

**PROJECTS / PROCESSES**

**ACTING IN CONCERT:  
REFLECTIONS ON  
WOMEN IN ALLIANCE**

PARVATHI RAMANATHAN



# PROJECTS / PROCESSES VOLUME I

Series Editor: Senjuti Mukherjee

**Acting in Concert:  
Reflections on Women in Alliance**

Parvathi Ramanathan



SERENDIPITY  
ARTS  
FESTIVAL



From the performance *Maanini: Expressions of Love* at DB Ground. Photo by the Lumiere Project.



From the performance *Red Dress Waali Ladki* at The Little Red at the Old GMC.  
Photo by the Lumiere Project.



## **Reflections of Time**

***Maanini: Expressions of Love***

***Venue*** DB Ground

***Red Dress Waali Ladki***

***Venue*** The Little Red at the Old  
GMC

***Curated by*** Mayuri Upadhya

## Curatorial Note

### Reflections of Time // Maanini: Expressions of Love

**Director** *Kiran Subramanyam*

**Artists** *Shivaranjani Harish, Rasika Kiran, Pavithra Krishnamoorthy, Himabindu, Archana H R, Shreema Upadhyaya, Navyshree K N, Gowri Sagar, Shraddha Srinivas*

**Music** *Raghuram, Mahesha Swamy, Srihari Rangaswamy, Pradesh Achar, Manjunath N S*

**Team Manager** *Ramya Janakiraman*

**Lighting Designer** *Nagaraj T M*

**Production Assistant** *Harshini C Natya Gummaraju*

**Production Manager** *Sandhya Kiran*

**Curated by** *Mayuri Upadhya*

Bharatanatyam has seen tremendous growth in the past decades or so, from its original format as Sadirattam, and after it was rechristened as Bharatanatyam and now to its modern avatar—it is extremely interesting to see the growth and the transformation that this form, one of India’s oldest, has gone through to reach this point today. Exploring the classical concept of the Ashtanayikas, Maanini traverses the fascinating phases and the various moods of a woman in love yet maintaining the grammar and vocabulary of the traditional Varnam in Bharatanatyam, aiming to bridge the space between the traditional and the modern.

## **Reflections of Time // Red Dress Waali Ladki**

**Artist** *Diya Naidu*

**Curated by** *Mayuri Upadhya*

Red Dress Waali Ladki was born out of the Diya Naidu's response to the brutal crimes against women in India. Through the research and introspection that went into making the work, she decided to talk about the layered, subtle experience of the woman, who is seemingly liberated but constantly carrying fear in her body. Through the performance, she asks: Where does this patriarchal penetration locate itself? If 'her' rape is 'my' rape, can my bliss be hers too? Can men be invited as equals into this? The work is an ongoing (failing) research. Not scientific per se or even just physical; not even restricted to the laboratory (in this case studio). It will probably never stop. But one can hope. It began in 2014 and now is a non-performance of itself. Those who witness it will in some way carry it within them.

## **Acting in Concert: Reflections on Women in Alliance**

**PARVATHI RAMANATHAN**

*Freedom does not come from me or from you; it can and does happen as a relation between us or, indeed, among us.*

– Judith Butler, “Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly”.

Walking through a large protest site in Delhi against the Citizenship Amendment Act in January 2020, I heard slogans praising Delhi’s Muslim women who had led the protests through peaceful sit-ins and demonstrations. The slogans soared, “*Jamia ki ladkiyon ne raasta dikhaya hai! Shaheen Bagh ki auraton ne raasta dikhaya hai!*” (The women of Shaheen Bagh have shown us the path! The girls of Jamia have shown us the path!). While women in India have long been an active part of political and social action, this was possibly a first in the heart of northern India where protests were led by such huge numbers of Muslim women from an economically-oppressed background to assure the dignity and security of the entire Muslim community as citizens and protect the nation’s constitutional principles. Inspired by Shaheen Bagh, women of the community organised and started several protests in at least a dozen other cities of the country. Large number of students, academics, journalists, and other professionals provided solidarity to the protests and volunteered their time and skills while the women continued their undeterred sit-ins for months. The protesting women occupied public space on the frontlines of a national political movement, strategised and designed their methods of participation, simultaneously dealing with domestic responsibilities often bringing their young infants to the demonstrations through the cold months of the North Indian

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winter. In doing so, Shaheen Bagh and various protest spaces became sites for other voices, those with experiences of marginalisation on various fronts to form solidarities, alliances, and assemblies while creatively expressing their political will. As women, they resisted the underlining *ghar/bahar* (home/world) divide which framed the home-bound woman as an ideal and symbol of the nation's cultural sanctity in the pre-independence period. In contemporary India, this patriarchal dichotomy continues to shape struggles women encounter in the inner quarters of their homes, and restrains their presence in public spaces. One begins to wonder then in what ways models of femininity are created or shattered when women's bodies appear in public, mobilised by purpose and precarity, assembling in solidarity and vulnerability. How does collective assembly in public spaces inform women about their place in the world? What quality of the moving body is altered in conditions of alliance? Are there other inner workings—a dis-assembly, exploration, and re-assembly of the self—when perceived as part of an alliance?

The performances curated by Mayuri Upadhya at the Serendipity Arts Festival 2019 carrying the theme “Reflections of Time”, *Red Dress Wali Ladki* by Diya Naidu and *Maanini – Expressions of Love* by Kiran Subramanyam, each show a glimpse of the charged possibilities of alliances and assemblies that are characterised by solidarity. The audience journeys with the women portrayed in these performances and gets privy to their intimate inner conversations, anxieties, desires, and hopes. In them, one looks for reflections of the women in twenty-first century India: as female archetypes, as nuanced desires, as spectrum-ed identities, as evolving assemblies, and as reflections of time.

The Bharatanatyam piece *Maanini* explores the idea of the *ashtanayikas* or the eight moods of a woman in love as described in the *Natyashastra*. Each aspect of the *Sringara rasa*—love and desire both in union and separation from the beloved—is manifested by a nayika. Through movements, expressions, and gestures the eight nayikas illustrate the varying conditions of love and desire that consume the heroine. The figure of the nayika isn't alone. She is accompanied by

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her trusted *sakhi* who comforts her, encourages her, brings her bitter truths and happy news, and listens to her misgivings. In *Red Dress Wali Ladki*, it is the audience that listens. The girl in the red dress is multiple figures—she is a police officer, a sex-guru vlogger, and an unhappy homemaker—negotiating their desires. The choreographer Diya Naidu uses Jungian female archetypes such as the goddess, the child, the mother, and the warrior as images that begin to manifest in all her characters as we are confronted with their tales.

Among the curatorial concerns that recurred in various projects at the 2019 edition of Serendipity Arts Festival, was the idea of “home”. In Mayuri Upadhyā’s curatorial endeavour, one observes an attempt at expanding the notions of what performance forms may inhabit this home. As part of her curation at the festival, audiences in Goa witnessed street dancers from across the country breaking, locking and popping in a form that was international and yet had a local essence: both in its choreography and music. Maher Raas performed by Chamunda Maher Raas Mandal Bokhira from Porbandar pushed the notion of the traditional Gujarati garba beyond a form that is performed to express bhakti alone. Instead, it becomes an acknowledgement of the Maher tribe’s warrior roots.<sup>1</sup> These curatorial choices worked at widening historical assumptions of a dance form on the one hand and celebrated new histories and trajectories of another. With ‘Reflections of Time’, Upadhyā chose to focus on women, “because it is our time today”, she asserted in a conversation with me during the festival. The juxtaposition of *Maanini* and *Red Dress Wali Ladki*, uproots a linear framework of history and presents images of gendered experiences that could be understood as montages weaved into one another. Both performances, in their own ways, play with the contours of this “home” as well as with experiences of women in private and public spaces.

### UNPACKING ARCHETYPES AND SEEKING A VOICE FOR THE SPECTRUM: ASSEMBLY AS MONTAGE

Walking into a black box erected by Serendipity especially for the festival, audiences behold one of the manifestations of Diya Naidu's *Red Dress Wali Ladki*—an eight-foot-tall figure, clad in a fiery red gown, her eyes frozen in a cold stare and her mouth wide open in a silent scream. As she begins to move, Naidu presents images that are familiar and yet evade easy categorisation. While a posture or gesture may evoke a recognisable character, she quickly transforms the gesture to shift and challenge its established meaning. The deity-like tall figure in red begins to jerk her head and points at the audience from her high vantage point. Her pointing finger is then thrust into her mouth, as if by an external force, and her free hand struggles to pull it out—thus creating a distortion in the image of a powerful Goddess witnessed moments before. This duel within her body then dissolves as she begins to lick her finger and moans in pleasure as if engaging in a sexual act. Soon after, choking and gagging upon her finger, she churns phlegm in her mouth and forcefully spits it out on stage. With this, Naidu sets the tone for the next hour of a performance that teases the audience by simultaneously engaging and challenging them. She talks about and mimics routine human acts, which may not turn heads in a usual setting; when weaved into a performance though, it keeps the audience from settling into complacency. The labour of executing this emotionally intense performance and that of experiencing it as an audience member, don't give us a suitable moment to talk immediately after the show.

When the Bangalore-based choreographer Naidu and I spoke over the phone three weeks later, protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act were raging across India and our conversation gravitated towards the value of resistance in society and art. As a contemporary dancer who seeks to resist being a dancing body purely for the gaze or being consumed and measured solely by aesthetic concerns, Naidu sees the various forms she incorporates in her creative practice emerge from their contexts. The performance *Red Dress Wali Ladki* that we witness



From the performance *Red Dress Waali Ladki* at The Little Red at the Old GMC.  
Photo by the Lumiere Project.



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is a movement theatre piece with abundant voice work, “because the voice was demanding to be spoken”, she asserted in our conversation. This work took root in the choreographer’s mind in the weeks following the infamous gang rape of Jyoti Pandey in 2012 that led to mass protests across India. Beginning her journey as an independent dancer around this time, she shared how this period shaped her and infused a feminist approach in her artistic statement. In *Red Dress Wali Ladki*, she refers to Jyoti Pandey and several other victims of sexual assault reported widely in the media since 2012, making it glaringly evident how much remains unchanged in terms of legal policies or social reality. Even feminist movements and strategies of resistance such as the SlutWalk or #MeToo, begin to fall into structures which continue to frame women into reductive categories and archetypes. In the assembly of voices and bodies together, what initially appears to be a uniform desire for change begins to show fissures. Nuanced differences in perspectives or choices become the basis for drastic divergences and fragmentation of the collective assembly. Naidu’s approach to the archetypes in *Red Dress Wali Ladki*, intends a conversation among women across these categories, a unifying sense of sisterhood, an alliance across archetypes and regeneration of the assembly. Even as her female characters graze across one another’s entirely contradictory lives (such as when the police woman looks upon the character of the housewife who happens to be her neighbour), the audience hears a narrative that does not feign complete understanding, but is also not judgemental of the other woman. They aren’t friends in this story, but they are allies due to their experience as women in India. Throughout the performance, Naidu brings in details that enable the audience to approach this sisterhood in the most expansive way to comment on the violently gendered human condition—not vilifying men but depicting the pressures of toxic masculinity upon them as a burden and tragedy. The character of the vlogger jestfully advises her followers, “Love your guy like a little boy, and he will turn into a man”.

The title of the performance—*Red Dress Wali Ladki*—doesn’t translate easily. Is it simply the girl in the red dress? How does the Hindi word

‘wali’ translate after all? The girl who belongs to the red dress? The girl and the red dress defy easy anchors, which allows all the red-clad characters to indulge and transgress. The dancer-choreographer has her hair coiffed into antennae-like buns, as if to invoke and attract the calling of the women and female archetypes from across the ages. One of the leading psychologists working on the concept of archetypes was Carl Jung, who Naidu referenced through the process of making this work. In his theories, Jung lays out archetypes as universal cognitive structures or predispositions that he claims shapes the perceptions, emotions, and actions of all humans. Through this work, Naidu experiments with a curious combination of assertion and effacement of these archetypes. “The piece lies somewhere in between the woman we look up to and worship, and the woman we look down at, one who is primal. I knew that I wanted to work with archetypes such as warrior, mother or innocent virgin. While these are merely tropes, they become a real thing. Men and women that we interact with on a daily basis, even activists or academics who might be very educated subscribe to these tropes”, she told me.

Jung distinguishes between the male and female psyches, and the factors that shape them. “Woman’s psychology is founded on the principle of *Eros*, the great binder and loosener, whereas from ancient times the ruling principle ascribed to man is *Logos*. The concept of *Eros* could be expressed in modern terms as psychic relatedness, and that of *Logos* as objective interest”.<sup>2</sup> He also declares: “In women *Eros* is an expression of their true nature— their *Logos* is often only a regrettable accident”.<sup>3</sup> Naidu’s *Red Dress Wali Ladkiyan* (a plurality added to the title here) are ridden by great doses of this accident, negotiating their archetype and animus, and the weave of power relations among the sexes in twenty-first century India. They traverse facile moulds, for the women clad in red may superficially appear to fall within these archetypes but also challenge them: the policewoman is also a mother; the housewife has desires and finds exhilaration when she masturbates. The so-called sexy diva is also like a Goddess with internet followers. As an activist, she thinks of her work as one that empowers women. In Naidu’s careful stitching of narratives,



From the performance *Red Dress Waali Ladki* at The Little Red at the Old GMC.  
Photo by the Lumiere Project.



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we see heroic characters emerge among her women. They defy the reductive dualism of the archetypes of female heroism as is generally depicted in mythology, literature, art, and popular culture: the “masculine”, “Warrior”, and the “feminine”, “Martyr”.<sup>4</sup> Naidu allows her female heroes to love and nurture, to give comfort, to seek solace, to please and demand pleasure. Through her narratives, she portrays these impulses as not necessarily feminine, but as human sentiments. This, Naidu states, has been a theme across her other works *Rorschach Touch* and *Hands and Face Project*: “to dispel societal notions that define appropriate emotions based on gender, religion, class and caste; to restore empathy in interactions; and to enable connections and alliances that holds space for freedom, democratic thought, consciousness, creativity, and spirituality”.

### A PLETHORA OF CONTRADICTIONS: ASSEMBLY AS DIVERSITY

The Eros of women is explored in yet another way in *Maanini – Expressions of Love* through the *ashtanayikas* (eight kinds of heroines in different phases of love) as described in the twenty-fourth chapter of the *Natyashastra*.<sup>5</sup> Each phase of love portrays a situation that the nayika finds herself in with respect to her beloved nayaka, and the mood that engulfs this moment. Heroines, one is told, go through eight different phases or moods when engaging with their lover<sup>6</sup>—one dressed up and adorned in eager expectation of love’s pleasure (*Vāsakasajjā*); one distressed by separation when her beloved does not turn up on account of his preoccupation with other engagements (*Virahotkanṭhitā*); one having her husband in subjugation, captivated by her qualities (*Svādhinabharṭṛkā*); one separated by quarrel with her husband (*Kalahāntarītā*); one enraged by her beloved when he doesn’t turn up for their conjugal union due to his attachment to another woman (*Khaṇḍītā*); one jilted and deceived by her lover (*Vipralabdā*); one whose beloved is sojourning abroad on account of various duties (*Proṣitabharṭṛkā*), and finally, one who is besotted by her beloved and secretly goes out to meet him (*Abhisārikā*).<sup>7</sup> At the

Serendipity Arts Festival in Goa, Guru Kiran Subramanyam presented these *ashtanayikas* in the form of a classical Bharatanatyam *varnam* on the vast proscenium erected on the DB Grounds in Panjim. The black background of the stage is overlaid by a simple doorframe with eight dupattas in different colours hanging as ornaments on either side of the frame. The fabrics later come to life as audiences meet each of the *ashtanayika* in *Maanini*. In a conversation after the performance, Subramanyam states, “The colour of the dupattas and the way each nayika handled a dupatta was symbolic of the emotion they were going through, and therefore of their character”. The bright pink fertility of the *Vāsakasajjā nayika*’s costume and gold fabric trails about her as she gets her home ready to welcome the beloved, dusting surfaces with her muscles knotted in anticipation. The *Abhisārikā nayika*’s veil camouflages and comforts her in the night as she steps out in the open to seek her lover. The fiery orange and yellow of the *Svādhīnabhartṛkā nayika* is tinged with the power and pride she draws her lover with. One sees the immersion of these colours in paintings of the *ashtanayikas* from the Rajput and Pahari schools. In *Kesavadasa*’s paintings in the *Rasikapriya* dated to around 1760, the artist used motifs and metaphors of birds, trees, clouds, blinking lightning, stream, and many more in the environment to convey the emotions and feelings of the *nayika*.<sup>8</sup> In *Maanini* too, the *nayika*’s inner mood colours aspects of personal space and animates the elements in the outer world, across her changing phases.

I attempt to retrieve these gradients of *sringara* rasa from the performance a few weeks later, over a phone conversation with Kiran Subramanyam and Sandhya Kiran who together founded Rasika Arts Foundation in Bengaluru. “*Maanini*, meaning woman, came as the perfect title for this work because through the *ashtanayikas* we were attempting to explore women as an exquisite combination of contradictions” says Bharatanatyam guru Sandhya Kiran. “Though we are presenting women of the past, we feel that the complexity of feelings remains the same even today. Whichever time this woman may belong to, love generates a plethora of emotions such as coyness, joy, despair, anger, pride, and jealousy, all in the same person. So the



From the performance *Maanini: Expressions of Love* at DB Ground. Photo by the Lumiere Project.



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*ashtanayikas* are not eight different women but different moods of a woman in love. *Maanini* asks: Isn't there a nayika in every woman?"

Curator Mayuri Upadhyia resonates with this idea of the past, present, and the future being blurred as she comments on bringing together *Maanini: Expressions of Love* and *Red Dress Wali Ladki* as "Reflections of Time" in her curation. "Growing up in India, one's life is suffused with traditional metaphors and yet can be tinged with everything that comes with present-day technology. I have early memories of learning Bharatanatyam and other dance forms, of making the Rangoli at my doorstep, and loving rock concerts as much as listening to the *suprabhaatam* chants. While I have respect for the past, I am living in the present and for me all of these coexist. All these cultural and social textures merge in our body where we carry the memories of them all within us. In my curation too, I wanted to bring in such art that coexists in a capsule and such performances that can strike a chord with people across age, class, and gender".

Through *Maanini*, choreographer Kiran Subramanyam indicates this transitional quality of the nayikas. "The *Varnam* as a traditional piece is usually performed by a solo dancer. She portrays a *Virahotkanṭhita nayika*, a heroine who is separated from her lover and is pining for him. But I have always believed that a particular nayika cannot exist in isolation. She has evolved from another nayika and will further evolve into another one. Therefore, the *Ashtanayikas* are not separate nayikas, but rather a movement of emotions in a single nayika. Thus, I took upon the challenge of portraying eight nayikas in a piece that traditionally required the presence of only one, and *Maanini* came into form". This approach to the nayika shows her not as a fragment, but as an assemblage. Not only do we see an alliance among the eight nayikas and the *sakhi* as a social form, but alliance is part of the nayika's own subject-formation. The invocation of the "I" of the nayika is shaped by her own diverse forms but also by the nayaka and sakhi, by her transitioning responses to love and desire—which are all plural and simultaneous. In this way, she is herself an alliance and an assembly of identities.

The song chosen for *Maanini* is a traditional Varnam from the Bharatanatyam margam format, composed by Sri Dandayudhapani Pillai, one of the doyens of South Indian classical dance. This particular piece “Swamiyai vara solladi” (Please ask my lord to come) is a composition where Lord Subramanya is the hero. At the end of the performance, when the various nayikas have journeyed through their emotions awaiting catharsis, the *sakhi* draws them all together into a nritta, generating a sense of play and abundant joy. She traipses in, her arms overflowing with long peacock feathers, and hands one to each nayika. Through the metaphor of the peacock feather that symbolises the vehicle of the deity Subramanya, the nayikas appear to find catharsis and fulfilment in their dance together. A new kind of *lila*, a mood for play is evoked despite the absence of the nayaka.

While the nayika remains the heroine of the drama, it is the *sakhi* in *Maanini* who carries the drama forward. She becomes the sole omniscient figure and engages with the nayika in all her phases of love and desire. The *sakhi* is an intimate confidante of each manifestation of the *ashtanayika* and plays a changing role as messenger, narrator, listener, and observer while enabling a transformation of the nayika’s state of mind. Even though the absent nayaka is the beloved who she seeks, in *Maanini* the nayika and the *sakhi* are the duo to reckon with. This emerges as a central thread in each section of the work, where one sees Kiran Subramanyam’s choreographic expertise working with duets. In a 2016 interview, Kiran Subramanyam and Sandhya Kiran shared how they learnt the essence of a duet from the Bharatanatyam gurus Dhananjayans in Chennai. “A duet demands that ideas, concepts and thought processes of the two dancers match too. Of course, there needs to be synchronisation in terms of physical movements. But most importantly, the *sattvam*—the essence—has to be one even if it is two different individuals and mindsets performing together”, they explain.<sup>9</sup> In each nritta<sup>10</sup> section of *Maanini* too, Subramanyam’s choreography often couples up the dancers to explore a series of kaleidoscopic formations on stage. The pairs move in unison with other duos, collectively revealing the sisterhood among them that is also exemplified by the friendship

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of the *sakhi* and the *nayika*. Although at first glance *Maanini* is an exploration of the *sringara rasa*, it is the *sakhyam*—the mood of loving friendship—among the women that heralds the work. In the essay “A Handmaid’s Tale – Sakhis, Love and Devotion, and Poetry in Rajput Painting”, Annapurna Garimella draws out the role of the *sakhi*’s presence and participation forming the substructure on which love-affairs are built in the Rajput paintings depicting the amorous play between Krishna, Radha and other *gopis*. The *sakhi* brings forth the conflicts endured by Radha; the *sakhi* enables and celebrates love that breaches social norms. “Though she is only a ‘substructure’, the *sakhi* remains in the picture, mediating between the lovers and the reader [of the eighteenth century *riti* and *bhakti* poetry] as a messenger and as an observer. The *sakhi* who comes from the margins of society (barber woman, bangle seller) gains a limited subjectivity by trafficking and policing the love affair. The *sakhi*’s work is the lovers’ and reader-viewer’s pleasure”.<sup>11</sup> In the performance of *Maanini*, the *sakhi* becomes the medium through which the audience realises the charge of eroticism and mysticism between the *nayika* and the absent *nayaka*. Her presence creates the paradigm for the audience to access the emotional world of the lovers, simultaneously perceiving her own devotion towards the *nayaka*, and primarily her friendship and adoration for the *nayika*.

In a conversation with me in the run up to the festival, Upadhya shared that her choice of *Maanini* came from her desire to dispel the notion of classical Indian dance being a dated form for older audiences. Through this choreographic work, she wanted to showcase Bharatanatyam depicting women that are graceful, feminine and powerful, while yet “maintaining the grammar and vocabulary of the traditional *Varnam* in Bharatanatyam, aiming to bridge the space between the traditional and the modern”.<sup>12</sup> This navigation between tradition and modernity – a supreme concern of south Indian urban, middle class aspiration – is represented, among other embodied “heritage” practices, in Bharatanatyam dance too. Indeed, the stagnant perception of this dance form that Upadhya alludes to is the result of narratological conventions that have bound Bharatanatyam



From the performance *Maanini: Expressions of Love* at DB Ground. Photo by the Lumiere Project.



From the performance *Maanini: Expressions of Love* at DB Ground. Photo by the Lumiere Project.

to notions of a national identity and upper caste cultural pride. Vastly touted narratives celebrate Bharatanatyam's "revival" from the devadasi temple dance tradition of *sadir attam* but cloak the appropriation that it accompanied. This reductive historical approach that practitioners inherit from their gurus, and one that is largely repeated by scholars, valorises the reform and reconstruction of the former "profane" form. Viewed as a seamless and homogenous artefact with a long continuous history in Indian culture, Bharatanatyam remains constrained in terms of shifts in its practice and resists challenges to systems of patronage. This becomes further problematic when, as Davesh Soneji writes, "Tropes such as the 'fall of the devadasis' and 'temple to theatre' for example, are consistently used to index idealized, nationalised and easy claims to moments in Bharatanatyam's heterogenous and ambiguous pasts".<sup>13</sup> In his wide scholarship of retrieving and rewriting the histories of devadasis in the twentieth century, he points out the injustice of the way the Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act of 1947 tends to end the narrative of the devadasis and their knowledge systems. With that it obfuscates the social history of a community of women who "possessed a degree of social agency, in that they were not restricted by the norms of patrifocal kinship. They lived in matrilineal homes, had sexual relationships with upper-caste men, and were literate at moments in history when most South Indian women were not".<sup>14</sup>

At a time when mimesis without introspection or active enquiry is still the pedagogic norm in Bharatanatyam, one wonders about the shifts we would witness if the choreographic process offers space for reflection on this complex layered history and the possibilities that equip its contemporary practice. Are young dancers who depict the *ashtanayikas* today aware of the social histories and narratives of the devadasis with whom they are connected by a lineage of corporeal practice? Would this awareness lead to a shift in their embodied approach when it comes to depicting women who are "graceful, feminine, and powerful"? In contemplating the temporal threads binding this tessellation of moods of the *ashtanayika*, one also wonders if there is space to complicate the nayika further as a

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contemporary woman or one that is not a stock archetype who is but a shadow of Eros. Does a young dancer playing a nayika carry her experience of love and desire in the twenty-first century into the performance? During rehearsals, is there an enquiry about the shifting social and political tides that she scrolls through on her Instagram feed, moments earlier? If, as Kiran Subramanyam imagines of the *ashtanayika*, one woman could embody them all, does her body carry a memory of a different emotion of the past? Are there overlaps and transitions, a possibility of yearnings that tug at once in different directions? Does the weeping *Vipraladbha nayika* remember in her body the experience of being a *Svādhīnabhartṛkā nayika* when she felt valued by and power over her lover? In showcasing a certain spectrum of female love and erotic longing in this varnam, *Maanini* hints at the possibilities of many doors that could be further explored to enable an inquisitive assembly for classical dance in contemporary India.

### AT HOME IN THE WORLD: THE BODY AS A SUTURE FOR ASSEMBLIES

This exploration of doors, crevices, and the contours of the “home” in the “Reflections of Time” performances, gives us a glimpse of what lies beyond the physical spaces that our red-dress *wali ladkiyan* and our nayikas inhabit. Their interactions with public spaces are mediated by the restrictions on women within the larger patriarchal order, and yet they chaff with its boundaries. Unlike Baudelaire’s flâneur—a nineteenth century figure of privilege and leisure, with the time and money to amble around at will—their movements are measured by legitimate purpose. A reading of Lauren Elkin’s writing on the *flâneuse* and in the context of India, Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan, and Shilpa Ranade’s work *Why Loiter*<sup>15</sup> drives home the point that the *flâneuse*, is not just a female version of the flâneur. The necessity to demonstrate respectability and purpose define the pitstops of their movement in the city. *Flâneuserie*, Elkin claims, “is about women moving from being looked at to looking. Through movement, we assert our subjectivity”.<sup>16</sup> Among the nayikas and

red-clad women too, the audience perceives assertions of their subjectivity. Like Walter Benjamin's interpretation of the flaneur, they are collectors and connoisseurs of detail: Benjamin's flâneur "is a sensibility as opposed to an intelligence. His highest aspiration is to become a medium, a precipitate in which the scattered particles of sense can reconstitute themselves. The original whole ... has been shattered, by time, by history, by the hubris of progress; but the flaneur, by drawing together bits and pieces from the rubble, can discover its echo. The flaneur is, thus, dedicated to the surveying of space, for it is only in space, in the network of layered particulars, that the successive images of time are concretised. Space exists to take the print of time".<sup>17</sup> Through her narratives, Diya Naidu tempers her women with qualities that evade the constancy or linearity of time. Her woman who demands erotic pleasure could be pre-modern, and her goddess isn't simply mythical. In observing and narrating the details of the corporeal incisions, her women are flaneuses taking cognisance of historical injustices encountered by women across time. The choreographer in *Red Dress Wali Ladki* corporeally maps historical injustices as uneasy sensations in her throat, knees, lower back, heels, cuticles, and fascia. As one is led to confront the truths of a gendered city, so does Naidu make the audience confront "patriarchal penetration" in society—a term she prefers to use now as a reference to the all-pervasive patriarchy oppressing people across the gender spectrum. The *flaneuse* is evoked in Naidu's woman in the red dress who observes the drama of the public space and further mobilises it as we see in her references to protest movements following Jyoti Pande's rape in Delhi in December 2016. The *abhisarika nayika* is then perhaps a different kind of *flaneuse*: while rushing in the dark to seek her lover, she nonetheless becomes an observer of the outer world, describing elements of the landscape to the *sakhi* later. For the women we encounter in these performance works, the simplistic dichotomy of women at home or in the world doesn't suffice. An image that I recall instead is the mobile home adorned by the artist Shivani Gupta in *Girl in a House* at the photography exhibition "Look, Stranger!" at the Serendipity Arts Festival this year. Like Gupta carries her home upon her back akin to a hermit crab, or has her limbs lick the earth

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floor from within her assumed built environment, so too does Naidu's character of the vlogging diva as she unspools her thoughts to the audience from the liminal space of the internet, being within and outside of her private domain.

Both these works that were juxtaposed to be reflections of time by curator Mayuri Upadhyia at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019, drew attention to qualities of the moving body, of the body which is alive, that have persisted across time. In particular, *Maanini – Expressions of Love* and *Red Dress Wali Ladki* become reflections of what may happen when bodies act together. In motion and unison, the bodies become sutures that enable the assembly. When the nayikas of *Maanini* come together as a cohort and celebrate the multiplicity of their loves, their alliance makes the nayaka redundant. Although Naidu's piece is performed as a solo work, there's an effervescence generated in her final segment of ritualistic movement that resonated with and created propositions for a community of bodies in alliance. She takes large leaps from side to side, rotating her arms along wide arcs as she bellowed an adaptation of the civil rights movement protest anthem "We shall overcome". Not only her heart, but deep in her bones, deep in her fascia, and deep in her marrow, she says, she does believe, that we shall overcome someday. In these moments, particularly as a culmination to the stories of patriarchally penetrated women, Naidu transforms the performance space "with an active process of embodying certain cultural and historical possibilities".<sup>18</sup> This repeated performative motion and insistent assertion of change to come, passes the baton of responsibility towards imminent action to the viewing audience. She draws attention to the essential yet not evidently visible elements of the body that give it the quality of the living. She vocalises and makes visible the "sexual and labouring, feminine, foreign and mute, that generally relegated to the private and pre-political sphere. [This] body operates as a precondition for appearance, and so becomes the structuring absence that governs and makes possible the public sphere".<sup>19</sup>

As Judith Butler observes with the protestors in Egypt's Tahrir Square, the women at Shaheen Bagh and other sites across the

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country have not shed but asserted these qualities across female archetypes in their protest. In gathering to claim the public space, they have infused it with aspects of the private—eating and resting there, planning and strategising, leading and feeding, teaching and learning, participating and collaborating, praying and celebrating. They have created various systems for sharing the space and “so not only refusing to be privatised—refusing to go or stay home—and not only claiming the public domain for themselves – acting in concert on conditions of equality – but also maintaining themselves as persisting bodies with needs, desires, and requirements”.<sup>20</sup> As in *Maanini*, they are infused with grace, strength, and play absorbed from a sense of *communitas*. As in *Red Dress Wali Ladki*, they have illustrated the power and resistance that can be upheld by women’s corporeal interdependency and entwinement. The performances that were meant to be reflections of time at the Serendipity Arts Festival, hinted at a creation of new female archetypes claiming the public sphere that have been long in the making.

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Himalay Gohel, “Caste Genealogies: Myths and Histories of Dalit Communities from Saurashtra, India”, PhD Thesis in progress at the Department of Anthropology and Sociology, School of Oriental and African Studies, London.

<sup>2</sup> Carl G. Jung, *Aspects of the Feminine (From Volumes 6, 7, 9i, 9ii, 10, 17, Collected Works)*, ed. and trans. by Gerhard Adler and R.F.C. Hull (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982).

<sup>3</sup> Carl G. Jung, *Psyche and Symbol: A Selection from the Writings of C. G. Jung*, ed. by Violet S. de Lazlo, trans. by R. F. C. Hull (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982).

<sup>4</sup> Terri Frontgia, “Archetypes, Stereotypes and the Female Hero: Transformations in contemporary perspectives”, *Mythlore* (Mythopoeic Society) 18, no. 1(67), Autumn (1991): 15-18.

<sup>5</sup> *Natyashastra* is the classical treatise on “Indian” dramaturgy and performance, which is believed to have been written between 200 BC and 200 AD. Spread across thirty-six chapters, it is a prescriptive text for the creation of characters and their interpretation for a theatrical performance.

<sup>6</sup> The *ashtanayikas* have been described in sacred as well as secular texts. The same classification as in the *Natyashastra* is found in later works like those by Vatsyanana in *Kamasutra* who followed a purely sexual classification of the women, the *Dasarupaka* (tenth century), *Sahityadarpana* (fourteenth century) and various other treatises on poetics as well as erotic Kamashastra texts like *Kuttanimata* (eighth and ninth century) based on courtesans, Panchasayaka, Anangaranga, and Smaradipika. See Jiwan Sodhi, *A study of Bundi school of painting* (Abhinav Publications, 1999), 52-53.

<sup>7</sup> *The Nāṭyaśāstra: A Treatise on Hindu Dramaturgy and Histrionics*, trans. Manmohan Ghosh (Calcutta: Royal Asiatic Society, 1950), 467-469.

<sup>8</sup> Kanupriya Rathore, “Appraising the Portrayal of Virahotkanthita Nayika through the Artist’s Eye”, *The IIS University - Journal of Arts* 4, no. 1, (2015): 71-75.

<sup>9</sup> Archana Nathan, “A school for the connoisseur”, *The Hindu*, July 28, 2016, <https://www.thehindu.com/features/friday-review/A-school-for-the-connoisseur/article14513117.ece>

<sup>10</sup> Nrīta is a section of pure rhythmic dance that does not emphasize on *abhinaya*, that is, facial expressions.

<sup>11</sup> Annapurna Garimella, “A Handmaid’s Tale- Sakhis, Love and Devotion, and Poetry in Rajput Painting”, *Love in Asian Art and Culture* (Washington DC: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> Project Note on “Maanini”, Serendipity Arts Festival 2019 Catalogue (New Delhi: Serendipity Arts Foundation, 2020).

<sup>13</sup> Davesh Soneji, “Critical Steps: Thinking through Bharatanatyam in the Twentieth-first Century”, *Bharatanatyam: A Reader*, ed. by Davesh Soneji, i - li (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. xi.

<sup>14</sup> Davesh Soneji, “Critical Steps: Thinking through Bharatanatyam in the Twentieth-first Century”, p. xiii.

<sup>15</sup> Shilpa Phadke, Sameera Khan, and Shilpa Ranade, *Why loiter?: Women and risk on Mumbai streets* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> Laura Elkin, “Radical Flâneuserie”, *The Paris Review*, August 15, 2016, <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2016/08/25/radical-flaneuserie/>;

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Laura Elkin, Radical Flâneuserie

<sup>17</sup> Sven Birkerts, “Walter Benjamin, Flâneur: A Flanerie”, *The Iowa Review* 13, no. 3/4, 165.

<sup>18</sup> Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory”, *Theatre Journal* 40, 521.

<sup>19</sup> Judith Butler, “Bodies in alliance and politics of the street”, Lecture held in Venice, September 7, 2011, as part of the lecture series *The State of Things*, organised by the Office for Contemporary Art Norway (OCA).

<sup>20</sup> Judith Butler, “Bodies in alliance and politics of the street”.

## Biography

**Parvathi Ramanathan** is a researcher, writer and arts manager working across disciplines, with a keen focus on the performing arts through her work at Gati Dance Forum and Pro Helvetia New Delhi. She did her MPhil in Theatre and Performance Studies from the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. She is interested in questions of identity pertaining to nations and borders, especially looking at how they manifest in the body and in everyday life. Her written work on these themes can be found in *Ligament*, *Howlround*, *The Wire* among other publications. She is a trained Bharatanatyam dancer, exploring other forms of movement as a means of expression and therapy. Parvathi is motivated to work towards creating inclusive and accessible platforms for art, and particularly enjoys community engagement. She is a recipient of the Arts Research Grant 2020-21 by the India Foundation for the Arts..

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Projects / Processes 2019

Acting in Concert: Reflections on Women in Alliance  
by Parvathi Ramanathan

Series Editor: Senjuti Mukherjee  
Managing Editor: Nandita Jaishankar  
Copy editor: Arushi Vats  
Cover design: Aman Srivastava  
Layout: Aman Srivastava & Mallika Joshi

Projects/Processes as an initiative is conceptualised and supported by Mr. S. K. Munjal, Founder Patron, Serendipity Arts Foundation and Ms. Smriti Rajgarhia, Director, Serendipity Arts Foundation.

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Published by



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