Dimensions and Dynamics of Sharing Dance in India
A Conversation

Anurima Banerji, Lona Bhattacharjee, Aishika Chakraborty, Rajkumar Das, Prarthana Purkayastha, and an anonymous author

Preface

On February 3, 2022, Anurima Banerji and Prarthana Purkayastha convened a conversation on what "sharing" signifies, conceptually and materially, in the many worlds of dance in India. Our aim was to create a project that aligns with and models the theme of sharing in its collaborative format and features multiple perspectives on the subject. While it is impossible to consider the diversity of Indian dancing in a comprehensive frame, we organized an exchange with three important interlocutors who can each speak *to* the topic from their particular locus. They are specialists in areas of Indian dance that remain underrepresented in the current field: Lona Bhattacharjee and Rajkumar Das from *Komal Gandhar,* a group of cis and transgendered dance activists comprised a group of cis and transgendered sex workers in Kolkata; an author who wishes to stay anonymous for safety reasons as she researches Kashmiri culture and performance; and Dr. Aishika Chakraborty, a trained dancer and scholar in Kolkata who has worked on Indian popular and modern choreographies. Participants spoke in a mix of Bengali, English, and Hindi during the conversation. Our discussion was oriented towards highlighting the voices of dancemakers, activists, and scholars in India who are making major contributions to the discourse and share a common investment in unsettling Indian dance hegemonies. (Anurima Banerji)[1]

1 **Notes on transcript:** *Transcript prepared by Arpit Gaind and edited by Anurima Banerji; Translation from Bengali: Prarthana Purkayastha; Translation from Hindi: Arpit Gaind; The transcript has been edited for clarity, for purposes of publication.*

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Conversation

Anurima Banerji (AB): Thanks everyone for being here today. Could you please introduce yourselves and the area of dance that you work on?

Aishika Chakraborty (AC): I am Aishika Chakraborty, Professor, School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University. I am a cis-gendered woman. I started my teaching career as a lecturer in history. So, I began my journey as a historian, and my area of research was widowhood in 19th century Bengali Hindu society. I had a parallel journey as a dancer, as a performer, which I began as a student of Manjusri Chaki Sircar and Ranjabati Sircar.[2] Manjusri was also an anthropologist, a feminist activist, and a contemporary Indian dancer-choreographer who rose to prominence in the dance map of post independent India. The dancer-duo shaped our visions of dance and body. They taught us not only the new dictions of the body and dance, but also taught us how to take the stage as a dancer, how to critique the patriarchal eye, to rip apart the dancing stereotypes, to change the mode of representation, to use the female dancing body as a site of cultural, gender, or sexual politics. They left the stage too early, and I discovered the politics of dance only after their sudden demise. I discovered that dance can be approached beyond my own body – that even when I am not dancing, I can write on the gendered politics embedded in Indian dance.

Honestly speaking, I was an accidental dance scholar. My theorization of the critical politics of the dancing body began with Manjusri and Ranjabati, who also pioneered academic dance writing in India way back in the 1990s. Ranjabati's explorations of the theory and practice of contemporary dance critiqued the *guru-shishya parampara* (teacher-disciple tradition) as a masculine penetrative system that demanded the unconditional surrender of a feminine receptive body to the sacrosanct cultural tradition (Sircar 1993; Chakraborty 2008). My first lessons in "dance scholarship" perhaps began with my late afternoon rehearsals at Dancers' Guild. I learnt the politics of

2 Dr. Manjusri Chaki Sircar (1934-2000) and her daughter Ranjabati Sircar (1963-1999) were dancers and choreographers who established the nationally and internationally acclaimed company Dancers' Guild in 1985 in the city of Kolkata in West Bengal, India. The mother-daughter duo was renowned for their feminist re-interpretation of texts (such as Rabindranath Tagore's dance dramas, songs and poems).

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representation while unlearning my previous training in classical dance. My long years of performance with the Guild and my day-to-day training under Manjusri processed a reversal of the hegemonic reification of Indian classical dance, embedded in patriarchal and religious traditions. Then, perhaps, I started "thinking" about the "moving" body … only after I left dancing.

Anonymous (AA): I wish to be anonymous. I identify as a cis-woman. I am an independent scholar based in Srinagar, Kashmir, India. My research practices primarily focus on literature and history, and I study the medieval and modern periods. My PhD and my post-PhD research work has been moving to and from between these time periods with a special focus on Kashmir. After some preliminary research in the contemporary period, especially dealing with the political conflict[3], I happened to focus on some cultural aspects, such as visual culture in Kashmir, and dance was a very accidental meeting. About a year ago, I started really thinking through dance and began looking at this particular form called *ragda*[4] as a political protest. That's when I was introduced to the discipline of dance. The year 2008 witnessed the biggest mass protest in Kashmir and it is commonly remembered as *ragda* – a protest dance – a performance where the dancers/performers form a circle. Once the circle is created, one person initiates the dance by chanting a slogan, to which others respond with slogans, and stomping with one foot while moving in a circular motion amidst the cheers and shouting audience.

As I said, I have no prior relationship with any dance form in India or on the global front. And there aren't many dance forms in Kashmir. So, this interest in terms of dance stems from the whish to look at the emergence of creative forms of political protests in Kashmir, against the intervention of the political or the military intervention of India in Kashmir, which goes

3 After the partition of British India into India and Pakistan in 1947, the indecisiveness of the king of the state of Jammu and Kashmir led both countries to lay claim over it. This led to a war in 1948 between the two countries, leading to the division of Jammu and Kashmir into Pakistan-controlled and India-controlled territories, from 1948 onwards, the two countries fought three wars over Kashmir. In 1990, the Kashmiri people, with help from Pakistan, launched an armed insurgency in India-controlled Kashmir against the illegal occupation of the state. India retaliated militarily and positioned 700,000 armed forces in Kashmir. The struggle of Kashmiris to create an independent state of Jammu and Kashmir continues till date. See Duschinski (2009), Kabir (2009), Kazi (2010), Zia (2019) and Varma (2020).

4 See anonymous author (forthcoming).

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back to 1947. I will not talk more about that here, because I assume that you are all familiar with the background event (please see footnote 3). And taking that lead, I think my intervention into studying dance was to understand dance as a creative expression, and also to look at the political space or the public space that gets created through the dance practices in Kashmir in the contemporary context and also to see the relationship between dance as a creative form of expression and political freedom. So, these were the three major entry points where I try to locate *ragda* as a dance in Kashmir, which I don't think would be considered as a "proper" dance.

Rajkumar Das (RD): *Namaskar.* My name is Rajkumar Das. I am a transgender female. I have been working in the social work sector for the past 16 years. Kolkata has so many NGOs and I have worked a little with many of them. Hence, I do have some experience that I will share today. It's been eight years since I came to work at Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC), where I got *Komal Gandhar* as a platform. There is a background context to *Komal Gandhar* that I will share here. It has been registered for about 25 years and was created by female sex workers to provide a platform to those who had artistic talent, but couldn't show it anywhere, as no one in the broader society or community gave them a space to perform. So, they thought, "we will make a platform ourselves." In the early years of *Komal Gandhar,* members used to go to learn art or show their talent, to perform in dance classes or singing classes, in places where they used to be ostracized or excluded – they were never allowed to stay in these mainstream spaces. And now, the whole situation has reversed for us. Earlier it only used to be sex workers, their family members, or their children in these performance spaces, but now the platform has widened a lot. Now there are sex workers, their children, transgenders, and even members of the general population who participate in *Komal Gandhar's* performances. We took up this challenge because the people who once rejected us, now their own children are coming to join us. *Komal Gandhar* has performed everywhere – within and outside India, and we continue to do it. The one special thing about *Komal Gandhar* is that the dance that we perform is mostly about social issues – like addressing child marriage or addiction issues of our young generation through dance drama. We make our own productions, edit our own music, and that's how we work on social issues – like HIV, or rape, basically issues that concern the society – we perform about those topics.

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Lona Bhattacharjee (LB): Hello everyone, I am Lona Saha Bhattacharjee. I am a transgender female. I am also a sex-worker's child. *Komal Gandhar* is the cultural wing of Durbar Sonagachi, and I am a choreographer and have been attached to the organization for the past 18 years. And Rajkumar-ji, for some reason, missed one thing; I think maybe she forgot to mention that she became the first Indian transgender judge of Lok Adalat [People's Court] in 2016.[5] And I became the second transgender judge of Lok Adalat.

Now let's talk about *Komal Gandhar* again: there wasn't just one reason to start the group. It was because we weren't getting any platform for expression; we weren't able to enter the society because we were referred to as a marginalized community – so there wasn't just one issue that we faced, there were/are many issues. For instance, *Komal Gandhar's* objective is to raise public consciousness that sex work is work, a sex worker is a worker, that sex workers have a Self-Regulatory Board (SRB) at Durbar, and that they have an anti-trafficking board. For *Komal Gandhar,* these need to get social recognition. The people from sex worker forums or from transgender communities weren't able to come into the mainstream because we were excluded and ostracized from society, but we could enter the cultural wing of Durbar very organically and easily. Durbar also engaged in other activities, like HIV/AIDS awareness, anti-trafficking, women's empowerment, sex worker rights, sex worker's children's rights and the Child Marriage Act. But, if you stand on a podium and give a speech on this kind of topic, no one will listen; if you do a dance drama about it, then a few people will watch it and see what is happening. And that's why *Komal Gandhar* played an important role for sex workers and the transgender community.

Komal Gandhar not only performs across India, but all over the world. It has performed in many international shows and for many funding agencies and NGOs – All India Network of Sex Workers (AINSW), Oil and Natural Gas Corporation Limited (ONGC), Goal India and Goal Project – we have done programs for all of them, across India and at a lot of platforms abroad e.g. in Switzerland, Thailand, Bangladesh, South Africa. This was a small summary of *Komal Gandhar* and its activities.

5 The Lok Adalat (People's Court) system in India is a statutory organization under the Legal Services Authorities Act of 1987. It is an alternative mechanism to the formal courts for dispute resolution in India pertaining to "public utility services". In these People's Courts, nominated judges discuss and settle cases that are pending at a prelitigation stage.

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Prarthana Purkayastha (PP): I am Prarthana Purkayastha, and I work as a senior lecturer in the Department of Drama, Theatre and Dance at Royal Holloway University of London. I identify as a cisgender woman. My research interests are in dance history/historiography, with a focus on questions around race, gender, sexuality, and activism. My current book project, titled *Dance Remains*, is interested in visual and material cultures in relation to "nautch" as a 19th and early 20th century phenomenon. A wide variety of dance practices from across India were subsumed under the category of "nautch"; I am primarily interested in examining the work of stigmatized dancers who belonged to this category, by studying their visual and material remains. What I am particularly interested in excavating are moments of nautch agency, or the voice of the nautch dancer, as these become evidenced through these remains, for example through Kalighat paintings, or scrapbooks belonging to courtesans. While working on this research project, I met *Komal Gandhar* in 2019; we have continued to maintain a relationship and while I have already published some material on their practice, I hope to further write about their dance work and activism (Purkayastha 2021).

AB: I am Anurima Banerji and I work at UCLA as a professor. I also identify as a cis woman. I trained in Odissi dance and have written a book on it. Currently, I am writing a monograph on the *Impossibility of Indian Classical Dance*. I'm interested in how we think about this category, in the history of classical dance and its present, and the politics of inclusion and exclusion (in terms of both social and aesthetic stratification) that mark it. How can we think of ways in which power gets manifested in this category? How do we deconstruct the category of the classical from a historical perspective? These are some of my research areas and interests, all sparked by my engagement with Odissi dance. So, I am interested in taking a critical look at classicism and thinking through its social and political implications – that's the broad area of inquiry that I am working on right now.

Now, an open question for everyone: What does "sharing" mean in your dance worlds and the performance contexts that you're engaging with at the moment?

AA: I think sharing is the primary concept in the *ragda* dance form. Sharing is primary because the dance itself or the dance performance cannot come into being, unless there is sharing. The minimal unit that is required for the

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performance is a group; and that group shifts from or alternates between the performers and the audience. So the sharing becomes basic – the way the group is a primary tool, sharing also is central to the dance. That can be sharing the space, sharing the rhythm, sharing the slogans [during political protests]. Sharing, in that sense, is probably the primary unit or concept for the dance that I am looking at.

AC: If you are a practitioner – a performer, or a teacher – then sharing dance means transference, handing over, passing on, transmission, outreach, and dissemination. Without sharing, how can the cultural capital that you own – be it classical, contemporary, folk – be transmitted to another performer's body? How else can you inculcate or impart the training to your successors, who are going to take the stage after your show is over, or in your absence? Sharing means the process of "passing on," carrying forward the legacy of a cultural/performance tradition and transmitting the *parampara* from one generation to another. The continuation of that knowledge system only passes on through sharing. And secondly, as far as dancers' testimonies, personal narratives and experiential knowledge are concerned, we can share and gather that by listening, writing, searching and re-searching. Sometimes we create on our own, or sometimes we derive it from others, and so derivation is also sharing.

RD: More than half of what sharing is for me has already been shared by the anonymous author and Aishika Didi. Agreeing with them, I will only say a couple of things: whatever I have, I can share, but I can't teach. If I share with my friend, my colleague, my dancer – be it a song, or an idea during a production, or some dress sense, we can share that. Or whatever dance I have trained in, I can share that, but that sharing will only be completely successful when it is done properly – meaning, for example, a teacher will share what they know with the disciple, but it needs to be done properly. If we are in training, we should learn properly, and that's how it will work. Then going forward, the disciple will train someone else and that is how this process will go on, as it has been done in the past. And I will say this again and again: sharing doesn't mean to "just say" something – meaning, it is not that I had some feelings and I shared that. It is different; for example, I had an idea/thought and I shared it with the other person/disciple. But even in that idea, there will be something positive, something negative; some will accept

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the idea, some won't accept it. There is a distinction between sharing dance knowledge informally, and teaching and learning dance knowledge more formally – sharing can be contested if it happens in informal settings.

LB: So, for me sharing is not just something that happens between the disciple and teacher. Sharing applies to each and every aspect of our dance work – in a choreographic context, it could mean the sharing of one's composition, or a couple of lines from a song, it could be an idea, or a concept that dancers can share. So sharing is expansive. A teacher can share with a student, a student can share with a teacher, and to share means everything in our dance.

RD: Without sharing, I mean if we don't share, then our dance industry won't run. It is imperative for us to share. The relationship that sharing creates, the thread it weaves has such a strong impact, so if that gets closed, then the next generation won't receive any support or knowledge. Sharing is the most important thing.

AC: Listening to Rajkumar and Lona, I understand that our knowledge and research are contingent upon sharing. Sharing is critical for dance ethnography. When ethnographers set out for field research, for in-depth interviews they have to depend on the sharing of data by performers or respondents. One person's gaining or acquiring knowledge is dependent upon and inextricably linked to another's sharing. It is not about knowledge that flows from teacher to disciple in the dance training context, but even more than that. If practitioners and performers refuse to share their private and personal stories, how can we "build on" the knowledge of our dance scholarship? In March 2020, I went to Purulia to interview the *Nachnis* (dancing women of Manbhum) as part of my research on the disenfranchised and marginalized dancing women of India. During my fieldwork, I came across many untold stories on their exploitation, abuse and sexual violence. Behind the scenes of the nighttime performance of the *nachnis*, the routine violence and stigma suffered by them often remains unrecorded and unshared. *Nachnis* were considered untouchable. Their dead corpses were not even cremated after their deaths. The discovery of the dead body of Rajabala Nachni at a hilltop drew the attention of the media, NGOs, and finally the state (Devi 2007). The *nachnis* have started raising their voices against social and natural injustice

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and gained recognition as folk artists. Those sharings have now turned into a movement against untouchability, an activism to gain natural justice.

PP: What I loved about Rajkumar's and Lona's contribution is that sharing is crucial to your survival in this world. Your work, and your networks, cannot survive without sharing – that is, in your line of work, survival is dependent on sharing.

So, how is sharing important in my work? During my research on 19th and 20th century dance for my current book, I came across the archival remains of a courtesan called Indubala Dasi (1899-1984), who was the first Bengali artist to record for the Gramophone Company of India, and the only student that Gauhar Jaan (1873-1930) had acquired as a *shishya* (disciple); Gauhar Jaan was Indubala's main *guru*.[6] During the course of my research, I found Indubala's scrapbook quite by chance; it was donated to the archival collections of Jadunath Bhavan Museum and Resource Centre (JBMRC) in Kolkata by the collector Parimal Ray [7]. I happened to be the first researcher to examine the contents of this scrapbook.

Sharing becomes particularly important, a key governing principle, in relation to the courtesan's world as shown by the scrapbook, which essentially consists of playing cards, greeting cards, invitation cards and food menus. I was struck by this very personal world of the courtesan, which is revealed by the scrapbook, and the notion of a sharing of time, of space, of pleasure and aesthetic labor becomes evident here. The dances and songs that courtesans had trained in or learnt were being shared in these intimate social gatherings, and we get a glimpse of these through the invitation cards, which women courtesans/actresses/performers gave to each other. There is a personal or affective dimension to this sharing, too, something that Aishika referred to earlier – a sharing of emotional/personal time made possible through these

6 Gauhar Jaan was a legendary singer/dancer from Kolkata, of mixed Armenian-Indian heritage and with Muslim, Christian, and Hindu religious backgrounds, who was first noticed in the royal courts of Darbhanga and Wajid Ali Shah in Bengal. She is acknowledged as one of the earliest recording stars of the Gramophone Company of India, and a key proponent of Hindustani classical music in late 19th and early 20th century India. See Sampath (2010).

7 The JBMRC is a unit of the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta (CSSSC) and comprises of a library, archive, and exhibition space. It holds a significant collection of rare books, periodicals, newspapers and photographs, and a textual and visual archive of 19th and 20th century Bengal.

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networks of courtesans and women performers. It is possible that Indubala Dasi's mother, Rajbala, had received these invitations from her peers – and that Indubala collected these in her scrapbook. Some of these invitations refer to *pushpotsav* or "flower ceremonies," and we don't really know what these ceremonies allude to, because the scrapbook does not reveal the meanings of these words.[8] Yet, even though there is a silence around these meanings, we come to recognize that there are social events happening in the private worlds of courtesans where they are sharing each other's lives, social spaces, and aesthetic capital; so sharing becomes a form of sustenance for this network of women performers. What is interesting to note is that many of the names found in the invitation cards are those of late 19th- and early 20th-century theatre actresses, dancers, and singers who hailed from the red-light districts of Sonagachi/Rambagan. Indubala's scrapbook becomes a very valuable resource to examine the ways in which the stigmatized world of the theatre actress, dancer, singer was in fact a world of prolific and abundant sharing of pleasure and joy.

AB: It's very interesting to me how sharing happens in Odissi. For example, there are two traditions that went into its making, the Gotipua tradition and the Mahari tradition.[9] The Mahari ritual was not necessarily meant to be shared broadly, since it was an enclosed practice inside the temple, with limited sharing with the public, historically. Yet, the Gotipua dance was very different in that it was meant to be a public event, it was meant to be shared, because the intention was to propagate the message of Bhakti through the work of Gotipua entertainment. So, these two notions of sharing are in tension – one is a sharing within the Mahari community, to exchange knowl-

8 A *pushpotsav*, or "flower ceremony" would, according to historian Tapan Ray Chaudhuri, mark the coming of age of the child bride in nineteenth-century India, when child marriage was still prevalent. It was observed as a ritual by women, for women. See Raychaudhuri (2000).

9 *Gotipuas* are boy trained to assume female roles in their performances. The aim of the tradition, which began in the 16th century, is to celebrate the Hindu god Krishna and spread the message of Bhakti, a popular religious movement that rejected the temple as a mediating structure between devotees and the divine. *Maharis*, who also referred to themselves as devadasis, were female ritual singers and dancers in Odisha who held positions of esteem in the Hindu temple order, considered the consorts of the god Jagannath (a cognate of Krishna). While the gotipua system exists today, the mahari tradition has faded out. See Marglin (1985), and Banerji (2019).

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edge in order to sustain the practice, to sustain the order. On the other hand, the Gotipua practice is meant to be a public enterprise, to be shared with an audience coming from many different backgrounds rather than just temple-goers. So I am interested in how the sharing is thought of in distinct ways in these two traditions, because they both influenced the formation of Odissi dance today as a stage practice, as a classical practice, which again has a mediated form of sharing with its publics, because it's constructed and perceived as an elite genre. So there are multiple ideas of sharing that are operating here.

Also, like Prarthana, I am interested in the historical element. I am thinking of the archive as a form of sharing. The archive becomes the space in which we access the materials, the traces of dance – this relates very much to your work on *dance remains*, Prarthana. So, even as the archive is ideally a place that houses materials to be shared, sometimes public archival institutions also limit access to the knowledge available and take on a form of gatekeeping that restricts a broader sharing of the histories which we engage with in dance. So, we're contending with the problem of open and closed archives. Of course, we also have to consider those archives which are meant for specific communities who might hold a marginal or vulnerable social position, which are meant to safeguard their knowledge, and such archives are deliberately designed to carefully regulate access – *not* share freely – for this reason.

I'm wondering now, for each of you, how is sharing made possible in your work? So, in your case, Rajkumar and Lona, you had talked about your relations with each other in *Komal Gandhar,* like the *guru-shishya* relationship, sharing within the group, sharing as a form of survival. How else does sharing occur – for example, through your activism with the public?

RD: If we talk about sharing beyond dance in our work, then we believe that in India it is very important for everyone to know the laws, the Constitution of our country – this is the most important thing for every woman in our country to know. That's why wherever we go, we share whatever we know about fundamental rights; that is very important. For example, after six o'clock in the evening, a woman cannot be arrested if she is considered a criminal or an accused, as she is protected by constitutional rights; to share

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this information with women is very important.[10] For example, if you arrest and take a woman to the police station, she has a right to make a phone call to someone she knows – a relative, a friend. Knowing the law is very important for us, if nothing else, to protect ourselves. If a police officer does something wrong to us, if we don't assert ourselves confidently, then they will think, "they have come from certain red-light areas, they are prostitutes, they are not educated, they don't know anything." And that is why it is important for us to say something, so that we can exert some pressure on them. I know my rights, I live in India, I know my Constitution, and I also know how to protect myself. So, we share all this with everyone in our community, in our sex workers community, and beyond; it is very important for me to share this information so that it helps and protects our work, and I have seen that it helps, and we have had a lot of good results from doing this work [of sharing knowledge of constitutional rights].

AB: And how do you share *with* dance, or *through* dance?

RD: What we do is – say, for example, we are doing a dance-drama – we will put in a scene about someone arresting us, and we show through the dance-drama enactment that the police is coming to arrest us, and we will show all that through a musical. We practice and improvise all of this in our rehearsals – to make it easy for someone watching us – because we perform on the road, we do a lot of street dance also. So, the aim is that the pedestrian – because we are not doing it in a professional setting, we are doing it for the common and lay people – can empathize and understand the scene quickly and imagine themselves in the scene: the police came, they arrested someone, and now the arrested person wants to call someone – we show this through our dance. And not just this, but we also deal with the matter of women and what rights they have. But we don't overdo it, because if we say too much then the onlookers won't be able to understand properly, so we pick basic issues. For example, even the richest woman will get a free government lawyer

10 According to Section 46 (4) Code of Criminal Procedure (1973): "Save in exceptional circumstances, a woman shall not be arrested after sunset and before sunrise," and in cases where an arrest is made, "the woman police officer shall, by making a written report, obtain the prior permission of the Judicial Magistrate of the first class within whose local jurisdiction the office is committed or the arrest to be made." Damini Singh Chauhan (n.d)

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under the law – this can be very important for a woman watching our show and we try to present this through our dance drama.

LB: Yes, I will surely say something about sharing. Actually, I will add something – I like adding/joining something rather than just "saying" something. Rajkumar-ji[11] has already mentioned how we make the street plays and perform them. But we don't just deal with the matter of legal representation. We also show a lot of other important social phenomena that are relevant even outside the sex-work forum – for example, *bodhu nirjaton* (domestic violence), like when a husband comes home drunk and becomes violent towards the wife; or the situation of dowry and other monetary pressures from the mother-in-law and father-in law; so there are a lot of these other issues, too, that are part of society. For example, the child beggars and kids who are on the street and homeless, and many such situations that we see while travelling – we need to think about all these vicious things in society – what are they, and who do they happen? What are the problems that a girl faces if she doesn't get married because of dowry? Or, what happens to that girl who marries and goes to her husband who beats her, and she experiences violence? Or what happens to the sex worker who is visited by a drunk customer and who ends up poking burnt cigarettes into the legs, breasts, hands, and chest of the sex-worker? But they still deal with it because they need to earn money, and live their life, and get food on the table for their child. It's very important to tell the society about these issues, and all this is done by *Komal Gandhar*.

RD: What we share through our activities, like information about the law, covering issues such as under-age marriage and children's education: we share these through dance as well.

RD: We do all of this, and I won't say we haven't reaped any results from this. We have – otherwise we wouldn't have reached this level so far. But the biggest problem still in our society is patriarchy. I don't know how long it will last, and for how long it will follow us, but we still keep challenging it.

11 Adding *-ji* to a name, or referring to a person as "Didi" (elder sister) indicates an honorific is being used to address the interlocutor in a courteous and respectful manner.

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AB: Thank you, Lona and Rajkumar – it's illuminating to hear about how your dance practice articulates an important social critique and raises awareness of the violence faced by sex workers, while creating a space for relaying crucial information about civic rights and generating conversations through interactions with the broader community. AA, your work also analyses protest, activism, and sharing as interwoven dynamics – in that sense it seems thematically connected to *Komal Gandhar*'s. How do these play out in the context of *ragda*?

AA: So, as I said, the *ragda* dance or the performance starts with this concept of sharing – it can be sharing the space, it can be sharing this idea itself to challenge the sovereign, and it also includes sharing the authorship. Nobody is the "author" in the sense that nobody controls the performance. Right from the space that the performance is organized to the authorship or the control of the performance, it's all decentralized. The power does not lie with one person or in one place. It's everywhere. And this challenging the sovereign, the might of the sovereign, itself is a kind of sharing, the freedom to speak back to the sovereign.

In 2008, there were mass demonstrations in Kashmir against the Indian government. One year later they became popularly known as *ragda*. While photographing those demonstrations, I was astonished to see how dancing created an echoing effect where all the young men gathered at one point, let their bodies loose, and followed what others around them were doing.[12] It often started with one individual and in no time the event would gather momentum, where everyone was dancing and cheering. There were no instructions from anyone except a collective situation which usually sparked those bodies to move.

The presence of military barricades, barbed wires, bunkers, and checkposts heightens the presence of violence and limitations imposed on the political self, against which the performance begins. These limitations imposed by the state on the participants' movements cast bodies in a state of vulnerability. While the outside symbols and practices of violence and restraint on

12 To date, only males (mostly between the ages of 13-25 years) have participated in *ragda*. There have been no documented instances of female involvement in the phenomenon. There were instances in 2017 and 2018 when girls started participating in stone-pelting during protests, but they did not join the *ragda*.

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personal freedom mount on the subject's consciousness, the chants from the crowd *hum kya chahte azaadi* (we want freedom) trigger a response in the subjects. The bodies inhabiting the outside physical space start moving towards each other. In this process of sharing public space, the bodies now inhabit a newfound physicality that is marked by new systems of inscription. The dancers come together to mark the space of dance in the crowd. This marking of a boundary in a shared space is a process of negotiation where the crowd also participates while clearing off the site for *ragda* to begin. There is no fixed structure to the entire process. The dancers finally come closer to dance together.

Each body can converse with other bodies to express and relate the intense joy of feeling free, from which emerges the sense of a sovereign self. Here, I have employed the concept of sovereign self as the ethical right of a person with bodily integrity, and the subject as the exclusive controller/choreographer of their own body movements. In other words, sovereignty of the self means the individual right to bodily integrity, and the collective right of freedom of assembly, and also the right to mobility. As the multiple bodies come together, chanting and dancing, the bodies inscribe onto one another a form of solidarity. The implicit and explicit solidarity between the dancers brings them closer to perform together in the form of a *collective*.

For the performers and the spectators alike, *ragda* is an enabler of expressing affective choreography, to accommodate more and more people and long-distance solidarity to oppose the state's political oppression. There is a poignant message in the performance. It does not just create a community that shares a space and arranges itself according to the logic of a complementing political cause. It is about creating a space where every voice acquires equality in participation and expression of the lack of their freedom. The dance creates an autonomous, democratic, and shared space. Therefore, the element of sharing is a crucial characteristic in its emergence. And that is how we need to understand the importance of a *collective* in this context – particularly in a state where creating a shared public space is not allowed to come into existence, *ragda* becomes crucial for making inroads into the question of political sovereignty, agency, and creating and claiming of spaces.

The dance provides the Kashmiri people with a way to express solidarity by being together in a physical space. As this form of creative participation endows the performers with a sense of political freedom, *ragda* empowers the collective to challenge sovereign authority. The sovereign authority here

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is a concept of absolute political authority that does not permit people to assemble or engage in a dialogue and conversation to address the limitations on their political freedom imposed by the state. It is clear that the Kashmiri people are bound together in dance beyond class, ethnic background, and sectarian differences. The *ragda* provides a language that binds people together against the backdrop of the political conflict that has wrecked the everyday life of Kashmiri people. Any protracted political conflict of this kind inscribes violence on human bodies and limits the platforms for exploring complex questions of identity and self.

I think sharing is a very important idea in the sense that it also involves this decision-making process, where everybody becomes part of a decision to be made and considers what kind of protest to wage against the sovereign, at what place or at what time. All of that happens so simultaneously and spontaneously that I think all of it is performed through sharing, all of that is made explicit through sharing. It all becomes possible through this notion of sharing. I read *ragda* as an example of the ways dance can be employed to make a political claim to counter the Indian state's assertion of its own sovereignty over Kashmir, even though the claim made by *ragda* has only symbolic value since it does not produce anything stable or concrete on the ground. For this reason, the counter-sovereign space is precarious and fleeting, which emerges only during dancing and does not acquire a permanent or solid structure. But dancing opens up the space for expressing political solidarity and conversations among Kashmiris about their political existence, which is otherwise marred by state oppression. These conversations in turn become integral in order to persist and resist in everyday life and may include a mere pun on state power or a way forward in thinking about the political future of Kashmir.[13] It can initiate a process of reflection, which then might again turn into political activation.

AB: That is such an important set of reflections on *ragda*, and the simultaneous articulation and subjugation of sharing that its performance engenders.

13 The state is identified by the officials and people who run it. In everyday conversations, puns are often directed against them. As one example, take the pun *Nabin Qabar Kasheer nyebar* (translation: The Grave of Nabi is outside Kashmir). In 2008, there were widespread protests in the Kashmir valley. The Congress Party leader Ghulam Nabi Azad was the Chief Minister then, and in everyday parlance the above cited pun was aimed against him. This is one example among many such puns in the Kashmiri language.

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Yet, it's so different from *Komal Gandhar's* project, because due to the political constraints you've outlined, the oppositional work of *ragda* can rarely be shared with a public beyond the borders of Kashmir. Aishika, you have worked on the politics of popular dance forms as well. I wonder if you could talk about the materializations of sharing in those particular areas that you have studied?

AC: Yes. I started with women's stories, underlining their voices, their agencies, and their subjectivities. When I thought that I was almost done with my research on women performers of Bengal, I suddenly stumbled upon the memoir of Miss Shefali (1944-2020)[14], the cabaret dancer, a refugee from East Pakistan [now Bangladesh] who rose to become a celebrated figure as the first cabaret dancer of color in Calcutta's five-star nightclubs, like Firpo's and Oberoi Grand Hotel. Thereafter started my third innings as a researcher, as I was allowed to peep into the forbidden world of erotic dance and desire through my personal conversations with Shefali. During my five-year-long research journey, I visited her at her own small flat in north Kolkata. We spent long hours as our unstructured and informal *tête-à-tête* slowly developed into a polemical discourse on the cultural and moral politics of the state. The interview started with initial hesitation on her part. Shefali was very skeptical about my "class-privileged" position: "You are a university professor – what are you going to do with me, my life? Why is the *bhadralok*[15] or the intelligentsia now so curious about a cabaret dancer's life, what the hell you are going to do with my dance?" So, in the first few sessions she was very cautious, very suspicious of me. Then she opened up, and those moments of sharing and unfurling revealed her gutsy critique of the patriarchy, the state, the intelligentsia, and the hypocritical moral politics of Bengal. My long sessions with Shefali revealed an uncharted cultural politics of Bengal.

Actually, as her interviewer, I felt many times that I was trying hard to come out of my comfort zone. As an urban, educated researcher and a mod-

14 *Shefali* also refers to the tropical jasmine that blooms at night and loses its shine during the day, so the title plays on the symbolic meaning of the cabaret dancer as a figure desired at night-time yet scorned at daybreak (Shefali, 2014).

15 *Bhadralok* is the social elite of Bengal that emerged through the transformational processes of social changes brought under the British rule in colonial Bengal. Generally, it denotes the upper-/middle-class educated and genteel social category of urban Bengal. See J. H. Broomfield (1968).

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ern dancer of the same city, I never wanted to share my space with a half-literate cabaret girl. I, too, performed in the *darbar* hall of Oberoi Grand Hotel, but only after and only because Miss Shefali was removed from that space. We actually shared little in common. Why was I so keen to know the titillating stories of her life? Did I appropriate her story for the purpose of my research? But Shefali was also keen to share more, keen to see her words in print. She wanted to celebrate her censored and unsanctioned identity, critiquing the moral policing of the educated intelligentsia. The spaces once inhabited by Indubala and Gauhar Jaan ran alongside the red-light districts of Rambagan/Sonagachi. The half-nude dancers who arrived later on the same scene and performed in Minerva and Rangana, the theatres of the neighborhood, were equally considered obscene and nasty. All these obscene bodies needed to be crossed out from our space of performance. The Bengali intelligentsia struggled hard to preserve the sites of culture – their theatre, revolution, music and dance – as a prized possession or index of their cultural identity. They did it by evicting and erasing the "vulgar" dancing bodies that tarnished and ruined their cultural reserve.

In the last five years, my research on cabaret was primarily focused on Miss Shefali, whose journey of life offered an intricate maze in itself. From arthouse films directed by Satyajit Ray[16] to low-brow *jatra*[17], she worked from the sacred to the profane, and troubled the middle-class reserve of culture. She moved from upscale nightclubs to the cheap commercial theatres in Hatibagan and walked through those historic moments, taking me through a virtual tour de force of her life. I accompanied Miss Shefali to the Oberoi Grand and also watched theatre with her at Girish Manch; and I made a video documentary [a part of which is submitted to Women's Studies Centre of SNDT University, Mumbai, India]. Throughout my research, I discovered the hypocrisy and double standard of my own middle-class self, which felt intimidated by a cabaret dancer, a refugee, a woman who had endured multiple instances of sexual abuse, and yet who stormed the bastions of middle-class culture and respectability. So actually, the middle class felt threatened by her, and she wrecked the moral economy of the *bhadralok*, the

16 Uttam Kumar (1926-1980) was a star actor in the Bengali and Hindi film worlds. Ray (1921-1992) was an internationally renowned director of independent Bengali cinema.

17 *Jatra* is a form of popular theatre prevalent in eastern India.

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intelligentsia, with her "obscene" dance. Her life was like a slap on the face of our middle-class liberal politics!

My journey as a researcher is my way of coping with the "Other", and encountering an already disenfranchised, evicted, "immoral" body through my privileged lens. As I set on my research on the "popular" and the "pervert" I also realized that Kolkata is not only about Rabindranath Tagore[18] and Uday Shankar[19] – exclusively about the intelligentsia and the intellectual. The city danced in multiple ways and in myriad spaces, from the illumined amphitheater to its dingy underbelly (Chakraborty 2022). We are yet to unearth the subterranean world of culture inhabited by the so-called obscene and vulgar bodies. Obsessed with the hegemonic modern, did we ever pan the searchlight on the erotic entertainers who danced the night away in our own city?

Shefali passed away in February 2020. Ten days before her death, she released my Bengali monograph (2019) on her, at the Mughal Room of Oberoi Grand. That's how we bade her farewell. With her death, I have lost my archive. An entire era has disappeared with Miss Shefali because most other cabaret dancers of her time have moved underground, and none had her courage to speak up.

AB: This brings us to the question of the limits of sharing, because sharing can also imply at times that the participants involved are in similar or horizontally linked positions in the social field: We may think that we're in an equal exchange – but that's not always true, because there are power differentials and structures of inequality that inform these exchanges, and we are often asymmetrically placed. So how do we share in these situations where the participants aren't in fact framed as equal in social terms? Are there containments on sharing in the work that we do? If so, are the limits coming from within the community, or are the limits imposed from outside?

RD: Actually, there are some limitations, and they should exist, because we are dancers. In West Bengal, there is competition all the time because there are a lot of dancers here, and we learn a lot of variation within classical

18 A famous Bengali polymath and globally respected cultural icon, Tagore (1861-1941) won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913.

19 Shankar (1900-1977) was a Bengali choreographer who achieved acclaim for his contributions to Indian modern dance.

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dance in West Bengal.[20] I am not even talking about the pan-India level – we can't even think about that – but I can tell you about the West Bengal scenario. Since we are always in competition, we don't share everything about our process and choreography. For example, where do we have our dresses made, what is the material that we use; or during our annual function, we do a broad-minded performance that reaches everyone, but we share nothing specific. Or we hide the fact that we are learning from *gurus* who are teaching us separately, because we won't be able to make a living otherwise in this age of competition; if someone steals or uses our ideas, our whole game will get spoiled. So, this is a big limitation, that we can't share certain things even if we want to.

LB: What Rajkumar-ji said is true. But other than that, too, there is one more thing which we will share here: that is, we try to give our best.

Still, there is a limitation between the teacher and the disciple that will always remain. There is a norm, a tradition, that the disciple will only be given "this much" (*gestures*) that they can digest and if too much/this much is taught (*gestures again*) then the student won't be able to learn. So, for that reason, there should be some prudent limitations in the teaching process.

AA: In *ragda*, the limitation on sharing is not the kind which is intrinsic to the performance, but the limitations imposed are external. Now, the dance or the performance is situated in a political context, so the limitation that will be upon the performance or the performers is very much political, and mostly it comes from the sovereign, since the sovereign will not allow its sovereignty to be challenged – even if it is ephemeral, even if it is a token of challenge, not in that sense very material or on equal terms with the sovereign – it will still not allow that, so it puts a ban on the performance, and threatens the performers to the extent that they are arrested and intimidated.

The *ragda* became popular and spread across the valley in the summer of 2008. Its popularity grew on online platforms including YouTube, where the videos of performances were uploaded. However, the space of dissent created by *ragda* did not go unnoticed by the ruling regime, which consistently

20 Komal Gandhar's members receive training in various forms of Indian dance, including Bharatanatyam, and also train in modern (or what is also referred to as "creative") dance styles. Their dance is a combination of classical and Indian popular dance styles.

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acts to deny the Kashmiri people their sovereign rights. The state officials banned the performance on the pretext of a threat to the sovereignty of the Indian state. The recordings of protests were taken down from the internet. One wonders if the power of *ragda* at the symbolic level is threatening enough for it to elicit official intervention from the state?

Performing *ragda* or sharing the recorded performances on public platforms has been portrayed as an act of aggression against governmental authority and is increasingly subject to censorship by the Indian state. Most of the uploaded videos and footage of *ragda* are no longer available on internet sites. Those who participated in the *ragda* and are found by the police are then subject to detention, interrogation, and physical torture. So, that kind of limitation, yes, it happens on the sharing of *ragda* as well as the performance itself.

PP and AB: As AA notes, public dancing such as *ragda* can be clamped down and stopped by authorities, such as government agencies, the military, or the police – and dissenters can be subject to grave violence in the process. Even representations of *ragda* are prohibited because of their political significance. Rajkumar and Lona, you gave us a hint earlier that you experience this kind of suppression too. In your line of activist work, when you are out in the field performing for the rights of sex workers, have you experienced any limitations, like the cancellation or closure of shows?

RD: Yes, it has happened. Our shows have been terminated abruptly by the police, by the opposition politicians who don't want us to do them, or the *dalal* (or pimp) of Sonagachi. Once, we had our stage ready, our guests had come to attend the performance, but we still couldn't perform the show, because they didn't allow us to do it. Our Durga Puja festival – we could do it only after a directive from the Supreme Court and fighting the issue. So, during that time, all of our shows were cancelled, and we couldn't perform anywhere. We were stunned – we practiced, we had a date and time decided, we were all prepared, and our show was closed in the middle of the performance so that we couldn't complete it. It also happened, for example, we did a drama show on 1st December on HIV, because it is International AIDS Day. We were stopped then, too, and we were given excuses, but we also know that there was [no legitimate reason], but they still pressured us and cancelled our show. There have been a lot of experiences like these; we have also fought and

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argued with the police, they'll tell us we don't have permission to perform even if we have permission and all legal regulations in place, but still, they intervene. So, this keeps happening, even though the closures have lessened in frequency over the years, and we keep getting this challenge in many different venues where we have to fight for social acceptance.

PP: So, in your activist work, in sex work, the police and the law can shut down your work anytime?

RD and LB: Yes, they can impose a lot of limitations. Because they have power, right? We don't have it, so they can shut us down anytime they like.

RD: We also don't lose hope, we keep trying. A lot of times, it has happened that in the same place where our show was stopped, we have done the same show there again, and it went really well and was a hit.

AB: So, there are commonalities here with what's happening with the repressions from the state, from the law, from the police, on forms of dance expression which they deem improper, or they want to suppress – be it *ragda*, or your activist work with *Komal Gandhar*, Rajkumar and Lona. And Aishika, you also had mentioned that in your research, you found there is this curtailment of cabaret dancing through its dominant framing as "pervert culture." Can you elaborate on that?

AC: Yes, actually this is also a historic journey of the exotic-erotic dance, which was always practiced as sexual or erotic labor. My current research looked at three political milestones of Bengal – the Partition of India in 1947, the Naxalbari movement in the 1970s[21], and the birth of Bangladesh in 1971, which triggered another wave of a refugee exodus, creating another pool of cabaret dancers in Kolkata. My work meandered through the political, the social, and then the alleyways of the moral and cultural – everything implicated, everything overlapped with each other.

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21 The Naxalite movement began in the 1960s as a peasant revolt, born out of the disenfranchisement of tribal groups, rural populations, and exploited laborers militating against the privileged classes. It so named because it began in Naxalbari, West Bengal.

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But apart from dance, theatre was also the epitome of the hegemonic cultural aesthetic of Bengal, integrally connected with its political culture. While professional theatre traced its past to the nineteenth-century Bengal Renaissance, group-theatre activism particularly carried forward the lineage of IPTA (Indian People's Theatre Associations, started in the 1940s), which was leftist in orientation and worked as a cultural wing of the ruling Communist Party of Bengal (Dasgupta 2011; Bhattacharya 2013; Purkayastha 2015). By making roaring business in the box-office, cabaret-in-theatre visibly disturbed the aesthetic hierarchy of intellectual theatre. And, when that zone or the performative domain of revolutionary aesthetic was wrecked, disturbed, or interfered by some profane, some lewd, or some "unwanted bodies" coming from the low class, laboring proletariat background, moral policing perhaps became inevitable. The cabaret dancers that I have looked at are not the equivalent of the present-day bar dancers who are coming from a particularly hereditary community of dancers, or low-caste communities, like Sameena Dalwai (2019) and Anna Morcom (2014) have worked on.

The cabaret dancers mostly hailed from Bengali Hindu "higher caste" backgrounds (i.e. Brahmin, Baidya and Kayastha) but were from poor families; a majority of them were dislocated refugees from East Pakistan (present-day Bangladesh). They were uneducated, illiterate and famished while their clients and audiences comprised a cross-section of Bengali men, from the middle-class *Bhadralok* to the urban proletariat. While analyzing performance, we need to explore and engage with these intersections – caste, class, and gender. Power or the sovereign state, too, does not always play the same card – different agendas coalesce. In such situations, when the woman and her body speak back, new histories are written, and a different sharing begins.

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