

Vision for a Nation

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and
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Imagining and Embodying the Nation

Navtej Johar

Imagining a nation is not independent of how we view imagination itself, where we find ourselves today, in the face of rising right wing nationalism may not entirely be a result of having envisioned wrongly, or exercised our idealisms ineffectively, but perhaps more due to a loss of faith in imagination itself. From my perspective of a Bharatanatyam dancer and a yoga practitioner, I feel that we seem to have progressively confused imagination with projection, and in doing so robbed it of its inherent reciprocity.

Years ago, I turned into an urban activist. Being an embodied practitioner, I have grown an affinity with the body, and was dismayed to see how Indian cities are disrespectful, even contemptuous, of the human body. The human body does not seem to be factored into the plan, design, maintenance or the governance of our cities. And the brunt of this contempt is largely borne by the pedestrians, who are mostly the poor and the lesser privileged; the privileged getting whisked through this contemptuous landscape in the safety of their vehicles. This not only points to a marked class distinction between the rich and the poor, but it also reflects the glaring divide between our sense of inside/outside. Inside our homes, most Indians are obsessed with cleanliness and order, at the same time

we so willingly submit to the disorder and filth that surrounds us outside, and remain unfazed by perfunctory policies and rules of civil governance. Is it because we are callous and complacent as a people, or does such a divide somewhere suit us?

‘Stupid’ Matter

Contempt for matter and the body is inherent in our psyches. The philosophy of Vedanta, which can be seen as the predominant Indian philosophy of the time, for instance, is categorically dismissive and abhorrent of both matter and body. It privileges mind over body, thought over action, even idea over lived history. Plus, we are culturalized in comfortably designating the dirty task of dealing with matter, particularly used and discarded matter, to a certain people, be it the woman—the wife, mother, sister or daughter within the family— or the lower classes and castes who are available to serve us. ‘I shall throw, and you shall pick up!’ seems to be an unspoken dictate that almost each one of us has partaken in in some form or fashion.

The underlying thrust of idealistic Indian theories is that matter does not matter, and that, in fact, it is contaminating. Thus, it advocates, rather rigorously, a separation between lofty ideals and polluting matter. It presupposes the stupidity of matter, viewing it as inanimate and unreciprocal, there to serve a purpose and function, having fulfilled which must exit into the lower domain of the lesser mortals, who in turn, by the virtue of being matter-handlers, are viewed as not only ‘lesser’ subjects, but even worthy of contempt, to be kept at the periphery of society. In fact, the exalted status of the haves, the keepers of ideals, morals and propriety, rests precisely upon this marked distancing from the have-nots, the handlers of stupid matter.

Except that, matter is not ‘stupid’, it not only requires respect and responsible handling but it also is actually reciprocal. My understanding of yoga, based on my practice, the study of the *Yoga*

Sutras, and the teachings of my teacher, Sri Desikachar, is that whatever object, image or word that I may choose to focus my attention on, in time, that object—real or fictitious—will begin to reveal itself. Because the very property of attention is reciprocity. It warrants an exchange. And within a resolved exchange lies my sanity, serenity and spirituality.

Today, the world over, we, the ostensibly intelligent and conscious human-subjects, have bought into the idea of ‘stupid’ matter. And we are more the fools for it. Nothing seems to have drawn more contempt than plastic over the last century. It was perhaps viewed as doubly-stupid because it was man-made and even emblematic of man’s triumph over nature. And today, this same plastic is reciprocating with a vengeance and threatening to destroy our planet. This era, our *yuga*, fears a collapse not due to the wrath of Gods, but due to the wrath of unattended plastic.

The environmentalists of course need to be up in arms and ring alarm bells, the activists need to pour out into the streets to protest the production and mishandling of plastic, and the sociologists, educationists, economists, politicians all need to work in their respective fields to counter this crisis. But I really hope that the philosophers start to examine our brand of contempt for matter. This calamitous crisis does not hinge on whether or not to use plastic; in fact, we need to be wary of such polarizations. It actually requires, in the final analysis, our humbling before matter.

An issue, especially one as grave as this, does not need polarizing not only because we are all implicated in it, but more so because polarizing is a deflective construct. It pitches one idea against another and actually often deflects attention from the ground reality, lived history, and the very philosophical paradigm that sustains the glossing over of the real issue at hand. We are polarized over ideas, pushing for the efficacy and correctness of one idea over the other. It is no longer time to be ‘correct’, but to be open to critique and examine the soundness of our matter-contemptuous ground rules.

Bharatanatyam's 'Fanciful Shift'

The history of Bharatanatyam is fraught with ideas. Almost a century ago, Rukmini Devi initiated the project of saving the temple dance by removing it from the lives and ethos of the devadasis. The devadasis were traditionally both temple dancers as well as courtesans, combination that neither modernity nor the puritan British could stomach. Annie Besant, the president of the Theosophical Society and the Indian National Congress, and a personal mentor to Devi, most ingeniously offered a resolution to this conflict, nay paradox, by simply reimagining the devadasis; she declared that the devadasis were originally meant to be chaste like the Catholic nuns.¹ And India wholeheartedly bought into this reimagining. It is on the basis of this utterly *fanciful shift* that Bharatanatyam gets constructed. Sheer fancy, then, marks the foundation of Indian classical dance, when lived history and paradox were both self-righteously abandoned in favour of idea. Making fanciful assumptions, fabricating claims, and reimagining history was allowed sanction at that point in our national history, in fact, it became our sociocultural as well as political premise. We must not forget this! Correspondingly, if this paper here is read as proposing a critique of Rukmini Devi, I would like to emphatically state that it is singularly a result of her 'saving' the dance that people like me have been able to become Bharatanatyam dancers. Thus, I cannot not but be grateful and indebted to her. And I most deeply am! Thus, it is not Athai's (as Rukmini Devi was fondly addressed by her students) intervention that this paper attempts to criticise, but it tries to point to the political premise that she came to occupy. It is time for us to view the historic unsoundness of this premise. In fact, I would say that the admission of this historic unsoundness at the level of premise would signify a coming-of-age for us as a people and a nation.

In dance, the narrative of the originally chaste devadasi keeps getting denser with every passing generation of dancers. Here I'd

like to add, that such unsound narratives thrive on polarisations. Because polarisation divides attention and deflects attention from the fabricated narrative at the core, it, in fact, serves to protect it. Based on Besant's fabricated 'truth', Devi began by making a clarion call to fellow Indians to step forward and take India back to its pure and illustrious past. She did that by exalting an imagined past while proceeding to extricate the dance from the influence of the devadasis, and then realign it to the text *Natya Shastra*, which was incidentally rediscovered by the British only in the 1850s. The reconstruction spawned many self-aggrandizing narratives, and the glossing over of this *fanciful shift* got woven not only into the pedagogy of the dance, but it keeps getting reinforced through a regular invention of polarizations. Other than the primary polarity surrounding the morality of the devadasi, there emerged the debate around the christening of the reconstructed dance, which was earlier called Sadir. This was followed by the question whether, Bharatanatyam ought to adhere to 'text' or if it could accommodate the style and mannerisms of the traditional practitioners, whom Devi viewed as 'vulgar'. In the late 1950s, a heated debate raged between the legendary Balasaraswati, one of the last living devadasis of the time, and Devi, over *sringara* and *bhakti*, i.e. if the import of the amorous songs of Bharatanatyam was meant to be erotic or devotional. The eighties were a time of social awareness and thus raised the concern of the dance's social relevance, whether it was enough to dance to myths or engage with more socially relevant issues. And then there has also been the ongoing, tireless fight between tradition and modernity.

Today, we stand at the cusp of a new debate around the place of nationalism in dance. These polarities have been reinvented with some regularity; they are potentially exhausting and can force the practitioners, if not also the public, to take sides. But in effect, what these polarisations do is that once again they serve to deflect attention from that *fanciful shift* that lies arrested at the core of this dance. The glossing over of this deceitful shift remains the dharma

of dancers today. My firm opinion is that the energy of the dancers becomes so locked, in the deflection of this lie and in holding up the 'pure' stance, that we do not feel able or permitted to somatically engage with the subtleties of our own bodies. In other words, we are rigorously trained to block out the sensory responses of our bodies, because the showing-and-telling of a fixed idea must overrule the aliveness and unpredictability of the material body.

The art of Bharatanatyam then rests upon a textually 'authentic' veneer, but one that cannot accommodate or absorb complexity or paradox—the very stuff of poetry. It remains a dance of platitudes, feigned innocence, supplication and sublimation. Poetry in Indian classical dances is rendered through emotive abhinaya, which could be said to be the art of externalizing interiority, or more correctly, a means of rendering interiority transparent. The interior condition is termed bhava, or feeling. But for this feeling to be externalized, it must have a cause for both its validation and manifestation. For instance, if the selected bhava be *sringara*, the erotic-amorous sentiment, then I must actively conjure a lover who may effectively cause and elicit my feeling. This conjured cause is the *vibhava*, or one that will make my *bhava* *vikasit* or allow it to flourish. The artistic challenge is to first carefully script and effectively conjure this *vibhava*, and then, more importantly, to willingly submit to its influence, the force of its orbit, and its ambiance. Because, the *vibhava*, like any object, does not come alone, it carries with it its ambiance. And it is its ambiance that I must inhabit to make the poetry and dance come alive. My job is then not to produce poetry, depict the *vibhava*, or portray the *bhava*, but to become sensorially available to the *vibhava* that has a life and force of its own. My intention then is not to dance but to get danced by this imagined, though forcefully real, *vibhava*; because the very nature of this conjured-up *vibhava* is reciprocity.

Today, I suspect that we, Indian dancers, have forgotten that imagination can speak back to us. We have perhaps started to treat imagination in the same manner as we treat objects, lifeless, 'stupid'

and devoid of ambiance or reciprocity. And it is due to the fact that our primary preoccupation has been made to become the upholding of an idea, and therefore what we see in dance more often than not, is a projection of imagination, i.e. imagination that is treated only as a verb and one that needs to be illustrated, as opposed to an abode within which the performer comes to reside and become “present” to and in the performance.

Cultural Misappropriation

The Sanskrit meaning of asana is ‘seat’, i.e. it is something to be occupied. *Asana dharaṇa kiya jata hai*, i.e. asana is to be acquired, pretty much like a guise is donned. It is an extraordinary bodily shape that is voluntarily acquired for the promise of its effects and affects, which in turn may evoke involuntary sensory responses and insights in the practitioner’s body and mind. Pretty much how abhinaya initially involves voluntary emoting with the hope that in time, as the vibhava gains life and force, the dance in response to the reciprocal and mercurial vibhava would become reflexive, spontaneous, unstudied, unpremeditated and involuntary, i.e. *sattvika*. Incidentally, the word asana also means ‘the frontal portion’, which may be presented, offered to strike an interface, or from where the ‘driver’ may steer and negotiate the space in front. Thus, asana also inherently implies something other than itself, which like the vibhava, I propose, is reciprocal, and presupposes a sensory correspondence with it.

As I stated earlier in the case of vibhava, each object or shape carries within itself the seed of its unique ambiance. It is within the subtle dimension of ambiance, unseen but palpably sensed, that inanimate objects may exercise animation. And they do so by casting an influence, an affect, a spell. An asana gets stilled and comforted (*sthira* and *sukha*, as Patanjali proposes in the *Yoga Sutras*) when it becomes sufficiently contained within its own ambiance. And this can happen only within the here-and-now, not in a future

time when the body may be ‘perfected’ or become completely emptied of the polluting influences of its corrupt materiality, thereby becoming worthy of the pure ideal, absolute and external (to the body). The experience of being sensorially absorbed in the here-and-now is neither a simulation nor an imagination, and it is most definitely not an idea. In order to arrive at such a state of absorbed containment in the moment, the asana must imbibe an unambitious ease to occupy and accept the shape (as it is!), allow it to radiate its dream for correspondence, and generate its self-containing ambiance. This, to me, is the promise of yoga, and it can happen only when the body has gained the licence to locate its object or ideal within its own materiality.

Asana is thus not a vacant shape, nor does it stand in a vacuum. It carries within it the dream of its ambiance. It is a shape that is alive, responsive, and actively in search of containment. Like the bhava-harbours body in dance, which dreams of being taken over by the force, prabhava i.e. affect of its corresponding vibhava; asana too dreams to both occupy and be occupied by the self-affirming containment of its own reciprocating ambiance. It is particularly important to register, at least in the context of embodied practice that physical shapes contain within themselves the dream of an object, akin to the vibhava, the ambiance of which may perfectly match and validate their subjective condition. Beauty, sukha and rasa lie in the delicate exactness of such a match!

However, we see today that asana is popularly seen as something to be exerted or *produced*, much in the production line mode of good-better-best. It is seen as a self-bettering, self-correcting, moralist, and perfectionist practice, where the ideal—be it moral or cosmetic—remains external to the body and looms eternally in the ‘bettered’ future.

Bharatanatyam too has become a spectacle of self-bettering surrender and supplication. It betrays ‘feigned’ piety and innocence, and it is for this piety—pure and moral—that it has been chosen to become the prime object of cultural exhibitionism. Such a profound

and beautiful art tailor-made to exquisitely address the anxieties of intimacy and the paradoxes of lived life, and to tune into the finest nuances of the body and voice, has been reduced to an instrument of in-your-face, nationalistic projection. Bharatanatyam, today, virtually makes the body absent from the dance. Yoga too fears a similar fate as it has been lately discovered as an object of national heritage. The body in both these embodied national projects must be recruited to proudly and chauvinistically uphold an idea. An idea that will never allow the body to exceed into the richness and subtlety of its own material reality, and thereby it, the idea, supersedes the body.

I have always wondered what chance the embodied practice of yoga has as it gets admixed with body-dismissive Vedanta. Reimagining yoga to be an integral part of Vedanta—considering that Shankara, the most notable 8th century authority of Advaita Vedanta, categorically dismisses Kapila, Samkhya and by extension yoga in the tenth century—is just as unsound, if not spurious, as Besant's imagining of devadasis to be originally virgins. India's embodied practices of yoga and Bharatanatyam, both of which offer us the promise of an immersive bodily experience, have been nationally yoked to ideas, the former to a matter-dismissive doctrine and the latter to a fabricated history. These are very grave misappropriations, but ones that have remained unaddressed and, in fact, inform us at a very integral level as Indians. If we are in the grip of fundamentalism today, we need to realize that fundamentalism may very well just be the extension of cultural chauvinism that we have allowed and harboured all along.

Thus, to me, dance and yoga have become interrelated practices, but they have become so because of inquiry, both historical and philosophical. Both share a common history, not only of being embodied practices that stem from the same ethos and the same systems of thought, but also for being singled out as odd, bizarre, and 'shameful' by the British. Inquiry into the history of philosophy clearly tells me that not only did the efficacy

of premodern embodied practices in India hinge characteristically on fierce autonomy, but that they have historically been subversive and challenging of the status quo over millennia. Furthermore, it shows that they have been paradoxical, radical, and nonconformist, in contrast to the conventions of imposed morality, purity, and simplistic theism, which seem to plague the Indian mind within the post-Independence, modern period. Another thing that becomes evident to me is that the deeply affirming, pleasurable, empowering, and spiritual mode of self-recognition that both dance and yoga promise, is dependent upon the cultivation and ‘farming’ of after-effects that may arise surprisingly and spontaneously from within an intelligent and sensitively self-regulated embodied practice, and not out of blind and earnest following of instruction and text alone.

Loss of Pluralism

The absolutist dream is not new to India. Supremacists have silently trudged through history amassing believers. Within the subcontinent, we can trace the gradual rise of absolutism and the subsequent erosion, if not obliteration, of plurality through the centuries. A very wide spectrum of plurality—valid schools of thought including the heterodox, orthodox, idealist and materialist, which offered a multitude of varied perspectives on primary concepts such as karma, ahimsa, atman, Brahman, God, vegetarianism, agency, morality, purity are practically lost to us. Today, this plurality has all been morphed or erased out of our consciousness. Vedanta alone remains as the abiding and predominant school of valid thought in popular consciousness; in fact, it has almost become synonymous with Hinduism. Today, in effect, we are left with no other way, than just one, to be Hindu. We have not paid attention to, even overlooked and undermined, our own philosophies, and as a result we are left with one unified Hindu philosophy that offers a ‘categorical’ version of truth.

The dilemma I mentioned at the start of this essay about practising yoga and Indian classical dance—both of which are

considered ‘spiritual’—in chauvinistic or fundamentalist times is essentially about practise in times when theism seems to have gained a monopoly. ‘Vedanta’ in a nutshell can be categorized as a mainstream religion that is conventional in its definition and shares with other world religions the idea of God as Creator, Perpetual Doer, or Primary Cause, as well as the authoritative, moralizing judge of merit and demerit. It represents the orthodoxy of the Brahmanical order and the preservation of caste purity. According to Vedanta, the phenomenal world is unreal ‘because what is real has neither a coming-into-being nor a disappearing. The analysis of the relationship of causality leads to the conclusion that both cause and effect are unreal.’² It therefore views the material world as illusionary or contaminated and in opposition to the pure, absolute and eternal Brahman; and defines religiosity as supplication to the ‘absolute’ and rejection and denial of the material world. Moreover, it considers ‘[r]ational argument [. . .] incapable of leading to the absolute Brahman, access to which is given only by intimate experience wholly lacking any discursive representation.’³

In the fourteenth century CE, Madhavacharya, the fourteenth Jagadguru (pontiff) of the Sringeri Sharada Peetham, put together a doxography called the *Sarva-Darsana-Samgraha*, in which the various systems of Indian philosophy were presented in sequence of their theistic efficacy. It lists sixteen philosophical schools, including all the schools that have found mention in this paper—i.e. Charvaka, Samkhya, Buddhism, Jainism, Yoga, Shaivism, and Pratyabhijna—along with a host of other schools,⁴ culminating with Advaita Vedanta as the most evolved option. Somewhere during the subsequent centuries, this grouping is again revised, separating the astikas (believers) from the nastikas (nonbelievers), excluding the latter, as they do not rely upon an idea of God nor the hegemony of the Vedas.

However, apart from the nastikas, a lot of other schools are also side lined, such as Shaivism and Pratyabhijna, and the revised doxography gets pared down to six. These six—namely Samkhya,

Mimamsa, Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Yoga, and the most perfected Vedanta—are what students of Indian philosophy today learn as the shad darsanas, or the six Indian philosophies that reveal ways of valid seeing. Both these doxographies are clearly drawn from the perspective of Vedanta and directly suggest its superiority over all other schools. Today, however, all the six schools that find mention in the new doxography seem to have become morphed into Vedanta. Though the study of all schools must still continue in selective circles, a common man on the street would be hard put to even name most of them. Apart from Buddhism and Jainism, which are still living religions in India, and of course Yoga (which is understood mainly as a regime of physical asanas and not an independent philosophy), the only school that is not only popularly known but seen as synonymous with Hinduism is Vedanta.

The way in which rational, discursive and atheistic ways of seeing have been silenced or co-opted by Vedanta can be attributed to (a) the writing of commentaries on important philosophical texts from the perspective of Vedanta—with every subsequent commentary steering the text to align more with its theistic doctrine, such as in the case of the *Yoga Sutras*; (b) the drawing up of doxographies (which happen to bear tremendous authority in posterity), again from a strictly Vedanta-centric point of view, and then proceeding to categorically nix the nastika schools, going silent on abstract or paradoxical theisms such as Kashmir Shaivism, and effectively reinterpreting the nontheistic, rationalist schools such as Samkhya and others to fall somewhat within the theistic fold; and finally (c) strategically positioning themselves at the four corners of the subcontinent by opening the four powerful mathas, monasteries, or centres of learning that also housed libraries, and assigning them with authoritative pontiffs with the aim of propagating and installing Advaita Vedanta⁵ as the definitive and most superior doctrine across the subcontinent.

Today, with Vedanta alone being recognized as the all-encompassing school of Hindu thought, unopposed from the

inside, the monopolizing theistic project of establishing God or Brahman as unquestionably central to Indian thought is complete. To think of Indian thought within a seriously nontheistic mode of reasoning is almost impossible today; God has come to rule the Indian philosophical stratosphere. The result is that yoga today is popularly postulated as a 'union with God', and Indian classical dance is presented as a means of sublimation or surrender of the atman—lower self or soul—to the Supreme God, Paramatman. To question these models is close to heresy. Indian dance was reconstructed just less than a century ago when it was cleansed of eroticism and thereby liminality, that hinged on the sacred/profane paradox that was integral to it. It has since been presented as categorically spiritual and uncomplicated by paradox. The unwritten agenda of classical dance is to maintain this morally correct, 'representational' stance—which does not allow room for reflexivity of the involution/evolution variety that I described—and offers virtually no scope for the opening up of a self-reflexive space.

A Supremacist Reimagining

Indian dance today is self-endorsing, even self-congratulatory, but it is certainly not self-recognitive. Thus, as a practitioner of these two disciplines, I have embarked on this exercise of deliberately evoking alternative philosophical systems, which have historically countered and challenged the monopolistic-theistic modes of first Vedic and later Vedantic assertions. I am not challenging theism here, but the monopolizing tendencies of theism. Likewise, I am in no way attempting to challenge the highly evolved and profound doctrine of Vedanta, but I certainly wish to point to what seems to be its overarching ambition to silence other points of view. The critical discourse that philosophical pluralism can foster is imperative to not only freedom and autonomy, but also poetry and art. Today, when cultural chauvinism and religious fundamentalism

are threatening to scale new and even more monopolistic heights, it is all the more important to evoke pluralism and philosophical discord between valid schools of thought that can and have held each other in check. It can be said that today in India, religion has swallowed the critical discourse of philosophy, and that culture, the classical arts and philosophy have all been reduced to an appendage of religion, whose monopoly depends upon strong-headedly maintaining a philosophical vacuum.

It is not overnight that Indians turned majoritarian and turned unsecular or undemocratic. They have just bought into another type of narrative that has been slowly brewing. The supremacists today are evoking and subscribing to that same brand of grandiose 're-imagining' of an illustrious and pure past that we collectively opted for at the onset of our nationhood; the difference is just in the narrative, this time the 'purity' that they are reinforcing is not only moral, but also casteist and communal.

Unfortunately, we have not paid attention to the slow and systemic erasing of plurality on the level of philosophy; not addressed or critiqued the unsound constructions of our national identity, and offered no forums for critiquing fabricated imagination. Our education system, like our cities, has been both uncreative and ungenerous. It has in fact played a part in widening the gap between the haves and the have-nots; our schools and cities have become instrumental in keeping a sizeable mass of the population at arm's length i.e. on the outside. And today, it is these masses that have been democratically harnessed by the supremacist forces into an absolutist narrative.

We have to stop treating select people like objects. And we may be advised to initiate this change by, first and foremost, rigorously reviewing and overturning our disdain towards matter, and by extension those humans we feel have been contaminated by it. Until we don't review this attitude, chances are that our stance towards the ones we have historically othered, whom we consider lesser-subjects, will remain, as ever before, patronizing and deeply

offensive. We need to clearly register that a) matter matters and b) it is reciprocal, and in time it will speak back. And that matter may extend to include all things and beings that we have become conditioned to objectify—be it objects, animals, or humans whom we may be loath to fully assign the status of subjects. If we play blind and mute to the reality of matter, and choose to continue with our polarized battles over lofty ideals, it will strike back. Because neither it, nor those contaminated by it, are stupid. And if we don't pay attention to and view them as worthy of exchange, they shall in time and turn, stupefy us. And most deservedly so!