Indian Idealism

The Disenfranchised Body in Yoga, Dance and Urbanity

Navtej Johar

I am a performer and a practitioner. I engage in plural practices of yoga, dance (*Bharatanatyam*), and urban activism. As a rule, I am not interested in concentrating on only the "vertically ascending practice" of any one of these alone but am drawn to the horizontal connections, the insights as well as the overlapping patterns that may become apparent between these varied practices. I actively rely upon these cross-connections and overlaps, which are both real and telling of shared attitudes and patterns that may repeat across disciplines. These are also gentle due to their casual nature, and today I locate a sense of meaning in these ordinary yet revelatory overlaps. I think we are entering an age of ordinariness. Being special, being an expert, being an authority, or being a star seems to be losing credence.

The common denominator in my three seemingly varied practices is the body; body both as material as well as an idea. In fact, my practice is progressively informed by the conflict that has historically pertained between these two for centuries. The materialists being the empiricists – most notably the school of Samkhya that has been an influential rationalistic school of thought in India since approximately the sixth century BCE – who viewed the body as an intrinsically intelligent and revelatory organism, insightful observations of which may give rise to indubitable knowledge. And then, on the other hand, the idealists who can be said to comprise various schools of theistic thought that rely upon the intelligence of an external or divine entity, and thus consider intelligence as extrinsic to the body. For the materialists, the body is an inherently reliable mechanism, supremely responsible, materially endowed with the infinite potential of refining, rather distilling itself down unto its subtlemost dimension of essence or spirit, while for the idealists, the body is a treacherous entity, naturally sensual and thus morally irresponsible, and therefore in constant need of taming, disciplining, and

conforming in order to befittingly house the ideal. Both spawn their respective set of "embodied" practices and rituals. While the idealists' practice may be formal, evocative, prescriptive, corrective and even "self-deprecatory," for the materialists, the practice is essentially experimental and revelatory, as well as a means to re-inscribe knowledge that has emerged out of the body, back into the body, thereby making the body and knowledge one autonomous whole.

The post-Enlightenment nineteenth century saw a sweeping ascendency of idealism, both reformist and nationalistic. India's grand romance with nation-building spawned fanciful idealizations and re-imaginings along with wild historical conjecturing about mythical pasts that were once lofty, illustrious, ethnically pure, and most importantly, true to the "book"; and conversely advocated, expressly contemptuous measures against the morally irresponsible body that had to be subjected, subjugated, colonized, disciplined, rendered docile and, most of all, productive. It is within this exact time that I locate the re-imagining of the embodied practices of both Indian dance and yoga, an imagining that disposed the modern practitioners of these forms to become romantically and idealistically oriented towards their practice. It is this state of idealization that I seek to target and disable in my work. Thus my practice intermittently evokes or challenges the following four categories: a) the lived histories of the pre-modern practitioners; b) the nationalistic reconstructions of these embodied practices; c) the modern training methodologies of these forms; and d) the actual materialistic exploration or experimentation of the form independent of an ideal—notwithstanding the fact that this requires both rigor and information to resist the very well-mechanized exigencies of the ideal.

Reimagining of Yoga and Dance

The history of pre-modern India points to yogis with radical, even "amoral" lifestyles whose esoteric practices and subsequent transformations were based upon un-interceded experimentations with the material body. However, yoga today is increasingly becoming conformist, moralistic, sanctimonious, and even traditionally religious. Similarly in dance, the traditional musical and textual repertoire of the courtesans suggests their sacred-amorous song to have been a tailor-made forum for exerting, airing and divulging the anxieties around the ever-slippery subject of intimacy and the liminal condition of the amorous heart, which today have been converted into a highly prescriptive, pious and curtailed mode of show-and-tell expositions of moral correctness and sublimation of desire. Lastly, my engagement with urban activism is a response to India's haphazard urbanity, which remains unfriendly and even hostile to the body. In this paper, I will share

a little about these three practices within the Indian context; the modernized practice of yoga, the nationalization of classical dance – both of which are singularly invested in realigning the embodied practices with an imagined ideal – and the body-dismissive reality of our cities.

The histories of both yoga and Indian dance were reconstructed by the Hindu reformists during the mid-nineteenth century. They sought to cleanse cultural practices of impurities and immoralities which, they decreed, had crept into the fold due to moral degradation of its irresponsible practitioners as well as foreign influence. They were categorical in rejecting the practices of both the *hatha* yogi as well as the *devadasi* (the traditional temple dancers from South India) on the grounds that they were obscene, immoral, repulsive, and reprehensible digressions from the norm. In fact, what is to be remembered is that first the imagining and then the constituting of India as an illustrious, moralistic, spiritual nation hinged critically upon the strident and self-righteous rejection of cultural practices that freely mixed the spiritual with the sensual, or the material with the ideal. The sweeping clarion calls of all reformists declared impeccable morality and stringent spirituality as India's original and cardinal truths. Political and spiritual leaders of very high international stature such as Vivekananda, Blavatsky, Aurobindo, Annie Besant, even Gandhi became the advocates of such modes of self-attestations and lent modern India a new face, a new stance, a new mannerism that claimed to have been eternally even more moral than the puritanical colonizers.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, yoga was still viewed as an obscure practice, a fringe subculture that was outside of the social norm and at odds with the life and aspirations of a householder. The *yogi* or *jogi* was seen as this self-inflicting outcast with magical powers, who was dirty, naked, sexually vitiated or depraved, and even a potential miscreant who was to be feared and kept at a distance. It was only in the beginning of the twentieth century that yoga as we know it today was fashioned as a form of physical culture, cleansed of its obscure, esoteric, secretive, no-holds-barred practices. This re-visioning and reconstruction of yoga was a direct result of the Protestant wave of aligning practice to original texts, in this case the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali that were ironically rediscovered by the British at the end of the eighteenth century with the singular intent of ruling the natives more effectively, and also the influence of "Muscular Christianity" that swept over Victorian Britain in the middle of the nineteenth century and resulted in the reform of physical fitness training in public schools. It equated "physical strength" with "moral strength" and hoped to use physical fitness as a means of both building "manly" character and instilling Christian morality in the young men. This project of "gentleman-making" "favourably predisposed Vivekananda to think seriously about – and take inspiration from – the numerous advocates of health reform whom he met in the United States between 1893 and 1895. Most

certainly, his best-known book – *Raja Yoga* – reflects a concern with the physiology of spiritual fitness."[1] The same idea also later influenced Savarkar, the father of the extreme right wing Hindu movement of Hindutva, who dreamt of an India that would be energized by a Masculine Hinduism. However, the one who put his money into this idea was the Maharaja of Mysore, who opened a *vyayamshala* or gymnasium that offered European style routines of calisthenics and bodybuilding for the masculinization of the royal princes. A few years later he decided to add a *yogashala* for the teaching and promotion of our own indigenous practice of body conditioning, i.e. yoga, and appointed Tirumalai Krishnamacharya, who is today recognized as the father of modern yoga, to head it. T. Krishnamacharya, a highly learned man of modest resources is better known due to the legacy of his illustrious students, prime amongst them being B. K. S. Iyengar, K. Pattabhi Jois (founder of what is popularly known as Ashtanga Yoga today), Indira Devi, and T. K. V. Desikachar, who happens to be my teacher.

The history of Indian dance also follows a similar trajectory. The sacred/erotic temple dancer called the devadasi turned into an object of scorn by the end of the nineteenth century and was seen as "a blot on Hindu civilization" by the reformists and the Western-educated Hindu elite. These pleasure women or courtesans, who for centuries had singularly remained the repositories of both dance and salon music in India, were now seen as the agents of moral corruption, the succubi who through the seductions of their song, dance and wayward ways would suck the spiritual and physical strength of the young men of the nation. Rukmini Devi Arundale, the pioneer dance revivalist, took it upon herself to "save the dance" from the traditional community that was rapidly losing its moral standing and artistic space within the emerging modern nation state. In 1935, she set up Kalakshetra, a school dedicated to the teaching of the reformed dance of the devadasis, which was by then christened as Bharatanatyam in the precincts of the Theosophical Society. Arundale was a prime protégé of Annie Besant, the president of the Theosophical Society as well as the Indian National Congress, thus a major architect of Indian nationalism. The revival and reconstruction of this dance was therefore squarely situated within the lofty and purist dream of nationalism.

Whereas the new yoga taught at the y*ogashala* at the Mysore Palace valorized the connection between physical strength and moral character of the young men of India, the new Indian dance celebrated the morally-cleansed and devotional ideal of dance. Under the new vision of an emerging nation, the men had to be upright and moral, and the women proper and virtuous; the men had to be athletic and strong and the women had to be refined, demure and modest. And this project of making proper Indian ladies and gentlemen would be fulfilled through the means of indigenous but reformed practices of dance and yoga. In this way, both traditions would be saved from the clutches of the morally gone-astray, mystery-

mongering traditional practitioners, and preserved and domesticated by and for the middle classes who put them to new use in the construction of good and proper citizenry. It was a win-win situation that spawned a win-win narrative for modern India of which I am a part. As a practitioner of both these physical disciplines, I am viscerally implicated in this win-win narrative. To my mind, one main shift that this narrative has caused is that it has effectively extroverted these embodied practices, which are intrinsically self-curious and inward-looking. Indian dance to date remains the prime object of cultural exhibitionism, while yoga has become a standardized practice, of the "one size fits all" variety. Both of these practices have lost a critical specificity that is a prerequisite to first establish the primacy of the practitioner, and crucial for the embodied practice to materially engage, exert, express, reconfigure, and then reintegrate the material-energy for it to return and re-nest in the practitioner's body. For me the prime purpose of the embodied practice is to uniquely re-make the body.

Before I go any further, I would like to briefly touch upon India's nodal materialistic philosophy, that of Samkhya, which is attributed to sage Kapila (approximately sixth century BCE). Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, the primary text on yoga, is squarely based on the philosophy of Samkhya, which relies and is focused upon fully realizing the potency of matter. Because of the ever-in-flux nature of matter and no deemed discontinuity between matter, energy and spirit, it views the calibration of tangible matter as the most effective means to bring about desirable change in body, mind and being. According to the Sutras, matter can be methodically energized and subsequently distilled unto spirit, and conversely spirit may become re-coagulated unto matter. Towards that purpose, it offers a sophisticated grid of evolutes within which the distilling/coagulating process takes place. What is most important about Samkhya is that it remains determinately silent about and indifferent to the idea of God, i.e. it does not entertain the idea of an external ideal. Towards the end of the first millennium, the school of Tantra further elaborates upon the Samkhya grid of evolutes and makes it even more complex. It incorporates into it both the aspect of sensuality as well as the idea of an abstract "God": one who is not an external, divine entity but a super-subtle phenomenon or a super-sensitive primal condition that is equally intrinsic to both body and cosmos, and more to the point, one that is materially achievable. The school of *hatha* yoga that offers us the postural practices that are so popular today is an offshoot of this sacred/profane school of Tantra.

The Self-Energizing Mechanism of Matter

According to the materialistic school of Samkhya, the mental and emotional states are seen to be directly dependent upon the physical or more precisely the "chemical" make-up of the body. The mind is considered to be directly un-approachable and can be affected only through the body and breath; thus, it is precisely for this reason that the physical practices of tempering the materiality of the body such as in yoga or tantra are devised with the singular aim of influencing the mind and disabling its compulsive tendencies. The "chemistry" of the body is seen to constitute of physical substances called "*guna*s." Gunas can be termed as fluid (not necessarily liquid) substances that are constantly flowing and influencing the state of the body/mind, but these are not just substances, they are substances-with-tendencies. The literal translation of guna is "quality," to be precise "positive quality," and they are given the positive attribute because they can bring about desirable change in the body/mind and thus carry the promise of hope. But they need to be tempered. Gunas are three in number, two of them being opposing in nature while the third is neutral. The opposing two are *tama*s and *rajas,* representing the conflicting energetic and lethargic tendencies respectively; these two tendencies are self-triggering, reactive and potentially compulsive, thus susceptible to lock into patterns of co-dependency with/against each other and as a result arrest free movement and change. The third, *sattva,* is considered "pure" as it is unbiased, free of habit, fixed identifications and conditionings, and therefore is considered to be autonomous, free, self-reflective or even illuminating. While tamas (slothful) and rajas (aggressive) have conflicting drives or forces, sattva does not have a drive, but is instead characterized by lightness or a buoyancy that because of its un-ambitiousness can be easily overwhelmed and overpowered by the drama of the conflicting two drives. It can be released and rise up only when the gridlock of tamas/rajas is relaxed or rather when their drama has been resolved or exhausted. So, one fundamental goal of any form of yogic practice, be it asana, *pranayama*, chanting, meditation, visualization, ritual, or contemplation, is to free *sattva* by disabling the yoke of tamas and rajas. And this disabling is done by effectively energizing and awakening the tamas out of its slothful and resistant slumber, and tempering or exhausting the aggressive rajas, so that they may both be temporarily de-programmed and, as a result, release their gridlock and allow for a clearance for the sattva to be released and to rise. This can be orchestrated through a variety of means such as movement, stillness, sound, gaze, touch, voice, smell, substance, or just thought. The rising of the buoyant, calm, and clarity-conferring state of *sattva* then is not such an esoteric occurrence; it is materially orchestrated through technique and attention.

A yoga asana routine conventionally ends with the mandatory *shavasansa*, when a practitioner, after having gone through an energizing/exhausting routine of intelligently sequenced challenging postures interspersed with gentler counter poses, eventually lies down in the mandatory shavasansa or the reposeful corpse pose. The practitioner lies down in a still pose not only to recover but also to allow for the body to "stop-doing," and passively re-assimilate and re-absorb the fruits of its own qualitatively-effortful practice. This lying down in a state of 'non-doing' at the end of a rigorous session of exerting, expressing and doing is the most important part if not the very purpose of the practice. In my classes, I often describe this moment of repose in this way: if we shake a blanket or a rug, it throws out dust particles that fly out of it into the air, and if then we lay the same rug down upon the floor, these dust particles slowly resettle back into the rug, but they settle down in a new configuration. Shavasansa is thus the passive state of an energized/exhausted body, which is being re-patterned through the re-absorption or re-nesting of the energy dust, one grain at a time. At this point, I would like to point out three important things: a) that it is voluntary manipulation of the tangible body that produces an involuntary and intangible aftereffect, b) that the mind-altering intangible aftereffect is extracted or farmed out of the material body through the fine balance of an energetic/restful calibration, and c) that such a moment of absorption cannot only be stilling and deeply satisfying for the practitioner, but is also visible to the viewing eye. A methodically-calibrated body absorbed in the reposeful moment is a visible body, visible to the naked eye. I would even go a step further to say that it is also a transmitting body, a body that can elicit attention as well as sympathetic identification of the viewer and thereby transmit a portion of this aftereffect. And I attempt to incorporate this technique, an "infectious absorption," into my performance work.

The sensitive potency of materialism upon which the transformative promise of yoga and Samkhya rests has today been overshadowed by projections and prescriptions of religious as well as New Age idealism. As a yoga teacher, I see students lying on their mats in shavasansa, sweetly immersed in a state of repose and relaxation after an energetic/exhausting practice, but hardly anyone of us seems to know how to further build upon this experience that is physically orchestrated, can be repeated, and has such a palpable and abiding impact on the mind. The responses to the reposeful aftereffect can be broadly generalized to range between these two extremes, those who wish to romanticize and make "much" of it and then the more pragmatic lot who do not want to pay anymore heed to it than is necessary. So while some sit to pray and meditate after class, there are others who paste gentle smiles on their faces and ostensibly become elated into what can be euphemistically called the "Om zone." And while a good number of them choose to take the experience at face value and sit it out, there are also the impatient ones

who are discomfited by this state of non-doing and are quick to brush it aside in order to get on with their day. But hardly anyone seems to be able to "sit with it!" and become absorbed or suspended in the buoyancy of the moment without falling into the trap of either further embellishing or dismissing it. And I feel that this is because relying upon the body and becoming trusting of the sensitive aftereffects have become culturally and even religiously forbidden. To stand rooted in the face of the body, out of which are erupting materially-induced aftereffects, requires an education in materiality, as well as rooted certitude in the intelligence of the body, which have both been historically disrupted by the idealists. So, getting sensitively familiar with the material requires a re-education into the wonders of the body and a systematic de-conditioning of the internalized ideals that are undermining the body. It is important to note that the theological construct of Advaita Vedanta, which predominates the brand of modern Hinduism prevalent today, does not accept the materialistic philosophy of Samkhya or yoga, and is categorically dismissive of both body and matter. According to this school, matter and body are immaterial, i.e. they are *maya* or a false-illusion, which is the root cause of spiritual blindness. The post nineteenth-century imagining of essentially materialist, embodied practices within an idealist philosophical construct that is categorically dismissive of the body is curious to say the least!

The Amorous Song of the Pleasure Women

If I look at the repertoire over the last decade and a half, I realize that what remains a common thread through almost all my choreographic works is the "amorous song" of the pleasure women of yesteryear, i.e. the *padam* sung and danced by the temple/court dancers called the devadasis in the South. The padam is essentially a song of unrequited love that is grave in import and sung in slow tempo. These songs were central to salon singing and dancing in pre-modern Southern India and remain central to the traditional Bharatanatyam repertoire even today. However, what is presented today is a rather prescribed or even moralized version of this song. The padam freely equates not only god and lover, but even god and pleasure-customer. One major anthology of padams put together by the notable A. K. Ramanujan is indeed titled *When God is a Customer*. Musically brilliant, grand and very sophisticated, the padams can be textually candid and sexually explicit to the point of sounding indiscreet or pedestrian to morally-correct viewers. During the reconstruction of Bharatanatyam about a hundred years ago, the padam repertoire was severely edited – deleting all risqué references and notorious details in order to tailor them to suit the gentle ears of the morally-upright gentlemen and their modest ladies. The rather bold yet musically sophisticated sacred/erotic padam is

now made to sound more like a love-prayer of supplication, sublimation of desire, and surrender of the soul to an idealized God, a soul that is "tarnished" due to the contaminating contact with corrupt matter and body. By doing so, it has become first of all categorically moral, and effectively flat in its declarations of idealized "innocence" and pious longing, rather than a complex, soul-searching, and materially engaging exploration of desire within the dialectic of autonomy and powerlessness, laced with the carnal sensitivity and potency of the body.

The sensitivity, richness, humanness, and material-potency of the padam can still be gleaned even within its cleaned-up form. The Bharatanatyam repertoire is traditionally arranged in a specific order, and the slow paced padam is placed in the second half of the evening in contrast to the fast-paced, rhythmic dancing that takes place in the *varnam* and other rhythmic sequences during the first half. So by the time it is time to perform the padam, both the dancer and the stage have been amply energized or warmed up and the spectator has realized and registered the extraordinariness of the event and is viewing it from one-remove or even an altered state of mind. The legendary Balasaraswati, last in the line of devadasis who was particularly known for her padam singing and dancing, compares the padam to the sanctum sanatorium of a temple, where after the devotee having done the obligatory perambulations and gone past the noise and clamor of the temple, arrives in the dark sanctum and may enter into a quiet and somber space of self-divulgence/reflection. The padam basically is a simple entreaty to "let love be!" It slowly airs and loosens resistance, fears and anxieties around love and intimacy, it divulges, hesitates, doubts, ponders, pleads, banters, implicates, and mocks both self and other like any other love song perhaps. But what sets it apart is that the address is neither aggressive nor expectant, it just is! It carries within both its musicality and its meter the carriage of its own resignation, the exhaustion of perpetual un-begetting. So though it is fully real on one hand, it is also fully aware of the impossibility of its love pleadings. Both the longing of the heart and the unrequited-ness of the song are concretely entrenched in songstress's reality of being but a pleasure woman, thus her entreating and pleadings are both fake and painfully real at the same time. Her job is to beautifully and perennially sing the song of ever-unrequited love, peeling the heart layer by layer, shade by shade, while still managing to give it one new shade for that one last time. The connoisseur of a padam or a *thumri* is on the lookout for that one more shade that keeps him "one more last time" within the forbidden space of the salon. Companionship, togetherness, forever-ship are outside the realm of a courtesan's reality. Her freedom and fulfillment lie in a highly-energized, poetic and even romanticized moment of her "telling" and in its being heard. And the courtesan's heartfelt need and design are to just make that moment of heart's disclosure a little more elastic.

The padam is thus no ordinary song, but it is the story of the courtesan, and only she can tell it the way she can.

I am drawn to the padam because, first and foremost, I feel it is the song of "being" the very condition of liminality. I feel it is tailor-made to momentarily orchestrate a condition-less, suspended state of freedom. I am personally drawn to it for its beauty, emotional honesty and poetics. It is gentle; it has the gentleness of resolved intimacy, and at the same time, it is infinitely cruel in its disclosure of the impossibility of intimacy. To me the padam is highly romantic, but my attraction to it is not just based on my personal proclivity towards romance. I am also drawn to it because it is a very important socio-political marker of a historical time that remains glossed over by a nationalistic narrative that is romantic in its own way; it marks India's historical "shift of premise" from being paradoxical to becoming rational, materialist to idealist, pluralistic to nominal, and amoral to moral. But what is even more significant is that in its re-tailoring it makes this shift historically indecipherable. So the sanitized padam is used as a political foil. Enfolded into the padam is the history of shaming by the colonizer of India's belief in sacred-sexuality (which the devadasi singularly embodied) and its ceremonious abandoning by the Hindu reformists in their bid to remodel themselves to find a foothold in the new, "progressive" world. It brings into relief the idealizing, nationalistic dream of realigning India to its pure, illustrious, and moral Aryan past, an Aryan past that was at that time being fancifully co-entertained by both the colonized and the colonizing "Aryans." According to the native idealists, India was not modernizing itself, it was authentically and already modern; all it had to do was to weed out the irrational/paradoxical practices and once again tap into its authentic moral, rational, "modern" past. And for this, all it had to do was feign continuity. In fact, feigning continuity at the cost of annihilating lived histories and cultures became the defining force behind the forging of Indian "tradition."

The padam also carries within it the Indian elite's ingratiating "identification with the aggressor," viewing them as none other than their long lost "Aryan cousins" and conversely the vengeful, self-loathing, slighting and shunning of the devadasi on grounds of morality and reducing her to destitution. It is a reminder of those superior stances, self-righteous posturing, and the passing of sweeping moral judgments that all became integral to the Aryanizing, "self-pride" building project, which reeked of a narcissistically-wounded India shaping its "Indianness" to suit, please, identify with and resemble the British aggressor. And lastly it is a reminder of the appropriation of the devadasis art by the moralists. This space of the devadasi has gone, even her *unreplicatable* music has lost its idiosyncrasy, but within the idea of it is still uncomfortably contained the genesis of our self-redefinition: a colonially coerced redefinition, not out of force but through the elicitation of an eager and ingratiating submission to the ostensibly superior and

progressive model of modernity that fancifully mixed up the past and present. The padam also marks the disenfranchisement of a morally problematic and complex song, the unspeakable ambiguities of which draw upon the material sensitivity of the body, i.e. the weight of its bones, the texture of breath, the shape of sound, the anchorage of gaze, the import of the words, gestures, and utterances that emanate out to viscerally divulge and explicate the ineffable condition which cannot be explained, or shown, but can be "seen" upon the body. The revised and reconstructed version of the dance of the devadasis as it is danced today makes embellished platitudes of the idealized, un-paradoxical, self-definitions, which reduce the body to becoming a mere mouthpiece for an idea.

Within this flattening of the amorous song of the pleasure-songstress, there not only lies a kernel of collective national shame for having compromised or self-slighted ourselves at a very essential level, and secondly the rage of the obliterated embodied practitioners that India will do well to recognize in order to come of age, but most importantly also exemplifies the loss of a material tenacity between the inside and the outside, between the body and the signs it makes, between interiority and its tenaciously contiguous extension in word, sound and gesture. An idealized, non-paradoxical, unambiguous word does not need visceral tenacity or engagement, because it relies not on the body but on the flat nominalization of the word, or on belief in an ideal, which can be stated or proclaimed in show-and-tell gestures that are purely external and disconnected from the body. The prevalent phenomenon of belief in an external ideal has, in a way, overwhelmed the body, if not divested it of interiority; it certainly has disenfranchised materiality, and this is what is marring our embodied practices. Idealism has no need of materiality, no need of the body; its proclamations of truisms do not require the complexity of the body or of lived histories.

Today, the padam is a dying art. There would perhaps be a handful of vocalists who can actually sing a padam capably, and this is not only because the padam is musically very sophisticated, but also because it is idiosyncratic and contains unique traits and mannerisms of vocalization, which characterize that particular school (*gharana* or *bani*) or "family" of musicians and their lived histories. To me, the padam, because of its slow and dragging pace, allows a luxury to deliberate and sensitively unearth and engage with the materiality of the body, the word, as well as the voice to create a resonant and nuanced moment when the body may reveal and reflect the changing shades of the season as the ineffable condition of the heart vacillates from a "yes" to a "no," from the amorous to the sacred, form holding tight to letting go, from specificity to continuity. No amount of skill or preparedness can allow for such a resonant moment in performance; it is a result of an informed and, most of all, a trusting engagement with the material of the body. The padam, which seems to be customized to the externalization of human

vulnerability, is today reduced to a trite display of well-rehearsed mono-acting, which is frankly uninteresting and boring and the main cause why not many people want to sing, dance or see padams anymore.

Apart from the padam, another social reality that has become central in my dance-work over the last few years is that of the domestic helpers or servants who cohabit with us in our middle class Indian homes. In a way, this is also an extension of my occupation with the devadasi narrative, as devadasi is literally a "maid of the god" and a potential pleasure-server, either purely aesthetic or even carnal. I find the proximity between the haves and the have-nots potent and volatile. Between the commandeering memsahibs, who only instruct and supervise, and their servants, who do all the menial work from cooking, to cleaning, to scrubbing floors and bathtubs, there lies the gap that makes the ideal and the material non-continuous. And this non-continuity is both enraging and paralyzing. My last three major works have dealt directly with this topic, the first being a solo called *Grey is Also a Colour,* inspired by Doris Lessing's award-winning novel, *The Grass Is Singing*, in which a white woman gets erotically charged and involved with and eventually murdered by her black male servant in apartheid South Africa; the second being a trio*, Charumathi Claire Singh* (*CCS*) that juxtaposes a generic narrative of the devadasi with *The Maids* of Jean Genet, who are both constantly impersonating and plotting to kill the madam; and the third, a duet called *Frenemies*, which is a sequel to *CCS* that centers around the viscerality of the padam, the cruelly-beautiful amorous song that emerges out of the ghettoized existence of the maids and whose beauty, power and embittered lives warrant a material engagement with the bones, breath, desire for love and violence within the body.

Urban Activism

Indian cities glaringly exemplify a lack of tenacity between the material and the ideal. Quite literally, our cities lack the glue that adheres one pavement block to the next. What is planned, designed or envisioned on the drafting table is not what meets the eye on the ground. Making a pavement that stays intact and facilitates orderly movement of vehicles and pedestrians is not an insurmountable task; we have the expertise, skills, resources and the manpower. And yet our roads, pavements and public spaces remain in a state of perpetual disrepair, quite literally un-tethering even while they are being built, the various street elements are haphazardly placed, ill-logically designed, ill-fitting with quite often no attention to detail, specificity, or measurement. Our urban policies are often arbitrary, inconsistent, unregulated, derivative, and perfunctory, and the construction and main-

Fig. 1: Navtej Johar and Lokesh Bharadwaj in *Frenemies*;
© Anshuman Sen.

tenance work is slapdash, uncoordinated, and erratic, resulting in our cities being haphazard, chaotic, inconvenient, hazardous and even unsafe for its human users.

Since 2006, I have been running a project with school children called "The Power of Seeing," which facilities the children to adopt one street element in their neighborhood and then document its history over a period of time. During this period, the children make a case study of the ground reality and the requirements of the immediate context pertaining to this one street element; and realistically review its actual "materiality" along with its design, and the regulations plus policies governing it. It is an exercise in "sustained observation" with the aim to first instill a sense of identification with the outside in the child, which then might develop into deeper interest in and analysis of materiality in relation to function, efficiency, mobility, safety and even fun in public spaces. The upper hand of idealism over materialism in the Indian mindset that I have mentioned earlier plays out very prominently in the way we relate to our streets and cities. Most middle class Indian homes are almost picture perfect, well-designed, organized, pretty, comfortable and super clean. Traditionally, "cleanliness" for the upper and middle class/caste Hindus translates into the maintenance of "purity." Most homes, particularly the kitchens, are sparklingly clean, obsessively so; ideally the prime dharma of a Hindu wife or mother was to keep the home pollution-free, and housekeeping would even include rites of ritual cleansing and purification. This obsession with purity directly translates into exclusivity and the drawing of a very rigid divide between the "pure" inside and the "polluted" outside, which reflects in not only an absence of concern, but even disdain for the outside that is both the place of pollutants as well as the unclean social other: the social other being that class of people who physically deal with materiality and, for that reason, are less-than. The idealistically bereft working class may often also belong to the lower castes. Thus the glaring inequality between the haves and the have-nots is not only economical or socio-cultural, but it is also deeply philosophical, as it reflects the un-bridgeable divide between the materialists and the idealists.

Whereas the post-independence obsession with moral purity can be seen in the policing and moral-cleansing of the embodied practices of dance and yoga, both of which were actively domesticated in the last century, the pure/polluted, insider/outsider divide is glaringly visible in the disparity between how we keep our homes and how we treat and accept our cities. The inside space belongs to the purity-obsessed middle class insiders, whereas the outside space is for those belonging to the underclasses who have been contaminated by contact with polluting material. And therefore, the real underlying philosophical tenacity that actually pertains is that of keeping this gap (which is realistically quite easily surmountable!) wide open. At one level, middle class Indians do not only accept the dirty and chaotic outside (which we obviously do!) but seem also to be comfortable and content with

it, as one hardly ever hears any protest against it. Broadly speaking, Indian society divides itself between the idealist upper/middle classes and the material-engaging lower classes, and there is not just a social hierarchy that pertains between the two, but in fact an unbridgeable divide. While one enjoys the commanding privilege of idealizing and "knowing better" the non-material, higher truths of life, rational or irrational, the other is born into and destined to a life of material engagement or servitude.

Without delving into it deeper, another thing that I would like to draw attention to is the fact that the spaces that are most dysfunctional on our roads are not the carriage ways, upon which our vehicles ply, though they are bad enough, but the worst affected are the pedestrian spaces. And the pedestrians in India are comprised of the poor. The rich barely walk in India; they are chauffeured around and avail door-to-door service. Our cities are not only dirty and dysfunctional; they are disrespectful, if not contemptuous, of the human body as well as the poor. So idealism is not only in opposition to materiality; it is also anti-body and invested in keeping the poor classes adequately inconvenienced.

For the idealists, engagement with materiality is fundamentally base, polluting, and corrupting or contaminating, thus best to be ignored and held in disdain. This results in a huge gap between the ideal, i.e. an idea on paper or the drawing board, and its implementation and efficacy on the ground. The top-heavy idealism of the urban planners, designers, policy-makers hardly ever effectively translates on the ground. And one main reason is that their idealism doesn't really take into consideration or engage with or effectively survey the ground reality, does not take into consideration the compunctions of matter, space, context, and the behavior of the human user, nor is the human body used as a point of primary reference when designing a public facility or urban space, which can often be absurdly unergonomical. Thus there remains a perpetual gap between the proverbial "cup and the lip," as the "lip" may never ever touch (and in some cases even come to the ground to see, survey or supervise) the polluting "cup." How the design and its intent is fixed on paper and what shape it takes on the ground when "unfixed" by the flux of matter and human users is not only quite another matter, but one of unconcern for the idealist. Because in the final analysis, primacy is neither granted to material nor the human user, it is the idea and the idealist that retain supremacy and continue to govern the Indian mind and inconvenience the Indian body.

For the sake of this paper, I have focused on only a couple of observations that have emerged through working on the ground and which are indicative of the lag between the ideal and the material, which in real terms translates into the overlooking of specific nature of materiality; a specificity that warrants detailed observation, survey, visualization, real experimentations of trial and error, precision,

Fig. 2: An Indian kitchen; © Monica Chand.

Fig. 3: Overflowing garbage dump in a middle class residential area; photo taken by a student of St. Mary's School, New Delhi.

Fig. 4: The pavement is so high that an old woman has to haul up in order to cross the street; © Mona Metha.

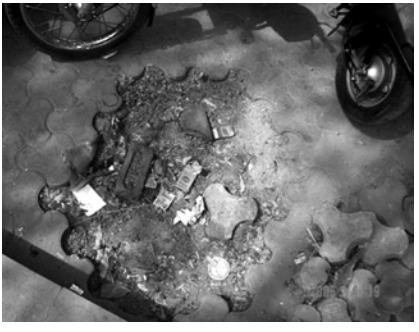

Fig. 5: The pavement tiles peeling off as the uncompressed ground beneath them begins to sink with time; photo taken by a student of St. Mary's School, New Delhi.

an understanding of the nature of different material, tenacity, rigor, rules, foresight and above all common sense.

Rules and common sense pertaining to matter are respectively flouted and suspended with alacrity when building streets and cities. It is quite common to see two street elements not precisely adhering to each other or even precisely fitting the space that they are meant to occupy. This could be due to a) no attention to measurement or calculation, b) no prior planning, c) no prior preparation, e.g., the soft earth is not first compressed before the tiles are laid upon it. This is one of the main reasons why our pavements are un-tethering within weeks of being built, d) not using appropriate materials that will adhere well with each other, e) not using the right kind of tools to ensure precision, etc. None of these things are insurmountable or foreign to us. After all, we live in homes that are designed precisely to suit our requirements and specifications, and we will not brook even the slightest deviation or negligence. But we accept and remain complacent when it comes to shoddy workmanship that meets us right outside our own homes.

The inability of our municipal authorities – and this includes the urban designers, planners, constructers, policy makers, city councils, etc. – to effectively stitch the roads and the street elements together is neither a myth nor an exaggeration. It is there for all to see. India is no longer a poor country; we have the money, the expertise, the material, the know-how, but we lack a will, and often it is termed as the political will. But I would again say that it is the lack of a deeply internalized philosophical will of not taking material seriously. Paying heed to matter, the body, and the poor is not a part of the brand of idealism that we have become conditioned to privilege. To me this is in some ways reminiscent of the moralized, or shall I say nationalized, padam that though it may talk of the love play of the god-lover Krishna and the human vulnerability that it may evoke, is but fundamentally very conscious of keeping it within the parameters of idealized morality, middle class propriety, and the model of sublimation that is constantly declarative of purity, innocence, non-carnal spirituality and the unbroken continuity of a chaste tradition. But it does not have the ability or the permission to engage the materiality or the ambiguities of the heart or the carnal resources of the body – the very stuff that art, poetry, and life are made up of.

I will conclude by saying that what lacks is material tenacity, and it reflects clearly in the practices of domesticated yoga, nationalized dancing, and in the on-paper envisioning of cities without placing the human body as a central point of reference, and furthermore with scarce attention to how the plan may get implemented on the ground. Both dance and yoga continue to remain emblems of morality and thus are invested with middle class anxieties that do not permit curious and visceral engagement with the body. The body must not tell, divulge, express, or reveal itself, as it is fundamentally unreliable and has to be instructed,

sublimated, corrected, repressed and made to become a mute carrier of the body-dismissive ideals. Similarly, the city planner does not deign to pay heed to what the human user needs on the street and thus continues to get away with perfunctory planning, making and maintenance of Indian cities. The towering idealism has effectively muted the body and axed its resources and needs. Until we begin to engage the body, get our hands dirty with the mud of the body and the messy stuff of the heart, we will keep making extroverted, non-absorptive yoga postures; self-congratulatory dances that grow progressively vapid and poetically bankrupt; and continue living in nerve-racking, abrasive, chaotic and unsafe cities in which bodies do not matter

Notes

1 John J. MacAloon, ed., *Muscular Christianity in Colonial and Post-Colonial Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 61.

Bibliography

MacAloon, John J., ed. *Muscular Christianity in Colonial and Post-Colonial Worlds.* New York: Routledge, 2008.