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## The Essentiality of Abhyas in Natyam

Navtej Johar

As an embodied practitioner of both Bharatanatyam and yoga, I am often asked, “how many hours do you practice?”, or people often exclaim, “it must be bloody tough work!”, “badi tapasya hai, asli sadhana hai!” Yes, that is one way of looking at it. There is, and has always been, an orthodox school of Indian thought that does view practice necessarily as tapas, i.e. unflinching discipline and dogged commitment to a doctrine in pursuit of “self-perfection”. There are however other options of practicing too that are not self-perfecting but self-reflexive, and I personally view my practice or abhyasa, as self-reflexive and distinctly different from tapas.

This difference lies in the ways the goal, the processes and the purpose of the form may be defined. Whether the goal is prescribed or is open to discovery; whether the process is regimented or can be intuitive; and whether the purpose of the form is to instruct and project or to suggest. I would like to talk here about abhyasa, or praxis, from the perspectives of both, dance and yoga, my twin practices, because they are not only intermittent in my case but also greatly influence and define each other. I also pay special attention to how I define or understand these practices, because definitions can pre-script and prescribe the parameters of possibilities obtained within these forms. And to me, both dance and yoga, being practices that employ the unpredictable, insightful and infinitely sensitive body, harbour possibilities that may far exceed the predetermined projections and ideas attributed to them by popular convention.

*Meenakshi, photo credit ... >>*



Words are not fixed entities. They can keep getting layered and their signification may change within the constructs of historical time. Post Renaissance, the industrial revolution, the advent of the machine, plus colonisation, the idea of “tempering” the body may have gathered additional layers of meaning. On the one hand, the body now has perforce been thrown into competition with the exactitude and metallic-precision of the machine; it has had to contend with the stoic discipline and self-restraint of the spectacularly regimented and militarized body; it is up against the overpowering Cartesian logic of “mind-over-body” that is puritan and body-dismissive; and its value is contingent upon the production-generating concepts of industry which routinely get galvanised by slogans like, “practice makes perfect”, “work is worship”, “no pain, no gain”, “aaram haram hai”, or (alas) “the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak”.

The bar of the “perfected” body is not only raised to match the machine, but also embody the theatrics of steely stoicism to wilfully exceed the vulnerabilities of its own humanness, subscribe righteously to its own undermining, and most of all, become an instrument of production - be it that of a product or an image of aesthetic, cultural, religious, economic or political value. Further, the 19th century ushers in the age of stardom that valorised a prototype of high-level virtuosity: indefatigable bodies performing gravity-defying feats of soaring up to the skies with bird-like ease or performing, at break-neck speeds, with mechanical precision, against all elemental odds.

However, today, even as their numbers grow and “rock stars” continue to exploit their physical faculties with unimaginable, technical wizardry, the appetite for such “marvellous”

and “impressive” spectacle seems to be reaching a saturation point. A gradual, palpable shift is taking place in our appetites. Could it be that we have become jaded, spoilt-for-perfection, are not so easily impressed any more, or are we becoming less and less enamoured of nature-defying bodily feats? And are our appetites slowly turning inward, seeking resonance, in which we may be able to recognize traces of our innate, ordinary and humanly fragile and sensitive selves? It is such a climate of attitudes—both fixed and shifting—towards the body, that informs the pedagogy, practice and presentation of our embodied practices within India today.

In the Yoga Sutras, Patanjali offers abhyasa as the very first proposition to attain the goal of yoga. However, he proposes it very tightly in conjunction with vairagya, or detachment. The sutra, **abhyāsa - vairāgya - ābhyām tan-nirodhaḥ** (1.12), is a terse utterance, made in as though in a single breath, clubbing the practice and its governing attitude. He defines abhyāsa as an extended, uninterrupted, repeated practice that is marked by consistency, respectful attitude, and firm focus; and vairagya as dispassionate engagement that can be achieved either by wilful refraining or subduing of the senses (vashi-kar), or else through the disabling of trishna, the drive or thirst of the tri-gunas that fuels all thought and action. The tri-gunas being the three “tendencies” that constitute all matter, including the body/mind, namely the two oppositional forces of tamas and rajas, plus sattva, or the tendencies of sloth, over-drive and lucidity respectively. Interestingly, all three pertain to movement. Whereas tamas resists movement, rajas



*Vishnu pose, photo credit...*

cannot stop or withhold movement, thus, the two constitute the basic human dilemma of “to move, or not to move”. In fact, the two can form a gridlock and arrest the mind within a self-perpetuating loop of repeated patterns of compulsive behaviours. A carefully designed abhyasa can effectively energize, and thereby mobilise the tamas, while the vairagya may restrain and contain the overdrive of rajas. This may result in the easing and opening of the gridlock formed by these oppositional forces and allow for the sattva, that is buoyant in nature, to be released and rise to bring calm, contentment and clarity. Thus, the aim of abhyasa, as I see it, is not self-perfection, that being highly ambitious, but clarity and contentment; and to these I also add, subtlety, beauty, resonance and preeti or loveliness. These may emerge insightfully through processes that are both non-ambitious and self-distilling, as opposed

to self-perfecting, and aim at arriving at an experience within, rather than pursue an external ideal of perfection, be it moral or physical.

Thus, this twinnedness of abhyasa-vairagya that pertains within the practice warrants a calibration, and the aim of the practice becomes defined, not by what is externally produced but by the quality of effort or yatna that may be internally employed to delicately temper and twine the oppositional forces. Patanjali makes haste to state this in the next sutra: *tatrasthitaoyatno-abhyasaha* - 1.13, meaning that that it is within the cusp of the two, abhyasa-vairagya, that there lies, delicately poised, yatna or qualitative effort. An effort whose quality shall pervade both the inside and the outside! Abhyasa thus comes to silently imply the very erasure of its ambition, becoming an inward-looking



practice, making the external form incidental, even if meticulous. The quality of yatna or the tenacious push and pull within, is subtly palpable and may lend an “ambiance” to the practice, an ambiance that is sensible to the viewing eye and ear. In other words, the embodied abhyasa-with-vairagya becomes delicately awash, aglow and alive, with “a quality”. And this quality may be infinitely refined and further distilled through a self-erasing process. In real terms, it entails respectful and percolative processes, doing, non-doing, and self-seeing. While the doing may entail the repetition of carefully crafted routines of trial-and-error along with simultaneous self-observation, the non-doing lies in the passive absorption of the stilling after effects of the mindfully calibrated movements - be it of the body, breath, gaze, sound, speech, imagery, attention, imagination and so on.

Abhyasa, though initially guided, in its final analysis becomes self-regulatory and thereby autonomy-generating. It eventually aims at achieving a delicate internal balance that only the practitioner can internally sense, gauge and calibrate. It therefore involves the honing of that intuitive sense of “rightness” from within. A “rightness” that is not determined by how the external form looks but by the delicacy and integrity of the yatna employed, and furthermore, by how it may elicit sensitive responses from within the body. Abhyasa can, therefore, become a practice in recognising, appreciating and absorbing the involuntary nuances of the body. And as a viewer, it is finally the sensitive and nuanced responses of the body that I wish to witness. It is this that will satisfy my human, aesthetic and poetic longing. Words such as mastery, showmanship, stardom, virtuosity, discipline, siddhi, perfection, spectacular, especially as used and understood within the modern milieu, are all externally projective, ambitious and even aggressive. And these have come to define and describe the practice of Indian classical dance, today. However, I find them essentially antithetical to abhyasa, which by definition is self-reflexive, self-erasing, and by nature super-subtle.

Thus, when talking of abhyasa, particularly in reference to natya or in particular to classical Indian dance, I call into question the pedagogy, socio-cultural values, and criteria of appreciation that we have put into place over the last hundred or so years in our attempt to reconstruct, revive and popularize these traditional forms. For this we have to become willing to doubt and be emotionally-honest, in order to examine the motivations that led to the reconstruction, revival, and popularisation of the form. Or in other words, be ready to critique the history of the revised form.

Since independence, Indian dance has been chauvinistically flaunted as the emblem of high-culture and national pride (and currently even more parochially, as Hindu pride!). Though, a little closer look at its flip side will reveal that the history of our dance is steeped in cultural shame. It wasn't too long before the revival of the dance, that we, as colonial subjects, were fiercely admonished and shamed by the British for our paradoxical practices that had existed for centuries within premodern India. The sacred/profane devadasi, a

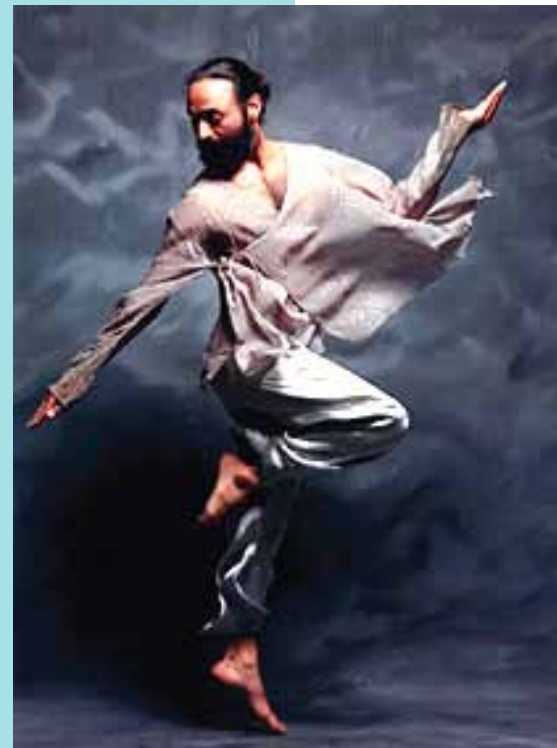


*Somatics, photo credit...*

pleasure woman officially employed in the service of our gods was “shocking” to puritanical European sensibilities. The Abbe Dubois, who in "Description of the Character, Manners and Customs of the People of India, and of their Institutions, religious and civil" (London, 1816),(1) described the devadasis as “strumpets... who opened their halls of infamy and converted the temple into a stew after their religious services were over.” And he continued to call Hinduism the most “degenerate religion in the world”. Almost a century later, there launched a anti-nautch movement in Southern India with the bid to wipe this “blot” off the Hindu consciousness, leading to the signature campaigns and the eventual abolishing of the devadasi system in 1947. The appropriation of their traditional dance by the Brahmin elite was mobilized by a sweeping narrative that was floated by Annie Besant, the President of the Theosophical Society as well as Indian National Congress. In one fabricated and sweeping statement, she defended the purity of Hindu religion and axed the devadasi tradition by declaring that the devadasis were originally meant to be like chaste Catholic nuns dedicated to the service of the Lord, and now, that they had lost their chastity, they in principle had lost their rightful station in the temple, and subsequently, in society.(2) This ingenious defence was not only historically unsound, but also as judgmental and moralistic as the vehement Abbe. And though it served as an effective face-saving device to an India transitioning into modern nationhood, it restored the idea of India for all times to come, to Victorian morality. To this day, this alien puritanism is being violently thrust into our faces as original Hindu morality. As long as India remains locked in this bind of “appearances” which are principally false, there is little room or permission within our national narrative to become

self-reflexive. We have all become subjects of the production, policing, reinventing, and defending of projective, self-aggrandizing, moralistic stances, and the classical Indian dancer is at the helm of this brigade.

With the traditional performers side-lined and their lived-histories undermined and obliterated, the reformists, created yet another trope, that of re-authenticating these appropriated embodied practices by aligning them to an “original” text and overriding the centuries-long, tried and tested, abhyasa, of the traditional practitioners. The written word takes ceremonious predominance over embodied practice and image comes to overrule experience. In short, it is within this historical time that the “idea” comes to rule the roost and is privileged over lived experience.



*Modern dance, photo credit...*

Both traditional dance and yoga meet with similar fates. Vivekananda vehemently rejects the practice of the hatha yogis (3) and aligns the practice of yoga to the Yoga Sutras in his Raja Yoga, and Rukmini Devi refashions dance as per the Natya Sastra at the cost of selectively dismissing the lived practice of the devadasi.

Thus, we cannot forget that the narrative that informs the earnest revival, reconstruction and popularization of dance as chaste, moral, and unambiguously-sacred, as opposed to being paradoxically sacred/profane, has to be seen in reference to our collective glossing over a lived history and replacing it with one that is imagined and fabricated. We also cannot overlook that Indian classical dance, particularly Bharatanatyam, has been and remains an intrinsic component of such a national project. And thus, it is a stance! It is a means to project a predetermined, fabricated, carefully censored image of India. By its very definition it is representational and not meant to self-reflect. In fact, it cannot even accommodate any curiosity pertaining to self - personal or collective. And thus, as long as we are training to prepare bodies to assume a select and censored stance, reinforce a categorical value, and pursue the perfection of an ideal that is both orchestrated and predetermined, we cannot call it art practice, but a production! Training thus has become focused on the bettering, mastering and perfecting the skills employed in the production of these images, but it still remains a production. It is and cannot be confused with creation. It is a production for the sake of producing and circulating select images, messages, and values that will in turn reinforce the idea that underlies and propels its production. This type of production-driven practice is unrelentingly ambitious and un-reflexive, and lies in grave contrast to the delicacy and “honesty” of abhyasa, that seeks to erase its own ambition.

The word, abhyasa, is made up of abhi + aa + as + ghain. While abhi and aa both indicate a desirable, forwarding process, as, amongst other things, may mean gati, deepiti and dana, making abhyasa progressive, illuminating, and yielding respectively (ghain is a technical appendage used to end the word with a vowel). The gift of ongoing lucidity is thus the promise of abhyasa. And as it is essentially a self-regulatory practice, I, the practitioner, must then be intrinsic and integral to the practice, i.e. my “I-ness” ever remains at its centre, because it is from here that I delicately self-calibrate the yatna as well as receive its aftereffects. The trajectory of abhyasa is then that a self-regulated and progressive practice of tempering the materiality of my body, distilling it from gross to subtle, or from literality to abstraction, leading unto lucidity, sensitivity, even poetry.

(1) A work that was bought by the East India Company for twenty thousand francs and printed at their expense to serve as an introductory text for their young officers recruited to operate in India.

(2) Soneji, Davesh. 2012. Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory, and Modernity in South India. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, pages 122- 123

(3) Singleton, Mark. 2010. Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice. New York: Oxford University Press, page 118

Only I, the first person-singular being, am equipped to register, recognize and absorb my sensitivity in all its subtle fullness. It is a sensitivity that is for me to own in my body. As an embodied practitioner, I don't represent my sensitivity nor the poetic images that are emerging out of my body, but I am present in them as they are present in me. I then don't trade in received-images but embodied images that I have authored, mined and farmed within the field of my material body, mind and spirit. The idea of "pure" tradition that the classical Indian dancer has to uphold and preserve, leaves no space for the generation of self-authorship, or real embodiment. To me Indian dance, unfortunately, has become a masterful show-and-tell routine of received images and ideas in which the body, its possibilities, intelligence or sensitivity, does not count.

The reconstructed narrative of classical Indian dance is rigid and fixed, it does not, rather cannot allow for self-reflection, and thereby cannot allow the practitioner, the abhyasee, to stand at the centre of my practice. With the dancer being viewed as a cultural ambassador of the Indian national project, the practice is relegated to the propagation of highly policed, received-truths. This runs the risk of making the classical Indian dancer not an artist, but a cultural propagandist. One who cannot occupy his/her own center as it is already occupied by an internalized, indoctrinated, inscrutable "lofty" idea. How I see it is that as a serious embodied practitioner, my body is first and foremost my medium of knowing and absorbing, and not showing or telling. And therefore, I detect a conflict of interests within a self-reflexive and creative embodied practice and the very idea of performance as it has been historically come to be defined with the national Indian project.

A no-holds-barred self-reflection warrants the permission to doubt, ponder, question, challenge, postulate and enquire into the various possibilities and dimensions of the materiality at hand. And this can also exceed into the materiality of history, the motivations, goals, processes and the form of the practice. That is what makes the practitioner a detached, vairagya practitioner; dispassionate or indifferent to the agendas that might have been inscribed into the form, and equally uninvested in subscribing to the stance and labels that the form might impose, expect or predispose me to. As the appetite for resonance and poetic resolve slowly comes to rise, like I sense and detect that it might be, I hope the classical Indian dancer will look inward to discover the inherent abhyasa-vairagya dynamics embedded within the form and allow for self-reflection to emerge.

The reason I resort to focusing so much on history while talking of abhyasa is because how we define or imagine a form has a direct, if not an authoritative, bearing on how we practice, teach, read, present, and view that practice. My abhyasa of both dance and yoga today has come to intrinsically include the critique of history, both political and philosophical.

I include the philosophical, because alongside the re-fabrication of a historical past there has also been a systematic move within Indian philosophy of slowly side-lining materialist philosophies that have a direct bearing on embodied practice, and the privileging of idealist doctrines that fall more within the gamut of a variety of doctrines that could even be body-dismissive, thus undermining of both lived histories and self-reflexive abhyasa.

To conclude, I would like to reiterate that abhyasa cannot be confused with a lage-raho-Munna-bhai kind of dogged practice. It is by its very nature intelligence, sensitivity, intuition and permission-generating, and it is real for anyone who is willing to approach the material body and history with an open mind. To me Indian dance pedagogy is so far not an abhyasa; and it will not become one till we stop mistaking India with the idea of India that was fabricated as we turned Modern. For me abhyasa requires, that along with my personal, carefully calibrated, self-reflexive, insight-generating practice, I also critically look at our dance, its pedagogy, its neo-aesthetic, its pop-spirituality, and exhibitionistic modes of presentation with detachment, from one-removed, and in the process, wrest open for myself a ponderous breathing-space to entertain doubt, misgiving and wonder. I strongly propose the inclusion of the critique of our nationalist history as well as the history of philosophy as an intrinsic part of dance pedagogy. Because otherwise, our practice will be hard-put to go beyond how we define and imagine it. For starters it may help to remember that as art-makers our job is not to be the cross-bearers of a received "idea", no matter how lofty, and that beauty, insight, resonance and autonomy are intrinsically and undeniably entwined.

**Navtej Singh Johar** is a dancer-choreographer, scholar, yoga exponent, and a social activist. A recipient of the Sangeet Natak Akademi award for Contemporary Choreography, 2014, his work — within all fields of his varied interests — remains consistently body-centric. His choreography draws on plural vocabularies: Bharatanatyam, Yoga, Physical Theatre and Somatics and has won critical acclaim both nationally and internationally. A research fellow at the, International Research Centre, "Interweaving Performance Cultures", Freie University, Berlin; Johar teaches Dance Studies at the Ashoka University, India; is the founder-director of Studio Abhyas, New Delhi, and the Poorna Center for Embodied Arts, Ann Arbor, MI, USA.



*photo courtesy The Friday Times*