

The Paradox of Authority: the Body of Dance

Aadya Kaktikar

Shiv Nadar University, India

*Corresponding Author: aadya.kaktikar@snu.edu.in/

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Abstract Authority of parampara projected through the medium of the Teacher (Guru) is the cornerstone of traditional dance pedagogy in India. In this paper I illustrate the paradox of the authority of the teacher/ tradition and examine the enabling and disabling effects of this discipline. As a performer and teacher of a traditional dance form, I examine the lived experience of learning a traditional dance form and the creation of a disciplined dancing body which becomes simultaneously, a site for preservation and continuous re-negotiation of tradition. The paper also explores the sub-structures of authority that permeate into the traditional dance class; simultaneously creating rubrics for transmission of knowledge and scaffolding learning while hindering individual agency and expression. Authority (of the teacher and the tradition) and its manifestations become the lens through which traditional dance pedagogy and its resulting narratives are examined.

Keywords Guru Shishya Parampara, Trained Body, Dance Pedagogy, Discipline

psychical through the physical.

The power of the training process inscribes the dancer's body with forms of knowledge which derive their authority from the relationship between the dancer and his/her Guru. This process of inscription is Foucauldian in that it is achieved by regulation, supervision and arrangement of the body and the mind (soul) to create a docile body which becomes a medium for transmission of the Guru's heritage. In the traditional context, the body refers not only to the physical body of the dancer but also to his/ her *paramparic* body, one "which is formed out of corporeal dispositions passed down tacitly through teaching lineages" and where 'culture' is installed by disciplining the body through gestural and postural forms (Noland 2009, 15). This installation takes place in the dancer's body through the sustenance of a hierarchy; subordination to the Guru, to the art, and to the discipline of training.

And yet, dancers exhibit individual human agency despite the enormous pressure of social conditioning. In spite of submitting themselves to the authority of the system of training dancers exhibit varying degrees of resistance, innovation and variation. What is danced and how evolves in script, meaning and presentation. This suggests that

...innovation is more than mere chance...agency cannot spring from an autonomous undisciplined source....gestures, learned techniques of the body, are means by which cultural conditioning is simultaneously embodied and put to the test.

Noland 2009, 2

1. Introduction

*Dhyaana-Muulam Gurur-Murti Puujaa-Muulam
Gurur-Padam |*

*Mantra-Muulam Gurur-Vaakyam Mokssa-Muulam
Guruur-Kripaa ||*

The Root of Meditation is the Form of the Guru, The Root of Worship is the Feet of the Guru,

The Root of Mantra is the Word of the Guru, The Root of Liberation is the Grace of the Guru.

This popular *shloka*ⁱ illustrates two critical and seemingly paradoxical aspects of Indian artistic traditions which this paper explores- the authority of the *Guru* or teacher and the aim of personal liberation for the artist. The authority of the Teacher (Guru) as an embodiment of *parampara*ⁱⁱ which creates, molds and shapes a dancing body (and mind) is the cornerstone of traditional dance pedagogy in India. Simultaneously, the goal of the dancer is to endeavor to attain liberation from the world and the rules that bind him/her in it. Dance becomes a way of accessing the

This paper builds upon the theory put forward by Carrie Noland that "a biological body... unfolds its unpredictable (as opposed to predetermined) possibilities as they are pruned or expanded through variables that are primarily historical and social in nature" (Noland 2009, 8). Illustrating the paradox of authority through the body of a traditional Indian dancer, the paper examines the enabling and disabling effects of discipline that the body (and the mind) is subjected to; wherein the severity of discipline renders a philosophical contour to the dance forms so that *abhinaya*ⁱⁱⁱ is not just acting and *saadhna*^{iv} is not just practice. The paper also examines the role of the Guru in exerting the authority of *parampara* by embodying in himself the ideal of what the dancer aims to be. In playing this role the Guru paradoxically

uses his authority to infuse the student with cultural meanings while simultaneously imparting the means to alter, subvert and reconfigure those very meanings.

2. The Dancer's Body: Inscribing Gesture

The process of 'inscription' signifies the permanent alteration of a (blank) medium to a signifying character and "renders an ordinarily unchanging material permanently altered in some way" (Ness 2008, 4). In the process of training, the dancers' bodies become the site upon which the gestural meanings of tradition leave their mark. Codified movement techniques "penetrate beneath a dancer's skin to fix enduring marks into their hardest, most durable connective tissues" (Ness 2008, 6).

'Practice, practice, practice' is the mantra for every student of classical dance. The student is required to merely follow the teacher (*shravan*) with little or no verbal explanations and it is assumed that with practice (*manan*) and time 'realization' of the technique dawns upon the student (*Chintan*) (Chatterjea 1996, 72). Not a day goes by that the students are not reminded, goaded, prodded or reprimanded about their practice or lack thereof. This goading takes the form of verbal scolding or physical correction (through slapping, kicking etc. It must be noted that these methods are being increasingly discarded) claiming that the body needed tough love to be kicked into mindfulness (Nair 2014). "The importance of practice is not only explicitly recognized in the Indian tradition but it is also prominently emphasized and accorded a most elevated status" (Simms 1994,6). It is essential that this rigorous practical training should be supervised by a competent *acharya* or a dance teacher. It is essential that a correct illusion of unity be created with a proper admixture of the science of dance and tradition (P.S.R. Appa Rao in Chatterjea 1996, 70). I shall elaborate shortly to the position of the Guru/teacher and the authority vested in him as the source of knowledge.

The virtuosic nature of classical dance forms and the obdurate mechanical demands of all genres require the dancer to be physically in 'top shape'; anything less would be inadequate to execute the style effectively. Technicalities of dancing, like the basic stance of *chauk* or *aramandi*, requires the body to move, constantly and for long durations, in ways beyond the normal range of human movement. These mechanical skills need to be fused with the intellectual demands of raag (music) and taal (rhythm) systems. The semantics of the dance then get layered over by a network of philosophical understandings which are extremely subtle and complex, and require years of careful concentration and study in order to 'understand' and 'perform'. Extreme precision in the alignment of the body and the mind of the dancer is an absolute prerequisite for the creation of *Rasa*'.

(Practice) itself, then, turns into the ultimate lesson where the student interacts with the traditional

structures on his/her own individual terms; indeed,...(practioners) often regard *riaz* (practice) as an art and an end in itself.

Neuman 1980:36 in Simms, 9)

Through hours of repetitive practice the dancer begins to embody the instructions of the Guru, and internalizing and actualizing the dance within him/herself. These hours spent in individual (often lonely) *saadhana* fill in the un-teachable and un-expressible (Simms) elements of the process of 'in-body transmission' of knowledge (Zarrilli in Chatterjea , 76). It might be argued that repeating 'doing' creates what Edward Casey calls a 'body memory' (Sklar 2008,88) where inscription of the dynamic contours of movement (Sklar 2008,88) takes place in the muscle and sinew of the dancer. This repetition allows the dancer to access his/her kinesthetic memory. For example, in order to portray the pain of separation from a loved one the dancer will, during hours of solo practice, access similar memories from his/her own life. By repeatedly accessing this memory, the dancer then ingests the movement of the emotion and fuses it with the stylistic nuances of the dance form making it seem like a spontaneous reaction on stage. This repetition is, as Judith Butler calls it, "simultaneously a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings which are already socially established" (Noland 2009,191). This process of 're-experiencing' is indicative of the primary aesthetic of the *Rasa* Theory where the dancer becomes a medium for the viewer to experience meaning, and not just an instrument for enacting a taught and imbibed habitus. "...in order to move, the subject must rely on not only the learned routines and personal or collective desires but also on her engagement, her embeddedness, what Martin Heidegger calls her 'everyday-being- in the world' " (Ness 2008,16).

For wherever the hand moves, there the glances follow; where the glances go, the mind follows; where the mind goes, the mood follows; where the mood goes, there is the flavour (*rasa*).

Coomaraswamy and Duggirala in Anoop & Malshe 2011, 138

This maxim from *Nandikeshwara's Abhinayadarpana* (Mirror of Gesture) summarizes the ideal of the learning process in the classical Indian dances that involves a move from a physical to a psycho-physical discipline that aims at the experiential goal of creating *rasa*. The constant endeavor of the artist "is to arrive at a greater and greater degree of subtlety and refinement"(Vatsyayan 1996, 55). At an individual level, the intensity of training very limb elevates the dancer above the physicality of the body. With practice, the individual moves from "trying" to "doing." (Zarrilli in Chatterjea 1996, 78) This diabolical relationship of submission and control is illustrated this discussion of *abhinaya*.

It is this aspect of universalization that keeps a *rasa* from descending into emotional outburst, even in the dancer. The moment she is swayed by the

emotion which she seeks to represent, stylistically, *rasa* slips away. Her purpose is-or should be-at all times to recreate before the audience a vibrant form of the lyrical poetry. This is where, it seems to me, dance stands apart from drama; whereas an actor's aim is to step into the role he seeks to play, the dancer does not. For, her forte is the ability to relate emotions of the subtlest shades, impersonally.
Reghunathan in Chatterjea 1996, 78

This stylistic requirement where the dancer is required to have the "ability to portray strong emotions without getting swept away by them and to maintain impeccable technique in such a portrayal comes from training, repeated practice, and continual exposure to such finesse in performance by masters in this field" (Chatterjea 1996, 78). The discipline of practice also allows for a critical distancing of the dancer from the practice and allows the dancer to see his/her body as an sentient support for meaning making for others. That is to say that the trained body the divergence of the performed meaning and that the dancer experiences through kinetic-kinesthetic operations.

The authority of a traditional performer then emanates from a trained body where "the will...has been marshaled over many years to discipline the haphazard and instinctive movements of the body and to create the control necessary to make artful moving forms"(Kern in Hanna , 132). A blend of physical, emotional and spiritual refinement happens in the dancer's body within a regimented, codified and prescribed process. The socio-pedagogical structure of the *Guru-Shishya Parampara*^{vi} is ideally suited to the transmission of this paradoxical nature of training.

3. The Politics of Lineage

At the turn on the twentieth century the term *Guru Shishya Parampara* has acquired a dense, ambiguous and multi-layered significance; it simultaneously implies fidelity to the 'tradition' through the guru and a practice of rigor during the learning process. The inherent nature of the pedagogical process requires the student to be in a position of complete submission to the teacher. The relationship between the giver and receiver of knowledge is a prime factor in structuring the mode of training. The 'in-body transmission' (Zarrilli in Chatterjea 1996) of knowledge which takes place through a primarily oral system, requires "the complementarity of the shishya's (student's) capacity to receive and the guru's capacity to give" (Chatterjea 1996, 71).

A traditional dance class is based on the creation and sustenance of hierarchy. At the zenith is the Guru and students' position in the power structure is largely decided by the number of years of training and level of commitment to the school. The performance of this position is displayed in many ways like assignment of responsibilities, spatial placements in class, access to the Guru or speaking priority.

The centrality of the Guru is evident from the prominence

of the Guru's name in artists' resumes, concert announcements, and books on great masters which eulogize the virtues of their Gurus. The Guru's name is often enough to establish a dancer's credibility and competence (Schippers 2007). In the process of learning dance, students learn how to learn; to imbibe qualities of patience, tenacity, dedication and hard - work. Training is 'the chief function of disciplinary power' (Foucault in Gardner 2011, 153). Training is geared to eschew the 'I' or the personal self. "His (students') search is not for the new unique self; instead it is for submerging himself in a perennial flow (of the discourse)" (Vatsyayan 1996, 4). Being deeply rooted in Hindu culture and philosophy, the authority of 'Ancient Indian culture' is deemed absolute and tradition is considered immutable and learning dance becomes a way of forging the next link for transmission of this discourse.

"In the Indian worldview, self is held to be of a more social nature, and me and mine is subsequently held to be secondary to 'we' and 'ours' " (Gupta 2006, 123). Thus 'telling' a student what to do is expected during teaching. The focus of teaching is on developing the socio-centric self through a high degree of human interaction and the power of extended family and relations. *Guru- Shishya Parampara* built upon this social nature of teaching entails the absorption and transmission of aesthetic and contextual knowledge through an intuitive process. "Indian adults do not create learning situations to teach their children, but rather young children always being in the presence of adults, learn from watching them go about their daily activities (Yunus in Gupta 2006, 125).

In the *Guru Shishya* tradition the student learns not only from the teacher or Guru but through a community of practice- Legitimate Peripheral Participation. In this process, learners learn by participation and mastery or knowledge of a skill requires full participation in these socio-cultural activities. Students learn by 'scaffolding' with senior students being responsible for junior students, often teaching and mentoring them. Hierarchy is cyclical and every individual is instantaneously in a position of authority and submission. Learning dance has as much to do with participation in the community, understanding one's position in the hierarchy and spending time with the Guru as it has to do with actual dancing hours. These contributions to the community are as important to one's identity as a dancer as are actual skills and techniques.

This interaction with the community creates Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development. ZPD is created when a learner interacts with the environment and a gap between what he/she can do independently and what he/she can do with guidance is formed. The ZPD is different for every learner and the ways of negotiating it and the time taken to do so varies for each student. In a typical dance class, each student learns at his/her own pace and set their parameters of learning. It is typical to have students at varying stages of learning in one class. In spite of learning the same movement, items or pieces, each student engages at a different level with

the semantics of dance. Often, during my training sessions with my Guru, he would talk about dharma and karma of a dancer, and how I needed to find a balance of these in my life. Karma implied my individual decisions, choices and the consequences of those choices and Dharma implied my positioning and relationships within society. Therefore the individual is seen as both a social being and a unique entity (Viruru in Gupta 2006, 86) and the pedagogy of dance is geared towards this aim.

While traditional dance training systems individualize training and are aimed at the goal of self fulfilment and self-expression, a typical dance school/class becomes a site for domination and authoritarianism. The question of why dance forms founded on such fluid principles become inflexible structures wrapped in power struggles may be answered by evaluating dance schools to Arthur Deikman's study of cult behavior (Smith 1998, 134).

The dance classroom is a setting in which obedient students present themselves for improvement. The teacher has absolute power, and surveillance is a key tool for administering that power (Smith 1998, 135). As with cults, a particular dance school looks up to the Guru as the fountainhead of all knowledge. His/her word is law and usually a student's professional trajectory is shaped with the consent of the Guru. The semi-divine status of the guru empowers him "as someone who can provide the experience necessary for the individual to achieve particular goals such as 'enlightenment' " (Smith 1998, 134). *Guru Brahma, Guru Satya* (Guru is God, Guru is truth). The absolute power of the Guru in the classroom is evident through this idiom. The word of the Guru is supposed to be law and there is no questioning it. The degree of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1993) emanating from his/her position in the field of cultural production positions the teacher beyond the realm of accountability (Bourdieu 1993).

The students form an elite group, who alone has an access to the knowledge pool of the Guru. In order to continue having access to it, students accept the limitations imposed on them. Within the group, students are supposed to be *guru-bhai* (guru- brothers/ sisters) and are expected to be responsible for each other's learning and well-being. However, the need to comply with the group (Smith 1998, 134) hinders independent thought. The creation of a unique and elite group necessitates a devaluation of the thoughts and beliefs of outsiders (Smith 1998, 134). This denies the group the possibility of empowerment through participatory action and social justice (Mullen 2000, 5).

This mode of training is easy to idealize from a distance. The tension between a sense of self (of the student) and the subjugation to the Guru is not entirely a pleasant experience. Daily interactions are often unpleasant, trying, uncomfortable and stressful. Though the teacher is publically given a semi divine status, individual exchanges reveal that teachers have weaknesses, oversights and are often moody (Schippers 2007, 124). Abusive behavior of the teacher is commented upon but never challenged and is most often

expected (Smith 1998, 129). Often teachers are incapable of assuming the full onus of what their position implies. Yet, students flock to them, complicit in their own exploitation.

The process of teaching is such that the student learns, in a hierarchical manner, body movements that range from simple to complex. This Foucauldian 'trained /docile' body, is created as the student is placed in constant cognitive environment through a close personal relationship with the teacher (Chatterjea 1996, 72) and an atmosphere of constant surveillance is used as a method in forming and controlling the docile body (Smith 1998, 130). As the students' body is being trained to carry forward a tradition, individual expression is suppressed. Training of the body and the mind is so rigorous, that in time, the student 'begins to think like the teacher'. What the student might be thinking becomes irrelevant. This often leads to students not being able to form a personal bond with the dance resulting in lowered motivational levels. Nowhere in the long training period is there an acknowledgement of the individualism of the student. But a cultivated sense of duty, to further the vision of the guru and to fulfill the responsibility of being a student ensures a continual channel of knowledge. This mode of education, is, according to Paulo Freire, a 'banking' concept of education "which regards men as adaptable, manageable beings" (Freire 2009, 165).

Based on a mechanistic... spatialized view of consciousness, it transforms students into receiving objects. It attempts to control thinking and action, leads women and men to adjust to the world, and inhibits their creative power. (Freire and Ramos 2009, 167)

My first experiential understanding of the difference in the social behavior towards a teacher occurred during my induction week at the Royal Academy of Dance, London. Students would sit around the teacher with water and sandwiches on the table, even eat and drink during the lecture and happily share a drink at the pub with her in the evening. In my context, students still leave foot-wear outside the room where the guru is or where the training happens (because this is a sacrosanct space); one begins and ends the training session by touching the guru's feet as a mark of respect; one fittingly lowers one's eyes when the guru scolds strongly: all this is part of a learned behavior system that is still part of the training in classical dance and some of the other performing arts. "I am more interested in the way you walk into the room than how you dance" (Pandit Chitresh Das cited in Dalidowicz 2012, 87) The performance of this social behavior sometimes takes precedence over the capability of the student and the quality of dance training provided. In spite of a (supposedly) close bond between the student and the teacher, the relative importance given to such overt, often forced expression of respect, embitters the relationship.

As a student grows in stature and knowledge, with a growing sense of self, their own authority as an artist/ teacher comes in conflict with that of the teacher. "You are always an apprentice to your master, no matter how skilled or successful one has become" (Dalidowicz 2009, 137). The emergence of the authority of the student as a teacher in his/

her own right clashes with the key ideology of humility before the Guru. The ranking of hierarchy is so rigid that there is no scope to re-calibrate the shifting patterns of behaviour. In my Guru's presence my students are expected to extend the respect of a teacher to my Guru instead of me. In his/her presence I am expected to defer back to my Guru for accuracy and final say; an act which serves to extend my Guru's authority over my students.

The Guru Shishya Parampara is still seen as the only possible (correct) mode of dance training by most senior dancers. But Guru Shishya Parampara with its doctrine of subordination and long period of apprenticeship seems to be an anomaly in this post-modern era. Riddled with issues of personality clashes, incompetence, commercialization, bad faith and conflict the disintegrating system leaves dancers in a dilemma.

Classical dancers embody a vast storehouse of performance knowledge, both explicit and implicit. Without revamping the system, "this knowledge continues to shrink as the system plods on unexamined, soon, within a few generations, much of this knowledge will be retained unevenly and eventually lost" (Chatterjea 1996, 89) In the light of the fact that "there remains something in the guru/shishya system that makes it so effective -something that is missing from other contemporary learning mode" (Chatterjea 1996, 89) a reflective analysis of its pedagogical structure, the symbiotic nature artistic production and authoritarian frameworks and the discourse of dance produced in the class is an urgent need of the hour.

4. Conclusions

The paradoxical nature of the two critical aspects of Indian arts: that of submitting to the authority of cultural and social structures while seeking liberation and individual expression is illustrated in the traditional dance class. On one hand the ability to learn a traditional dance form is dependent upon the students ability to suspend their individuality while enduring grueling (in both mind and body training. The paradox of the human body lies in that the body employs deeply etched skills embedded in unconscious memory structures to enjoy a heightened awareness of proprioceptive feedback. Dancers engage with their bodies simultaneously as instruments of an acquired technique and as a source of interoceptive sensations which are used to sustain, repeat and extend the techniques of movement. Discipline and training become a means by which, a distinctive present is revealed through the repeated act of inscription. The persuasive authority of the Guru and the *parampara* creates a 'lived' body of tradition where collective beliefs, acquired through acculturation are rendered individual (Noland 2009, 9). In the trained body of the dancer, tradition is installed, through a socio-cultural pedagogic process as a collection of signifiers. These collective signifiers etched on the body under the voluntary duress of training are not tools for a fabrication of experience (Noland 2009, 13) but are rather tools for a heightened

experience of the self.

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ⁱ Shloka- Sanskrit verse

ⁱⁱ Parampara- tradition

ⁱⁱⁱ Abhnaya- the art of emotive practice

^{iv} Saadhna- used primarily to denote religious rigour. For a dancer it also signifies rigorous training and practice in order to attain liberation.

^v Rasa- loosely translated as juice or essence, generation of emotional rasa in the audience is the primary goal of the traditional artist.

^{vii} Guru Shishya Parampara- the tradition of one to one transmission of knowledge comparable to Guilds in medieval Europe.