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Dragging the Classics:

On the Pursuit of (Trans)Gender Liberation through Indian Classical Dance

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree Master of  
Arts in Asian American Studies

by

Prahas Rudraraju

2024



## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Dragging the Classics:

On the Pursuit of (Trans)Gender Liberation through Indian Classical Dance

by

Prahas Rudraraju

Master of Arts in Asian American Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2024

Professor Purnima Mankekar, Chair

“Dragging the Classics: On the Pursuit of (Trans)Gender Liberation through Indian Classical Dance” explores how transgender and non-binary South Asian Americans find gender liberation and euphoria through drag performances of Indian classical dance. In this thesis, I chart the appropriation and sanitization of Indian classical dance forms from their original practitioners and the linking of Indian classical dance to Indian and Hindu national consciousness over the past hundred years. I also examine how transgender South Asians who perform Indian classical dance in queer South Asian event spaces in the diaspora *disorient* rigid traditional structures and values enforced through Indian classical dance. By analyzing non-binary South Asian Americans’ drag performances of Indian classical dance through the lenses of affect, nostalgia, and diaspora, this thesis articulates how such performers create liberatory utopias through their

cultural and gendered performances where they and their audiences can celebrate their queerness and South Asianness together.

The thesis of Prahas Rudraraju is approved.

Kyungwon Hong

Thu-Huong Nguyen-Vo

Purnima Mankekar, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2024

# Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to all the young queer and trans South Asian Americans who feel alone, who feel misunderstood, and who have not met another person like them. We are out here. We exist. You are meant to exist in all the beautiful ways that you are and will become. You *will* find your community, whether online or in-person. We love you and want you to grow up, thrive, and feel alive. I hope that reading this thesis helps you to know that you are not alone and that your presence is a gift on this Earth.

This thesis is also dedicated to Palestinians in Gaza, the West Bank, and all around the world. You are in our hearts now and forever. None of us are free until you are free. None of us are free until Palestine is free. Free from occupation, genocide, and tyranny, and free to return to your homeland. Falasteen Hurrah!

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I must begin by thanking the three men who are the reason I joined, declared, and continued my lifelong commitment to Asian American & Pacific Islander Studies at The College of William & Mary: Dean and Professor **Francis Tanglao-Aguas** (now of Drexel University) and Drs. **R. Benedito Ferrão** and **Stephen Sheehi**. To my undergrad dad and Guru, Francis Tanglao-Aguas, thank you for your academic mentorship and your deep care for the last ten years. I can never put into words just how grateful I am for all that you've done and continue to do. To Bené, thank you for always expanding my horizons and opening my eyes to the fluidity of identity. Thank you for noticing the signs and checking in on me when I wasn't okay, and for reminding me that part of creating a legacy means putting faith in others to continue the important work. And finally, to Professor Stephen Sheehi, thank you for some of the most important classes of my undergraduate career – especially “From Orientalism to Islamophobia” and “Israel-Palestine: A Dialogue”. Your classes empowered me to make sense of the racism that I experienced and witnessed around me and to learn about topics that were taboo to speak or learn about due to the American Empire. Palestine will be free in our lifetime – hopefully sooner than any of us could ever imagine. *Falasteen Hurrah!!*

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We never could have expected to start our program with the UC-wide graduate student strike nor end it with the absolute dystopian nightmare that was the anti-Palestinian and white supremacist mob violence against our campus and the ensuing police brutality and authoritarian shut down of UCLA. (As I make final edits in late May of 2024, we can now add another graduate student strike to the count. Free Palestine!) I know for a fact that I only made it through these two years because of the family we created. Thank you for being the best cohort I could have asked for, and thank you all for the myriad of ways you've loved me in our two short years together. Here's to many more!

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To everyone who I have met over the past two years, and who has grounded me in the years prior, thank you from the bottom of my heart for how you've shown up for me.

With more love and gratitude than I could ever express,

—Prahas

# Chapter 1:

## Introduction

**June 2023**

On the last day of Pride month in the gayest corner of Los Angeles (West Hollywood, of course) I find myself backstage at the Los Angeles LGBT Center for local South Asian LGBTQ organization Satrang SoCal's - *and the city of Los Angeles*'! - first-ever South Asian Pride Night. I am trying to calm my nerves, running through my choreography in my mind and praying I don't fuck up. Part of the difficulty in calming my nerves comes from the fact that "backstage" is out in the open right next to the hundreds of people who have gathered to watch us. There is nothing but a short row of lighting and sound equipment separating me and the other performers from the eager crowd of queer and trans South Asians who, like us, have been drawn to the Los Angeles LGBT Center tonight to celebrate this historic night.

"Prahas?" repeats one of my friends, a fellow drag king, slowly sounding out my new name. "That's hot."

"Thanks," I reply, grinning cheekily and temporarily breaking my mental run-through of my dance routine. "Chose it myself."

My birth name, *Pallavi*, means melody in Sanskrit and refers to the core lyrical refrain within Indian music and dance. Plenty of family members – blood and chosen – have expressed their dismay that I have parted with something so meaningful to my performance as I

simultaneously step forward into *Prahas* and the most authentic presentation of my inner being. *Prahas* means smiling, joyful, and laughter, and is another name for the Hindu god Shiva, the Destroyer of Evil and Lord of Dance. Both Pallavi and Prahas embody core parts of who I am, and both tie me intrinsically to dance and performance.

By the time my name is called and I step out into the blinding stage lights, my nervousness is forgotten. I have a confident, knowing grin stretched across my face. I know the crowd and the crowd knows me. The tiny distance between us is no longer a problem – in fact, it only serves to heighten our experience of this exquisite moment. They take in my painted beard and kohl-rimmed eyes, my gold belt, chains, bangles, the bells wrapped tightly around my ankles – a fusion of Indian classical dance and drag aesthetics – and I feel the excitement ripple through them. As the opening notes of the Tamil pop song “Tum Tum” hit their ears and my fingers sharpen into mudhras<sup>1</sup>, painting lines through the sky above me, their whistles and cheers pour energy into my body. For the next few minutes, as folded dollar bills cascade onto the dance floor, we engage in a reciprocal act of love, enthusiasm, and appreciation in which our energy and emotions reflect and build off one another.

Afterwards, friends and strangers alike envelop me with their excitement, love, and adoration. They gush about the performance – about the music, my attitude, my choreography and technique. Someone tells me that they had no idea I could dance Bharatanatyam, or so well. “You actually know what you’re doing!” they inform me enthusiastically, to my amusement. People tell me that they never imagined seeing a person like them – brown, queer, trans, gender nonconforming – dancing this type of traditional dance in drag and in a queer space. The comments that mean the most come from the quieter ones who look me dead in the eyes and

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<sup>1</sup> Hand gestures which convey specific meanings in Indian classical dance.



solemnly share how meaningful my performance was to them, who come up to me throughout the rest of the night and even weeks or months later when our paths cross again to share how the performance touched their hearts.



**Prahas performing to “Tum Tum” at Satrang SoCal’s Mujra Brunch April 2023, hosted at Bollywood Beach  
Photos courtesy of Prahas Rudraraju**

When I reflect back on moments like these, I realize that the thrill, excitement and sense of ease in my queer, trans, and brown identities that I felt when I performed Indian classical dance was something that resonated for many in my audiences as well. This begged the question: what is it about the fusion of Indian classical dance and drag that causes such a reaction in its performers and audiences?

Transgender and non-binary South Asian American dancers are able to powerfully achieve gender liberation and euphoria through Indian classical dance because it is a cultural vehicle for gendered expression, joy, and freedom. Drawing from the spirit of queer political and community-based activism from my years of non-profit work with the Human Rights Campaign which inspired these conceptualizations, in my work I define gender liberation as freedom from the constraints of sex and gender assigned at birth, and gender euphoria as the indescribable moment(s) of joy when a transgender person's internal and outward embodiment of gender meet.

This research is important because it centers a cultural reclamation of a powerful element of South Asian culture that has, over the past 100 years, been culturally appropriated by savarna Hindus into Hindu nationalist iconography that seeks to oppress the very transgender and non-binary subjects who are now performing it. My research gains clarity about cultural appropriation, reclamation, and ownership. It challenges religious nationalism in countries of origin and throughout diaspora. This master's thesis sets out to explore transgender South Asians' configurations of belonging. In its quest to better understand religious nationalism, transgender belonging, and questions of cultural appropriation, it also asks how imagined communities are maintained and reconfigured through the diaspora of various individuals who form community together.

This exploration of how transgender and non-binary South Asian Americans find gender liberation and euphoria through Indian classical dance was born from my own experiences of gender liberation and euphoria from a young age. As a middle schooler, I could not explain why I was filled with an innate sense of joy when I was assigned to play male deities like Krishna and Shiva, but as a non-binary young professional dabbling in drag, I finally found the terms to explain the phenomenon. Upon meeting another transgender drag performer, who was assigned a different gender at birth but performed drag in a similar way with complementary experiences, I realized this phenomenon may be greater than myself and worth exploring. While conducting preliminary research in my first year of my master's program in Asian American Studies at the University of California - Los Angeles, under the guidance of esteemed professors in various disciplines, I began to pull at various threads to help me better conceptualize and ground this research in its greater implications. In my second and final year, I conducted independent studies with my committee members and explored my interests further through performances, interviews, and my own autoethnography. The thesis you see before you is the culmination of two years of study, and the contextualization of a lifetime of queer and transgender South Asian experiences.

My research fills gaps in various fields that do not address the experiences of transgender and non-binary South Asian Americans, especially from the lens of performance and identity formation. This project additionally attempts to make legible the joy and celebration of minoritized and marginalized identities. So much of the conversation on racial minorities and transgender populations - *especially* for transgender people of color existing at the intersections of these identities - centers on unemployment, health disparities, suicide, and death. As important as it is to understand these dire realities, it is equally important to center the sheer joy and

community bonds we transgender South Asian Americans experience. To find joy through art and community in moments of suffering is an act of resistance and resilience.

This project is also timely as conversations in South Asian American Studies turn to the question of caste and as caste abolition movements in the United States gain traction. Furthermore, the rise of Hindu nationalism in India has reached critically dangerous levels with attacks on religious minorities becoming more prominent than ever. Thus, any examination of art forms such as Indian classical dance which are associated with and utilized by Hindu nationalism and the Hindu nationalist government is critical and must be done cautiously to avoid aligning itself with the Hindu right. A deeper understanding of the various methods Hindu nationalism is either symbolized or subverted - such as through transgender Indian classical dancers in the diaspora - is crucial in these times.

To better understand this central question, I would walk you through several important concepts, trajectories, and histories shaping the queer and transgender community in the United States, as well as the Indian classical art form that some of us transgender performers utilize to achieve powerful transformations within our queer performance spheres.

### **“I Feel It in My Bones”: An Exploration of Sensory Knowledge through Affect**

My research seeks to examine how transgender and non-binary South Asian Americans find gender liberation and euphoria through Indian classical dance, and also asks the question: “Why Indian classical dance?” Central to this question has been an exploration of affect. Affect refers to the powerful effect of sensory knowing felt through the body. Affect can be located in the aisles of an Indian grocery store, or the live performance of a larger-than-life Tejana singer. It

can also be found shimmering in the cool night air and coursing through the bodies of performers and audience members alike after an Indian classical dance performance.

Through a reading of Joshua Guzmán's "Affect" contribution to *Keywords for Gender and Sexuality Studies*, his article "The Impossible Latinx Future: Listening to Selena's Voice and Nothing More", Purnima Mankekar's *Unsettling India: Affect, Temporality, Transnationality*, and Anurima Banerji's "The Epistemic Politics of Indian Classical Dance", I can better explain the nuances of affect and apply it to the Indian classical performing arts and popular culture. As I will demonstrate later in this paper, the answer to "Why Indian classical dance?" has to do with the power of affect as created through dancing bodies and their audiences. Transgender and non-binary South Asians who incorporate Indian classical dance in performance can powerfully reclaim their cultural identity while they assert their gender fuckery due to the dynamic affect produced through the dance form, which has been carefully curated through cultural codes and national investment in the dance form over the past hundred years.

Building on Gayatri Spivak's seminal article, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" José Esteban Muñoz asks "Can the subaltern feel?" This opening question in Joshua Guzmán's *Keywords* entry on affect demonstrates the power of affect as he asks his own question: "Can knowing be felt, and is feeling a way of knowing?" (13). In this thesis, I seek to emphatically respond: "YES!" Guzmán connects affect's history to feminism and gender studies in how philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Sigmund Freud dismissed emotions and feeling as hysterical and irrational, terms famously used to describe women (2021, 14). According to these theorists, emotions are felt through the body and therefore feminine, whereas thoughts are contained within the mind and therefore masculine. Guzmán then directs us to Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa's "theory in the flesh" and declares that the combination of theories in the flesh and

hysteria make “clear that feelings can be projected, and “boundar[ies] between interiority...and exteriority blurr[ed]” (14). Thus, Guzmán returns us to his opening question, answering that knowing can be felt and that feeling is indeed a valid way of knowing, according to feminist and Chicana theorists.

Joshua Guzmán, Purnima Mankekar, and Anurima Banerji offer their perspectives and expertise on affect through Tejana, Latina, and Indian performance, demonstrating how affect is not only sensually experienced and understood, but also culturally specific. In Guzmán’s “The Impossible Latinx Future”, he understands affect as “ethnic” due to the manner in which white people have disregarded affect as “excessive” (170). He goes on to describe moments of Latina and Tejana icon Selena’s performance such as her grito – a Tejano and traditionally masculine vocal effect, and her vocals overall as producing a culturally-specific affect due to the echoing of history that emerges through the echoing technique of her own voice. In fact, through her death, Guzmán argues that Selena’s vocals produce (*re*)sentimentality due to her status as a Latina and Tejana political and cultural icon (171). Thus, Selena’s affect is tied to both Tejana history and lineages stretching far before her as well as history extending after her through her legacy.

Purnima Mankekar examines culturally-specific affect in various ways in her text *Unsettling India*, notably through Indian grocery stores and Bollywood film watch parties. Mankekar walks us through an Indian grocery store in the Bay Area, describing it as a sensuous experience combining all five senses: touch, smell, sound, sight, and taste (73). She poignantly shares how, to her informants, “Indian grocery stores,” with their pungent smells of spices and sandalwood, “felt familiar in a foreign land where Indians are marked as aliens by the smells we embody” (80). This vivid depiction transported me back to Indian grocery stores in Northern Virginia and Culver City, California alike, which I frequented whenever I felt out of place.

Whether bouncing around to a new city in my old stomping grounds – the greater D.C. metropolitan area – or traveling to an entirely new coast for my studies at UCLA, Indian grocery stores always grounded me in my new surroundings. Those familiar scents – sandalwood, garam masala, neem – transport me to India and root me firmly to whichever new location I have found myself in. It’s odd how something unique to the diaspora – an Indian grocery store – can connect an Indian American to both India and the United States through the nostalgia of the smell of *home*. The smells of the store itself as well as the smells that will waft through my new apartment once I begin to cook familiar, comforting Indian foods with the spices I purchased at the store earlier today all serve to set my spirit at ease.

Similarly, the vibrant drum beats and vocals of an Indian song, paired with the aesthetics and visuals of a traditional Indian dance performance, may evoke a similar affect in Indian American audience members who are transported to India and back, rooted firmly in their here and now through such a performance. Indian classical dance evokes a particular affect in Indian American audiences through its central technique of *rasa-abhinaya*. *Rasa-abhinaya* combines two terms: *rasa* (flavor) and *abhinaya* (acting and gesture). Together, *rasa-abhinaya* refers to evocative storytelling, one of the three central pillars of Indian classical dance. Through a combination of expressive facial expressions which fully embody 9 main *rasas* or emotions along with descriptive *mudhras* or hand gestures, a dancer has become an actor and storyteller through their body (Banerji). In an Indian classical dance performance, dancers employ known cultural codes of *rasa*, *abhinaya*, and distinctive footwork to evoke innately understood meaning within their audience. This in combination with other visual and auditory cues such as makeup, jewelry, costuming, and music produce cultural affect which is then embedded in their audience through sensory knowing.

This same sensory knowledge allowed a heightened pleasure and response to the performance within my audience that last night of Pride month in 2023. Through visual markers in my aesthetics and choreography as well as aural markers through the Tamil song, my audience was transported to blissful and nostalgic memories and locations – these may have been places they can no longer access due to their queerness and transness. Despite the warm and evocative nature of the scholarship on affect I have covered thus far; I must warn that affect is not always produced for benevolent purposes. The power of affect can be dangerous. An important direction of my research is to understand, name, and explain how nationalism, supremacy, and affect can be combined. While my research focuses on the communities and imagined spaces of belonging made possible through cultural affect of Indian classical dance, this same affect has been used to depict an ancientness of *Hindu, brahmanical*<sup>2</sup> India and invalidate Islam, queerness, and transness and uphold Hindu and caste supremacy in India and abroad in the Hindu diaspora.

## **Nostalgia**

Performance of Indian classical dance in particular contexts can be used to advance minoritarian interests or majoritarian demands, especially when these groups incorporate the powerful tool of cultural, community, and identity-based nostalgia. The concept of nostalgia has been explored notably by various prominent scholars within fields such as South Asian diaspora studies and queer of color critique, namely Purnima Mankekar and José Esteban Muñoz. In her previously-mentioned book, *Unsettling India: Affect, Temporality, Transnationality*, Purnima Mankekar incorporates nostalgia into her exploration of affect and temporality in transnational

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<sup>2</sup> I intentionally do not capitalize brahmanical and brahmanism as a literary tactic to decenter the system



understandings of self and homeland. Nostalgia, as understood by Mankekar, works phantasmically; it is hard to locate and define, but “nevertheless, [has] material and tangible implications” on those who experience it (73). Mankekar’s specific examination of nostalgia is contextualized within the nostalgia evoked as South Asian Americans experience – enter, peruse through, linger in – Indian grocery stores in the United States, and it is inextricably linked to affect as produced through sensorium such as smells, music, aesthetics, and textures within these stores that remind South Asian Americans of *home*.

José Esteban Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, on the other hand, theorizes and critiques the idea of a queer utopia by examining the lines of elitism, exclusion, and hierarchy present within queer spaces, which are juxtaposed with realms of possibility, hope, and a beyond offered through a queer utopia. Although Muñoz specifically argues beyond the idea of nostalgia, the idea of longing and utopia provide a rich arena for deeply engaging with the concept of nostalgia. In the case of Muñoz’s work, he understands these queer utopias as a response to the elitist exclusion of BIPOC queers from white cisgay spaces along lines of race and class. In the context of queer and trans South Asian American cultural performance spaces, by combining nostalgia, memory, past, and present, performers and event organizers imagine utopian realities in which we can embrace our queerness and South Asianness together.

Nostalgia is evoked in these South Asian American queer cultural spaces through *apparel* – where both performers and audience members may dress in South Asian, “Indowestern”, or South Asian-inspired clothing, jewelry, and makeup – through *music* – in which the music played throughout performances and during breaks is comprised of both classic and current Bollywood and other South Asian film hits and pop music – through *activities* and *emceeing*

from the event organizers – such as saree draping contests or auctioning off audience members, and the general incorporation of various South Asian *languages* into their audience interactions – and, finally, in South Asian-style *choreography* employed through drag performance. The nostalgia evoked through these cultural signifiers – style, music, language, and dance – transports attendees from their location in the diaspora to their place(s) of ethnic origin, thereby mending bridges burned by family and community rejection. By actively engaging in these intentionally South Asian and intentionally queer performance spaces, queer and trans South Asians have thus utilized nostalgia to heal cisheterosexist trauma and create utopias in which they can celebrate and embrace their queerness, transness, and South Asianness together. In this way, I theorize that a queer and trans South Asian nostalgia utilizes utopia to imagine possibilities of existence at the intersections of all that we are, and all we are barred from.

On the other hand, a Hindu nationalist nostalgia incorporates much of the same affect and sensorium evoked to reinvent a grand Hindu Indian past stripped of context to establish a Hindu Indian future. Through cultural dance performance, namely Indian classical dance, the Hindu nation fabricates and remembers its glorious Hindu Indian past in order to establish pathways towards their Hindu Indian utopia, thus utilizing the (past) nostalgia in (present) performances to imagine a (future) utopia.

## **Diaspora**

Growing up as a young, queer South Indian in Northern Virginia, I felt out-of-place more than I felt at ease in any of my surroundings. Pre-9/11, I have a few memories of growing up Othered due to my brownness and cultural activities. In a post-9/11 United States, Othering was transformed from fetishization and ostracization to outright hostility and disgust towards me and

my culture. On the other hand, as a queer and trans South Asian person, the process of discovering my sexual orientation and gender identity at an early age was a profoundly lonely experience in which discovering my truth resulted in the same hostility and disgust – this time from my parents and community members. These exciting moments of self-discovery quickly turned into a deep desire to forget what I had just uncovered.

It wasn't until I found a community of diverse queer and transgender South Asians in the D.C. Metropolitan area at the age of 24 that I felt *in-place* and belonging. I was finally at ease. In this community, we were Indo-Caribbean, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, South Indian, North Indian, and more. We were bisexual, non-binary, lesbian, intersex, ace, and beyond. Somewhere in this difference, this exclusion on two ends, we met in the middle, and finally felt whole.

While many in the South Asian diaspora, particularly those with privileged identities, uncritically use the term diaspora to discuss the ubiquity and oftentimes, the prominence of South Asians around the world, feminist and queer scholars on diaspora would disagree with such simplistic renderings. These scholars offer nuanced gendered and queered perspectives addressing questions of labor, dispossession, identity transference, and community. The diaspora of South Asians in the United States, as viewed through the South Asian American queer and trans community, can be understood as both a reinforcement and rejection of the nationalist and liberatory avenues that both plague and provide possibilities for our reckoning with the term diaspora.

Gayatri Gopinath in *Keywords for Gender Studies* outlines the term diaspora as a “descriptive category” which “refers to the dispersal and movement of a population...from one national or geographic location to other disparate sites” (67). This term has popularly been used to describe forced diasporas such as that of Jewish, Armenian, and Black enslaved peoples, but is

also used to describe migrations and dispersals of peoples with complex histories of movement, such as South Asian, Southeast Asian, and Arab populations. The etymology of diaspora derives from the Greek language, combining *dia* - “across” - and *sperein* - “to scatter” (Gopinath, 67). Helmreich in “Kinship, Nation, and Paul Gilroy’s Concept of Diaspora” has likened this to the scattering of seeds and spreading of sperm, thus linking the notion of diaspora to that of paternity and patriarchy (245). Purnima Mankekar comments on the male-centricity of diaspora in her article “Brides Who Travel,” which examines how women are controlled in the diaspora and used to reproduce conservative homeland values. These contextualizations of diaspora as centering maleness, patriarchy, and sex are important in understanding how patterns of control and domination can replicate themselves in diasporas, especially in the Indian diaspora.

Roger Brubaker in “The ‘diaspora’ diaspora” argues that we should shift from the idea of diaspora as a noun and orient towards diaspora as an “idiom” or a “stance”, a term that seeks not to “describe” but rather to “remake” (12). He positions the term as an “alternative to...nation-statist understandings of immigration and assimilation” (13). Ideas raised in Brubaker’s piece provide possibilities for diaspora that greatly aid my own work wherein I conceptualize a South Asian queer and trans diaspora as a decolonial formation that transcends nation-statehood in countries of origins and prioritizes a queer and trans South Asian imagined community outside of those sites of origin and the institutions of inequality they reinforce. This conceptualization is in harmony with Brubaker’s repositioning of “diaspora” and is interested in how people outside of a homeland reconfigure bounds of identity and create new bonds of imagined community.

Stuart Hall examines diaspora not as a “generative notion of identity” but rather as a “positioning” (230). This could be understood as how the term “Black” has emerged in some ways as an identity but additionally as a positioning and a political claim. For example,

somewhat recent African immigrants may decide when to consider themselves African or African American versus when to align politically and socially with those of the forced African diaspora as “Black”.

As an Asian Americanist particularly focusing on queer and transgender communities within the South Asian diaspora present on Turtle Island, I consider Hall’s scholarship as key to understanding the positioning as well as the politics of difference contained within the South Asian diaspora. To better understand queer and transgender South Asians in the United States, it is important to trace the diaspora scholarship regarding labor migrations, unequal migrations, and queer diaspora.

The first significant presence of South Asians on Turtle Island indicates how labor and caste played a role in South Asian migration over the last two centuries. Nayan Shah in *Stranger Intimacies: Contesting Race, Sexuality, and the Law in the North American West* explores South Asian homosocial community and queer desires through the law in the western territories of the states we now know as Canada and the United States from the 1800s to early 1900s. Karen Isaksen Leonard in *Making Ethnic Choices: California’s Punjabi Mexican Americans* also describes the Punjabi community of agricultural laborers along the West Coast of the United States and the multiracial families they created in the early 1900s. These multiracial Punjabi families were formed due to anti-miscegenation laws and immigration restrictions which severely limited the immigration of Asian women into the United States. The South Asians on the West Coast were predominantly men and predominantly Punjabi, and many were looking for better agricultural prospects in the United States due to British colonial land and inheritance policies restricting their opportunities in India. Additionally, according to popular interpretations of central tenets of brahmanism at the time, savarna or caste people cannot travel over water, or

otherwise they will lose their caste privilege. Therefore, it is nowadays understood by caste abolitionists on Turtle Island that a significant number of our South Asian predecessors were uncasted or were caste oppressed peoples (Equality Labs, “Unlearning Caste Supremacy”). Similarly, the Indian indentured laborers brought to the Caribbean are also understood to be from caste oppressed backgrounds under previously-cited logics (“Unlearning Caste Supremacy”).

However, the demographics of the diaspora have shifted. Determining the exact population of caste privileged demographics among the South Asian diaspora will never be completely possible due to concerns around safety as well as unwillingness to confront caste privilege depending on who you’re asking. Equality Labs, a prominent caste abolitionist organization in the United States, has made a strong attempt at uncovering some of these details. In their groundbreaking report, “Caste in the United States,” Equality Labs noted that post-1965, the South Asian immigrants to the United States were “largely ‘upper’ caste, upper class, the most educated, and came from...newly independent Indian cities” (Equality Labs, 13). Thus, when South Asian immigrant “civic, religious, and political institutions” were created in the United States, they were created by savarna immigrants who “established ‘upper’ Caste Hindu culture as the norm for all...South Asian immigrants” (14). It was not until 1990 that caste oppressed populations were able to immigrate to the United States in larger numbers, thanks to both the passage of additional immigration legislation as well as the fact that over time, “more generations in India had...benefited from Affirmative Action policies and welfare” programs (14).

Another significant intervention by Gayatri Gopinath is her formulation of “queer diasporas”. Gopinath highlights how “queer diaspora”, which utilizes “queer” as a position rather than an identity, allows for the exploration of the “shift and transform[ation]” of “sexual desire, subjectivity, and practices” in “diasporic movement, migration, and dwelling” (68). Similarly,

Nayan Shah in *Contagious Divides* discusses Chinese American bachelor societies in the early 1900s in San Francisco's Chinatown. In this case, the "queer diaspora" envelops these bachelor societies due to their homosocial relations and the queering of the cisheteropatriarchal family structure. Due to various immigration laws severely limiting the immigration of Asian women and anti-miscegenation laws such as barring interracial marriage, these men were in essence forced to remain bachelors and remain within bachelor societies rather than performing cisgender, heterosexual duties of reproduction within nuclear family units. Here the cishetero family is not reproduced. Rather, bachelor societies without women have emerged, and society is not reproduced biologically but through kinship, homosocial, and working-class bonds.

While I understand reasonings for using "queer" as a positioning, which is not limited to diaspora studies but can be found in various other fields, I wonder about the limitations of extending the term "queer" in this way. What do we lose when we call all family structures and relationships outside of patriarchal families and cishetero relationships "queer" or "queered"? In my opinion, this centers cisheteropatriarchy and broadens the term "queer" too much. I feel specificity and new, nuanced terms can be more beneficial in a new generation of scholarship and can do more to decenter the cisheteropatriarchy than inserting "queer". Additionally, I am interested in exploring "queer diaspora" as a powerful term describing the dispersal and forced migration of queer populations for safety and/or liberatory possibilities. "Queer diaspora" could also function as a way to describe the BIPOC queers who find community and new forms of kinship outside of their places of ancestral origin.

Ultimately, "diaspora" offers possibilities of solidarity and coalition building, but it must be used intentionally rather than as a homogenizing term. Most importantly to my research, it

can create an imagined community and space for shared understanding and joy among minority subjects.

## **Conclusion**

Nostalgia and affect, especially as evoked through song, dance, and aesthetics, hold unique power over South Asians in the diaspora. This was evident in the enthusiastic audience reaction to my performance at Satrang SoCal's South Asian Pride Night. These moments offer an opportunity for performers to bond with audience members over shared marginalized identities such as their queerness, transness, and South Asianness, and for audience members to connect with each other over emotions and memories evoked through the performance.

In the remainder of this thesis, I will further explore, examine, and contextualize themes raised throughout the introduction. In Chapter 2, titled "Why Indian Classical Dance? Understanding Indian Classical Dance as Nationalist Iconography" I explore the formation of Indian classical dance as we see it today and situate it within its current position as iconography synonymous with India as well as Hindu nationalism. In Chapter 3, titled "Where Liberation and Euphoria Meet" I examine how transgender South Asian performers find gender liberation and euphoria in their drag performances of Indian classical dance.



# Chapter 2:

## Why Indian Classical Dance?

### Understanding Indian Classical Dance as Nationalist Iconography

#### Introduction

“Indian classical dance” refers often to the eight forms of classical dance recognized by the Sangeet Natak Akademi in India that vary stylistically from region to region: Bharatanatyam in Tamil Nadu, Kathak in North India, Kathakali and Mohiniyattam in Kerala, Kuchipudi in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, Manipuri in Manipur, Odissi in Odisha, and Sattriya in Assam. Chhau from Odisha, Jharkhand, and West Bengal is also recognized by the Ministry of Culture. Dance historians of the 20th century have commonly attempted to trace the lineage of Indian classical dance forms back through to the Natya Shastra, a treatise on dance from 500 BCE.

I grew up in the suburbs of Northern Virginia where I learned Bharatanatyam alongside dozens of other children at Charu Narasimhan’s Nrityakalpana school for Bharatanatyam. Although I cannot trace the exact source, I know I was also informally taught the same myth of Bharatanatyam as an art form thousands of years old which is traced back to the Natya Shastra. Upon the onset of this research project last year, I quickly discovered that these “facts” may actually have been constructed to suit nationalist narratives and erase peoples and histories from the centers to the margins of society. Pallabi Chakravorty considers these narratives as attempts

to erase the true nature of Indian dance forms and, through appropriation, trace them back into an elitist, brahmanical lineage (113).

### **Sanskritization and the appropriation of Indian classical dance**

Despite modern attempts to trace Classical dance to Hindu and brahmanical lineages, few if any of these forms are exclusively Hindu. Kathak and its Mughal influences are the most well-known because of the strong patronage of the art form in Mughal courts during the golden age of the Mughal empire. There are various faiths and traditions that have influenced these dance forms over the years and continue to influence them into contemporary times due to the backgrounds and identities of the practitioners, political and societal influences, globalization, and other contributing factors. Today, the rise of social media and handheld technology has interesting implications on the evolutions and adaptations of the dance forms. Yet, as Andrée Grau notes, Kathak and the other forms of Indian classical dance have been twisted in order to “reinforc[e]” an image of authentic Hinduism while “downplaying” the Islamic “influence” within the dance (45). The purposeful erasure of Kathak’s Islamic influences clearly demonstrates the greater and more insidious trend of modern rewritings of Indian classical dance as both authentically Hindu and brahmanical - or culturally pure and elite (49).

Twentieth century narratives about Indian classical dance both as brahmanical and Hindu emerged due to upper caste attempts to fold existing dance forms into the emerging Indian national consciousness. In this thesis, I will focus on how the Sanskritization of Indian dance forms affected devadasis and hereditary practitioners of the Isai Vellalar caste, and how sadir attam was “cleansed” into Bharatanatyam. Sanskritization of Indian dance differed for each form in terms of timelines, methods, and backgrounds of the practitioners, but I choose to focus on

devadasis and sadir attam both because of the prominence of Bharatanatyam as one of the most commonly-known forms of Indian classical dance and because it is the form I have been raised in since early childhood.

The movement across India towards “Sanskritization” nowadays refers to the “return to ancient Vedic and brahminical values and customs” which was “often but not necessarily in response to Westernization” (Coorlawala, 53). Uttara Asha Coorlawala in “The Sanskritized Body” understands the phenomenon of Sanskritization of Indian culture as a national movement in which “[i]ndigenous customs and institutions” were re-examined in light of “Victorian and rational” influences in British India (51). When this attention was turned to devadasis, Tamil Isais, and the dance form sadir attam, “brahminical concerns” over the “pollut[ion]” of this custom came to work together with “Victorian convictions regarding social purity” (52). This anti-Nautch campaign thus allowed savarna practitioners such as Rukmini Devi Arundale in the early and mid 1900s to “cleanse” this once-“pure” custom which had now become “polluted” (52). Coorlawala comments poignantly on the sanitization of sadir attam into Bharatanatyam by Rukmini Devi Arundale:

In an article by Rukmini Devi written before 1957 she claimed that Bharata Natyam was the quintessential dance described in the Nāṭyaśāstra and that Kathakali and Manipuri were its variants while Bhāgavata Mela and Kuchipudi came "under the category of Bharata Natyam" (Kothari, 1979). Thus she argued for the aesthetic priority and dominance of the dance of Tamilnadu, sadir attam that was renamed Bharata Natyam to disassociate the dance from the stigma attached to its earlier name. The renaming linked the dance with the Nāṭyaśāstra whose authorship is attributed to Bharata, and the principles of bha-va, ra-ga and ta-la11 of Indian sangeet (musical forms) so establishing the dance as possessing an ancient spiritual and aesthetic heritage, and as an equivalent to status of classical as in western ballet. Further, since Bharata is the San

skrit name for India, the renaming also linked the dance to nationalism (see Srinivasan 1984; Meduri 1996). Thus the dance of Tamilnadu could be historically validated and represent unified India

Here, we can see how savarna or dominant caste appropriators capitalized upon the de facto banning of “nautch” dance through social exclusion and criminalization of their practitioners and repurposed these dance forms for their own nationalist needs. “Nautch” dance is, according to Anurima Banerji, a “careless but convenient descriptor for a multitude of choreographic endeavours” practiced throughout the subcontinent, often by indigenous groups and lower caste and Muslim hereditary dance communities prior to British criminalization of Indian dance (90). The anti-nautch movement in British India began in the 1880s and as a “purity movement” for “natural regeneration” undertaken by British missionaries and Hindu social reformers as an attempt to control and dispossess temple dancers and devadasis (90, 93). Though often under the guise of morality and disease prevention, the anti-nautch movement was about restricting and dispossessing nautch girls, who often owned property and were lavished with gifts from their patrons. Many exercised tremendous political influence on local rulers and politicians, while some owned vast estates. Thus, attempts to socially stigmatize devadasis and nautch girls can be read as an attempt by the British Raj and upper caste collaborators to remove their feminine political and financial power.

With the dismantling of nautch and expulsion of dancing caste practitioners, first, by the British through their anti-nautch social campaigns and, subsequently, by savarna groups through their carefully orchestrated legislation criminalizing devadasis in newly independent India, many elitist and caste privileged individuals such as Rukmini Devi Arundale took it upon themselves to “revive” dance forms. In so doing, they appropriated these dance forms, sanitized them by underplaying erotic dimensions of their dance, and created new “tradition”: the version of Indian

classical dance we see most widely practiced to this day. In fact, what they did was the opposite of revival because it constituted reclamation of what was not theirs to begin with. As Matthew Harper Allen puts it:

The term "revival" is a drastically reductive linguistic summary of a complex process—a deliberate selection from among many possibilities—which cries out to be examined from more than one point of view. While the "re-vival" of South Indian dance certainly involved a re-vivification or bringing back to life, it was equally a re-population (one social community appropriating a practice from another), a re-construction (altering and replacing elements of repertoire and choreography), a re-naming (from nautch and other terms to bharatanatyam), a re-situation (from temple, court, and salon to the public stage), and a re-storation (as used in Schechner 1985:69, a splicing together of selected "strips" of performative behavior in a manner that simultaneously creates a new practice and invents an historical one) (63, 64).

Allen is referring to a “revival” or rather a sweeping attempt at “purification” by dominant caste community leaders of famous dance forms performed by lower caste or caste oppressed<sup>3</sup>. In this case, *sadir* dance from Tamil and Telugu peoples in its “revived” form is known today as Bharatanatyam. The intentional language Harper Allen uses counters the casteist airs that caste oppressors have revived and purified the dance and offer the possibility for a reclamation of “purified” Indian dance forms from their current elitist chokeholds.

Transgender drag performers may be able to destabilize savarna attempts to “purify” and “sanitize” Indian classical dance forms by their disruptive performances of ICD. By performing the dance form unapologetically in the gender fuckery of drag, transgender performances of

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<sup>3</sup> These attempts at “revival” come in stark contrast to California tribal peoples’ efforts to culturally reproduce their art forms, in which the latter are rediscovering and reviving practices indigenous to their own people through use of care, memories, and archive of their ancestors to reimagine their art forms today.

Indian classical dance allow transgender South Asian performers to assert their Indianness (through this Indian symbol) as well as their queerness (through the bold statement of drag aesthetics and performance). The current destabilization enacted by transgender drag performers in the diaspora reflects past histories of social and legal criminalization of queer, trans, dancing, and indigenous people subject to colonization by the British Raj. In “The Queer Politics of the Raj,” Anurima Banerji explores the joint criminalization of Indian queer, transgender and non-binary nautch dancing, and indigenous subjects by the British Raj. She argues that these groups were linked together through the British Raj’s criminalization of their “abnormal movement”, such as when hijra and indigenous communities’ movements were made illegal through The Criminal Tribes and Eunuchs Act. Thus, Banerji argues, transgender, queer, dancing, and indigenous bodies were inherently queered through their criminalization by the British. I take this to also conclude that these transgender, queer, dancing, and indigenous bodies were inherently linked through their joint criminalization as deviant and in need of control by the state. This piece offers possible avenues for solidarity and coalition building among transgender and caste oppressed nautch dancers through their uniform marginalization and criminalization.

While these groups were linked through criminalization in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, I wonder if it is still possible for them to build coalitions together and be in solidarity with one another in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and in the United States. Careful concern and attention must be paid to the unique landscapes and contexts we reside in before claiming shared experiences and risking the possibility of pinkwashing. I address some of these concerns in the following chapter.

## **Dance Vocabularies and Gendered Possibilities within Indian Classical Dance**

One of the most important features of Indian classical dance performance to my research is the gender fluidity of the form. When I was in elementary school and middle school, I felt an inexplicable joy when I performed male characters such as Lord Shiva or Krishna<sup>4</sup>. As a child, I excused this joy as the result of being a “tomboy” - maybe I was just excited to cosplay manhood. As a teenager, I explained it away as due to my pansexuality – maybe I enjoyed playing Krishna because adoring gopis<sup>5</sup> were flocking to me? As a young adult, upon coming to terms with my gender as a transmasculine, non-binary person, I realized these moments of euphoria I experienced performing Nataraja<sup>6</sup>, Krishna, and other male characters were due to my (trans)gender identity. These moments of euphoria made possible through my performance of Indian classical dance resulted from the profound joy I felt when my inner conception of my (trans)masculinity combined with my outward expression of iconic male figures within Hinduism.



**Prahas and classmates performing a Krishna paadam in 2009**

**Photo courtesy of Prahas Rudraraju**

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<sup>4</sup> the eighth avatar of Lord Vishnu, one of the Trimurti or trinity of Hinduism. This trinity includes Vishnu the Protector, Shiva the Destroyer, and Brahma the Creator. Krishna is one of the most popular reincarnations of Vishnu and was known in his youth for his flirtatious and womanizing ways. There are many interpretations of his actions towards women, and some classify them as innocuous while others consider them dangerous and sexist. For the purpose of this thesis, my classification of Krishna is restricted to the intentions of my guru, my classmates, and myself as a fourteen year old. In this instance, we can view the Krishna I embodied as a magnetic youth whose charms attracted flocks of adoring gopis.

<sup>5</sup>cowherds and devotees of Lord Krishna, understood as women

<sup>6</sup> Literally “Lord of Dance”, another name for Shiva

When I was a young child and teenager performing male deities, I was not assigned male roles simply because I was taller than my cisgender girl classmates. Furthermore, when I performed such roles, I was not made to change costuming or makeup to match a more masculine aesthetic. I was able to shift smoothly from character to character because of the (gender)fluid nature of Bharatanatyam, in which a performer slips seamlessly from emotion to emotion, story to story, and character to character through the expansive capabilities of the dance form. In Bharatanatyam, a single performer can tell a great epic in a single routine. Through a spin or flourish, they can shift from one character to the next irrespective of the gender or other characteristics of the character. They can shift from a human to an animal, from a god to a demigod. They can depict cascading water, a buzzing bee, an imposing building.

Some of the core components of Indian classical dance include the frenetic footwork of thandavam and the graceful, flowing movements of laasya (Banerji, 193). Within the Natya Shastra, Shiva Thandavam is understood as the divine dance performed by Lord Shiva as God of Dance which continuously creates, preserves, and destroys the world (Bharatamuni). Laasya, on the other hand, is considered to be the gentler form of thandavam, nowadays characterized in binaristic opposition to thandavam as more graceful and flowing movements (Bharatamuni). In the Odissi dancing body, dancers relegate thandavam to their lower body while embodying laasya in their upper body (Banerji 2023). In doing so, they create a flowing, continuous movement through the different temporalities flowing through their body (Banerji 2023).

This binary is extended when in some dance forms such as Bharatanatyam, certain positionings can be read as masculine and others as feminine. For example, to depict Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati at once, I may transform the right half of my body into a more curved and smaller representation with my right foot placed behind my left on its tip toes, with my knee bent



inward to tuck the rest of my right leg behind the left, and with my right hand curved inwards to represent a soft, feminine bird, elbow drooping slightly and tucked close to my waist. On the other hand, my left foot would be placed flat on the ground, toes pointed to the side so that my left leg fully faced the audience, taking up as much of the horizontal plane as possible, with my left hand pointed downwards, palm facing up and elbow proudly thrust to the side to uniformly take up additional horizontal space. The feminine signifiers on the right side of my body and the male signifiers on the left side of my body along with the symbol created with the mudhras of my right and left hands all come together to represent the combination of ShivaParvati in Bharatanatyam. Thus, we can see how particular poses in Indian classical dance demonstrated a fluidity of gender, or as some may call it, *genderfullness*<sup>7</sup>.

Although some moves may be considered masculine and others feminine, it is important to note that characters are not limited to masculine and feminine depictions according to their gender. For example, when I perform Durga<sup>8</sup> or Kali<sup>9</sup>, I incorporate what may be perceived to Western audiences as masculine dance vocabularies such as widened stances and foot placements, blazing facial expressions, and broad, taut arm and hand placements. This is where an incorporation of shakti<sup>10</sup> can be helpful. Shakti is the divine manifestation of power and read as feminine. Therefore, performing shakti requires a fluid understanding of gender in which the Hindu conception of *power* – understood as feminine – combines with “masculine” dance vocabularies to represent power irrespective of the gender of the performer or the character they

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<sup>7</sup> A term popularized in the queer community to understand the fullness of gender many feel within them. Genderfull can be in alignment with gender fluidity and may be considered as on the other side of the gender spectrum from agender.

<sup>8</sup> Also known as Ma Durga. Goddess of Protection, Motherhood, War, and Destruction

<sup>9</sup> Also known as Kali Ma. Goddess of Time or Death, consort of Shiva the Destroyer.

<sup>10</sup> The Sanskrit word for power or divine energy and a central concept of Hinduism. This word is inherently female. Shakti is also the name for the Hindu goddess who embodies all manifestations of female divinity and power, and is often represented through Goddesses Durga and Kali

are presenting. By reading shakti into binary understandings of masculine and feminine dance vocabularies, we can understand how female characters may embody traits associated with masculinity such as power and fierceness, and vice versa with male characters. By reading shakti into Indian classical dance vocabularies, we can understand how concepts of masculine and feminine are blurred by performers and characters alike.

### **Cultural Performance as Nationalism**

Cultural art forms originating in or appropriated by Hinduism hold a particular sway over the heart of Hindu nationalists, perhaps none more so than Indian classical dance forms such as Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Odissi, and Kuchipudi. Odissi dancer and University of Minnesota professor of dance Ananya Chatterjea in “In Search of a Secular in Contemporary Indian Dance: A Continuing Journey” marks “bodies” as being transformed into “sites of staging and familiarizing a certain iconography” (103). This phenomenon is illustrated powerfully through the emotions and nationalism evoked through ostensibly “traditional” performances of Indian classical dance, whether nationalist or not in its choreography and presentation. Through the fierce pride Classical dance evokes in the hearts of Hindu nationalists, they have dizzyingly extended their feelings to a sense of ownership over this cultural art form. This extends to a sense of ownership and control over those who practice the forms, as exemplified in the case of Hindutva punishment of Classical dancer, feminist, and activist Mallika Sarabhai.

In light of the Gujarat pogroms of 2002, Gujarati dancers took to the stage and to courtrooms to protest the Hindutva at their doorstep, utilizing their power as performers to take action against this violent manifestation of nationalism. Perhaps none did so more visibly than Mallika Sarabhai, internationally revered Kuchipudi and Bharatanatyam dancer who filed a

Public Interest Litigation suit against the colluding state government of Gujarat, “charging it with...human rights” violations, and “demand[ing] the resignation of [Gujarat’s then-] Chief Prime Minister, Narendra Modi” (Chatterjea, 105). Mallika experienced fiery backlash from Hindutva vadis who felt betrayed by her actions – for as a Classical dancer, was she not supposed to represent *them?* – and was falsely accused and thereby arrested and imprisoned over claims of wage theft. This was a concerted effort by Hindu nationalists to punish her for her supposed betrayal in speaking out and acting against them and their colluding state government (Chatterjea, 105).

The same interplay of cultural performance and Hindu nationalism was on full display over a decade later in Houston, Texas as part of the cultural event and political rally “Howdy Modi” which drew, dancers, singers, DJs, yoga practitioners, Narendra Modi, Donald Trump, and enthralled Hindu Americans to the event. Most of the performances were a carefully curated collection of Hindutva favorites: Indian classical dance, Carnatic or Hindustani Classical music, and a handful of specific, intentional Classical song and dance fusion pieces (PMO). Such a display appealed not only to Hindutva sensibilities but also perhaps less-nationalist, but still fervently Hindu and Indian sentiments present in the audience. Piece after piece as well as the accompanying event script blared over the speakers either mentioned explicitly multiculturalism or alluded to it through fusion (PMO). Such allusions may have even convinced audience members that the event they were participating in was an important act of Indian American cultural representation. There was fusion music, for example, a Carnatic pop hit remix of Carnatic solfeggio set to Ed Sheeran’s “Shape of You,” fusion dance, as in the tap-dance and Kathak fusion performance accompanied by a Western band performing Hindustani music, and

fusion costuming, for example, when dancers performing modern dance and Kathak fusion wore Indowestern style jewelry and clothing (PMO).

In one notable example of Indian classical dance, a five-minute piece performed by a huge assembly of practitioners of multiple classical forms, women and girl dancers were adorned in ostensibly “traditional” costuming, hairstyles, makeup, and jewelry of their specific dance form. Their uniform choreography employed *nritta*, or pure dance which emphasizes footwork and rhythm over storytelling. Images of ancient Hindu temples were projected onto the enormous background. This performance may seem simple and innocuous to the untrained eye. Some may protest, “It was just dance! There were no lyrics in the songs! No stories were performed!” And yet the iconography of Indian classical dance when paired with the iconography of ancient Hindu temples, juxtaposed with the fact that this was performed at an event hailing the Hindu nationalist prime minister of India makes it abundantly clear that this was a performance of Hindu nationalism on the “Howdy Modi” stage.

The strategy of multiculturalism was employed by “Howdy Modi” event organizers and performers to make acceptable their participation in a blatantly Hindu nationalist and white nationalist political rally. “Howdy Modi” was the American manifestation of decades of NRI Hindutva vadi organizing, packaged and presented in the quintessential Vishwa Hindu Parishad package of a “festival celebration for the Hindu community to make it ‘conscious’ of its collective identity” and “thereby cement it further” (Katju, 212). “Howdy Modi” did just this by celebrating a distinctly Hindu Indian community, thereby crystallizing Hindu religious consciousness as tied to the Indian state.

# Chapter 3:

## Where Liberation and Euphoria Meet

**August 2022**

*Stomp, lift, elbow up, arm loose - HOLD!*

I will never tire of the thrill that comes over me when I swoop low into a *Nataraja* pose and coolly survey my audience while embodying the God of Dance. On a hot August night in downtown Los Angeles in the summer of 2022, I am performing Bharatanatyam before a packed, raucous, and overjoyed crowd crammed into the upper floor of the Airliner. Twenty-two years of careful training and practice in Indian classical dance brought me to this moment of dancing a self-choreographed piece on the duality of gender and longing for homeland to a rapt audience of queer and trans South Asian Americans. As I pound the stage, the bells wrapped around my ankles chant a rhythm. As my hands flutter from one *mudhra* to another, my hand symbols evoke meanings and tell stories legible even to those not trained in Indian classical dance. My bearded drag king makeup, complimented by my winged eyeliner, conveys the full spectrum of gender to my audience. Tonight, I feel an indescribable joy when my inward understanding and outward representation of myself as beyond the gender binary meet through this Indian classical dance performance. At night, I am Pahas the Drag King, dancing Bharatanatyam to my queer and trans South Asian peers. By day, I am Pahas the Scholar, pursuing a master's degree in Asian American & Pacific Islander Studies at the University of Los Angeles.

At one point in my professional career in Washington D.C. several years ago, I came across another non-binary performer, a bearded drag artist named Vidhya, who also utilized the familiar tradition of Indian classical dance to perform a heightened form of gender to their audience. While we share some identities and depart at others, the main differences in our transgender performances center around the different Indian classical dance forms we incorporate into our dance and the intent behind these incorporations. Vidhya utilizes the Indian classical dance forms of Kathak and Kuchipudi to convey femininity to their audience while I utilize Bharatanatyam to emphasize a duality of genders to my audience. I knew that Vidhya and I both had stories to impart about Indian classical dance and transgender identity formation in the diaspora. When I decided to pursue a Master's in Asian American Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, I knew I simply had to explore the topic more, to make it legible to larger queer and transgender South Asian American audiences and those interested in learning the lessons this scholarship can impart.

This chapter will delve into my findings – a compilation of autoethnographic recollections and analyses from my childhood to teenage years to adulthood, as well as an interview with Vidhya, a genderqueer Hyderabadi now residing on the East Coast - in order to examine how transgender, non-binary, and genderqueer drag performers utilize Indian classical dance to create belonging for themselves and other queer and trans South Asians through cultural performance space.

## **Meet The Subjects**

Vidhya and I are both South Indian, Telugu, queer and trans performers of the South Asian diaspora in the United States. We met by way of my childhood gudi<sup>11</sup> in 2018.

A few days earlier, a Facebook event notification caught my attention and made me catch my breath. Was my temple really hosting a Pride-themed event about Hinduism and the LGBTQ community? Intrigued, but with a bit of trepidation given that I had left Hinduism a few years earlier, I made the drive from my apartment in Northern Virginia to my gudi in the suburbs of Maryland. Not only was I nervous about the prospect of attending due to my long absence from the temple – how would I feel once within its walls? - but I had additional concerns about running into my Bharatanatyam guru unprepared. She was a staple at the temple, and I nearly always ran into her when I was there.



**Pre-transition Prahas at their childhood gudi, circa 2015**

**Photo courtesy of Prahas Rudraraju**

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<sup>11</sup> temple in Telugu

You see, at the same time I lost my connection with Hinduism in 2015, I also stopped lessons with my guru, determining that maybe an arangetram<sup>12</sup> was never in the cards for me and I could pursue my passion for Indian classical dance through other routes. A couple months later, feeling liberated from the constraints that came with performing an arangetram as someone with a feminized body, I swapped my long locks for the fresh skin fade and short curls. I'd always been drawn to short hair, and I would have cut it sooner if not for the constraints and aesthetic expectations that came with performing an arangetram as a person who was assigned female at birth.

*What is she going to think of my hair?* I bemoaned as I strategically chose a black floral dress which would at least suggest some alignment with womanhood while I departed from what my Amma and guru and most temple-goers would have approved of – a churidar kurta, anarkali, or better yet, a saree. As I drove along the long stretch of highway towards the gudi, I convinced myself I wouldn't see her – after all, why on earth would she be present at an event on queer inclusion in their temple?

It turned out that she was there because she was going to be reciting opening prayers to bless the event, and because her daughter-in-law and son were two of the organizers of the event, something which I only realized *after* sharing my own experiences of parental rejection of my queerness due to Hindu cultural expectations. In my defense, the room was so packed I could barely see anyone unless they were right in front of me. The moment I caught her profile towards the end of the event, my heart began to pound in my chest, filling my ears with a roaring sound. I had been out for eight years at this point, but as queer BIPOC audiences will understand, coming out is a constant and continuously negotiated throughout your life. You are constantly at risk of losing something or someone important .

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<sup>12</sup> literally “ascending the stage” in Tamil and Malayalam, a dancer or musician's debut



I awkwardly greeted her at the end of the event, an awkwardness that she reciprocated. I wondered if she had recognized my voice or seen me as I shared my story. I wondered if she had realized that the people who had inflicted such deep pain on me were the very people she'd known my entire life and regarded as acquaintances and friends. And yet, despite the awkwardness, I felt liberated. I was at peace that my guru knew of my queerness now. I wonder if in this brief, awkward moment, she too had made peace with the understanding that I would never perform my arangetram under her, something which both of us had been working towards for nearly three years of my life and anticipated since my infancy.

I did not know at that moment that it would be the last time we spoke to each other.

As my guru walked away from me, I saw someone I'd noticed from the event, someone who'd spoken immediately after my comment and shared their experience of family rejection and outing from the Indian community due to the similarly violent expectations placed upon us. Without knowing me from Adam, they rushed up to me with a loud, warm "Hiii!" and enveloped me in a hug. We immediately introduced ourselves and shared more about our experiences. Their name was Vidhya, they were South Indian too, and they lived in Maryland – not too far from the neighborhood I was moving to. Within a few minutes, we had each other's contact information and had plans to meet again as soon as my new lease began. With excitement brimming in my heart, I added a rainbow emoji next to their name and smiled down at my phone as I exited the familiar hallways of my childhood, feeling inexplicably healed thanks to the events of that afternoon.

In this moment, I had no idea that meeting Vidhya would have such a huge impact on my life and scholarship.

Within a month of knowing each other, Vidhya came over to my new apartment and we talked about and shared videos of our past performances of Indian classical dance with one another, and we even attended the NQAPIA (National Queer Asian Pacific Islander Alliance) Conference in San Francisco together. Within just a month, I'd made a lifelong friend without knowing it, all thanks to the gudi I'd left in 2015 and an event organized by the son and daughter-in-law of my Bharatanatyam guru.

Vidhya and I immediately noticed many similarities between us. Though Vidhya is gay and I am pansexual, we both floated around the non-binary umbrella, with Vidhya leaning closer to genderqueer and me leaning closer to agender and transmasculine. I am assigned female at birth while Vidhya is assigned male at birth.

We of course also were both Telugu, although Vidhya identifies as Hyderabadi and I identify as an in-between of Telugu and Tamil – though ethnically Telugu on both sides, my mother's family has been in Tamil Nadu for generations, making me feel culturally Tamil although linguistically and ethnically Telugu.

Both of us prefer to identify as South Indian over Indian or Indian American, which I have noticed is common among many queer Indians in the diaspora in the United States. Although I can only speculate as to the reasons for others, I know for myself a large reason for the distance in associating as Indian or Indian American comes from my resistance to the Hindu nationalist and Indian nationalist movements in India that seek to consume or erase important parts of who I am – South Indian, queer, transgender, and anti-fascist. Central to my anti-fascist framework is a deep commitment to solidarity with other oppressed peoples, and in the Indian and Indian diasporic context, this includes leveraging my privileges as a caste privileged person raised as a Hindu.

Vidhya and I were also both non-profit workers by day, queer community members and performers by night. Both of us were members of Khush D.C. – the DMV’s South Asian LGBTQIA+ organization – where Vidhya took on the additional role of board member for a time. Vidhya was a regular in the drag scenes across the DMV, and their mesmerizing performances which were authentically South Asian – incorporating cultural clothing, makeup, and aesthetics, music, and choreography – increasingly inspired me to step onto the drag performance stage. While we approached South Asian drag performance in different ways, there is no doubt that witnessing Vidhya’s magnetic and dynamic performances for a year is what drew me to finally leap onto the stage in the summer of 2019 for my first drag performance at Khush D.C.’s Jalwa Night.

Our final similarity – one which has grown with our friendship through the years – lies in how we utilize both Indian classical dance and drag as our performance mediums. Vidhya is trained in Kuchipudi and has also performed Kathak, while I am trained in Bharatanatyam and have a beginner’s understanding and training in Odissi. I have performed drag less than ten times over the past four years and am fond of sticking to choreographed routines interspersed with occasional crowd work. In the meantime, Vidhya is a seasoned, effortless drag artist who is constantly prepared for and preparing for the next performance with new ideas, choreography, costuming. They can seamlessly switch between choreographed routines and improvised crowd work in their sets, to the delight of their audiences.

### **Anywhere Can Be Your Stage**

Some of you may be wondering: well, where did you two perform this genderqueer Indian classical dance? After all, drag performances are not known for their presence in

mainstream society which limits venues and spaces for performance. I doubt that Vidhya and I will ever perform Indian classical dance on the proscenium stage where Indian classical dance is traditionally performed. This is where the community allyship and understanding queer spaces and queer performing spaces as an act of cultural and cross-cultural solidarity comes into play.

In his book *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* Martin Manalansan provides insights that enable me to better understand the problematic nature of cities hailed as queer-friendly metropolitan centers such as Washington D.C. and Los Angeles. Although these cities may appear queer-friendly on the exterior due to their high populations and visibility of queer and transgender people, Manalansan emphasizes how these metropolitan centers' queer spaces typically cater to white and wealthy clientele, leaving out poorer and BIPOC queers. Manalansan finds that gay immigrant Filipinos who are excluded from mainstream gay spaces find community in their ethnic enclaves and spaces that become queer through temporality. One example of this was a Filipino restaurant which catered to cishet patrons during the evening and queer clientele later at night.

The spaces where Vidhya and my South Asian drag performances are met with the most enthusiasm are indeed South Asian-specific performance events – sometimes offered by South Asian businesses, and other times by other BIPOC establishments – lending their space and solidarity for a period of time. Manalansan's piece resonates strongly with Vidhya and my experiences of queer nightlife and (counter)publics in how our local queer South Asians organizations in both Washington, D.C. and Los Angeles navigated community spaces and events through temporality and despite “there” and “out there” politics of belonging and exclusion that so often impact the queer community. Manalansan asks us to step away from the white framing of queer inclusion and exclusion as at odds with cishet society and to instead

understand BIPOC queer inclusion and exclusion as in concert with our own BIPOC cishet communities who experience the same inclusion and exclusion from white society. Thus, Vidhya and I find we can turn to these BIPOC establishments like restaurants and nightclubs and rent out their spaces so that for a few hours at night, it becomes *our* space. By lending us their space, these BIPOC establishments also lend those of us on the margins their legitimacy and access to the broader (BIPOC) community.

Two of my performance spaces – ones for Jalwa in 2019 and Mujra Brunch in 2022 – demonstrate Manalansan’s findings quite clearly. For Jalwa, Khush D.C. rented out a Black-owned and run night club in the Shaw neighborhood of D.C., and for Mujra Brunch, Satrang SoCal rented out Bollywood Beach, an Indian restaurant in downtown Los Angeles. These establishments typically served Black, South Asian, and broadly multiracial communities, but for a few hours they transformed into a queer and trans South Asian-run performance venue for queer and trans South Asians. At Bollywood Beach especially, we felt the warm embrace of our cishet South Asian counterparts who cheered us on, filmed us, and posted us to their restaurant’s social media accounts. There, the cisgender and heterosexual South Asian restaurant staff actively engaged in our performances and celebrated us rather than distancing themselves from our queer and trans drag performances, thus integrating us into their broader, dominant South Asian space.

Kareem Khubchandani in *Ishtyle: Accenting Gay Indian* Nightlife discusses a similar phenomenon occurring in Bengaluru, in which some gay Indian pubs located on the upper floor of the same building of other “straight” pubs use the legitimacy of the “straight” pub as a cover for their own safety. Khubchandani notes a “straight floor” as positioned immediately upon entrance into the space, serving to camouflage the queer floor located directly above it and

provide a straight barrier between the public and the hidden queer space (57). These spaces of intimacy, community, and safety provide opportunities for authenticity and kinship among queer Indians which are otherwise difficult to replicate in public spheres during the daytime due to safety concerns. In this case, Khubchandani demonstrates how queer Indian spaces are created through physical separation and levels. While both options demonstrate the creative ways queer South Asian community organizers and members have navigated spatial and temporal reckoning, they also reveal the many ways that queer and trans South Asians are generally relegated to the periphery in cisnet dominated societies both in India and in the diaspora.

I find Khubchandani and Manalansan's arguments about creating safe counterpublics for queer people of the global majority can also be applied along lines of queerness, in how the Los Angeles LGBT Center, an organization that is catered to the LGBTQ+ local community, provided Satrang SoCal their space for a few hours so that Satrang could host South Asian Pride Night in June 2023. Thus, we can see how along lines of either racial solidarity in the case of the Black and South Asian establishments or queer solidarity in the case of the Los Angeles LGBT Center, established community organizations and businesses in the United States can offer their allyship to the queer and trans South Asian community. Rather than understanding queer BIPOC counterpublics as entirely separate from society, Manalansan and Khubchandani's scholarship help us to explore the possibilities of queer BIPOC counterpublics as integrated into both BIPOC communities and queer communities. Though these BIPOC and queer establishments may themselves not be located within the center of white cisnet society, by understanding and negotiating their proximity to the center, they can temporarily usher queer BIPOC communities closer to the center for when their celebrations and events call for greater access to the public.

## Careful Constructions: Decision Making in Drag

Costuming. Hair. Makeup. Music. Choreography.

These core elements of a drag performance vary from performer to performer and performance to performance. For a drag performer like me who focuses mainly on song and dance, my costuming, hair, and makeup stay relatively consistent from performance to performance. However, for more capital-D Drag performers like Vidhya, their costuming, hair, makeup, music, and choreography changes from performance to performance. Exploring these elements individually offers us insight into how unique choices by transgender drag performers add to the gender liberation and euphoria that both they and their audience members experience throughout a performance.

As a nontraditional drag performer, I incorporate certain elements of traditional Indian classical dance performance aesthetic as well as modern or drag aesthetics into what I refer to as my “classical drag aesthetic”. My costuming incorporates a blend of modern dance aesthetics such as loose black harem pants and a sleeveless black top with essential adornments from Bharatanatyam such as salangai<sup>13</sup>, a gold belt, a short and a long gold necklace, bangles, and gold earrings. My makeup also includes a blend of masculine and feminine elements. In Indian classical dance, men and women performers alike will don similar makeup, from pronounced eyeliner to red lips. My makeup choices, displayed through thick winged eyeliner, sparkling inner corners and cheekbones, muted lips, and thickly painted black beard thus result from both Bharatanatyam and drag king aesthetics. Curiously, elements such as eyeliner here take on a gender neutral quality. Eyeliner here is not inherently feminine, given that it is a staple of Indian classical dance aesthetic. Similarly, the sparkling highlight that accentuates the inner corner of

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<sup>13</sup> Bells, also referred to as ghungroos. In Bharatanatyam, these small bells are attached to a cloth pad fastened tightly around the ankles.

my eyes and the lines of my cheekbones take on gender neutrality in that they are drag performance aesthetics meant to enhance the visuals of the artist and are not designated to any one gender in drag performance. My hair, boringly, remains the same from performance to performance. The most I can do with these short locks is attempt to get on my barber's books prior to the performance in the hopes that by showtime I am rocking a clean fade.



**Prahas performing at Satrang SoCal's 2023 South Asian Pride Night**

**Photo courtesy of Prahas Rudraraju**

On the other hand, Vidhya's costuming, makeup, and hair changes each performance night. Even within a given set, they may have multiple costume changes incorporated



masterfully into her choreography and routine. I have been witness to many such instances in which Vidhya twirled out of a gown to reveal a stunning saree or lehenga, much to the delight of their adoring and raucous audience.

Vidhya detailed the process that goes into each routine, starting with song choice(s). Once she has selected a song, she conjures an image in her mind of the performance aesthetics, from hairstyle to costuming. “The makeup is common each time, but changes colors for the moment,” they inform me, casually mentioning that her makeup alone takes two hours to apply.

“And what about your outfits?” I ask. “How do you go about your costuming? I notice you are one of the few AAPI drag performers who wears only South Asian clothes.”

“I always perform in South Asian clothes, and anything that is flowy enough to twirl around in. I never saw myself — All the inspirations are rooted to my own identity in where I am and where I come from, who I am and what I carry with me,” they reply with a wistful look. “After coming to U.S., the only thing I still feel connected to are clothes I’ve seen, outfits my mom and sister wore – sarees, half sarees, and the colorful fabrics I saw growing up. What I live in and what my drag is – I’m very much confident in doing that.”

Here we can see Vidhya’s costuming choice as not only emblematic of her song choice, but also as a reflection of her family members’ influence throughout her life, and perhaps as a connection to her family in India despite their geographic distance.

I asked Vidhya why she chooses to incorporate Indian classical dance into her routines. “I like how expressive you can be in it,” she answers readily. “I know how elaborate, dramatic expressions can be for very simple things. The drama and essence of it, the way you move your body and stretch your body – and postures! Some of them say stories, some of them are figurative, refer to words with fingers and hands. I can’t do all of it into drag every day, but it

gave me the hope of ‘I could do something in my own ways too!’”, referring to their culturally-coded performance choices.

When it comes to my own processes around choreography, I also begin with music. Sometimes it’s as simple as seeing if a popular song on TikTok has the kind of lyrics I can match with choreography. It’s very important to select a song that your audience will get excited to hear. A key reason for my selection of Tamil pop hit “Tum Tum” for my performances at Satrang SoCal’s Mujra Brunch and South Asian Pride Night was that I knew the song had been popularized through TikTok trends and would be a huge hit among the many Tamil Satrangis<sup>14</sup>. Additionally, I will often try to center a South Indian – specifically Tamil or Telugu - song due to my own cultural pride and connection to the languages.

From there, I pay close attention to the lyrics, often finding multiple English translations online as I try to uncover the various meanings within the song. Once I have the approximations of the original meaning pulled up before me, I note the words in English I can translate through mudhras, poses, and other Bharatanatyam vocabularies through my body. In the case of “Tum Tum”, the snippet of the song I’ve selected for my performance is sung by a woman, and accordingly my movements in the first half of the song take on the fluid, graceful characteristics of laasya. Once the song progresses into the upbeat chorus, I allow my body to transition into the more fervent tempo of thandavam. I shift from graceful, evocative abhinaya to a rhythmic nritya which continues some of the storytelling of the first half of the song with my upper body while my lower body matches the new, fast tempo with intricate, rhythmic footwork.

In both Vidhya and my drag decision making, a clear duality of gender appears in our aesthetic and performance choices – in both cases through our hair, makeup, and beards, and in my case, also through my choreography.

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<sup>14</sup> A nickname for members of Satrang.

While Vidhya and I experience gender liberation and euphoria through our careful choices in performance elements and the act of performing itself, we also experience it through our audience reception of our performance. Through nostalgia and affect, as mentioned earlier in this thesis, we and our audience experienced heightened moments of gender liberation and euphoria and cultural reconciliation with their queer and transgender identities. The excitement, acceptance, love, and appreciation we experience through our enthusiastic audiences at these genderqueer South Asian performance events enhances our own moments of gender liberation and euphoria through performance.

## **Conclusion**

Beyond the implications of these transgender performances of Indian classical dance for the purposes of gender liberation and euphoria for performers and audiences, there are greater implications in regard to destabilizing and disorienting Indian classical dance, brahmanical patriarchy, and Hindu nationalism.

I prefer using the terms disorienting and destabilizing over “reclaiming” or “reappropriating” for a variety of factors. Before delving into these reasons, it may be most helpful to explain why positing transgender performances of Indian classical dance in the diaspora as “reclaiming” ICD is problematic. My main concerns with using terms such as “reclamation” and “reappropriation” lie in the fact that if used in conjunction with this research, such language choice would imply that the queer and trans practitioners of Indian classical dance in the diaspora hold claim to the forms. This would then align these practitioners with the brahmanical sanitizers of Indian classical dance who appropriated the original arts into the nationally elevated and approved dance forms we see today. While it is possible that some such

practitioners may in fact come from hereditary dancing communities, given that the majority of those learning Indian classical dance in the United States come from caste privileged backgrounds, one can assume that this is neither guaranteed nor the norm – at least in the diaspora. As a caste privileged transgender practitioner of Bharatanatyam, I cannot claim to “reclaim” or “reappropriate” this dance form.

Some notable scholars who have discussed reappropriation include Gerlov van Engelenhoven and Lovalerie King. Gerlov van Engelenhoven’s work on the reappropriations of the term “adat” in Moluccan communities as a part of their diasporic cultural heritage explores reappropriation in conjunction with postcolonial identity formations. Van Engelenhoven analyzes how the reappropriation of the term adat – derived from Arabic and translating to “custom” or “habit” – served to support Indonesian nationalist movements to shake off Dutch colonial hold (704). Van Engelenhoven positions the reappropriation of adat as a form of self-identification, which helps me to understand reappropriation as finding new meaning and purpose for a term, object, artifact which originates from that person or people’s community and heritage. Thus, for someone outside of these communities to argue reclamation or reappropriation would be tantamount to “appropriating once more”.

Similarly, Lovalerie King understands reappropriation as an act to understand and revise history in the absence of records from within the community. Rather than elevating the existing colonial records, King explains how Gayle Jones resisted the existing colonial archives by instead making legible erased history of the “destroyed nation of Palmares” (755). Thus, according to King, reappropriation occurs when Gayl Jones attempts to understand and revise history through Black women writers’ revisionist strategies. King’s work demonstrates to me that revisionism and reappropriation when done ethically create pathways for reclamation of

what was once *yours*. In other words, King and van Engelenhoven's scholarship both indicate that the terms reappropriation and reclamation are best suited for individuals who belong to communities that have experienced cultural theft and appropriation.

Therefore, I assert that reappropriation is something that can only be performed by the community of origin – we must be cautious in painting specific framings. I would instead suggest terms such as “destabilizing” and “disorienting” to better encapsulate what I mean when I attempt to articulate the reworking done by queer and trans practitioners of Indian classical dance. Although queer and trans practitioners may share some commonalities with caste-oppressed communities in their marginalization by brahminical patriarchy and are sometimes caste-oppressed themselves, using “reclamation” and “reappropriation” may serve to pinkwash casteism and the caste privilege of caste-privileged queer and transgender South Asian American dancers like me. Instead of claiming that transgender dance performances of Indian classical dance are reappropriating or reclaiming ICD, I would instead argue that trans and non-binary performers of the form are attempting to shake off the rigid confines of brahminical patriarchy which would restrict their queer expressions and instead use this sacred symbol of Hindutva to resist such expectations.

Disorienting Indian classical dance, as understood by Leia Devadason in “Disidentifying with Odissi: Towards a Queer Phenomenology of Indian Classical Dance”, involves a “call for critical reflection and change”. Here, Devadason “take[s] up” Sara Ahmed’s “call to stay with moments of disorientation” in order to better understand the “conditions that produced” this disconnect within Devadason’s queer body as she learned Odissi. Devadason discusses the stress of transforming her queer body into “shapes signifying idealised womanhood” and performing “narratives organised by heterosexual love” (Devadason).

This is something I can relate to deeply as a non-binary, transmasculine performer. Upon coming to terms with my transmasculinity, I began to present differently in public. On YouTube, white trans mascs told me what kinds of shirts to wear to cover my curvy shape and what kind of posture I should carry myself with to appear less feminine. I felt disoriented – my posture was not something I associated with femininity. It had been cultivated since age five to maintain perfect posture for Bharatanatyam dance. Still, the white trans mascs on YouTube told me to tuck in my pelvis and stop curving my spine, and so I did.

After a year or two of acclimating to this new “masculine” posture, sitting in a proper aramandi<sup>15</sup> with a curved back became awkward and threw my whole body out of alignment. My knee pain returned when I danced Bharatanatyam, and I began to disorient from that which had come so naturally to me before. I firmly believe the only reason I have been able to return to Indian classical dance with comfort instead of confusion and pain is due to the masculine mask I can put on through drag. I doubt I would be able to perform Bharatanatyam without the heightened masculine aesthetics I don through drag aesthetics, which allow me to disregard the outside, white noise of how a transmasculine person should perform gender.

Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* explores the intersections of space, orientation, and queerness. Ahmed’s work helps us to understand how cisgender performers of Indian classical dance may orient themselves in manners aligned with the traditional values and expectations placed upon the dance form and its practitioners.

Devadason’s piece, on the other hand, helps us to understand how transgender performers of Indian classical dance can disorient themselves from alignment with expectations surrounding ICD and its practitioners, thus destabilizing the restrictions and barriers of the art form. The

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<sup>15</sup> The “seated” position in Bharatanatyam. Feet are positioned outwards, creating a 180-degree line, and heels are nearly touching. Knees are bent at a 90-degree angle.

disruption caused in drag performances of Indian classical dance can serve as the call for critical reflection and change.

# Chapter 4:

## Conclusion

So what? What is the significance of Vidhya and me performing classical dance forms in drag attire? The answer is twofold: in disorienting Indian classical dance, a central component of Hindu and Indian national iconography, Vidhya and I are asserting as non-binary and queer individuals that we, too, are authentically Indian, as we destabilize a dance form that in its pan-Indian manifestation has been sanitized, appropriated, and removed from its origins through a casteist “revival”.

Despite the long and recorded history of transgender and non-binary South Asians in the subcontinent, transgender and non-binary desis in South Asian countries and in the diaspora face constant attacks from fellow desis claiming we are non-native due to our queerness and transness, and that these core elements of our being are in fact Western diseases. In online spaces, cyber bullying is especially vicious – especially against gender nonconforming South Asians (especially those assigned male at birth) who share their makeup, clothing, and performances with the world through the Internet. The worst of the hate comes from within our own Indian community.

However, it becomes glaringly apparent through scholarship of many notable scholars of India and queerness, such as Anurima Banerji’s “The Queer Politics of the Raj,” which details the criminalization of transgender Indians by the British Raj, that queer and transgender identities have always existed in South Asia, long before contact with Europeans.



In framing the performance of Indian classical dance in drag as a disorientation of Indian classical dance, I understand the transgender performance of ICD as one that disrupts cis-het Indian society in the diaspora just as it creates a utopic space of belonging for its queer and transgender practitioners and its queer and transgender audiences. By virtue of the sheer power of the iconography of Indian classical dance and its firm association with *Indianness*, disorientation as enacted through transgender performances of ICD allows for practitioners and audiences to feel whole as both South Asian and queer and trans individuals.

Gender liberation and euphoria can come about through a multitude of ways. For some, it entails a social transition, such as “coming out” as transgender to friends and family, changing hairstyles, and updating one’s wardrobe. For others, it entails a medical transition such as starting hormone replacement therapy or undergoing gender affirming procedures. For others still, it may entail carefully curating a culturally-specific drag performance routine and performing it in front of a rapt audience of adoring onlookers.

As Vidhya and I can attest to, the importance of “feeling whole” cannot be overstated. Moments of gender liberation and euphoria when enacted through culturally-specific means and in culturally-specific spaces allow us to feel seen and embraced in our queerness, transness, and brownness, and heal the trauma of family and community rejection.

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