

The Oxford Handbook of Religion and the Arts

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Part Three: Religious Ways of Being Artistic

Chapter 23: Hinduism—Aesthetics, Drama, and Poetics

[Dedicated to Ursula Kolmstetter]

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Between sacred and profane: six attempts at artistic resolution

Any discussion of the 'religious' uses of art must necessarily begin with a closer examination of the opposition between the 'sacred' and the 'profane' whose applicability to the Hindu context is problematic.¹ Demarcation in terms of activity (worship), setting (temple), content (depicting deities), intent (spiritual edification), and so on—that may be readily applied in the Abrahamic and modern secularized cultures—is less reliable in Indian aesthetics, precisely because the latter often hovers ambiguously between transcendent values and worldly pursuits, while sometimes claiming to constitute a third and distinct domain. It may be legitimately argued that Hindu aesthetics, which has shaped the Indic sensibility as a whole, has been mostly about bridging the distance between the religious and the worldly. The two perspectives are often superposed, such that the artistry may consist in playing upon the opposed registers, sometimes holding them together even while keeping them scrupulously apart, and at other times refusing to recognize the very distinction. This is best illustrated by the deployment of (the

semblance of profane) 'humor' (*hāsya*) around the (ritual) clown (*vidūṣaka*) of the Sanskrit theater, whose obvious purpose is vulgar entertainment though his stereotyped role and characterization is intelligible only in terms of a sacred function.

Despite overlap in both practice and theory, at least six fundamentally different approaches to the 'sacred' may be distinguished that, in the Indic context, correspond roughly to the following currents: 1) sacrifice (*yajña*), 2) renunciation (*sannyāsa*), 3) secularization (kingship), 4) possession (*āveśa*), 5) devotion (*bhakti*), and 6) transgression (*tantra*).²

Vedic sacrifice, heterodox renunciation, and worldly theater

The religious may be opposed to the worldly in several distinct modes: 1) by carefully demarcating a sacred space and time subject to a ritual order that is immune to the vicissitudes of ordinary life even while aiming to regulate and (re-) structure the latter. In the brahmanical context, the religious in this sense was defined above all by the Vedic sacrifice, which provided the paradigm and model for all other human activities, including the expression of animal propensities such as sex and violence. The 'refined' (Sanskrit) hieratic language, already from its earliest canonization in the Ṛgveda, was intent on establishing, maintaining, and renewing the (symbolic) 'connections' (*bandhu*) between the otherwise dispersed 'nodes' of the ritual activity, its mythical backdrop, and the 'outside' world. There were however entire regions, peoples, and cultures that were originally beyond the pale of this expanding tradition that was then centered in the northwest of the Indian subcontinent.³ The subsequent rise and spread (from 500 BC) of Buddhist renunciation, which disenchanting and devalored this inherited symbolic universe, was a powerful catalyst for opening up and consolidating a 'secularized' domain that straddled both the brahmanical tradition that it called into question and the extra-Vedic peoples whom it proselytized and acculturated.

Jainism and Buddhism are hence representative of a different approach: 2) rejection of life-in-the-world, whether immediate (monks) or delayed (laity), for the sake of a transcendent (spiritual as opposed to material) reality. The aims of life (*puruṣārtha*) were accordingly reordered into an ascending hierarchy of hedonism (*kāma*), wealth-security-power (*artha*), socio-religious duties (*dharma*), and renunciation culminating in 'liberation' (*mokṣa*) that was sometimes opposed to the preceding three 'worldly' values. For *dharma*, despite its by now competing religious underpinnings, was understood in this 'secularized' context more as the scaffolding and glue that held a complex, segmented, and hierarchical (*varṇa*) society together, making the harmonious and equitable pursuit of *kāma* and *artha* possible in keeping with one's station in life (*āśrama*).⁴

Both the (Buddhist) renunciatory and 'reformed' (Vedic) sacrificial outlooks initially rejected the arts because of their profane character, for they served only to entertain by soliciting and pandering to the sensual and emotional entanglements that were the antithesis of the spiritual life and by creating their own imaginary worlds that were doubly removed from the sacred, as if intent on escaping from the burdens of life through the backdoor. Eventually, the brahmanical tradition embraced theater as the Fifth Veda, open to all, by transposing the sacrificial paradigms into even apparently worldly dramas, while the Buddhists likewise harnessed its possibilities to promote the ideals of renunciation, especially among the laity.⁵ The integrative thrust of the dramatic art and its paradoxical results are best exemplified by *The Little Clay Cart* (*Mṛcchakatikā*) touted as evidence for the secular achievements of Indian theater. The worldly narrative is of a noble merchant (Cārudatta) falsely accused of strangling his beloved Sanskrit-speaking courtesan (Vasantasenā) for her gold and vindicated only as he is about to be executed at the stake. This plot is superimposed upon the canvas of a palace 'revolution' where an unjust king (Pālaka) is killed and replaced by a commoner (Āryaka) who is endorsed by popular assent. However, a closer reading of the semiotics of the play, starting from the sustained metaphors used in the final chapter and

the devious role of the vidūṣaka, reveals an underlying sacrificial framework derived from Vedic ideology. 'Faithfully' creating dire obstacles for his unsuspecting friend and patron, the perverse clown is aligned with the villain (Śakāra) of execrable deeds and lispings, hilariously garbled, speech. The trans-sectarian story also features in a favorable light the conversion of a repentant gambler into a Buddhist monk, who eventually saves the courtesan-heroine and then the Brahmin hero: originally a sensual masseur, this 'heretic' renouncer serves to encode and project the ascetic pole of the consecrated (*dīkṣita*) sacrificer.⁶ Except for the high characters, who speak Sanskrit, the other actors including the Brahmin 'jester', speak as always in regional and class dialects. The many episodes of mistaken identity and quid pro quo can thus be enjoyed by all, with ample scope for humor, at a purely worldly level, but also by the initiated on the ritual plane: the true artistry of the playwright is measured by the skillful manner in which these two registers, the obvious and the hidden, have been carefully held apart even while being seamlessly woven together. For Kālidāsa, 'the Indian Shakespeare' (c. 4th C), the dramatic performance is a "sacrifice (rendered) delightful to the eyes."⁷

Aesthetics of Power: 'secularization' of universal kingship

The 'secularization' of Sanskrit theater is thus better understood as a 3) cultural strategy aimed at re-sacralizing the 'profane' world of the senses rejected by the religion of renunciation, but now through the mode of transposition. The 'hero' or protagonist (*nāyaka*) is typically the king (-sacrificer) or, as in the *Mṛcchakaṭikā*, a stand-in for the latter, whereas his *dīkṣita* state has been split off into his clownish alter ego, the 'anti-hero' (*vi-nāyaka*) with hidden ritual affinities to the villain of the plot.⁸ When the jealously guarded esoteric language of the gods began descending upon and annexing the world of men—from beyond the Hindu Kush, through peninsular India, across Indonesia, and arcing back way up to Indochina—its rich polysemy and obscure workings were studiously categorized, secularized, and

generalized into intricate 'figures of speech' (*alankāra*) exemplified by the pun.⁹ Classical theater betrays the same genealogy whereby the Vedic enigma-contest, preserved by the *vidūṣaka* in the ritual preliminaries (*pūrva-rāga*) to the worldly drama, was translated into the riddle-play (*vīthī*), whose constituent elements subsequently penetrated all the other surviving dramatic genres. Grammar, prosody, metrics, etymology, hermeneutics, and other 'philological' disciplines that had been ancillary to the Vedas now lent their resources to and were transformed by the emerging trans-local, trans-ethnic, trans-sectarian, and universalizing aesthetic cultivated within the courts and centered on the king. The ideal ruler was not just a fearsome warrior, judicious administrator, public servant intent on maintaining the socio-religious order, munificent patron of the arts, but himself a knowledgeable connoisseur and versatile poet: such was the illustrious Bhoja (10th C), architect of the *Śṛīgāra-Prakāśa*, a monumental treatise on philosophical aesthetics that elevated the erotic sentiment into a metaphysical principle. The new cosmopolitan dispensation recognized worldly ambition (*artha*) to be the driving force of social intercourse, violence as pandemic and existentially constitutive, but sought to contain them within a shared royal ethos (*raja-dharma*); religious dissensions were relegated to the transcendental (*mokṣa*) realm to be addressed by the rules of philosophical debate. Hence, non-Hindus contributed wholeheartedly to nurturing the Sanskrit ideal of the refined (twice-born) 'gentleman' (*ārya*) exemplified by (the poetic accomplishments of) the Buddhist philosopher Dharmakīrti whom Abhinavagupta, his unrelenting Śaiva critic, simply and admiringly addresses as 'Ārya'.

The primary socio-political function of literature was to harness the petty chieftain's self-aggrandizing greed, tame his lust for power, and channel his personal aspirations into becoming a universal monarch, whose moral (if not physical) suzerainty would extend across the entire Sanskrit Cosmopolis. Raghu's legendary 'conquest of the quarters' in Kālidāsa's *Raghuvamśa* and Samudragupta's imperial acquisitions bequeathed in verse to posterity upon the Allahabad pillar are

among the many mirrors constituting a unified aesthetics of power. The seductive 'body of fame' that poetry (*kāvya*) sought to confer upon the sovereign is a reflection, within the secular realm, of the immortal 'self' of the *dīkṣita* constituted through the sacred hymns and the semiotics of ritual. Even his readiness to be martyred in the attempt to slay rival kings and acquire their territory could be construed as the profane exteriorization of (self-) sacrifice through a substitute victim. The denouement of the *Mṛcchakaṭikā* is the usurper Āryaka killing the Pālaka ('Protector') just about to immolate the sacrificial animal to which unrighteous king is thereby assimilated. These clan lineages performed costly (imperial horse-) sacrifices that redistributed (even plundered) wealth, and consistently endowed land and other privileges to Brahmins; the ostentatious inscriptions that bore these panegyrics were often occasioned by such acts of royal munificence. Regional overlords could stake concurrent claims to being the 'pivot of the universe' (*cakra-vartin*), for the belligerent Indra, the king of the gods, had been already receiving competing sacrifices from rival Rigvedic chiefs. Crucial here is how this expansive secular domain remained constrained and worked through by the Vedic religio-cultural matrix within which it emerged.¹⁰ From the religious perspective, the ruling 'autocrat' was merely the sacrificer par excellence, which is why the hero of *The Little Clay Cart* could be a poor brahmin merchant surreptitiously identified with the usurper Āryaka. The royal deity that Hindus worship in the nuclear temple identifies the mortal king-sacrificer with the undying transcendental god.¹¹

National epics and popular devotion: riddles, jokes, and the esoteric art of story telling

The two Hindu epics, rendered diversely from Sanskrit into the regional sensibilities of the vernaculars, address the entire *puruṣārtha* spectrum through engrossing narration accessible even to the illiterate and have remained the bulwarks of a shared popular culture. Vālmīki's Rāmyaṇa, which depicts the ideal king and society, provided the exemplars for just and stable human relationships. Rāma, who

ruled over Gandhi's heart and inspired his trans-sectarian political struggle, could at the same time be regarded as God, as in the Hindi rendering of Tulsīdās (16th C), on which the festive enactment of the Rāmīlā is based, and in the soulful compositions of Carnatic music by the musician-saint Tyāgarāja (late 18th C.). The Mahābhārata, distinguished by the contestation and confusion of values, similarly inculcates a trifunctional (priesthood, aristocracy, producers in descending) order through the internal hierarchy of the five Pāṇḍava brothers wedded to the common weal incarnated by their wife Draupadī.¹² This monumental work of high and sustained drama is interspersed throughout with profound spiritual teachings, above all by the 'Song of God' (Bhagavad Gītā) that Lord Kṛṣṇa discloses to Arjuna, the exemplary warrior-prince, on the eve of the great sacrifice of battle. However, these (often all-too-) human actors also serve as masks for divine personas as exemplified by the worship of Draupadī in Tamil Nadu. In Nepal, she is the dark goddess Kālī flanked by a vegetarian Arjuna and the bloodthirsty Bhīma, identified with the 'terrifying' god Bhairava. Such ritual notations are omnipresent beneath the 'historical' drama and battles of the epic and have been understood in folk religion. The prior sojourn of the disguised Pāṇḍavas within the Fish Kingdom, where the heroic Arjuna assumes the ridiculous role of a transvestite befitting the *vidūṣaka*, is cast in the language and imagery of the Vedic initiation (*dīkṣā*), which was a regression to the maternal womb. Such 'embryogonic' symbolism is invested in the island of Laṅkā—stage for the monkey-god Hanumān's comic performance—and this is how the Rāmāyaṇa too has been understood by (tantric) Theravādins in Cambodia and Laos. Rāvaṇa, the demon-king—great brahmin, who excels in the science of music, knows the secrets of the Veda, and whose sonorous ode to the dancing Śiva is still cherished with innumerable renderings on YouTube—is set aflame every year amidst great rejoicing during the Rāmīlā.¹³ Popular song-recitations and vernacular enactments of epic episodes across Greater India are not only entertaining exercises in worldly didactics but amount to religious performances in themselves.

The intellectual scaffolding and emotional gratification offered by the fine arts is rooted, ontogenetically, in childish pleasure at problem-solving, exemplified by the nonsensical riddle, and in ‘cathartic’ mirth at the release of nervous energy, especially at and through the comic. For Abhinavagupta, the “semblance of (any) sentiment (*rasābhāsa*) engenders humor (*hāsya*),” such that through (imitating) their varied semblances “all the (other) *rasas* are included in *hāsya*.” Even the ‘semblance of humor’ (*hāsyaābhāsa*)—like the infectious sight of another guffawing for no reason—can provoke ‘illogical’ laughter: “thus, through incongruous speech, costume, ornaments, behavior, etc., the *vidūṣaka* too deploys *hāsyaābhāsa*.” The ‘bisociative’ principle underlying (these enigmatic pronouncements on) humor is the abrupt mutual neutralization of two opposing cognitive (associative) fields invested with incompatible emotional charges, triggering the involuntary discharge that constitutes the laughter reflex. The depiction of love-in-union (*sambhoga*) in Sanskrit poetry and light-hearted romantic comedies (*nāṭikā*)—where mutual attraction is interlaced with negative emotions—is invariably suffused with humor arising from the ambivalent juxtaposition of conflicting perceptions and feelings of the warring couple. The evocation of love and sorrow through aesthetic identification (*tanmayībhavana*) with a protagonist ensures the purification (‘catharsis’) of these dramatized emotions generalized thereby to the reflexive awareness of the audience. Abhinava adds, however, that onstage ‘humor’ (*hāsya*) can provoke unmediated laughter (*hāsa*) just as directly as mundane jokes cracked around the water-cooler: is stand-up comedy a fine art or a shared exercise in profanity? ¹⁴ Whereas the incongruity underlying wit must remain preconscious or even unconscious for the punch-line to register as funny, the riddle entertains by soliciting a deliberate effort on the part of the confounded listener to bridge otherwise unrelated cognitive fields: bisociation is at the heart of all intellectual and artistic creativity. The *vidūṣaka*’s (semblance of) worldly, even ribald, ‘humor’ thus becomes the opaque, hence innocuous, recoding of the sacred enigma (*brāhman*).

The *vīthyaṅgas*, discrete formulas that served to transpose and thereby equate the *brāhman*—and the agonistic context in which its sacred knowledge was acquired—onto the profane stage, are best epitomized by the *nālikā*, which is defined as a humorous ‘riddle’ (*prahelikā*), that the *vidūṣaka* resorts to in his cosmogonic altercation with (the royal) Indra (hero of the play) in the ritual preliminaries. The (transgressive) nexus (*bandhu*) between order and chaos has been thus conserved in the silly vernacular ‘joking’ of this ‘great brahmin’, who is ridiculed as a ‘perverse brat’ and ‘would-be brahmin’ (*brahma-bandhu*). The conflicting definitions, sometimes diametrically opposed, proposed for the remaining elements of the *vīthī* reveal the collective intentionality underlying the semiotic transformation: ‘word-play’ (*vāk-keli*) with several replies addressing a sole question or a single answer resolving multiple questions; unintelligible words or interrogations complemented by other words chosen with due deliberation (*udghātyaka*); incoherent chatter or salutary words of wisdom whose meaning is not grasped by fools (*asat-pralāpa*); verbal disputation that reciprocally inverts virtues into vices and shortcomings into merits (*mṛdavam*); outwying dialogue where the sequence of (counter-) propositions generates a surplus of meaning (*adhibala*); a single intervention that achieves a dual purpose or an (apparent) interruption that contributes to a total result (*avalagita*); an emotional outburst, often uncannily predicting an inauspicious event, that is immediately reinterpreted (falsely) innocuously (*avaspaṇḍita*); insincere and amusing flattery for a selfish ulterior motive (*prapañca*); ironical pleasantry (*chala*) that provokes anger (from the butt) and ridicule (among onlookers); sound-resemblances that artfully resonate with multiple meanings (*trigata*); abrupt impetuous remarks, often left incomplete, that intentionally bewilder the opponent, throwing him off guard (*gaṇḍa*). When Vasantasenā deposits her gold ornaments for safekeeping at the end of Act I, the great brahmin takes the blessed ‘gift’ with greedy delight only to be rebuked by Cārudatta: “Fie you fool, it is only a deposit!” Vidūṣaka: (Aside) “If so, then may thieves steal... Cārudatta: “In a very short time...” Vidūṣaka: “this deposit entrusted by her to us...” Cārudatta: “I will return it.” Subsequently, in Act III, the indispensable Fool happily hands over the entrusted ornaments to an otherwise reluctant thief, setting off

a chain of events that (almost) results in his bosom friend's execution at the (sacrificial) stake. Given their biunity, the jester's interruption of the hero's utterance amounts to the 'unconscious' speaking through and against the protagonist's avowed intention and dramatizes the psychopathology of everyday life. Such rhetorical transposition not only pervades the classical theater but forms the basis of storytelling. In the *Mahābhārata*, Agni, the Fire-God, appears as a gluttonous brahmin, with telltale traits of the *vidūṣaka*, to devour an entire forest named 'sweetmeat' (*khāṇḍava*). This episode, which abruptly intervenes even as Arjuna-and-Krishna are described dallying with the women of their royal harem, elaborates on the (tantric) equation of sexual pleasure as 'food' (for the senses) and alludes further to the 'incestuous' theme of regressing to the maternal womb that accompanies the fiery expansion of (the otherwise) 'individualized' Consciousness. Rooted in the collective 'unconscious' (*ásat*), the entire drama of Hindu existence (*sát*), constructed artfully as a continuous chain of dialogue and interaction, is the sacred enigma (*bráhmaṇ*) that offers the keys to its own solution and realization, at least to those who know to ask it the right questions.

Ecstasy, possession, and spiritual realization: Yoga of Dance

Though shamanic ecstasy and spirit possession both deconstruct ('slay') or at least suspend the 'normal' personality, they are induced by techniques of immanence that valorize the human body and harness its animal physiology: 4) 'primitive religion' is a misnomer because such cultures have too well integrated these privileged experiences into the symbolic life of the community, as attested by the ubiquity of the mask.¹⁵ Nor is there the space, opened by a rift between sacred and profane, for a separate aesthetic domain, for 'art' was wholly functional and 'beauty' subservient to life. Dance and music, however enjoyable in themselves, induce trance in Indian (rural illiterate) 'folk' religion that continues to reflect the holistic integrity of the 'pre-classical' Vedic outlook. Post-Buddhist Hindu culture conserved and

cultivated such techniques in ascetic strands marginal to mainstream society to the extent of violating (conventional understandings of) *dharma*. Though inwardly chaste, the naked Pāsupata had to make lewd gestures (*śṛṅgāraṇa*) before women, feign epileptic fits (*spandana*), babble unintelligibly, snore, and limp. The brahmin ascetic, intent on destroying his worldly identity, courted censure by making a fool of himself in public and laughing explosively. This Śaiva adept is hilariously, crudely, and accurately depicted, from the outside, in the genre of the farce (*prahasana*). Esoteric techniques of self-transcendence enumerated as aphorisms in later compendiums, like the *Vijñāna-Bhairava Tantra* and *Spanda Kārikā*, have abstracted out the cognitive and aesthetic essence of such practices from their original cultic context. When the *Śiva Sūtra* declares that “the Self is the Dancer” (or Actor), they are not simply borrowing a colorful metaphor from the performing arts but revealing the sacred origins and underpinnings of the Sanskrit theater.

Theater (*nāṭya*) was considered the total art-form because it encompassed everything else, such as representation, poetry, dance, music, makeup, architecture, etc., and its authoritative compendium took shape (c. 200BC–200AD?) as Bharata’s *Nāṭya Śāstra* (NS). Their discerning use converged on the sustained evocation and intensification of aesthetic emotion (*rasa*), the thread that strung these elements together both conceptually and in practice. The NS is a synthesis of three distinct schools of the performative arts: the brahmanical (whose sacrificial imprint upon the whole is evident in the ritual preliminaries to the plays proper), the Śaiva (which has elaborated dance and music), and the epic (that drew upon these resources to dramatize edifying tales in an engaging manner accessible to all sectors of an otherwise segmented and stratified society). The theatrical depiction of the eight traditional *rasas* (love, humor, heroism, wonder, anger, sorrow, disgust, and fear) served to mirror the real world, now transfigured by art to promote the legitimate pursuit of the *puruṣārthas*, a schema that sought to reconcile the claims of both the religious and worldly poles of human existence. The *vidūṣaka* crowns this

synthesis: the 'great brahmin' embodies the (hidden) initiated state of the (royal) sacrificer (hero); his (symbolic) violations of socio-religious norms reinforce the *puruṣārthas* through negative example; while the plot is both hindered and furthered through the unpredictable 'blunders' of this Joker. The inarticulate most sacred Vedic syllable AUM-kāra (OM) presides over the spiritual praxis of the Pāśupata, the theatrical role of the clown, and the 'grotesque' beauty of the elephant-headed mouse-riding Gaṇeśa, the Lord of Obstacles. The patron deity of humor in the NS, who derives from the deformed hosts (*gaṇa*) of goblins accompanying Śiva, is probably the prototype for this ludicrous but most popular Hindu god.

The Vedic landscape was peopled by dancing nymphs (*apsaras*) coupled with sinister musicians (*gandharva*) flaunting onomatopoeic names such as Hāhā, Hīhī, and Hūhū: the science of music is called Gāndharva Veda. A vigorous (*tāṇḍava*) dance was cultivated by later Pāśupata ascetics to facilitate ritual self-identification with their divinity, Śiva, hence stylized in myth and sculpture as the many-armed Naṭa-rāja ('king of dance'). Similarly, gentle interpretative dances (*lāsya*) of temple-courtesans led public worship by offering the whole range of human sentiment to the divine Lover. This vocabulary of dance, with its varied postures, rhythms, movements, and musical accompaniment was adopted, refined, and systematized by the NS to ensure a much broader appeal. Its comprehensive codification has in turn shaped the repertory and aesthetics of the regional dance-dramas of India, viz., Kathakali, Kathak, Manipuri, Odissi, Kuchipudi, and especially Bharata Nāṭyam. Not only could the same music be performed in either religious (e.g., temple) or profane (e.g., courtly) settings, but the performances often deliberately lent themselves to interpretation and enjoyment on both registers, for example, when Kathak was patronized by the Muslim courts more for its universal aesthetic appeal than for its persistent Hindu underpinnings, or the otherwise 'idolatrous' Bharata Nāṭyam is adopted and de-paganized by Christian missionaries to propagate the gospel especially among Indians already attuned to such a sensibility.¹⁶ Abhinavagupta's (pseudo-) 'etymology' of *svara* (musical note) in terms of its capacity "to restore one's

true nature” could have well served as the motto for the Sufi adoption of Hindu music and *rasa*-theory not only to express devotion but also induce trance-like union with (the Islamic) God. Later commentaries on the foundational treatise of the Pāśupata discipline stipulate that the ascetic, otherwise intent on *mokṣa*, should study the NS and be conversant with its techniques, attesting to the expansive nature and scope of Hindu aesthetics that drew its resources from both the religious and the profane realms.

Rasa, bhakti, reflexivity: autonomy and triumph of the beautiful

The furtive principle behind art may be arrested at the reflexive moment of the simple (not just verbal) ‘metaphor’ (*rūpaka*): the “moon-faced” cliché applied with almost unthinking Indian generosity to both sexes, human and divine, springs from the refreshing coolness of this fragile ray of beauty before the heart (*hṛdaya*) is lost in sensual desire or inward contemplation.¹⁷ The most popular and delectable sentiment depicted in the arts, especially literature, is eros (*śṛṅgāra*), the ‘juice’ (*rasa*) that (pro-) creates and sustains the worldly drama of human life. Though the unruly emotions (*bhāvas*), driven by passion, are the prime cause of such entanglement, the Buddhist theater sought legitimacy by inculcating their restraint and cessation through sympathetically portraying the ideal of non-attachment in exemplary Buddha-like personages, so much so that *śānta* (‘tranquility’) was championed as the paradoxical ninth *rasa*. Though Hindu orthodoxy initially resisted the incorporation of this anti-*rasa*, they came to recognize that the ‘universalized’ aesthetic emotions evoked through art were cognitively different from their egocentric real-life counterparts. These insights into the sui generis (*alaukika*) nature of *rasa* were developed most fully and synthesized by the towering 10th-11th century polymath, philosopher, and mystic, Abhinavagupta, in his insightful, comprehensive, and authoritative NS commentary. The underlying literary appeal of *alanikāra* and other qualities (*guṇa*) of literary speech having been already subsumed within the powers of poetic suggestion (*dhvani*) expounded by Ānandavardhana (9th C) in his

Dhvanyāloka, the finality and supremacy of *rasa-dhvani* was firmly established by Abhinava in his *Locana* commentary. His crowning synthesis of aesthetics, which assimilated and eclipsed all preceding efforts, sought to demonstrate that turbulent and typically painful emotions such as lust, anger, fear, sorrow, etc., become distanced from and purified of their instinctual bases when evoked through the artistic medium,¹⁸ and suffused as it were by the transcendental peace and joy of the universal consciousness. He therefore upheld the supernumerary (ninth) and supreme *śānta*, even while insisting that it permeates all the other 'worldly' *rasas*. Thus, a discerning connoisseur enjoying highly sensuous, even erotic, poetry with no, not even implicit, reference to transcendental values, is nevertheless graced by a foretaste of the sort of spiritual bliss otherwise achieved only through strenuous efforts at introversion by *yogins* who have turned their backs on the world. Here the content of art remains profane though its relish is recognized to be quasi-religious.

The religion of love (*bhakti*), which arose in response to the renunciatory currents, sought to revalorize this world and the objects of the senses as opportunities for and instruments of worship: 5) whereas both the Vedic sacrifice and the Buddhist *nirvāṇa* attached little positive value to the emotional states of the ritualist or the monk, *bhakti* sought instead to transfigure the inner life by focusing the devotee's energies on an external (-ized) personal God. The spiritual detachment striven for through asceticism arose more naturally as a consequence of such sublimated eros, while the sort of ritual activity imposed as impersonal or self-interested obligation by scripture was embraced rather as the outer behavioral framework for sustained transcendental (and more than just 'artistic') delight. The relationship between the human and the divine was diversified by anthropomorphizing the Formless such that *bhakti* overflowed the sublime reverence and self-abnegating supplication of the temple to annex the whole range of 'worldly' human emotions. The dualistic Bengali Vaiṣṇavism of Rūpa Goswami (16th C.) envisages a hierarchy of devotional attitudes where *śānta* is merely the first rung in the ascent through

servitude, mutual friendship, parental affection, to culminate in the 'sweet' *bhakti* of a transfigured *śṛṅgāra*. Such personal intimacy that accommodates even playfulness, anger, jealousy, scorn, mischief, humor, and so on, is exemplified by the (devotee assuming the) lovelorn attitude of adulteress wives courting the gracious attentions of the flute-playing divine Cowherd (Krishna), and by ecstatic songs ([Venkaṭa Kavi's Alai-Pāyuthe in Tamil](#)) and dance-dramas (Jayadeva's *Gīta-Govinda* in Sanskrit) that transform the climax of sexual union into a metaphor for complete surrender of the individual soul to God. By harnessing the *rasa*-schematic into the service of devotion that transforms the whole world into a stage, the performance of Hindu *bhakti* has become thoroughly aestheticized in the sense of appealing to the refined taste of even a secular temperament. Worship, in Abhinava's non-dualistic doctrine of 'recognition' (*pratyabhijñā*), is ultimately a means to realizing and expressing one's true Self: to re-descend from transcendental peace so as to enjoy the 'mundane' aesthetically is to become God-like.

What justifies retaining the label 'religious' for so many disparate, even conflicting, approaches is [the common orientation towards a transcendent principle as structuring human experience and endeavor](#). The founding opposition between the spirit and the flesh that uneasily unites the Christian and secular outlooks has been readily mapped, through Western Indology, onto the Indic polarity of *moksha* and *samsara* and thereby generalized onto the Indian cultural landscape as a whole. Hindu aesthetics has resisted such attempts by enthusiasts and detractors alike to reduce its unique status to either its religious or worldly dimensions. Since Abhinava epitomizes these tensions and their 'resolution', such 'enlightened' scholarship cuts him down to size (while bloating what remains beyond proportion), gleefully uncovers his blatant 'contradictions' (under the guise of restituting hitherto suppressed aspects of Indic experience), pits against him another synthetic larger-than-life figure (such as Bhoja) to demonstrate the fundamental inadequacy of Indic categories of self-understanding (reduced to caricature in the fun-mirror of an alien intelligence), charges him with 'plagiarism' for modeling the universal appeal of poetic

language and dramatized emotion on the Vedic injunction to sacrifice,¹⁹ and ‘exposes’ his public conservatism as (typical brahmanical) ‘hypocrisy’ in the dark light of his equally engaged secret commitment to transgressive sacrality. Pioneers Jeffrey L Masson and MV Patwardhan concluded that Abhinava, the mystic, must have ‘philosophized’ about *śānta* to assuage a guilty conscience for his persistent indulgence in profane and sensuous literature. This has not prevented contemporary ‘connoisseurs’ from gushing over their ‘spiritual’ experience of *rasa* in not just Sanskrit poetry (*kāvya*) but even Hollywood movies (and rap music?) simply because they too excite the emotions, forgetting that *kāvya* is a formal domain governed by stringent rules of propriety (*aucitya*) and that *rasa* is also likened to a golden veil upon the face of Truth (Yoga Sūtras). Edwin Gerow has correctly intuited the subtle convergence of aesthetic and philosophical perspectives in Abhinava that does not reduce *moksha* to (*śānta*-) *rasa* nor artistic delight to religious instruction. Donna M Wulff argues that *rasa* is intrinsically religious: obviously so in Rūpa Goswami's *bhakti*, by implication in Abhinava's conflation of its vocabulary with that of his spiritual experience, and even in the ‘secular’ Kālidāsa because many Hindus contemplate his verses with a reverence verging on the mystical. Because the earliest and sustained examples of *kāvya* are found in royal inscriptions that are panegyrics to the cosmopolitan aesthetic of power, Sheldon Pollock paints a secularized picture of Sanskrit literature and its exemplary appeal across (Southern) Asia. ‘Hindu’ aesthetics would be another misnomer for it has been also cultivated by not just Jainas and Buddhists, but also Muslims, Christians, by foreign conquerors from the northwest and cultural vassals to the southeast, all on the road to becoming Indians, and mostly in a trans-sectarian spirit that also embraced the worldly minded. What this essay suggests is that the appreciation of beauty is in itself neither sacred nor profane; but the cultivation of *rasa*—through a tradition of martial arts even today by Javanese Muslims—remains suffused by a transcendental dimension. One need not be ‘good’, much less a mystic, to be a great artist, but to transform one’s ‘worldly’ life reflexively into a sustained work of art amounts to being ‘religious’ in a novel sense.

Brahmanical order and tantric transgression: transcending caste and gender

Hindu aesthetics, so privileged a medium for the dissemination and interiorization of religion, also points the way forward towards the resolution of its constitutive aporia. The Veda is universalist even 'imperialist' in intent but its conservation and application was the sole prerogative of the patriarchal Brahmins to the extent that (the servile caste of) Śūdras (and more so the Untouchables) were barred from listening to their recitation and from learning Sanskrit. The Śūdra played a key semiotic role in the pre-classical ritual but only to be beaten and robbed of his Soma, fight a losing battle for the sun with an Ārya, and to revile the brahmanical sacrifice from the edge of its arena, making it impossible to decide whether he is within or without. Even after the language of the gods consolidated its secular hold upon the world of men, the ritual qualification of being 'twice-born' that was the prerogative of the three upper castes was largely conflated with the cultural attainment of being a refined 'gentleman' within the single honorific address of Ārya. The classical theater illustrates the resulting paradox especially well in that this Fifth Veda, based on 'promiscuous' role-playing, remained in the custody of Śūdras, so much so that terms for actress were often synonymous with prostitute.

However, not only were these 'non-Āryas' called upon to assume Brahmin roles but the stage-manager (*sūtra-dhāra*), at the very least, must have had a profound understanding of the Vedic sacrifice to be able to craft the play according to its esoteric principles. Indeed, to enact the *Mṛcchakaṭikā* such that the 'joints' (*sandhi*) between the sacred and the profane were seamlessly articulated would be beyond the ability or even comprehension of most certified priests, who recite the Vedas by rote or perform the rituals by the rule-books. Was the obscenely idiotic 'manikin' of a *vidūṣaka* always addressed as 'Ārya' and treated deferentially as a friend by the king himself simply because he happened to be a (great) Brahmin (by birth) and insisted on being treated with such reverence? Though Hindu kings were often of Śūdra

origin they were opportunely (re-) 'christened' into protectors of the 'Āryan faith', as exemplified most recently by the 'nationalist' Śivaji. From the start the *Mṛcchakaṭikā* names the lowly cowherd destined to usurp the throne as Āryaka, yet its authorship is (self-?) attributed to a mysterious Śaiva king, master of the Vedas and performer of the horse-sacrifice, who is simply named Śūdraka. This anomaly points to the (otherwise hidden) ritual identity of the Hindu king as an 'untouchable' initiate (*dīkṣita*). Abhinava insists that the Sanskrit-speaking Sūtradhāra is correctly addressed as a "scion of the Āryan race" in the prologue, because this Śūdra is "initiated into the (mysteries of the) great sacrifice of the Veda (in the form of) theater." This stage manager, who already personifies Brahmā in the ritual preliminaries, switches to the vernacular when he steps into 'make-believe' world of *The Little Clay Cart* to assume, it would seem, no less a role than that of the (ritual) 'reviler' (*vidūṣaka*) to artfully wield his signature staff, Brahma's own crooked present to the Sanskrit theater. Our own 'comic' deference to the follies of this 'great brahmin' (*mahā-brāhmaṇa*) is an unwitting acknowledgement of Abhinava's insistence, in his esoteric tantric treatises, that the Kaula initiation (*dīkṣā*) not only trumps its more 'constricted' Vedic antecedent but restores the latter to all its fullness.

The ongoing revolt against brahmanical hierarchy and patriarchy often takes religious avenues as when Dalits (formerly 'Untouchables') convert en masse to 'egalitarian' Buddhism and Islam, or the 'individual freedoms' of Western Christianity, even when their underlying motives remain secular. Whereas many high-caste women rebel against their stifling upbringing by rejecting their heritage outright, others have found in traditional dance the means, previously taboo in respectable society, to (re-) gain self-esteem and social approbation. While the Great Goddess inspires liberationists of Judeo-Christian background, their Hindu and Muslim counterparts seduced by the sensual aesthetics of Bharata Nāṭyam and Kathak are discovering a newfound reverence for their former custodians, the *deva-dāsīs* and courtesans respectively. The refined Sanskrit-speaking Vasantasenā, despite her innate nobility and

sensitivity, is repeatedly abused by the royal villain and even by her lover's confidant, the brahmin clown, as a (venal) 'prostitute' (to be avoided at all costs). The pure and faithful wife, observing strenuous ritual vows (fasting, etc.) to retain her wayward husband as partner in the next life to the point of abetting his 'adulterous' adventure, offers a studied contrast. The *Little Clay Cart* nevertheless establishes their deep sisterly bond, a symbolic identification deriving from two equally religious models: submissive yet indispensable wife of the brahmanical sacrificer and liberating partner of the tantric adept. The contemporary Hindu 'feminist' is seen reclaiming her individual autonomy through an often intensely spiritual harmonization and merger of these opposing images of ideal womanhood. Moreover, cultural exposure to the independence achieved by Anglo-Saxon women nourishes attempts to redefine gender relations and 'equality' within a distinctly native ethos, presided over by Naṭarāja, Lord of Dance, the Androgyne (Ardha-Nārīśvara) as polarized union of opposites, worshipped by the traditionalists and appreciated by the secular regardless of sex.²⁰

The earliest surviving fragments of Buddhist theater already depict the would-be monk curiously coupled with the brahmin *vidūṣaka*. The evolution of Hindu culture may be interpreted through aesthetics as it consolidates into an independent domain mediating between the religious and the worldly in a manner that tends to dissolve this opposition and minimize its significance. When the sacrificial model of life-in-the-world was eroded by the double-pronged assault of renunciation-cum-secularization, the structures underlying the former were transposed onto the theater and the arts as a form of 're-creation' that could be enjoyed by all, including and especially those who do not subscribe to, nor are interested in, nor even aware of these Vedic values. The aesthetic emotions evoked by the arts were then shown to be *sui generis (alaukika)*, different in nature from their correlates in the real world, suffused with and magnifying the innate reflexivity of our very Consciousness.

Abhinava was especially well-equipped for this task because he was steeped in and drew his secret inspiration from (radical Kaula) Tantra: 6) yet another religious attitude that sought to transform all sensuous experiences, including the basest of the emotions and instincts, into sacrificial 'food' offered to the all-devouring Fire of Consciousness, just as the Vedic brahmins lived to make oblations to Agni culminating on the funeral pyre. Whereas disgust and its ancillary fear are correlated to spiritual liberation in the purificatory (ascending) mode in the *puruṣārtha* scheme sanctioned by the NS, they constitute the aesthetic essence of the 'terrifying' Bhairava—criminal god par excellence, defined by his decapitation of Brahmā—worshipped and identified with as the all-encompassing Absolute by Abhinavagupta, the brahmin par excellence. Whereas the vulgar laughter reflex is frowned upon as an ignoble waste of nervous energy and the highest characters barely manage the benevolent smile of the ideal monk, Śiva-Bhairava is characterized by frighteningly loud laughter (*aṭṭahāsa*) more worthy of the 'Laughing Buddhas' of (Taoist) China. While inheriting and conserving core principles of the 'obsolete' Vedic religion (his very name is often of the most sanctified pedigree), the stereotyped figure of the clown-reviler has been subsequently invested with radical tantric notations that clarify what it really means to be a 'great brahmin'. In the traditional context, where the sacred was an exclusive and pure domain hemmed in by a rigorous network of taboos and injunctions and where spiritual liberation was predicated on the rejection of the senses, the alchemy of *rasa* could be catalyzed by transgressive practices that, to the uninitiated, would be indistinguishable from hedonistic acts of profanation. The *vidūṣaka*, who opens a strategic window onto such 'profane' antecedents within the Vedic corpus itself, is a comic figure, hardly a role model for the vast majority of his audiences, precisely because he incorporates within himself such a dialectic of transgressive sacrality.

“All the world’s a stage” for this Clown: God as ultimate and sole Connoisseur

Not only is “the Actor the (absolute) Self,” the “stage is the inner (psychic) self” and “the spectators the (introverted) senses” (*Śiva Sūtras*). This is why a professional Hindu danseuse, who earns her ‘profane’ livelihood by entertaining cosmopolitan audiences worldwide, can [claim on YouTube](#) that the centrifugal dispersal of her rhythmic gestures, evoking variegated sentiments, has gradually unified her fragmented inner being.²¹ As for the ‘servants of God’ (*deva-dāsī*), who seek ‘union’ with their exclusive connoisseur, the (temple-) deity (within), dance-drama still retains the potential of supreme Yoga. Among the (gross) physiological reflexes (sneezing, tickling, sudden fear or anger, orgasm, etc.) that the *Vijñāna-Bhairava Tantra* enumerates as opportune springboards for spiritual enlightenment, is the pervasive sense of wellbeing following sexual gratification or filling the stomach with food and drink.²² The self-indulgent, often indiscriminating, delight that the (Indian) dilettante (or would-be *rasika*) hankers after these days in (Bollywood) cinema—populated with ‘moon-faced’ larger-than-life screen-goddesses—is but a pale distracting refraction of the elixir of life objectified in the coveted sweetmeats (*modaka*), a ‘condensation’ of the Vedic Soma, that this gluttonous and burping clown shares with the pot-bellied Gaṇeśa, ‘ungainly’ dancer who is often praised in the same breath as a great connoisseur (*sahṛdaya*) of poetry, theater and the arts.²³ The *Mṛcchakaṭikā* inaugurates its ‘worldly’ drama with the wistful self-portrait of the *vidūṣaka* surrounded by so wide a palette of dainty dishes that he contentedly dips his finger in each only to brush it aside like a consummate artist: the very image of our revered elephant-headed god.²⁴ While we discerning humans keep laughing at the unseemly appetite of the ugly Fool, this Godlike Clown remains the secret ‘wire-puller’ (*sūtra-dhāra*) and ultimate enjoyer of the tragi-comedy of life.

By reintegrating an increasingly fragmented and kaleidoscopic mosaic of the sacred into the ever-present—even if hidden in plain sight—unity of the lost 'origin', Hindu aesthetics could be the launch-pad for 'renewed' (*abhi-nava*) and universal appreciation of Indian culture.

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¹ This essay is dedicated to the cherished memory of Ursula Kolmstetter, Head Librarian at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, who has remained a source of inspiration throughout the formulation of these reflections on beauty.

² These six approaches to the sacred-profane tension, opposition, and superposition relate more to shifts in perspective—often within the shared context of a single phenomenon—rather than constitute distinct domains of experience. So this essay introduces each approach at the appropriate moment within the elaboration of a historical-conceptual schema. Armed with the latter, the analytical categories can be fleshed out through further readings.

³ Despite the chronological and conceptual overlaps, the contested uncertainties of dating in Indian history, the following periodization would serve our purpose: cryptic hymns of the Ṛgveda (1500–1000 BC), brahmanical sacrifice (1000–800 BC), Upanishadic and Buddhist renunciation (from 800–500 BC), epic narratives of Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata (200 BC–200 CE), 'secular' court poetry (3rd to 8th century CE), temple worship (after 4th century CE), radical Tantrism (by 700 CE), devotional (*bhakti*) Hinduism (post-Islamic: 14th–17th century), and 'primitive religion' (possession, shamanism, blood-sacrifice) of ethnically diverse pre-Aryan tribes (prehistoric till present).

⁴ The *puruṣārtha* schema may be legitimately understood as a 'secularization' of Vedic life in response to the renunciation ideal as providing sole access to transcendence. Whereas there remained a relative disjunction between the sacrificing householder and (premature) permanent *sannyāsa* on the brahmanical side, the ethico-spiritual code of the Buddhist (and Jain) *dharma* intended to transform the

‘worldly’ life of lay adherents into a daily preparation for monkhood. Edwin Gerow (1979, 1980), for example, interprets the plot-structure—and hence *rasa*-aesthetics—of Kālidāsa’s crowning drama, *Abhijñāna-Śākuntalam* in terms of the tension between *kāma* and *dharma* and its eventual resolution through the birth of the princely heir from the love-union of the royal hero and heroine.

⁵ The scant historical records suggest the priority of Buddhist drama—represented by fragments of *Aśvaghōṣa* (c. 2nd century AC)—emerging in the northwest of the subcontinent, probably under the influence of Greek theater and the Dionysian cult prevalent in Bactria (modern Afghanistan). He also wrote the first known epic poem, which narrates and extols the life of the Enlightened One, *Buddha-Carita*.

⁶ Upon undergoing the consecration (*dīkṣā*), the Vedic sacrificer regressed into a deathly embryonic state, laden with evil and impurity, from which he emerged, rejuvenated with a reconstituted body. The self-abnegating ascetic phase that precedes the *dīkṣā* is inwardly maintained even amidst its subsequent transgressive notations. The bewildering metamorphoses of the Buddhist monk (hero’s servant, masseur, gambler, savior, national chief of all the monasteries) exteriorize and elaborate ideas and values invested in the *dīkṣita*, as do the clown and villain in their own ways. As exemplified by the drama, the sacrifice aims to assimilate the ‘outside’ world to its own schema.

⁷ The *Nāṭya-Śāstra* (NS), foundational treatise of Sanskrit theater, explicitly states that all its elements were taken from the four Vedas. The ritual preliminaries to the public performance retain elements of Vedic cosmogony. No systematic attempts have been made till now to decipher an entire play in terms of the sacrifice, least of all *The Little Clay Cart* (*Mṛcchakaṭikā*), which has been instead celebrated by Indians as a triumph of ‘secular’ populism. A detailed sacrificial hermeneutic of each of its ten Acts is available online (unpublished) at Visuvalingam (2009).

⁸ Among the ten major dramatic genres canonized by NS, the overtly ritualistic had long become obsolete with no or few surviving specimens, whereas the full-fledged legendary play (*nāṭaka*) has received privileged treatment and proliferated within classical Hindu culture. Apart from its plot drawn from the epics and mythology, the *Nāṭaka* is hardly distinguishable artistically from the worldly play (*prakaraṇa*), inspired by profane themes and exemplified by *The Little Clay Cart*. The *prakaraṇa* was no doubt originally popularized by the Buddhists as the backdrop to renunciation and its earliest known specimens are the fragments from *Aśvaghōṣa*, where the would-be Buddha (*bodhisattva*) is already curiously accompanied by a brahmin *vidūṣaka*, who attempts to dissuade him. Though the clown is not

called 'Vināyaka', Gaṇeśa—instigator of obstacles, propitiated for their removal at the beginning of all undertakings— seems to have borrowed this alternate name from the conceptual underpinnings of the *vidūṣaka*.

⁹ The Vedic brahmins, by then dispersed all over the subcontinent, resisted the use of Sanskrit for non-hieratic ends, e.g., royal inscriptions were invariably in the vernaculars. Curiously, foreign invaders were the first and foremost to promote Sanskrit in such secular contexts to be eventually and zealously adopted by other non-Aryan ethnicities, whose wholly distinct languages (Dravidian, Newar, Javanese, Cambodian, etc.) and literatures became increasingly sanskritized both linguistically and culturally. This breach between sacred and profane is reflected in the fact that Sanskrit poetics—alone among other disciplines such as grammar the various schools of philosophy—lacks an authoritative foundational text formulated aphoristically. Instead, there are two rival treatises, by Bhāmaha and Daṇḍin, on figures of speech that sometimes differ, even conflict, in their definitions and judgments.

¹⁰ Pollock (2006), who develops this aesthetics of power in great historical, linguistic, and cultural detail, does so by opposing the appeal of its secular cosmopolitan thrust to the closed conservative Vedic domain does not satisfactorily account for the peculiar ethos of trans-sectarian Indian kingship, nor the fact—for which he unwittingly provides ample evidence—that the sovereign, his court, and the wider polity participated in both worlds.

¹¹ The ambiguous status of the 'god-king' should be emphasized: the aesthetics of power, on the one hand, (politically) enslaves the populace by sacralizing their worldly dominator and, on the other hand, ensures their (ritual) 'participation' (*bhakti*) in the sacrificial dynamic of which he has become the pivot. His violent overthrow is likewise justified, in the *Mṛcchakaṭikā*, through Śiva destroying, and thereby fulfilling, the (restrictive) sacrifice.

¹² Dharma-Yudhiṣṭhira represents the sacerdotal caste (brahmin), Arjuna and Bhīma the warrior in his disciplined aristocratic and savagely brutish aspects respectively, the twins Nakula and Sahadeva agricultural and mercantile productivity, Śrī-Draupadī the shared prosperity of the Aryan realm.

¹³ A sacrificial reading of the Rāmāyaṇa reveals that Rāvaṇa is, in the final analysis, the 'evil' *dīkṣita* alter ego and substitute victim of the royal Rāma, which is why he assumes the yellow-garbed disguise of a renouncer (*sannyāsin*) to abduct the chaste and tragic Sītā, whose relationship to her ravisher is 'unjustly' doubted by her righteous husband. Similarly, celibate Hanumān, Rāma's larger-than-life

emissary, is literally a 'brown monkey', stereotyped description of the *vidūṣaka*, both figures having their prototype in the 'Virile Monkey' of the Ṛgveda.

¹⁴ Even while shoring up the *sui generis* nature of the aesthetic experience, Abhinava explicitly extends this blurring in practice to all the other *rasas*, excepting love and pathos, and thereby acknowledges that differentiating, from the emotional perspective, between theater and the world is more problematic than theorized. And, when he presses on to justify the distinction between our relish of (aesthetic) 'tranquility' (*śānta*) and the (inner) 'cessation' (*śama*) depicted by an actor on stage as its sustained (*sthāyin*) grounding, by invoking this very *hāsa* and *hāsya* (non-) distinction, the opposition between the artistic and the religious seems likewise at the risk of inversion. For if the relish of *rasa* were to 'spiritually' transcend its real-life counterpart, are we spectators superior to the Buddha?

¹⁵ The subcontinent has been at the confluence of Africa-type possession from the Dravidian South and out-of-body shamanism from the North and East; the Rig Vedic hymn to the 'long-haired' sage suggests flight of the soul. The 'sacred' here is expressed through a semiotic web that integrates the (symbolic) life of the 'primitive' community into the experience of the shaman. Utilitarian tools are artfully crafted into ritual objects, festivals both entertain and renew the tribal universe, the initiate does not hide behind the mask of the theatrical clown but openly transgresses binding interdictions: there is no religious-profane opposition to generate a distinctly aesthetic domain.

¹⁶ Controversy is mounting over expanding Christian appropriation of Indian dance forms within this politics of inculturation. While the Western-controlled Church hierarchy remains wary of legitimizing pagan doctrines through accommodating their artistic expressions, a growing Hindu faction accuses the missionaries of secularizing these traditional modes of worship to Christianize their meaning, intent, and audiences all the more easily. Others feel flattered that the rival religion is valorizing and helping to preserve endangered art forms, such as [Kathakali](#), that Hindus themselves have been neglecting. Indeed, such political concerns are encouraging some anti-conversion activists to take renewed interest in the underlying aesthetics and worldview of an ancient heritage otherwise taken for granted: an irony of recent history, for Victorian India's campaign against temple dances had been under the moral tutelage of a puritan colonial ethos. If practitioner-spokespersons such as [Shobana Jeyasingh](#) and [Saju George SJ, the Dancing Jesuit](#), can be taken at their word (allowing for the delicate balancing act of showing genuine appreciation for the Hindu essence of the newfound Passion without seeming to betray one's otherwise

exclusivist faith), the likelihood is of both religions being eventually transformed by such artistic encounters.

¹⁷ The moon-face is beautiful because of its rounded symmetry, the cool light it sheds, and hence its gladdening effect on the heart. This over-worn poetic conceit regains something of its original freshness, for example, when musically repeated and variously represented through dance gestures. Whereas the woman's attraction is sensual, the mediation of the metaphor introduces the reflexive moment (*vimarśa*) of (self-) 'repose' (*ātma-viśrānti*) that, for Abhinavagupta, defines the 'aesthetic' experience. The choice is not innocent, for the moon (*soma*) is invested with the elixir of life (*soma*).

¹⁸ Beyond the vicarious reliving and discharge of (especially negative) emotions (as through our laughter at comedy), this is the deeper (even Aristotelian) significance of *katharsis*. These all-too-human 'affects' are themselves 'purified' or 'purged' through aesthetic identification, depersonalization, and generalization. Though the *Mṛcchakaṭikā*, with its obligatory happy ending, is not tragedy in the Greek sense, it serves the cathartic (also in the psychoanalytic sense) healing function of bringing us face-to-face, even if only implicitly, with a primal scene.

¹⁹ That 'profane' drama is an aesthetic transposition of Vedic sacrifice is taken for granted by the foundational NS and by exemplary poets like Kālidāsa, to be explicitly endorsed by Abhinavagupta. However, Bhaṭṭa Nāyaka was the first theoretician to have attempted to conceptualize the generalization of otherwise personal emotions into the impersonal relish of literature, and more specifically by attributing to poetic speech a unique power of universalization (*sādhāraṇī-karaṇa*) modeled on the efficacy of Vedic injunctions. Whereas his predecessor proposed this quasi-ritual mechanism to obviate the need for Ānandavardhana's *dhvani* theory, Abhinava demonstrates how Nāyaka's generously acknowledged insights are better accounted for by the power of suggestion.

²⁰ Though Pārvaṭī is associated with the gentle *lāsya* dance, the Goddess is also depicted attempting to outperform Śiva in the otherwise masculine vigor of his own *tāṇḍava*, sometimes in the mythological context of a mortal challenge, graphically depicted in Indian cinema. The Telugu movie, [Ānanda-Bhairavī](#), depicts such a contest that the heroine wins in order to prove that women are just as capable of learning, performing, and transmitting the religious dance style of Kuchipudi, where female roles had been hitherto impersonated by males. In the Bollywood movie, [Dāminī](#), the heroine (Meenakshi Seshadri) is confined unjustly to a madhouse: the sight of a Durgā procession outside triggers her suppressed rage into frenzied yet awe-inspiring performance. The award-winning Telugu hit movie

Saptapadi ('Seven Steps, i.e., the marriage ceremony) sensitively depicts the submissive brahmin heroine obliged to marry her cross-cousin, the temple-priest, despite having lost her heart to her accompanist, an untouchable flute-player: trapped in a 'schizophrenic' impasse between duty and passion, her primal instincts burst into an tempestuous *tāṇḍava* that is finally allayed by his flute. In the mythical prototype, bloodthirsty Kālī, played by actress Hemamālinī, is 'pacified' only after standing astride her lover, Śiva, prostrate beneath her like a corpse. In this way, subconscious socio-sexual conflicts are expressed, transcended, and resolved through sacred dance.

²¹ In a specialy composed and choreographed rendering in the *rāga* Hamsadhvani, Malavika Sarukkai also recounts how the four basic dance-syllables (*tat-tit-tom-num*) of Bharata Nāṭyam are produced from an anklet bell breaking loose from the 'destructive' frenzy of Śiva's celestial *tāṇḍava* and hurtling towards earth like a doomsday comet. The compassionate savior muffles the impact with his matted locks (*tat*), such that the musical projectile loses momentum as it bounces off his shoulder (*tit*), knee (*tom*), and ankle to safely roll (*num*) onto the ground. Not only does this suggest that the cosmic rhythms of life originate deep within the human organism but, by donning the anklet to reproduce these primeval sounds, the artist is retracing their (inner) itinerary back to the unitary source.

²² The primitive equation, even etymological, of sex to food, which has been retained in the locutions of modern languages, points back to a fundamental psycho-biological affinity. In Sanskrit, both eating (*bhojana*) and (sexual) 'enjoyment' (*bhoga*) derive from the same root (*bhu*), and the metaphor is extended even to 'cooking' (the world). In the *Mahābhārata*, Agni, the Fire-God, appears with the traits of the gluttonous *vidūṣaka* to interrupt the erotic dalliance of Arjuna-and-Kṛṣṇa and devour an entire forest named 'sweetmeat' (*avalagita*).

²³ For example, in Muttuswami Dikshitar's musical composition "Mahā-Gaṇapati" set to the *rāga* Naṭṭai, the auspicious remover of obstacles is invoked in the heart as "the great aficionado of poetry, drama, etc., with the mouse for your vehicle and ever hankering after *modakas*." Conversely, the *vidūṣaka* accuses one of the rival masters in Kālidāsa's play *Mālavikāgnimitra* of pilfering these rounded sweetmeats offered to the goddess of learning and the arts—Sarasvatī, who presides over the heroine of the Sanskrit drama—under the pretext of teaching dance. After which, the 'supreme connoisseur' faults one of the competing dancers for not having propitiated this 'great brahmin' before her performance. Bollywood icon Meenakshi Seshadri shows just how beautifully this pot-bellied elephant-god, with his 'ungainly' gait and lolling trunk, could be depicted through Bharata Nāṭyam.

²⁴ Gaṇeśa is absent in NS. Most classical plays, including the *Mṛcchakaṭikā* begin by invoking Lord Śiva as patron of theater. However, this most popular and obligatory god of auspicious beginnings, also of subsequent dance and drama performances, seems to have been largely influenced by—if not derived from—the (symbolism invested in the) clown: the wavy proboscis (and single tusk) from the (upraised) crooked stick, the pot-belly from his ravenous appetite, sculptural depictions playing musical instruments or dancing exuberantly, creating and removing obstacles, and especially deformity transformed into grotesque beauty. The transgressive praxis of the goblin hosts (*pramātha*) accompanying Śiva was visually translated into deformity. The *pramātha*-deity presides over humor in the NS; Gaṇeśa is the ‘great lord of the hosts’ (*mahā-gaṇapati*), spiritual status coveted by the Pāśupata ascetic.