music teacher. After an hour, *saṅgītam* class is adjourned and dance theory begins. Here, students learn to chant the Sanskrit terms for the *asaṅyukta hastas* (single-handed gestures), *saṅyukta hastas* (double-handed gestures), *hasta viniyogas* (usages of gestures), and other categories of dance theory. Students study the pronunciation and tonal chanting of these terms, while simultaneously learning to demonstrate these gestures with their facial expressions and movements of the neck, torso, arms, hands, and fingers.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> Though it is known at camp as the *puja* room, the room is actually a large, carpeted multipurpose space surrounded on three sides by large picture windows overlooking the Blue Ridge mountains. The *puja* room is devoid of furniture, but has a long mantel against one wall adorned sparsely with a large framed photograph of Swami Satchidananda, and another framed poster of the Integral Yoga society's interfaith logo – symbols from numerous religious traditions inscribed within a lotus flower. The *puja* room serves as a dining hall, as well as a classroom for yoga, music, and theory classes, and *bhajan* (devotional singing sessions) each night.

<sup>204</sup> A portion of transcribed recordings from a theory class is provided in a later section of this chapter; students in this day's lesson learned a *śloka* from the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, describing the different movements used to cover space on a stage.

After a short break and a quick afternoon snack (occasionally fried Indian snacks such as *murukku* or *vada*, or non-Indian foods such as cookies, pastries or nachos), students head back to the dance studio for a continuation of studio repertoire study. Once again in their small groups, students continue rehearsing and perfecting the items they began in the morning session; the pressure is on, for students know they will be performing the numerous dance items in a program that concludes the camp session in a few weeks. After two hours of intense evening rehearsal, the fatigued, perspiration-drenched students close the day's classes by reciting in unison a short Sanskrit *śloka* praising Bhumi Devi (the Earth Goddess); students then perform the *namaskāram* and then bow to their teachers in a full prostration, their foreheads to the floor – a gesture of deep dedication and respect for their *gurus*. The instructors bless the students, and bid them to hurry back to their rooms, shower and dress for *bhajan*, communal singing of Hindu devotional hymns. After an hour, the students convene in the *puja* room feeling fresh and re-energized, dressed in clean, pressed *salvar kameez* with wet hair neatly combed. Led by their *guru* Shanta Dhananjayan, students worship together in song for a half hour before their evening meal. The *bhajans* are short songs primarily in Sanskrit, Hindi, Kannada or Malayalam, sung in a call-and-response fashion and accompanied minimally by Shanta Akkā's small cymbals, and the drone of the *śruti* box, an electronic device which emits a tri-pitched sound, and is used by Carnatic musicians to sing in proper key. Once *bhajans* are completed, students line up with anticipation for dinner, once again arranging themselves in order of age, and reciting the lengthy meal prayer once again before receiving their loaded plates from the house mothers. The menu at dinner is occasionally Indian, but more often consists of vegetarian renditions of

“American” foods such as salad, lasagna, enchiladas, or macaroni and cheese.<sup>205</sup>

Following dinner, students have a few hours of free time to continue reviewing, studying, and also socializing, laughing and relaxing together – before they are finally silenced for the day by the brass cowbell’s clang, and calls of “Lights out!” by their house mothers.

This schedule remains the same for five out of the week’s seven days. On Saturdays, campers are exempt from yoga, but still adhere to the scheduled morning practices and rehearsals; generally they have the afternoons and evenings free, a much-needed break after their demanding dance practices. Sundays are wholly free days, and the camp administrators plan special activities such as an outing to downtown Charlottesville for a movie, (vegetarian) pizza lunch and a trip to the local shopping mall. On this day of freedom from grueling physical exercise and other monotonies of camp life, the students are abuzz with excitement, spending their hours singing pop music together, indulging in chatter and gossip often shushed by the house mothers, and getting to know each others’ personalities, tastes and characteristics anew in these definitive “American” contexts of movie theater and shopping center. And yet, discipline remains central on this day: as the chartered bus carrying the campers pulls out of the ashram’s driveway, Shanta Akkā and the other camp staff lead the students in their daily pre-class *shlokas*, or in a *bhajan*. The students are required to dress in Indian attire of *salvar kameez*, with hair tied back neatly and *bindis* placed on the forehead for this field trip, and still recite their Sanskrit Meal Prayer communally at the suburban Virginia pizza parlor prior to eating. And most importantly, the boisterous students are reminded to

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<sup>205</sup> Though these foods are not truly “American” in origin, they are referred to by campers and staff as “American” dishes, and prepared in fashions similar to the ways they might be prepared in school cafeterias.

remain on their best behavior throughout the day, in order to make the excursion fun for all. The “Mall Day,” as it is referred to by campers, is the highlight of their many weeks at Yogaville – one that they eagerly anticipate, and reminisce and gossip about after the fact. While students certainly visit shopping malls in their regular lives with family members and friends, the opportunity to socialize with their camp friends freely, in the typical American, “non-camp” environments of pizza parlor and shopping mall provides a happy diversion for students from the rigorous days of dance practice and structured schedules at camp. Incidentally, the camp schedule of activities remains basically the same for both the beginner/intermediate and advanced sessions, though the ambience of the camp changes slightly due to the campers’ ages and experience; while the first camp session welcomes students ages ten through adult, the advanced camp tends to draw older students, from high school age onward, simply because of the number of years it takes to accumulate the dance skills necessary for the pace of the second camp session.

At the end of both the beginner and advanced sessions of camp, residents of the Satchidananda Ashram, camp students’ families and friends, and local citizens are invited to an evening program where the dance students showcase what they have learned in their time at the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam*. The program commences with a welcome address by an ashram administrator, and then moves into a series of dance items presented by the students. Students may also present vocal music selections from their *saṅgītam* classes, or a short demonstration of *hastas* (hand gestures) and *viniyogas* (gesture applications) from their dance theory classes. The program closes with an address by the Dhananjayans (described in more detail later in this chapter) and a presentation of certificates to each student, to honor their hard work over their camp

sessions. After bestowing blessings on the students, who prostrate to them in a show of reverence, the camp *gurus* dismiss their students, and invite them to return next year. This inevitably signals a flurry of tears and hugs, as camp students bid each other farewell, promise to keep in touch, and vow to return to camp together the following year for more friendship, hard work, and enjoyment.

While in years past, dance campers who lived far away from each other kept in touch only by phone calls and letters during the year, currently campers use the online social networking utility Facebook as a means of staying in touch on a weekly and even daily basis.<sup>206</sup> Camp students have created a Facebook “group” entitled “Dance Camp – Yogaville,” and periodically send each other private emails, public “Wall” messages, photos, virtual gifts, and other exchanges online. Campers inform each other about events in their daily lives, and inform each other about *arangetrams*, dance recitals, and other dance-related events using Facebook – and events from their non-dance lives as well.<sup>207</sup> Though campers often are unable to remain a close-knit community in the physical sense except during the summers, Facebook has allowed dance camp to become an imaginative community of shared experiences and conversation throughout the year.

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<sup>206</sup> Facebook, official home page, <http://www.facebook.com> (accessed February 4, 2010). Several scholarly articles describe the increasing use of Facebook as a site of “imagined communities” and public construction of identity. See Alessandro Acquisti and Ralph Gross, “Imagined Communities: Awareness, Information Sharing, and Privacy on the Facebook,” *Lecture Notes in Computer Science* 4258 (2006): 36-58, and Cliff Lampe, Nicole Ellison, and Charles Steinfield, “A Familiar Face(book): Profile Elements as Signals in an Online Social Network,” CHI 2007 Proceedings on Online Representation of Self, San Jose, CA, April 28-May 3, 2007.

<sup>207</sup> Facebook, official home page, <http://www.facebook.com> (accessed February 4, 2010). Facebook “group” membership is constantly in flux, as individuals join and leave the groups for various personal reasons, and technical reasons related to keeping one’s Facebook account active and updated. At the time of writing, the “Dance Camp – Yogaville” group consisted of 49 members, though in the last two years it has at times been much larger. I personally have been sent over two dozen pictures to my private Facebook account from members of the group, and countless messages and “Wall” posts.



## **Redefining Landscape: Summer Camps and Practices of Creating Sacred Space and Time**

Practicing the tenets of communal *gurukulam* life and becoming companions and teammates in the performance of Bharata Natyam, the students of the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam* repeatedly articulate that they feel changed and influenced by their experiences at camp, even after returning home. While undoubtedly much of this is due to the rigorous embodied practice, emphasis on tradition, and other aspects experienced during camp life, this change is also often attributed to a vague, indistinct, and nameless ambience generated by the schedule and flow of camp culture – its *habitus*, which differs dynamically from the *habiti* of students’ home environments. The Dhananjayans and other camp teachers frequently make mention of the special culture of camp, citing it as an “ideal” environment for learning dance in the *gurukulam* style.<sup>208</sup> Aside from its focus on dance practice, the camp is a time to learn how to live with roommates and elders, to form alliances and kinships, to share in duties and responsibilities, to stay up late telling stories, and to enjoy the bonds of friendship within the context of shared values and practices.

All summer camps inherently reimagine an individual camper’s relationship to landscape and place, and the Yogaville dance camp is no different. Ways of rethinking

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<sup>208</sup> In the summer of 2008, a 16-year-old repeat camper who lives in Bangalore, South India and takes Bharata Natyam lessons from one of the Dhananjayans’ senior disciples there, traveled to Virginia to attend the camp. Though she was born and raised in California, her family had relocated to Bangalore two years prior due to her father’s work; Dhananjayan Anṇā was thrilled that a student who lives and studies dance in India chose to travel all the way to the United States to benefit from the *gurukulam* environment of dance camp, and openly used the student’s initiative as evidence to the fact that the *gurukulam* model of education has become rare even in India today – yet it lives on at the American dance camp.

space are imbedded in narratives from the earliest examples of summer camps in American history. Abigail van Slyck's historical study, *A Manufactured Wilderness: Summer Camps and the Shaping of American Youth, 1890-1960*, describes the rise of camps as a popular and enduring institution in American life.<sup>209</sup> The late nineteenth century saw increasing urbanization of American families as society moved away from life on the frontier and into cities; along with this shift came rising anxieties about children being born and raised in urban environments, denied of exposure to fresh air and wilderness, and devoid of the self-reliance and survival skills of previous American generations. Van Slyck discusses the myriad ways that summer camps were used to supplement children's traditional education and impart special skills or modes of thought with the thinking of the current day. Summer camps were loci for teaching and reimagining the gender norms that ordered American culture at the time; camps taught practices of survival in nature, the importance of natural heritage, and numerous other social attitudes.<sup>210</sup> By the 1960's, the focus of summer camping had turned from simply living and playing outdoors to day-camping and "camping with a purpose," such as music camps or tennis camps where participants commuted to the campsite from home in the mornings and engaged in camp activities only during daytime hours, rather than residing at the campsite for the duration of camp. Nevertheless, the relationship of camp culture to space – specifically, the practice of "going away" to camp, and interacting with one's teachers and peers in a natural setting, even temporarily – remained an integral aspect to the camp experience.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> Abigail Ayers Van Slyck, *A Manufactured Wilderness: Summer Camps and the Shaping of American Youth, 1890-1960* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

<sup>210</sup> Ibid..

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

The rise of religious and cultural camps parallels that of summer camps in general; the histories and trends of Jewish summer camps are a relevant example in analyzing the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam*; Jewish summer camps share similar goals, practices and histories of reimagining landscape through ordering time and space. Michael M. Lorge and Gary P. Zola are two experienced administrators, curriculum developers, and social scientists who, in *A Place of Our Own: The Rise of Reform Jewish Camping*, discuss the complement of administrative practices and decisions which render summer camp as a reimagination of landscape.<sup>212</sup> While summer camp provides students with the unique opportunity of an immersion experience in religious culture, language, values and history, it is essentially an artificial environment, where time is ordered as fitting to the activities and priorities of learning about religion; daily rituals are carried out naturally in the schedule and time line of camp in ways that may not be a part of life as lived elsewhere, during the year.<sup>213</sup> Camp connects religious learning to activities of other interests to students, building intimacy between peers through social interaction and play; if nothing else, camp is generally regarded as a time for fun and friendship, no matter if other goals are at hand.<sup>214</sup> Religious and cultural camps are designed with the goal of awakening a desire for religious learning, by providing campers with compelling social incentives to live according to religious and cultural values in a contemporary age where they may not be a part of mainstream culture.<sup>215</sup> This is accomplished by strategic planning and natural integration of daily activities with anecdotes, special vocabularies

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<sup>212</sup> Michael M. Lorge and Gary P. Zola, eds., *A Place of Our Own: The Rise of Reform Jewish Camping: Essays Honoring the Fiftieth Anniversary of Olin-Sang-Ruby Union Institute, Union for Reform Judaism, in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin* (Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press, 2006).

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 92-94.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 102.

and terminologies, stories, songs and prayers which are used to teach lessons, resolve problems, and mark the passage of time during the camp session.<sup>216</sup> While at times the shared vocabularies and insider dialogues of religious camps may be derived from traditional religious languages, such as Hebrew in the case of Jewish camps, or Tamil at the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam* – these narratives and vocabularies may also be common English words or phrases which have special *euphemistic* meaning to camp insiders, as descriptors of shared values and concepts.

Lorge and Zola provide several reflections on how place is reimagined through various practices at camp; the “mainstreaming” of traditional knowledge, languages, and sacred time all contribute to creating an “artificial” environment where camp attendees can experience first-hand how religious and cultural practices are relevant to and reconcilable with their modern American lives. In *How Goodly Are Thy Tents: Summer Camps as Jewish Socializing Experiences*, Amy L. Sales and Leonard Saxe offer analysis on the environment of camp as “safe space” for Jewish children, who are members of a religious minority in mainstream American culture. Particular practices, vocabularies and modes of being, considered marginal in the real world, are mainstreamed and often marked as special; practices which may often be a source of embarrassment or shame in “regular life” are often considered honorable in the camp landscape.<sup>217</sup> Sales and Saxe observe that camp environments put emphasis on certain “language, norms, values, customs, traditions, history, mythology, and symbols,” and a continuity of these categories of practice from one generation of camp-goers to the next.<sup>218</sup> Time is ordered

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<sup>216</sup> Lorge and Zola, *A Place of Our Own*, 105-106.

<sup>217</sup> Amy L. Sales and Leonard Saxe, “*How Goodly are Thy Tents*”: *Summer Camps as Jewish Socializing Experiences* (Hanover, NH, University Press of New England, 2004), 48-50.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, 48-49.

by shared values at camp; certain religious practices that are time-dependent, but which often do not gel with mainstream life and daily schedules, feature prominently in the scheduling of activities at camp.<sup>219</sup>

The work of van Slyck, Zola and Lorge, and Sales and Saxe provide several basic frameworks and concepts for the analysis of summer camps as cultural, social, and religious educational environments. Summer camp is a self-consciously created landscape, a *habitus* governed by unique *praxes* governing constructions of time, and the euphemistic agreement of insiders to certain codes of spatial and social orientation.

### **The Anatomy of a Created Environment**

With its rigid schedule, emphasis on discipline and intensive concentration in classical Indian dance, the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam* provides its students with an encompassing cultural, practical and ethical embodied experience for several weeks each summer. It is more than a summer activity or extracurricular experience, but rather, an immersion experience for students in an *imaginative environment* of religious, cultural and ethical values. This created environment is comprised of four important organizational categories, wherein all choices and actions, on the part of camp organizers and *gurus*, are deliberate, intentional and carried out with a purpose or goal in mind.

1. Dance camp is an imaginative environment, wherein social hierarchy is created by insider codes of behavior and respect; the persons involved and social practices implemented within the imagined landscape exist to teach its citizens certain values or principles, and to create a particular *habitus*.

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<sup>219</sup> Sales and Saxe, “*How Goodly are Thy Tents*,” 50-51.

2. Numerous aspects of living at the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam* create an idealized social and physical landscape for Indian dance pedagogy. Aside from daily dance classes and the practices entailed in teaching and learning dance, clothing, material objects, foodstuffs, places, non-dance activities, and rituals also make up the landscape of camp. These items are conceived in a rubric of value, respect, and authenticity to an ideal landscape for dance pedagogy. The careful selection of “ideal” clothing, foods, and the like are meant to encourage certain values or principles, and deliberately exclude or dissuade others.
3. Time and space are ordered intentionally. In the imaginative environment of camp, activities take place on a rigid schedule that is significant beyond the basic nature of the activities themselves.
4. The camp environment is governed by a code, which insiders internalize, reflect intentionally through *praxis*, and spread to others through euphemistic action or speech. In other words, the “whys” and “hows” of camp life are communally constructed, rehearsed, understood, and rearticulated from one generation of campers to the next.

The following section will detail the ways that life in the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam* is organized based around these categories of a created imaginative landscape.

### **The “Camp’s” Social Hierarchies: Padma Akkā’s Lesson**

Returning now to the descriptions of daily life at the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam* dance camp, several components emerge as noteworthy in considering it a

created environment, replete with intentionality and objectives in its organization and activities.

Firstly, the dance camp's social organization is inherently tied to pedagogies of dance, and vice versa – specifically, modes of communication between teachers and students. Interactions between teachers, staff and students at camp are guided and framed by concepts of respect, reciprocity, hierarchy and tradition derived from Indian cultural and Hindu ritual contexts. As discussed in Chapter 3, the *guru-śiṣya* dynamic, or relationship between teachers and students, orders all other relationships at the dance camp in its own way. While various staff persons, housemothers, and other administrators are responsible for difference facets of camp life, ultimately the opinions and decisions of Aṅṅā, Akkā and Padma Akkā are final with regards to addressing many dilemmas or situations that may arise, not only inside the studio but outside, as well. Additionally, it is made clear to students from the outset of camp that the instructions and advice from teachers are to be obeyed unquestioningly; the failure by students to do so is considered a sign of great disrespect, and often results in a scolding and lecture which is made public to all other students as a lesson of sorts in why disobedience is wrong.

I found myself involved in one such incident at the beginner dance camp session in July 2008.<sup>220</sup> Aṅṅā and Akkā had left the camp premises for a weekend to attend a former camper's *arangetram* in a nearby city. Padma Akkā was then naturally left in charge of students' dance classes, as well as other activities. While indeed a kind-hearted, maternal, and spiritual figure to the students, Padma Akkā's more prominent

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<sup>220</sup> Observations in dance studio, Yogaville, VA, July 5, 2008.

reputation as an unshakable disciplinarian, especially in the dance studio, is more commonly known through the student body of camp. Her strict demeanor and high expectations from her students in all aspects of camp life – from dance classes to behavior outside the studio – is a testimony to her love towards and emotional investment in students’ success and well-being. While it may be easier for her to ignore students’ half-hearted dance execution, or to turn a blind eye on their inappropriate behaviors outside of class; Padma Akkā chooses not to, and for decades has taken the more difficult road of correcting mistakes with unfailing attention and energy. It is this commitment and dedication that foregrounded a memorable event during the beginner/intermediate camp session – an event that encompassed numerous noteworthy lessons about the places of authority, identity and intentions in the *guru-śiṣya* relationship.

On this hot July morning, a tangible nervous energy infiltrated the room as Padma Akkā assumed solo charge of the morning studio. As she launched into the rigorous exercises and *aḍavu* sequences that commence each morning’s dance class, the energy of the room was markedly different from the typical day, when Shanta Akkā and Aṇṇā were also at the head of the room; students’ concentration heightened and they focused body and mind on perfecting their execution of the steps. Padma Akkā’s gaze on the students was eagle-sharp. I recall that she was draped in a citrus yellow chiffon sari – a beautiful garment which I had admired numerous times, yet which somehow seemed alarmingly bright on this day. Her staccato raps on the *thaṭṭukkazhi* were punctuated only by her verbal cues compelling students to give 100 percent to the practice session: “*pick up that leg!*” and “*push yourself!*” In addition to the pedagogic style and attitude,



Padma Akkā's use of more informal, American English seemed to register differently with the mostly American, English-speaking campers, who had grown accustomed to the more formal, polished instructions from Shanta Akkā in her mix of Tamil and precise, intonated Indian English. While Shanta Akkā would also beckon students to "Bend more!" or "Look straight!" often her initial instructions would come in Tamil (intuitively, from her years of teaching dance in Chennai to native Tamil speakers), then would be translated to English for the benefit of her American charges: "*Kai tūkki!*... Raise your arm!" and "*Araimaṇḍi!*... Sit lower!" As these instructions would come first in Tamil, then English, students of various levels of Tamil fluency would heed them by and by, once they understood her words. There was often a natural delay of a few seconds as students gradually came to understand what corrections Shanta Akkā was making to their movements, then implemented them. On the other hand, Padma Akkā's instructions in American English to "Look straight!" or "Pick it up!" generated instant results, as students immediately comprehended her words; spines would instantly stiffen razor-straight, and arms tighten into statuesque positions.

Though in their second week of camp and thus somewhat conditioned for the strenuous work by this time, on this day the reverberation of trembling muscle fibers and aching joints were palpable throughout the room. On this morning, students seemed to demonstrate a physical and emotional anxiousness to appear at their best, stiffening their bodies, holding their breaths, and straightening their postures as much as possible, as Padma Akkā strode up and down the rows of students, observing their movements.

Weeks later, at the concluding ceremonies of the summer's camp, several teary-eyed students would ascend to the microphone podium to thank Padma Akkā publicly

for her hard work and dedication to their improvement in dance, and for the numerous lessons imparted, in particular, on this single day (the most important of which will be narrated below). Padma Akkā's love and commitment to her students' improvement and education is evident to her students even – and especially – in light of her high expectations of discipline.

At the break, the winded students seated themselves in a semicircle around Padma Akkā. who, in an effort to challenge students again, divided the class into five groups and appointed five senior students (myself and four others) to assist each group in reviewing a particular dance piece on our own, without her assistance.<sup>221</sup> Padma Akkā carefully instructed the five seniors to teach the item; we listened carefully, then we were dismissed with our charges to assist them in reviewing for a few hours. It was at this key moment that we made a pivotal error in judgment about our task.

Well into our practice time, several of us senior students worried that due to the varying age ranges and skill levels in our groups, our review was not proceeding very efficiently. The older, more-skilled students in the various groups were able to pick up steps very quickly, but the younger, less-experienced students were in need of more time

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<sup>221</sup> The social organization of the dance camp is also evident in the various informal appellations given to different types of students. The youngest campers, usually ranging in age from 10-12 years, and just starting their Bharata Natyam training with basic *aḍavus* and simple items like *puṣpāñjali*, are often referred to as “*kuṭṭis*,” the word *kuṭṭi* is a term of endearment in many South Indian languages meaning “little one” or “cutie.” Other students who are first-year or second-year campers are simply called “newcomers” or “juniors;” these students often are further along in their dance training and can perform items such as *jatīsvaram*, yet they are relatively new to the camp environment and the Dhananjayans' specific performative expectations. Older campers (perhaps 16 years to adult) who have attended for many years, and have completed or are near completing their *arangetram* debuts, are often referred to informally as “seniors,” and are expected to demonstrate responsibility in taking younger, less-experienced students under their wings.

and explanation. The older students were frustrated by the slow pace, and the younger ones felt anxious that the reviews were moving too fast for their benefit.

The five seniors decided to take a break and consult with each other. Thinking that it was more important to teach effectively and cover more ground than remain in our assigned groups, we redistributed our groups so that the older, more proficient students could learn together at one pace, under the direction of two senior students, while the three remaining seniors could assist the younger students to learn together more gradually.

A few hours later, Padma Akkā called to check on our progress. I was familiar with her reputation for a quick temper and intolerance for disobedience, and yet it had not occurred to me or the other seniors that Padma Akkā would be offended by our change in the plan, as we had the students' best interests at heart and had successfully reviewed the dance item with them. I was asked to give a status update, and I explained the challenges we had faced during our review sessions, and the way we had redistributed the students to make learning more effective for them.

Padma Akkā wasted little time in dispensing a colorful berating for our careless regard of the groups that she had divided for us. We had disregarded our assignment, and thus violated her instructions – to teach the groups that were divided for us, and *not* to teach the item as we felt would be most efficient and easy.

Initially we attempted to interject – after all, weren't our intentions at least good? Hadn't we wanted to do a good job in teaching, to help the younger students, and to make her proud of us? Foolishness – *our* intentions?! Padma Akkā was our teacher, our *guru* and the final say in our actions that day. Her intentions were clearly the ones that

mattered, not ours. Our interjections about our good intentions did nothing to help; on the contrary, they were an added insult to the injury we had already perpetrated. Padma Akkā called into question our respect for a *guru's* years of teaching experience, and asked us if we had even given a second's thought to *her* intentions as our teacher, which were not only to help the younger students learn, but to give us seniors a chance to rise to the challenge of teaching a multi-level class of students – something hardly any of us had ever experienced before, and a task which clearly challenged us to the brink of our capabilities. Completely absorbed in the simple act of transmitting information about the dance item, we five seniors had missed this other, more nuanced objective of Padma Akkā's assignment.

Speechless, defeated and humbled at this lesson, there was nothing we could say to apologize or prove our respect to Padma Akkā for this experienced guidance, in light of our repeated missteps. In the end, we five oldest, most senior students (myself included) spent the next week-and-a-half atoning for our transgression by doing our best to gain from this experience – that there are deeper lessons behind every word and suggestions of a *guru's* advice, whether we could discern them or not.

An interesting charge made by Padma Akkā during this conversation was that, had Aṅṅā or Shanta Akkā been the one to divide the groups, we would not have had the audacity to reorder them. The other seniors and I were silent in response to this comment. Padma Akkā was absolutely right – in all likelihood, we would not have taken it upon ourselves to change anything if the instructions had been given from one of the Dhananjayans.

Later, I tried to understand why we interpreted instructions from Padma Akkā the way we did. Why would we have been more blindly obedient to Aṅṅā and Akkā? What were the cues that appeared to us in this situation that we interpreted in such a way, that we felt it was within our rights to change our teacher's assignment to us? Perhaps it was because Aṅṅā and Akkā are a generation older than Padma Akkā, that they are from India while Padma Akkā has resided in the U.S. for decades and is the parent of an American-born child not unlike ourselves; perhaps it was because Padma Akkā speaks, critiques and provides feedback to us in American idiomatic speech and with an American accent, while Aṅṅā and Akkā speak to us in Indian English or in Indian languages. Or perhaps somehow Padma Akkā felt more familiar to us on account of these embodied and social cues – more like someone with shared values and principles with whom we could talk things through, understand and reason with as we often do in our “mainstream,” “American” lives outside of dance. Despite her disciplinarian role at the camp – or perhaps even because of it – Padma Akkā seemed to be regarded by the students as someone with whom they had a more intimate, familial connection, and with whom they could share and connect in ways different than with Aṅṅā and Akkā.

Once, during an interview with a camp staffperson who served as a housemother and a music teacher, I asked her about her relationship with her camp students. She chuckled as she responded, “Here! Here, so, my students – I treat them as my children. And so I keep them in this class, and they also don't have any fear, or any scared attitude!”<sup>222</sup> Her smiling, comedic demeanor when replying to me in this way sent me into chuckles – because the implication was that though she anticipated respect and

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<sup>222</sup> Valli S. Gopal, interview by author, Yogaville, VA, July 2, 2007.

obedience, she repeatedly got rambunctious behavior in return. But spoken in a light-hearted, chuckling voice, Valli Akkā's tone echoed the feelings of an exasperated parent, faced with misbehaving children – a tone of resigned endearment to the impish children who treated her like their own mother.

When reflecting on this incident between the seniors and Padma Akkā, this quote rung out in my mind. Like a parent, Padma Akkā played numerous roles in the campers' experience; of course she was a *guru*, teaching and guiding us in the dance studio daily. But she was also there among the students at other hours of the day, sitting in the front room of the dormitory house, attending to other duties and being present during campers' other activities. Naturally, she was there in a variety of other situations to correct us when we were wrong, teach us the appropriate way to behave in various circumstances, and take care of problems when they would arise. She was there to resolve disputes between roommates, attend to a sick or injured dancer late in the night, helping the house mothers in the kitchen, and on the phone pacifying campers' anxious parents who would call at odd hours. While Aṅṅā and Akkā were also supportive of us, in the end they were primarily our *gurus*, and did not have to resolve other matters with nearly the frequency or involvement that Padma Akkā had to have as both a teacher and a caregiver to students. Perhaps, then, students felt more comfortable testing the boundaries of relationships with someone who felt like a parent figure, with whom behaviors and consequences are constantly negotiated. Was it perhaps for these reasons, we were able to justify our actions and decisions without questioning ourselves, and with an expectation that Padma Akkā would understand and place a principle on our intention? These identity cues such as age, experience, language, accent, intimacy and familiarity

served to misguide us about the social hierarchies and normative behaviors of dance camp.

In addition to the *guru-śiṣya* dynamic within the dance camp itself, dance students are expected to treat other adults in the Yogaville ashram community with the respect due to all elders. As mentioned earlier, *sannyāsins* from the ashram often serve as instructors and administrators to the dance camp students. Swamis Charanananda and Priyananda teach yoga to the campers each morning, and Dr. Amrita, Yogaville's private ayurvedic physician on-call, attends to the campers' medical needs. Other Yogaville staff and volunteers donate their time and services to the camp by providing housekeeping services for the camp facilities, assisting with meal preparation, chauffeuring and chaperoning the students during field trips, and attending to them in other ways. Of note is the fact that most Yogaville *sannyāsins* and staff are not South Asian in ethnicity or national origin; most are Caucasian, either American or European in descent. Few, if any, are fluent in Indian languages, and in fact there are often mistakes in their pronunciation of Sanskrit yoga terms and the Indian names of their students, presenting students with a humorous yet awkward dilemma of whether it is respectful to remind or correct their elders' pronunciation of their names, or to let them continue their botched pronunciations without interruption. Nevertheless, the students are expected to show respect and courtesies to the *sannyāsins* and other Yogaville personnel, as they are to their dance teachers and house-mothers; they always rise from seated positions on the floor and stand with joined palms when a *sannyāsins* or other elder enters the room. When the occasion presents itself (such as at their final yoga presentation at the end of camp), they perform *namaskārams*, or full prostrations, at the feet of the *sannyāsins*. While many dance

campers already are taught to respect their elders at home or in other environments, at the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam*, these principles are reinforced in marked ways; *all* elders of the Yogaville community, regardless of ethnicity, belief structures, and personal journeys, are in positions of authority as *gurus*, and are to be revered and dutifully heeded.

The social landscape of the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam* is governed by the central *doxa* of respect for the *guru*. Students of dance, negotiating between the *habitus* of camp and their own experiences from daily life, must learn to adjust their perception of others, especially elders and teachers, according to the economy of social capital and *doxa* that constitutes the camp experience. The *doxa* of life at “home,” and the acceptable behaviors and interactions with elders, parents and teachers, differ from the measures of exaggerated propriety in place at camp – and students must learn to discern and adjust between the two. Misinterpretation of identity cues such as linguistic preference, accents, the use of colloquial expressions, can often mislead students into committing a symbolic violation of this central *doxa*, and result in pedagogic measures to rectify the appropriate structures and balances of propriety.

### **The Soundscape of Camp: Identity through Linguistic Learning and Music**

The knowledge of Indian languages, customs, religious stories and practices affects the hierarchy of respect and authority at camp. While in many instances, the older camp-goers may be more knowledgeable about Indian languages, rituals and ways of being than their younger peers, often this knowledge is not directly connected to age, but experience. Every so often, a younger camper will show exceptional knowledge of an Indian



language, conversant in Tamil or Malayalam with her teachers in ways beyond her years (and beyond the capabilities of her older classmates). Other times, students may show knowledge of Hindu sacred stories or *bhajans* (devotional hymns), and be asked by her *gurus* to share this knowledge publicly with her classmates by her teachers so that all can learn. In these instances, students with a special or heightened connection to Indian culture are often held up as examples by teachers and housemothers – as role models of how to “be Indian” and embrace Indian values, ideals and culture, even while living and growing in a non-Indian mainstream landscape. In this way, the student gains the endorsement of her elders as somehow unique or special, and therefore worthy of respect.

In fact, a correlation seems to exist between the teachers’ respect for knowledgeable students, and students who by exterior appearances would seem not to know much about Indian culture, yet at a key moment surprise everyone with their virtuosity in certain customs, languages or practices. From my fieldwork experiences, certain students immediately come to mind: there was 17-year-old Sita\*, a petite girl from suburban Connecticut. At *saṅgītam* class on the first day of camp, the teacher asked if anyone in the group had any knowledge or background in music. A few repeat-campers feebly raised their hands, and the teacher had each one sing a few notes of any song they knew, to assess their skill levels. Certain students confidently belted out verses of Carnatic music, with intonations and emphasis memorized and robotically regurgitated. Others squeaked out folk songs learned from grandmothers or aunts, in quavering, slightly off-key voices. While most had some skill in music, few seemed to impress the teacher in that they simply repeated songs taught to them, without infusing their music with the passion and energy of understanding – neither semantic meaning, nor

with *bhakti* (devotional sentiment). Eventually Sita, a shy newcomer to camp, was called upon to sing. The students looked on curiously to see how this rookie would fare under the teacher's watchful eyes. Sita's eyes closed and a calmness enveloped her, then she began to sing a *bhajan* in the Hindusthani, or North Indian classical, style. Her voice was not only clear, impassioned and beautiful, evoking the spirit of some Hindusthani virtuoso of another generation, but it possessed a deep devotional reverence, seemingly far beyond her years. The room was silent as Sita completed the verse, and as she opened her eyes and emerged from the magical ambience of the song, her fellow students erupted in gasps and applause, punctuated by exclamations of "O.M.G!" (as only teenagers can do).<sup>223</sup> Needless to say, Sita was no longer a shy outsider to the camp students' social circle after this episode, and was often called upon to help younger students with music, and even lead evening *bhajans* – an unique privilege among students.

Another such incident involved Thais\*, a 14-year old returnee to camp. Thais stood out among the crowd of dancers for two reasons: firstly, she was the only non-South Asian student at camp. Visibly distinguished from her peers by her fair complexion, blue eyes, freckles, and strawberry blonde hair, Thais also differed from her peers culturally and linguistically. A Mexican national, Thais began attending dance camp and learning Bharata Natyam after her mother, a practitioner of yoga, had met the Dhananjayans and seen their dance students while she was attending a yoga workshop at the ashram. Thais also stood out because of her ability to pick up and retain knowledge of Bharata Natyam, Indian classical music, and other Hindu or Indian cultural cues,

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<sup>223</sup> The abbreviation "O.M.G." (a short-hand for the phrase "Oh my God!") was frequently exclaimed or invoked among dance campers during my fieldwork; I was informed (with corresponding eye-rolls and belabored sighs) that the expression is a popular one on text messages and Facebook posts.

despite the fact that during the year, she had no access to a Bharata Natyam teachers or classes, and could only study Bharata Natyam during the summers at camp. A disciplined ballet dancer who attended Western classical ballet classes in Mexico four times weekly, Thais' impeccable posture, muscular strength, and keen sense of body-memory allowed her to learn, execute, and retain dance instruction often much faster than her peers, who had learned dance much longer than her and attended classes year-round in their hometowns. The fact that English was a second language for Thais, and that South Asian languages were entirely foreign to her, made her grasp and memory of pronunciation during *bhajans*, *śloka* recitation, and dance theory terminology surprising at times. Thais also seemed incredibly engaged with learning more about Indian culture, languages and history outside of the dance studio, and absorbing the information that the Dhananjayans gave to students during lectures – remarkable based on her lack of exposure to Indian languages, narratives or practices during her upbringing.

Thais impressed Dhananjayan Aṇṇā one day in class, repeating back to him some information from the previous year's lecture on *Nāṭyaśāstra* and the four *Vedas*:

Aṇṇā: "... *Nāṭyaśāstra* is actually a compiled version of the four Vedas. What are the four Vedas?"

Students: (independent voices mumbling uncertainly and not in unison; Thais' voice stands out confidently and with clear pronunciation) *Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Sama Veda, Atharva Veda.*

Aṇṇā: (surprised amusement) Good! (turns to Thais, the Mexican student in class) Good, Thais has remembered all that! (turning to the rest of the class) That's good, see? She is so interested, you must appreciate that. From Mexico she came, and she has remembered all she was taught last year.<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> V. P. Dhananjayan et. al., personal communication in dance theory classroom, Yogaville, VA, July 2, 2008.

Earning the rare praise and positive attention of Dhananjayan Aṅṅā here, Thais was rendered a good example for all other students to follow. On many occasions such as this one, Thais' natural skills and ability to pick up both embodied and discursive information about dance and Indian culture impressed her teachers, and she was made a role model for other students in the camp.

Often in theory class, students are taught verses of the *Natyashastra*, sung tonally in Sanskrit meter. The Dhananjayans impart these verses to students in a pedagogy of tonal repetition, where one line is chanted slowly, with the syllables broken apart so that students can repeat them correctly or write them down. Over the course of several repetitions, the phrases are joined together and repeated at a more rapid pace, so students can hear the ways that the *sandhi*, or phonetic joining, of words would sound in meter.

During one theory class at the advanced camp, Shanta Akkā repeatedly chanted a verse about the different lower-body movements used in Bharata Natyam, as students attempted to memorize it. The lesson was not new to many students; several had written the *shloka* down in their notebooks from the previous summer, but seemed to have forgotten the tonal pronunciation during the year. Shanta Akkā patiently engaged in repetition and correction for several minutes, helping to refresh the lesson for students. Afterward, Dhananjayan Aṅṅā asked students if they recalled the *viniyogas*, or usages, of each gait; the students mumbled in response, obviously having forgotten the *viniyogas*. This, unfortunately, was not unusual; often, Aṅṅā would question students about a particular *viniyoga*, asking the students “Do you remember?” The students would often feebly respond: “Kind of!” This response would then draw out a roll of the eyes and disappointed sigh from Aṅṅā. On this day, when the students again proved to have hazy

memories about past lessons, Shanta Akkā issued a tongue-in-cheek remark about the students' vague recollection of the *viniyogas*, playfully mimicking their colloquial response of “Kind of!” as she winked at the students.

Shanta Akkā: Another, I'll give you. [begins tonal recitation of *śloka*] *Maṇḍalotplavaṇe caiva* – [interrupting herself to guide students on writing the *śloka* in their notebooks] okay, I'll split the words for you. First, you write it as *śloka*.

[tonal recitation]  
*Maṇḍalotplavaṇe caiva bhramari pādacārikā,*  
*caturthā pādabhedāsyūh teṣāṃ lakṣaṇamucyate.*

[begins repetition technique of teaching *śloka*]  
*Maṇḍalotplavaṇe caiva* ...

Students: [repeating] *Maṇḍalotplavaṇe caiva* ...

Shanta Akkā: ... *bhramari pādacārikā* ...

Students: ... *bhramari pādacārikā* ...

Shanta Akkā: ... *caturthā pādabhedāsyūh* ...

Students: ... *caturthā pādabhedāsyūh* ...

Shanta Akkā: ... *teṣāṃ lakṣaṇamucyate*.

Students: ... *teṣāṃ lakṣaṇamucyate*.

Shanta Akkā: Okay. Only four actually, the four has already come in that – the four important positions of the feet, of the legs. First is *maṇḍalas*, like we did. *Utplavaṇam* are the jumps. *Bhramari* next, third is *bhramari* – turning. Spinning, spinning actually. *Pādacārikā* are the walks, gait, different gaits. So these are the four important features of the feet.

Aṅṅā: Covering all the space. How you cover space.

Shanta Akkā: So what are the four? *Maṇḍalam, utplavaṇam, bhramari, pādacārikā*. [repeats] *Maṇḍalam, utplavaṇam, bhramari, pādacārikā*. Say it.

Students: *Maṇḍalam, utplavaṇam, bhramari, pādacārikā*.

Shanta Akkā: [begins tonal, repeated recitation of *śloka*, signaling for students to repeat after her; Shanta Akkā's enunciation is crisp and deliberate, teaching the students the proper syllables] *Maṇḍalotplavaṇe caiva ...*

Students: [repeating] *Maṇḍalotplavaṇe caiva ...* [full repetition of *śloka* twice, in call-and-response fashion]

[continued repeating pedagogy of *śloka* for several minutes]

Shanta Akkā: *Maṇḍala, utplavaṇa, bhramari, and pādacāri*. What is *maṇḍala*?

Students: [mumbling] Positions.

Shanta Akkā: Positions of the feet, yes. And, *utplavaṇa* is . . . ?

Students: Jumping.

Shanta Akkā: Jumping. *Bhramari* is . . . ?

Students: Spinning.

Shanta Akkā: Spinning, turning. And *pādacāri* is . . . ?

Students: Gaits.

Shanta Akkā: Gaits, the different gaits. Walking.

Aṇṇā: There are *viniyogas* for all these, also. Usages. The kinds of *utplavaṇa*. [in a knowing tone] Do you all know that?

Students: [uncertain mumbling, giggling]

Shanta Akkā: [winking; in jest] They “kind of” learned it!

Aṇṇā: [pedantic tone; exhausted; sighing] You should know all that.<sup>225</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> Shanta Dhananjayan et. al., personal communication in dance theory classroom, Yogaville, VA, July 27, 2008.

During *śloka* pedagogy, students are occupied with the detailed breakdown and mastery of pronouncing complex Sanskrit words that are relatively foreign to their common linguistic ways-of-being. At the same time, they must synthesize the sonic experience of Sanskrit chanting with semantic meaning and physical performance, by knowing how each component of Sanskrit *śloka* translates into Bharata Natyam movements. To synthesize yet another element – the *vinnyogas*, or usages of each movement – and to call upon rusty memories of the previous year’s lessons proves to be too much of a challenge for students, who ashamedly mumble in confusion when quizzed by Dhananjayan Aṅṅā. The varying degrees of linguistic familiarity, aptitude, and understanding often prove to be a point of disparity between *gurus* and students, highlighting the differences of each individual’s normative linguistic *habitus* outside of the camp experience.

Another related point worth noting here is that Dhananjayan Aṅṅā strongly encourages students to use the word “Samskṛtam,” rather than the Anglicized “Sanskrit,” to describe the ancient Indic language. Most campers had little context for speaking about the language Sanskrit, beyond pedagogic contexts such as dance class, religion classes and Bal Vihar at their home temples, and subsequently adapted to Dhananjayan Aṅṅā’s insistence on saying “Samskṛtam” very easily. I, on the other hand, entered the field with a different set of experiences with Sanskrit; perhaps because of my familiarity with scholarly contexts of Sanskrit literature and historical discussion, and years of Sanskrit language study in university settings (and also perhaps of my “advanced” age and corresponding forgetfulness, as compared to my young teen fellow campers), I found it nearly impossible to remember to use the word “Samskṛtam” when

talking about Sanskrit. Consequently, I developed a reputation at camp for my repeated memory lapses about using the word “Saṃskṛtam” rather than “Sanskrit.” and earning Dhananjayan Aṇṇā’s pointed corrections in front of my peers, often on a daily basis.

I once questioned Dhananjayan Aṇṇā about his insistence on this practice, contending that in academic circles focused on South Asia, “Sanskrit” is often the normative word choice, and that for ease of comprehension, it might be an easier term for others to understand. As an example, I pointed out to him that when we spoke of other languages, such as Spanish or French, we referred to them as “Spanish” or “French,” rather than by the terms for the languages used indigenously (i.e. “Español” or “Français”), because in the company of English-speakers, our conversations could be more clear. Dhananjayan Aṇṇā countered in a didactic tone, gently insisting first that as a dancer, I knew better than to use this corrupted pronunciation of “Sanskrit,” no matter how easy it might make conversations about the language. He encouraged me to “correct others’ mistake,” and insist on my scholarly colleagues’ usage of “Saṃskṛtam” as well. Secondly, he playfully invited me to begin using “proper” terms such as “Español” or “Français” when talking about other languages, insisting that if I set a good example, my friends, colleagues and students would become even more interested in others’ cultures and heritages..

In our casual conversations about Sanskrit and “Saṃskṛtam,” Dhananjayan Aṇṇā briefly made dismissive reference to certain criticisms he has received in dance circles and political circles in India for “Sanskritizing” or “Brahminizing” terms and



practices in Bharata Natyam.<sup>226</sup> While I could not find further evidence or explanations of these criticisms levied against Dhananjayan Aṅṅā in print or in person, and while I cannot speak to his true feelings or motivations on the matter, anecdotally I can share that Dhananjayan Aṅṅā ‘s tongue-in-cheek response to these criticisms was, “I’m not even a Brahmin!” In a short statement, he explained to me that he simply intended to create terms tthat were more specific and relevant to the types of movement and expression used in certain dance items.

In the case of “Sanskrit” vs “Saṃskṛtam,” differences in sonic and linguistic experience often created awareness of difference between *gurus* and students – both difference in experience and context, as well as differences of opinion and perspective. But in other moments, familiarity with common vocabularies and linguistic abilities becomes a focal point for collaboration and mutual assistance between *gurus* and students. The landscape of dance camp is a polyglossic landscape, where often pedagogies rely heavily on English for the translation of Sanskrit, Tamil or other language knowledge. In some instances, the *gurus*, who speak English colloquially with great comfort, but often have not studied literary English, and have difficulty coming up with English words that convey the subtle connotations of the Tamil words in song lyrics. At these times, *gurus* occasionally look towards their American students who have knowledge of Indian languages to provide idiomatic expressions in American English, or to provide subtle connotations of Tamil words through contexts or examples that American students would understand. Alternately, students with this polyglossic

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<sup>226</sup> See footnote 202 on page 184 for an example of Dhananjayan Aṅṅā’s substitution of traditional Tamil dance terminology with new, Sanskrit terms that he has introduced among his students as replacements.

background step forward to offer appropriate words that fit the subtle nuances of the poetic lyrics of songs.

Students in the advanced camp learned the item “Yēn Paḷḷikoṇḍīr Ayyā,” a *kīrtanā* on Lord Ranganatha, a form of the reclining Vishnu who serves as main deity in the Srirangam Temple of Tirucirapalli. The Tamil music composition, written by Arunacala Kavirayar, is divided into two halves; the first half describes the story of Visnu’s Sri Rama incarnation, and the second half relates the narratives of his Sri Krishna incarnation. Each line of lyrics suggests a narrative of Rama or Krishna detailing their cosmic, superhuman achievements – then playfully asks the question: “Is it because of these great demonstrations of physical prowess during your human incarnations, that you recline in exhaustion now as Sri Ranganatha?”<sup>227</sup> A sample of the verses in praise of Krishna are provided below, to provide context for the field observations that follow in the next paragraph:

**Excerpt from *kīrtanā*:** “Yēn Paḷḷikoṇḍīr Ayyā” (*rāga*: Mōhana/Bauli//Kāpi;

*tāla*: Ādi)<sup>228</sup>

**Tamil Lyrics**

Putuvaiyāna mulai uṇḍu pēyin uyir  
pōkki alittirō

**English Translation**

*Did you exhaust yourself,  
vanquishing the life of the  
demonness Putana by sucking dry  
her breast milk?*

atira oḍi varum kuruvi vāyai ireṇḍākki *Or are you tired from defeating the*

<sup>227</sup> Shanta Dhananjayan, personal communication in dance theory class, Yogaville, VA, July 29, 2007. The full text of “Yēn Paḷḷikoṇḍīr Ayyā” and translation appear in the appendix. Translations (both the verses here, and the full text) are my own.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid. The lyric composition of “Yēn Paḷḷikoṇḍīr Ayyā” is credited to poet Arunachala Kavirayar, and inspired by the first song of the Tamil *Irāmaṇatakam*. The choreography which accompanies this item is credited to V.P. and Shanta Dhananjayan.

alittirō

*great crane, whose gait made the earth tremble, by splitting his broad beak in two?*

While translating the song for students during theory class one day, Shanta Akkā looked to Dhananjayan Aṇṇā several times for assistance with translating subtle connotations of Tamil words. When Dhananjayan Aṇṇā appeared to be unsure of a better translation of a word, I offered an English equivalent without solicitation, and Shanta Akkā accepted it as a more fitting translation. In another moment, Shanta Akkā turned to Aradhana\*, a native of Chennai and fluent Tamil-speaker, to provide an English suggestion for another descriptive term.

Shanta Akkā: Okay. *Putuvaiyāna* – that is Putana. The name of the *rākṣasī* (female ghou) is Putana. *Putuvai* means Putana.

[singing, to recall the following words] *Putuvaiyāna mulai uṇḍu* – “Putana’s” – with an apostrophe, “Putana’s.” *mulai uṇḍu* – that means “suckling from her breast.” “Drinking her milk,” that means. [enunciating for the students, who are writing the translations in their notebooks] *Mulai uṇḍu*. *Mulai* means “breast.” “Drinking her breast milk.”

*Pēyin*. *Pēy* again is “demon.” “That demon’s” – apostrophe – *uyir pōkki*. *Uyir* is “life.” *Pōkki* means “destroyed,” or “killed.”

*Alittirō*. *Alittirō* means again, “tired.” [unsatisfied with the English word “tired] Um . . . [turning to Dhananjayan Aṇṇā, other Tamil speakers in the room, asking in Tamil] What do you say for “*alittu*” [Dhananjayan Aṇṇā muses for several seconds, but says nothing; I offer “exhausted” as an alternative. Shanta Akkā accepts my suggestion]. “Exhausted, exhausted.” Yes.

Next – *atira oḍi varum*. *Atira* means – [gesturing with hands, vibrating rapidly] – “shaking.” [appears unsatisfied with the English word “shaking”; begins making an onomatopoeic sound to define the word, while continuing to vibrate fingers] “*Dum dum dum dum*” – when something happens with a lot of *thud*, thundering sound... [again looks to

Dhananjayan Aṅṅā, who does not appear to have an alternate translation in mind; then looks to Aradhana\*]

Aradhana: [suggesting through example] If this huge truck were going by, and you feel the ... vibration.

Shanta Akkā: “Vibration,” like that. *Ōḍi varum*. Something which comes with force, or, you know. *Atira ōḍi varum* – *ōḍi* is “running.” Yes.

*Kuruvi* – is this big bird. A big crane. *Kuruvi*, “big cranes.”

*Vāyai* – “mouth.”

*Ireṇḍākki* – means “torn apart into two.” *Ireṇḍu* means “two,” he made it into two. Mouth became two, two pieces.

*Alittirō* – again, “tired, are you?” “Exhausted, are you, having done that?” [to students] Got it? Finished? [continues singing]<sup>229</sup>

In the sonic landscape of the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam*, language, pronunciation, and semantic understanding have the cache to encode dance camp participants with symbolic capital as competent and capable vessels for special knowledge. Facility with languages, music and aural memory also generates opportunities for students to collaborate on ideas and interpretations with the *gurus*. Sound is a fertile medium in which exchanges of knowledge and capital take place.

### **Sacred Space and Embodied Behavior: Physical and Narrative Practices at Camp**

The physical spaces and places that comprise the dance camp’s world are a part of what render it a special landscape, marked by symbolism, practice, ritual and function. For starters, the location of dance camp is extremely remote – it is an hour and a half drive from Charlottesville, deep into the woods by two-lane, winding mountain roads. As of the time of writing this chapter, cell phones still did not function reliably in this area,

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<sup>229</sup> Shanta Dhananjayan, personal communication in dance theory class, Yogaville, VA, July 29, 2007.

and GPS directions often contained no information on these roads. The camp's remoteness from bustling, populated areas and the accompanying amenities of city life – neighborhood developments, large shopping malls, eateries and other public venues – render it a relatively pristine natural environment, replete with lush greenery, rolling hills and wildlife such as birds, snakes, insects and other creatures that are often pointed out to students by their teachers to help conjure their imaginations, and help them depict natural themes in dance.

The physical buildings that comprise the dance camp are located within a short walk of each other. Camp activities take place in two main structures; the dance studio, and the “house,” which contains dormitory-style rooms, an industrial kitchen, and several open rooms for gatherings and group activities. A house mother stays in the house with the students in her own private room, and the other teachers and administrators of the camp bunk in private trailers, located about three minutes' walk from the dance studio. The physical proximity of these buildings and gathering sites to each other, and the common understanding of these spaces as communal spaces, gives the physical environment of camp an intimate feeling.

The geographic locale of camp is far from most campers' homes and families; students come from as far as California, the Midwest, the Gulf Coast, and even occasionally from international countries to attend camp. For many youngsters, this first foray into summer camp and being away from home can be a frightening, lonely and intimidating experience. The Dhananjayans and other teachers acknowledge the students' potential worries at all stages of the camp experience, reminding students that for this brief time, they are to regard their teachers and house mothers as their parents,

and their fellow campers as their siblings and family. The use of kinship terms such as Aṅṅā, Akkā, Aunty and other terms to address each other, particularly teachers and students who are elder in age, helps to foster a sense of relationship and intimacy.<sup>230</sup> Students are encouraged to think of the camp as their home and to treat it with the same love, respect and responsibility that they would feel when in their own homes. Over time, students who initially seem homesick or having difficulty adjusting to camp life become privy to the special rituals, practices and language of dance camp, and eventually are able to feel much more at home there once they become fluent in these myriad traditions. For example, initially newcomers seem dazed and intimidated when the return campers line up for lunch and are able to recite the lengthy meal prayer in unison; the foreignness of the Sanskrit *śloka*, its pronunciation and intonation seem nearly impossible to grasp. However, within days, all students appear to recite the prayer without hesitation or fear.

Collective memories from prior years of camp comprise an important part of the traditions that make Yogaville a special and exciting place to be for the campers. Repeat campers often congregate together, laughing and narrating to newcomers episodes from the previous year, where perhaps a practical joke was played on one of the teachers, or some other harmless mischief was undertaken – “the time we stole the brownies,” or “the day Valli Aunty told us stories of her childhood.” Often, repeat campers waste little time in enticing newcomers with the most magical narrative of all, and most repeated – the

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<sup>230</sup> Ann Gold and Gloria Goodwin Raheja discuss the concept of fictive kinship at length in their ethnographic study of North Indian folk singing communities. For more information on fictive kinship, see: Ann Gold and Gloria Goodwin Raheja, *Listen to the Heron's Words: Reimagining Gender and Kinship in North India* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1994).

story of how Aṅṅā and Akkā met and fell in love. Longtime camp students will cajole a younger, new camper to innocently ask Aṅṅā to tell the story. Hushed giggles erupt from the crowd as Aṅṅā rolls his eyes, exasperated that year after year, the students seem to wheedle this same story from him. Yet, within the course of the camp, eventually he will narrate the story with great gestures and expressive faces, delighting the students and making the newcomers now feel privy to this special element of the camp experience.

Space and time are clearly demarcated in many ways at the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam*. In the house, the large, blue carpeted room with panoramic windows overlooking the mountains is called “the *puja* room.” The title was perhaps a misnomer in its early years of usage, but nevertheless, it has stuck for generations of campers. This room is indeed used for *bhajans* (a devotional activity) and contains a large display on one wall (called an “altar” by Yogaville *sannyāsins*) that holds a framed photograph of Swami Satchidananda and a framed image of the Satchidananda ashram lotus emblem – a sacred symbol for followers of Swami Satchidananda). So in one sense, it is marked with religious images and by religious activities. However, the altar in the room does not contain any traditional items which would be found in a Hindu home altar – images of Hindu gods and goddesses, an oil lamp, incense holders, and the like. Additionally, the room is used for many activities besides devotional ones; it is transformed into a *hatha* yoga studio each morning as students lay down long beach towels, and line up for stretching exercises. *Saṅgītam* and dance theory classes take place here each afternoon, with dance campers gathering in large circles or semicircles on the floor, around their instructors. The *puja* room is the site where students spread faded sheets to protect the carpet, before plunking down cross-legged with their lunch and dinner plates, laden with

food, and chattering loudly while eating their meals. It is the location for all social gatherings, dance-related or otherwise. In their free time, students spend hours in the *puja* room rehearsing their dance items – or alternatively, sitting together in circles chatting, telling stories, and erupting into raucous laughter. It is a fluid space where any number of activities might occur, based on the time of day.

The studio, on the other hand, is solely for the practice of dance. Like the *puja* room, a small altar adorns the front of the studio, and features framed photographs of Swami Satchidananda again, but it also includes traditional lithographs of Hindu deities, a South Indian brass oil lamp, and a small statue of Lord Nataraja – the form of Shiva who is known as the presiding deity of dance. Aside from these ritual images, the studio is sparsely decorated, and its cool concrete floors and bare wooden platform, which reverberate with stamping feet during dance class, are silent at all other times. Students are prohibited (and in fact, independently avoid) socializing or informally gathering in the studio during non-class times, as it is regarded as marked in special ways. The studio is restricted *solely* to the practice of teaching, learning, and performing dance – and it seems that this fact is enough to mark it as a sacred space, to be honored and respected.

Additionally, camp space is at times gendered. During the day, female and male students take part in dance classes together, eat together and study their dance theory in groups. But in the evening hours following dinner, the sexes are sent to separate areas to continue studying or socializing. Male students are usually sent to their accommodations – dormitory rooms located in a trailer across from the main house. The female students are permitted to continue sitting and talking in the *puja* room until “lights out” is called.



The schedule of camp activities and the designation of space are unquestioned by students; these demarcations are authoritative, and any deviation from them often comes as a surprise to students. This likely contrasts to students' perceptions and experiences of space, time, and gender back home, where often the family schedule varies slightly from day to day, and the notion of space in homes, schools and other locations is not nearly so structured, by gender or other factors.

The designations of sacred space provide rigid physical structure to the sensory and embodied experiences at dance camp. It is noteworthy that the principal criteria for the sacrality of space is the type of practice that ensues within it. The key pedagogical activities that take place in a space, such as dance rehearsals in the studio or the singing of *bhajans* in the *puja* room, often are identifiable markers and practical reasons for a space's sacrality. The total physical *habitus* of camp as a whole is a sacred space distinct from the *habitus* of students' home environments, as its geographic and practical associations with the ashram, constituent pedagogic practices, and social practices of communal culture are pervasive elements that mark it.

### ***Saris, Propriety, and Self-Perception: Constructing Gender, Modesty and Performative Selves through Codes of Dress***

At camp, certain culturally-constructed vocabularies, material objects and substances, which might be regarded as marginal in the "real" world, are considered mainstream and normative. Sanskrit meal prayers, Indian food, clothing, and material culture are considered the norm at camp in ways that differ from the realities of students' daily life at home. Additionally, students often engage in certain embodied and

discursive communicative practices related to their communal dance knowledge, sharing and communicating with each other in ways perhaps unique only to communities of classical dancers. More experienced dancers help younger students learn their dance theory lessons during spare time and in the evenings. Often, as both a fun pastime and also a means of practicing their *hasta* (hand gesture) knowledge, students adapt a popular American song into *hastas* – a lighthearted and enjoyable activity which inevitably incites laughter and joy, as students appreciate their peers’ creative applications of gesture. Students share stories about their dance teachers and dance classes back home, comparing the repertoire of items that their teachers tend to teach, or the types of material covered in theory classes at home. Though at times students’ dance teachers select different items to teach, or follow slightly different procedures in dance pedagogy, overall most campers’ teachers regard the Dhananjayans’ mode of teaching as authoritative, and share their views about the Dhananjayans’ pedagogies with their students. Thus, while at times students discover differences in the pedagogies of their respective teachers, overall conversations tend to focus on shared experiences, and the common understanding of the Dhananjayans’ importance in their own teachers’ eyes. Stories about dance experiences at home constitute a normative discourse about dance as a facet to everyday life, as natural and common as history or algebra classes at school. Students who arrive at camp not particularly interested in or fond of dance, many times feel newly committed and inspired when listening to the older students discuss the feeling of accomplishment when performing their *arangetram*, or putting their dance knowledge to use when going to college and teaching others about their heritage.

South Asian modes of dress and bodily comportment are a visual example of shared values. Students who normally don't wear Indian clothes on a daily basis, and in fact may not particularly enjoy doing so, at camp feel less self-conscious of their attire since everyone dresses the same, and they often borrow and trade practice *saris* or *bindis* in the mornings while getting ready for dance class. The emphasis on attire at dance camp appears to convey two key messages to students about self-perception and self-representation. Firstly, Indian clothes and dance attire provide an alternate sensory experience to dancers' bodies than non-Indian or "Western" attire might. Practice *saris* constrict the body in certain ways, and free it in other ways; the priority and primary benefit of this marked sensory experience is the improvement of dance skills. The *sari's pallu*, or 1.5 meter end-piece, is pleated and draped across the dancer's torso, then tightly drawn in a diagonal line across the back, and wrapped tightly around the waist; the result of this tight binding is that the torso is somewhat forced to maintain straight posture in order to be comfortable. The lower portion of the *sari*, contrastingly, is pleated and tucked in a manner that forms a full, loose skirt over the loose *salvar* pants worn underneath. This allows the dancer to stretch the legs and lower body freely and modestly, thereby enabling dancers to improve their leg positions and footwork without impediment or constriction. The teachers' insistence that students tie their hair up neatly is also geared towards helping students improve their dance presence; students with sloppily-tied hair, loose strands and bangs on their faces are more likely to develop unconscious habits, such as brushing hair out of their eyes, while in the midst of dancing on stage. The Dhananjayans' requirement that all students wear *bindis* on their foreheads also teaches students the importance of this aspect of dress and bodily comportment when

dancing on stage; the Dhananjayans often tout the *bindi* as brightening a dancer's countenance, and creating a symmetry of the face, which thereby enhances facial expression during performance.

Clothing and forehead markings also convey Indian modes of gendered body comportment. There is “a virtue proper to the form” of *sari* wearing, and female students of *sari*-wearing age must learn it quickly at camp, or surely face correction by an older camper or teacher for improper dress.<sup>231</sup> Students quickly learn to keep their *pallus* draped neatly across their chests, as a practice of modesty and aesthetic propriety. This is a lesson of acute importance to female students from around age 14 onwards, as they must face the embodied experience of *sari*-wearing on a daily basis. However, younger female students and male students also learn lessons about modesty and ideals while observing their *sari*-clad peers in class adjusting their own *pallus*, or assisting each other in wrapping the drape tightly around the waist. For male students, a parallel experience takes place in learning to wear the dance *dhoti*, ensuring it is tucked and pinned in appropriate ways so as not to fall apart during vigorous dancing. While female students are encouraged to wear large sticker-type *bindis* in either a round or teardrop shape, male students are generally taught to draw a long *tilaka* on their foreheads, using powdered *kumkum* (vermillion) and the back of a bobby pin. There is little verbal discourse about why female students use stickers for their faces while males use powder; the practice simply seems to speak for itself.

At the dance camp, clothing and cosmetic practices contribute to students' embodied education about not only Indian modes of dress and appearance, but *gendered*

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<sup>231</sup> Bourdieu, *In Other Words*, 78.

modes of cultural dress. Wynne Maggi's book, *Our Women Are Free*, explores the ways that women's fashion, in particular, among the Kalasha community of northwest Pakistan is a locus of creative and dynamic individuation of self from other Kalasha individuals, and from broader categories of Pakistani society. Women visually "carry" the culture through their dress and beads, which are a source of pride to the entire community.<sup>232</sup> In some similar ways, Indian identity in the U.S. is more often made visible in women's dress at community special events and celebrations (such as at temples, weddings, artistic performances and other cultural events) than it is in male clothing. A visit to a Hindu temple on a Sunday morning will find most women in Indian dress, whereas most men are in slacks (even jeans) and button-down shirts or t-shirts.

At the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam*., the required practices of clothing and forehead markings comprise an education in ways of individuating oneself in accordance with both traditional and idealized concepts of femininity or masculinity. For the few male dancers, their dress and adornment also helps to create a gendered self and comportment. Nevertheless, even here there are gendered differences. One can observe a male dancer drawing the *tilaka* on his head, and interpret this act as a practice of distinguishing himself from his female stage-mates and fellow students, as well as reflecting models of male appearance and fashion as a classical dancer. A female dancer engages in the same process of individuation as she pleats her *sari*, while her male counterparts are permitted to dance in plain t-shirts and *dhotis*. These lessons on gender individuation through dress and appearance are especially important for dancers, who, when onstage and in full costume, aim to represent not only their own individual

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<sup>232</sup> Wynne Maggi, *Our Women Are Free: Gender and Ethnicity in the Hindukush* (Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 2001), 94-116.

gendered identities and selves, but ideals of aesthetics and physical or performative exactness as appropriate to their genders in classical dance.

The Dhananjayans make a point to advise students that as dancers, they should develop the habit of always being composed, presentable, and in a sense, “stage-ready.” The stage arts of *alaṅkāram* and *āhāram* (adornment and costuming) are not learned overnight or in the few hours backstage before a big performance. As demonstrated by the Dhananjayans’ training in the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam*, they should be honed carefully over time, and through daily attention. As Bharata Natyam dancers, the campers are advised that they represent their art form and all the diligent work that goes into learning it; they are encouraged to be responsible in representing it well.

In one longtime dance camper’s experience, these moments of shared practice are often indicative of individuals’ personal subscription and investment in a larger lifestyle of embracing traditional Hindu elements that constitute an important part of Bharata Natyam’s history. Other embodied behaviors, such as reciting *shlokas* and prayers together while in public areas, become new opportunities for experiencing life as a member of a visible, broader community of dancers with shared practices. Kannan Rasiah, a 21-year old university student, had been a participant in the beginner and intermediate dance camp for nearly 14 years, and a junior teacher in the beginner camp for the last several years at the time of my interview with him. He shared at length many observations about the difference between experienced, “return” campers’ behaviors and newcomers to the practices and traditions of camp – and ways that behaviors change over time as a result of campers’ shifts in consciousness through shared practices:

... the years when we’ve had [return campers] who’ve come here before – there is a difference, definitely a difference, in their awareness [as opposed

to years where the camp is primarily comprised of newcomers] . . . . For example, when children first come here, and they're trying to learn the Meal Prayer, they close their eyes because they're *asked* to close their eyes. They close their eyes. And they mumble the words. But after a certain point in time, like when we go to the mall, instead of being embarrassed about the fact that we're saying the Meal Prayer, they'll say, "Oh, we haven't said the Meal Prayer yet!" And say the Meal Prayer *in the mall*, in *salvars*, and not be ashamed about it! You're taught by immersion, that anything that sticks out of the culture that you live in is weird, and you should probably not do it. Even the young ones, when they come back the second year, they're ten years old, or 11 years old - when they get back here you can tell that they remember the Meal Prayer, they're *proud* of the fact that they know the Meal Prayer, and it's not just, "Oh yeah, I remembered something!" It's, "This is part of who I am, this is part of the way I respect life, part of the way I respect people around me." Throughout the school year, I have people that keep in touch with me from camp, and you can see the fact that they've imbibed certain values. And they also call me Aṅṅā all the way through the school year. And I've seen some of them outside of camp, in their school settings, and they're also very respectful. I guess they carry the mantel of camp quite well.

And then, years when we get the children who've never been here before, every once in awhile you get someone who just doesn't get it. And that's *exceedingly* rare – I can think of maybe three people in the 14 years I've been here that just don't get it. They complain about the Meal Prayer, they complain about having to stand with their feet together [i.e. standing in a straight, respectful manner during prayers, versus slouching or leaning on a wall] ... "Why do we have to do all this stuff? It's unnecessary." And the moment we get into town, they *completely* slide back into their American persona. But the occurrence of that is extremely rare. The majority of the people that I see here have not only gained something from having the camp mentality, the *gurukulam* mentality, but also have shared it. . . . I've seen a big difference, even over three weeks or two weeks, they come to genuinely close their eyes and do their prayers in the morning. Genuinely say "thank you" when they're doing *namaskāram*.<sup>233</sup>

Kannan's comments reveal that to returning campers at the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam*, being a Bharata Natyam dancer, being South Asian, being Hindu – and more specifically, being privy to corresponding genres of embodied knowledge, practice, vocabulary, and ethical comportment of dance knowledge – no longer feels odd, lonely or

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<sup>233</sup> Kannan Rasiah, interview by author, Yogaville, VA, August 4, 2007.

“weird” to students in the company of peers who share common experiences and personal views. Additionally, his phrasing about students “carry[ing] the mantel of camp” reveals his insight into the way in which insider experience of the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam* indelibly marks individuals as a part of an esoteric community with shared values – no longer lonely individuals, burdened by isolated and isolating practices.

Another feature of dance camp that assimilates students together in unified community is the provision of single, unifying explanations and reasons for certain practices, beliefs and customs in the worlds of dance and culture. The activities and goals of dance camp are chiefly concerned, among other things, with providing students with reasons for why certain practices, behaviors, beliefs and histories must be upheld in order to accord respect to the Hindu religion, to be better dancers and repositories of Indian classical arts, and to represent their culture and heritage proudly. In many instances, students are often given explanations certain phenomena, that are repeated verbatim by all teachers and older students at the camp. Interpretive space may exist for certain concepts and practices that happen to occur at camp (such as the reason for eating vegetarian meals), but for practices integral to the pedagogy and performance of dance (such as why one must wear a *bindi*) students take the principles and explanations directly from their *gurus* without question.

The *gurus* themselves acknowledge that it is often a daunting task to be such a major resource to their students, and to have to provide all explanations when asked questions. Shanta Akkā spoke casually about the fact that in her own upbringing at the Kalakshetra academy for arts in Chennai, a number of different opportunities, observations, practices and resources informed her about Hindu mythologies and



practices; she experienced Hindu ritual, social, and festival traditions as a part of daily life in South India. She speaks here about the impact of students' questions in her own pedagogical methods, noting the ways in which American students' eagerness to ask questions differs slightly from the normative student-teacher interactions in India, and ways that things are explained – and that in fact, American students' questions often direct their pedagogical method in ways unheard of during her training in India:

Shanta Akkā: Kids there [in India] may not ask you that many questions. Either they think they should not ask, or they think there's no necessity to ask. I don't know, either one. For instance, when we were kids, we didn't ask that many questions – at least I didn't ask. Well, if at all I wanted to know, it was always not during the class time, but probably at some other time [I would ask]. The teachers of course did explain a lot to us, because that was the system we followed in Kalakshetra. So in that way, I didn't miss out on that. Because we also had – apart from dance lessons, we also had general talk on religion, talk on various subjects. Experts would come, scholars would come and talk to us. Or even have *harikathā kālākṣepam* [traditional genre of dramatic storytelling] done, and they explain all the stories, all the incidents, all the whatever. Threadbare, it was explained. So we were able to clear all our doubts through the entire entity, not just learning from dance alone. So here, you need to put things all in its place. You would get to know. It's a learning process even for us, how to explain and how to make them understand.<sup>234</sup>

Conceptually, Shanta Akkā's recollections demonstrate both a concerted *need* to address and answer questions from the pedagogical standpoint of teachers, but they also indicate a strong demand from students for clear explanations about things related to Indian culture, religion, details about dance, and other topics. While she, Dhananjayan Aṅṅā, and the other teachers and administrators of the dance camp do their best to provide a comprehensive immersion experience for students at this residential camp for Indian performing arts, in many ways the students' own inquiries are the predominant

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<sup>234</sup> Shanta Dhananjayan, interview by author, Yogaville, VA, July 20, 2007.

method by which students derive their answers and explanations – forcing the *gurus* to render information quickly and concisely – and often, without much time for interpretation or alternative answers. Students learning dance in the U.S. experience certain voids in Hindu cultural knowledge, which, in India, would be filled by osmotic learning from daily ritual life, festivals, and social events. At the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam*, the dance *gurus* must become more than dance teachers as they fill this pedagogic void with explicit, discursive teaching about Hindu religious culture.

### **Teaching Spirituality, Religious Narrative, and Self-Representation: Relationships as a Pedagogic Medium**

On a near daily basis, teachers take the opportunity to remind students of the reasons, importance and benefits of carrying on certain general traditions or behaviors in their daily lives as well. A most obvious topic of teaching is information about the history and origins of Bharata Natyam. Over the course of camp, Dhananjayan Anṇā delivers several lectures about the mythological, socio-political, and historical origins of Bharata Natyam. In one lecture, Anṇā addressed the various facets of Bharata Natyam pedagogy and practice that should carry over into one’s personal life:

Anṇā: *Nāṭya* means – what is *nāṭya*?

Students: Dance.

Anṇā: Mm. It’s not nearly – *nāṭya* has something else. If you just say, “dance,” anything can be a dance. Any movement can be a dance. But the system that you practice has got something different, something more to it. It is not just a movement, or entertainment, but it educates, enlightens and entertains. There are three aspects. It educates people – it is a media for education. That’s why [the *Nāṭyaśāstra*] is called *pañcama veda* [the fifth *Veda*]– it has got all the knowledge that you want. And then it elevates you to a higher plane. And then entertains. All the three are

involved in *nāṭya*. Dance can be just physical entertainment only, doesn't elevate you or educate you. It is only an entertainment, dance, as you see today in people moving with rhythm, whatever kick and pop [trying to recall the term "hip hop;" students giggle], whatever. That is dance, okay? But it doesn't give you anything other than physical pleasure. But in *nāṭya*, you get physical discipline, mental discipline, and spiritual discipline. Spiritual discipline means knowledge, acquiring knowledge. So when you are learning Bharata Natyam, you learn all, you have all these included in that. Okay?<sup>235</sup>

Here, Aṅṅā speaks directly to the ways in which *nāṭya* affects one's personhood and perception of self. He discusses not only the dancer's own consciousness through the practice of Bharata Natyam, but also the dancer's ability and responsibility to communicate with an audience, and to affect their perception of the world around them.

Aṅṅā's "Four D's" are a quintessential phrase that make their way into a number of lectures for campers from year to year. "The Four D's" refer to the words "discipline, devotion, dedication and dance" – four concepts that go hand-in-hand with one another, according to the Dhananjayans' pedagogy of Bharata Natyam. In his book *Beyond Performing: Art and Culture* (2007), Aṅṅā provides some history about the "four D's" and credits Swami Satchidananda with initially presenting the formula to him and all participants of the inauguration of the very first *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam* in 1989.<sup>236</sup> These four principles are constantly repeated to campers, who year after year, are able to chant them out sequentially by the end of camp. In fact, while nostalgically reviewing a videotape from my own first camp experience as a teenager in 1996, I came upon Aṅṅā's

<sup>235</sup> V.P. Dhananjayan, personal communication in dance theory classroom, Yogaville, VA, July 7, 2008.

<sup>236</sup> V.P. Dhananjayan, *Beyond Performing: Art and Culture (Politico-Social Aspects)* (Delhi, B.R. Rhythms, 2007), 159-160. The essay "Memories of Sri Gurudev Swami Satchidananda" discusses this event, mentioning "The three 'D' formula" as Swami Satchidananda first presented them, describing it as "a 'mantra' (chant) in our life." In recent years, when verbally communicating this tenet to students, Aṅṅā has referenced "dance" as the fourth "D" in the formula.

closing address to the audience at the final performance. In this performative moment, Aṅṅā stands with a microphone, addressing the audience seated in folding chairs before him; the campers sit cross-legged on the floor in front of the audience, facing Aṅṅā. Aṅṅā mentions “the four D’s,” then dramatically pauses, and smilingly addresses the campers: “And what are the four D’s?” The campers joyfully call out: “Discipline! Devotion! Dedication! Dance!” The 2008 *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam* marked the twentieth anniversary of the camp’s foundation. A number of commemorative events took place, and the camp administrators printed and sold t-shirts to camp students and alumni who attended these events. It was perhaps a perfect synthesis of Aṅṅā’s views on clothing (to be addressed in a moment) and his “four D’s” that the modest, oversized white t-shirts bore an Indian design on the front, and the slogan “Discipline, Devotion, and Dedication” on the back. The words themselves become a part of student’s everyday vocabularies while at camp, and long after. As revealed earlier, longtime camper Kannan Rasiah shared:

Throughout the school year, I have people that keep in touch with me from camp, and you can see the fact that they’ve imbibed certain values.... And I’ve seen some of them outside of camp, in their school settings, and they’re also very respectful. I guess they carry the mantel of camp quite well .... The majority of the people that I see here have not only gained something from having the camp mentality, the *gurukulam* mentality, but also have shared it.

The four concepts of “discipline, devotion, dedication and dance” are integrated into other activities aside from dancing at the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam*, and in Kannan’s observation, remain a part of campers’ daily lives and personal codes of conduct long after camp is finished.

Dhananjayan Aṅṅā also often delivers small lessons or anecdotes which may seem unrelated to dance; they are more general, overarching suggestions which are made to encourage students to recall at all times their connection to the culture and heritage of India. These suggestions can be made subtly at times, in ways that are seemingly insignificant or joking. During the annual excursion to a Charlottesville pizza parlor called “Christian’s Pizza,” Aṅṅā took the liberty to jokingly modify the restaurant’s name, into a fitting Indian play-on-words: “We shall call it ‘*Krishna’s* Pizza!’” The students laughed, but at Aṅṅā’s periodic and insistent repetition of this fabricated name throughout the day, they also began calling it “*Krishna’s* Pizza.” While this example is a light-hearted one, it should be noted that Aṅṅā regularly offered amused suggestions to modify Anglicized or American expressions or names into Indian ones – which often seemed to be a subtle reminder to students to remember their Indian identity.

The “Primitive” story is one of Aṅṅā’s favorites to retell year to year, in order to teach dance students the importance of dressing oneself with modesty and care, and valuing Indian modes of dress for their beauty and “civilized” nature. Veteran students at the dance camp often glance knowingly at each other or chuckle quietly, as Aṅṅā seizes the opportunity to launch into this story for the benefit of newcomers every summer. The story is important enough, in Aṅṅā’s view, that he has published it on his website, with the introductory line: “Dhananjayan relates an incident that perhaps best underlines the purposeful motive behind the [*Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam*] program.” The “Primitive” story is as follows, as it appears on the website:

We were enrolling the participants when a brother and sister came in. The girl looked in astonishment at me and remarked, ‘you are the Guru? You

look so *primitive!*<sup>237</sup> She was about 13, wearing brief shorts and a brief t-shirt and in her perception, wearing a *dhoti* and *kurta* was primitive to her. On the formal camp inauguration the next day, we had a full-fledged pooja [*sic*] with mantrams [incantations], followed by a talk with the parents. I called this girl and asked her what her definition of primitive was. In typical American accent, she said half clad, tribal, crude and so on. I asked her how civilization started. She said people started wearing bark, then leaves, then skin and finally covered themselves completely in clothes. With a smile, I asked her how she would describe her extremely brief attire of the earlier day. When she realized the import of her careless remark of the earlier day, she burst into tears and ran away from class! It was not our intention to humiliate anyone; it was just that she realized how the description of primitive had bounced back on her. She realized how mistaken she was in her values and changed her outlook on life. She is now a doctor and proud of her Indian heritage. Kids who used to hate India started coming to India. Some even worked with Mother Theresa with the Calcutta street children.<sup>238</sup>

This lesson about the value and pride of Indian dress offers us a glimpse into ways that dance camp students are called to view themselves as individual members of a special community marked by unique shared practices and responsibilities. In his lecture about the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Aṅṅā describes *nāṭya* as an embodied art form which “educates, enlightens, elevates and entertains.” He states that practitioners of Bharata Natyam must accept themselves not only as dancers or entertainers, but also as educators and spiritual repositories who are bound by a rigorous standard of discipline which differs from the discipline or regimen of dancers from other styles or genres of embodiment, such as hip-hop dancing.<sup>239</sup> Dhananjayan’s interpretation of a dancer’s identity is part calling, part

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<sup>237</sup> The italics here are mine; when hearing V.P. Dhananjayan tell this story over the two years of fieldwork, both times the word “primitive” was emphasized by his use of an affected American accent, and a high pitch, presumably to imitate a young female student. Usually listeners giggle or smile upon his pronunciation in this manner, understanding that he is imitating the young student here.

<sup>238</sup> Bharata Kalaanjali, <http://www.bharatakalaanjali.org/intro.html> (accessed January 9, 2010).

<sup>239</sup> V.P. Dhananjayan, personal communication in dance theory class, July 7, 2008. It should be noted that Dhananjayan Aṅṅā recognizes any classical art form that takes disciplined study as beneficial to a Bharata Natyam dancer’s training; on the other hand, he looks down upon dance

credo, and his students are taught these views as truth in their lectures. “The Four D’s,” another of Aṅṅā’s long-standing mottos for a dancer’s duties and practices, is now regarded as a proclamation of all that is entailed in the dance camp experience. In his story about “Primitive Clothing,” Aṅṅā implies that the selections of Western clothing worn by the student, considered revealing by traditional Indian standards, are a step backwards according to the laws of cultural development and evolution. In other words, traditional Indian concepts of modesty and proper attire are superior to contemporary Western notions; those who choose to follow traditional Indian practices of dress are therefore choosing a more “civilized,” developed, refined route of personal conduct. Aṅṅā’s story is a call for students to select this superior route, to represent a culturally superior way of living.

And yet, the Dhananjayans are careful to clarify that while learning Bharata Natyam inevitably involves learning a number of stories, concepts and principles from traditionally Hindu sources, their intention is not to promote or advocate Hinduism over and above other belief systems. The Dhananjayans are aware that while the majority of dance campers are from South Indian Hindu backgrounds, not all are. There are often a number of students from North Indian families, from Jain, Christian, or mixed ethnic and

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forms such as hip-hop, pop, and other forms which are more impromptu and fad-like, and (in his view) are not reliant upon disciplined study in a formal environment. Aṅṅā frequently shared experiences collaborating with Indian classical dancers of Kathak, Kathakali, Odissi and other styles, as well as Western classical ballet dancers and musicians; he would describe how these experiences influenced him positively as a dancer and choreographer. He often recognized and praised campers who study both Bharata Natyam and Western classical ballet at home, commenting that the conditioning exercises and emphasis on posture involved in ballet are beneficial to a Bharata Natyam dancer’s physical stamina. Campers who informally enjoyed learning hip-hop and popular dance moves, on the other hand, were playfully but pointedly questioned about how these genres of movement contributed to their performance of Bharata Natyam. Perhaps out of respect, or perhaps out of a genuine lack of answers to Aṅṅā’s questions, the hip-hop enthusiasts rarely responded to these questions, choosing to sigh or smile in defeat.

religious households, and in some years, there are students who have no personal connection whatsoever to South Asia or Hinduism. The Dhananjayans have taught numerous non-Hindu students (both in India and abroad) over the years, and while they respect students' different systems of belief and religion, they maintain that knowledge of Hindu stories is important to one's development as a Bharata Natyam dancer, since in the course of dance education, a dancer will play roles from different Indian stories and myths. Also, Shanta Akkā interprets Hindu narratives as replete with general themes, emotions and characters that might help a dancer portray any role or story on-stage:

Shanta Akkā: *Puranas, itihāsas* .... Those are all beautiful stories, but not necessarily to *propagate* Hinduism. We don't try to propagate Hinduism through our art. We are just saying these stories of great scholars to learn lessons ... They have lots of teachings. Look at *Bhagavad Gita*, if you learn *Mahabharata*, if you do a part from *Mahabharata*. All the incidences that have taken place. When you are talking about those parts, and enacting, you're thinking of the characters and the qualities, whatever should be done, what should not be done. Those are the characters that you are trying to think. But it doesn't mean you are trying to *preach* something to somebody. So that is a very important factor that we have to understand. When people say this is a religious art – *how* religion is played in our art form is definitely different from what people think.<sup>240</sup>

Shanta Akkā's comments here reveal that though Bharata Natyam items often center around narratives taken from traditionally Hindu contexts or mythological events, that the essential lessons and tenets one might derive from them can be construed as part of an universal ethic. For example, in teaching the item "Bhavayami," a lengthy choreography narrating the *Ramayana* epic, Shanta Akkā teaches students to depict an episode where Parasurama, depicted as an irate, haughty and boastful figure, approaches the divine Rama, asking him boastfully if he has the strength to string his divine bow,

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<sup>240</sup> Shanta Dhananjayan, interview by author, Yogaville, VA, July 20, 2007.



which is known widely to be an impossible feat for a mere mortal.<sup>241</sup> When the humble Rama calmly and effortlessly is able to string the bow, Parasurama is shocked – and his pride is deflated instantaneously, as he realizes Rama is none other than a human incarnation the cosmic Vishnu. Shanta Akkā's understands narratives such as this one as not necessarily teaching Hindu values and religious ideals per se; rather, she interprets them as teaching broadly applicable values and ideals – and she feels that students from diverse viewpoints or backgrounds can certainly benefit from becoming familiar with these stories.

The setting at the Satchidananda Ashram lends itself to an environment where students are contemplating religion and values, and there is an emphasis at the ashram on finding common ground between people from diverse religious, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. Though campers are busy with dance activities during the bulk of most days, they interact with ashram staff and visitors periodically – in yoga class, for a brief time during meals (as ashram staffpersons often assist with cooking and serving food), and at *satsaṅg* on Saturday evenings. *Satsaṅg* usually lasts one to two hours, and consists of a *bhajan* session, several guest speakers who discuss yoga, and a brief, 30-minute video presentation Swami Satchidananda at a past *satsaṅg*, giving a brief discourse on an aspect of Vedanta philosophy, or answering questions from devotees in the audience about incorporating yogic principles into daily life. Dance campers participate in the *bhajan* singing at *satsaṅg* and are often asked to initiate a *bhajan* alongside Shanta Akkā, so that the other attendees at *satsaṅg* might be able to sing along in a call-and-response fashion. But once the singing ends and the speakers ascend the

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<sup>241</sup> Observations from studio classes, Yogaville, VA, August 2008.

stage, the younger campers appear to be bored and overwhelmed by the philosophical topics of discussion, and subsequently tune out, fiddling with their *dupattas* or the *bhajan* handouts passed around at the start of *satsaṅg*. The campers sit silently throughout the remaining presentations (unable to talk with each other or socialize, under the watchful eyes of their teachers and house mothers) until it is time to return to their dormitories for the night.

Though the students do not appear to be actively participating in the discussion portions of *satsaṅg*, nevertheless the opportunity to interact with both *sannyasins* and other guests at the ashram raises consciousness for students about the exchange of religious and cultural ideas going on around them. Also, the students are keenly aware that their *gurus*, the Dhananjayans, Padma Akkā, and the house mothers are sitting still and listening intently to the discourse, and are subtly informed by their teachers' embodied behaviors of respect and attentiveness during *satsaṅg*. Even outside of *satsaṅg*, the *gurus* periodically refer to Swami Satchidananda, the *sannyāsins*, and other persons and aspects of the ashram's multicultural culture with an attitude of deep appreciation and respect. The Dhananjayans are articulate about their personal relationship with Swami Satchidananda over the years, and their own affinity to his teachings geared toward people of all faiths and backgrounds. Padma Akkā and her family are also widely known among camp students to be lifelong devotees of Swami Satchidananda, and an integral force in the ashram's establishment. Overall, students appear to learn that though the philosophical concepts discussed at *satsaṅg* and other ashram events may be beyond their scope at present, the interfaith culture of the ashram is important, honorable, and worthy of their *gurus'* respect.

Other discursive and embodied cues reveal the impact of the ashram's culture on students' experience at camp. The ashram *sannyāsins* and staff often verbally repeat simple slogans or phrases during *satsaṅg*, at yoga classes, and other contexts that are credited to Swami Satchidananda. These phrases often constitute an informal opening and closing to ashram events. Ashram residents often greet others or commence yoga classes with the phrase "Hari Om," and at the end of yoga classes, *satsaṅg* and other events, close proceedings by saying the English phrase "May the entire universe be filled with peace and joy, love and light."<sup>242</sup> Campers quickly learn these phrases, and often repeat them to each other outside of yoga class or *satsaṅg*, indicating their consciousness of these practices. In fact, during the course of the year, I have often witnessed dance campers on the social network website Facebook leave messages for each other that say "Hari Om!" or "May your universe be filled with peace and joy, love and light" – a lighthearted reference to their camp days, and the interfaith culture that presides over their experience.<sup>243</sup> The repetition of certain key phrases and greetings that are part of the Satchidananda ashram culture demonstrates how "public" interfaith consciousness appears to constitute a part of campers' experience.

At the same time, the camp is in many ways an intimate environment, where social dynamics often are more akin to intimate familial relationships marked by affection, playful teasing, and sense of mutual obligation and reciprocity. Students' overall "takeaway" from the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam* is chiefly framed by this

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<sup>242</sup> The phrase "May the entire universe be filled with peace and joy, love and light" appears to be an English rendering of the Sanskrit *śloka*: *Lokāḥ samastāḥ sukhinoḥ bhavantu*.

<sup>243</sup> Facebook, <http://www.facebook.com> (accessed February 4, 2010). Former camp students often leave these phrases as messages for each other on the "Wall," a publicly-viewable interface on Facebook.

juxtaposition – of an environment bounded by interfaith philosophies, and the close-knit dance community of individuals living together and adhering to interpersonal exchanges as would take place in a family. The teachers, staffpersons, and students of the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam* also identify with this view of the camp landscape, and articulate the importance of connecting with Hindu religious concepts, Indian cultural values and Bharata Natyam as an art form through the framework of personal relationships, respect, and viewing their teachers, mentors and companions as living examples of an ethical system.

Valli Gopal, a 74-year-old woman who served as both a house-mother and music teacher at the camp for nearly 14 years, offered some insights that summarize this personal aspect of the camp’s message and overarching goals. I asked her first to speak about both her own personal religious beliefs, and the camp’s role in teaching religion and values to students. She offered the following thoughts on the lessons that students take away from camp:

My religion is, “Don’t hurt others. Don’t do anything wrong. Be happy wherever you are. And be contented.” That is my religion. . . . [as for how the camp teaches students about religion and values - ] Now, people are born here, and the mother and father busy going for work and everything. Nobody has the time to spend some time to put the culture in their heart. So what we do is, we tell them. We go on giving some examples and everything. Definitely, today they may not be saying it back, whatever they’ve learned. But – it is in their mind. They will bring it out at the nick of time, when they really want it. At that time, they will definitely bring it out. Because these words, always somewhere or other, it’ll be there. And when they do something wrong, that mind will tell: “No. I think Valli Akkā told me once,” or “Shanta Akkā told me once,” or “Aṅṅā told me.” Like that, it will always come in the mind. In your actions, or your attitudes, or anything you say – but it comes out.<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>244</sup> Valli S. Gopal, interview by author, Yogaville, VA, July 2, 2007.

Through their use of both subtle and informal suggestions about daily living, traditional Indian mythologies and concepts related to dance and classical arts, and the intimate landscape of human relationships and reciprocity within the camp environment, Dhananjayan Anṇā, Shanta Akkā and the other teachers at the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam* incorporate techniques into their pedagogy which aim to cultivate certain behaviors, actions and embodied practices in their students which fulfill an standard about ideal living and action.

### **The Embodied Ethics of Dancers: Implications of Imaginative Environment**

An intricate world of ethical tenets emerge through the dance pedagogies at the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam*, reflecting the imaginative constructions of codes of right behavior in accordance with interpretations of Hindu, Indian, and Vedanta culture. Firstly, well-trained Bharata Natyam dancers and students are taught an ethical code of conduct which includes guidelines for activities from dressing, to eating, to respecting your elders, peers and those younger than you. At the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam* camp; here, these values form the very core of general social decency. In the everyday, “outside” world, however, dancers likely do not reside in an environment where these guidelines are the norm. Nevertheless, the authority figures and teachers at dance camp advocate that students should continue honoring these practices euphemistically, continuing and even teaching practices such as the *ślokas bhajans* and yoga to their family members after returning home.

Secondly, camp teachers acknowledge that this proper way of living and behavior may be easier to maintain while at camp, where everyone’s understanding of the system

is common; however, they maintain that being back home in the outside world is no excuse for forgetting these ideals of right action and right living. A Bharata Natyam dancer, trained “properly” not only in dance but personal conduct and respect, should set an example for others and conduct oneself appropriately, never embarrassed or ashamed to stand out from others based on these principles, and never succumbing to the definitions of propriety which, while dominant in the outside world, don’t always honor the understandings of modesty and propriety that Indian or Hindu culture espouses.

Thirdly, respect, authority and power are important attributes that one acquires based on age, experience and expertise. Teachers are an ultimate repository of authority, and should always be given proper deference and respect.

Fourthly, certain principles of mind and body, so easily a part of daily life at dance camp, are important principles of daily life everywhere. *Hatha* yoga not only makes life easier for dancers by keeping their bodies healthy and supple, but it is worth continuing even in regular life and even when one discontinues dancing, for it provides both the body and mind with focus, and enduring discipline. And more generally, learning the myriad facets of Bharata Natyam, including *adavus*, repertoire, theory, dance history, Hindu mythology, music, and philosophy, require “the four D’s” of discipline, devotion and dedication and dance – principles of body and mind which should be applicable to all other facets of daily life no matter what other landscapes or environments in which we might find ourselves.

The residential, closed environment of the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam* constitutes a rich site of unique discursive, embodied, social and hierarchical *praxes* of learning Bharata Natyam – a utopian *habitus* that imaginatively upholds *gurukulam*

models of traditional Indian learning. The camp's lessons on embodied ethics and culture are transmitted through dynamics of power and authority, the prioritizing of duties and responsibilities, the ordering of space and time, and the provisions of reasons and explanations for certain beliefs or practices. The twenty years of the camp's operation and maintenance of exacting values of dance pedagogy, cultural continuity and membership are a testament to the life of practices themselves, and the declaration of theology made year after year by their enthusiastic engagement.

## CHAPTER 5

### Performing Identity:

#### Practices of Interpretation, Achievement, and Belonging at the Triveni School of Dance

I realize how early I am, as I pull into the near-empty parking lot of Newton South High School one warm September afternoon, following signs around the cement-block building till I find one reading “amphitheater.” I quickly enter the building and make my way into the theater, onto the stage, then proceed up the stairs and behind the curtain. I walk into mayhem: a flurry of clucking Indian women clad in colorful saris, running back and forth across the curtained stage, carrying several microphone stands, electrical cords and rolled straw mats. Three grey-templed Indian men stand at center stage; one is atop a ladder, suspending a strand of flowers from a rod, while the other two men direct him from the floor: “more toward the right . . . oh, now to the left a little.” The Nataraja (image of dancing Shiva) statue is already set up at the corner of the stage; the oil lamps and incense holder stand expectantly, waiting to be set alight in a short time. I walk down the dark wings toward backstage and the green room, from where I can already hear a clatter of conversation between voices I recognize. Spirited would be a way to describe it; cacophonous would perhaps be a more accurate term. One voice emerges as louder than the others, barking at the others in a stern tone. As the din rises to a crescendo, I suddenly hear the voice declare, “Well! There’s nothing we can do now, can we?! Just have a seat and let me get started already!” Then – silence.



My brisk strides toward the green room slow to a tentative creep; I wonder, should I wait a moment before entering? Clearly, someone is being scolded – and I don't want to intrude on a delicate situation. But my curiosity is too powerful, and after all, I know these folks well. So I peek in, then enter as quietly as I can, to figure out what has transpired.

Amy is livid. I can tell already, just by looking at her face. Though she is adorned in a pretty salmon-pink embroidered sari with matching earrings, bangles and an immaculate makeup job, her frustration is palpable. Her large, brown eyes lined with long lashes are dark with anger, and her cheeks are flushed. A 27-year-old assistant teacher at the Triveni School of Dance, Amy is presenting two of her students today in their *arangetram*, or solo performance debut of classical Indian dance, and the day was bound to be a stressful one no matter what; but clearly something unusual is going on to cause her high level of anxiety.

Seventeen-year-olds Krupa\* and Anjana\* sit silently on stools in front of her; they are in jeans and button-down shirts, but their hair is already pulled back in tight plaits, and their faces are primed with white talcum powder, ready to be painted with their stage makeup. But they sit stiffly with melancholy expressions, as Amy looks at them incredulously and sighs. She then turns around, gathering supplies such as bobby pins, combs and eyeliner pencils, as the two girls glance at each other worriedly.

I see Oami standing a few feet behind Amy, dressed in a sherbet-orange colored silk sari, her short, black bob of hair neatly styled. She smiles at me, subtly beckons me toward her, and then stifling a laugh, whispers slowly in my ear, “What happened is, Krupa forgot the fan of her yellow costume at home.”

My brain reels at this information. I try to stop myself from reacting, but my eyes inevitably widen and I bite my lower lip at the shock at this news. I immediately understand the premise of Amy's mood.

Amy looks up, noticing that I have entered, and gives me an exhausted nod, as I smile back at her and shrug with a grin, feeling sympathy that this attractive and normally cheerful young woman bears the harried expression of someone more than twice her age, in the midst of this stressful situation. Amy glances at me knowingly, with a look of exasperated surrender to the chaos around her; she seems certain that I can understand her mood at this moment. I recollect the hours of conversations we've had over the year about these girls, who somehow have constantly managed to test Amy's patience as she has prepared them for this day.

As she begins applying stage makeup to Anjana's eyes and cheeks, Amy becomes distracted; Krupa seizes the opportunity to slip off her stool quietly, scamper to an isolated corner of the room, produce a cell phone from her jeans pocket, and place several frantic calls in Telugu to her house, asking relatives or friends to search for the elusive costume fan. Amidst her long sentences in Telugu, I catch snippets of English pleading that the person at the other end look on the "ironing table," or on top of the "vanity." Eventually her guidance proves helpful, as she suddenly exclaims to those of us in the room, "They found it!" Krupa looks relieved.

While this is certainly good news, unfortunately too much time has passed, and Amy has had to make a change in the costume decisions in order to avoid a delay in the show's start. Amy has already dressed Anjana in a white costume with crimson borders and fans, and instructs Krupa to put her white costume on right away. The girls were

hoping to wear their colored costumes for the first half of the show, which consists of their solo dance pieces. They were planning to wear the white costumes for the second half, when they would be on stage together performing duets. But due to the delay involving Krupa's fan, Amy has made an executive decision to change the costuming plan. Krupa's face falls in disappointment, but she silently and obediently follows Amy's instructions; Oami helps her into the white silk attire.

Suddenly, in bursts Neenaji, the *guru* of Triveni, along with two other women – a cloud of silk saris humming busily, in chatter about microphone stands and the sound booth. Neenaji's attention is clearly elsewhere, but mid-sentence, Neenaji glances ahead and notices Krupa and Anjana in their white costumes. "What is this?!" she sharply questions, in surprise. "I thought we were starting with the colored ones first!"

Amy then walks calmly to Neenaji and explains the situation matter-of-factly, without apology or hesitation; the frustration is still perceptible in her face, but her calm voice and decisive demeanor clearly show that she has had to move forward and forget the original plan, in the interest of preparing the girls in time for the curtain to go up.

Neenaji immediately groans, and gives the girls a lecture (the tone of which is more in line with an exhausted, well-rehearsed guilt trip than an energized scolding) about the importance of proper planning and preparation for this day, the most important of their lives till this point – their *arangetram* day. The girls' heads hang a little lower with remorse, but they say nothing. Neenaji's lecture is quickly truncated, however, when one of the girls' mothers rushes in with an urgent question about how to set up the orchestra microphones. Neenaji bustles out of the green room mid-sentence, her train of thought left hanging in the air incompletely, and without providing the girls an

opportunity to mutter their sheepish apology. The lecture now over, the room is once again quiet.

The girls finally break the deafening silence, glancing at each other once again, and giggling nervously. They seem dazed, but somewhat surprised at the lack of an explosion of finger wags and reprimands on account of their mistake. They slowly turn their gaze to Oami, who can't seem to help the smile creeping across her effected stern face, though she turns away from Amy so as not to irritate her further. I find myself doing the same thing. Amy rolls her eyes and sighs, and in spite of herself, lets a chuckle escape her lips as she shakes her head in surrender and utters one, single word: "Unbelievable." The giggles become hard to stifle, and we all eventually break into laughter. The issue is now effectively over. The show *will* truly go on.<sup>245</sup>

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A number of decisions power classical Indian dance performance, and each decision can be understood as a negotiation and declaration of identity among classical Indian dancers. The Triveni School of Dance, a large, urban dance school, emphasizes public performance as an aspect of dance education, in ways more unique than the other two dance schools featured in this study. Public performance, targeted toward both South Asian audiences and non-South Asian audiences alike, comprise a pivotal and frequent experience at Triveni, where students often perform multiple times a month (or even a week) in the Boston area as part of their progress through the trajectory of their dance training. Triveni dancers, who perform in three styles of classical Indian dance, also frequently engage in innovative choreographic projects involving non-traditional music,

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<sup>245</sup> Observations at *arangetram* of Krupa\* and Anjana\*, Newton, MA, September 27, 2008.

movements and collaborations with other dance communities in the area, and to promote causes or themes unrelated to South Asia. This chapter focuses on performance at the Triveni school as a context of negotiating religious, cultural, and communal identity. It analyzes the practices of choreographic and interpretive selection of dance items, negotiation of *arangetram* arrangements, and myriad interpersonal communications and exchanges that go into the preparation for performances, as practitioners' means of declaring personal identity and value.

### **The Triveni School of Dance: An Introduction**

Powell Street is a picturesque residential drive lined with trees and large, elegant estates with expansive front yards, wraparound porches, manicured gardens and long driveways. The serenity of Powell Street belies its direct proximity to Boston's busy Beacon Street, in the neighborhood of Brookline, with its bustling pedestrian crosswalks, countless shopfronts, eateries and businesses, and lanes of chaotic traffic split by the rumbling subway's Green C-line. The residential home at 67 Powell Street, not unlike its neighboring houses its outward appearance, happens also to be home to the Triveni School of Dance.

On any given afternoon or evening, cars turn down Powell Street from Beacon and pause to drop dance students off in front of the driveway of 67 Powell Street. The occasional taxi deposits a hurried-looking, *salvar*-clad dancer in the driveway, especially when it has snowed or during Red Sox season. Many dance students drive themselves, jockeying for street parking on the narrow lane, and running into the studio while making a mental note of the time that they pulled into the parking spots so as not to incur the

wrath of the Brookline meter maids. Some students hop the subway to class, getting off at a nearby stop along Beacon, and walking a block to the dance studio. The urban location is perhaps what makes Powell Street an ideal location for the Triveni School of Dance, an academy of classical Indian dance serving a diverse population from the Boston area.

I remember the warm, familiar feeling that filled me the first time I stepped into the Triveni studio. Though I had not been there before, the ambience felt instantly like home – perhaps because the studio is indeed located in a residential home, in the basement of a large estate on Powell. Students and guests enter the studio through a dedicated gateway and door in the back of the house. The studio's golden hardwood floors are obviously worn, and here and there feature small pieces of colored tape which have marked the spots of dancers over decades of rehearsals; nevertheless, the floors lend a warmth to the space. The front of the room is a cluttered space; a large shelf running the length of the short wall holds a monstrous stereo sound system, hundreds of audio cassettes, CD's, folders overwhelmed with papers and notebooks, cups of pens and pencils, bins of hair barrettes, ponytail holders and clips, and a worn *thattukkazhi*. A hard red plastic chair is at the front of the room. A cushioned bench lines the long side of the room along the entryway.

The studio is lined with beautiful wooden paneling, custom designed with Asian-inspired arches and niched shelves; the eye is immediately dazzled by several large, framed oversized lithographs of Hindu deities along the long wall – Ganesha, Krishna and Radha, Mahalakshmi. Other religious emblems and pieces of art are present throughout the studio – a papier-mâché Ganesha mask hanging from a windowsill, along

with several other small drawings or portraits of Ganesha; several small statues of Lord Nataraja. A few frames along walls and shelves contain faded, yellowing cutouts from newspapers that detail the performances and contributions made by Triveni dancers to cultural events and causes in the Boston area over the years. But most striking, perhaps, are the hundreds of color photographs displayed throughout the room – dozens upon dozens of small, 3x5 or 4x6 photos are tacked onto several large bulletin boards, while larger 5x7 and 8x10 framed photos sit atop a ledge that runs the length of all four walls. Each glossy, vibrant photo contains one or two dancers in full classical costumes, jewelry, and makeup, posed in traditional postures, and smiling joyfully into the camera. As I came to find out over time, each displayed photograph represents a dancer who, after years of learning and preparation, has completed her or his *arangetram* under Triveni's auspices. There are hundreds of such photographs adorning the studio walls.

There are surprisingly few pictures of Neenaji in the studio, as compared to the countless images of her students that grace the room. But one or two beautiful photos, in simple black and white, appear on the walls for her students to view and admire. A framed snapshot of a young Neenaji kneeling in prayer before a statue of Lord Ganesha sits at the far short wall – perhaps the most dramatic and captivating of all the photos in the room.

“Neenaji” or “Neena Aunty,” as she is affectionately called by her students and acquaintances, is otherwise known as Neena Gulati, the founder, executive director and head instructor at the Triveni School of Dance, an institution offering instruction in three

distinct styles of classical South Asian performance.<sup>246</sup> Originally from Delhi, North India, Neenaji began training in Bharata Natyam at an early age under the teacher Sri Venkataraman Guru, and under his tutelage completed her *arangetram* in 1961. She became a member of his professional troupe, performing widely in Delhi and other parts of North India in her early career.<sup>247</sup> In 1963, upon graduating from her undergraduate university, Neenaji received an academic scholarship to study in the United States for her master's degree in a science field; she lived and studied in Boston for two years, visiting India intermittently hoping to meet with her Bharata Natyam dance teacher to practice during vacation, but realizing that her aging *guru* was rapidly becoming too frail to continue providing her dance instruction. A friend and fellow dancer then recommended that Neenaji try studying a different genre of classical dance, Odissi, with her teacher, Shrinath Rauji. Neenaji heeded the recommendation and soon became engrossed in the study of Odissi, engaging in an intense course of study for three years.<sup>248</sup> She got married in 1966 and would soon return to Boston with her husband to settle permanently and start a family; she returned as often as possible to visit her parents and continue studying

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<sup>246</sup> The suffix “-ji” is an indicator of respect, usually on account of the individual’s age, accomplishments, or status in society. “-ji” is often attached to the end of individuals’ names as a way of addressing them respectfully. I first met Neenaji in August 2007, during a rehearsal for two of her students’ *arangetrams*. At the rehearsal, several of attendees including the students’ parents, the orchestra musicians, and other students referred to Neenaji as “Neenaji,” using this “-ji” suffix. I thereafter adopted the practice of calling her Neenaji also. Later, I would discover that most of her students with whom I conducted fieldwork preferred calling her “Neena Aunty,” and in the next two years, when communicating with Neenaji through emails, phone calls, cards and letters, Neenaji would often refer to herself as “Neena Aunty” with me. Nevertheless, I preferred to continue addressing her as “Neenaji,” as this was the way I was first introduced to her.

<sup>247</sup> Neena Gulati, interview by author, Boston, MA, January 9, 2009.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.



dance, but her training would again face hardship when her Odissi guru, a healthy young man, died in a car accident.<sup>249</sup>

While in Boston, Neenaji had the opportunity to attend a performance by noted Kuchipudi artists Raja and Radha Reddy, who were on an international tour. At a meeting with the Reddys, Neenaji discovered that they were soon moving to Delhi, to a home not far from her parents' residence. After this time, Neenaji began to study Kuchipudi intensely with the Reddys on frequent month-long visits back to India.<sup>250</sup> And periodically, Neenaji had opportunities to rehearse and take master workshops with various gurus of Bharata Natyam, to review technique and expand her repertoire of dance choreographies and items.<sup>251</sup> Neenaji's background in three different genres of classical dance and her willingness to study with different *gurus* is somewhat unusual, both among professional dancers in India and in the United States; while most dancers engage in training under the tutelage of only one or two *gurus*, and openly articulate a dedication to and continuity of their own *gurus'* pedagogic practices and manners of performance, Neenaji openly shared that she has learned from a number of different, equally influential teachers in a variety of dance styles, and does not feel the need to promote any one *guru's* style of teaching and performance exclusively; she also articulated that to this day, she remains open to learn from any number of accomplished teachers toward expanding her repertoire, and willingly sends her students to a number of different institutions of dance in India for further study if they are interested in doing so. She also does not emphasize her *gurus'* names or lineages to her own students, though occasionally she will mention the choreographer of particular pieces just to give interested students some background.

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<sup>249</sup> Neena Gulati, interview by author, Boston, MA, January 9, 2009.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

These practices of openness to change, dabbling in numerous styles and lineages of dance, and willingness to send her students to learn at diverse dance academies in India is somewhat unusual in comparison with other dance teachers featured in this project, and more broadly, among dance teachers worldwide. Neenaji's flexibility throughout her own dance education is likely related to her own free spirited, enthusiastic willingness to study dance with good teachers anywhere, but also was likely a function of her early immigration to the United States, and need to study dance whenever and wherever possible when on brief visits back to India.

Neenaji's career as a teacher began in 1971, when she gave a performance at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and was approached by an American student who had traveled to India and had a fondness for classical Indian arts. The student begged Neenaji to teach her how to dance, but Neenaji was hesitant to commit as she now had two young children, a son and a daughter, and was living in a small apartment not conducive to dance rehearsals. She promised the young woman that once she moved to a house, she would begin teaching dance. Soon afterward, Neenaji moved into a house in Brookline – the house on Powell Street, in which she still resides today – and began giving classes from the basement in her home. The Triveni School of Dance was born.

When asked about the early years of her dance school, Neenaji credits its growth and expansion to “word of mouth,” as her number of students practically doubled each year. Students would drive from small towns all over Massachusetts to attend classes each week at Neenaji's home; she would teach a class of girls for a year, and the following year, have another class begin for their younger sisters. Her students were often the children of Indian immigrants like herself, but occasionally she would have

American students in her class, or the half-Indian, half-American children of mixed race couples. Starting in 1975, the Triveni School began its tradition of staging the “Annual Show,” a program where every student at the school could perform the items they had learned over the year on-stage, with full costume, for friends and family to enjoy. Triveni students also began performing at local India Association events and other cultural gatherings and opportunities in the Boston area.

In the early 1980’s, Neenaji began to teach an eight-year-old girl, the Indian adoptee of a Caucasian American single mother. The experience of helping this family and getting to know their needs inspired Neenaji to create the Triveni scholarship fund, to assist dance students with free or lower-cost lessons based on family need. Around the same time, Neenaji established the Triveni ensemble group, a group of her senior students who would stage several performances each year, and perform at paid events, in order to benefit the Triveni scholarship fund and other philanthropic causes. Around this same time, the interest in studying classical Indian dance was booming, with newer waves of Indian immigrants and the continued growth of the South Asian-American community. Several of her senior students also began teaching dance classes in Brookline and other areas of Boston, as a way of expanding the resources and opportunities to learn dance for an ever-growing community of eager students.

Today, the Triveni School is comprised of approximately 230 students and eight teachers – Neenaji, along with seven of her senior dance students who now oversee several of their own classes each week. Triveni has branches in Boston’s Brookline neighborhood, as well as Burlington and Lowell, Massachusetts, two suburban towns located approximately 25 and 40 miles north of Boston, respectively. The dance school

provides instruction in three styles of classical Indian dance: Bharata Natyam, Kuchipudi, and Odissi. Triveni students also stage literally dozens of performances each year; the Annual Show, the Ensemble Show, approximately ten to fifteen *arangetrams* each summer, and appearances at local museums, libraries, schools, colleges, government venues, cultural shows, and Boston theaters.

In the sixteen months of fieldwork at Triveni, Neenaji's primary assistant teacher was Amy, a 27-year-old Malayali Catholic woman, lifelong resident of Boston, and student of Neenaji for over twenty consecutive years. Amy frequently conducted more classes at Triveni's Brookline location each week than even Neenaji by sheer number of hours, and had at least ten of her own students, who had trained with her from the start, present their *arangetrams* in the two summers that I conducted fieldwork. Amy principally taught students items in Bharata Natyam and Kuchipudi, but occasionally Odissi as well; she also oversaw many administrative and fiscal details at Triveni, and coordinated many of the Ensemble's activities and performances. Oami, a 25-year-old woman of Telugu Hindu heritage, and also a lifelong Bostonian and student of Neenaji, also served as a student-teacher and administrator in Brookline, instructing students in all three genres of dance offered at Triveni; she also coordinated Triveni's scheduling and operations for the year. Saumia, a 28-year-old Malayali Catholic woman, also studied with Neenaji for over 20 consecutive years alongside Amy and Oami, and single-handedly ran Bharata Natyam and Kuchipudi classes in Burlington, Massachusetts each weekend. Sima\*, a woman in her early 30's, conducted exclusive Kuchipudi classes in Lowell, Massachusetts, under the Triveni name. Mary, a Caucasian woman in her early 40's, disciple of Neenaji for over fifteen years and practitioner of yoga, conducted a

number of classes in Bharata Natyam during the week at Brookline. Tara, a student of Neenaji for a collective 15 years and mid-30's woman of mixed South Asian and Caucasian heritage, also taught classes in Bharata Natyam and Kuchipudi at Brookline. Vivian\*, a Caucasian-American woman in her late 30's, also occasionally taught classes at Triveni in 2007-2008 although in previous years she had taught more frequently at Triveni. A lifelong New England resident and student of Neenaji, Vivian had traveled to India a number of times, studying dance for brief periods both with Neenaji's Kuchipudi *gurus*, Raja and Radha Reddy, as well as at the Dhananjayans' academy in Chennai. She also has extensive training in other genres of dance, including Western Interpretive and Modern dance, as well as other non-Western movement styles such as Sufi devotional movement and other forms. Vivian heads a professional dance company that frequently stages shows in the Boston area, but on occasion would lead intensive Bharata Natyam workshops at Triveni during the summers for interested students.

### **A Theater of Choices: Musical, Thematic, and Pedagogic Decisions for Performance**

The countless evenings and weekends I spent in fieldwork at the Triveni School over eighteen months between August 2007 and February 2009 were some of the most engaging and busy of my research experience for this project. My senses and faculties were constantly abuzz, as I took in Triveni's deep range of teachers, students, dance items and choreographies, musical selections, opinions, ideas, performance spaces, practice attire, costume selections, and audiences. A large portion of hours I spent at Triveni entailed observing Neenaji or her assistant instructors teaching introductory items to young children and adult beginners; students in cotton *salvar kameez* or tight leggings

and long tunics line up on the warm yellow floors to rehearse the *puṣpāñjali*, a simple Bharata Natyam invocatory item, or “Nrityalaya,” a fast-paced item celebrating Lord Shiva as Nataraja, and featuring intricate footwork in five separate rhythm sections with different beat cycles. Most students who attend dance classes at Triveni for at least five or six years accrue a wide repertoire of Bharata Natyam items, including numerous choreographies of *jatīsvaram*, *varṇam*, *tillānā*, *padam*, and other items.

At this point, advanced students continuing even further in their dance education commence their study of Kuchipudi, adding to their personal libraries of dance popular Kuchipudi items, with their expressive and lyrical choreographies. Students just beginning their study of Kuchipudi would commence with the rhythm-driven Kuchipudi Mandāri *jatīsvaram*, later moving to items like “Satyabhama” or *Rās śabdham*, which combine rhythmic *jatīs* with romantic, expressive *sāhitya* (verses) about the love of Krishna and his consorts.

As students continued their years of study, Neenaji gauges interest among her classes about studying Odissi; after several years of gaining proficiency in Bharata Natyam and Kuchipudi, interested groups of students begin to study the techniques of Odissi, eventually learning items such as the Saveri *pallavi* or “Battu.”<sup>252</sup> Generally, a student in preparation for an *arangetram*, or solo stage debut, has spent at least eight to ten years in intense study of both Bharata Natyam and Kuchipudi; approximately a third also engage in rigorous practice of Odissi in the two or three years prior to the

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<sup>252</sup> The word *pallavi* here refers to a type of Odissi choreography. But *pallavi*, when used in discussions about music compositions, refers to the second verse in the typical Carnatic composition structure.

*arangetram*, and perform an Odissi item or two, in their *arangetram* programs of six to eight total items.

Senior students – that is, students who have studied with Neenaji for nearly fifteen to twenty years – are often invited to participate in special choreographic projects for what are often called “fusion” pieces. Fusion items at Triveni generally combine movements from Bharata Natyam, Kuchipudi or Odissi with non-traditional music selections, dance formations, themes and costuming. I observed that the music selections for fusion items were often adopted from both Indian and American new age artists, as well as genres from other Western and non-Western contexts, such as Gospel, African drumming, and poetry or spoken word. Fusion items occasionally highlight themes which may be overtly religious or deliberately non-religious (or vaguely between the two) in nature. The initiative to include fusion items as another category of dance items, and the continuous effort to teach fusion items to new generations of proficient students as readily as teaching *jatīsvarams* and *tillānās*, is unique as compared to the other dance schools featured in this study, which solely uphold and teach traditional classical categories of choreography to their students.

The decisions about staging performances were informed by complicated and diverse issues, that were somewhat unique to Triveni’s own mission, history and demographic. For one thing, Triveni’s massive student body factored into the decisions made about how performance could take place. During the course of research for this project, Triveni enrolled over 230 students ranging in age from four to the mid-60’s or even 70’s. This broad age span also entailed wide ranges in student skill level. Triveni offers beginner classes for nearly every age, and while naturally some of the younger

children were just starting their long careers as dancers, often teenage and adult students were also beginners, and many anecdotally shared with me that in a class of five and six year olds they felt like the slowest learners, because aggregating the body knowledge and techniques of dance at a later age came much more slowly than to the young children around them. Other teen and adult dancers came to Triveni having studied some form of classical dance at another school, in their recent or not-so-recent pasts. These students often were able to pick up dance techniques fairly easily due to their prior experience, but for some, changing subtle nuances of their technique from their original style of learning and performance to the style preferred at Triveni was a challenge. Many dancers in their teen years and adulthood had been lifelong students at Triveni, and thus had accumulated a wealth of skills, technical knowledge and repertoire that factored into casting decisions for various performances. The culture at Triveni was characterized by longevity of student membership and study, common *praxis* in the way teachers teach basic steps and dance items, and a strong sense of codification about the repertoire of dance items that are part of Triveni's performative menu.

Age and years of study aside, other factors guiding pedagogic decisions involve the aesthetic details and particulars of performance – a highly valued concept at Triveni. For this community, *performance* of dance is an integral part of the experience of *learning* dance; it constitutes a *praxis* in and of itself, which yields experience and insight into the art form as a performance art. Part of the *doxa* of dance pedagogy is the way dance is experienced aesthetically while engaged in public performance, which at Triveni, includes teaching and learning elements of aesthetics, music, and other details as part of performance planning.



Dance students' personal aesthetics and performative ability were important aspects of the practice of dance and performative decision-making. In a class of ten students, where everyone had studied together for ten years, inherently some dancers possessed an inherent fluidity, virtuosity, and passion in/for the form, while others, though proficient in the same dance skills and techniques as their peers, had to work harder at developing their performative appeal. The variations in aesthetic appeal were often (though not always) related to students' personal investments of meaning and value in learning classical dance, and eagerness to continue building knowledge, skill, and performance experience with each year.

Music availability and selections also served as a factor in performance planning. Neenaji spoke at length a number of times about her experiences over the years amassing music for her dance students, and the ways that music's appeal, recording quality, language or other factors would influence the decisions about staging performances.

The consideration of venues and audiences played a pivotal role in decisions about performance. The Triveni School of Dance stages two large-scale productions each year. The Annual Show is held each fall; it is a free (unticketed) event where all 230 students and community members are given the chance to perform on-stage in full costume and makeup. It is the highlight of each year's dance training for most students, especially those in the pre-*arangetram* stage, as it is a chance to perform on-stage in full makeup and costume to proud parents, family members, and other onlookers. The Annual Show is always dominated by more traditional choreographies and dance styles; the final item of the show is sometimes a fusion piece performed by Triveni's senior-most dancers, but it too is occasionally a classical item.

The Ensemble Show is a full-length production staged each spring by Triveni's Ensemble dancers, a group of approximately twenty of Neenaji's senior-most students and student-teachers. Students are admitted to the Ensemble by Neenaji's selection and invitation, and the Ensemble community works alongside Neenaji in making choreographic and performative decisions. The Ensemble show is usually a ticketed event, where the income from ticket sales and solicited donations goes toward a charitable cause selected jointly each year by Neenaji and the Ensemble group. The 2008 Ensemble Show benefitted the Liz Walker Foundation, an organization providing resources and support to women refugees in Sudan. The 2009 Ensemble Show benefitted Agape International, a foundation which provides healthcare and educational resources for children in India afflicted with AIDS. The Ensemble Shows differ from the Annual Shows in that they are ticketed events and therefore draw crowds willing and able to afford to attend, whereas the Annual Shows' audiences usually consist of family members and close friends of the performers. Ensemble Show audiences also may include the dancers' friends and family, but also, members of the Boston community interested in classical Indian dance, and supporters of the charitable causes that the programs benefit. Triveni dancers also perform at other venues; Neenaji is approached frequently by local schools, associations, and libraries and other public offices, with requests to send some of her dancers to perform at different community events.

These context differences in performance venue are of critical importance to Neenaji and the other teachers at Triveni, who carefully discuss how a performance staged at a local high school auditorium necessitates different performative choices than a performance staged at the Institute for Contemporary Arts, the Boston Public Library, the

Sri Lakshmi Temple, a local university or college, or at Boston's famous outdoor Hatch Shell amphitheater on the riverfront. Critical performance decisions often depended on dancers' awareness of (or even speculations about) the audiences that would attend performances at different venues, assumptions about their ethnic makeup and linguistic identities, level of knowledge about classical Indian dance or music, common interpretations of Indian history and myth, enjoyment of certain costuming techniques and set design, interest in certain humanitarian causes or benefits, and investment in innovative or fusion techniques in dance.

### **Performative “Big Times”: Stage Productions and the Construction of Identity**

The work of several anthropologists of performance provide useful guiding concepts in exploring the ways that performance serves as a practice at the Triveni School of Dance. Existing scholarship on the relationship of performance and lived experience analyzes the way in which the two contribute towards each other, and how their relationship is an aspect of ways that the Triveni community negotiates identity and meaning through embodied practice.

Victor Turner, scholar and author of seminal works on performance anthropology, writes about the intimate relationship of performance and experience. In Turner's view, performance is a self-reflexive commentary on experience, and contributes back to experience; he describes performance as “a cultural aesthetic ‘mirror’” in which society achieves a degree of self-reflexivity through reenactment of lived, social dramas, as

rehearsed, bounded dramas of theater or ritual.<sup>253</sup> Turner also posits that performance creates the cosmos, or reality, for communities; not a stable and repeated cycle of social dramas brought to the stage and back, but rather a spiral, constantly changing and responsive to inventions and productions. Society, Turner writes, stages dramas “to restabilize and actually *produce* cosmos.”<sup>254</sup>

Performance is often a marker for change in society; it can also be a catalyst for that change, both on the communal and individual level. Edward Bruner, citing the work of [first name] Dilthey on experience, discusses the notion of change in society and customs as a causal occurrence and contributing factor of cultural expressions and experiences:

...the anthropology of experience sees people as active agents in the historical process who construct their own world. Using Myerhoff’s phrase, we are ‘the authors of ourselves.’ Selves, social organizations, and cultures are not given but are problematic and always in production. Cultural change, cultural continuity, and cultural transmission all occur simultaneously in the experiences and expressions of social life. All are interpretive processes and indeed are the experiences in which the subject discovers himself (Dilthey 1976:203).... There are no raw encounters or naïve experiences since persons, including ethnographers, always enter society in the middle. At any given time there are prior texts and expressive conventions, and they are always in flux. We can only begin

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<sup>253</sup> Victor Turner, “Are There Universals of Performance in Myth, Ritual, and Drama?” in *By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual*, ed. Richard Schechner and Willa Appel (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990), 8.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-18.

with the last picture show, the last performance. Once the performance is completed, however, the most recent expression sinks into the past and becomes prior to the performance that follows. This is straight Dilthey. Life consists of retellings.<sup>255</sup>

The reality of the present, authoritative worlds and experiences of communities are constantly being generated and regenerated through performance, and performance again contributes towards communities' experiences. As Turner describes through his model of the spiral, performance and experience constitute a cycle constantly in movement, influenced by unpredictable changes in society's knowledge, values, opinions and practices with the passage of time. Each revolution of the cycle, while reflecting aspects of society's experience, produces new materials for reflection and reenactment in performance.

In observing and analyzing activities, rehearsals, and stage productions at the Triveni School of Dance, I had occasion to witness this creative interplay of performance and experience. What I came to realize, is that the active pursuit of opportunities to engage in this interplay *is in itself a practice*. That is, the acts of communal planning, rehearsing, and preparing for performances are a set of *praxes* that constitute the Triveni *habitus*, and can be examined to understand ways that the Triveni community members negotiate identity. Performance is indeed a "mirror" which reflects "lived social dramas," but in return provides the generative matrix for the construction and unfolding of new social experiences and notions of self. The deliberate and enthusiastic position of

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<sup>255</sup> Edward M. Bruner, "Experience and its Expressions", in *The Anthropology of Experience*, ed. Victor W. Turner and Edward M. Bruner (Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1986), 11-12.

teachers, students, performers, and supporting persons at Triveni to engage in regular encounters with the nexus of performance and experience is, itself, a dedicated practice of making meaning and articulating identity.

Another important guiding principle for studying identity and practice at Triveni comes from Roger Abrahams, who offers insights into the way that performance and experience are synthesized during individuals' practices of negotiating identity.

Abrahams writes about the "economy of experience," wherein stories and narratives that individuals distill from special experiences, in time, foster lessons or world views that have unique impact on perceptions of self, community, and identity – elements in an individual's "identity kit," borrowing a term from Erving Goffman.<sup>256</sup> These stories are exchanged with other members of the community who value the same type of stories and experience – a valuable currency of narratives, replete with identity cues, that imbue their tellers with a value and authority connected to esoteric knowledge.<sup>257</sup> He writes:

Stories about one's own experiences provide an important resource for not only establishing one's place in the community (because of one's special knowledge) but also for establishing one's identity, should that be an important feature of the culture. Such stories are commonly told to those who will respond in kind, or at least with some other kernel of information regarded as equally valuable.<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>256</sup> Roger D. Abrahams, "Ordinary and Extraordinary Experience," in *The Anthropology of Experience*, ed. Victor W. Turner and Edward M. Bruner, (Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1986), 56.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid.

In Abraham's view, the most valuable stories that individuals collect stem from unique situations or special circumstances that stand out from ordinary, mundane experiences in daily life. These moments are often merely unexpected incidents, good or bad; at times, they are formal in nature, framed and rehearsed as in the case of performance.<sup>259</sup> Abraham appropriately terms these significant occasions "Big Times," and notes the tendency in American cultures for individuals and communities to strive to extract the lessons from the "Big Times," into units of value applicable and relevant to ordinary contexts.<sup>260</sup> But perhaps interestingly, especially in the case of Indian classical dance and the practices and experiences surrounding performance, he notes that the highest value and premium is placed on events which contain an element of the unexpected. He writes:

... in spite of the differences of feeling and apprehension between everyday experiences and those arising from the Big Times of our lives, American culture wishes to optimize the ease of passage between the two states.... In our desire to optimize authenticating acts at the expense of authoritative ones, we seem to appreciate most those moments we can say afterward were big but which stole up on us and took us unawares. To encourage such moments, however, we must expend a good part of our energies secretly preparing for these breakthroughs, for these spontaneous times in which we are overcome by the fulfillment of the expectations we hardly could admit to having – like those 'first-time experiences' which when successful, are surprising because we hear about them and even talk

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<sup>259</sup> Abrahams, "Ordinary and Extraordinary Experience," 63.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid.

about them but they seem to sneak up on us anyhow. We are surprised only by the fulfillment of expectations.<sup>261</sup>

It is fair to say that with every Triveni production, the teachers and students spent countless hours meticulously preparing in rehearsal to meet their own rigorous expectations for a successful performance – through countless beads of sweat, an infinite number of raps of the *thaṭṭukkazhi*, a closetful of costumes starched and ironed, and dozens of stages swept and decorated with paper flowers. And indeed, the stories and narratives most often brought up in gatherings to argue a certain point, suggest a choreography, negotiate a costuming plan, or reminisce about a prior performance inevitably involved either the rousing success that the group had experienced in the past when a planned performance went off as well (or better) than planned – the lighting looked better than expected; the student who perpetually forgets her cue miraculously tuned in at the precise moment needed; the costumes dazzled the audience and matched to perfection. But memories of catastrophic failures to meet certain expectations of performance also resurfaced in conversations, as a cautionary tale casting a shadow over conversations about how to approach the next important show. Unfulfilled expectations in performance most often arose from technical problems (“the CD started skipping in the middle of the *tillānā!*”), students’ incomplete preparation (“Mala\* turned the wrong way in the *jati!*”), or other challenges (“Krupa forgot her yellow fan!”). Stories about “Big Times” fuel a culture of discussion and negotiation at Triveni, and provide members with

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<sup>261</sup> Abrahams, “Ordinary and Extraordinary Experience,” 63-64.



a wealth of symbols and value in their negotiation of decisions about how best to present themselves and their communal identity through performance.

### **The Building Blocks of Performative Identity: Music, Interpretation, and Inclusivity**

As dancers set out to learn, teach and create new choreographies at Triveni, several key factors act as building blocks in the early stage, providing context cues and direction to the entire process and its affect on the identity and self-perception of the dancers involved. Music is a pivotal aspect of performance, not merely for the way its rhythms and tones may inspire movement, but also in the way that music holds special significance for how dancers see themselves as members of the Triveni community and how they envision their role in transmitting dance or articulating certain principles or philosophies through dance.

#### ***I. Music***

On several occasions, Neenaji narrated a brief story about the way she came to amass a library of classical Indian dance music over her years of teaching. In her early years, she had limited resources for music suitable for students, and was forced to adapt the musical recordings from her own *arangetram* to the needs of students who were far below the skill level of *arangetram* performers. Quickly realizing the difficulties in this situation, Neenaji worked hard to locate new sources of music appropriate for students of all levels. In the following selection of transcribed field recordings, a senior student of Neenaji, Tara, was leading a class as Neenaji assisted with finding the appropriate music.

While searching for the proper cue in the music, Neenaji casually told the story again about her experience finding music and modifying her own *arangetram* recordings for teaching purposes. Upon hearing this narrative, Tara and other students were amazed at the symbolic link inherent in the music to which they perform, that connects them to their teacher:

Neenaji: This whole CD is from – you know, I had *no* slow music when I started to teach, because all the music I had was from my *arangetram* or things I'd performed with my *guru*! So then I'm hunting for CD's and tapes, and this was Vyjayantimala's, who was an actress, but also a dancer.<sup>262</sup> She had a very basic *alārippu*, *jatīsvaram*, *varṇam*, *śabdham*. So this was from her thing, and it worked out good! [rewinding, starting and stopping tape; finds the proper musical cue in the recording for the *alārippu*] There it is! It was right there! This is the “Maha Ganapati Stuthi.” Okay, ready? [speaks to a student in the class who has arrived late] Sorry Bhairavi\*, stretch, stretch. Stre-e-etch. [chuckles] I don't want you to get hurt!

Tara: [interjects in amazement] So Neenaji, we're dancing to music from your *arangetram*?!

Neenaji: Well, now you're doing – but yes, yes you are. A lot of them are.

Tara: [voiced filled with wonder] That's amazing! [laughter from class]

Neenaji: But [others] did their *arangetrams* to these too, here. All these, the “Ganapati Vandana” – Clara\*, you did the Kalāvati *tillānā* too, right? Yeah, you did! And the “Ganapati Vandana?” Yeah, all these. Yeah, they're all from my *arangetram*.

Tara: That's such a cool thought. It is! Wow!

Neenaji: Yeah, a long time ago.... I don't know what happened, I used to have some – [trails off; muffled rustling sounds as Neenaji looks for a photograph of her *arangetram* that used to be displayed in the studio, among dozens of photos of her students and other programs. She does not find it] They all disappeared. Oh well. [recalling] I think it fell down, and the glass broke, and I put it away.

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<sup>262</sup> Neenaji's mention of “Vyjayanthimala” is a reference to Vyjayanthimala Bali, a Tamil and Hindi film actress of the 1950's and 1960's. Also trained and accomplished Bharata Natyam performer, Vyjayanthimala established her own school of dance, and was awarded the title of Padmashri in 1968, and the Sangeet Natak Akademi award in 1982, for her contributions to the Bharata Natyam world. See “Vyjayanthimala” on Internet Movie Database, <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0904537> (accessed January 1, 2010).

Another time! [laughter] So. Yeah, long time ago. 1961! My *arangetram* was in 1961! How many years ago was that?

Tara: I wasn't even born yet!

Neenaji: Yeah, I know, that's what I'm saying! [laughter] Long time ago! [returning attention to class] Okay, back to *alārippu*. [cues music] Okay. Ready? One-two, three-four! Five-six, seven-eight! Eyes to the right-left! [dance class continues]<sup>263</sup>

In this example, Tara's astonished questions indicate the significance of Neenaji's story about the history of dance music used at Triveni. That the music used nearly every day at the Triveni studio for over three decades, linking students of different generations, all dating back to their own teacher's *arangetram*, is something that Tara found "amazing," and continued to think about, even as Neenaji herself continues rustling around the studio, looking for things and talking with the class. Tara's comments indicate her correlation of performance music with a sense of continuity and lineage, within Triveni's historical and communal identity. Neenaji has passed on the musical and choreographic knowledge from her own dance training and *arangetram* debut to her students, who now pass it on to their students as a continuous source of knowledge and practice.

On another occasion, Neenaji and her senior group of Ensemble dancers sat together in conversation about their upcoming professional production, in order to brainstorm about choreographing a new fusion item. Neenaji emphasized her wish to find a fresh and aesthetically-pleasing music selection with a contemporary feel, and requested that her students help her by using the iTunes online music store, a searchable

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<sup>263</sup> Neena Gulati et. al., personal communication in dance classroom, Boston, MA, April 3, 2008.

database of music.<sup>264</sup> Another senior student, Suniti, suggested that perhaps using a traditional, classical selection of music might be nice, but she was quickly shot down by Neenaji and the others, who felt that though the classical song was exquisite in its technical aspects, the audience (for this show, a “mixed” audience of South Asians and non-South Asians, with a relatively low level of understanding about classical Indian arts) would not appreciate its difficulty and aesthetics.<sup>265</sup> Neenaji also cited the sound quality, which is poor for the classical piece, as it was recorded decades earlier in her parents’ home, and not a professional recording studio. In her experience at contemporary performance contexts, audiences seemed to prefer professional, digital recordings like ones available from more modern resources such as iTunes. The various perspectives and insights during this conversation revealed the ways that the aesthetics of music, the use of new media such as iTunes, and speculations about the audience’s views contribute towards the group’s vision for self-presentation and choreography.

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<sup>264</sup> Here, Neenaji refers to the iTunes music store, an online multimedia facility operated by Apple Inc., where music, videos, and other forms of electronic media can be purchased for download. (See Apple iTunes, official home page <http://www.apple.com/itunes>). The Triveni Ensemble members often peruse iTunes for selections of New Age music inspired by Indian aesthetics for potential use in choreographies.

<sup>265</sup> In traditional scripture such as the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and certain contexts of dance pedagogy (both historical and present), the word *rasikā* is used to denote particular, “knowledgeable” audiences of dance (and music, drama, and other performance genres). While an “audience member,” in conversational English, merely describes an observer of performance, a *rasikā* is more of an educated connoisseur of art, who possesses a degree of mastery and fluency in the aesthetic theory, technical terminology, performative ideals, embodied execution, and authoritative frameworks of performative genre being presented on-stage. In dance, for instance, a *rasikā* would be able to appreciate that a dancer is not merely depicting a romantic story onstage, but is enacting the *bhāva* (emotion) of *śṛṅgāra* (beauty, eroticism and romance) through the use of particular *abhinaya* (facial expressions) and *hastas* (hand gestures). The *rasikā* would also notice the use of particular *rāgas* (melodic structures) in the music being played during the romantic scene, and would note the effective performance of both the dancers and musicians in conjuring the right *rasa* (aesthetic richness) of the scene through all these technical details. For further information about *rasa* and *rasikā*, consult Schwartz, *Rasa* (2004).

Neenaji: [mid-conversation about a fusion piece for the upcoming performance] . . . [we'll perform a piece using the] *thali* [brass plate used in Kuchipudi dance], possibly with fusion music. Or even that lady – I loved her – you know, Susheela Raman. She sang that, “Mamavathu Sri Sarasvati.” You know that?

Sunita: Oh yeah, that was nice.

Neenaji: [sings] “Mamavathu Sri Sarasvati.” She sang that. She has a beautiful voice. So, let's look at that. Can you all listen, look at iTunes whenever, and come up with some interesting music? And even if you're not sure, you can forward it to five or six of us, so we can listen and via email decide. So, okay. We're looking for some fusion music for that. Before that, maybe [track] number six, the “Battu,” with formations. And what else? [enthusiastically] We should select some *really* unusual invocation item to start with!

Sunita: Something we haven't done in a long time.

Oami: What about this one? [referring to a Murugan *śabdham*, a definitively classical Carnatic selection of music, which the group had just rehearsed minutes before the discussion about the program items began]

Sunita: [hesitant tone] I don't think people will appreciate that.

Neenaji: Oh, this *śabdham*? [hesitant] You know, this *śabdham* – classically, is an *excellent* piece! Technically, too. But you know, the music quality is just *average*. It was something that was recorded in my living room, forty years ago! [laughs; tone shifts to one of reminiscing] My brother just brought a few microphones, and *guru*-ji is doing the *mṛdangam* [percussion], his wife Padmaji and his daughter Rami are doing the vocals. So it was a very – it was not done like the Kuchipudi pieces [meaning, like the professional studio recordings that Neenaji has commissioned in India for Kuchipudi items]. Some Bharata Natyam pieces I have. And I'm going to be there in January, so I can try to get more. But that piece would be impossible to get, because it is my *guru*-ji's choreography.

Sunita: And, I just don't think that an audience is going to appreciate that.

Neenaji: [agreeing with Sunita] No. No.<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>266</sup> Triveni Ensemble members, personal communication in dance classroom, Boston, MA, November 5, 2008.

In the “Murugan *śabdham* conversation,” the debates and conversations about music selection are indicative of the community’s interests in self-presentation. Though Neenaji understands Oami’s interest in the Murugan *śabdham*, she and the other students articulate their opinion that the song would not fit their vision for a performance that fulfills certain criteria and predictions about the audience and their preferences for musical style, sound quality, and contemporary choreographic aesthetics over classical and traditional themes. It is knowledge of codification, “cultural mastery,” and the “virtue proper to the form” for students to be able to discern musical expectations or preferences appropriate to different performative settings.<sup>267</sup> Recalling Roger Abraham’s writings about performance, correct music selection is an effort towards having the performance event successfully realize certain preconceptions and predeterminations, resulting in a “Big Time” that will be remembered in a positive light.

## ***II. Interpretation***

In the spring of 2008, Neenaji and members of the Triveni Ensemble discussed in earnest the idea of choreographing the second half of the fall annual show as a dance-drama, or dance ballet centered on a single mythological narrative or theme.<sup>268</sup> It would not be the first time that Triveni had staged a dance-drama; such projects had taken place numerous times in decades past. However, Neenaji had chosen not to stage a dance-

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<sup>267</sup> Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 78.

<sup>268</sup> Kuchipudi is probably best known, among all styles of Indian classical dance, for lengthy and elaborate dance ballets that depict full-length narratives from Hindu mythology by a diverse cast of characters, and with elaborate costuming. Other genres of Indian classical dance, such as Bharata Natyam, Odissi, and Kathakali, also have traditions of dance-dramas, though more frequently their programs contain brief, finite items of choreography in recital style, rather than lengthy, cohesive ballets. The Triveni production of the *Mahabharata* story was choreographed primarily in Kuchipudi, though it also included a brief Bharata Natyam *tillānā* in one scene.

drama for the past fifteen years due to the logistical difficulties of doing so. Dance-dramas require a tremendous effort in coordination, casting, and diplomacy, unlike recitals with single, short, independent items presented on-stage by different groups of dancers. A regular recital without a dance-drama was easier to stage; students could attend their dance class once per week during their regularly scheduled class, interact with peers that they knew well, learn a finite dance item of five to ten minutes, then savor the experience of performing that item in total, wearing full classical costumes on-stage in front of their families and friends. Dance-dramas, however, were another animal altogether. Students would be cast in different roles, which would necessitate attending rehearsals at times outside of their normal schedules, and with peers that perhaps were strangers to them. Even the most prominent dancers in a dance-drama often got only one or two minutes of stage time, whereas in a typical recital, students would perform an item for at least five to ten minutes. Costumes were another issue; in a normal recital, students simply wore costumes appropriate to the style of dance that they would perform (Bharata Natyam, Kuchipudi, or Odissi). In a dance-drama, however, Neenaji and the students would have to coordinate and improvise how to use students' existing dance costumes and clothing to render them appropriate for the different roles in the production. Lastly, dance dramas involve a tremendous amount of politics and diplomacy. Often, a dancer would be upset by the role chosen for her, and feel that her skill and level of knowledge should afford her a more prominent role in the production; tears would be shed, angry mothers would call in, and prima donnas would pout. The casting process for dance-dramas certainly constitute a site of heated negotiation of social hierarchy and social capital, as experienced students, novice students, and everyone in between had to be

placed in roles appropriate for their skills and experience. For these reasons, Neenaji had not cared to stage a dance-drama for many years now, but her Ensemble students seemed to feel up to the task, and eagerly looked forward to the chance to choreograph movements and scenes appropriate to a story. Neenaji willingly consented to her enthusiastic students, but naturally was aware of the concerns that would inevitably follow.

The story chosen for the 2008 Annual Show dance-drama was the *Mahabharata*, the Indian epic narrative of five noble brothers called the Pandavas, and their battle against their cousins, the Kauravas. The Pandavas (five brothers, including Arjuna and Yudhistira) ally with the divine Lord Krishna to wage war against their cousins, the Kauravas (led by Duryodhana), with the interests of regaining their beautiful wife Draupadi, and their illustrious kingdom, Indraprastha, which were both lost to the Kauravas in a fraudulent game of dice instigated by their conniving uncle, Shakuni.<sup>269</sup>

Neenaji's last dance-drama had also been a rendering of the *Mahabharata*, staged fifteen years prior in 1993. Based on this experience, she had certain preconceptions of how best to interpret the story of the *Mahabharata*, based on prior experience with determining which scenes and chapters would be most compelling on-stage, and how certain scenes would be easily staged, using the recorded music and established choreographies that she had used previously. Among the group, it was understood that the principal roles of the *Mahabharata* story, such as Krishna, the Pandavas, Kauravas and Draupadi would go to Ensemble dancers. This understanding made casting the main

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<sup>269</sup> C. V. Narasimhan and R. K. Narayan both offer concise translations of the epic Mahabharata, for further study. Consult Chakravarthi. V. Narasimhan, trans., *The Mahabharata: An English Version Based on Selected Verses* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1965), and R. K. Narayan, trans., *The Mahabharata: A Shortened Modern Prose Version of the Indian Epic* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1978.)



roles somewhat stress-free, and while Neenaji had some ideas about certain roles simply as suggestions, she invited the students themselves to decide among themselves who would play which roles. Neenaji seemed much more concerned and preoccupied with the task of including the maximum number of her other students, and providing them as much stage time as she could, even if it meant including certain narratives or dance items that were only tangentially related to the central plot line of the *Mahabharata*. Her prior experience with the politics of dance-dramas and unhappy students seemed to weigh considerably on her decision-making process.

Some of the Ensemble dancers, who had not been at Triveni in 1993, also offered their insights into creative interpretations of the stories, and intrepidly questioned Neenaji on why certain narratives of the *Mahabharata* were being included, while others were excluded, or on the logic behind the order of stories that Neenaji seemed to take for granted. Other times, dancers also asked for clarifications or explanations of certain episodes or events in the Mahabharata story, indicating their unfamiliarity with the narrative or their lack of understanding about why certain characters or events were important enough to include in a brief production. Ensemble members also came up with creative suggestions for music and choreography to depict certain scenes, often not realizing that in the prior production, other selections of music and movement had been used. At times, Neenaji welcomed these suggestions and worked with them in the planning of this new production; at other times, she offered her opinions on why these suggestions in the end would be problematic. A few other Ensemble students in their mid-20's had actually studied at Triveni long enough to recall the 1993 production vividly, although many of them had been too young to participate personally in it at that

time, or had only minor roles. Nevertheless, these students offered opinions about how to improve the production or streamline it for maximum narrative efficiency, without drawing out the story simply to include more dancers. Few of them, however, questioned the selection or order of narrative sequences as decided by Neenaji.

The relative democracy that exists between Neenaji and her senior students is worth analyzing further. Whereas in other contexts of dance learning students and teachers often discuss, negotiate and contest ideas amongst themselves, often students' interactions with their teachers eventually must fall within the parameters of certain conventions of acquiescence and agreement with their *gurus*, as a measure of adherence to traditional rubrics of behavior that govern a *śiṣya*'s permitted interactions. At Triveni, however, while students still adhere to certain gestures and practices of respect and deference to Neenaji, when discussing performance a certain culture of egalitarianism and mutuality between senior students and teachers allows for more informal, honest and collaborative conversations and debates. Though, as *guru*, Neenaji's experience with the prior production was certainly taken into account and consulted by senior students participating in the performance planning, she certainly was not regarded as the absolute authority on staging the *Mahabharata* dance-drama. On the contrary, senior students' pointed questions and honest critiques about the narrative and choreographic choices from the past production helped Neenaji and the group in general see some of the incongruities, detractions and points of confusion from the past production. While in certain cases Neenaji maintained that certain choreographic decisions were necessary and justified, in other instances she received her students' concerns with a diplomatic perspective, either agreeing with their assessments or offering compromises.

The experience with dance-dramas, teaching, the *Mahabharata* narrative, Triveni's past performances and overall culture also provided identity cues during the planning session to create an authoritative hierarchy among the senior students. The students who were also teachers or who had participated in the past production often were vocal about their perspectives, and had past experience to draw upon as justification. Still, Neenaji welcomed and valued new ideas from students who were relative newcomers or who didn't teach, who she often anecdotally credited with having a fresh perspective and awareness of audiences' interests.

The following extended excerpt of transcribed observations provides insight into the way that each individual exercised creativity in performative interpretation of the *Mahabharata* for a dance-drama. The back and forth between Neenaji and her Ensemble students, both "new" and "old," about interpreting the *Mahabharata* offers unique opportunities for observing their negotiation of identity through the interpretation of traditional narratives and logistical social concerns of casting dancers. For ease of understanding individuals' backgrounds, the "new" Ensemble students, who were not present at Triveni in 1993 or did not participate in the first dance-drama, will be indicated in bold font, while the Triveni community members who were part of the 1993 production are presented in regular font:

**Suniti:** What's your total student count, approximately?

Neenaji: Well, you know, total count is 230. But for the *Mahabharat*, we would only include about 40.

**Suniti:** So it's not going to be the whole show?

Amy: Oh, *no*.

Neenaji: No, just the second half.

**Sunita:** The whole second half?

Neenaji: The whole second half.

**Suniti:** Why not make it the whole show?

Neenaji: Oh gosh . . .

Amy: That would be *way* too much. We should have started last year.

Suniti: [trying to suggest ways of including more dancers] But if you just had snippets? Know what I'm saying? They could do little dances . . .

Neenaji: [stopping Suniti to clarify] Well, we're already going to incorporate. Let me tell you what we have planned, in the *Mahabharat* segment. We started with the first scene, doing the *rās śabdām*. Krishna dancing with the *gopikās*. Okay? For that we already have [Amy's] Saturday and Sunday group. They're good, Dina\* and all.<sup>270</sup>

**Suniti:** And how long are you going to make that piece? A minute?

Neenaji: No, not a minute . . . [muffled discussion]

Amy: Four minutes, four minutes.

Neenaji: When we did it before, we included only the sections of *rās śabdām* that were pertaining to the story. Like the *rās līlā* [an event in the *Mahabharata* story, where Krishna dances with the milkmaids]? That section. So yes, four minutes.

Amy: I told them all one minute! [laughter]

**Sunita:** It's good to prepare them [for the fact that they won't be on stage long. Sunita is alluding here that some dancers may be upset at their short appearances on stage. Muffled background conversation ensues between Suniti and Sunita].

**Suniti:** How many girls are in that class?

Amy: Oh, I would say – twelve.

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<sup>270</sup> Names that are followed by an asterisk have been changed to protect the identities of students not present during the conversation, or not a part of the fieldwork population for this project.

Neenaji: And we don't have to use them all.

**Suniti:** Okay, so four minutes, for twelve. So we have twelve down!  
Thirty-six to go! [laughs; continued conversation]

**Suniti:** [asks a question about why the program is ordered this way at all]  
. . . can I ask why do we start with the *rās śabdām*?

Neenaji: Why? [surprised, then after a pause to think, explains] Just, to introduce. You know, after that, Krishna doesn't have much of a role till the very end, when he's called to give the Hitopadesh [portion of *Mahabharata* story, where Krishna reveals his cosmic form to Arjuna [a Pandava brother], and advises him on remaining steadfast to his warrior duties. This narrative constitutes the Hindu sacred scripture of the *Bhagavad Gita*]. You know, for Arjun.

Suniti: [giving an honest critique] Well, I don't think it makes sense to have the *rās śabdām* there, you know what I'm saying? It's kind of like, it didn't help the story.

Neenaji: Right. Well, it's more like an opening, ah, an opening...

Suniti: ... prelude?

Neenaji: Yes, prelude.

Suniti: Then we really should keep it shorter. Keep it shorter.

Neenaji: We can keep it shorter, yes.

Suniti: And none of those other dancers from that Krishna piece show up later, right?

Neenaji: No, that's it.

Suniti: Other than Krishna?

Neenaji: Other than Krishna, no. [tone shifts, indicating her wish to move to next topic] That's what we did before. Okay. So after the Ras Shabdām, it was introducing the Pandavs and the Kauravs. And here, we started with the Archery scene. Dronacharya, he's their teacher, and we used jatis from the *puṣpāñjali*. [reminds students of the song's rhythmic nature] *Ta-din-din Ta-din-din Tam! Ta-din-din Ta-din-din Tam!* You know, all those syllables? We incorporated them into teaching them how to do the "Surya Namaskar" ["sun salutation," a yoga sequence], and then

how they tighten the bow, and do the arrow scene. Things like that. So that is what our second scene would be. So we have, again, five Pandav brothers, and we have five Kauravs.

**Suniti:** And then one teacher.

Neenaji: And one teacher.

**Suniti:** So, eleven. Why don't we use that dance I hate, that has all that archery stuff?

Amy: Pada *varṇam*?

Neenaji: Oh! *Tam-ki-ta-tha-ka, dim-ki-ta-tha-ka, tam-ki-ta-tha-ka, dim-ki-ta-tha-ka!* [recites the *jati* syllables of that dance that correspond to archery movements, musing over Suniti's suggestion]

Amy: Then you can split it!

**Suniti:** Then, [the choreography is] already done! You don't have to do it again!

Amy: [hesitant, worried about her students' reactions to this idea] But I don't know if they'd appreciate doing that. Because they just performed [the Pada *varṇam*] last year. [Amy is aware that students prefer to show off "new" items each year on-stage to their friends and families]

Neenaji: [lost in thought, not responding to Amy's comment] Should we make Samuel\* our teacher? The *ācārya* [teacher]? Dronacharya?

**Sunita:** Oh, he'd be good.

**Suniti:** But you could use that whole section. You wouldn't have to do any chanting or anything.

Amy: [interrupting current conversation to provide the number of students discussed earlier] I have fifteen in that group, technically. Assuming they'd all perform.

Neenaji: Archery scene. So, for that –

**Suniti:** But you know, for the archery scene, you should have fewer of the Pandavs, right?

Neenaji: We'll have the teacher . . .

**Suniti:** Yeah, but you should have more of the Kauravs, because there should be a difference.

Neenaji: Difference? Oh, you mean have only three of the Pandavs?

**Suniti:** No, five, and seven –

Neenaji: Seven of the Kauravs?

**Suniti:** Yeah, and then the teacher. Something like that. Because it should represent that there are many more of them [the Kauravs]. [Suniti seems to be mindful here of including more dancers this way]

Neenaji: [catching on to Suniti’s logic] We can do that. We can do that. [someone sneezes loudly – everyone says, “Bless you!”]

Neenaji: So then we have to use people from our groups here, who would be.... There is Arjun – you know, the main parts. Yudhistir, who does the gambling. She [Amy] is going to be my Shakuni. [snickers]

Student: Is that one of the bad guys?

Amy: Yeah. [laughter]

Neenaji: And I was thinking, Oami and Saumia will be my two evil brothers, who are disrobing [Draupadi]! [laughter; Oami and Saumia are known in the group for embracing vibrant *nṛtta*, or rhythm-oriented sequences of dance; they also don’t shirk from roles requiring fierce and virile expressions and gestures. Neenaji continues her thought] – and I thought Priyanka would be good as Draupadi! [raucous laughter, as students imagine petite, soft-spoken and lyrical Priyanka being symbolically disrobed by the taller, more outspoken and *nṛtta*-driven dancers Oami and Saumia]

Amy: She’ll be good at that! We need to get the photographer all over that!

Neenaji: And then you guys decide, one be Krishna, one be Arjun, one be Yudhishtir, you know. Between you all. But you have to tell me your schedules.

**Sunita:** Yeah, I know.

Neenaji: And then Madhavi\* – anyway. So the Archery scene, and then third we go to the, ah, the Dice Game. No, no, third is Sita *svayamvar*. [“*Svayamvar*,” which literally translates to “self-choice,” is a ritual contest

in traditional Hindu myth wherein a young woman chooses her husband; it often describes a ritual contest wherein the winner would be granted the hand of the bride. In the epic *Ramayana*, Sita chooses Rama as her husband in a ritual contest. Here, Neenaji confuses the scene from the *Ramayana* with a similar scene in the *Mahabharata*, but quickly catches her error - ] No, not Sita *svayamvar*, [it's] Draupadi *svayamvar* [from the *Mahabharata*]. Where [Arjun] marries Draupadi. [Neenaji attempts to describe the *svayamvar* contest to her students briefly] Arjun shoots the arrow in the eye of the fish. So we have, not Sita *svayamvar*, but Draupadi *svayamvar*.

Oami: [Oami, afflicted with laryngitis this day, has remained silent throughout the conversation, but here interjects in a hoarse, surprised whisper to no one in particular; clearly, she has not understood Neenaji's explanation of the *svayamvar* as a ritual contest, and finds Neenaji's explanation of Arjun "shooting the eye of a fish" somewhat odd as a scene in the story] Uh, why does he shoot the eye of a fish?! [I hear myself snicker with Oami in the recording]

**Suniti:** [doesn't answer Oami; here continues Neenaji's train of thought on the Draupadi *svayamvar* scene] You should have a good dance for that. Neenaji: Yeah, so we have a celebration dance. So now we need to fix names, who is going to be Arjun, who is going to be Draupadi . . .

**Suniti:** But, let's figure out what dance we're going to do there.

Amy: Didn't you write all this down before?

Neenaji: I started to write, but we may change things. Because I remember putting her as Yudhistir, and now she may not to be here! And I hadn't put Shalu\* anywhere, because I thought Shalu was gone. But Shalu will be here! [excited to include this long-time Ensemble member, who at one time thought she would be moving away. Neenaji addresses Shalu directly] Maybe you may have to do one of the dances you already know, because you may not make a lot of the rehearsals. . . . [Shalu nods silently; a shy young woman, Shalu has not had much to contribute to the *Mahabharata* planning, and has deferred to the more opinionated members of the group thus far]

**Suniti:** [excitedly] Ooh, I have a great idea for the celebration dance. I have a great idea!

Neenaji: [picking up Suniti's excitement] Ooh, what is that?



**Suniti:** Can the Draupadi have a couple of handmaidens with her or something? [snickers the background; Suniti's goal of including more dancers is not subtle]

Neenaji: Yeah, of course. The *sakhīs* [female companions]!

**Suniti:** Let's do a piece like that "Yugma Dhvanda" thing [an Odissi piece] – where the men are doing the more Bharat Natyam part, and the Draupadis are doing the same music, but they'll be doing the Odissi part, because it's more delicate. They don't have to do the whole thing, but the motions could be the same, and connect where we mix the two –

Neenaji: But then we'll have to start teaching a group that dance!

**Suniti:** But if we're the ones doing it ...?

Neenaji: [doesn't follow Suniti's logic; asks her to repeat] Sorry?

**Suniti:** It's going to pretty much be our group, right?

Amy: But we can't do everything.

Neenaji: Yeah, but you can't do all parts. If your group is going to be Krishna and Arjun and Draupadi –

**Suniti:** Right, but that piece is done with Krishna and Arjun and Draupadi.

Neenaji: Yeah. But, one Draupadi, so only one person.

**Suniti:** Yeah, and a couple of handmaidens. So a couple of Odissi people.

Amy: So you're teaching the others, like the Tuesday group, right?

Neenaji: Yeah. They have to start learning. I have to start teaching them.

**Suniti:** And it only has to be three to four minutes. That's all.

Neenaji: Right.

**Suniti:** Isn't that celebration dance done with only the five Pandavs and Draupadi? Or no?

Amy: [shakes head] No, no, no.

Neenaji: [correcting Suniti] No. This is a court scene. And there is Draupadi and her brother sitting . . .

**Suniti.** Oh. Then you don't have to do that. I was thinking of a dance where you could have male and female . . .

Neenaji: *That*, we could do at the very end, as a finale. After they win the war, a celebration. Then, you all will be there, on stage.

**Suniti:** Okay, okay. So what do we need to incorporate more of, right now? [clearly stating her intention now, which is to include more students as per Neenaji's concern] Do you need some Odissi people in now?

Neenaji: No, Draupadi, celebration – we could even pick some of the kids who are doing a *tillānā*, or a *tarāṇā*. Good dancers.

**Suniti:** But you only have four minutes though. Just remember.

Neenaji: Yeah, just four minutes. It has to be. Four minutes of the *Rāsābdam*, four minutes of each scene. Each scene has to be four minutes. But in between we'll have narrations. We *could* have a *sūtradhāra*, you know? A narrator, who tells the story. That would be an interesting touch.

Amy: [to Suniti] We'll have you do that too! [giggles]

Neenaji: [to Suniti] You want to be the *sūtradhāra*? The narrator of the whole thing?

**Suniti:** I can narrate, sure. But – I don't dance, then . . .?

Neenaji: No, you'll dance it out! [laughter] The *sūtradhāra* dances it out! [takes on voice of narrator] “Do you know what happened? Aaah, this and this! And then, that wicked uncle . . .!” [gesturing with *mudras* as she talks] So you'll have to dance out all the time. So whatever you write, you have to memorize – [students burst into laughter] – and then act it out. So we'll make you the *sūtradhāra*!

**Sunita:** That would be good!

Amy: Yeah. And she's writing it anyway! [laughter, as the group realizes Suniti has now unknowingly agreed to write the script as well] Glad you volunteered! [laughing]

**Suniti:** [laughing in realization] You know how sometimes everyone steps back, and one person remains in front? [laughter]

Neenaji: So we'll make Suniti our *sūtradhāra*. Right? Okay. Next, after the wedding scene, then is the Dice Game. The Dice Game. [smiles]

knowingly at Amy and nods; Amy has already been cast as Shakuni, the instigator of the fated Dice Game, prior to this meeting]

Amy: [jokes] I need to go gamble . . . [laughter; continued conversation]

Neenaji: So now we have to select – after the Dice Game, in that one, you know, it went way too long. [undecipherable sentence about previous production] You know, they get sent off to the forest when they lose everything. And they go to this poisonous pond, and they all fall. You know, Madhavi\* fell, and then Ruchi\* fell . . . [giggles]. Anyway . . .

**Suniti:** How about we just say, “They get banished to the forest”?

Neenaji: Just say “Forest Scene.” We should do a scene in the forest. That was good! Even though it’s [actually] in the *Ramayana* – the Deer – we were able to do a fun dance, with all the animals.

**Suniti:** You know that [dance] with all the elements? We could do that as our forest dance.

Amy: “Shakti Tandav.” [characterize what this is]

Neenaji: Well, only the Earth part.

**Suniti:** Yes. But that’s three minutes, or four minutes, right? That’s perfect!

Neenaji: [musing; reciting the *jati* syllables of the “Shakti Tandav” as per Suniti’s suggestion, as she gestures animals to envision how the choreography would work in context] *Di-taam, di-taam, di-taam, di-taam* . . . [returns to conversation] What all is happening in the forest. Then, we have to tie it around to how they come back to fight, to get their kingdom back.

**Suniti:** So doesn’t Krishna come and see them in the forest.

Neenaji: Yes, well, the next thing is when Krishna is lying down. And Arjun [a Pandava brother] comes and sits by his feet, and Duryodhan [a Kaurava cousin] comes and sits by his head. And he wakes up, and they both want him. And of course, Duryodhan wants a big army. And Arjun says – no, not Arjun. It’s Yudhistir [another Pandava]. Yudhistir says “no, we just need you as our charioteer.” So. And that’s with Krishna. And Eighth is the battle, and Ninth is the celebration. Victory. Victory Dance.

Amy: Victory!

**Sunita:** You skipped Six. That's Six.

Neenaji: Oh, Six. So Eight is the War –

**Sunita:** No, Seven.

Neenaji: Oh, Seven. Sorry. Okay, so Eight is the celebration. Okay! So, I'll put these together, you watch [your email accounts], and then we will see.

Amy: Don't lose the paper! [everyone laughs]<sup>271</sup>

In this portion of the planning conversation in preparation for the *Mahabharata* dance-drama, the various perspectives and opinions indicate a great deal about their sense of identity as a community of dancers, and the implications of interpretation of a narrative on their sense of identity, both individually and collectively. At the outset, Sunita emerges as one of the more vocal, honest and provocative voices in the crowd, often questioning Neenaji and the other students forthrightly about the justification for certain choreographic decisions. A skilled oncology surgeon by profession and a slightly older member of the Ensemble community at 40-something years of age, Sunita was not involved in the 1993 production, but she had been a long-time member of the Triveni community and had intimate familiarity with Triveni productions – the moments of success and aesthetic cohesiveness in production, and often the shortcomings in plot continuity, choreography, or casting. In dance settings, interpersonal communications at work, with her family at home, and in other community contexts, I found that Sunita's communication was usually direct and articulate; this tendency seemed to render her conversations with Neenaji more casual and open than other students' interactions with

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<sup>271</sup> Triveni Ensemble members, personal communication in dance classroom, Boston, MA, May 7, 2008. Similar discussions took place on May 28, 2008 and June 4, 2008.

Neenaji, particularly concerning choreographic decisions that perhaps were not successful in past performances. On this day also, Suniti did not hesitate to inquire about the logic and reasoning for certain decisions in the performance's sequence. While she certainly made it her mission to include as many dancers as possible, Suniti appeared to be principally concerned about the storyline of the *Mahabharata*, intending to clarify the plot as much as possible, and highlight the chief characters and main trajectory of the story. Though she was respectful and sincere in her interactions, Suniti's questions were also honest enough to give Neenaji pause at several moments, as in the case of justifying the use of *rās śabdām* as the opening item of the dance-drama, when in fact Krishna's *rās līlā* was not as central to the plot as other scenes. In other instances, however, Suniti's contributions give Neenaji new and exciting ideas, such as her suggestion to use certain segments of choreography for the archery scene, or the use of Odissi choreographies for the female characters in the story. Of note is the fact that Suniti's honest and open nature also rendered her amenable to many suggestions she otherwise may not have considered; when Neenaji suggests that Suniti serve as the *sūtradhāra* of the story, Suniti is apparently surprised by the suggestion, but humorously agrees to the role, finding it an interesting new challenge. Suniti's frank comments in the dance studio and with Neenaji rarely felt sharp, harshly critical, or out-of-place, though perhaps few other students would have been personally inclined to be as open with their ideas, simply due to age or experience. Suniti's participation in the dance-drama conversation reveal her identity in the Triveni Ensemble group as an experienced, candid, and diplomatic collaborator, whose goals were to improve production values, clarify the narratives of the plot, and

include the maximum number of students possible without muddying the aesthetics of the show.

Amy, another vocal member of the Ensemble, often provided insights about the dance-drama from the perspective of the new demands it would create in her teaching. This particular year, Amy juggled a heavy teaching load at Triveni, with near sole responsibility for over 60 students. She knew the personalities, preferences, and challenges of coordinating dance classes for rehearsals and costuming all too well, and also diplomatically negotiated the requests, questions and barrage of commentary that some of her students' parents would often articulate about their children's' roles in performances. Thus, she was clear in her disagreements with Suniti or others when suggestions would have made matters difficult for her students or her job as their teacher, as in the case when Suniti suggested making the dance-drama a full-length show, rather than just the second half of the annual show. She also was honest in saying that though the Pada *varnam* might musically be a good choice for the Archery scene, her students would probably be upset to perform the same item twice in two years, as they enjoy performing new items each year for their friends and family to see. Amy's participation in this planning session principally stemmed from her desire to keep the scheduling for her students simple, and to ensure that they would not be too disappointed by choreographic choices or their minor roles in the production. Amy's role as teacher and administrator of the dance school appeared to be the principal aspect of her complex identity that emerged from the planning session.

Overall, Neenaji and the other Ensemble students also demonstrated keen awareness about the ways that casting and choreographic assignments would subtly speak

about experience, background, and skill. They were attentive to the need to be democratic in providing “stage-time” to all dancers involved, and worked together in interpreting the chosen frame narrative of *Mahabharata*, which contains a number of different stories, into aesthetically pleasing and choreographically achievable scenes that an audience would enjoy. The complicated intersections of the Ensemble dancers’ opinions here speak to the ways that interpretive decisions in performance are a way of negotiating and articulating a sense of communal identity, and communal views on performance. While the group’s overall perspective seemed to be that the performance should be an aesthetically pleasing, concise, and enjoyable rendering of the *Mahabharata* narratives for an audience, perhaps more importantly, the performance should be a collaborative experience for Triveni students, giving them a chance to work together in embodied ways towards the narration of a story.

### ***III. Inclusive Frameworks in Fusion Choreography***

Triveni’s Ensemble group often articulates a strong impetus to choreograph dance items centered around socially inclusive themes. Often, this impetus stems from the performance contexts in which the dancers stage various productions. The Ensemble Show every year, with its focus on benefitting charitable foundations, often provides a natural environment for fusion pieces – items choreographed entirely in classical modes of movement, but set to contemporary South Asian, Western, New Age, or other cultural forms of music and sound. One of Triveni’s fusion pieces, titled “Enigma,” was set to a music selection by the same name, performed by Scandinavian New Age artist Enya. The piece entails both Kuchipudi and Odissi movements, performed by approximately six

dancers, and is a staple of the Triveni repertoire. Other fusion pieces at Triveni include “Poetry,” a sub-genre of items where a dancer performs classical Indian *mudras* (hand gestures) and *abhinaya* (facial expressions), as a poem is read aloud into a microphone onstage. Aside from the wide selections of sound accompaniment to fusion choreography, the religious or literary themes of fusion items are also often usually diverse in nature. Neenaji’s fusion choreographies for poetry have at times used Biblical verses and Psalms, or the rhythms of African or Japanese drums; in musical items, fusion choreographies often include a tribute to the narratives, mythologies and divinities from Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and other faiths, whether or not the music makes reference to religion at all. Fusion items often comprise a significant portion of the Ensemble group’s spring productions that are staged in support of charitable organizations, as the foundations being featured are generally international and multicultural in nature. Thus, dancers used the Ensemble Show as an opportunity to spend their energies during the year choreographing pieces with cross-cultural, interfaith, or humanitarian messages and aesthetics.

Fusion endeavors at Triveni during my fieldwork period included the choreography of a piece called “Connected,” which was set to a Gospel hymn, titled “We Are All Connected,” and wove a narrative through Indian classical dance movement about women reaching out to each other in support across cultures (*Divine Rhythms*, by the Triveni Ensemble, directed by Suniti Nimbkar and Monica Trivedi, Massachusetts College of Art Theater, April 13, 2008).<sup>272</sup> Another example, a brief dance item included in the *arangetram* of a Catholic dancer, fused dance movements with live, verbal

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<sup>272</sup> Andrea Whaley and the Berklee College of Music Gospel Choir, “We Are All Connected” From *We Are All Connected: Berklee College of Music Reaches Out to the Women of Darfur*, Berklee College of Music, 2006.



recitation of several Psalms from the Bible.<sup>273</sup> The finale of the Ensemble Show in 2009 was a piece entitled “Talamalika,” in which dancers performed intricate footwork from the three styles of Bharata Natyam, Kuchipudi, and Odissi, to the beats of West African drumming provided by the Cape Cod African Dance and Drum Company (*Talamalika*, by the Triveni Ensemble, directed by Manjula Nair, Hellenic College Theater, April 6, 2009).<sup>274</sup>

A fusion choreography that most stands out in my recollection is called “Divine Rhythms,” and was staged as the grand finale to the 2008 Ensemble production (*Divine Rhythms*, by the Triveni Ensemble, directed by Suniti Nimbkar and Monica Trivedi, Massachusetts College of Art Theater, April 13, 2008).<sup>275</sup> In this item, dancers interpreted a line of Sanskrit lyrics to celebrate not only Hindu sacred figures and narratives, but also Christian and Islamic canonical stories. The song features a repeated refrain, with the lyrics: “Bhumi Mangalam, Udaka Mangalam, Agni Mangalam, Vayu Mangalam, Gagana Mangalam, Jagata Mangalam, Surya Mangalam, Chandra Mangalam.”<sup>276</sup> The lyrics celebrate the auspiciousness of the earth, water, fire, wind, sky, universe, sun and moon, respectively, and dancers interpreted the line through movement in three ways, to represent the three traditions of Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity.<sup>277</sup> From the Hindu perspective, dancers demonstrated traditional classical Indian dance *mudras* (hand gestures) and embodied poses which represent the incarnations or anthropomorphic representations of these elements and celestial bodies – Bhumi Devi, or

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<sup>273</sup> Observations at *arangetram* of Krupa and Anjana, September 17, 2008.

<sup>274</sup> Cape Cod African Dance and Drum Company, official home page, <http://capecodafricandanceanddrum.com> (accessed April 3, 2001).

<sup>276</sup> Prem Joshua, “Mangalam,” *Dance of Shakti*, White Swan, 2001.

<sup>277</sup> Prem Joshua, “Mangalam,” *Dance of Shakti*, White Swan, 2001, and Triveni ensemble, personal communication in dance classroom, Boston, MA, April 2, 2008.

the earth goddess; the goddess Ganga; Agni, the fire god, and so on. From the Muslim perspective, dancers presented movements to honor the elements in their earthly manifestations – therefore, movements resembling wind, fire, the sun and moon. From the Christian tradition, dancers depicted the line by creating embodied vignettes, each telling a story from the Bible. To interpret “earth,” the dancers created a scene of Eve kneeling on the earth, and receiving the Forbidden Fruit from the Serpent; dancers depicted a phoenix rising into the sky from ashes to signify “fire,” and so on.<sup>278</sup>

Opportunities for choreographing and innovating dance items to suit inclusive themes appears to be a defining characteristic of the Triveni School. Though often not necessitated through specific religious contexts of performance or descriptive song lyrics, the Ensemble often chooses to include multicultural and interfaith elements in their fusion choreographies as an embodied experimentation in movement and inclusivity. This tendency is striking, considering that religion is not often the topic of open conversation or discourse in class, either at the individual or communal level. Ensemble members rarely converse about their own religious lives or beliefs. Once or twice, I observed Catholic students excusing themselves from class early on festival days like Easter to attend Mass, and occasionally Hindu and Muslim students (particularly when discussing their weddings) would talk about their customs and rituals. Yet, religion – and specifically, the inclusion of elements from different religions – was privileged in the dance studio through embodied communication, as an essential aspect of fusion choreography. While the prevalence of religious themes often might have served simply as an opportunity for creative collaboration and innovation in dance, it is striking that

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<sup>278</sup> Triveni ensemble, personal communication in dance classroom, Boston, MA, April 2, 2008.

these items were held in high regard for the reason that they delighted and engaged audiences of all backgrounds, often providing dancers with a sense of positive feedback, rousing applause and praise given, over and above any expectations, in response to the aesthetic and thematic inclusivity of fusion choreographies. The performance of fusion items with multicultural and interfaith themes often resulted in many of the “Big Times” at Triveni, celebrated as the most successful productions in the group’s memory, and affording them the reputation and identity in the community as inclusive.

### **Cultivating Performers, Cultivating Identity: *Arangetrams* at Triveni**

The Triveni School of Dance places a high value on developing skill as a stage performer, and students even at a young age are given opportunities to gain experience performing publicly. Notably, the completion of the *arangetram*, or solo debut performance, is a pivotal part of the culture of dance pedagogy at Triveni, perhaps more so than at the other field sites included in this study. Certainly, not all Triveni students progress in their dance education to the point of completing an *arangetram*. Some students face financial, logistical, familial, or other challenges that make an *arangetram* difficult or impossible to attain. Other students simply do not have the interest in dance to make worthwhile the commitments of time, effort, finances and family participation that an *arangetram* demands. However, for a large percentage of Triveni students, the *arangetram* is a rite of passage that is eagerly anticipated and met, when the time is right. And perhaps uncommonly, as compared to other schools, a large number of students (perhaps over 60%) continue studying dance and performing at Triveni long after their

*arangetram* is completed. The *arangetram*, it can be argued, is a central aspect of Triveni's culture of dance education.

Reminders of the *arangetram*'s centrality are pervasive at Triveni, both in discursive and non-discursive ways. In informal social conversations and program planning meetings at Triveni, the school's roster of dancers is often communally conceived of as divided into two halves: those members who have completed an *arangetram*, and those who have not. The completion of an *arangetram* is a requirement for participation in the Triveni Ensemble, and in many other performances and productions that are deemed "advanced" or "staged by senior students." Of course, the non-discursive but constant reminder of the *arangetram*'s importance is conveyed by the hundreds of color photographs that cover all four walls of the dance studio. Only *arangetram* students are displayed in these photographs; during dance classes, hundreds of eyes gaze out from these photos onto the students at the center of the room, reviewing their basic steps and practicing their items for the next performance. This visual reminder is a permanent, sensory feature of dance classes that literally permeates dance students' experience from every angle of the room. The centrality of the *arangetram* to the *habitus* of Triveni's dance pedagogy is an important factor in the ways that dance and performance are connected to the construction of communal identity and meaning.

### ***I. Arangetram Pedagogy: Mastery, Aesthetic Appeal, and Internalized Character***

The pedagogy of dance class for students preparing for *arangetrams* is a unique opportunity to explore teaching techniques geared towards performance. During *arangetram* rehearsals, Neenaji and the other teachers (consciously or unconsciously)

employ techniques of teaching and storytelling, designed to help students envision themselves on stage, performing with an energy and expression driven by a clear understanding of the narratives and mythological characters depicted in the music. In the following excerpt of transcript, Neenaji was leading a rehearsal for seventeen-year-olds Krupa\* and Anjana\*, the two girls whose backstage conundrum opened this chapter. In this rehearsal, Neenaji encouraged the girls to run through the item “Satyabhama,” which they would be performing during their *arangetram*, using the long braids and other details of costuming such as ankle-bells that would be a part of their stage performance.<sup>279</sup> Neenaji invited the girls to connect the choreography of “Satyabhama,” which they knew well enough, with both the physical realities of using the prosthetic braids on their hair as props to emphasize performance, and also with the internal dialogue of the character Satyabhama as she delivers her proud narratives about her courtship and marriage with Lord Krishna. Harini, a slightly older dance student who had already completed her *arangetram*, rehearsed alongside Krupa and Anjana for moral support, as did a few other teenage dancers.

Neenaji: You do this only then? [commenting on Krupa’s wispy ponytail, and wondering why she is not practicing with a long braid extension pinned to her hair, as she will be wearing on her *arangetram* day]

Harini\*: Yeah. I sometimes do this just to remind her she has to get her braid, just for fun! [pulling playfully on Krupa’s ponytail, and giggling]

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<sup>279</sup> Neena Gulati et. al., personal communication in dance classroom, Boston, MA, March 23, 2008. Here, “Satyabhama” (in quotation marks) refers to the choreographed dance item that the girls would be performing in their *arangetram*. The word Satyabhama, written without quotation marks, refers to the character by the same name, wife of Lord Krishna and speaker in the song lyrics to which the girls dance. This item is often referred to as “Bhama Kalapam” by other schools of Kuchipudi dance; at Triveni, however, it is referred to as “Satyabhama.” I would like to thank Harshita Mruthinti Kamath for her assistance in transliterating the lines of “Satyabhama” provided in this excerpt of transcribed audio recording.

Neenaji: Yes, Krupa, seriously! Next time on, practice with this long. It looks very pretty. [demonstrates the lilting walk of Satyabhama] *Ta di mi, ta-ta di mi. Ta di mi, ta-ta di mi.* She's supposed to have like a peacock walk. *Ta di mi, ta-ta di mi.* Both of you! I can even tie – [grabs a *dupatta* or long sash, to tie to Krupa's ponytail as a makeshift "braid"]

Krupa: [surprised at Neenaji's tying of a *dupatta* to her ponytail] – to my head?!

Neenaji: [responding to giggles from students] Yes! We can pretend! We can pretend! [Neenaji giggles, and approaches Anjana\*, readying another *dupatta* for her head] Let's go, come on, you do it too!

Anjana: [hurriedly interrupting Neenaji from using a *dupatta*, by pulling out a false hair attachment out of a plastic bag to use instead] I have it, it's right here!

Krupa: I'll bring one tomorrow.

Neenaji: Because you need to hold it. You hold it – no, we want it longer than that – so then you hold it, and you step out. *Ta di mi, ta-ta di mi.* [demonstrates the entry walk onto the stage] I think it's more interesting when you're holding your hair like this. You want to try it? Shall we do yours next time? You'll have it like this, right? *Ta di mi, ta-ta di mi. Ta di mi, ta-ta di mi.* Okay? Eventually, it should come to here [shows her the appropriate stopping point on the floor, marked with a masking tape X].

[muffled sounds as students attach *dupattas* to each others' ponytails, brief conversation about whether students have music for home practice]

Anjana: Is the braid in your right hand? I always look on my right.

Neenaji: No, when you start, start with the left. But then, it's fine. Because in between, it'll come here when you do the *dhigi dhigi dhigi, dhigi dhigi dhigi dhigi.* [corrects Anjana's posture] No, just keep it there. That's too much. Here [demonstrates where the arm should show the braid], and then here. You don't want to overdo it. But you need to hold it, because you need to know how to use it. [cues music]

[music starts; Neenaji mostly refrains from commenting, only occasionally shouting "Eyes!" over the music, to remind students to use their facial expressions, or, "You can drop it there," instructing girls to drop the *dupatta* "false braid," at certain moments]

Neenaji: [instructing students in depiction of the line “*Vaiyaari muddula*,” exclaiming coyly as Satyabhama] “I’m so delicate!” – [explains in her own voice] “*muddu*,” you have to show the “*muddu*.” [demonstrates upper body movements and expressions, while sitting in a chair; in Satyabhama’s voice again] “I’m so delicate!” [coy expressions, flutters of eyelashes] [students continue dancing to the line *Bhamane padiyaaru vela komalu landari lona*]

Neenaji: [suddenly stops the audio cassette] No, Krupa!

Krupa: [flustered; she has been caught making an error and realizes it quickly] Sorry!

Neenaji: [gently] No. We have to correct this. It’s just that you’re going right, left, down, and right. [singing and demonstrating movements] *Ramaru gopalamurtiki premadaana naina* – [translating] “I’m his beloved wife.” [singing and demonstrating movements] *Gopaladevuni baasi . . .* – [translating] “I can’t be separated from him! I can’t bear it!” [returning to conversation] Okay? So try that.

Anjana: [overwhelmed by information, and seemingly irritated with the *dupatta* dangling from her head, Anjana stops dancing abruptly to plead] Neena Aunty, may I please take this out? [students snicker somewhat unsympathetically, unable to contain their hilarity at Anjana’s frustration]

Neenaji: [sympathetic, but didactic tone] Yes, you can. But you have to get used to something hanging from your head! Your braid is going to be that long on the real day.

Harini: And heavier than that.

Neenaji: [clucking maternally, beckons to Anjana] Here, let me take it off. [addressing Harini] Well, we don’t have to make it too heavy. We can just put a little gold ribbon or something, because if it’s too heavy, then, you know, it’ll fall off. [turns to Anjana, ensuring her head now feels less strained] Okay? So – [singing line of lyrics and demonstrating movements] *Ramaru gopalamurtiki* – move your body right, and back, and left. From the waist. Ready? [interrupts student as she is attempting the movement] But, what’s happening is, your hands are going with it. The hands should stay right here. You’re turning your body, so the hands are going here. [Instead], keep your hands still.

[continues singing] *Ramaru gopalamurtiki premadaana naina*. [in her own voice] Address the audience! [says with a proud, sassy tone as Satyabhama] “I’m his beloved wife, do you know that?!” [singing] *Gopaladevuni baasi* – [in a melodramatic female voice, mimicking Satyabhama’s theatrics] “Oh, I can’t bear it! I just can’t!” [explaining in her own voice] That’s in this part. So this way, and that, then you go to the front. [mimicking again] “I can’t bear it!” [Neenaji rolls her eyes, returns to her own voice, and pokes fun at the diva Satyabhama’s exaggerated nature] Hmph, faker. Such a faker! [class bursts in laughter] She’s so artificial! Geez!

[music starts again, students’ laughter is drowned out and still chuckling, they scramble to find their place in the choreography. They continue dancing as Neenaji sings along with the lyrics, providing instructions]<sup>280</sup>

Krupa and Anjana’s rehearsal of “Satyabhama” highlights a number of pedagogic techniques used to cultivate dancers’ mental and physical skills for public performance. Firstly, it highlights the reality that rote mastery of an item in simple, studio practice sessions is not enough to prepare for the experience of dancing on stage. A dancer must be able to synthesize her comprehensive preparation of a choreographed item with the use of props and special costuming, to add an extra element of aesthetic flair to the item and enhance the narratives within it. Additionally, a dancer must have an understanding of the narratives and characters in the music, and be able to understand both the song’s lyrics, and the inner dialogue and sentiments of the character to most effectively provide the character’s ambience and attitudes to an audience. Neenaji’s multi-pronged approach to guiding Krupa and Anjana’s rehearsal also revealed the challenges that these two young women, both capable and well-rehearsed dancers, must face in preparation for the “real day” of their *arangetram* – and the often frustrating process of coordinating multiple skills and capabilities into a performative identity.

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<sup>280</sup> Neena Gulati et. al., personal communication in dance classroom, Boston, MA, March 23, 2008.



## *II. The Economy of Performance: Arangetrams, Financial Matters, and Symbolic Gain*

*Arangetrams* are important markers of a dancer's performative skill at Triveni, and are conducted with careful planning to emphasize their special nature as an opportunity for demonstrating the aggregate knowledge a dancer has accumulated in years of study, and the personal artistic skill that a dancer has cultivated within herself in the interpretation of this knowledge through the body. The *arangetram* is truly a rite of passage at Triveni; a declaration by the community that one of its members has achieved a certain level of achievement and virtuosity in the performance genres she has learned.<sup>281</sup>

However, the Triveni community also recognizes that at times, *arangetrams* can become decadent and grandiose, when emphasis is placed not on the dancer's experience of performance, but on the details of decoration, costuming, and putting on a lavish show for friends and family. With *arangetrams*, as with other aspects of performance, there is again a sense of codification, "a virtue proper to the form" – a common understanding in the Triveni community about propriety in conducting an *arangetram*.<sup>282</sup> Neenaji and other teachers often bemoan about the fact that some families favor ostentatious displays at their *arangetrams*, seemingly more fixated on renting the most lavish auditoriums, hiring fancy musicians and purchasing expensive costumes for their children, rather than focusing on their children's dance skill, and encouraging them to practice and perform well. Triveni's senior students group also frown upon dance teachers at other schools,

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<sup>281</sup> Susan Schwartz offers a compelling chapter about the *arangetram*, or solo debut of a classical Indian dancer, as a cultural rite of passage. See Schwartz, "She Stands Before Us to Bear Witness: The *Arangetram* and The *Bat Mitzvah*," in *Rasa: Performing the Divine in India*.

<sup>282</sup> Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 78.

who appear to pander to their students (and their parents) in the name of increasing their own pocketbooks; such teachers, in the community's estimation, willingly sacrifice the quality of dance pedagogy and shunt meaning and importance away from the dance form itself, and towards tangential details such as costumes and glitzy stage décor, in order to charge students more fees for *arangetram* costume and décor rentals, orchestra fees, and rehearsal fees.

In the following excerpt of conversation, Sunita, a doctor by profession and member of the Triveni Ensemble, had recently returned from a weekend trip, where she presided as the emcee at the *arangetram* of her cousin (student of another teacher) in New Jersey. Sunita was in utter disbelief about the manner in which the program had been conducted, and described to the other Ensemble members the exorbitant fees charged by the dance teacher, the musicians, and other service providers, as well as the behaviors and demands that she witnessed backstage that she perceived as extravagant and unprofessional. The Ensemble community responded with shock and disgust at Sunita's experience.

Sunita: . . . [my cousins' parents] were paying a ton of money for their musicians, and after every piece [the musicians would] get up and they'd want their *chai* [tea] in the back, and they'd have their snacks . . .

Amy: You're kidding! [in disbelief]

Sunita: *Every piece!* So I would announce something, and then I'd be like, "Oh, there's nobody there!" Then I'd [say] "Okay, well!" [shrugs]

Amy: Oh my god!

Sunita: Every piece. I'd be like "Where did everybody go?!" Then I'd step back, and see them drinking tea!

Neenaji: Where did these people come from?!

Sunita: They're all New York professionals ... [more exclamations in background of "how unbelievable!" and "that's crazy!"]

Sunita: I mean, it was unbelievable. And they were charging them a fortune. There was all this – the stage stuff was beautiful, because it was all professional. But it was a little over-the-top, I thought, for just a basic *arangetram*. But I couldn't believe it. The teacher was in the back, putting her makeup on – her *own* makeup on! And I was like, "I just announced you!"

Amy: Oh my god!

Sunita: It was just unbelievable.

Amy: Wait, how long did the whole thing end up taking?

Sunita: It was three and a half hours long [as compared with Triveni's *arangetrams*, which rarely exceed two hours in length].

Amy: Oh my god!

Neenaji: Three and a half hours?! What were they doing?!

Sunita: And there were *seven* costume changes!

Arthi: Oh my god! [collective laughter at my uncharacteristic outburst]

Sunita: She would change in between every dance!

Neenaji: Well, maybe that's why they started having tea and snacks, because they knew she was going to change! [everyone snickers harder]

Sunita: But, Neenaji! [incredulous; implying that nothing justifies the length]

Neenaji: It was like when Devika changed six times. The orchestra was looking at me! ... Not Devika ... [thinks] What was her name? Oh, Sarika\*. Yes, Sarika. [sighs] My god! [laughs in recollection] When she had six changes, the orchestra decided.... [trails off dismissively] So here, they probably knew that there were six breaks, so they decided to have snacks!

Sunita: [speaking about emceeding such an event] But, you can only talk for so long. So originally, they said they'd have some musical interlude. But the musicians are gone! [laughs] So then I was announcing the

musicians, but they were all gone, and then I was like, “I can’t see anybody,” and then I said, “they’ll be right back,” and . . . it was . . .

Amy: You should have just danced! [students explode in laughter at the mental image of their friend, Sunita, attempting to fill the silence with improvised banter]

Neenaji: Where was all this again?

Sunita: In New Jersey. So I started, even though there was no Odissi [in this program], I was like [killing time], like “Let’s compare Odissi and Bharata Natyam!” [laughter] So I just started talking, killing time, filling time, anything! [more peals of laughter] I was like, “Are they back yet? Somebody tell me if they’re back yet!”

Amy: [imitating Sunita’s desperation on stage] “Questions? Anyone in the audience, questions?!” [laughter]

Neenaji: Oh, then there’s no flow!

Sunita: There was *zero* flow!

Neenaji: [practically shrill with disapproval] You’re supposed to build up a flow! You’re supposed to build it up from *alārippu*, *jatīsvaram*, then move on to the *varṇam*. A ten minute break after that, then –

Sunita: The audience was just [bored]. I mean, even for someone who enjoys dance, it was just *too* long.

Neenaji: [still in disbelief] But . . . Why did she want *so* many costume changes?!

Amy: [interjecting] Because that’s what these *teachers* want.

Sunita: Yes, this is what the teacher does. This is what she wants.

Neenaji. Oh. [sighs] That’s how they do it. It’s so silly.

Sunita: But like, you know? They take away from the dance, because all it was –

Neenaji: Everyone’s asking, “I wonder what costume she’s going to wear!” rather than “I wonder what dance she’s going to do!” [snickers] The focus changes!

Sunita: Yeah, the focus was completely not on the dance. It was on, “What are they wearing?” and “What are the stage decorations?!”<sup>283</sup>

In this conversation, the community of dancers seemed to agree in their evaluation of this *arangetram* event, that the dance teacher, orchestra members, the student’s family, and other parties placed higher value on creating a lavish display than highlighting the dancer’s accumulation of performative skill over years of practice. In the Ensemble’s view, the displays of affluence and abundance at the New Jersey *arangetram* inevitably affected the quality and aesthetic value of the program for the audience, as the “flow” was interrupted by repeated costume changes and the orchestra’s departure from the stage to consume snacks during numerous long breaks. Sunita’s comments about the orchestra’s “*chai* breaks” and the dance teacher’s concern over her own makeup instead of attentiveness to her student were veiled commentaries on the fact that priority was placed on monetary compensation and prestige of the accompaniment, versus the dancer’s own experience as a budding performer.

In other conversations about *arangetrams* and financial matters, the community had not been nearly as unanimous in its views. In my field experiences at Triveni, the financial aspects of fees for dance lessons, *arangetram* costs, costumes, or other matters were rarely discussed. Occasionally at the start of a dance class, while taking attendance, the student-teachers I would observe might remind a student that she or he had not paid the month’s fees yet, or on other occasions, let a student know that he or she had paid enough to carry over for the following month’s lessons. Once when Neenaji had returned from India, I witnessed several students’ mothers reimburse Neenaji with checks or

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<sup>283</sup> Triveni ensemble members, personal communication in dance classroom, Boston, MA, October 22, 2008.

envelopes of cash for dance costumes that Neenaji had custom-tailored for students while in Delhi. But these conversations were few and far between.

One day, the Ensemble community exchanged views about the right of “*gurus*,” or master-teachers, to charge higher fees than student-teachers or other teachers at Triveni. The topic came up in reference to Vikramji\*, a particular guru of Bharata Natyam who lives in India, but had visited Boston the previous year to conduct master-workshops at Triveni’s studio; Neenaji was chagrined that the guru, unbeknownst to her, had demanded fees of her students that in her view were exorbitant. Suniti, a longtime member of the Ensemble community, clearly voiced her disagreement with Neenaji on this issue; in Suniti’s estimation, an experienced master-teacher with years of training in India had the right to expect higher compensation for private workshops with advanced students, than a teenage or twenty-something student-teacher who primarily oversaw beginner and intermediate students learning basic items. Diplomatic but uninhibited to share her opinions, she often encouraged Neenaji not to be taken for granted by her students or their families, and pointed out that the fees collected from students who can afford lessons benefits the Triveni Scholarship, a fund set up by Neenaji to provide free or reduced-fee lessons for students who need them. Neenaji agreed with Suniti’s point about the scholarship fund; however, she remained firm in her personal principles that the act of teaching dance should not be about making money, but sharing an art form. She then went on to praise Oami, a student-teacher, who had volunteered to help coach *arangetram* students free of charge over the summer months. In Neenaji’s estimation, Oami’s free contribution was in line with her objective of making dance accessible to all who care to study it, regardless of their personal background. Suniti and Sunita, who are

not student-teachers but perform with the Ensemble, interjected in surprise, feeling that Oami should not feel guilty or hesitant to charge for such a tremendous service to students. But Oami and another student-teacher, Amy, provided an alternate reasoning that Oami's generous contribution of time is not a purely altruistic move; it actually provides benefits to the Triveni community by helping to uphold its level of performative identity in the Boston area.

Neenaji: Vikramji\* has become very mercenary. I think he just – *way* too mercenary. I mean, all he wanted to do was have more-more private classes, and find out how to make more money. Sima [a student-teacher] was so disgusted with him. He came last year, and I didn't have time. So I said, "you talk to Sima, if her Kuchipudi kids want." And they were all so fed up with him.

Amy: *I* was so disgusted with him! You know, he charged Malvi\* like \$50 for a half hour! Because she was supposed to be with Neena Aunty, and Neena Aunty was out, and he just came down. And he said, "Oh, I'll teach you," and she said "Oh, okay!" I mean, she didn't know . . .

Neenaji: [exasperated] Malvi is a simpleton. She should have said no. [students snicker]

Amy: Well, you know how she is . . .

Suniti: [disagreeing with the others, and, addressing Neenaji, defending Vikramji's right to ask for more fees than a "regular" teacher] No, it just means you undervalue yourself.

Neenaji: [responding pointedly to Suniti] You know, Suniti, we had a big discussion about what *arangetrams* cost. And you know, I have never ever thought of dance as a way of making money. Because fortunately, I don't need it to make a living. And I also want it to be accessible to everyone.

Suniti: [still disagreeing with Neenaji] But you know, a private lesson with the guru should be more than just a regular class, than just a private lesson with anybody else.

Neenaji: [emphatically disagrees] No! It should be the same, whether I teach a private or someone else!

Suniti: [trying to be diplomatic, but voicing her opinion that Neenaji shouldn't feel bad about charging more, as a master-teacher, than her own assistant teachers] Well, it's just a thought out there. I don't think it's mercenary.

Neenaji: [still emphatic] On the contrary, Suniti, many times if they can't afford, I say, "If you can't pay me, I won't charge you anything. But if you're working with any of the other teachers, they have to be paid."

Suniti: [countering] But Neenaji, let me tell you something. Probably more than 50% of your students can afford to pay it.

Amy: Yeah, *definitely*.

Suniti: Because the people who really *need* the scholarship can benefit from that.

Neenaji: Well, those who can afford to pay, like Jyoti\* and Manish\* – I charge them for every lesson, every penny .... I don't know how many we did – but they needed it. Manish needed it, a lot. [turns to Oami, a student-teacher] But look at my wonderful Oami! [beaming] Such a sweetheart! Such a sweetheart! [referring to Oami's donation of every weekend of her summer in 2008 to help *arangetram* students, free of charge] She's given up so many Sundays! [other students "aww" in appreciation]

Oami: [shyly, and dismissive of Neenaji's praises] Every Sunday of the summer, except for one. I just checked my calendar.

Sunita: [amazed at Oami's sacrifice] Wow, you can't even travel anywhere!

Suniti: [in disbelief, emphatically] Oh my god. Oami, you've *got* to charge! Come on, you've *got* to charge!

Neenaji: Now she won't do it. She's already started that.

Amy: [chiming in to support Oami's decision] It's kind of hard. Because they *won't come*, if you charge. They won't come!

Oami: [passionately defending her choice as benefitting the group] And, *it's in our interest! It's in our interest!*

Neenaji: [speaking for the mothers, as being willing to pay] No, no. The mothers have been shooting me emails, asking me "when can we do it?"



Neenaji, when can we start?" [meaning, when can my child start training for her *arangetram*]

Amy: [pointedly skeptical] Well, *some* mothers. I can name several mothers, several students, that will *not*. That will *not* do that. If we charge.

[room pauses]

Sunita: [echoing Oami's sentiments and words, after some reflection] And it's in our best interest that they do well. It's like an investment on our part.

Amy: Exactly.

Nilima\*: [another long-time Triveni student, who has till now listened silently; at last, she quietly voices agreement with Oami's logic] Otherwise, we're going to get crappy . . . crappy people. [laughter; students understand Nilima's phrase "crappy people" to mean "*arangetrams* performed by unprepared students," but laugh at her choice of words]

Neenaji: [still diplomatically giving a perspective on the students who get help] No, and its not like they don't appreciate it. They're all there, and they watch her, they listen to her, they respect her. What I mean is, whatever you tell them, they listen to you.<sup>284</sup>

The diverse and impassioned opinions on dance and financial gain provided in this conversation are illuminating about how the Triveni community processes their views on authority, dance skill, monetary compensation and performance. To Neenaji, art is something to be enjoyed by all, and she has established the scholarship fund to ensure that her school can provide lessons to students regardless of background. Suniti and Sunita, however, seemed to feel that Neenaji undervalues herself, and should not hesitate to expect compensation from students for the skilled level of instruction she provides. They also pointed out that more often than not, Neenaji's students could afford

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<sup>284</sup> Triveni Ensemble members, personal communication in dance classroom, Boston, MA, May 21, 2008.

their lessons. Amy, Oami and Nilima offered a third set of perspectives. Amy agreed somewhat with Neenaji that there are times when lessons can be “mercenary,” as in the case of Vikramji’s demands. However, they also felt that there were reciprocal benefits in providing free lessons to students, in that Triveni’s reputation could gain more acclaim by staging as many high-quality *arangetrams* as possible.

Ensuring that Triveni students’ performances were as high-caliber as possible affords the entire community an increase in its symbolic capital, both within the group itself, and in broader dance communities of Boston. In these conversations and others between Neenaji and Triveni members about *arangetrams*, the Ensemble members seemed to share perspectives on *arangetrams* as a performative achievement and rite of passage, and an opportunity for dancers, teachers and families to focus on dance for dance’s sake, rather than accumulating social or financial capital by staging lavish displays, impressing community members, or collecting hefty fees. But none of the Ensemble members made mention in this conversation, or any others, about the fact that *arangetrams* at Triveni were in essence, a rite of passage, and a means toward accumulating symbolic capital within the walls of the dance school itself. The achievement of the *arangetram* at Triveni provided dancers with symbolic capital and an opportunity to enter the upper echelon of hierarchy in Triveni’s own social organization. This reality was often mentioned simply and without contestation as a “rule” governing membership of the Triveni Ensemble, in that no dancers could join the Ensemble unless they had completed their *arangetram*; however, it was never really discussed, debated or analyzed. At certain occasions, Neenaji would ask a skilled and talented non-Ensemble dancer to fill certain roles or positions in a choreography if an Ensemble member was

unavailable to perform, but even if the dancer was proficient in the role (at times, more proficient than the Ensemble member she temporarily replaced), she often would not be called upon to join other Ensemble projects, simply because she had not completed her *arangetram*. The topic of *arangetram* completion proved to be a site of noteworthy discussions and observations, in that while Ensemble members apparently shared certain views on the goals, aesthetics and objectives of the *arangetram* performance, they often disagreed about the financial or pedagogic preparations that went into staging performance – and remained unquestioning (at least discursively) about the symbolic value of the *arangetram* achievement as a prerequisite to their own insider status.

### ***III. Achievement and Personal Value: The Motivations for Arangetram Completion***

The culture of *arangetram*-completion at Triveni is often a powerful motivating factor that leads students to declare their interest in eventually undertaking the immense amount of preparations to complete a full-length solo program. For one thing, the years of dedicated adherence to the *praxes* of dance pedagogy often inspires a dancer to take on the challenge of *arangetram* preparation, to put oneself to a performative test of skills, determination and performative aesthetics. The notion that nearly all others in one's community of teachers, mentors, friends and fellow dancers have performed their own *arangetrams* is also certainly enough to make the completion of an *arangetram* the normative path to a young dancer. Completion of the *arangetram* is an adherence to a standard of *praxis*, and affords the student a boost in symbolic capital within the dance community. To many of the parents of dancers, the years of supporting a young dancer in her training, and watching her grow and mature as a performer, inevitably leads to the

dream of her onstage debut after careful preparations and practice. For others, the idea of hosting an ornate, dazzling performance event for close friends and family may be an enticing temptation to encourage a daughter to prepare for an *arangetram*.

Tara, a student-teacher at Triveni who has assisted in the *arangetram* preparation of numerous young students, offered insights into some of the current reasonings of her students for engaging in *arangetrams*. She shared experiences about the “who” of *arangetrams* – that is, the types of students who most often broach the topic or envision completing such a performance. In her experience, often students’ parents, and not students themselves, are eager to embark in *arangetram* preparation for symbolic capital outside of the Triveni community or dance pedagogy in general, such as perceived benefits to a college application or resume, or general symbolic gain in students’ social circles as a person well-versed in a fine art. She described her experience as a teacher in such situations, and the ways she has advised students to approach the *arangetram* experience out of a joy for dance, rather than a hope for any benefits in other realms.

Arthi: What do you feel that students are looking for, or parents are looking for when they bring their kids here? Has there been a change over the years in what people are seeking, or what they *think* they are seeking, when they come here?

Tara: That’s interesting. [pauses] Well, it’s interesting. I think maybe it has changed, and of course I had a huge break of 13 years. But at least with my generation, and I’m 39, I think a lot of kids started because their parents wanted them to retain some cultural connection to India. I think that’s still very true, but I also think now there’s another element of multiculturalism being an asset to someone’s background and resume. The word “multicultural” didn’t exist when I was a kid! [laughs] .... It’s great on college applications to have a diverse background, to have different interests. And if you have something relevant to your cultural heritage, that’s something very positive. So I think that’s definitely a bonus for families.

I’ve had a few parents approach me and say, “Oh, I really want my child to do her *arangetram*, when do you think she’ll be ready?” [pregnant

pause] I don't know. Not everybody should do an *arangetram*, and most people actually *shouldn't* do one. You should really be passionate, you really should be technically proficient, and everything else. But I think some parents really want that piece on their resume. I actually had one parent say, "Oh, you know, my girl isn't practicing. Tell her to practice, she doesn't want to come, she wants to quit." And I turned to the girl – I'll say her name is Maya – and I said, "Maya, is this true? Do you not want to dance?" She said "No." I told her, "I used to dance when I was kid, and then I quit because I didn't want to do it. But then I regretted it, because I had that big break. So I want you to think about whether you don't want to dance because you'd rather hang out at home and watch TV and talk to your friends. Or, if you really hate it. And if you really hate it, then don't come. Play music, do something, play sports. But if it's just because you'd rather be hanging out and doing something else, then I think you should try to keep coming." And she did, which was good. It was nice. But I tried to impress upon her mom that it should be about desire, not about a resume.

Arthi: That's true. Do you get a lot of students themselves who really want that *arangetram* under their belt? I can certainly understand, and I've seen and heard the mothers a lot. But I was wondering about the students. Sometimes you don't hear it from them.

Tara: Yeah, you don't hear it as much from the kids. And I don't teach as much as I used to; I used to teach ten hours a week. Mostly kids. I think most girls or dancers in general are shy, because it's very ambitious. So it seems a little bit proud or possibly overconfident to say, "I want to do it, I'm ready!" Or the parents push it. So I haven't – you can see the gleam in some dancers' eyes that they want to do it. There are two teenage girls in this class, they're both 14 [years old] maybe? Both excellent dancers, very talented. And they *should* do their *arangetrams* eventually, and they can, and I'm sure they will. Yeah, so probably only – oh, but they haven't said anything, to me yet anyway. But maybe they will. Or maybe they have, to Neenaji. But I think it's understood for those really talented dancers that they will be encouraged to do so. There have been maybe 5% of my students who have talked about it.<sup>285</sup>

Tara's insights about the students' goals or intentions behind completing their *arangetrams*, and the source or catalyst for the decision to prepare for one, reveal the flux of the community's views on *arangetrams* and the perceived advantages of their symbolic capital. New generations of dancers, aware of the cache that "multiculturalism"

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<sup>285</sup> Tara Ahmed, interview by author, Boston, MA, February 16, 2009.

and diversity in experience can provide for other endeavors in life, seek to complete their *arangetrams* as a way of proving their intensive training in an international or cross-cultural art form. It is also noteworthy that while completion of the *arangetram* remains an integral part of Triveni's culture and dance pedagogy, often students do not speak about their aspirations to complete this rite of passage because of a perception that to plan an *arangetram* or even demonstrate a personal expectation that they will be permitted to perform an *arangetram* would appear overly ambitious or presumptive about their skill and talent as dancers. In this sense, students remain bound to codes of personal comportment and speech, preferring for either the teacher to approach them and personally invite them to train for an *arangetram*, or else allowing parents to broach the topic with the teacher and determine the teacher's view on the student's preparedness.

### **A Collaborative Identity: Embodied Diversity in Triveni's Culture of Performance**

The Triveni Ensemble, which is Triveni's professional company of senior dancers and teachers, performs at both South Asian community events and broader community events in the Boston area that celebrate the intersection of cultures. In recent years, Triveni has had increased opportunities to interact with these communities outside of the South Asian American realm; the Ensemble dancers have actively collaborated with larger arts circles and dance communities in productions, and also reached out to various nonprofit and humanitarian organizations based in the Boston area through their benefit performances.

In 2008, the Triveni Ensemble staged "Divine Rhythms," a benefit performance for "My Sister's Keeper," a grassroots organization for Sudanese refugee women and

children founded by Tufts University pediatrician and minister, Rev. Gloria White Hammond, and local Boston news personality Liz Walker.<sup>286</sup> In 2009, the Ensemble's spring show supported Agape International, a nonprofit organization which provides resources to orphaned children in India affected by AIDS.<sup>287</sup> Triveni is affiliated with the Massachusetts Cultural Council, and interacts with other ethnic dance organizations in various programs and shows.

Triveni Ensemble members enthusiastically envision the school as becoming an increasingly more visible part of a greater arts community in Boston, and not merely a cultural arm of the Boston-area South Asian community. To be involved with the broader dance community of Boston, and to gain increased visibility, acclaim and performative opportunities alongside other dance schools, is a huge gain of symbolic capital in more "mainstream" local culture, and not merely in the South Asian margins of society. Ensemble dancers Suniti and Oami discussed the significance of the school's involvement with the "dance scene" of Boston, which historically has not always been oriented towards world dance forms.

Arthi: ... What is it like being able to go to different venues and being a representative of this art form? Over the years, have your thoughts on this changed?

Suniti: I would have to break it down into two different types of venues. One type of venue would be the kind of "cultural fair," where you're basically showing people what this idea of Indian dance is, and Indian culture is. And very often, if there are a lot of children, and it's a situation where you're trying to express your culture to a crowd that wants to understand it. But then there's the other kind of venue that I think I'm becoming more interested in, as I get older. It's kind of the – so to speak – "Boston dance community." That's kind of the more cutting edge, avant-

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<sup>286</sup> Triveni School of Dance, official home page, <http://www.trivenidance.org> (accessed April 3, 2008), and "My Sister's Keeper," official home page, <http://www.mskeeper.org> (accessed April 3, 2008).

<sup>287</sup> Agape International, official home page, <http://www.agapeintl.org> (accessed April 10, 2009).

garde, fusion kind of stuff. I think the type of crowd, the audience, what you're trying to present, is very different. So I think that probably that second category, that "Boston dance" category, has expanded a lot in the last five years. [to Oami] Don't you think?

Oami: Yeah. And I think we've also become more a part of the dance community .... Triveni has always been a big presence in the Indian community, the "desi" [South Asian] community, in the Boston area and in New England. But I think that I've noticed a bigger presence in the *dance* community, which is a *completely different* group of people. There aren't a lot of South Asian dancers in the dance community in Boston. And there are a lot of well-known dance schools. The dance community is pretty Anglo-Saxon in Boston, and there aren't a lot of other "ethnic" groups that are involved in Boston in those performances.

Suniti: [regarding Triveni gaining local renown as part of the Boston dance community, and not solely a repository for Indian community arts] I think – a couple of things I've noticed in the transition, with Triveni being known. It has pros and cons. It has pros in that kind of cultural – the community that just wants a cultural event. It has pros there. I think that it has cons in the dance community, in some ways. The dance community is always trying to be edgy and avant-garde, and trying to go forward. And sometimes I think that because of our traditionalism, we don't get thought of in some of those capacities. [Another senior student] had kind of started the push, trying to change that, ten years ago. I mean, had a hard time, because she was back and forth to India. But I think we've been working more, toward having [it]. And again, I don't think that the whole school should face that way, but I think a part of it should certainly face that way. I think that one thing, the give and take of it, is that we just don't learn as many new dances. Because we're so busy choreographing, and doing fusion stuff. So we don't actually learn as many new dances.

Oami: Our lives sort of revolve around the two shows – the April show, and the annual show. As soon as one ends, the next one begins.<sup>288</sup>

Oami and Suniti's comments indicate the significance of Triveni's burgeoning presence in Boston's larger dance community as a significant, positive factor in notions of performative identity, as the dance school moves forward. In Suniti's view, performance of classical Indian dance creates two distinct forms of identity for individual

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<sup>288</sup> Oami Amarasingham and Suniti Nimbkar, interview by author, Boston, MA, January 21, 2009.



students and the community at large: one is a certain form of Indian cultural identity, which is generated through embodied movement and reified through public performances of this identity for South Asian community members. The second layer of identity is a more “avant garde,” transitional mode as a member of the broader community of dancers in the local area. Performance creates a new avenue for identity development and embodiment, in its provision of access to broader cultural resources and practices. While becoming involved with projects and outside groups inherently has some drawbacks – Suniti noted that the pressure to create and innovate more fusion choreographic projects often comes at the expense of the group expanding its repertoire of classical Indian dance items, thereby impacting its means of reaching out, embodying, and performing Indian identity – nevertheless, she viewed the effort to interact and constitute a visible presence in the dance community as important to the future of the school. Suniti and Oami’s views reveal that Triveni’s burgeoning presence, noteworthy contribution of Indian aesthetics to a primarily “Anglo-Saxon” performative milieu, and high reputation in the city’s dance scene provides the group with symbolic capital in the broader, ethnically-diverse Boston community.

### **Membership, Belonging, and Solace: Joining The Triveni Ensemble**

Membership to the Triveni Ensemble, as stated earlier, is by invitation only; the Ensemble is comprised of Neenaji’s senior dance students and student-teachers who have completed *arangetrams*, and demonstrated both performative acumen and choreographic creativity over time. Membership in the Triveni Ensemble, it can be argued, is the culmination of incremental progress through the ranks of identity within Triveni’s own

interpretation of classical dance pedagogy; from student, to long-time student, to *arangetram* graduate, to advanced performer, to student-teacher and finally to choreographer.

The sheer tone of voice and bright demeanor with which these women speak about their first experiences as Ensemble dancers speaks to the significance that membership has for their personal identities, as performers and in their broader lives. When asked about how she first got started in classical Indian dance, student-teacher Oami shared this brief narrative; her tone when discussing Neenaji's invitation to participate in the Ensemble, and the subsequent dilemma and decision-making process she faced about other hobbies in her life, indicate the value that Ensemble membership has in her perspective.

My parents met in Cambridge, and got married, and when I was four we moved to Brookline. So it was probably September when my mom opened the *Boston Globe*, and the Annual Show was there in an advertisement, as a free cultural event. So we went, and I don't actually remember it. All the annual shows sort of blend together after awhile. But I guess I was really excited about it, and was dancing around in the aisles. And I started when I turned five here, and I guess I just never left! [laughter] .... And then, yeah. So when I was five ... it was like, I *had* to do it. I used to live right up the street, four blocks, and I would just come whenever I could. I had my class, but at one time I was attending three classes. And whenever I had finals or tough things going on in school, I would come all the time. When my dad died, I practically moved in here. I was just here all the time ... And then, I went to college in Western Mass. It was the only annual show I ever missed, was my freshman year, because I was doing crew then. But then, Neena Aunty asked me to be in the April show that year. And it was *such* a big deal that she asked me to be in the April show. Then I had to decide whether I was going to do crew or do dance, because it wasn't possible to do both. And I picked dance. And after that, I started coming back from school – it was supposed to be once every two weeks, but it was more like once a week. And then I started teaching.<sup>289</sup>

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<sup>289</sup> Oami Amarasingham, interview by author, Boston, MA, January 21, 2009.

Oami narrates the ways in which not only dancing, but advancement through Triveni's various levels of membership, provided her with a sense of belonging and solace at various points through her life. Her love for dance initially compelled her to become deeply engaged in dance classes, often attending several per week, and provided her with even more comfort during the difficult period in her life following her father's demise. Membership in the Ensemble community was valuable enough to convince Oami to put aside other hobbies and commute weekly from Western Massachusetts to Boston to participate in classes and choreography sessions.

Tara, another student-teacher, shared her story about joining the Triveni Ensemble and experiencing the honor of dancing alongside her guru Neenaji. A half-South Asian, half-Caucasian American who began studying with Neenaji at age five, Tara quit at age ten because, as she explained, "I was really rebelling, and I wanted to be 'American.' And so I studied Jazz and Modern, and I actually got really got into West African dance for several years ...".<sup>290</sup> She returned to the study of Indian classical dance at 23 years of age, after seeing Neenaji and her senior students perform at the University of Massachusetts, where she worked at the time. She described her progress through the ranks of Triveni, describing the personally transformative experience she had as she gained proficiency and authority in the art form and in the pedagogy of dance.

. . . And then [having returned to the art form at age 23], I just fell in love with it again, and really became intense about it. I was just so hungry to learn it. And I would come here three times a week. Before I had started back up with Indian dance, I was trying to pursue dance professionally. I had studied dance anthropology at university. So I was trying to dance, not making much money, obviously [chuckles]. And Neenaji was just so great, so encouraging. I would go to so many classes, and she would let me do work for her or something, in exchange for more classes. It was

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<sup>290</sup> Tara Ahmed, interview by author, Boston, MA, February 16, 2009.

great. She is so generous. And you know, I kept asking her, “Can I do something, because I really don’t have enough money to pay for all these classes.” And then eventually, after about a year and a half, she said, “Well, you could teach at this point.” Because I had been learning three different dances every week at that point. So then I started teaching, and really loved it. And performing with her, and her group. I remember the first time I ever performed with Neenaji on stage, I was *so* excited! And I just felt so honored. Because she really is exceptional, as everybody knows.<sup>291</sup>

Tara’s narrative describes her movement through the trajectory of dance skill as well as movement along a hierarchy of membership that exists at Triveni; returning to Indian dance after a long hiatus, and progressing in her dance education to the culmination point of becoming a teacher and performer alongside her own guru, Neenaji, provided her with both performative and personal senses of transformation. Continuing with her narrative, Tara revealed the ways in which performing at Triveni and residing in its *habitus* has infused meaning and a sense of community in her life, and contributed to alternate views on her own identity, in ways that other practices could not.

### **Performance as a Pedagogy of Religious Narrative, Heritage and Embodied**

#### **Theology**

For Tara, knowledge of classical Indian dance and becoming an insider to a South Asian cultural dance community came only after years of experiencing what she describes as “political problems” in other cultural dance styles. Certainly, learning and performing a dance style related to her own ethnic identity were contributing factors to Tara’s sense of insider membership and identity at Triveni; however, she speculated that even if she were to be of a different ethnic background, she still would have found

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<sup>291</sup> Tara Ahmed, interview by author, Boston, MA, February 16, 2009.

meaning and a feeling of belonging at Triveni simply because of the nature of the community.

Tara: . . . I actually got really got into West African dance for several years. And I actually was having political problems in West African dance, because I'm not West African, or African-American, which was interesting.

Arthi: If you don't mind my asking, how did you feel, facing political dilemmas with West African dance? Did you feel [your experience] was any different with classical Indian dance?

Tara: Oh, *completely*. With West African dance, it was different. Because I was the brown girl dancing! [laughing] And I actually had lived in West Africa for a year and apprenticed with a company there. And they thought I was kind of weird and funny, but eventually they accepted me. And then when I came back to the U.S., it was much harder integrating in the African-American community, because of the legacy of slavery and appropriation of African culture and everything else. There were some people who accepted me more than others, but it was challenging. With Indian dance, I kind of felt like I was home, because I was just easily accepted. And even if I hadn't been Indian, I might have been . . .

[musing] So, what kept me going with it? Well, I have always loved dance, be it Indian dance or other forms. And I just love the fusion of the spirit, and the body, the intellect. It is the most kinetic way to communicate, and just really be in yourself. For me, it doesn't have as much of a religious meaning, because I am not Hindu. My father is actually Muslim, and my mother is American, she's Christian – although they're both secular. When they met each other, they stopped practicing. So I didn't grow up with any religious background at all. But if anything, dance actually became my religion – just dance in and of itself, as an art. I stayed with it because it sustained me, really. And I needed to. If I didn't dance, I'd get sick.<sup>292</sup>

Dancers at Triveni have different relationships to South Asian ethnic heritage and culture. Many dancers are of South Asian descent, either from both parents or one parent; some dancers are ethnically-South Asian adoptees of non-South Asian families, and others have no direct connection to South Asia at all through family. For Tara, while

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<sup>292</sup> Tara Ahmed, interview by author, Boston, MA, February 16, 2009.

“political problems” stemming from her personal background were the driving factor in her return to classical Indian dance at Triveni, in her view, the multicultural community and inclusive ambience of the school made her feel easily accepted, and she speculates that she would have felt welcomed even if she had no personal connection to South Asian culture. Her further comments about dance as her “religion,” and a vital practice for her physical, mental and spiritual well-being demonstrate that the embodied practice of dance, rather than any discursively articulated philosophy or system, constitutes her religious life. Tara’s identification of embodied practices of dance as “her religion” are a practical theology of sorts, wherein embodied actions and engagements give her the feeling of “home” more than any other type of practice.

Suniti and Oami shared with me further insights on the way that dance offers opportunity for learning and negotiating religious beliefs and identity through performative practices. When asked about their perspectives on learning religious values as youngsters, the dancers replied:

Oami: I mean, *I* learned it [Hindu mythological stories]. That’s how I learned all the stories. [through dance]

Suniti: I learned that way too, totally.

Oami: And of course, I studied [Hindu narratives] in college, and I also read books. But I think I was pretty well-versed by the time I got to undergrad classes. Probably, from listening to dance music. It’s not like my parents really taught me at home. Outside of practicing dance, there wasn’t necessarily anything.

Arthi: [to Suniti] Was it sort of the same for you?

Suniti: I think I learned the bulk of my Hindu mythology from dancing ... See, I didn’t grow up with any religious schooling in any way. And I also think that the traditions of, say, Calcutta are different of the traditions of Pune. So, there were stories I had never even heard of. See, my family is totally [devoted to] Ganesh. So I knew every Ganesh stories cold. But I

didn't know any Shiva stories, I didn't know any of the Durga stories, I didn't know any of those, you know? And I think that part's really interesting. I wonder about the kids who are Maharashtra, are they learning stories that they've never even learned about?

Arthi: [acknowledging Suniti's interesting line of inquiry] Yeah.... To what degree is learning the stories kind of the fun part? Is it a big deal, or no?

Oami: [confessional tone, admitting that she doesn't care for learning the stories] For me it's always the footwork. The really fast, hard, complicated stuff. Stories are okay. [giggles]

Suniti: I do too. The stories though - as I've grown older, I actually go and look up the stories a little bit more in depth. But I like the hard, complicated footwork too. [laughs] Much better. But the stories - you know, for example, this last year when we did the *Mahabharata*, I had actually never read it, stem to stern. And this time, I read the whole thing, for the first time. I had never read it before. And with the *Gita Govinda*, when we did that - that was really exciting for me I actually got the whole *Gita Govinda*, and I read it for that series of concerts we did. I think that as I get older, it's become more important for me.

Oami: It's nice to have that though. Because if you're reading a book, you can always take a piece to the next level. There's always somewhere else to go, because there's so much mythology and history.<sup>293</sup>

Oami and Suniti's comments reveal the ways in which dance has the practical capacity to teach religious knowledge and awareness to an individual, in more effective or tangible ways than other practices. Oami's statement that she learned Hindu mythological narratives exclusively through dance, and that her parents "never taught her anything," are perhaps the most provocative aspect of her discussion - and strangely, perhaps the most common among her peers, and many second-generation South Asians in general. Oami identifies the practice of dance performance as the principal medium of religious, or at least, mythological, learning. She also shares that she had opportunities to

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<sup>293</sup> Oami Amarasingham and Suniti Nimbkar, interview by author, Boston, MA, January 21, 2009.

read about Hindu narratives in college (Oami holds a B.A. in South Asian Studies from Bryn Mawr), but that she had already acquired a broad familiarity with these stories by that time. Her comment about the lack of religious instruction from her parents is almost dismissive. While it is entirely possible that religion and culture were not aspects of Oami's home life, one wonders if instead, Oami's parents might have provided Oami with certain cultural cues and background in the home, but that she had sought a different form of religious instruction from her parents (perhaps discursive, literary, or embodied) that they did not provide.<sup>294</sup>

But both Oami and Suniti also reveal here that while the religious narratives in classical Indian dance are somewhat interesting, and that their relationship to narrative and learning has changed and become more meaningful with age, they are more moved and excited by the fast-paced, elaborate footwork sequences that they learn in dance class. The attraction to *nr̥tta* in dance – the rhythms, aesthetics and physical challenges of rapid movements and technically challenging forms of embodied practice – is a statement about value and personal meaning in dance. For Oami and Suniti, mastery of

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<sup>294</sup> As an aside, I must share that I was surprised at Oami's statement here, though I had heard similar statements frequently from other dancers during fieldwork. For starters, Oami was an experienced performer and dance teacher in her own right, and for some reason I assumed she might have a different perspective on the cultural learning that takes place in the home versus in the dance studio. Secondly (and more significantly, perhaps), I had met Oami's mother, a college professor, on numerous occasions, and been struck by the fact that even in the chilliest of winters, she always wore a *sari*. Oami's father had passed away many years prior, and her mother, to my knowledge, had never remarried. Though I have not had many detailed conversations with her, she expressed great interest in my dissertation topic and research when I first began fieldwork at Triveni, and in fact showed up at Oami's apartment one day when I had gone to interview her, explicitly to meet me and get to know my work. She was encouraging to me, firmly iterating that she felt classical dance was an important part of teaching Indian culture in America. Oami's mother is well-known at Triveni as an active part of the community; she is a former board member of the school, and assists with nearly every major performance backstage, helping students with their costumes, makeup, the stage set-up, and other concerns. She has encouraged Oami's dance training throughout her life, even through difficult times. By external appearances at least, I felt that Oami's mother appeared to value and think critically about cultural practices in the South Asian community.



fast *nṛtta* is a fulfilling and enriching experience imbued with symbolic capital. Their views on physical achievement and mastery are a form of practical theology, in their identification with satisfaction, value and happiness with embodied accomplishment.

Tara shared an interesting narrative about a relatively “new” embodied practice and tradition of Triveni, in which the students conclude each lesson by touching the feet of their teacher. Tara’s humorous description of this change over her years at Triveni reveals her personal discomfort with this practice when her own students touch her feet, but provides important background observations about the ways in which embodied religious practices spread and change within communities over time.

Tara: [when asked about how life at Triveni has changed over the years] Oh, you know what else that’s changed, that’s funny? It’s that everybody touches the teacher’s feet now.

Arthi: Really?!

Tara: Yeah. It wasn’t like that when I was a kid, somehow. And as far as Indian dance schools go, it’s not a very traditional school. [Students] call Neenaji “Aunty”. So, that was an interesting thing, I know. I was like, “Oh! All of a sudden this is happening!” And students do it to me too which I’m not entirely comfortable with! [laughs] But I’ve gotten used to it.

Arthi: [laughing] That’s really interesting! So – do you think they tell each other to do that? How do you think that catches on?

Tara: I think it just caught on through observation.

Arthi: That’s so interesting. No one else I’ve talked to has mentioned that!

Tara: Yeah, no one used to do that. And it’s only been in the last five to ten years. Because even when I started back up again, in ’93, after my break, they weren’t doing it.<sup>295</sup>

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<sup>295</sup> Tara Ahmed, interview by author, Boston, MA, February 16, 2009.

Tara's comments here are revealing about the way that embodied practice has changed over time – specifically, it highlights the emergence of traditional practice that might be understood as unexpectedly or uncharacteristically traditional and Hindu, within Triveni's *habitus* of more progressive, multicultural practices. I first noticed students' *namaskārams* (touching of the *guru's* feet) at Triveni on my very first day of fieldwork, when I was invited to observe an *arangetram* rehearsal; I continued to witness students engaging in this gesture for the next year and a half, both in the studio and on-stage following performances.<sup>296</sup> However, I never realized that it was a relatively “new” practice at Triveni, until Tara brought it to my attention. At the Natyanjali School in Andover, and at the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam*, students perform gestures of respect to their teachers at the closing of every dance class

Perhaps because of my routine observation of these practices in other contexts, I never questioned the fact that students at Triveni performed similar gestures to Neenaji. However, I did find two other aspects of *namaskārams* at Triveni to be unusual as compared to other contexts: firstly, that students routinely touched the feet of younger assistant teachers such as Tara, Oami and Amy, when in other contexts dancers usually only touched the feet of a *guru* much elder to them.<sup>297</sup> Secondly, I was surprised that students and teachers of various backgrounds (Hindu, Muslim, Christian South Asian, mixed heritage, etc.) would participate in these measures without hesitation or delay.

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<sup>296</sup> Here, the word *namaskāram* is being used to describe the embodied gesture of touching the teacher's feet; in other contexts, the word *namaskāram* might describe other practices.

<sup>297</sup> I regret that I never had a chance to discuss this new tradition with other Triveni members as part of my research interviews, although once in casual conversation, Amy did briefly mention that it took a long time for her to get used to her students touching her feet, simply because some of her students were elder to her.

But in recollecting the studio and stage contexts of *namaskāram* at Triveni, I would interpret the adoption of this practice as a theological statement of sorts. Though the school has a progressive, democratic ambience perhaps unusual among other schools of classical Indian dance, the students still articulate (both discursively, and through small ritual and non-ritual gestures each day) their devotion to the *guru*, and respect for the knowledge that is being shared through dance pedagogy. The teachers at Triveni are adored by students, both for their personal approaches and care shown toward students, and also for their dedicated, careful instruction in dance. At many *arangetrams*, students and parents alike would shed tears of gratitude and affection while thanking the teachers that trained them over the years, and would subsequently perform a *namaskāram* to their teachers on-stage. Tara's speculated that students learned to perform *namaskārams* through observation of their peers, leading to a sensory learning and adoption of the embodied practice from students further along in their dance education and accrue ment of social capital and hierarchy within Triveni's community. It can be argued, therefore, that the adoption and performance of this traditional Hindu gesture is an embodied practice of declaring a culture of respect toward the teacher. The performance of *namaskāram* to the teacher is an embodied statement of theology about the value of dance knowledge and pedagogy.

### **Gifts of Performance: Relationships, Fulfillment and Special Meaning**

The Triveni community is comprised of literally hundreds of individuals, each of whom has unique relationships with fellow dancers, their student-teachers, and principal instructor Neenaji. In an extended conversation one chilly January afternoon, Neenaji

and I spent hours sifting through an enormous plastic bin of old program brochures, flyers, photographs, postcards, and letters from Triveni students of years gone by. I must describe my experience of the conversation as almost magical. I took incredible pleasure in Neenaji's joyous, glistening eyes, slow-spreading smiles and wistful descriptions of students she taught in 1971, 1981, 1991 and 2001, and sheer amazement at her razor-sharp memory of each student's name, *arangetram* date and program of items, and detailed, nostalgia-filled memories of the goings-on at their rehearsals and classes.

But Neenaji's description of two special students in her years of teaching were perhaps the most emotional and poignant of all the years of relationships she described to me; Neenaji's experiences with these individuals – the children of single mothers and adoptive or underprivileged family backgrounds – perhaps speak most clearly about the ways in which she envisions performance as a gift that provides special meaning and fulfillment in her life, and as an ordering principle to the ways she chooses to run the Triveni School. Neenaji describes her first experience with a Caucasian-American single mother, who adopted a number of orphaned children from India and enrolled them in dance classes at Triveni to provide them with exposure to Indian culture. Inspired by the woman's magnanimity to help unknown children from a strange land despite her own personal hardships, Neenaji established the Triveni Scholarship fund, as a way of providing free dance classes and resources for all South Asian adoptees and children of single mothers and underprivileged families.

Neenaji: But I think, when was it? About, 1981? When that Nirupa\*, who was the first adoptee that came. With her mother. And after I worked with her – you know, I don't know if I ever mentioned to you, she must have been eight, but she was so tiny, undernourished, and no confidence, nothing. Scared – like a five year old, she'd be clutching to her mom's arms, sitting on this couch. And within a year of dance, she

had a sparkle in her eye. She was on the stage, excited to dance. And Karen\* [the girl's adoptive mother] was so happy, she said "Boy, this has been amazing! One, it has helped keep her up with her roots. Second, it has boosted her confidence." And consequently, I helped Karen bring three more girls from there. Because she wanted to adopt more kids, so I helped raise funds.

Arthi: Oh, I see! Like a fundraiser?

Neenaji: It's expensive to adopt, and she was a single mother. No [not a fundraiser] – just between my friends, my social circle. We had a Diwali program, and I announced there. I said, "I need to collect \$100 from everybody. We have this wonderful mother, and she is adopting children from the orphanages in India. And doing a fabulous job! And none of us have the time or the guts to adopt, you know, a child – so please support her! And from there on . . . Also, I realized, she needed money. Because when she started, she was doing a half hour, and she would pay \$20 a month. And then she moved to an hour [long lesson] group, and the tuition went to \$30, or \$35. And she said, "I'm sorry, I'm not sure I can afford." And that brought *tears* to my eyes. I said, "Karen, from now on, please don't pay *any* tuition. I want her to come as much as she wants, and tuition will be free." So after that, we made a rule that *all* adoptees, *all* children of single mothers, will have a full scholarship here. There are still a few mothers that insist on paying something. That's fine. But we offer it. And it's been amazing.

[Moments later, Neenaji stumbles upon a card from Tanvi\*, the child of another single mother, who benefitted from Neenaji's policy of full scholarship for such families. She is immediately filled with emotion]

You should see some of the letters. I don't know if I ever saved. Tanvi – [voice cracking] She said, "Ever since I was little, you've been like a goddess in my eyes." [eyes moist; takes a moment to collect herself, then continues] And you know, they moved to Northampton\*. And her mom – I gave her a couple of names of teachers there, you know, there's Radhika\*, and one or two others. And her mom said she refused to go to anyone! She said, "If you want me to keep up my dance, you have to take me back to Neena Aunty." And can you believe, her mother did that?! For seven years, she brought her every Saturday, drove her back and forth two and a half hours! Then, when it was time for her *arangetram*, I said, "Now we will all come to you! Find an auditorium in Northampton, let's do it over there!" And the whole orchestra, we drove over there! And by then, she was sixteen, so she could drive herself. And she still comes. It's been an amazing journey, Arthi. I have to say – in fact, some of these students give me *so* much love and respect, sometimes my husband says,

“I think they’ve spoiled you so much, now you expect *me* to do all that!”  
[laughter]<sup>298</sup>

In this segment of conversation, Neenaji’s sharing of narrative about students from adoptive and single-parent families speaks to the ways that performance provides dancers with the senses of confidence, love and acceptance. For Neenaji, dance is a gift to be shared with anyone interested in learning, no matter their financial or personal background; in this conversation, and in her earlier conversation about Vikramji and “mercenary” *gurus*, she emphasized the fact that she cherishes her ability to share dance knowledge especially with students who might not otherwise get the chance to learn due to family hardship. Her recognition of her own relative good fortune in life, and ability to share her knowledge of dance among enthusiastic students without needing financial compensation for her time and efforts is reminiscent of the Hindu concept of *seva*, or service. The word *seva* is often used in temple contexts, community organizations and other settings to describe service and outreach to less fortunate peoples. Neenaji’s long-standing practice of offering a Triveni scholarship to students in need can be understood as a statement about her personal and spiritual values, which she models for all of her students.

Additionally, Neenaji’s story demonstrates her view that the practice of dance provides practitioners with numerous gifts, not only of cultural learning, but also physical well-being, spiritual and mental encouragement, and demonstrations of love and affection between teachers and students. She takes pride in the fact that her adopted student, Nirupa, blossomed from a skinny, undernourished, and terrified child into a sparkling,

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<sup>298</sup> Neena Gulati, interview by author, Boston, MA, January 9, 2009.

confident and healthy girl after learning dance and experiencing the joy of stage performance. Her story about Tanvi, the daughter of a single mother, demonstrates that her students also share views on dance and performance as an opportunity for reciprocity and connection with her students. Tanvi expressed her deep appreciation for Neenaji's generous scholarship to learn dance through her devotion and loyalty to Neenaji as a *guru*, even when circumstances made it difficult for her to commute back to Brookline for lessons. Her *arangetram* performance became an opportunity for both *guru* and *shishya* to demonstrate the depth of their affection for one another, as Neenaji willingly conducted Tanvi's *arangetram* in her hometown. In these ways, performance serves as an opportunity for expressing affection, love and support in personal relationships.

### **Conclusions: Performance as a Practice of Expressing Identity**

Neenaji's affection toward her students is reaffirmed and redefined with every performance at Triveni. The backstage mishaps of Krupa and Anjana's *arangetram*, described at the start of this chapter, do not fully characterize the experience of that day for the dancers, Neenaji, Amy or Oami. Minutes before the curtain went up, the girls appeared in the wings, now with makeup painted on pristinely, jewelry glittering upon their heads and arms, and costumes (in all their colored brilliance) arranged in lovely pleats about their bodies. Neenaji stood in front of them, with one hand cupped gently around each girl's shoulder, as she whispered last-minute advice and encouragements with an excited, anticipating smile playing upon her lips. The girls' eyes widened slightly, and tears began to well as they simultaneously sank down, touching Neenaji's bare feet then folding their palms. Neenaji hurriedly pulled both girls up, embraced them tightly,

whispered sharply, “Go!” and then turned, in a flurry of her own silk sari, toward the stage and her seat among the orchestra.

Two hours later, to the sound of thunderous applause and cheers, the girls bowed again at Neenaji’s feet before receiving certificates in honor of completing their *arangetram*, as is customary at Triveni. Even Amy beamed and dispensed warm hugs to the girls onstage, unable to contain her pride, the frustration from hours earlier now completely absent. The group gathered together onstage and looked forward, as the photographer knelt down to capture photos. Krupa and Anjana’s radiant smiles immediately were recognizable to me – I had seen such smiles before, sparkling at me from the pictures adorning the walls of the Triveni studio.<sup>299</sup>

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Performance, at Triveni, serves as the central catalyst for a number of diverse practices of decision-making, interpretation and identity formation. Students and teachers at Triveni negotiate various pedagogies of dance which each share the common end-goal of transforming collective identity and self-understanding through performative acts. The members of Triveni, though comprised of diverse backgrounds, opinions, and perceptions of the school’s mission and best interests, appear to agree with some unanimity on performance, and its component practices, as an essential means of negotiating Triveni’s position in both the South Asian segment and broader parameters of Boston’s cultural networks. Through both traditional dance contexts such as *arangetrams*, and more contemporary interpretive contexts of fusion opportunities and interdisciplinary shows, performative and choreographic choices offer dancers multiple

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<sup>299</sup> Observations at *arangetram* of Krupa and Anjana, Newton, MA, September 27, 2008.



possibilities for understanding dance's contributions toward identity. Practicing and performing in the *habitus* of Triveni creates and transmits not only dance knowledge, but knowledge about individuals' lives, backgrounds, personal views and relationships to each other. Practice and performance in the Triveni *habitus* create a sense of belonging – both to a perceived South Asian and Indian community in Massachusetts, and to broader circles of ethnic, cultural, and artistic membership in the Boston area. Performance provides Triveni members with a chance to express their opinions and interpretations of traditional Hindu themes and more progressive, interpretive values alike; it creates goals and aspirations to guide students in their education over the years, and signifies their passage from novice dancers into well-groomed performers within their community. Perhaps most importantly, performance fosters a sense of “home,” family, confidence and acceptance among students, providing solace, fulfillment, and a sense of belonging among Triveni members.

## CHAPTER 6

### **Epilogue: Notes on Ethnographic Responsibility and Friendship in the Field<sup>300</sup>**

My experience of the end of fieldwork for this dissertation brought with it a whirlwind of personal and intellectual shifts. In particular, I was struck by my initial methodological initiatives to engage in reciprocal ethnography, and the eventual realization of the difficulties of that type of research. While, in Chapter 2, I have shared my perceptions that that reciprocal ethnography, in Lawless' initial use of the term, is all but an impossibility except in the most specific of situations, I experienced new difficulties in attempting reciprocity when I could hardly get my field informants to read and respond to my work, or to discuss it in conversation.

#### **Shifting Relationships: Life After The Fieldwork Experience**

After recording the last of my fieldwork audio data files, hugging dozens of young dancers, and doling out the last of my rice crispy treats at my field sites in January 2009, I completed my weekly field site visits in Boston, and set to the task of writing this dissertation. I periodically attended a few recitals and *arangetrams* over the year, and stopped in once or twice to the studios for special events or rehearsals; however, I was unable to converse freely with fieldwork subjects at performance venues the way we normally did in the studio. I also faced difficulties in coordinating meetings with fieldwork subjects due to my own preoccupation with the regimen of dissertation writing,

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<sup>300</sup> Garcia, "Ethnographic Responsibility and the Anthropological Endeavor," 89-101. Here, I borrow Garcia's phrase "ethnographic responsibility," and write in the following section about my experience with negotiating scholarly responsibilities as an ethnographer with the personal responsibilities as a friend or community member alongside field participants.

and a part-time job that occupied my weeknights and evenings – the same time frame as my fieldwork participants’ dance rehearsals.

My conclusion of fieldwork at the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam* was a more complete exit, simply because of the fact that once camp ended in August 2008, I would not be able to return again due to distance and the temporary nature of the camp sessions. I did see Dhananjayan Aṅṅā and Shanta Akkā twice after the end of my fieldwork at the camp – once when they performed in Boston on their retirement tour in November 2008, and again in June 2009, when I traveled to Washington D.C. to participate in an intimate master workshop in dance alongside several of their other their adult students, including a few fellow dance camp alumni.<sup>301</sup>

Perhaps it was natural that I was nervous to share my written chapters with the teachers, *gurus*, dance students and performers I had gotten to know so well over the course of sixteen months of fieldwork. But the prospect of ascertaining their thoughts, considering their reactions, and including their perspectives on this project was also

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<sup>301</sup> Though I did not conduct dissertation fieldwork there, and attended solely as a dance student, the Washington D.C. master workshop provided an interesting comparative context for observing students’ interactions with Akkā and Aṅṅā in a non-*gurukulam* environment. Dance classes were held at a rented ballet studio in a busy downtown area; classes took place from 10 a.m. till 1 p.m., then again from 5 p.m. till 7 p.m. There were no yoga, theory, or *saṅgītam* classes; no *bhajan* sessions or *satsaṅgs* to attend. Akkā and Aṅṅā were the only teachers and authority figures; the workshop was arranged by members of the Daniel Phoenix Singh Dance Company, but these individuals also participated in the workshop as students. Nearly all of the workshop participants had studied under Akkā and Aṅṅā in other contexts (either at the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam* camp, or at Bharata Kalaanjali in Chennai). Most of the workshop participants lived locally, and commuted to class from home or work; three of us traveled from out-of-state to attend the workshop, and therefore booked rooms at local hotels. Students ate meals independently, and went their separate ways at the conclusion of class each day, although on a few occasions, some of us had meals with Akkā and Aṅṅā simply to spend time with them. In these instances, students often paid for Akkā and Aṅṅā’s meals or performed other respectful gestures (carrying their heavy bags to the car, opening doors for them) as part of the etiquette towards *gurus*. These behaviors came naturally to and without an overt culture of ethical rules that were part of a *gurukulam* environment.

exhilarating. In the end, while I received valuable feedback from a few of my research subjects from the past year, I was unable to converse with the vast majority of them due to their busy schedules and lack of availability. I was not terribly surprised by this fact, as most of my informants seemed nonchalant about my project, sharing that they thought it was wonderful that someone would be interested in studying dance, but that they could not imagine that I would write about their lives in a way that would warrant their review.<sup>302</sup>

### **Sharing Analysis: Conversations (Actual and Failed) with Fieldwork Subjects**

My chapter on the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam* was the first to take shape, and so I decided to provide the Dhananjayans with a copy during my time with them in Washington D.C. in June 2009. I was asked by the workshop organizers to chauffeur Aṅṅā and Akkā between their hotel and studio each day of the workshop, and at its conclusion, to provide them with a lift to Philadelphia on my way back home to Boston. I willingly agreed, for personal reasons of enjoying Aṅṅā and Akkā's company, and also to discuss my work with them. The long drives with Aṅṅā and Akkā gave me plenty of time to converse with them informally about dance and non-dance topics, and thus, time to work up my nerve to hand over the chapter. I must confess that I turned my chapter over to them rather late in the week – too late, in fact, to speak with them in person about their impressions, as the workshop became busy as time went on, and Aṅṅā and Akkā

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<sup>302</sup> In Chapter 2, I provide a lengthier discussion about the informed consent process, my field informants' prevalent sentiment of nonchalance about my research, and lack of impetus or concern to review my work for discussion or correction of analysis.

had little down time to spend reading. Nevertheless, I promised to communicate with them via email and phone calls to hear their thoughts once they had completed reading.

I was both excited and terrified to see an email from Aṇṇā in my inbox within two days of saying goodbye in Philadelphia. He wrote that he appreciated my expressive writing style and detailed, forthright observations about the pedagogies of dance at camp; I recall that he used the phrases “Good job” and “Keep it up,” which thrilled me to the core after years of his gentle corrections in the dance studio. But he also shared his honest hesitations about some of my choices of phrasing, particularly in reference to the story about Padma Akkā’s lesson. I offered to talk with him and Shanta Akkā on the phone about the issue, but silently resigned myself to removing the story from my chapter, and cringed that I had ever dared to include such an open depiction of certain pedagogic practices at camp, which I suspected might translate as severe or shocking when written in plain English.

During our phone call, however, I was surprised at both Aṇṇā and Akkā’s insistence that I keep the story, as it was an important part of my experience at camp that summer, both as a dance student and a researcher. In Aṇṇā’s words, I was not to be “hypocritical” about my observations; I was to be honest and thorough in my work. Shanta Akkā gently encouraged me to frame it more thoroughly in a context of a *guru*’s loving dedication to cultivating discipline in her students. I willingly agreed to revisit my writing, and only then thought to include observations about the students’ gratitude toward Padma Akkā for her passionate teaching at the camp’s end. I also agreed to email the chapter to Padma Akkā, and similarly offer to discuss its contents by phone if she wished. Regrettably, I have not heard a response from her since emailing it to her in

July 2009, and to this day wonder whether she has simply been too busy to read the chapter, or if she has read it, but is unwilling to discuss it. I have resigned myself to her silence.

I contacted several camp students from my fieldwork period, who agreed to read the story about Padma Akkā and offer me honest feedback; they shared that while they imagined the story might make the camp *gurus* uncomfortable, that events had indeed transpired as I had narrated them. Furthermore, they enjoyed my detailed ethnography of dance rehearsals and studio classes, and provided me with their musings about the culture of camp to further enhance my descriptions. When looking back on the experience of sharing my chapter with the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam* participants, I recall a worry I had before commencing fieldwork that soliciting their feedback (particularly that of Aṅṅā and Akkā) might be particularly difficult because of my long personal relationships with both the institution of camp and its participants, and I think in the end, my speculation was correct. My relationship with the dance camp and its cast of characters began through personal and family connections, and will remain intensely personal for the rest of my life, though my scholarly interests in their practices and systems of value have certainly added a new dimension to my interactions with them.

In the early fall of 2009, I had a chance to meet with Jeyanthi to discuss my approach to writing the chapter about Natyanjali. We met on a chilly night at the coffee shop of a suburban Barnes and Noble bookstore, and I explained my planned outline and the portions of transcripts that I intended to include. Mid-sentence, Jeyanthi interrupted me, asking if I would be telling the stories about Ritu and Mallika, and the problematic *puṣpāñjali* rehearsal, and also the story about Rukmini, the mother whose daughter

refused to attend her dance class. I was taken aback, because at the time I had been worriedly debating within myself about the inclusion of these narratives; I had actually already drafted a chapter that included them with analysis, but had yet to make up my mind about whether they would make it to my final chapter. When I explained my dilemma to Jeyanthi and solicited her perspectives on the two stories, she spoke in an affirmative tone with no hesitation: “Yes. You *must* tell those stories.” I was not surprised at Jeyanthi’s insistence on sharing the two tales in the chapter, but it did catch me off-guard that in over a year of teaching, and having experienced countless moments like these stories with her students, that the same two episodes stood out in her mind as particularly significant to understanding the training of young dancers. I confidently moved forward after this meeting, drafting the chapter with these two narratives intact.

I worried also about Jeyanthi’s reaction to the stories about her three adult students who at times seemed to resent the pressure to perform, but who repeatedly acquiesced to Jeyanthi’s wishes as their teacher. Jeyanthi appeared indifferent about these stories, sharing that she was well aware of the women’s conflict, and found it an interesting example of negotiation between students and their teacher. She quickly returned her focus to the stories about the younger students. Our meeting ended on an upbeat, hopeful note, with Jeyanthi wishing me good luck with concluding the dissertation, and sharing that “she wanted me to do well.” From the outset, Jeyanthi’s conversations with me about my work were often construed as an older member of the local South Asian community, helping an up-and-coming young scholar of that same community to chronicle its history and development. I expect that Jeyanthi and I will continue to discuss the chapter over time.

As for Neenaji and the dancers at Triveni, I have yet to meet with them for feedback and suggestions about the chapter detailing their practices of dance and performance. I emailed Neenaji and several of the Ensemble members repeatedly in October 2009, to inquire if we could make time to meet for conversation in the coming weeks. I received several brief responses from the Ensemble dancers, who congratulated me on my progress with the dissertation, and whose emails included descriptions of the half-dozen performances they would be giving in the coming weeks, with invitations to attend any and all of them. I chuckled at the responses, envisioning the noisy, chaotic studio on Powell Street, the students bustling in from work, university classes, and other commitments, and finding ways to schedule their rehearsals and performances amidst their busy lives. Neenaji's solitary response to my email struck me as the most comical, and yet the most descriptive of her hectic schedule of teaching, producing shows, and overseeing rehearsals; her email contained no text at all, and instead simply had a PDF attachment of a colorful marquee for an upcoming large-scale production.

### **Ethnographic Responsibility: Intellectual and Personal Challenges<sup>303</sup>**

Considering the difficulty of scheduling time with my field informants at Triveni, I feel it was a convenient coincidence that I had independently made the decision to exclude certain portions of field recordings from transcription and analysis in the chapter about this dance school. During the course of my year of field research at Triveni, a key member of the teaching staff made the decision to leave the school for personal reasons. Her announcement of this decision came as a shock to many of her students and peers,

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<sup>303</sup> Garcia, "Ethnographic Responsibility and the Anthropological Endeavor," 98.



but most of all to Neenaji who, along with the other teachers, mourned her physical and creative absence, and also had the difficult administrative tasks of reconfiguring the teaching schedule and division of other duties to adjust for the change in staffing. The departure of this individual from the school occurred on friendly terms, and she remains a part of the Triveni community through her affectionate relationships with former dance partners, students and her *guru* Neenaji. But nevertheless, her abrupt exit resulted in a difficult emotional experience for all involved, as students, peers and Neenaji had to say goodbye to their beloved teacher, friend and disciple as they formerly knew each other in their dance lives. The departure of a key member proved to be a rather traumatic event in the lives and social organization of the Triveni dance community.

While inevitably the dancers' practices and performances shifted with this change in social structure, to a large degree the experience was intensely personal in nature, and unrelated to any major changes in the dance studio. Parts were recast, other student-teachers stepped in to fill the absent teacher's classes, and the show eventually went on at Triveni. A few weeks later, though Triveni members continued to miss their friend in the dance studio, the class schedules, performance roster and planning sessions appeared to be continuing with little evidence of the major shake-up from weeks prior. The departure of a member was discussed as a sad event, but not contextualized as an experience that changed or conveyed new information about dance pedagogy in the classroom. The episode did not appear to impact the continuation of dance instruction, rehearsals and performances at Triveni, and revisiting it in detail would have unnecessarily rekindled painful personal memories of their friend's departure from the school for the remaining Triveni members. Therefore, I elected to exclude any conversations or interview

materials about this shift and loss to Triveni, primarily because the details of the event were not crucial to my overall analysis.

I would be remiss if I did not also share that I had become friends with the former teacher over the course of the year, and therefore was concerned for her emotional experience, as well; while the news of her departure came as a shock to Neenaji and other Triveni members, the truth is, it was not a shock to me. The teacher had actually shared and discussed her intent to leave Triveni with me in private, for several months before she finally said her goodbyes. She had trusted me, despite knowing my research agendas, and had still chosen to confide in me about the difficulty of her decision. I was reminded of Kirin Narayan's agreement with her field informant Urmilaji to "keep her secrets," and I knew that I had to do the same for this person.<sup>304</sup> However, this decision brought new doubts to my mind about the choice I had made to include Padma Akkā's story in the chapter about the dance camp. Though Padma Akkā was not exactly a "friend" to me, and though the experience of her solo class was not a secret in the true sense, Padma Akkā was – and is – a respected and beloved teacher whose dedicated teaching has made an impression on me for over 15 years of my life. At the time of my initial drafting of the chapter, I reasoned that her story was integral to demonstrating the pedagogic importance of language, accent, and students' perception of social cues in the study of dance – and I still see those valuable aspects of the story (and the camp experience, more broadly) as worth sharing with a scholarly audience.<sup>305</sup> But despite the intellectual certainty I have about the story's importance, I remain personally doubtful about my ethnographic

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<sup>304</sup> Narayan, "Shared Stories," 95.

<sup>305</sup> Garcia, "Ethnographic Responsibility and the Anthropological Endeavor," 98. I was influenced here by Garcia's work, wherein she writes about the ethnographer's responsibilities to the scholarly world, and in particular to burgeoning "local intellectuals" – scholars from within field communities who serve both as advocates and historians.

decisions about inclusion and exclusion of private in the wake of the Triveni experience. Negotiating the friendships formed in the field, the burden of “keeping secrets,” and the ethnographic responsibility to remain analytical and thorough with field research, has been one of the greatest intellectual (and personal) challenges of this project.

Nevertheless, returning to my attempts at eliciting responses from field informants, I am struck by the ways that Neenaji’s email, the brief email responses from other students and teachers, and other quick but preoccupied reactions from the Ensemble members at Triveni demonstrate the high priority that all classical Indian dancers in this study place on their dance lives, despite full-time commitments as students, careerpersons, family caregivers and community planners. The time spent in dance class is precious, and not only for the opportunities that dance provides for social interaction, discursive and embodied creativity, and immersing oneself in an aesthetic and religious milieu. The practice of classical Indian dance provides practitioners with social, imaginative and performative space in lives that often feel overrun by mundane demands (including, seemingly, the request to respond to a lengthy dissertation chapter about their studio). Dancers’ myriad practices during studio training, rehearsals and performances constitute a framework of personal choices and sacrifices that, when embraced with enthusiasm and passion, imbue their lives with joy and value. The intellectual and personal opportunities to portray these practitioners’ lives has, in turn, been my great joy.

## CHAPTER 7

### **Conclusions: The Value of Practical Theology in the Study of Dance**

A year removed from the daily rhythms of ethnographic fieldwork, I often look back with deep personal gratitude at the cast of characters who became a part of my life through this project, and who have continued to comprise a large and vibrant part of my professional and personal journeys. In reading the descriptions and exchanges presented as ethnographic data in this dissertation, undoubtedly the reader is struck by the differences in personalities, authority sources, embodied practices, codes of personal behavior and propriety, and interpretive voices that give dimension to each of the three dance schools featured. The picturesque, family-oriented suburban location of the Natyanjali School, alongside stately churches and beautiful homes and yards, differs from the remote, sylvan landscapes of the dance camp along the Blue Ridge Mountains and James River. The camp, in turn, seems a world away from the clattering subway, hectic traffic, and other bustling urban sights and sounds that surround Triveni's dance studio. The intimate, casual, familiar ambience of the Natyanjali School differs drastically from the rigorous, hierarchical and rule-bound world of the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam* camp; the bustling, performance-driven culture of Triveni adds another picture of life in the dance studio altogether.

The ages and backgrounds of the students at each school also vary. At Natyanjali, most students are either local young children, or the mothers of young children, almost all of whom hail from South Indian geo-linguistic backgrounds and generally share that they have been in the United States for less than 15 years. At the dance camp, students are

also of primarily South Indian family backgrounds, but they are mostly U.S.-born, and travel from all over the country to study dance with the Dhananjayans; they primarily fall within the age range of 12 to 22 years, though certainly a few adult students attend each year. At Triveni, students come from diverse ethnic, religious, linguistic and familial backgrounds, and range from age six to 60+ years; the Ensemble members, who decidedly are the most involved and articulate members of the community in their contributions to the choreographic innovation and performative visibility of the school, fall between the ages of 18-40 years.

Notions of traditional knowledge, authority, and pedagogic techniques comprise perhaps the greatest points of differentiation between the dance communities. At Natyanjali, Jeyanthi's formulaic explanations of *ślokas* and South Indian poetic lyrics combines with her highly personal, individual and emotive ways of encouraging her students to dance "from within," creating an unique sense of an authoritative world ordered both by traditional concepts and narratives alongside a more personal and experiential way of gaining experience in dance. The sense of authority is markedly different at the dance camp, wherein the *gurus* engage in pedagogy that makes explicit their connections to traditional arts institutions in India, their own upbringings in decades-old culture of respect and social hierarchy, and their preoccupation both with guiding students in the study of dance and in modes of knowing, explaining, and representing Hindu culture. At Triveni, Neenaji's own training and formative experiences in classical dance were plurally informed, and correspondingly, the sources of authority at Triveni itself are multiple, in that Neenaji herself does not emphasize her own *guru* lineage, and her senior students also serve as teachers and administrators of the

school. The diversity of personal backgrounds and interests of her students render the environment to be democratic, fluid, and experimental – a place where traditional understandings of movement, choreography and interpretation can be debated and reimagined. Neenaji and her senior dancers are interested in interacting with the wider Boston dance scene, performing Indian dance and fusion choreographies not simply as a visible expression of *Indian* culture, but also as a form of high art amenable to creative experimentation, and broad public consumption and appreciation.

The personnel and personalities, locations and languages, histories and goals of these three fieldwork contexts demonstrate the wide range of ways in which American communities of Indian classical dancers can differ in their appearance and activities. However, a number of shared elements emerge as noteworthy among the three sites researched for this dissertation. Similarities include shared styles of embodied movements, gestures, and choreographic items in the *mārgams* among the three schools; the consciousness of costuming, jewelry and makeup in both practice and performance settings; demonstrations of respect and reverence towards *gurus* and elders, trajectories of gaining dance skill and experience over years of training; regard for a performative milestone, such as the *arangetram*, to signal young dancers' achievement of virtuosity in dance, and many more features. Above all, dancers in each of the three schools demonstrated a personal dedication and near-reverent regard of dance – both of the art form of classical dance itself and their time dedicated to mastering it, in the intimate company of teachers, peers and friends in the studio. While young dancers often seemed to take for granted their weekly visits to class and the hours spent in the studio, dancers with several years' experience, even high school-age dancers, appeared to savor their

time in the studio, and, when asked, would gush excitedly and passionately about the goings-on of their dance classes. Nearly every adult dancer I spoke with demonstrated great pleasure when talking about her time in dance class, no matter her personal dance history of dancing – whether she enjoyed continuity in her dance careers from childhood to the present. They all made mention of the good fortune they have had to find teachers or dance classes at all points in their lives; those who have returned to dance after a long hiatus spoke even more poignantly about the meaning and value of returning to the art form after various factors managed to get in their way. Adult beginners in dance often spoke with a perceptible satisfaction about finally achieving a lifelong dream of learning to dance. No matter the circumstance, and notwithstanding the minor frustrations of daily life or mundane difficulties in scheduling, communication, or creative difference that might occur in the dance communities, the dancers who inform this project left an overall impression of deep affection and passion for classical Indian dance, and the personal, embodied ways that learning dance has shifted their notions of self and the world around them.

Reflecting on the field experiences that have informed this project leads me to contemplate the ways that dance builds personal, embodied theological connections between dancers and various notions of religious knowledge, cultural location, and practice. The frameworks of two pieces of scholarship are useful in this analytic processing of dancers' enthusiasm for their art – and the personal feelings of value they openly declare that dance provides them. In “Dancing the Divine Female,” Harshita Mruthinti explores Hindu-American women's practices of classical dance, contending that dance is a medium and method through which women create personal, experiential

relationships with Hindu goddesses.<sup>306</sup> The use of practice as a theological channel between human and divine females is especially noteworthy among second-generation Hindu American dancers, who share that they relate more easily to dance as an embodied form of relationship with the goddess than they do through the traditional home *puja* of prior generations of Hindu women in their families, or the new, feminist reinterpretations of Hindu goddesses often touted by New Age forms of spirituality now prevalent in the United States.<sup>307</sup> Katherine Zubko's doctoral dissertation on *bhakti rasa* similarly places dance and dancers in a theological framework, wherein dancers' experience of the *rasa* of *bhakti* (devotion) has the capacity to create imaginative bridges across religious boundaries.<sup>308</sup> Dancers engage with *bhakti rasa* in the depiction of Hindu, Christian, and other religious themes, drawing upon their personal resonance with the traditional aesthetic and embodied concept of *bhakti* to portray devotional themes, without reifying traditional frameworks of institutional religion.

Both Mruthinti and Zubko's observations and conclusions demonstrate dance's embodied and emotive practices of theology, which generate personal contexts of value and identity in relation to broader religious frameworks. Dancers use dance to create intimate personal connections to traditional Hindu deities through aesthetic and emotional frameworks. My fieldwork with communities featured in this dissertation confirms the conclusions of Mruthinti and Zubko, and demonstrates more broadly that dance does not only connect individuals to Hindu deities or traditional Indic understandings of aesthetics

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<sup>306</sup> Harshita K. Mruthinti, "Dancing the Divine Female: Diasporic Women's Encounters with the Hindu Goddess through Indian Classical Dance." *Journal of Asian American Studies* 9, vol. 3 (Oct. 2006): 271-299.

<sup>307</sup> Mruthinti, "Dancing the Divine Female."

<sup>308</sup> Katherine C. Zubko, "Embodying Bhakti Rasa: Dancing Across Religious Boundaries in Bharata Natyam." Ph.D. Dissertation, Emory University, date.



and emotions, but it also provides individuals a way of theologizing the various intersections of religious knowledge, community, and identity that comprise their worlds. The embodied and discursive processes of dance education provide seemingly innumerable opportunities for dancers to reexamine or reinterpret notions of authority, membership, hierarchy and change within social communities, and also ways of identifying as Indian or Hindu. Dance is a dynamic mode of reimagining and reinterpreting traditional knowledge for new contexts through performance, and subsequently creates links between generations within South Asian communities and between these and non-South Asian American communities. With its numerous practices of pedagogy and performance, dance is a multifaceted theological process. The pedagogies of dance teach dancers how to relate to the worlds around them and to interpret variously their inherent feelings of value and identity as Hindus and South Asians in a diaspora context.

### **A Return to Lessons of Dance Pedagogy**

This dissertation began with the two driving questions that compelled my interest in classical Indian dance communities: firstly, what is taught and embodied in dance classes, besides dance? Secondly, how do the pedagogies and practices entailed in classical Indian dance create identity? In the course of fieldwork observations, data and analysis presented through research at Natyanjali, the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam*, and Triveni, I have identified three central concepts taught and generated by dance pedagogy, and the *habiti* of dance educational settings. These three concepts that are exchanged in dance studios and interactions, in turn, generate what we might call practical theologies that give symbolic meaning and value to the individuals who comprise the communities.

Firstly, dance teaches several systems of social and religious authority. Dance pedagogy provides dancers with opportunities to learn from and about traditional Hindu scriptural canons (oral, scriptural, and embodied) that convey knowledge about Hindu life and practice. Students become familiar with the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and other scriptural sources of authority through discussions of its prescriptions for movement, gesture, and modes of communication and interaction between teachers and students, and performers and audiences. They gain oral, aural and kinesthetic experience of aesthetic knowledge through repetition of words, gestures and expressions.<sup>309</sup> The *guru-śiṣya parampara* (teacher-student relationship) and other social hierarchies and orders in classical Indian dance communities are indicators of symbolic capital – evidence of community members’ long traditions of dance training, practice, and the formation of relationships. Students also become familiar with Hindu myth through embodied experience, studying dramatic choreographies that recount the narratives of gods, goddesses, saints, devotees and other figures. It is noteworthy that for many dance students in the United States, dance pedagogy is the only context for mythological learning, whereas for dancers in India, Hindu myth and ritual knowledge are pervasive aspects of daily and festival life.

To teach these notions of religious authority, narratives, social practices and knowledge through dance is to teach theological ways of living in the world. At the Natyanjali school, for example, Jeyanthi carefully instructed a student about the *namaskāram* performed at the start of class, and its significance as a gesture of respect toward religious figures from all faiths, and the families, community members, and

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<sup>309</sup> Schwartz, *Rasa*, 5.

audiences that support a dancer in her training.<sup>310</sup> The *namaskāram* lesson demonstrates the way that a primarily non-discursive practices is imbued with discursive theological understanding, which the student can then draw upon for interpretation. The practices of conveying social and authoritative knowledge through dance subsequently teach students ways to draw from embodied practical experience, to answer questions about her religious background, practices, and worldview.

Secondly, dancers learn imaginative practices as part of their dance training, and draw upon imagination to create theologies and interpretive worldviews. By imaginatively reconceiving time, space, sound and language, and social organization within the community, dancers create cultural ideals that they internalize both inside and outside the dance world, and share these with new generations of dancers. The euphemistic adoption and propagation of concepts of space, time, language and sound are intentional acts that are significant beyond the scope of the acts themselves; they are theological declarations about proper modes of ethical conduct, religious obligation, and embodied practice. At the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam*, for instance, Shanta Akkā's recollections of her experiences at the Kalakshetra institute in South India, and the near-osmotic experience of learning about traditional Hindu performance genres, ritual practices, and narratives, brings into sharp relief the disparity in learning opportunities that her American students have in their daily lives.<sup>311</sup> At the camp, she and the other *gurus* lead dancers in the recitation of Sanskrit *ślokas* before meals,

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<sup>310</sup> The *namaskāram* lesson is discussed on pages 152-154 of Chapter 3.

<sup>311</sup> Shanta Dhananjayan, interview by author, Yogaville, VA, July 20, 2007. Shanta Akkā's personal narrative about her Kalakshetra education and experiences of pedagogic observation are discussed in Chapter 4 of this dissertation, on page 230.

and encourage their regard of certain spaces as sacred even when there are no overt symbolic, physical or material markers of its sacrality. Dancers learn social, ritual, and embodied practices that, at first, may be experienced as somewhat foreign and unappealing. But over time, and through observation and conversation with their peers, many students come to regard them as meaningful practices worth continuing in their lives, even outside of the dance camp.<sup>312</sup> Imaginative practices at the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam* are an aspect of dance pedagogy, and over time, students become theologically transformed by them in both dance and non-dance contexts.

Thirdly, dance pedagogy, education, and performance foster a number of practices that create a set of multiply embedded identities, and symbolically articulate communal beliefs about the theological purpose and mission of practicing dance. Dancers learn to see themselves as interpreters of myth and narrative, as they engage in choreographic selection or omission of stories to present onstage. Practitioners of dance also must negotiate their myriad obligations and personal experiences as they interpret stories in performance, ensuring that the decisions they make are attentive to the needs and requirements of their own teachers, peers, students, and audiences. Students learn to see themselves as performers as they gain experience and prepare for their *arangetram* debuts. They cultivate new talents of synthesizing embodied (and rehearsed) dance knowledge with new talents and capabilities, such as managing elaborate props and costumes, or speaking spontaneously but authoritatively about dance theory and history. Dancers identify as carriers of a traditional genre of art, aesthetics, and cultural knowledge – and in that way, valued and visible representatives of a religious and

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<sup>312</sup> Campers' consciousness about the Meal Prayer is discussed on page 227-229 of Chapter 4.

cultural community. At the same time, dancers self-identify as more than just carriers of tradition, but as theological innovators, possessing the authority, knowledge, and embodied means to use traditional genres of performance to reach diverse audiences, address non-traditional and new themes, and form connections to broader communities of embodied practitioners and artists. Performance becomes a vehicle for participating in public discourse, by allowing the body to articulate the beliefs, values and priorities of the Indian cultural community, and the community of dancers at large. In this process, dancers learn to conceive of themselves as simultaneously bound to upholding classic Hindu narratives and performative modes, while also bound to developing new techniques and applications of dance to reach broader audiences.

Performance provides dancers, at the individual and collective levels, contexts for negotiating the multiple identities of teacher, student, performer and choreographic interpreter, through interpersonal relationships that have deep meaning to practitioners. The use of performance to sustain relationships is also a theological practice, wherein the symbolic exchange, service, devotion and affection that dancers share with one another constitutes an opportunity for creating personal value and reciprocity.

### **Dance as Pedagogic and Theological Practice in America: Future Projects**

As dance communities continue to grow and develop in the Boston area and elsewhere in the United States, further study will be needed to understand new challenges, debates, opportunities and innovations in the use of dance pedagogies as practices of developing identity and theologies. Generational shifts in dance communities will be noteworthy sites of change and development. As second- and third-

generation South Asian American dancers ascend through their training and take on the role of dance *gurus* to younger generations, the practices of conveying authority, social order and social knowledge will likely change. The *guru-śiṣya* dialectic, as a conventional relationship in Hindu scriptural and social contexts, will likely be reimagined to accommodate for a range of “American” models of teacher-student relationships, under which second- and third-generation dancers themselves have grown up. As future generations of dancers draw from the educational, training and performance models of American schools and universities, sports, and other embodied and artistic genres, the culture of classical Indian dance classrooms, rehearsal studios, and performance venues will certainly change.

It remains to be seen whether dance communities will continue to uphold certain imagined or remembered Indian pedagogical contexts and practices as “ideals” for dance education in diaspora – and how closely these imagined contexts approximate developing contexts in India itself. Future generations may or may not choose to uphold the models and reasons for pedagogical techniques that were taught by their first-generation immigrant *gurus* –including the social, sensory, or scriptural sources of authority that legitimized certain constructions of social hierarchy, landscape, and public performance.

As dance communities in the Boston area and elsewhere continue to develop, resistance to and modifications of traditional Indian dance pedagogy may also emerge in unique ways. Future study of practices may reveal a radically different picture about dance studio culture, and the ways that power, language knowledge, embodied and discursive communication are used as part of the dance education experience. As demonstrated in the *Mahabharata* planning conversation featured in Chapter 5, currently

dance students and teachers often disagree on the importance of keeping dance narratives brief, concise, and plot-driven, versus preserving minor episodes from traditional framework narratives (such as the *rās līlā*) in choreography, even at the risk of rendering a performance that bores or confuses an audience.<sup>313</sup> Generational change among Indian classical dancers, and coordinating changes in the selection, continuation, adoption, omission, or alteration of current pedagogical and interpretive practices, will prove a rich field in need of much analysis as communities continue to grow.

Another topic worthy of future exploration is the increased transnational communication and transmission of ideas among American-based classical dancers, and dancers based in India and elsewhere in the world. The ubiquitous presence of satellite media channels, telecommunications, and the internet have fostered a global sense of community among classical Indian dancers; the development of media sources and internet forums such as Narthaki, KutcheriBuzz, *Sruti*, and others allow dancers from diverse international locations to communicate and stay abreast of developments in dance communities throughout the world.<sup>314</sup> These websites provide a number of interactive resources for dancers, including user discussion forums, directories of dance teachers and services, schedules of upcoming performances, and music and video file sharing utilities, so that dancers around the globe can participate in conversations, and keep abreast of current practices and news in the dance world. In future years, dance communities may experience new developments as a result of easy transnational communications; it will be

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<sup>313</sup> The Triveni Ensemble's planning conversation about the *Mahabharata* dance ballet is featured in Chapter 5, on pages 275-292.

<sup>314</sup> KutcheriBuzz, official home page, <http://www.kutcheribuzz.com> (accessed February 9, 2010); *Sruti Magazine*, eds. P. Sundaresan and S. Janaki (Chennai), official home page, <http://www.sruti.com> (accessed February 9, 2010), and Narthaki, official home page, <http://www.narthaki.com> (accessed February 9, 2010).

interesting to see how American dancers' lives and experiences will be affected by the knowledge that their practices are in conversation with the practices of dancers worldwide. American practitioners of classical Indian dance are currently a major presence on the global stage; it remains to be seen how American dancers will be perceived by practitioners of classical dance worldwide, and conversely, how American dancers will view the dance pedagogies that develop and change in other contexts. Additionally, teachers in this study articulated that certain pedagogic practices of dance now exist and flourish in the United States, in ways that they no longer can or do in India; this lament was heard repeatedly among the dance *gurus* of the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam*, in particular. The dance *gurus* often bemoaned the fact that Indian dance students' academic calendars and demands, a paucity of dance space, and financial constraints often limit dancers' ability to pursue advanced training. Additionally, they shared that many urban, educated Indians' regard of classical Indian dance as excessively "traditional" has made it unlikely for students to commit to a lengthy dance training workshop, the way that American dancers (who are free from school in the summer, and hungry to study Indian culture and art in an American environment often sparse in these cultural elements) commit to the summer dance camp. How will the traditional models and ideals that have taken hold in the United States be interpreted on a global stage, where tradition has at times been selectively altered? Will the high regard for these traditional landscapes and models of learning change? These questions will also need further research and analysis over time.

Another site in need of further analysis is the issue of gender in classical Indian dance communities, current and future. As stated at the beginning of this dissertation, I



did not start this project intending to focus on analysis of gender, although certainly the drastic imbalance of male dancers to female dancers in my fieldwork contexts drew notice. Clearly, as dance communities grow and change over time, the significance of dance pedagogy as pedagogy of religion and culture will be indelibly marked by the dominant presence of females in these contexts.

Linda Alcoff's work *Visible Identities* discusses the various social, biological and political forces that constitute individuals' identities, and makes the claim that the categories of race/ethnicity and gender/sex are unique in that they are visible aspects of identity.<sup>315</sup> She further emphasizes that race and gender are also embodied parts of individuals' experience, in ways that less visible forms of identity (such as political leanings, intellectual perspectives, or family status) may not be. The visibility and embodied qualities of race and gender, in Alcoff's system of analysis, constitute not only a "simple" difference in physical and social perception of individuals' identities, but rather, foster a major epistemic difference in world-view and practices, in ways that other identity factors would not. She writes:

Raced and gendered identities operate as epistemological perspectives or horizons from which certain aspects or layers of reality are made visible.... Racial and sexual difference is manifest precisely in bodily comportment, in habit, feeling, and perceptual orientation. These make up a part of what appears to me as the natural setting of all my thoughts. Perceptual practices are tacit, almost hidden from view, and thus almost immune from critical reflection.... The realm of the visible, or what is

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<sup>315</sup> Linda Martín Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and The Self* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

taken as self-evidently visible (which is how the ideology of social identities naturalizes their specific designations), is argued by Foucault to be the product of a specific form of perceptual practice, rather than the natural result of human sight.<sup>316</sup>

If Alcoff's theories on the fundamental impact of race and gender on world-view indeed hold in the case of classical Indian dance, then as communities of practitioners continue to grow and develop in the United States, the inherently gendered and raced identities of dancers will result in specific shifts in epistemological perceptions of the world, and the change or direction of practices to coordinate with these interpretations. Future analyses of gender, race and embodied identities in dance communities and dance pedagogy will chronicle the ways that dance has and will increasingly become a site of gendered religious learning, thinking, perception and practice within the Hindu diaspora community at large.

### **Practical Theology's Contributions in Studying Dance**

In "Attending Locally: Theologies in Congregations," James Nieman asserts, "theology operates as the innate and self-conscious language through which the church says, among other things, what it is and intends to be."<sup>317</sup> Nieman writes that communities' theological work constitutes an "identity discourse" wherein actions define and reflect their own self-perceived goals and missions.<sup>318</sup> Nieman's definition of

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<sup>316</sup> Alcoff, *Visible Identities*, 126.

<sup>317</sup> James Nieman, "Attending Locally: Theologies in Congregations," *International Journal of Practical Theology* (Fall 2002):198-225, 200-202.

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*

theology contains several elements which can be separated and analyzed as they pertain to the communities of dance practitioners featured in this dissertation.

Firstly, Nieman's definition describes practical theology as "innate" and "self-conscious," which harkens back to Bourdieuan understandings of the *habitus*. Practices, for members of a community, are normative actions by insiders that demonstrate socially accepted and authoritative modes of being for others within the same *habitus*. Nieman considers theology to be a "language," which in the case of dance is both discursive (verbal) and non-discursive (embodied or performative); theological knowledge is conveyed in dance pedagogy not only through semantic and verbal interactions, but also through gesture, social interactions, and body comportment. Nieman uses the word "church" to indicate participants in theological practices; in the instance of dance pedagogy, we might consider participants to be a community or school, teaching and performing a common genre of practice (in this case, classical dance). Nieman connects collective action to common values and identity; essentially, he contends here that individuals, communities and congregations make decisions everyday about the ways they choose to spend their time, and the priorities or statements they wish to uphold as a part of their personal systems of value. Lastly, theology is a means for the community to articulate, "what it is and what it intends to be." In other words, practices within a community comprise a prescriptive, authoritative declaration of interpretive identity. Practices not only define a community, but also reveal notions of ideal values and actions, goals and intended modes of being; that is, practices both reflect and create identities, values, and ideals. Nieman's definition of practical theology is helpful in understanding how practices (here, the pedagogies of dance) bring together self-

consciousness about normative behaviors and values, diverse modes of expression and communication, a sense of cohesive community, and most importantly, the idea of prescriptive knowledge and action.

In light of my research experiences and findings in this dissertation, I define practical theology as the dynamic, explicit and *prescriptive* actions in which practitioners engage, that speak to their priorities and values (both discursively through speech, and non-discursively through performance and social practices). In this project, communities of dancers choose to gather each day or each week to move, memorize, embody and transmit certain forms of knowledge and interpersonal relationships. Part of practical theology's value for this project has been what I call its "hermeneutic of prescription" – in other words, its broad assumption that communities' activities are not only indicative of their values and priorities, but they are *prescriptive* about values, priorities, and beliefs. This is a simple, but important, way of understanding the way that the framework of practical theology has contributed to this study of dance; no other field of inquiry makes this connection of action and prescription explicit in quite the same way. Dance practices are authoritative and normative in their own right, prescribing value, social structure, and "a virtue proper to the form" within communities in ways that are often related, but not dependent upon, the authority of written text, governing figures or bodies, or other external forces.<sup>319</sup> For communities of dancers, pedagogical practices do not merely reflect religious knowledge – they *stipulate* ideal religious, cultural, symbolic and ethical values.

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<sup>319</sup> Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 77-78.

As stated in Chapter 2, my intention in this project has not been to articulate a practical theology of dance myself, but rather to share and analyze practical theologies that my fieldwork communities themselves create and enact – that is their own rules and ideals about social organization.. To gather data about communities’ prescriptive acts of dance pedagogy, I depended heavily on ethnographic methods of observation, writing, and analysis. The tools of ethnography were vital to recording the details of practices – the minutiae of what was happening physically in the room, the characters who had the authority or knowledge to speak or act, and the individuals whose role was to respond, absorb, or react to this knowledge; ethnography enabled the observation of narrative and performance, power and authority, and the affirmation or subversion of dominant ideas and practices in the room. But if I had relied on ethnography alone, I would have taken cues about practices’ value and purpose within communities from the field informants themselves. My project would have been to analyze the categories, intentions and goals of practice as introduced to me by my field informants. Using practical theology, on the other hand, I applied an “external” notion about the prescriptive nature of communities’ acts to data gathered through ethnographic means. Without including a practical theological approach to ethnography, this project would have been rich and descriptive in its own right, but it would not have spoken in quite the same way about activities of theological reflection, and the way that dance pedagogies engender emerging, dynamic and diverse negotiations of symbolic value and worldviews. This explicit correlation of action to values made in practical theology – its recognition of the intended goals, senses of purpose, and creative properties inherent in communal practice – has provided this dissertation a framework within which to use other methods of field data collection and

analysis that do not often impose their own broad assumptions about field communities' lives and work, and therefore do not generate the same forms of data inherently. The theorizing of this connection between practice and broader discourses of identity has provided a central focus to this project, and has given more direction to the application of ethnographic research methods.

The three schools of classical Indian dance featured in this dissertation performed practical theology through their (discursive and non-discursive) statements of symbolic value and personal meaning. Dancers embody traditional social hierarchies and/or renegotiated their boundaries; dance pedagogies serve as a medium for imagining ideal landscapes and environments for learning and living, and for performative interpretations of religious and symbolic knowledge. Through dance, individuals find ways to negotiate, contest, and bridge the diverse goals they have about sharing their cultural ideas with others, and the numerous sources of religious and ethical authority in their lives, the multiple material, cultural and communicative elements from both Indian and American cultures, and Hindu and non-Hindu religious frameworks, that constitute their landscapes.

Historically, Indian dancers have used their practice of dance to respond to colonial history and views on the body, as a demonstration of Nationalist identity, and as an expression of Indian regional identity.<sup>320</sup> In India today, classical Indian dance is often performed at cultural festivals, particularly during the months of December and January, when dance and music festivals take place throughout South India. In the United States, dancers perform dance as an exhibition of Indian or Hindu identity and culture, but also

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<sup>320</sup> For more information on classical Indian dance, the Nationalist movement, and other historical trends in dance interpretation, see Matthew Harp Allen, "Rewriting the Script for South Indian Dance," *The Drama Review* 41, no. 3 (Fall 1997): 63-100.

as a means of understanding, reinterpreting, and prescribing religious knowledge. In the context of dance pedagogy, theological reflection took place in dancers' effort to interpret the numerous practices of dance – and other Hindu or Indian practices – with a greater sense of symbolic value.

But studying these communities with an eye towards theology provided an interpretive framework for analyzing dancers' practical actions, decisions, and interpretations as not simply Hindu, or American, or embodied, or authoritative – but as a search for other categories human feelings of connection, identity, and meaning in a world informed by multiple sources. Practitioners use dance as a resource through which to negotiate their identity within the categories of Hindu, Indian, American and so on, but also more abstractly, their insider knowledge of dance provides them a place within an ideological framework and community greater than themselves as individuals. Dance provides a medium for a process of introspection, and envisioning oneself as part of a broader whole, a larger cultural milieu or realm of experience that is shared by other practitioners worldwide. While for some individuals featured in this study, personal fulfillment, value and meaning are connected to the idea of divine entities or philosophical tenets, for the vast majority, value and meaning are predominantly situated in feelings of connection with a large social and cultural network, with which both intimate friends or strangers from across the globe might identify. I recall that several dancers, especially dancers in their teen and early adult years, often discussed the practices of their peers outside the dance world. High school-aged dancers talked about their friends who played team sports such as soccer or tennis, and the ways that they would excitedly discuss the experiences and elements of the insider culture of soccer –

details ranging from embodied culture (such as ball-handling techniques, physical conditioning exercises, or stories of injury), to the social hierarchies inherent in soccer (the authority of coaches, and the jostling of power upon electing new team captains or admitting neophyte players to the team), to exciting new experiences that colored their experience and feelings of identity within the soccer world (wearing their uniform for the first time, or meeting a soccer “icon” such as a World Cup player in person). Dancers shared similar narratives or identity cues with one another, discussing the embodied practices particular to their schools of dance, the social negotiations that took place between teachers, senior students, and less-experienced dancers in their social circles, the material culture aspects of dance such as selecting new *saris* to tailor into costumes or receiving their ankle-bells, or other experiences that cued expertise or symbolic capital, such as completing an *arangetram*, being invited to perform at prestigious venues and recitals during the Chennai music festival, or meeting a renowned professional dancer in person or taking private classes with a well-known *guru*. Whatever the details and particulars of these exchanges, membership in the dance world appeared to provide more than just a source of value stemming from religious knowledge or even personal feelings of accomplishment or fulfillment. Insider knowledge of life as a dancer provided practitioners with a sense of cohesive identity within a global, “named” community of classical Indian dancers, which is replete with its own culture of symbols, common experiences, social structure and cache. Practical theology provided a broader field of scholarly perspective to analyze dancers’ motivations for embodied practice – not only the prescriptive intentions of negotiating religious knowledge and categories, but also for moments of personal introspection, and seeking identity within a larger, global



community of practitioners and experiences.

### **New Directions: Practical Theology's Applicability for the Study of Hinduism**

The study of religious practices, as developed within practical theology, has numerous valuable applications and benefits in analyzing the lives, theologies, and developments in American Hindu communities. Practical theology was initially a radical and controversial development in the study of Euro-American Christian contexts, which privileged scriptural (Biblical) knowledge; the radical aspect of it was not in the analysis of practice or ritual per se, so much as the notion that theology could be created through practice. Perhaps in the study of Hindu communities, including those in the diaspora, the application of a practice-based method of (theological and ritual) analysis is not so radical, as practical experience, rather than scriptural knowledge, tends to be central to and explicitly valued in Hindu religious life. To approach Hindu communities through the analytic lens of practical theology is, in many ways, an indigenous method to comprehend sources of authority, social organization, religious interpretation, and value systems, in that it recognizes the powerful source of authority engendered by practices, which are themselves a “new canon” in Hindu diaspora experience. Practical theology – specifically, the analysis of religious practices as constitutive of religious life, worldview, and theology – is a new and potentially productive way to understand the religious lives of Hindus in the United States.

What might be innovative for the study of Hinduism is the explicit notion that religious practices create a theology and are prescriptive within a particular community. The academic study of Hinduism has come to accept as a given the “polytheistic” and

“poly-canonical” sources of authority in lived Hinduism. In diaspora Hindu communities, however, practice often emerges as the principal source of authority, in some cases more imbued with value and interpretive power than other traditional sources, such as sacred scripture. Dance is a critically important site of religious practice in the Hindu diaspora, as a primary context of religious and Indian cultural education. While other environments of religious learning might include home *puja*, Bal Vihar classes, visits to the temple, and other activities, dance offers a unique combination of communal and multigenerational social interaction, embodied practice and pedagogy, and the integration scriptural knowledge, cultural modes of body comportment, Hindu mythological narratives, and public presentation of self.

Through embodied practices of dance, communities make an engaged and active commitment in negotiating values and identity. It is often through deeds and actions, rather than discursive exchange or references to traditional authoritative sources, that individuals debate, refute, support, propagate, invent, or declare religious beliefs and theologies. These acts, and their intentionality and consequential nature, can be conceived of as theological behavior; they are prescriptive in scope, influencing other members of the community about religious and ethical ideals, and symbolic capital and value. Conceiving of religious practices and engagements as prescriptive behaviors, which often inform lived religion more directly than other sources, is a valuable and worthy supplemental mode of analysis to that of ethnographic observation. The study of practice provides new models for understanding subjects’ lives, relationships and religious motivations. Additionally, it provides new models for the relationships of fieldworkers and research subjects, particularly in “ethnography at home” scenarios, so

that both sides of the field are aware of their shared vocabularies, practices and experiences, and can move forward in clarifying to each other the variances in objectives and intellectual influences.

Conceiving of practices as a theology is useful to me both as a scholar and “ethnographer at home,” for all the aforementioned benefits – but also as a Hindu American, who knows from experience that Hindu Americans often feel they cannot dialogue with members of other religious or cultural communities or academic circles devoted to the study of religion, because of a critical gap in analytic vocabularies, shared symbols, or understanding. Joyce Flueckiger once anecdotally shared with me that an Hindu American student wistfully declared to her: “I wish we [Hindus] had a theology” – a remark that surprised her, firstly because it indicated the student’s lack of familiarity with the notion of “theology” and the fact that, indeed, his religious community *had* theologies of its own, but he did not recognize them as such. More broadly, the remark brought into sharp relief for me the chasm in vocabularies between Hindu communities and other religious groups for discussing personal religious experience.<sup>321</sup> This poignant statement indicates a stark gap in the insider discourse of diaspora Hindus and their neighboring religious communities about religious life, and yet also speaks to the desire for common vocabularies, so that communities can engage in dialogue and cross-cultural education about their respective traditions and practices. Recalling this student’s statement, I would contend that proposing the recognition of practices as a Hindu theology could be an innovative and empowering move, providing Hindu Americans with a means of relating to the vocabularies and authoritative structures of other religious

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<sup>321</sup> Joyce B. Flueckiger, personal telephone communication, Boston, MA, March 4, 2010.

communities (and the academic community, for that matter) when at times, other facets of religious belief, practice or scholarship appear to be vastly different, with few points of common ground or exchange. The application of practical theology can provide new directions in the study of Hinduism, enhance analytic models that have already contributed to the field of knowledge, and potentially foster new avenues of dialogue, awareness, and interaction between Hindu Americans, other American religious communities, and the academy.

## ILLUSTRATIONS

### Natyanjali School of Dance,

### Andover, Massachusetts



Figure 1: Chimaya Maruti Temple, Andover, MA  
Site of dance classes, Fall 2007-Summer 2008



Figure 2: Ballardvale Church, Andover, MA  
Site of dance classes, Fall 2008-present



Figure 3: Dance classroom in  
Chinmaya Maruti Temple



Figure 4: Dance classroom in  
Ballardvale Church



Figure 5: Dance recital in community  
room of a local public library



Figure 6: Parents observing their  
children in dance class

ILLUSTRATIONS

***Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam Summer Camp,***  
**Yogaville, Virginia**



Figure 1: Campus of the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam*, Yogaville, VA



Figure 2: Lotus temple and rural setting of the Satchidananda Ashram, Yogaville



Figure 3: Dance studio



Figure 4: Sri V. P. and Smt. Shanta Dhananjayan



Figure 5: Communal meals



Figure 6: Studio performance at the conclusion of camp session

## ILLUSTRATIONS

**Triveni School of Dance,  
Brookline, Massachusetts**



Figure 1: Dance studio at Triveni School of Dance, Brookline, MA



Figure 2: Dance studio at Triveni School of Dance, Brookline, MA



Figure 3: Triveni Ensemble rehearsal



Figure 4: *Arangetram* rehearsal



Figure 5: Performance of *Mahabharata* at Kresge Auditorium, MIT



Figure 6: Concluding Remarks at Triveni's Annual Show 2008

## Appendix A:

### Daily Ślokas (Sanskrit Verses) at the Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam

Dance camp students at the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam* learn several lengthy ślokas (Sanskrit verses or prayers) at the first week of camp. These ślokas are to be said daily at the start of dance class, before meals, and at the end of dance class each day. These ślokas along with English translations of the Sanskrit verses are provided to the students for memorization, and return campers often assist newcomers in memorizing them quickly, as there is no explicit class time dedicated to learning the ślokas; one is expected to catch on as time goes on.

In this appendix I provide the Sanskrit words along with the verbatim translations that the Dhananjayans give to their students as explanations for each śloka. In certain cases, as in with the Meal Prayer, no translation is provided to students; they simply learn the tonal recitation of the verse without any corresponding English rendering.

#### Morning ślokas

OM  
Gajānam bhūta ganādi sevitam  
kapita jambūphala sāra bhakṣitam  
Umā sutam śoka vināśa kāraṇam  
namāmi Vighneśvara pāda paṅkajam

Sarasvatī namastubhyam  
varade kāmārūpiṇī  
vidyārambham kariṣyāmi  
siddhir bhavatu me sadā

samudra vasane Devī  
parvatha sthana maṇḍalī  
nāṭyam kariṣye Bhūdevī  
pādākhādam kṣamasva me

#### English Translations

*Om.*  
*Ganesha's servants serve him.*  
*He eats different kinds of fruits.*  
*His mother is Parvati; he removes*  
*obstacles.*  
*I salute Ganesha's lotus feet.*  
*O Goddess of Knowledge, I bow to you.*  
*O giver of boons, your beauty is*  
*unmatchable.*  
*I am beginning to learn;*  
*May I achieve in life.*  
*O Goddess, whose clothes are the ocean,*  
*Whose mountains are your body –*  
*When I dance on you (Earth),*  
*Pardon me for stamping on you.*



GuruBrahma Gurur Viṣṇu  
Guru Devo Maheśvarah  
Guru sāksāt param Brahma  
tasmai Śrī Gurave namah

āṅgikam bhuvanam yasya  
vācīkam sarva vāṅgmayam  
āhāryam candra tārādi  
tam numas sāttvikam Śivam

Bharata kula bhāgya kalike  
bhāva rasānanda parinatā kāle  
jagadeka mohana kale  
jaya jaya rangādi Devate Devī

vighnānām nāṣanam kartum  
bhūtānam rakṣanāya ca  
Devānām tuṣkaye cāpi  
prekṣa tānām vibhūtayet

śreyase nāya kasyātra  
pātra saṁrakṣanāya ca  
ācārya śikṣa siddhyartham  
puspanjalim adhārabet

Om sahanāvavatu sahanau bhunaktu  
saha vīryam karavāvahe  
tejasvināvadi tam astu  
mā vid visāvahai  
OM śanti śanti śantih

### Evening *Shloka* at the Close of Class

Viṣṇu śakti samudpanne  
sarva varṇa mahītale  
aneka ratna saṁpanne  
Bhūmi Devī namostute

*Guru is Brahma, Guru is Vishnu,  
Guru is Maheshvara, Destroyer of Evil.  
Guru is Brahma, who creates,  
Therefore to you, Guru, I bow.*

*That One, whose body is the world,  
Whose speech is sound,  
Whose ornaments are the moon and stars,  
To that Shiva, I bow.*

*Embodiment of prosperity to Bharata's  
family (humankind),  
Out of the expressions, one who brings  
the one and only art in enchanting the  
earth,  
Victory to you, the world is the stage, and  
we are the actors.*

*To destroy all obstacles,  
And for protection from bad omens,  
And to please the gods,  
I look toward them (the gods).*

*We offer flowers  
to continue learning well.\*  
(no cohesive rendering provided here; students  
paraphrased a verbal explanation into notes)*

*Om. Let us live together, let us eat  
together, let us act nobly together.  
Let us not feel anger towards one another.  
Let us  
Let there be peace, peace, peace.*

### English Translation

*O Earth-Goddess,  
Who is created from Vishnu's powers,  
Who is the embodiment of all creation,  
And who is made of beautiful jewels,  
To you, I bow.*

**Meal Prayer**

OM annapurne sadāpurne  
Śankara prāna Vallabhe  
jñāna vairāgya siddhyartham  
bhikṣām dehi ca Pārvatī  
mātā ca Pārvatī devī  
pitā devo maheśvara  
bāndava Śiva bhaktah  
svadeśo bhuvanatrayam  
hari om tat sat bramhārpanamastu  
lokā samastāḥ sukhino bhavantu

**English Translation**

*(no translation provided)*

## Appendix B:

### “Yēn Paḷlikoṇḍīr Ayyā” (*rāga*: Mōhana, *Bauli* and *Kāpi*; *tāla*: Ādi)

This item is a *padam* that praises Sri Ranganatha, an incarnation of Lord Vishnu depicted as reclining in deep slumber. Sri Ranganatha is the presiding deity of the Sri Ranganatha Swami temple in Srirangam, near the city of Tirucirapalli, Tamil Nadu. The rivers Kaveri and Kollidam converge at this geographic site.<sup>322</sup>

The song’s lyrics are adapted from the *Irāmanāṭakam* of Arunachala Kavirayar, The structure of the song is characterized by a use of speculative statements, represented by the Tamil verbal ending “-ō,” (“could it be ...?”). In the lyrics, the speaker, a devotee of Ranganatha, repeatedly begs the Lord to share why he is sleeping so deeply. He then speculates about the reasons that Lord Vishnu might be slumbering in such a manner, recounting the various heroic and difficult deeds performed in his earthly incarnations. The speaker first addresses Vishnu as Rama, and recounting the various narratives of the *Ramayana*, inquires about whether it was in performing these mighty physical acts that the Lord exhausted himself. The speaker then turns to Vishnu’s earthly incarnation as Krishna and similarly wonders if it was the heroic acts in this form that caused such fatigue.

The Dhananjayans choreographed “Yēn Paḷlikoṇḍīr Ayyā” in the 1970’s, and have incorporated it into several of their dance ballets; they also teach it to their advanced students as a solo or group item for recitals. The Dhananjayans taught “Yēn Paḷlikoṇḍīr Ayyā” to the advanced camp participants in 2007, and provided this basic translation of

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<sup>322</sup> K. R. Srinivasan, *Temples of South India* (New Delhi, National Book Trust, 1972), and George Michell, *The Hindu Temple* (Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1988).

the lyrics to guide students' study of the piece. The item was popular with students, in that it provided a chance to review both the narratives and the dance movements necessary in portraying stories from both the *Ramayana* and mythology of Krishna.

**Mōhana rāga sāhitya (Introduction):**

Yēn Paḷḷikoṇḍīr Ayyā  
Śrī Raṅganātā  
Yēn Paḷḷikoṇḍīr Ayyā

*Why do you sleep so deeply,  
O Lord Ranganatha?  
Why do you sleep so deeply?*

Āmbal pūṭṭa sahya parvata naḍuvile  
Avataritta ireṇḍaṭṭRu naḍuvile

*Amidst mountains replete with blossoming  
water-lilies,  
In the confluence of two rivers,  
You appear (sleeping).<sup>323</sup>*

Yēn Paḷḷikoṇḍīr Ayyā  
Śrī Raṅganātā  
Yēn Paḷḷikoṇḍīr Ayyā

*Why do you sleep so deeply,  
O Lord Ranganatha?  
Why do you sleep so deeply?*

**Bauli rāga sāhitya (verse on Rama):<sup>324</sup>**

Kausīkan soḷ kuRittataRkō

*(Do you sleep on account of fatigue) from  
abiding by Viswamitra's difficult request?*

arakki kuraiyil ambu terittataRkō

*(Or is it) exhaustion from the strain of  
aiming your arrow at the heart of the  
fearsome Tataka?*

Īsan villai muRittataRkō?

*Is it from snapping the great bow of Siva in  
two?*

Parasurāman uRam paRittataRkō

*Or perhaps, from divesting Parasuraman  
of his mighty ego?*

māśillāda Mitilēśan peṇṇuḍan vazhi  
naḍanta ilaipō

*Is your fatigue due to following the path of  
the blameless daughter of the King of  
Mithila (Sita)?*

dūśillāda Guhan ōdathile Gangai turai

*Or is it tiredness from crossing the river*

<sup>323</sup> This verse provides the geographic context of Srirangam for the song, and also references the reclining Ranganatha as presiding deity of the temple there.

<sup>324</sup> For further context and translations of these narratives, consult Swami Venkatesananda, *The Concise Ramayana of Valmiki* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988).

kaḍanda ilaip̄pō

*Ganga, in the canoe of the faultless  
Guhan?*

Mīsuramām chitrakūṭa sikarakkal  
misai kaḍanta ilaip̄pō

*Is your exhaustion due to climbing the peak  
of the mountains near Chitrakuta?*

kāśinimēl Mārīcan oḍiya gati toḍarnta  
ilaip̄pō

*Or is it due to the brisk pace with which  
you ran after the evil Marica?*

ōdi kaḷait̄tō dēviyai tēdi ilait̄tō

*Did you waste away, running in quest of  
Sita?*

marāṅgaḷ ēzhum tulait̄tō

*Or while striking down the seven mighty  
trees?*

kaḍalai kaṭṭi vaḷait̄tō ilangai ennum

*Was it when, having cross the river, you  
surrounded Lanka?*

kāvalmāṅagarai iḍitta varuttamō

*Is it due to regret over defeating the  
guardians of Lanka?*

Rāvanādiyarai aḍitta varuttamō

*Or, is it regret over mightily destroying  
Ravana and his forces?*

Yēn Paḷlikoṅḍir Ayyā  
Śrī Raṅganātā

*Why is it that you sleep so deeply,  
O Lord Ranganatha?*

**Kāpi rāga sahitya (verse on  
Krishna).<sup>325</sup>**  
Maduraiyile varum kaḷaiyō

*Are you spent from traveling all the way to  
Mathura?<sup>326</sup>*

mudalai vāi magalaḷai tarum pērum  
kaḷaiyō

*Is it great fatigue at having saved the infant  
child from the mouth of the crocodile?*

etir etirē porum kaḷaiyō  
kandRai eḍiteRinta pērum kaḷaiyō

*Is it tiredness from facing in battle a  
mighty demon, who was in the guise of the  
bull?*

Putuvaiyāna mulai uṇḍu pēyin uyir  
pōkki alitt̄rō

*Did you exhaust yourself,  
vanquishing the life of the  
demonness Putana by sucking dry*

<sup>325</sup> For information on these narratives, consult Cornelia Dimmitt and J. A. B. van Buitenen, trans., *Classical Hindu Mythology: A Reader in the Sanskrit Puranas* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1978). Dimmitt and van Buitenen's reader provides translations of several, but not all, of the Krishna narratives provided here.

<sup>326</sup> This line could refer to Mathura, the town in North India where a number of events in the *Mahabharata* took place. However, the Tamil pronunciation could also refer to the South Indian city of Madurai, where Vishnu is said to have appeared in his form of Azhagar.

	<i>her breast milk?</i>
atira oḍi varum kuruvi vāyai ireṇḍākki alittirō	<i>Or are you tired from defeating the great crane, whose gait made the earth tremble, by splitting his broad beak in two?</i>
tutisai āyarkaḷai kākka vēṇḍi malai tūkki alittirō	<i>Are you fatigued from lifting the mountain, in an effort to protect the penitent cowherds?</i>
jatisai kālināl Kāliṅgan maṇi muḍi tākki alittirō	<i>Are you spent from assaulting the serpent Kaliya with your dancing feet?</i>
marutam sāytō	<i>Is it from splitting the trees apart?</i>
āḍu māḍugaḷ mēyttō	<i>Or from herding the cattle to pasture?</i>
sakatuRulai tēyttō	<i>Is it from wearing out the demon who appeared in the form of a wheel?</i>
Kaṅcan uyirai māyttō	<i>Is it from taking the life of the wicked Kamsa?</i>
Arjunanikkai sāratiyāy tēr viḍitta varuttamō	<i>Are you filled with regret over driving the chariot, as Arjuna's charioteer?</i>
pōrile cakram eḍutta varuttamō	<i>Or is it regret over hurling your mighty discus in battle?</i>
Yēn Paḷlikoṇḍir Ayyā Śrī Raṅganātā Yēn Paḷlikoṇḍir Ayyā	<i>Why is it that you sleep so deeply, O Lord Ranganatha? Why do you recline in such deep sleep?</i>

## Glossary

The following glossary provides brief descriptions of special terminology used throughout the dissertation. Entries are alphabetized according to Roman script.

Guide:

(S) denotes a word of Sanskrit origin

(T) denotes a Tamil word

(Tel) denotes a Telugu word

(M) denotes a Malayali word

(H) denotes a Hindi word

(?) denotes a word of unknown South Asian origin

**A**

*abhinaya* – (S) facial expression

*ācārya* – (S) teacher

*aḍavu* – (T) a basic movement combination; a building block of Indian dance choreography

*Ādi* – (S) name of an eight-beat rhythm cycle used in Carnatic music

Advaita Vedanta – (S) Hindu monist or “modified nondualist” philosophy, first purported by 14<sup>th</sup> century A.D. thinker Shankaracharya

*āhāram* – (S) the act of dressing oneself beautifully; this term is often used in reference to the elaborate practices of costuming in dance

Akkā – (T) “elder sister;” a term of respect in dance contexts for female teachers and others

*alaṅkāram* – (S) the act of beautifying oneself through makeup, jewelry, and costume; this term is used in discussions about adorning oneself for stage performances

*alapadma hasta* – (S) a hand gesture used in dance

*alārippu* – (T) a short, basic choreographed item in dance emphasizing *nṛtta*, or abstract movements

“Alurulu Kuriyaga” or “Alurulu ” – (Tel) a padam, or expressive dance item, celebrating the Hindu goddess Lakshmi

Andhra Pradesh (pron. Āndhrā Pradeś) – a state in South India where the language Telugu is spoken; the Kuchipudi style of classical Indian dance originated in Andhra Pradesh

*añjali hasta* – (S) the hand gesture of folded palms, usually held at chest level

*Aṅṅā* – (T) literally “elder brother,” it is a term of respect in dance contexts used toward male teachers and elders

*araimaṅḍi* – (T) literally “half posture;” describes the sustained demi-plie position that is characteristic of classical Indian dance movements

*arangetram* (pron. *araṅgetRam*) – (T) literally “ascent of the stage;” a dancer’s first solo debut recital performing a full *mārgam*, or menu, of choreographed items

Arjuna (often pron. Arjun) – (S) the protagonist of the *Mahabharata*; one of the Pandavas, or five brothers, who gain the assistance of Krishna to face the Kauravas in battle

*asaṃyukta hasta* – (S) the single-handed gestures used in narrative sequences of dance

*Aṭāṅā* – name of a *rāga*, or melodic key, used in Carnatic music

*avatar* (pron. *avatār* or *avatāra*) – an earthly incarnation of a Hindu god or goddess

## **B**

Bal Vihar (pron. Bāl Vihār) – (S) Hindu “Sunday school,” or religious classes for children; often held at temples and community centers

“Battu” (pron. Baṭṭu) – (H) An item of Odissi choreography

Bauli – (S) name of a *rāga*, or melodic key, used in Carnatic music

*bindi* – (H) a forehead marking worn by women; *bindis* often come in a disposable sticker style, and in numerous shapes and colors

Bhagavad Gita (pron. Bhagavad Gītā) – (S) a sacred scripture of Hinduism, which narrates a conversation between Arjuna and Krishna at the end of the Mahabharata war

*bhajan* – (S) a Hindu devotional hymn, sung communally

*bhakti* – (S) “devotion”

*bhangra* – (?) a genre of folk dance from Northwest India

Bharata – (S) a ubiquitous author and scribe figure in Hindu mythology, Bharata is said to have received the oral text of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* from Lord Shiva, and written it into scripture for the benefit of mankind



Bharata Kalaanjali (pron. Bharata Kalāñjali) – (S) an academy of Bharata Natyam dance, founded by Shanta and V. P. Dhananjayan in Chennai, India

Bharata Natyam (pron. Bharata Nātyam) – (S) a genre of classical Indian dance from Tamil Nadu, India

*bhāva* – (S) often translated as “mood,” or “emotional state;” a visceral and emotional feeling elicited by the perception of an artistic expression imbued with *rasa*

Bhumi Devi (pron. Bhūmī Devī) – (S) a Hindu goddess who is the anthropomorphic embodiment of the Earth

*brahmacārya* – (S) a traditional life-stage, in Hindu pedagogical thought, often described as “celibate studenthood;” during the stage of *brahmacārya*, certain strands of society would engage in concentrated study of the Vedas and other forms of knowledge under the tutelage of a *guru*, or teacher

## C

calangai puja – (T) a *puja*, or ceremony, wherein a young dancer first receives her ankle-bells from her *guru* (teacher) in a symbolic act of entering into dance pedagogy

Carnatic (pron. Karnātik) – style of Indian classical music that developed in South India

*Che!* – (T) an expression of disgust

Chinmaya Mission – an international religious organization, centered on the teachings of Swami Chinmayananda, an Advaita Vedanta philosopher

codification / code – a Bourdieuan term for common practices and elements in a society which are regarded as authoritative, and repeated by members of the society; “a virtue proper to the form”

## D

*dāñḍiya-rās* – (H) a genre of folk dance that hails from the state of Gujarat, in Northwest India

*dharma* – (S) often translated as “duty,” “ethics,” “law,” or “virtue”

*Dharmamaa?* – (Tel) “Is it fair?” A word repeated in the lyrics of the dance item “Sarasijakshulu”

*Dharmasūtras* – (S) “Law Codes;” a Hindu scripture dating to c. 3<sup>rd</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E., that contains codes of conduct

*dhoti* – (T) a long, rectangular piece of cotton cloth worn by men as a garment upon their lower bodies

*doxa* – a Bourdieuan term for the code of normative behaviors, beliefs and practices in a society

Draupadi (pron. Draupadī) – (S) the wife of the five Pandavas, and a pivotal figure in the Hindu epic *Mahabharata*

Drona or Dronacharya (pron. Drona or Dronācārya) – (S) the teacher of the Pandavas and Kauravas in the *Mahabharata* epic

*dupatta* (pron. *dupaṭṭa*) – (?) a long sash worn by women along with the *salvar kameez*, or long tunic and flowing pants; in dance contexts, students often tie a *dupatta* tightly around their waist as part of the practice attire for dance class

Duryodhana (often pron. Duryodhan) – (S) one of the antagonists of the *Mahabharata*, and a leader of the Kaurava clan

## **E**

economy of symbolic goods – a Bourdieuan phrase describing the exchange of symbolic capital between parties in a *habitus*

euphemism – a Bourdieuan term for individuals’ tacit, practical adherence and propagation of authoritative and normative values within a society

## **F**

field – in a Bourdieuan context, a field is the site of symbolic exchange, struggle and action

## **G**

“Ganapati Vandana” – (S) a brief, invocatory item of classical dance choreography in honor of Lord Ganesha

*garbā* – (S) a genre of folk dance originating in Gujarat, Northwest India, and practiced predominantly by women

*Gīta Govinda* (pron. *Gītā Govinda*) – (S) a 14<sup>th</sup> century compendium of *bhakti* (devotional) poetry, authored by Jeyadeva, in praise of the romance between Lord Krishna and his consort, Radha

*gopī* – (S) a milkmaid or female member of the cowherd community; usually *gopīs* are pivotal characters in narratives about Krishna

*gopikā* – (S) see *gopī*

*guru* – (S) a teacher or master-teacher in Hindu and Indian contexts; *guru* is the word used in texts such as the *Dharmasūtras* and *Y* to describe teachers of Vedic and philosophical knowledge; it is also the word used in dance contexts to describe advanced teachers of dance

*gurukulam* – (S) literally “the family of the guru” the *gurukulam* is a traditional environment of pedagogy in the Hindu imagination, where the student resides with the *guru* and his family while engaged in study

## **H**

*habitus* – a Bourdieuan term for the communally-recognized, community-authorized structures of individual and collective practices that create a normative order within a community

*Hari Om* – (S) a verbal greeting used by followers of Hindu philosophical teachers, including Swami Satchidananda

*harikathā kālākṣepam* – (S) a classical genre of dramatic oral storytelling, indigenous to South India

*hasta* – (S) a hand gesture used in dance

*hasta viniyoga* – (S) see *viniyoga*

*hatha yoga* – (S) a particular branch of yoga focused upon physical postures, breathing exercises, and meditative sounds

*heterodoxy* – in a Bourdieuan context, *heterodoxy* refers to the segment of society that remains marginal, and without dominant control of the authoritative *praxes* that order the *habitus*

Hindusthani (pron. Hindusthāni) – (S) a branch of Indian classical music that developed in North India

Hitopadesha (pron. Hitopadeśa) – (S) the final portion of the *Mahabharata* epic described in the *Bhagavad Gita*, wherein Krishna pacifies a troubled Arjuna on the battlefield by revealing his cosmic form as Lord Vishnu

## **I**

interpathy – a term introduced by Mary Clark Moschella to describe a dialogical process of ethnography within pastoral settings, wherein fieldworker and research partner recognize their differences and diverse backgrounds as part of the ethnographic experience

## **J**

*japa* – (S) a form of meditation where Hindu devotees recite a sacred syllable, verse or name while counting their repetitions on a *mala* (small garland similar to a Catholic rosary bead)

*jati* – (S) a unit of *aḍavu* (*abstract dance movements*) strung together

*jatīsvaram* – (S) an item of classical dance choreography focused on *nṛtta* (abstract, dynamic dance movements)

*jāvaḷi* – (T) a type of *padam* (lyrical choreography) that addresses romantic or erotic themes from Hindu narratives

## **K**

“*Kai tūkki!*” – (T) literally, “Raise your arm!”

Kalakshetra (pron. Kalākṣetra) – (S) literally “Abode of Arts,” Kalakshetra is a center for advanced instruction classical Indian arts, located in Chennai, South India. Kalakshetra’s course offerings include training in visual arts, music, dance, and other performance styles

Kalāvati – (S) name of a *rāga*, or melodic key, used in Carnatic music

Kannada (pron. Kaṇṇaḍā) – (K) an South Indian language spoken by communities from the state of Karnataka

Kāpi – (S) name of a *rāga*, or melodic key, used in Carnatic music

*karkaṭa hasta* – (S) a double-handed gesture used in dance

*kaṭakāmukha* – (S) a *hasta*, or hand gesture, used in dance

*kaṭakāmukha bheda* – (S) a variation on the *kaṭakāmukha* gesture. *Bheda* means “variation,” and the word *bheda* is often affixed to the names of other *hastas* to describe slight deviations from the normative forms of gestures

Kathak (pron. Kattak) – (?) a classical dance style native to North India

Kathakali (pron. Katakkaḷī) – (M) a classical performance genre that hails from Kerala, South India, and is practiced predominantly by men

Kaurava (pron. colloquially as Kaurav) – the antagonists of the *Mahabharata* epic, and cousins of the protagonist Pandavas

*kīrtanā* – (S) a brief, melodic song in Carnatic music, that is often set to dance using lively sequences of movement combined with narrative interludes

Krishna (pron. Kṛṣṇa) – (S) an incarnation of the Hindu deity Vishnu, and predominant speaker of the Bhagavad Gita; tales about Krishna are popular in the dance world as they provide opportunities for depicting numerous facial expressions, movements and narrative episodes

Krishna *lila* (pron. Kṛṣṇa *līlā*) – (S) the episodes of flirtatious, carefree dance and play that take place between Krishna and the *gopikās* (milkmaids); also known as *rās līlā*

Kuchipudi (pron. Kūcipudi) – (Tel) a classical dance style that hails from Andhra Pradesh

*kuṃkum* – (S) vermillion powder; a red substance used for drawing forehead markings in Hindu practice

*kuñjalam* – (T) a long, tassel-like head ornament that is braided into dancers' hair as part of their costuming for performances

*kurta* – (S) a long tunic worn by men as a part of Indian dress

*kurti* – (S) a short, flowing tunic worn by women with trousers or jeans; a contemporary popular item of Indian ethnic dress

*kuṭṭi* – (T) a word used adjectivally to mean “tiny” or “child-like;” also used nominatively and/or as a term of endearment to indicate “little one” or “youngster”

## **M**

“Maha Ganapati Sthuti” – (S) a brief, invocatory refrain to Lord Ganesha, often used in dance contexts to open performances

*Mahabharata* (pron. *Mahabhārata* or colloquially, *Mahabhārat*) – (S) a lengthy Hindu epic, which serves as a framework story for numerous narratives about Hindu gods, heroic figures, antagonists and events

Mahalakshmi – (S) a form of the Hindu goddess Lakshmi, consort of Vishnu and bestower of wealth, beauty, and auspiciousness

*māla* – (S) a garland

Malayalam (pron. Maḷayāḷam) – (M) the language spoken by communities in Kerala, South India

“Mamavathu Sri Sarasvati” (pron. “Māmavatu Śrī Sarasvatī”) – (S) a short invocatory item in dance honoring the goddess Sarasvati, consort of Lord Brahma, who is said to bestows learning and knowledge on devotees

*Mānava Dharma Śāstra* – see *Manusmṛti*

Mandāri – (S) name of a *rāga*, or melodic key, used in Carnatic music

Manipuri (pron. Maṇipūrī) û (S) a genre of classical Indian dance originating in Northeast India

*Manusmṛti* - (S) also known as the *Mānava Dharma Śāstra*, or “Codes of Law of Man,” the *Manusmṛti* is a compendium of law codes governing ideal ethical and social behavior. It was composed c. 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E.-3<sup>rd</sup> century C.E.

*mārgam* – (S) literally “path, a *mārgam* is an authoritative “menu” or repertoire of classical dance choreographies that are imbued with authority and significance within a particular style or school of dance. A typical Bharata Natyam *mārgam* includes items such as *alāriṭṭu*, *jaṭisvaram*, *padam*, *varṇam*, and *tillānā*

*Mārgazhi* – (T) a Tamil festival honoring the end of a lunar year

*mayūra* – (S) a *hasta* (hand gesture), often used in depicting peacocks

*miśra cāpu tāla* – (S) a seven-beat cycle used in Carnatic music

Mōhaṇam – (S) name of a *rāga*, or melodic key, used in Carnatic music

Mohini Attam (pron. Mōhiṇī Āṭṭam) – (S) a classical genre of dance from Kerala, South India, practiced exclusively by women

*mṛdangam*- (T) a double-skinned percussion instrument used in Carnatic music, and played with the fingers of both hands

*mṛgaśīrṣa* – (S) a *hasta* (hand gesture) used to depict animals such as cattle, horses, and deer

*mudra* – (S) another word for hand gesture

*mūrti* – (S) a three-dimensional image of a Hindu deity or sacred figure, often used in worship

Murugan – (T) a popular male deity in South India, who is described as Shiva’s second son and younger brother of Ganesha

*murukku* – (T) a savory fried snack

## N

*namaskāram* – (S) 1. a series of embodied movements executed by dancers at the start and end of all practices and classes; 2. a prostration or touching of the feet, generally performed by students to teachers, children to parents and other elders, or devotees to sacred figures; 3. a simple gesture of folded palms at the chest, often used in greeting; 4. a verbal greeting

Nataraja (pron. Naṭarāja) – (S) the name of Shiva when in his form as cosmic dancer

*nāṭya* – (S) often translated as “dance” or “dramatic acting;” one of three categories of classical Indian dance movements

*Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam* – (S) the summer camp for students of Bharata Natyam held each summer at the Satchidananda Ashram in rural Virginia

*nāṭyācārya* – (S) “teacher of dance,” a pivotal figure in the organization of professional dance troupes as described in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*

Natyanjali (pron. Nāṭyāñjali) – (S) literally “an offering of dance,” Natyanjali is the name of Jeyanthi Ghatraju’s dance school in Andover, Massachusetts

*Nāṭyaśāstra* – (S) the “Science of Dance,” a scriptural canon composed between the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E. and 4<sup>th</sup> century C.E. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* is an authoritative Sanskrit scripture governing various aspects of performance and aesthetics.

*Nāṭyaveda* – (S) the “Science of Dance;” the *Nāṭyaśāstra*

*nṛtta* – (S) one of three categories of classical Indian dance movements, *nṛtta* consists of sharp, rhythmic movements that give aesthetic interest to dance items but do not inherently convey a story or emotion

*nṛtya* – (S) another of the three categories of Indian classical dance movements, *nṛtya* entails graceful, lyrical combinations of facial expressions, hand gestures, and embodied postures used to depict characters and portray stories

“Nṛityalaya” (pron. “Nṛityalaya”) – (S) literally “abode of expression,” “Nṛityalaya” is an item of Bharata Natyam dance choreography

## **O**

Odissi (pron. Ōḍissi) – (?) a form of classical dance originating from the Northeast Indian state of Orissa

Ōṇam – (M) a colorful harvest festival, celebrated in the Indian state of Kerala

Orissa (pron. Ōrissā) – a state in Northeastern India

*orthodoxy* – in Bourdieu’s work, the *orthodoxy* is a section of society that has dominance and power to declare (either discursively or through practice) certain customs, modes of behavior and living as authoritative and proper

## **P**

Pada *varṇam* – (S) a lengthy item of Bharata Natyam dance

*padam* – (S) a short, expressive item of dance wherein the dancer focuses on conveying a narrative through expressions and gestures

*pallavi* (or *paḷḷavi*) – (S) an item of Odissi choreography

*pallu* – (T) the one- to one-and-a-half meter segment of a *sari* that is worn across the chest, and down the shoulder; in dance contexts, the *pallu* of a *sari* is often wrapped tightly around the waist to assist dancers in keeping their posture erect

*pañcama veda* – (S) literally “fifth Veda;” the *Nāṭyaśāstra* is often regarded as a fifth Veda (authoritative canon) in Hindu scriptural discourse

Pandava (pron. Pāṇḍava or Pāṇḍav) – (S) the Pandavas are the five brothers who are the protagonists of the epic *Mahabharata*

*parampara* – (S) a lineage, especially in the context of pedagogical lineages of teachers and students

pastoral – referring to the practice and study of Christian ministry and communities

*patāka hasta* – (T) a hand gesture used in dance

*pavadai* (pron. *pavadai* or *pavada*) – (T) a traditional style of dress worn by young girls in South Indian cultures; the *pavadai* is a long, loose-fitting skirt which has a tight waistband, and flows down to the ankles. *Pavadais* are made with a variety of fabrics, from cottons for daily wear, to fine Kanchipuram silks for special occasions.



*poṭṭu* – (T) a forehead marking, especially as seen in women

practical theology – a branch of humanistic inquiry focused on the study of religious practices in communities, with the assumption that that theology and value systems are not merely reflected and rearticulated in practice, but are also created through practice

*prasāda* – (S) the “leavings” of food and other offerings used in *puja* and other ceremonies; where normally leftover food would be considered impure, *prasāda* (esp. the “leavings” of a deity) is regarded as a sacred substances

*praxis* – Bourdieuan term for a social practice

*puja* (pron. *pūjā* in Sanskrit, or *pūjai* in Tamil) - a traditional Hindu ceremony of worship, often performed in the home

*puṣpāñjali* – (S) a simple invocatory item, often taught to beginner dance students and performed at the start of dance productions

## **R**

Radha (pron. Rādhā) – (S) a *gopikā*, and principal romantic interest of Krishna

*rāga* – (S) the term for melodic keys in Carnatic or Hindusthani music

Rāgamālikā – (S) literally “a garland of *rāgas*;” describes Carnatic music selections where a shift of key occurs

*Ramayana* (pron. Rāmāyaṇa, or colloquially, *Rāmāyaṇ*) – (S) a Hindu epic story about the adventures of Rama, an incarnation of Vishnu

*raṅga praveśam* – (S) literally “entrance onto the stage;” a dancer’s solo debut (see *arangetram*)

*rās śabdham* – (S) an item of dance choreography depicting Krishna’s *Rās līlā* (flirtatious play) with the milkmaids

*rās līlā* – (S) Krishna’s flirtatious, playful dancing with the *gopikās* (milkmaids); a common and loved scene from Krishna’s narratives in Hindu imagination

*rasa* – (S) literally “flavor” or “essence;” the aesthetic of an emotional state of being

*rasam* – (T) a peppery, tomato-flavored broth served over steamed white rice in South Indian cuisine

*rasikā* – (S) a connoisseur of Indian arts who possesses knowledge of *rasa* (Indian aesthetic) theory, and can apply his or her knowledge to gain a deep understanding of performance

*rudrākṣa* – (S) a short garland of beads made from the seeds of an evergreen tree; *rudrākṣa* garlands are often used in Hindu contexts of *japa* (meditation) the same way that Catholics use rosary beads in prayer

Rukmini Devi Arundale – (1904-1986) The founder of the Kalakshetra Institute, and a pivotal figure in the revival of Bharata Natyam in the 1930's

## S

*śabdām* – (S) a type of *padam* (lyrical dance composition) wherein a dancer principally uses expression and gesture to narrate a story

*sāhitya* – (S) a verse or refrain of a Carnatic music composition

Sai society – an international religious organization centered on the teachings of Sri Sathya Sai Baba of Puttaparthi

*sakhī* – (S) the female companion or handmaiden of a heroine in a story; a conventional figure in Sanskrit drama and classical Indian dance

*salvar kameez* (pron. *salvār kamīz*) – (H) a long, flowing tunic worn over loose-fitting drawstring pants; a typical mode of dress for classical Indian dance classes and practice

*sāmbār* – (T) a thick, lentil-based stew that contains vegetables, and is served over steamed white rice; a staple of South Indian cuisine

*saṃyukta hasta* – (S) two-handed gestures in dance

*sandhi* – (S) the phonetic joining of sounds and words in Indian languages

*saṅgītam* – (S) literally “music,” *saṅgītam* is the term used to describe “singing classes” at the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam* dance camp

*sannyāsin* – (S) a renunciate who has dedicated his or her life to philosophical contemplation

Sanskrit or Saṃskṛtam – (S) a language of India; many authoritative scriptural works in Hinduism are composed in Sanskrit

“Sarasijakshulu” – (T) a Bharata Natyam dance item

Sarasvati (pron. Sarasvatī) – (S) a Hindu goddess who is the consort of Brahma, and benevolent guardian of education and knowledge

*satsaṅg* – (S) a communal assembly or gathering, usually in the context of religious or spiritual communities

Sathya Sai Baba – (1926- ) a spiritual leader from India; his following is known as the International Sai Organization

“Satyabhama” / Satyabhama (pron. “Satyabhāmā” / Satyabhāmā – (S) Satyabhama is the wife of Krishna, and an important character in Kuchipudi dance repertoire. An item that is popular at the Triveni School of Dance provides several of Satyabhama’s narratives. IT is known simply by the title “Satyabhama”

Sāveri – (S) name of a *rāga*, or melodic key, used in Carnatic music

*seva* – (S) Hindu notion of religious or philanthropic service

“Shakti Tandav” – (S) an item of Kuchipudi choreography demonstrating the cosmic dancing of Shiva and Parvati

Shakuni (pron. Śakuni) – (S) the uncle of the Kauravas in the *Mahabharata*, and instigator of a fraudulent game of dice that leads to conflict, and ultimately, war between the Pandavas and Kauravas

Shiva (pron. Śiva) – (S) a major male deity in Hinduism, and the presiding deity of dance and performance arts

*śikhara* – (S) a hand gesture in dance

*siṃhamukha* – (S) a hand gesture in dance, used to depict animals like cattle, horses, and deer

*śiṣya* – (S) a disciple or student in traditional Hindu models of pedagogy; the *śiṣya* places himself or herself in the care of a guru, who oversees religious or practical instruction

*śloka* – (S) a Sanskrit verse or prayer, usually composed in meter

social capital – Bourdieuan term for the symbolic value that an individual accrues through social exchange, events and practices in a *habitus*

*soḷ kaṭṭu* – (T) the verbal syllables and sounds chanted during dance instruction to indicate different movements and steps; *soḷ kaṭṭu* have no semantic meaning, and are simply verbal cues to indicate specific rhythms and movements

*Śrī Vidyā* – (S) a community of followers and/or set of practices of Tantric philosophy, that focus on the goddess Lakshmi

*Sri Venkateshvara Suprabhatam* (pron. *Śrī Venkateṣvara Suprabhātam*) – (S) a tonal chant of praise, usually sung in the morning, to the form of Vishnu known as Venkateshvara

*śṛṅgāra / śṛṅgāra bhāva* – (S) the Indian aesthetic and emotional category of romance or eroticism, often implemented in dance to depict beauty, love stories and romantic relationships

*śruti* – (S) the pitch or tone that guides a Carnatic musician’s practice, traditionally provided by the *tanpura* (a stringed instrument); today, musicians often use a *śruti* box, which is an electronic device that emits a tri-toned drone to help maintain pitch

*sūci hasta* – (S) a hand gesture used in dance

“Surya Namaskar” (pron. *sūrya namaskār* or *sūrya namaskāra*) – (S) a series of yoga postures, usually performed in the morning

*sūtradhāra* – (S) literally “carrier of the string,” the *sūtradhāra* is a conventional narrator figure in classical Indian dance and drama

*svayamvara* – (S) literally “self-choice,” a *svayamvara* is a traditional Hindu ceremony wherein a bride would choose a husband for herself, usually by laying the terms for an elaborate contest, and agreeing to marry the winner; the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* epics both contain *svayamvara* scenes

Swami Chinmayananda – (1916-1993) an Advaita Vedanta philosopher, whose teaching are the central source of authority for the Chinmaya Mission

Swami Satchidananda – (1914-2002) an Advaita Vedanta philosopher and exponent of yoga, whose teachings are a source of central authority for the Integral Yoga Institute and the Satchidananda Ashram-Yogavile

symbolic capital – see social capital

symbolic violence – Bourdieuan term for struggle or harm that is effected in society through non-physical or non-material acts; a situation where one’s social power, position or credibility are affected through a struggle for social capital

## **T**

*tāla* – (S) rhythm and beat, in both Carnatic and Hindusthani music

*tāḷam* – (T) a small pair of metal cymbals often used to guide dancers and keep rhythm during dance instruction and performance

Tamil (pron. Tamizh) – (T) a language of Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka

Tamil Nadu (pron. Tamizh Nāḍu) – (T) a state in South India

*tarāṇā* – (S) an item of Kuchipudi choreography which is dominated by *nṛtta* (technical or abstract dynamic movement)

Telugu (pron. Teḷugu) – (Tel) the language of Andhra Pradesh

*thali* (pron. *tālī*) – (T and Tel) a brass plate which serves as a prop in certain Kuchipudi dance items; dancers stand with their feet perched on the edges of the brass plate, and perform rhythmic movements without losing balance

“Thanthanana” (pron. “Tantaṇāṇā”) – (Tel) an item of Bharata Natyam choreography

*thaṭṭukazhi* (pron. *taṭṭukazhi*) – (T) the wooden block and long dowel used by dance teachers to rap out the beats of dance sequences, and guide dancers on the rhythm and steps of dance

*tilaka* – (S) another word for forehead marking; this word is often used to describe forehead markings on males

*tillānā* – (S) an item of Kuchipudi or Bharata Natyam choreography which features vibrant *nṛtta*

Triveni – (S) the school of dance run by Neena Gulati in Brookline, Massachusetts

## **U**

*uRi* – (T) a staple of gopikās’ homes in narratives about Krishna; the uRi is a macrame net or hammock that hung from the ceiling, in which earthen pots of butter would be stored

*uṭṭi* – (Tel) see *uRi*

## **V**

*vada* – (T) a savory, lentil-based fried snack

*varṇam* – (S) a lengthy composition of music or dance (Bharata Natyam or Kuchipudi), which consists of several intricate *ṅtta* series punctuated by episodes of lyrical movement, set to four or five *sāhityas* (narrative verses)

*vinaya* – (S) humility that a *śiṣya* should have toward his or her teacher

*viniyoga* – (S) the various usages or applications of certain hand gestures or body movements, often taught to students through lengthy tonal *ślokas*

Vishnu (pron. Viṣṇu) – (S) a powerful male deity in the Hindu pantheon; Vishnu has numerous *avatars* (incarnations) that appear in dance and music, including Krishna and Rama

## Y

“Yēn Paḷlikoṇḍīr Ayyā” – (T) a Tamil *kīrtanā*, with corresponding choreography, that praises Vishnu in his form as Ranganatha

Yogaville – small hamlet in rural Buckingham County, Virginia, where the Satchidananda Ashram is located. Yogaville is home to the *Natya-Adhyayana-Gurukulam* summer camp for Bharata Natyam students

Yudhistira (pron. Yudhiṣṭira, or colloquially “Yudhistir”) – (S) the eldest of the Pandava brothers, and a main character in the *Mahabharata*

“Yugma Dhvanda” – (H) an item of Odissi choreography

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