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Practice, Performance and the Performer: Analyzing the role of 'Preparation' in Kathak Dance ⁱ

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Yatohastostatodrishtiryato, Drishtitatomana

Yatomanatatobhava, Yatobhavatato rasa

Tatradwabhnayaseba, Pradhaanmitikathyake

(Where the hand goes the eyes follow, where the eyes go the mind follows, where the mind goes there is feeling, where there is feeling there is emotion)

Introduction

This is one of those popular *slokas* from *Natya Sastra* ⁱⁱ that is oft repeated by the teachers, students and practitioners of Indian classical dance. It is one of those quintessential imperatives that are drilled into the minds of the performers in course of their training. Interrogating the instant reception and popularity of the *sloka*, I notice its efficacy perhaps lies in its prescriptive tone through which it spells out certain 'know how s' about *Nritya* or acting in dance and indicates how to prepare oneself for acting. Our understanding of the nuances of the *sloka* would be limited if we consider only the component of acting. I shall therefore also include in my discussion, the other aspect i.e. *Nritya*, which refers to the abstract dance movements. How do I prepare myself as a *Kathak* dancer is the question I have often asked. What do I prepare and for whom? In an attempt to address these questions, this paper analyses the role of 'preparation' in a dance practice. There are two crucial components which form part of preparation - 'dancer's individual preparation' and 'audience reception'. I note further that, an interrogation of the concept of 'preparation' also yields varying understanding of 'Performance'.

Taalim and Riyaz: discipline, devotion and the dancer

In the context of Indian Classical dance (and largely Hindustani Classical music), *Riyaz* (practice), emerging through *Taalim* (training), is an essential element which shapes a dancer and his/her art. It signifies regular and rigorous practice through which strength, balance, breath control, clarity etc. can be acquired. A dancer, by committing to his/her *guru* (teacher), undergoes a training to acquire the tools of the art work. In other words, through repetitive doings of certain given tasks, *riyaz* enables a performer to acquire mastery over the craft. As Gardner notes following Foucault, this training evidences the disciplinary aspect of dance which calls for a willing submission on the part of the dancers to the system which subsequently produces useful bodies, i.e. dancing bodies equipped with certain skills. (Gardner, 152-154) The skill, in turn endows the dancer with an identity. The harnessing impulse of the training which is geared towards producing

certain capacities within the dancer is premised upon an impulse to regulate as well. As a dancer succeeds to do certain tasks, h/she fails to do some other. For example, while Anna Pavlova's fame as ballerina testifies her skills with ballet shoes, it also distinguishes her from the tap dancer Gene Kelly known for (displaying) another set of skills. Thus *riyaaz* as a part of *taalim* regulates bodies, reproduces bodies and redefine bodies.

The repetitiveness of *riyaaz* endows it with a ritualistic dimension as well in the case of Indian classical dance since, "the ritualistic approach of *riyaaz* reflects the exacting method and training of the body within the rigid aesthetic and social structure of the *guru-shishya* relationship." (Chakravorty, 98) The *guru-shishya parampara* (teacher-student tradition) of training, which calls for an unquestionable faith and submission to the teacher, not only strengthens the adherence of the performer to the strictures and aesthetics of the dance form but also towards the teacher who imparts the training. *Riyaaz* is thus more than just a bodily habit as it gestures towards a kind of self submission to a higher authority mostly identified as Guru and God. This ritualistic dimension is particularly crucial in understanding the larger context of Bhakti (devotion) movementⁱⁱⁱ implicit in Kathak's cultural history.

The interplay of pain and pleasure, through which a dancer journeys, yields further insight about the disciplinary and ritualistic aspects of *riyaaz*. The initial experiences of stamping my feet on the ground or putting the ankle bells were not quite pleasurable. The crisp sound one is required to make through stamping would not come to me easily. With a renewed vigor as I stamped harder and harder on the floor, it hurt my feet, the ankles, the calf muscles and my back. The ankle bells left marks on my skin, sometimes cutting through the skin that left me bleeding. In course of time as I grew familiar with the steps, I executed them correctly and gradually came into terms with the pain. The pain slowly gave way to a deep sense of pleasure I could feel within myself. The pain hadn't left me, but the pain itself became pleasurable. A dancer derives a kinetic pleasure from the movements which further heightens his/her kinesthetic senses. With the long drawn skirt (*ghagra*) and ankle bells when she takes fast paced *chakkars* or pirouettes covering the performing space, the vision gets blurred, the sound of the sharp pitched *tabla* and harmonium fades away too, the breathing is as if almost stopped. The dancer experiences trance. H/she is enraptured by the sheer presence of his/her self.

It is important to note that the sense of the trance varies depending on the condition within which one is practicing. While practicing with a group, the trance emerges from a sense of collective embodiment. In *Kathak* classes, as we recite the rhythmic composition (*bols*) together in a group, the repetitive utterance of mnemonic syllable in chorus, creates an almost dazed oral-aural sensation. Among the sound of bells, claps, foot stomps and continuous humming of *bols*, a dancer immerses himself/herself only to gain consciousness of another dancing self. One can also refer to a *kirtan* performance, a group of *Rudaali* mourners or a congregation reciting *namaaz*. Being embedded in different socio cultural context each of the acts would have different significances though. Yet they share a commonality. Each act requires orchestrated body movements of its participants, who in course of their actions reach a bewildered state. The 'bewilderment' is not to be understood as a state of unconscious, but as a moment

when the performer (dancer) receives the most acute perceptions of embodiment that belongs to the dancing body. Whether practicing with a group or in one's own company, the trance helps the dancer obtain an acute awareness about his/her body. This perception, I suggest, problematizes the aspect of self-submission, so strongly advocated by the disciplinary and ritualistic aspect of training. I argue that the consciousness of one's own body and the pleasure a dancer derives also propels self-assertion which further points that submission and self-assertion are not to be taken as opposites. They co-exist, they interact, and thus they shape each other continuously.

In course of tying the ankle bells, wearing the mask, putting on the costume, as a dancer slips into the role of a performer, does h/she not become another self, a self that aligns, opposes, contradicts, and complements the dancer's self? As I open my arms horizontally to perform *chakkars* (pirouettes) I do experience a certain release of energy which is both therapeutic and invigorating. I hurt myself, I strain myself, I soothe myself as I dance and in the process I create another self out of it. The dancing facilitates an opening up to my surroundings and an engagement with the space and place, which in turn produces an embodied experience about the environment. The more I immerse myself in the discipline, the more visible becomes the craft and my relation with it. With every *hastak* (hand movement) and every *tatkaar* (footwork), I can perceive how I am moving (*riyaaz*), how I should move (the discipline and its goal) and are the other possible ways in which I can move. I realize certain capacities of my body which are not expressed in other situations except for in dance. It has been argued on several occasions that particularly for women performers, dance provides the scope to express that hidden self which remains repressed among the disciplining of the society. The pent up anxiety, energy and other expressions find a release as she dances; dance thus imbue within her spirit of emancipation.^{iv} Interestingly this role playing in *Kathak* has aided the valorization of the image of ideal Indian women, by intricately linking the performers with the mythic figures they enact.^v For example, during *abhinaya*, as the dancer impersonates as *Radha* or *Sita*, she represents certain moral values which the characters embody. In the course of becoming these characters, the dancer enlivens a world inhabited by the mythic characters, a world quite different from the one in which she lives. In each *riyaaz* session she perfects her gestures, movements and expressions to make possible a faithful depiction of the characters; each *riyaaz* in turn inscribes the dancer's body with certain social values. In the face of such constant inscription, how does one account for the self-assertion I pointed out earlier?

To reiterate, as the disciplinary regimes of dance training, subjects individual body to a set of codes in order to bring it within the fold of a system, it also indicates how the repetitive execution of routines foregrounds the ongoing role play, the unceasing moving in and out of a character. The characters come to life *only when* the dancer enacts them, and as h/she exits from the play, so does the character. In other words, the roles are sustained through a constant performance of the same. The existing scholarship in the field of Anthropology and Performance Studies^{vi} shed further light on the notion of 'role playing' which as the scholars argue, forms an integral part of our everyday. They opine that the identity through which each person knows and names himself/herself is nothing

but a 'role' constantly being performed by the individual. The performative aspect thus hints at the contingency of the performance as well as to the fissures and gaps it produces. What I am hinting at is that, since the efficacy of the disciplining rests on the continuous adherence to the rule, an instance of in-adherence can thus disturb the system. Since a dancer can enter and exit from a role, h/she can make and un-make the role in his/her respective way. This is where the question of interpretation and innovation becomes important.

While playing *Radha*, as I adhere to the strictures on one hand, a slight inclusion of a different movement or use of a particular gait can change the depiction for there is always a scope for improvisation and innovation. It is important to mention about the *Kathak* choreographies by the noted dancer Kumudini Lakhia, who discarded the mythic tales and chose to talk about her contemporary reality through her work. She adapted from modern literature and built up stories through which she could speak about herself. Seen as a rebel at her time, she experimented with the *Kathak* by exploring the possibilities of its movement repertoire. This was not a denial of the craft, but a conscious move by an artist to infuse within it her own sensibilities which in turn rearticulated the aesthetics of the dance form. In *Dhabkar and Coat*^{vii} she closely followed the movement pattern and *abhinaya* traditions of *Kathak*, but this time to tell a new story. Thus evidently through *riyaaz* the women dancers "embody a cultural identity that they simultaneously affirm and contest." (Chakravorty, 96)

Practice, Performance and the space in between

The contingency in the performative nature of *riyaaz* further blurs the boundaries between performance and practice. In the common parlance, a performance is understood as an event, for which one needs practice. The distinction is made on the basis of temporality where practice precedes performance. It is the singularity of the performance as a unique instance as opposed to the everydayness of practice that aids the distinction. But some of the recent conceptual articulations on 'Performance' within different disciplines evidence blurring of the boundaries between the two. I am particularly reminded of Richard Schechner's idea of 'restored behavior' which gives us a further key to the discussion (Schechner, 35-37). He notes that restored behavior lies at the heart of every performance. It is a set of codes lying outside the performer as a separate element. Since it exists at a distance, it can be preserved, preached and worked with. In each rehearsal as the performer puts on this restored behavior h/she becomes what h/she is not, i.e. enters into certain roles. As h/she works with this set, h/she tries them on and tests them, commits errors and examines them, until h/she reaches a point to decide on a particular set of behavior to be used for a definite role. In spite of being a part of the indecisive phase of trial and error process, each instance of putting on the restored behavior is also an instance of 'becoming'. Each instance of becoming, which is geared towards a performance is in turn an autonomous performance in itself. The practice – performance continuum engenders another component, i.e. the audience, who

shape a performance in several ways. The next section elaborates upon audience reception in aiding 'preparation'.

People, Performer and the Performance

A performance is an act done in addressal to someone. The presence of the person, to whom the act is addressed, should not be understood only in terms of his/her physical presence, since various acts - like ritual, games, worship - which are considered as performance do not always necessitate the physical presence of a (separate) audience. Audience reception, I suggest should be counted as an important constitutive element of preparation.

Considering the practice-performance continuum, firstly the performer can be located as an audience himself/herself. In the course of practice, as h/she achieves an acute perception of the dancing body, h/she both enjoys and examines the dance. *Riyaz* gives rise to a double chambered consciousness, where the dancer is at a distance from the dance and also within it. Being at a distance, h/she can point the mistakes and do the necessary revision and at the same time, experience a kinetic pleasure from repeated movements. Further, as Schechner notes, in Indian performing traditions, the performers are required to express certain artistic emotions which are different from the actual feelings or the subjective experience felt by the performer during a performance. So a performer is also a partaker of his/her performance. Yet again, being a partaker, the performer is moved by his/her own performance. A self enjoyment springs from the emotions created within the performer. This prompts him/her to engage in a play and improvisation whereby he/she can provide interpretations of the narrative.

If we now consider audience as the crowd present at a given time and place to watch a performance, then it would be interesting to note the audience response to the *Nritya* and *Nritta* aspect of *Kathak*. From the definitional difference between the two, it is derived that they are characterized by the presence and absence of 'narrative' respectively. *Nritya* focuses on story-telling through acting out roles, whereas, *Nritta* is more abstract in nature dealing with pure movements. A *Kavitangibol*^{viii} or a *thumri*^{ix} serve as best example to analyze audience response in *Nritya* section. The following *Kavitangi* describes *Radha* and *Krishna* participating in *Holi*^x.

“Chhum- chum- chhanana- nachat - giridhar
Gopi-sang-liye-hath-kanak-pichkari
Bhaagat-it-uta - radhapyari
Dhara- nehi-pawat-Krishna-murari
Murari - murari- murari.” (Figure 1)



Figure 1

The words like *gopi* (mates), *bansi* (flute), *pichkari*, *naach* (dance) can be traced in various Indian languages and so they seem to be comprehensible to the audience. Moreover the



Figure 2

dancer's enactment of a timid *Radha* or a mischievous *Krishna*, through gestures and expressions, helps to elaborate the particular episode being depicted. An audience member does not always analyze the elements of each gesture, but interprets the whole sequence in relation to the lyrics, music and other elements. A familiarity with music, mythology, sculpture plays an important part in a viewer's ability to interpret *abhinaya* and this knowledge is usually shared by both the performer and the audience. Rajika Puri notes that "the movements are related to concepts about movement which prevail in social life as a whole." (Puri, 242) She adds further, "When people marry, eat, go to the market or cradle a child, they do so by moving their bodies through time and space. And when they learn to perform these actions in culturally specific ways they also acquire the beliefs and conceptual structures that underlie a particular cultural system, a system of belief and action." (Puri, 252) The comprehensibility thus achieved by the audience in *Nritya* is facilitated by a general cultural knowledge that underlies everyday body language and specific dance forms. What about *Nritta*? Let us look at a *bol*.

Tat-tat -tathai-thaitat-aathai-thaitat

Tat-traam-thai- tat-traam-thai- tat-traam-thai

Unlike the previous composition, here the words do not belong to any spoken language. They appear as mere sounds or 'mnemonic syllables', which are then put into a rhythmic structure to create a *bol*. The phonetic effect achieved by reciting or dancing these *bols* creates the beauty. These *bols* act like empty signifiers in two ways. Words like *tat*, *traam* or *thai* do not correspond to any real objects, nor do they correspond to any definite body movement, hence opening it up to multiple choreographic interpretations. They are signifiers without any signified as such. This 'emptiness' helps in creating variation in choreographies and makes possible for the *bols* to mean anything and nothing at the same time. (Figure 2)

In *Nritta*, a dancer foregrounds the richness of the repertoire by displaying the array of movements – pirouettes, footwork, slender hand movements, diagonal gliding movements, the subtle statuesque poses etc. Though these movements are considered as abstract being devoid of meaning, I argue, they convey certain expressions and accents, which in turn incite a mimetic charge in them. Each movement expresses a sense of ascent and descent both spatially – as the dancer fills the space while moving – and temporally as the dance movements determine the pace of the performance and thereby formulate a different temporality that does not abide the given clock time. The temporality working through a constant ascending-descending mechanism lends a

dramatic quality to the entire performance which subsequently fosters an emotional dimension. This emotional aspect of Nritta conveys a sense of contagion that enables the



Figure 3

audience to derive a bodily pleasure from the movements. Let us consider the *chakkars*/pirouettes and *tatkaar*/footwork as examples. During the pirouettes what becomes prominent is the spinning movement and not the dancer's body. The limb movements or the facial expression at the time of spinning can hardly be traced, but the mobility or the movement gets highlighted. It seems as if speed is personified through such acts. For the female performer her costume adds beauty to the pirouettes. The free floating and lengthy *ghagra* (skirt) spreads like wings as she spins creating an effect, as if she is flying. The connection between pirouettes and flying effect may seem pure imagination of an individual which can vary, but each movement

produces simulation within each spectator that evokes his/her sensation of the other experiences. (Figure 3)

Tatkaar comes towards the end of the performance. This section is called *Jugalbandi* or duet which is a playful challenge executed in a dialogic pattern by the two performers, the percussionist and the dancer. The former plays a *bol* on the *tabla* or *pakhawaj*, the latter listens to it and then demonstrates it through the footwork. A reversal happens when the dancer shows a *tatkaar* and the percussionist approximates it with his instrument. The little gap lying between the playing of the percussion and the demonstration through the footwork is a moment of tension when the audience eagerly waits to see how each performer replies to the challenge. Two moments are noticeable here – the audience's silence throughout the *jugalbandi* and their loud applauds, when both the performers arrive at the same beat together, at the end. (Figure 4)



Figure 4

The former signifies to the tension built up in the course of the challenge and the latter shows the release of excitement when the episode ends. Technically the *jugalbandi* is composed of most intricate mathematical calculations. But irrespective of whether an individual is musically trained or not, one enjoys them because, h/she can react bodily to it. The audience can anticipate the upcoming final moment of *jugalbandi*, since each of us possesses a sense of rhythm. Being seated in our positions we tap our feet or move our hand because of such rhythmic sensations inherent in us. The audience approaches the movements and relates with them individually making different meanings out of them. Yet, the rhythmic sense along with the performing ambience fosters a sense of proximity and solidarity among them because of which they can applaud all together at the same time with the arrival of the *Sam*, the final beat.

The improvisatory nature of *Jugalbandi* and *Kathak* as a whole provides scope to the performers to make on spot changes. Depending on the pulse of the audience or how the dancer feels on a particular day of the performance, h/she (often) changes the order of bols, inserts new ones, excludes a few, raises the tempo and thereby weaves in the performance in the course of presenting it. The dancer recites *bols*, introduces the dance compositions and directly communicates with the audience. The dialogue thus emerging between the two turn the audience as co-participants. Besides being a gesture of encouragement, their applauds become a constituent of the dance, which is not present in the practice room. As h/she moves during the *riyaaz*, h/she sees himself/herself, hears the sound of his/her own the breath. In the performance, h/she is conscious of being watched and heard by others. But h/she also looks at the audience in return, which makes the latter conscious about their position. It is this network of looks and reciprocities which facilitate the dialogue whereby emanating an energy that travels back and forth in between the dancer and the audience heightening the sense of contagion.

Each *riyaaz* is a performance, where the performer dances and at the same time looks at it from outside as an audience; yet again each performance is but another *riyaaz*, which is built in the course of interaction between the dancer and the audience, who are both trying, testing and transforming the dance (form), thus subsequently defying the closure and defining the continuum.

Notes

ⁱ The initial ideas of this paper were presented at an International Conference titled 'Rethinking Humanities in the Age of Visual' organized by CPRAC SIS at Kerala, in June 2009

ⁱⁱ *Natya Sastra* is a treatise on Indian performing traditions written between 200BCE and 200CE. Sage Bharat is considered to be its author.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bhakti movement which originated around 17th century in India was a reform movement pertaining to Hindu religion. It emerged in reaction to the dominance of priestly classes who exploited the people in the name of religion. Bhakti emphasized upon a personal relationship that a devotee can develop with his/her deity without having to adhere to the rituals of one's religion. It brought within its fold people of all caste and creed, who were otherwise marginalized in society. Several poets and singers composed songs in the praise of their Personal God and championed the cause of the movement. Kathak performers not only adopted the songs and poems but in their depiction of Krishna and other mythic characters, they brought to the fore, the emotion of devotion and filial affection.

^{iv} I am reminded of Pallabi Chakravarty's observations in *Bells of Change: Kathak Dance, Women and Modernity in India*. In the course of pointing to how the proliferation of Internet media and other technologies have triggered a greater access to dance forms she notices how the women dancers from different strata of society now 'own' the dance in their respective ways. Dancing is not just a profession or a pursuit; it has given them a platform to voice their opinion to a great extent. One should also mention about the several organizations who work on women

emancipation and empowerment. Some of them use dance as therapy to cure those who have been victims of societal violence.

^v The reformation and institutionalization of Indian arts during the nationalist struggle redefined the role of ideal Indian women who became representative of Indian culture and tradition. Several scholars through critiquing the Nationalist enterprise have help indicate the politics that engendered such a notion of Indian womanhood. Amrit Srinivasan. 'Reform and Revival: the Devdasi and her Dance', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 20: 1869-76, Avanti Meduri's unpublished dissertation "Nation Women Representation: The sutured history of the Devdasi and her dance' New York University, 1996, Somnath Chatterjee, *Kolikatar Baijibilas*, Calcutta, Book Land Private Limited, 1991. Vidya Rao and Geetanjali Shree, 'Retrieving Voices from the margins - The courtesan and the nation's narrative', *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 1990

^{vi} See, Irving Goffman, *The presentation of self in everyday life*, Anchor Books, 1959, Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*, Routledge, 1988, Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre*, PAJ Publications, 1982

^{vii} In Dhabkar, Lakhia emphasizes upon the pulses running through the human body and how that provides rhythm for dance. The piece called Coat is based on a modern Indian poem, where she depicts the feelings of an abandoned coat.

^{viii} Kavita ngibol refers to the poems which describe a short episode related to a mythic character and are mostly written in *brajabhasa* and Hindi.

^{ix} Thumri is a genre of semi classical Indian music written in mostly Hindi or Brajbhasa. The lyrics are often centered on the emotions of parted lovers or the celebration of love. In Kathak, while performing to the thumris the dancer impersonates as different characters and depicts the various *rasa* or emotions.

^x Holi is the Indian festival of colours celebrated in the spring season. Within Kathak repertoire, through the depiction of Holi the dancers enact in the role of Radha and Krishna and highlight the romantic relation between the duo who stands as icons of eternal love in the Indian socio-cultural scenario.

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