

## Motion in motion – between realms, bodies, and art forms: Arts in India and Anna Pavlova’s travel routes

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*The world is always in movement*

- V. S. Naipaul

According to the Hindu religious text *Vishnudharmottara Purana*, the king Vajra, wanting to learn sculpture, has a hard time getting instructions from the sage, Markandeya:

*Vajra: How should I make the forms of gods so that the image may always manifest the deity?*

*Markandeya: He who does not know the canon of painting (citrastram) can never know the canon of image-making (pratima lakshanam).*

*Vajra: Explain to me the canon of painting as one who knows the canon of painting knows the canon of image-making.*

*Markandeya: It is very difficult to know the canon of painting without the canon of dance (nritya shastra), for in both the world is to be represented.*

*Vajra: Explain to me the canon of dance and then you will speak about the canon of painting, for one who knows the practice of the canon of dance knows painting.*

*Markandeya: Dance is difficult to understand by one who is not acquainted with instrumental music (atodya).*

*Vajra: Speak about instrumental music and then you will speak about the canon of dance, because when the instrumental music is properly understood, one understands dance.*

*Markandeya: Without vocal music (gita) it is not possible to know instrumental music.*

*Vajra: Explain to me the canon of vocal music, because he, who knows the canon of vocal music, is the best of men who knows everything.*

(Kak, 2006: 3-4)

The legend from *Vishnudharmottara purana* highlights the interrelatedness of the arts through the story of King Vajra who wishes to learn sculpture from Markandeya, but is directed to first learn the arts of painting, dancing, music, and singing. In the following paper we add the dimension of travel to the mix, proposing an array of various relationships, sort of ‘routes’ through which the ideas, images or movements of dance can travel and transform. We look at the ways in which movement travels from realm to realm and from body to body, at travel in space and time and travel between bodies using the example of Anna Pavlova in India. But first we look at how dance found its way to the real of the humans.

### **From Gods to Humans – Descent of Natya to Earth**

*The Natyasastra* is the earliest extant literature on dance, drama, music, theatre construction, poetics, and costume making, to name just a few of the subjects that it deals with. This is a text that originates from, and deals with the arts particularly of the Indian subcontinent and South-East Asia. Western scholars place the origin of this text anywhere between 500 BC and 500 AD, though this can be refuted. The story that follows is based on the interpretation of *The Natyasastra* by Indian scholar Dr. Manmohan Ghosh

(Bharata, 1961) and dancer-scholar Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam (2003). During the *treta yuga* or the second epoch in the Hindu time system, virtues and morals slowly began to diminish. The gods and their King, Lord Indra were worried and approached The Creator, Lord Brahma, to create a form of education that was easy to understand because the most ancient texts, the Vedas, were not easily comprehensible to all. The Creator then took certain elements from each of these ancient texts and created a fifth text called *The Natya Veda* that dealt with the art of dramaturgy with an aim to educate through entertainment. The King of Gods, Indra felt that the gods were not capable of handling even this text, and so a sage named Bharata was given the task of compiling and classifying the text and embodying its practice as well as passing down this knowledge. Sage Bharata is therefore considered the author of the *Natyasastra* - the text on the science of the art of dramaturgy.

The sage then taught this to his hundred disciples and they all began creating different types of dramas. Lord Siva who is considered the Eternal Dancer, and the Dissolver of the universe, once saw a drama played by the Sage and his disciples. Siva felt the need to include dance in drama, and so instructed his own student Nandikeshwara, and his wife Parvati to teach Bharata the art of dancing. At that time, dance was only a part of drama, but the drama itself was mostly danced.

As time passed, the sage's disciples began to create satires, and slowly began to mock the sages! Infuriated, the gods cursed the disciples to be born on Earth and regarded unworthy of in society. The disciples went to their teacher Bharata and told him of this curse on them. The sage reassured them that though they would be born on Earth and looked down as unworthy, they must have faith in the power of their art and propagate this among all the mortals. And so it was to be, the art of dance, music, and drama descended from the realm of the gods to the realm of humans.

There is another possibility for travel between the realms when the divine visits the actual body of the devotee in the act of possession.

Ann R. David studies possession in her fieldwork in London at sites of Hindu religious practice. She notes: 'In Hindu ritual, possession beliefs and the enactment of them form part of the 'normal range of human experience' and are a widespread activity affecting young and old, women and men, and those of low-caste, as well as middle and high-caste status (Erndl, 2007: 150). Possession is a temporary state of being that is fully supported by socio-cultural and religious norms, and which draws on an understanding of human life and the cosmos that is inextricably linked, indicating a symbiotic relationship with both natural and supernatural forces.' (David, 2011: 76)

Possession happens in a state of devotional fervour after all steps are taken to transform the body into a 'sacred territory'; and it often takes a form of a ritual dance. The devotee's body becomes the 'vehicle' for the deity, who 'rides' or 'dances' on it (David, 2011: 87), and the dance announces his/her arrival. The division between godly and human becomes blurred and the possessed person who experiences a certain union with the god becomes to be honoured by others as the divine itself – and has to carry out the usual tasks required from a god like blessing and counselling. The possession episode has a time limit, and the *status quo* is restored in the end of the 'act'. The god has used the body for the transportation between different realms, and done its duty.

This deity also comes in contact with the humans where, in Hindu ritualistic worship, He/She is invoked into the idol, and on arrival is treated as a guest who has travelled from far would. On His/Her arrival, a seat is offered, feet and hands are washed, given water and sweetened drinks, is requested to bathe where the devotee washes the idol with milk, honey, yogurt, clarified butter and water, and is offered clothes to wear. Sandalwood paste is smeared on the deity for its fragrance is divine, and flowers are offered. Fragrant incense sticks are burnt, and a lamp is lit. Once the guest is thus made comfortable, food is served. After the deity has His/Her fill, entertainment is offered. After a sumptuous meal and lively

entertainment of music and dance, the devotees offer their final prayers. Dance therefore, finds an important place in the acts of worship, especially in temples.

### **From *devadasi* to the letters of Western travellers... to *La Bayadère***

Joep Bor writes of the long existence of Indian temple dancers and singers in European travel literature by using travellers' accounts from the thirteenth to the eighteenth century. For example Marco Polo explained how nearly nude temple maidens, given to the service of the gods, provide entertainment, food and service to the idol, trying to reconcile the male divinity and his female partner with their actions (Bor, 2007: 40-41). Portuguese trader Domingos Paes called them *baylhadeiras* in the sixteenth century and was surprised at their respected status in the society as mistresses of higher class men. Two hundred years later the Portuguese term was turned French – so the hybrid word *bayadère* was born (Bor, 2007: 43, 46). The sexual entertainment of the *devadasis*, either real or imagined, came to be morally condemned by travellers by the end of the sixteenth century; the seventeenth century added contradictory accounts as to what extent their sexual actions had a forced aspect. The theme of the temple dancers at the mercy of evil, lustful priests quickly found its way into eighteenth and nineteenth century Western plays, operas and ballets (Bor, 2007: 44). Even slightly more informed texts did not lessen Western interest in the story of immoral priests and their beautiful victims, combined with the notion of the widow burning tradition called *sati*. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe created his poem *Der Gott und die Bajadere* in 1797, in which the god Shiva in human disguise tests the depth of the love offered by a dancer by faking his death, stops the devoted girl committing a *sati* in mourning, and takes her into the divine realms as a reward (Bor, 2007: 53-54). It was first set to music the same year, operas followed, and Taglioni's *Le Dieu et la bayadère* (The Maid of Cashmere) premiered in 1830.

At this time, Orientalism in art and literature was in full bloom, and even the first European tour of five real Indian temple dancers in 1838 and 1839 in France, England, and many cities in Europe, did not deter its mystifying, romanticising run. Théophile Gautier, who became absolutely enamoured of one of these dancers called Ammani, guessed that the common European audiences had become too accustomed to the 'fictitious *bayadères*' to give the real thing a longer thought (Bor, 2007: 66).

### **From *La Bayadère* to Anna Pavlova**

Marius Petipa's version of *La Bayadere* premiered in Imperial Theatre in St Petersburg in 1877 and – from 1902 - starred Anna Pavlova in the role of Nikya. Graduating from the Imperial Conservatory three years earlier, she made a rapid ascent through the ranks of ballet, being named *prima ballerina* in 1906. The next year, for the first time, she travelled to perform in Latvia, Scandinavia, Germany and Austria, and did not stop until her untimely death 24 years - and perhaps as much as 400 000 miles - later (Money 1982: 7, referenced in Fisher, 2012: 60). Her journeys covered the whole globe in large loops, all across England, Northern America, Southern America, Asia, Australia, European cities, South Africa, crossing between New York, London and Paris in a tireless course.

### **From Anna Pavlova's Asian encounters to her repertoire**

Anna Pavlova performed Oriental-, Spanish-, and also Russian-inspired balletic themes throughout her career, but it was only in Mexico around 1920 that she first turned towards local dance teachers, who helped to add three Mexican dances to the programme which were balleticised for the troupe. The costumes were given by the locals as a goodwill gift (Lazzarinis, 1980: 167).

In fact, the company often travelled in such a rush that Pavlova barely had time to leave the theatre during the nonstop run of set-up, rehearsals, interviews, performance graze, reception and packing up. Yet her company member, André Olivéroff, reports an episode of sneaking out of the theatre with Anna and another male dancer during their stay in Japan at the start of their first Oriental tour in 1922. 'I never saw Madame, before or since, as happy as she was during our Oriental tour,' he says (Olivéroff, 1979: 181). So with giddy enthusiasm the three took off to a Japanese tea house, let the Geishas entertain them with some music and dancing, decided to go for *sake* instead of tea, and in the following merry discussions Anna's idea about studying Eastern dances, the new ballet *Oriental Impressions*, was born. The company started to train in Japanese dance, which Anna later needed to drop for her knees become too bruised (reported her dancer), and they continued through China, Malay peninsula, Java, India, Burma, and Egypt. They asked to see local dance wherever possible, but the tour promoters did not always know how to contact the best local dancers. So they encountered a disappointing 'parody of Oriental dance' according to some accounts (Dandré, 1979: 287, quoted in Fisher, 2012: 60); but were still impressed by movements, costumes and music at a performance by Indian Nautch girls according to other reports (Theodore Stier describing it in Lazzarinis, 1984: 113).

Whatever the extent of her contact with local dance culture, the tour inspired Anna to commission two short ballets from different artists on 'Oriental' themes when back in England. These works can be seen as a definite departure from the common approach to 'oriental' theme in classical ballet that she had performed previously. The three-part ballet *Oriental Impressions* combined Japanese, Indian and Javanese dance with the additional help and inclusion of Indian dancer and choreographer Uday Shankar, who performed with Anna for the next year and a half. The piece premiered in Covent Garden in 1923 with the music of Comolata Banerji and decor copied from old Hindu miniatures

(Lazzarinis, 1980: 185). The use of choreographies acquired from local teachers, as well as the use of non-western artists, was not that common on ballet stages at the time.

The other ballet, *Ajanta Frescoes*, premiering the same year, was inspired by her visit to the Ajanta Caves in India. She was using her usual co-creators this time, but provided them with more first-hand material from her trip. The Russian ballet choreographer Ivan Clustine was given sketches made in the Caves to base the movement on; the composer Alexander Tcherepnin (1899-1977) was requested to use certain tunes from Indian traditional music as a point of departure. Pavlova called it a somewhat archaeological work: 'I copied it, in most instances quite literally... Then I had to invent. I had to devise approximate dances after hints in the frescoes.' (Pavlova, 1923, in Lazzarinis, 1984: 113) The critics remarked on the finished work: 'It is a scene of great beauty of colour and the weirdest dances danced to the weirdest of music' (*Daily News*, London, 11.09.1923, quoted in Lazzarinis, 1980: 180). But yet, '...too many of the *clichés* of the conventional ballet make their appearance.' (*The Times*, London, 11.09.1923, quoted in Lazzarinis, 1980: 180).

Pavlova admitted to the actual styles always being out of reach to her and her dancers: 'I can never do the completely truthful thing. I have faced that fact... It is a different consciousness that animates the dances of the East and West. Perhaps, for this very reason, it is well that we cannot be utterly Eastern. The Western audiences might not understand us. We occupy nearer a middle ground between two peoples. It is all right for our work, good for the stage, and good for art and spiritual understanding. But it is not the real Indian expression...' (Pavlova, 1923, quoted in Lazzarinis, 1984: 114-115)

For Anna, doing the difficult job of an 'artistic ambassador' as she called it, was a necessary action that needed to be taken against prejudice and insularity (Pavlova, 1923, after Lazzarinis, 1984: 116).

Dance historian Jennifer Fisher suggests that although *Ajanta Frescoes* and *Oriental*

*Impressions* were naturally ‘impressionistic, hybrid ballets’, they ‘seem to have had more faithful elements of the culture that influenced them than Orientalist Petipa ballets such as *La Bayadère*’ (Fisher, 2012: 60-61). Pavlova’s travels, curiosity and usage of local art and artists might have provided for a somewhat more truthful account.

### **From sculpture to dancing body – the work of Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam**

Architecture, ritualistic worship, sculpture, painting and dance - how are these arts closely linked so that accomplished performers like Pavlova drew inspiration from them? These arts are based on a system of meridians, measures, symmetry, asymmetry, and positions of the body in space. It is for this reason that the saying ‘sculpture is stillness in dance, and dance is sculpture in motion’ is heard very often from the mouths of dancers and dance aficionados. And as mentioned earlier, dance formed a part of ritualistic worship, and thus found a place in the temples not only as practice, but also in the form of sculptures. One can find both dance and dance-like sculptures in the temples, the common link for both arts being their symmetry and proportion.

Subrahmanyam, in research for her doctoral thesis that lasted eleven years, undertook the mountainous task of reconstructing the *Karanas* – a system of 108 movements as described in the *Natyasastra* and in practice until at least the eleventh century. She used the text of the *Natyasastra*, commentaries on it, and allied texts on dance, drama, and music, as well as sculptures from five temples that she identified as not just dance-like but as sculptures specifically depicting the *Karanas*. The sculptures in these five temples sometimes followed the chronology of the

text, sometimes were haphazard, and depicted different phases of each of the 108 movements. The task was therefore to understand from the text the elements that made up the movements, identify each sculpture of the five temples in relation to the exact phase of the *Karana* they depicted, compile the entire movement sequence based on these, and finally embody them. The sculptures of the *Karanas* in some temples depicted the figure of a male and female having four hands. These would have generally been passed off as sculptures super-humans or deities with more than two hands, but it was Subrahmanyam, under the guidance of Dr. T. N. Ramachandran, her research guide and the then Joint Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India, who identified that the four hands depicted animation rather than merely divine creatures (Image 1).



**Image 1** The sculpture of the first *Karanā*, *Talapūṣpapuṭa* as seen in the *Uttara Chidambaram* temple in Satara, India.

With this reconstruction, the movement system has travelled from text and body, to stone, back to the body.

### **Pavlova's route as a journey of influence**

We have until now in the terrific speed of Anna Pavlova's travelling followed the journey of dance from gods to humans in India, from temples to European stages as a narrative through Western travel writing, into Pavlova's body, which then danced itself all across the world, and discovered the Indian subject and visual arts once more during the trip. The dance was back with the divinities once more when Anna Pavlova and Uday Shankar performed as Radha and Krishna in the *Oriental Impressions* in 1923.

Pavlova saw herself as a missionary of dance taking classical ballet to places it had never been before, but it is notable that she seemed to encourage people finding their own styles to work in (Fisher, 2012: 60). In numerous interviews she advocated the need for developing a local art scene, an institutional base for it and called for state subsidy (Lazzarinis, 1984: 136). In India, although the dance had fallen from grace partly as a reaction to Western colonial, exoticising and eroticising view on temple dancing by the turn of the twentieth century, there was still a warm welcome to Ruth St Denis when she visited. Yet Fisher suggests that Pavlova a little later was seen as a somewhat more respectable idol due to her costumes being less erotic than St Denis's (2012: 61).

Of her influences, next generation Indian dancer and choreographer Ram Gopal proposed: 'As far as the Hindu dance in India was concerned... Pavlova discovered Uday Shankar... urged Menaka, an Indian socialite, to take it up as her life's work, and even got the South Indian Rukmini Devi, the Theosophist, to give up studying Russian ballet and to look for her own dance forms in South India. All three of these pioneers of Hindu dancing in the late twenties, fired by Pavlova's own life, took to dancing.' (Gopal, 1957: 118) Fisher suggests additionally that through the act of travelling 'Pavlova improved on older forms of ballet Orientalism, starting a trend toward including many more non-Western influences on ballet' (2012: 62).

The places she visited did not only offer a moment of inspiration and a chance to practise and try out new styles for Anna. For example her musical conductor Walford Hyden discussed Anna using 'simpler' or 'lighter' kind of symphonic music in her performances – and continuing to perform in the way in which she could appear 'old-fashioned' to critics used to modernist experiments of *Ballet Russes* and others at that time. He proposed it was her conscious choice for approaching the audiences everywhere in the world and stated: 'Pavlova's repertoires were selected to please a world public, and not the hypercritical sophisticated public of the metropolitan centres' (Hyden, 1934: 145). Following his line of thought, it can be proposed that Anna's repertoire was shaped by not only where she travelled, but by the very act of wanting to travel itself. And since she was forever on a tour after leaving Russia, or even in her chosen spiritual home England often touring the provinces, the people influenced by her always met her in a travelling state. Frederick Ashton saw her performing on tour and said later: 'From the moment I as a small boy saw her in Lima, Peru, I never wished to do anything else but be connected with the dance' (Ashton, quoted in *The 1988 Pavlova Festival*: no page no.).

Dance historian Uttara Coorlawala is describing Indian Classical Dance as a product of East and West when she states: 'Say that Indian dance (classical) is an image reflected in two mirrors opposite each other – the "East" and "West." As the image multiplies into variations of itself, it becomes impossible to determine which mirror it is in. When one image is exclusively selected, it usually reflects the perspective and the image of the one who is looking.' (Coorlawala, 1992: 147, quoted in Chakravorty, 2000: 110)

Using Anna Pavlova's art as an example, we have been trying to demonstrate how these mirror images have had a very active process of reflecting, a process that needs bodies, narratives, letters, depictions, ideas and influences to travel swiftly and endlessly from one side of the world to another and even between the different worlds.

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Image 1: Subrahmanyam, P. 2003. *Karanas: common dance codes of India and Indonesia*. Volume 3. Chennai: Nrithyodaya.

