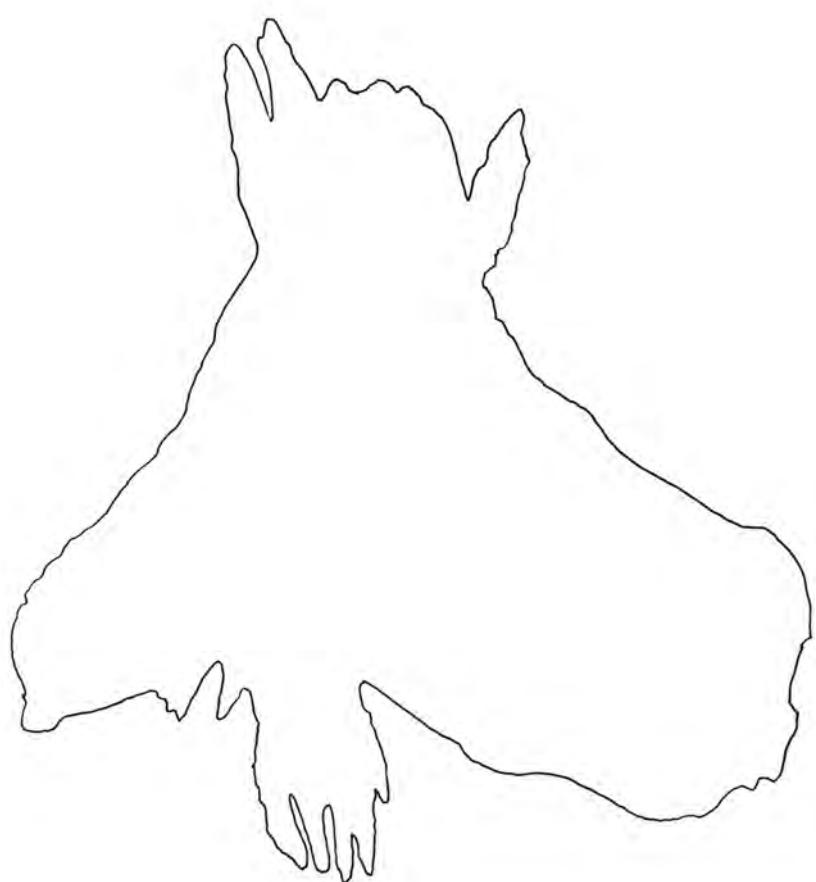


ARCHIPELAGO ARCHIVES EXHIBIT #2:
Picking (on) Prefixes
Kiran Kumār



To Rukmini Devi (1904–1986)

Rukmiṇīma, namaskāram.

You've been on my mind a lot lately, so it seemed only natural to articulate my thoughts to you sooner than later. At the outset, I must admit that my initial intention was to write only to Kelubābu (*Archipelago Archives Exhibit #1: Dear Dead Dancer, 2016*), critically voicing concerns with my practice of dance which I saw as having inherited from him. Yet even as I shared that letter with him, it began to dawn on me that while it certainly felt good to articulate an otherwise swelling critique to him, he was perhaps not the most appropriate recipient for some of my rants. Gracious as he is, he nevertheless humoured me patiently. And I ask for the same of you.

In my letter to him I spoke from my practice of Odissi as reconstructed by him. His Odissi, which was born in the 1950s, was modelled heavily on your strategies of (re)constructing Bharatanātyam in the 1930s. Indeed, the success of your project and the adaptation of its blueprint by reconstructionists of dances like Odissi and Kuchipudi has meant that by now your artistic progeny is a more complex demographic than solely Bharatanātyam dancers. This complexity has meant that without ever having met you or ever having learnt from your lineage, I may still stake a pedagogic claim to you. And as part of this claim, I will henceforth exercise a licence of address held dearly by your students, in calling you athai. And, athai, I must admit that I do so in hope that this gesture of endearment will allow me commensurate leeway to air some of those unresolved concerns.

In postcolonial India, your Bharatanātyam stood as an exemplar of what the Indian nation-state, through its Sangeet Natak Akademi and Ministry of Culture, would come to declare as “Indian classical dance.” This has since been a label of rather high purchase that many other dances have desired and acquired. At first glance, this double declaration of dance as “Indian” and as “classical” seemed to me as little more than a linguistic bureaucracy of delaying the dance. And not just linguistic—these words are indeed veritable rites-of-passage, at the other end of which dance is presented as a promise to my body in this present moment of modernity. Yet today my body carries a deeper discontent in partaking in these dances, in their pedagogies and public presentations. This sentiment of discontent perhaps echoes one that you expressed in one of your later talks, although our inspirations may well widely differ. You quipped: “Today sophisticated vulgarity has taken the place of simple crudeness. Owing to a lack of devotion, there is a lack of discipline and, as a consequence, there is a deficiency in technique. The result is that there is no inspiration” (*The Spiritual Background of Indian Dance, 1981*). It is precisely such descriptors as devotion and discipline, simplicity and sophistication, vulgarity and crudeness, consequence and result, that have come to ossify into the prefixes of “Indian” and “classical.” Today I see these dances in variegated states of crises derived from their continued, uncritical avowal to such ossified prefixes.

How you dealt with your discontents, I do sometimes wonder, for I often take long walks with mine, silently airing them in public. Something often happens through these walks; we live a little longer together, resisting the urge to hack haplessly at each other with emotional or analytical tools. On one such self-prescribed walk in the south of Delhi, I emerged from one of the city’s many lush public parks to a street view of this:



All the accumulated calm from the idyllic tryst threatened to vaporise in an instant. Even so, from under the induced calm emerged a thought that it would be naive to merely wish these words away. What I wish to do instead, perhaps somewhat inspired by the levity of the graffiti, is transform discontent into dissent. The seeming barrage of words on the banner paints a more complex picture than that offered by the two prefixes alone. As I stood across the street from that banner, I realised that I would have to unpack some of the complex registers that are invoked by the double declaration of these dances as “Indian” and as “classical.” In the conjunctive prefix “Indian classical,” the civic and cultural registers of the nation are more or less explicit. The national flag flutters unambiguously on the facade, as do the battery of words in the byline: “School for Dance Music Yoga Indian Culture.” Yet it is somewhere between the twin Anglo-Sanskrit names of “Centre for Indian Classical Dances” and “Shri Kamakhya Kalapeeth” that a more implicit religious register begins to reveal itself in opportune collaboration with the seemingly immutable register of art. Athai, in what follows, I propose to dwell on some nuances of these four registers: civic, cultural, religious, and artistic, with the specific intention of rethinking their continued relevance for my dancing body.

2020: State of Unrest

At the outset the word “Indian” has an unmistakably nationalistic ring to it. And rightfully so; as it stands today the word points to the geopolitical nation-state that is India. Nevertheless, as I write to you from February of 2020, this India is in a particularly tumultuous state over precisely the definition of being “Indian.” The Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), which was passed in the Indian Parliament in December 2019, has provoked widespread protest and polarisation among many Indian peoples. The act

has been touted as a gross violation of secularism. Resistance to the act stems also from an antagonistic sentiment to the political party currently in power, the Bharatiya Janata Party, which is perceived by its detractors as being blatantly anti-Muslim and pro-Hindu. I will stay clear of the political nature of the anti- and pro-CAA agitations because I see it as a decoy debate that, on account of not being ideologically open-ended on either side, risks an erosion of intellectual stamina and ultimately obfuscates the more complex ambit of registers at play in the Indian conceptions of nation.

Instead, I propose that we delve a little into the legality of this act. Drawing on documented legislative debates, the advocate Abhinav Chandrachud articulates with a rare clarity that, to my mind, often escapes many a political theorist and historian on the matter. In terms of its legislation, this act is delimited to granting citizenship through naturalisation to people subject to religious persecution in India's neighbouring Islamic states of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. The act attempts to address some old wounds dating back to the partition-at-birth of India from the then East and West Pakistan in August 1947. Already since 1948, India began witnessing a transmigration of peoples from both Pakistans into its territories. This seemed to be motivated by a social and economic promise that India held which, to them, Pakistan left wanting. Abhinav reminds us that the influx of people into India from the Pakistans included two groups: one, Muslims who at the time of partition had chosen to migrate from India to Pakistan, but since 1948 had begun returning to India; and two, Hindus and Sikhs already living in Pakistan at the time of partition who had begun migrating to India. The then Constituent Assembly's mitigation of these complex inward migrations termed the former as "evacuees" and the latter as "asylum seekers," while making no explicit reference to their obvious religious demographic, that is as returning Muslims and migrating Hindus and Sikhs. The advocate astutely terms this tactic of constitutional expression as "soft secularism" (*The Republic of Religion*, 2020).

1950: State Scripture

This "soft secularism," which came into force with the Indian Constitution in 1950, takes a hard hit with the CAA, which makes an expressed introduction, for the first time, of religion as a criterion in granting Indian citizenship to those peoples whose migration was motivated by religious persecution, hitherto identified only as "asylum seekers." This has thrown up questions of whether the act is fundamentally unconstitutional because it is seen as violating a certain value upheld by the Indian Constitution: secularism. It is noteworthy that the word "secularism" was itself introduced into the Indian constitution only in 1975 via an amendment made during a state of national emergency that was declared by the prime minister at the time, Indira Gandhi. Athai, this emergency was a

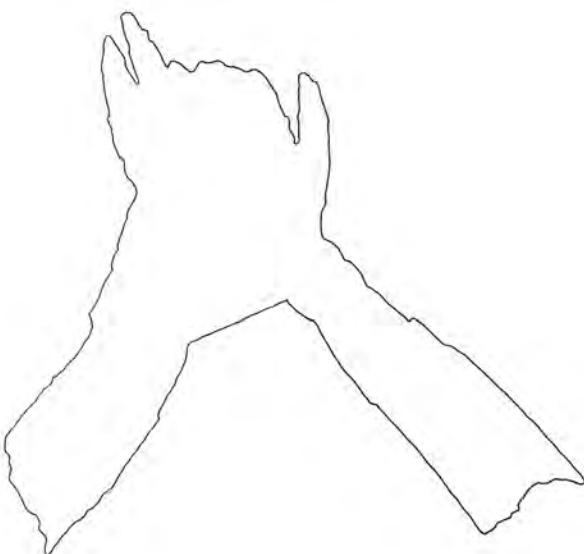
time that you had lived through, and one that I was born well after, so I do not have much to say about it except that it marks an important moment: against the backdrop of a declared national crisis, secularism is expressly impressed as a public ideal upon the collective consciousness of postcolonial India.

It is secularism, in all its varieties, that pits the civic and religious conceptions of the nation against each other in apparently irreconcilable deadlock, as with contemporary public discourse in the wake of the CAA. Yet there are some uncanny semblances of these two nations. As with warnings of the rise of populist, puritan, and fundamentalist tendencies, there seems to be an increasing, perhaps reactionary, tendency in India today towards a purely civic conception of the nation that fetishises constitutional articulations and amendments. Furthermore, this civic state and its constitutional scripture play upon large proportions of collective urban consciousness much as the warped-irrational beliefs of religious zealots might. As a result, earnest devotees of both the religious and civic nation find discomfort in nuanced arguments and critical histories, which they'd rather not or perhaps even dare not dispassionately debate. Such a climate of mutual disavowal and even disdain for each other only leaves the two nations of civic and religious conceptions evoking an older binary with arguably colonial roots.

1930: State in Scraps

Tucked away in an Indonesian archive, a few days ago I chanced upon a surreptitiously titled book, *Scraps of Paper: Authored by an Englishman*, A. P. Nicholson, and published in 1930, in the book's very first chapter titled "Perspective: The Real India," Nicholson observes:

We have been great colonizers in the world's history, but we could not colonize Hindustan ... So at an early stage we set about Europeanizing India. There is only one parallel to this gigantic experiment, the attempt of Peter the Great to Europeanize all the Russias, and in both cases the mass of the people were left unaffected.



This perspective provoked me: how could that which could not be colonised, be decolonised? While it may be easier to reject Nicholson's claim from a purely political perspective, the failure of colonising India strikes a more plausible note when the European colonial project is put in the context of evangelism. In fact, we only need glance westward from Europe across the Atlantic to the Americas to see what Nicholson may have implied. What then was it about the climate

of India that seemed indomitable to the coloniser, and what inherent immunity caused them to resist succumbing to the fate of pre-Christian Americas?

Indeed, Nicholson's own choice of words offer a hint: the uncolonizable Hindustan and the Europeanized India. Hindustan describes the *sthān* (place) that lies beyond the Himalayan river Sindhu, which the Persians called Hindush. The Greeks called this river Indus, the etymological source of the Latin India and Old English Indea. Although the India of early European imaginations begins quite definitively at the Himalayan Indus comprising present day Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar, its geographical extent in the Indian Ocean remains somewhat fluid. This is evidenced in the colonial nomenclature of present-day peninsular Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos as Indochina. It also persists in the colonial nomenclature of the Malaya Peninsula and Malay Archipelago as East Indies or Indonesia. Early Hindustan or India are civilisational names called out by Persians and Europeans, and not geopolitical claims made by postcolonies. The civilisational aspects of a nation necessarily extend beyond the nascent history of a civic conception of nation-as-state, to cultural, religious conceptions as well. But how was this civilisational India Europeanized?

1830: Mind the Minute

By the “Minute,” Nicholson reminds us as he describes, with unrestrained disdain, the Macaulay Minute on Education of 1835, which was the ignition for the engine of Europeanization, in modernist mechanistic metaphor. That infamous Minute reported an educational reform instituted by Tom Macaulay who, in Nicholson's words, “denounced the vernaculars as utterly useless … poured vials of scorn on Sanskrit and Arabic, of which he knew little, ignored the learning and literature of the Hindus, of which he knew less, and openly displayed his contempt for the native religions.” To pronounce the immanent fatality of the educational reform, he then takes recourse to Macaulay's own words from the Minute, which sought to produce “persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect.”

Nicholson reminds us that this educational reform systematically ruptured and replaced “an old indigenous education, the Brahman system of teacher and pupil, supplemented throughout the continent in village Mosques and Temples by simple instruction suited to people's needs.” The reform was instrumental in setting in motion a breed of secularism that would become the cornerstone of colonial governance of British India. This “colonial secularism,” Abhinav points out, was instituted by the British with a view to dismantle the deep association of indigenous Indian “religions” with the public life of Indian peoples—and this at a time when Britain's own monarchy and church remained unquestionably entangled. The aim of colonial secularism was to “pave the way for the introduction of Christianity into India” (*Secularism, Islam and Education in India, 1830–1910*, Robert Ivermee, 2015).

So secularism, in this version, clearly takes form as a strategy for colonial governance of different and diverse peoples. And in its attempt to grapple with difference and diversity, the colonial state applied labels, such as “Hindu,” to communities that were far from homogeneous. “In 1881, a census official in Punjab remarked that whenever an Indian was unable to identify his religion, or said he belonged to a religion that was not recognised, he was classified as Hindu” (*Ideologies of the Raj*, Thomas R. Metcalf, 1995). In arguably over-assimilating diverse, miscellaneous majorities, the colonial state was

instrumental in transforming the civilizational tone of what the Persians called “Hindu” into a distinctly religious one with long-lasting political and electoral ramifications.

0000: State of Mind

The civic and religious nations seem to be irreconcilably wedged apart by ideas of secularism. This wedge runs historically deep with varied motives in soft and colonial secularisms. Even so, both soft and colonial varieties seem to stand apart from the popular imagination of secularism today as a liberal, humanitarian value seemingly worthy of global aspiration. Yet civic and religious nations are not simply mutually exclusive antagonisms, for a critique of secularism does not only question the sacred assumptions of a civic nation, but also destabilises the very structural foundation of a religious nation.

In his 2015 book *Europe, India and the Limits of Secularism*, Jakob de Roover questions the very relevance of this value of European origin in the Indian context. His critique of secularism in India is built on an earlier foundation laid by S. N. Balagangadhara, that the very anthropological conception of premodern indigenous Indian practices as “religions” in a Christian theological sense may be argued as constructing false equivalences. In the 2008 conference “Rethinking Religion in India,” Balu opened with a provocation: “fundamentally religion is not to be found in all cultures and ... India, and Asia, would be cultures without a religion. This is a controversial conclusion.”

This conclusion is particularly controversial for the Hindu reformist movement of the early nineteenth century, and its implications to date. For this view would suggest that the movement was not so much one of reforming some extant Hindu “religion” as much as it was one of deconstructing many diverse indigenous practices and casting their fragments into a singular mould fashioned after a Christian theological conception of religion. Perhaps the only reformation involved here was the reformulation of the label “Hindu” from a civilisational into a religious one. Athai, in your own pivotal role in the workings of the Theosophical Society, you participated significantly in such a (re)formation of Hindu identity. Despite the Theosophical Society’s own complex misalignments with both Catholic and Protestant Christianity, it contributed verily to unwieldy transpositions of monotheistic concepts to the polytheistic conditions that comprised the being of Hindu. And it is in congruence with such a climate that you accomplished the (re)formation of Bharatanātyam from the indigenous Sadir āṭṭam.

Ancient: Classical Culture

Yet your Bharatanātyam boasts a formidable immunity to many of the above critiques of civic and religious nations, even as it has consistently profited from both these conceptions. This is likely because you were steadfast in framing your work with dance, music, drama, and textiles primarily as Indian culture. And this cultural conception has, at best, been in opportune collaborations with both civic and religious conceptions of India. Athai, I suspect that it was precisely such a commitment to putting the cultural before the civic and religious nations that allowed you, in 1977, to quite simply decline an offer to hold office as the ceremonial head of the Indian state. Rather than sitting in the chair of the President of India you chose to continue your calling towards your by then four decades old cultural institution, Kalakshetra. Since the birth of Kalakshetra in 1936, the success of your work has



inspired the mushrooming of many institutions across India in its likeness. And here I was standing across the street from one such. Let me take a few steps back in order to return to an image of its edifice:

In this view we are privy to the entire height of this institution, but let us begin at its bottom-line: “School for Dance Music Yoga Indian Culture.” As a “school” it is at once implicated in the legacy of education reform already discussed. By a reasonable assumption, the “Yoga” referred to here would likely be a modern physical posture-centric practice that claims the more complex nomenclature of yoga. At any rate, the “Dance Music Yoga” here are all concrete, skill-based products of direct pedagogic engagement between teacher and student. “Indian Culture,” however, stands as an anomaly in that it is ephemeral in comparison—a purported byproduct whose promised acquisition is impinged on pedagogic engagement with dance, music, and yoga.

Gregory Jusdanis argues in his 2001 study *The Necessary Nation* that “national culture” as an idea has been a necessarily belated invention, and that “nationalists exploit the resources of culture … its institutions … and its ideology … in order to promote the creation and maintenance of a nation.” But he doesn’t stop here. Carrying his argument to a conclusion that is in “contrast to a dominant trend in political theory, and one ignored by cultural studies,” he proposes that “nationalism is ultimately a cultural phenomenon.” In doing so he puts into question “the possibility of a purely civic (noncultural) conception of nationalism, that a nation-state can be based on an idea, that it can flourish in a purely political sense, that it is held together by its constitutional documents and democratic institutions.”

If the idea of a monolithic Hindu identity as well as that of a purely political sovereignty offer false foundations for a nation, then India is neither a religious nor civic nation. But can we recourse to a truer description of India as a cultural nation? Before we can venture an answer, we must address an elephant in the room: the “classical.” There are complex undercurrents that often operate in the determination of “Indian Classical Culture.” In the case of dance, in as far as your Bharatanātyam aspired to this label, you were complicit in the moral rejection of a living Sadir heritage, shifting the dance away from a practice of embodied liturgy into one of devotional aesthetics, and uprooting it from the ritual site of a temple and supplanting it on a secular stage.

Ironically, precisely these drastic reformulations have unequivocally bolstered Bharatanātyam’s claim to the “classical.” This is a complex historic act. As much admiration as it has drawn during and beyond your lifetime (you know your admirers well), it has also received much-needed critical assessment after your death from such dance scholars as Avanti Meduri and Janet O’Shea. Both admirers and critics, however, unanimously reify you as an indomitable figure in the recent history of “Indian Classical Culture.” Yet the conception of this culture since the nineteenth century has been far from profitable for the devadasi community of musicians and dancers who lived within temple patronage at least since the tenth century. The religious nation conceived by the Hindu reformist movement conceded with the British colonial view in morally denouncing the devadasi as a prostitute. The civic nation, mere months after its birth, passed the Madras Devadasi Act in November 1947 placing a legal ban on the dedication of women to temples, and thereby disenfranchising the devadasi community almost overnight. Published in 2012, among the few affirmative remembrances of these unsung songstresses is the evocative ethnography *Unfinished Gestures* by Davesh Soneji.

If the civic and religious conceptions stand suspect, if the cultural conception is to hold possible promise for India, then “Indian Culture” would need to urgently reassess its ascription to the classical. Even as your life’s work stands in testimony for such an ascription, I must admit, athai, that the

artist in me has grown rather suspect of culture too. What piqued me off was a short video by the French filmmaker Jean Luc Godard. “There is Culture, and that is the rule. There is exception, and that is art,” he says, “Everything tells the rule: cigarettes, computers, T-shirts, television, tourism, war. Nothing says the exception. That is not said. It is written, composed, painted, filmed. Or it is lived. And it is then the art of living. It is of the nature of the rule to desire the death of exception.” (*Je vous salue, Sarajevo*, short version, 2’15”, 2006)

Timeless: Body of Country

In as far as proclamations of Indian culture exhibit purist and puritan tendencies, such a culture unequivocally desires the death of pluralism. India has historically accommodated a high degree of cultural plurality as compared to Europe. Indeed, this systematic undermining of Indian pluralism is no failure of colonisation; it stands in singular proof of a colonisation of the Indian mind, even that of the “Indian eye/I.” In his 2016 study *Cultural Politics in Modern India*, Makarand Paranjape shifts the locus of the decolonizing debate away from the postcolonial preoccupations of “how India is viewed by Indians or foreigners” (which he dubs “India of the eye”) to a project of “regaining Indian ways of seeing.” He concedes that this is “the sort of thing fewer scholars undertake these days for fear of being accused of catering to Indian essentialism, if not exceptionalism.” Makarand’s project seems an affirmative roar to a caution whispered nearly two decades prior, that it would be “a mistake to confuse a culture’s significance with the ghoulish or romantic attention paid to it,” even as “it would be wrong to avoid a positive evaluation of culture for fear of essentialising or reifying it” (*The Roars of Whispers: Cosmopolitanism and Neohellenism*, Peter Murphy, 1997).

Makarand’s proposed perspectival inversion at once births a veritable body for the nation. Such a point-of-view articulation of Indian ways of seeing and being would be less an anthropological production and more an autopoetic expression. And this stands well differentiated from civic, religious, and even cultural conceptions, all of which promote an instrumentalisation of the nation as distinct from an embodiment of it. The Sanskrit words sandwiched between the English ones on that institutional banner beside the national flag unwittingly allude to just such an embodiment of nation. “Shri Kamakhya Kalapeeth” is an unambiguous allusion to the Kāmakhya Śakti Pīṭha, a temple upon the Nilanchal Hill in Assam, built for the genitals of a once-dead deity.

Once upon the mountains, Śiva plunges into despondency and rage over confronting the corpse of Śakti. He takes her burning body upon himself, dancing a dance of mayhem that threatens to throw all the lands and lives under the mountains asunder. Viṣṇu, seeing no other way, cuts into bits the corpse of Śakti just so Śiva can cling on to her no further. Her body flies in flaming bits and falls far and forever. An eye in a lake, a breast in the east, a toe here and a tongue there.

The people under the mountains say: oh look, another mother! And they do what they do best. They enshrine her every bit in a temple. Across lands and lakes of India-Pakistan-Nepal-Bangladesh-Sri Lanka, they consecrate her broken body within sixty-four sacred sites, each a seat (*pīṭha*) for Śakti. To bring life to her they re-member her dis-membered body through timeless pilgrimage, stitching sites together with mere mortal footsteps. As their soles draw out the sacred span of her body, their breath slowly sighs a broken song for her country.

Athai, the labour of this letter has been to pen this anthem-without-a-nation.

Indeed, athai, the labour of my dancing life thus far has been to curiously orbit within the ambit of dances prefixed by those unwieldy terms “Indian classical.” Alongside learning Odissi, I have repeatedly entered into constellations of learning in Kathak, Kuchipudi, Mohiniāṭṭam, and Kathakali. And when my body experienced Javanese court dancing, a certain gnawing crystallised into a sort of gnosis. This sense grew firmer as I began annual visits to the Indonesian island for the purpose of dancing. Since then I have also savoured some Balinese dancing, and some Kandyan dancing of Sri Lanka; and now I thirst for Khon and Khmer dancing of Thailand and Cambodia. In folding into these shapes and tapping into these rhythms, my body has felt an eerie consonance and a resonance so resplendent.

Yet today my body also carries a deeper discontent in witnessing these dances, their pedagogies and public presentations, in variegated states of crises. In my analysis, much of these crises are born of the uneasy nexus that these dances have with precisely the civic, religious, and cultural conceptions of nation. All these dances are somehow-surviving diffractions of premodern temple dances and in the postcolonial condition; they all acquiesce to the twofold prefixity that is “national classical.” Yet, even as the civic, religious, and cultural nations stand here deconstructed, we are still not left without a nation for our dances. For our dances, this last nation is akin to a second skin, and this skin is that of art.

I concede that this last gesture may well amount to a self-flagellation of sorts. Nevertheless, my travels across parts of India and Indonesia over the past few years, visiting many temples, some thriving and many more defunct, have provoked me so. Amidst photographing their sculptures, recording their songs, listening to their stories and, more often than I’d imagined to, dancing by their ponds, I was often irked by a question: is any of this art?

I do not ask this question with disdain towards art as such. But when it comes to these somehow-surviving diffractions of temple dances, I have come to see art as a sort of benevolent refuge within which they were necessarily sheltered during tectonic times of political and religious confrontations that threatened their very survival. Yet today as they jostle with structures of the art academy, theatre, and museum, I often wonder if these dances have well overstayed their opportune, artistic invitation. Indeed, I see the two in a state of mutual deadlock; neither have the dances honed their pluralistic embodied philosophies while sheltered within the frame of art, nor has the frame of art sufficiently decolonised its Euro-centricism for having housed a premodern Indic guest for so many decades now. Yet in calling into question the framing of these dances as art, I am not entirely nihilistic; for me there is still inspiration.

Indeed, I remain somehow inspired by the words of the philosopher and filmmaker Susan Sontag when she declares:

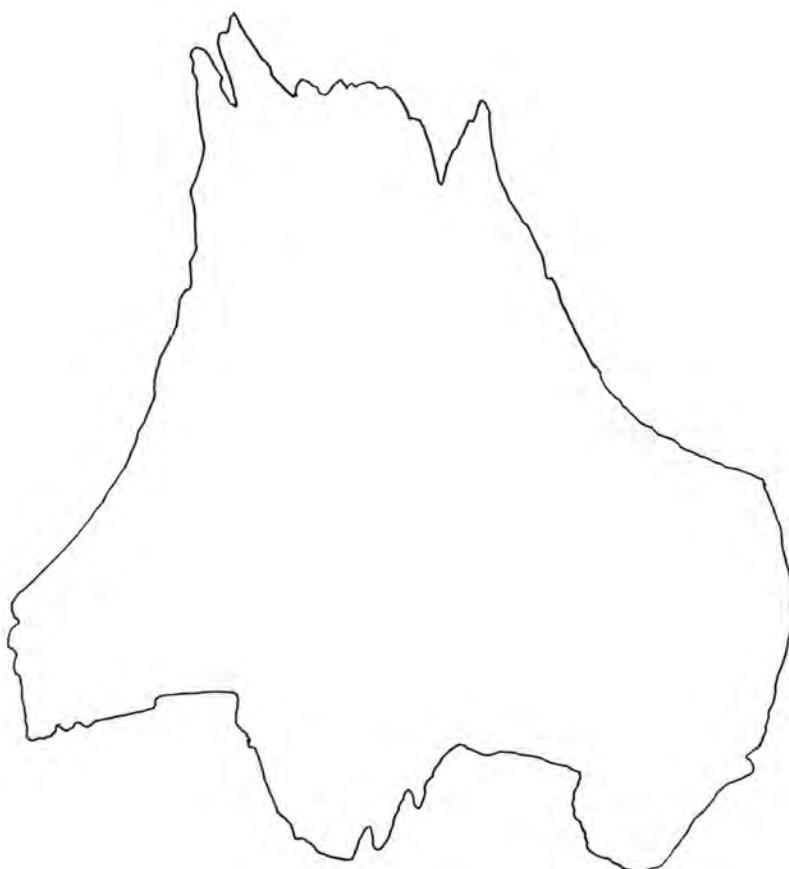
Every era has to reinvent the project of “spirituality” for itself. (Spirituality = plans, terminologies, ideas of deportment aimed at resolving the painful structural contradictions inherent in the human situation, at the completion of human consciousness, at transcendence.) In the modern era, one of the most active metaphors for the spiritual project is “art.” The activities of the painter, the musician, the poet, the dancer, once they were grouped together under that generic name (a relatively recent move), have proved a particularly adaptable site on which to stage the formal dramas besetting consciousness, each individual work of art being a more or

less astute paradigm for regulating or reconciling these contradictions. Of course, the site needs continual refurbishing. (Susan Sontag, *Aesthetics of Silence*, 1967)

I am inspired by this call for the “continual refurbishing” of the site of (generic) art, a continual refurbishing of the site of the modern “metaphor for the spiritual project.” I am also inspired by the silence with which her call seems to have been met. Athai, I remain inspired even by these somehow-surviving diffractions of temple dances for their undeniably embodied access to nonmodern, non-Eurocentric understandings of consciousness. Through my work beyond this letter, I am inspired to dance these dances out of their seemingly immanent prefixities, and to continually refurbish the site of art as I know it, and in so doing, perhaps yield some new ways of being human for us all.

All photographs in this text were taken by the author in Delhi in 2020.

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Kumār

