

## **Challenging content: making 'stairways to happiness' through dance for the child**

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### **Abstract**

This paper looks critically at the many ways in which inappropriate content enters the realm of dance for the child in India, ranging from folk, classical and reality show dancing on TV. It attempts to interrogate the deep social historical and religious roots of the problem and the interstices by which such maleficence persists unchallenged, leaving the many possibilities of using dance to kindle the imagination of the child and unlock the bigger potential of childhood. The paper concludes by citing two successful examples of attempts at creating child friendly Indian dance material including one in the diaspora. It also highlights the recent changes in the National Education Policy, that have foregrounded the arts making them at par with other privileged subjects, and seeing in this opportunity a chance to catalyse the creation of an age appropriate and child friendly repertoire

5 keywords; Child friendly content, NEP, Consent, Imagination, Intelligence

### **Context**

While there is a difference of opinion on the year in which India started celebrating its children through a special day in the government calendar, (Barooah, 1999, p. 161; Brecher, 1959, p. 25; Joshi, 2005), there is no denying the fact that the love which the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru bore for children, ensured that the child was the close focus of government programmes right from independence. In fact, Nehru himself gave permission to the Indian Council for Child Welfare, for Children's Day to be celebrated on 14<sup>th</sup> November, which was his birthday.<sup>1</sup> In his address on November 14, 1957, the first President of India, Dr Rajendra Prasad, declared that no programme of social welfare could be complete unless there was place for child welfare in it, a truism that has been followed rigorously.

Coincidentally it was in November 1989, 20<sup>th</sup> November 1989 to be exact, that the General Assembly of the United Nations Organisation passed its 'Convention on the Rights of the Child,' with the tagline - 'For Every Child Every Right'. It went on to become the most widely ratified human rights treaty in history. The Convention on the Rights of the Child is the most comprehensive detailing of the rights of the child, ever made, and India ratified it in 1992. These rights included the cultural rights of children.

### **Cultural Rights of the Child and how they impact imagination**

What are a child's cultural rights? Are they independent human rights, like the life to right, the right to food etc, or are they parts of the vision of a safe and meaningful childhood? Are these rights to identity? In the case of children of minority and indigenous groups, these rights are associated with identity issues, but in all cases the reference to cultural rights is linked with the idea of childhood and child

development. This paper takes a broad view of cultural rights and throws light on how they contribute to the expansion of the child's imagination through cultural activities like dance, that has the power to unlock creativity.

Let us be clear about what cultural rights and creative activities hope to achieve. The answer is in the plural. The very first achievement is kindling the imagination. With respect to children, within education, the importance of creativity is now widely recognized as an essential 21st-century skill (Donovan, Green & Mason, 2012; Rotherham & Willingham, 2010). The Webster dictionary defines imagination as "the ability to form a picture in your mind of something that you have not seen or experienced; the ability to think of new things." Every child is born with an imagination. Some parents and adults nurture children's imaginations and take joy in their creative thoughts and acts. Other times, they might (deliberately or unknowingly) stifle children's imaginations, perhaps concerned that children don't understand what's real, sustainable and of value.

Einstein, who knew a thing or two about imagination had said about it, that "Imagination is more important than knowledge." Imagination is the door to possibilities, where creativity, ingenuity, and thinking outside the box begin for the child. During imaginative play, children learn about the world, understand their natural and social environment, build and produce as they manipulate materials, express themselves verbally and non-verbally, plan (intentionally or unintentionally), act, interact, react, and try different roles.

To foster creativity and free the imagination, any kind of fixed content is therefore troublesome as it is prescriptive. But the contra position of unrestrained content is just as troublesome, since content itself fires the imagination. Age-inappropriate content is doubly troublesome. It would fail to unlock the imagination, being unable to speak to the child. Far worse, it may set the foundations for negative modelling. One of the rights the child has is to childhood and keeping the child in childhood is possible on matching content to childhood imagery and age appropriateness. This helps build in the child the ideal of individual sovereignty, social agency and good citizenship, through the ontological learnings, implicit in any strong educational training.

This way of looking at child development is about developing multiple intelligences particularly prioritising emotional and social intelligences. Data suggest that of the intelligences required to succeed, IQ may be the biggest parameter but it accounts for only 20% of success. This data links up with Daniel Goleman's (Goleman, 2007 & 2021) work on Emotional and Social Intelligences and Gardner's focus on multiple intelligences (Gardner, 2006).

### **Challenging content: a double wordplay foregrounding what is wrong with dance content**

In the title of the paper "Challenging Content", there is a double play on the word challenging. The title acknowledges that it is challenging to create age-appropriate content for the child but also that the prevailing content needs to be urgently challenged. This paper specifically challenges the prevalent content in certain dance forms commonly practiced in India and shares a few successful examples of how the content was challenged, tweaked and expressly created to achieve a positive goal.

In this part, I first highlight some examples of what is disturbing in the content for dance for the child, particularly in the context of classical and folk dance. Some folk dances have romance, eroticism and in-built double entendre, that cause doubt and convey mixed messaging to the child dancers. For instance, some songs for dance have family politics as its core, the lascivious father-in-law, the devious mother-in-law, the cruel sister-in-law, the flirtatious husband, the demanding wife, the entitled brother, etc, all too difficult for a young mind to comprehend, and certainly not the best behaviour to copy. What kind of relations could one hope to forge if the young mind is influenced by such negative behaviour traits?

### **Violence in a folk dance**

Let me give you the words of one traditional and rather popular folk song in Punjabi- '*Ni mein Sas kutni*'. '*Sass meri ta badi kapati bina gaal na bole. Ni mein sass kutni...*'. The words translate as follows- This mother-in-law of mine is terrible. She does not speak a sentence without an expletive thrown in, So I want to pound her, pound her...) At the point of the 'pound her', literally a mortar and pestle movement is danced. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bVnwLTVxXu8> shots at 30 seconds.) I hardly feel that we would want our children to be brutal murderers, but such songs are very popular and keep appearing in reinventions and newer editions.

### **The trouble of idolising errant qualities of Gods**

Next, I will move to classical dance and use the example of the North Indian classical dance form of Kathak. Kathak is one of the eight classical dance forms of India, and the only one from the north. My own training has been in Kathak, and I can vouch for how often as a child and young woman I wondered why I was dancing things that were objectionable by my imbibed standards of ethics and quite contrary to the values I was taught to uphold.

Much of Kathak's narrative content is inspired from the legend of the popular Hindu God, Krishna, the blue God, the flute player, the protector of cows, the bearer of the peacock feather in his crown. Krishna is worshipped at every age- Krishna the child, Krishna the young boy, the adolescent and as a wise guide. The myths are rich on stories about him. Popular is the narrative of the child Krishna stealing butter, or the young Krishna with his group of friends throwing stones and breaking the terracotta pots of the milk maids as they are on their way to the market, carrying milk for sale. Another popular segment shows him harassing the milk maids by blocking their passage, or even stalking them. The adolescent Krishna is also depicted stealing the

clothes of the milkmaids as they bathe in the river. While a spiritual take is offered for this particular narrative, the simple mind of the child can get befuddled with these mixed messages. Incidentally Krishna stories constitute a bulk of the content in all eight classical dances of India, not just Kathak.

I foreground this content as examples of inappropriate messaging for children, specifically in two contexts- Firstly in the form of artistic content that negates the idea of ethics, for stealing butter, however cutely it may be done, is stealing nevertheless. Secondly the interactions with the milk maids is problematic as this content negates consent. Negating consent lies at the epicentre of crimes against women. According to the 2021 report of the National Crime Records Bureau, crimes against women rose by over 15% from the preceding year.<sup>2</sup> Many of the actions done by Krishna and his friends would attract punishment via actual sections of the Indian Penal Code.

It is not surprising then, that in the community at large, such unethical and misogynistic behaviour is not just normalised but "divinitised", to create a new word. It is troublesome because it leads to copycat<sup>3</sup> behaviour, on the part of the boys and idealises submissive women, which really is what copycat crimes are all about. And in this case, imagine the license men get, when they are copying a God!

There have been many cases within the Kathak community of teachers identifying with Krishna, who was also a great dancer in Hindu mythology. Some of them adopt a synonym for Krishna as a personal poetic signature, while composing new compositions. For instance, Pt. Birju Maharaj, the doyen of Kathak adopted the nom de plume of Braj Shyam, a local name for Krishna. Some even dress in his colours, exclusively dance Krishna pieces, or get acolytes to refer to them as being virtual apparitions of Krishna. All this myth-making creates illusions of grandeur and encourages them to replicate some of this troublesome behaviour, which as described earlier transcends the parameters of social norms and even the law. The emergent behaviour in such a scenario of skewed power equations between the all-powerful Guru and the vulnerable disciple, may be inappropriate, unethical, and neglective of consent. Thus, it is not just the content but also dance's living context in India that is inappropriate and needs to be challenged

### **The negative side of the Guru Shishya relationship**

One of the most unique methodologies for inter generation transfer of such specialised artistic knowledge in the Indian system is the Guru and disciple relationship, called the Guru -shishya (disciple) Parampara. It is called a parampara as there is a several century old lineages of it. But in recent years many examples of its misuse have come to the fore. This is the result of skewed power relations between the Guru and the disciple. The system reinforces the point that power is willingly ascribed by the student in this arrangement, since the position of the guru is venerated and equal to God.

A popular Hindi poem by one of the most popular medieval poet Kabir, says

*Guru Gobind do-oo khade, Kake lagoon Paye?*

*Balihari Guru Aapne, Govind diyo Bataye.*

(Translation: If God and Guru appear before you together, who should you bow to first? You should bow to the Guru, who shows the way to God.)

In the Indian Guru- Shishya Parampara, as the above poetic lines suggest, the gurus enjoy a position of great respect and unquestioning devotion amongst their students who touch their feet every day, at least twice each day, once on meeting and then on taking leave. In fact, the student often pays similar daily respects to the Guru's Guru, as a sign of knowledge being a tradition of which they are the lowliest link.

### **Why does challenging content appear so challenging**

When the troublesome content of dance as described earlier and the skewed power relations of pedagogy meet in the crucible of prevailing prejudices of caste, class, race and patriarchy (Wilkerson, 2020), the imbrication of these social positionalities and the subsequent fermentation, reinforces unhealthy contexts, undemocratic ideas and a poor learning environment and example for young people. In a powerfully written article in the online news and ideas portal Scroll.in, scholar Brahma Prakash argues cogently against the hierarchies and elitism in the very idea of classical (Prakash, 2023). Dancer Nrithya Pillai, hailing from a now stigmatised traditional dance community, has consistently bemoaned the inherent exclusions in the idea of classical. In a recent article written on Scroll.in (Pillai, 2023), she has raised the issue of how classical dance is a "battleground over the real control of bodies, representation and power". The preferred ideal of submissive, docile and silent women dancers, who literally fit into the body types preferred by the male gaze, evident in every casting of choreographies, is patent to see. Till these recent statements, a culture of silence has covered up a lot of lived notoriety in and around dance.

### **The realm of Dance Reality Shows on Television**

In passing, I will also mention, that content needs to be challenged even when we look at the popular genre of Television dance reality shows for children. Television continues to be the most prominent entertainment medium in the Indian Media and Entertainment industry<sup>4</sup> where adult themes and sexually suggestive movements enter the dance vocabulary of the young one, in an imitation of adult dance reality shows. It is surprising that children's dance reality shows show such adult content given the fact that there are strict laws in India that are meant to regulate content on TV (Kaushik, 2016), but regulatory bodies make the laws only to ignore them, while the principle of self-regulation seems to not exist at all. Psychological studies have revealed that unhealthy modelling by the media is a reality. Watching reality shows lowers self-esteem by privileging unreal standards of body appearance and activity. According to an Indian study the "mediated reality" of these shows impacts almost 66% of the viewers. (Vardhan & Bhanupriya, 2021).

While the arguments for urgently needing to work on addressing the issue of content for children, addressing modern concerns in child development and education and shattering old shibboleths that have weighed down the content for dance for the child, it is a plexus of powerful forces that have impeded. These forces include social, historical and religious influences that have blocked the much-needed challenge to the dance content available for the child. It has included the resistance of the Gurus to accept inadequacy on their part and a certain laziness to be at it. Yet all is not lost. The next part of the paper shines the torch on some success stories.

### **Shining the Torch: Building child friendly and age-appropriate Indian dance repertoires**

This paper has briefly interrogated prevailing troublesome areas and persisting inappropriate practices. But the picture is not all negative. There are some moments and areas of luminosity. Cited here are some of the successful examples of building a child friendly repertoire. This essay argues that there must be a true and consistent commitment to the ideal of age-appropriate artistic content for the child.

The work of two seminal Gurus is taken up for discussion. They are the Dhanajayans- the husband-and-wife team of Shanta and V.P. Dhananjayan, based in Chennai in India, and Dr. Mamata Niyogi Nakra, based in Montreal, Canada. Both the Dhanajayans and Nakra have trained in the classical style of Bharatanatyam, albeit from different Gurus. The Dhananjayans learnt the art at Kalakshetra in Chennai while Nakra learnt it in Bangalore, from Gurus U.S. Krishna Rao and his wife Chandrabhaga Devi.

The Dhanajayans are well known for having created small standalone pieces based on Indian mythology for young children to dance at their school teaching Bharatanatyam. But this awareness is exceptional. Even if you search for writing for children's repertoires in India, one comes out with a mostly blank slate. The child dancer has been invisibilized in Indian dance performances, and yet is sought after by all teachers given the long years of training required to create a good dancer. While, catching them young is certainly a popular mantra, the child dancers are seen as miniaturised version of the adult dancer- costume, repertoire, the skills expected, all feed the long-fixed idea of the mature dancer.

But Nakra saw things differently. She has been a pioneer in this genre. Her work even though emerging out of Canada, has caught the attention of the dance world both internationally and certainly in India. Many dancers, especially from Kolkata, the Indian city where Nakra retains a home, have been inspired and are working collaboratively with her, enjoying the benefit of matured ideas for dance and the child and even benefitting from access to her pre-prepared repertoire and expensively recorded accompanying music.

"We have to enter the child's world rather than take him by the hand and drag him into ours" stated Nakra in an interview she gave in 2006 to the prominent daily from Kolkata, The Telegraph (Banerjee, 2006). Mamata Niyogi Nakra, has created a whole '*margam*', one evening's concert length repertoire, dedicated to the child. Her '*Shishu Sadhna*' ( For the Training of the Child) work is a remarkable start to finish effort keeping a child friendly repertoire in mind. She used questions that the Canadian children had asked her as the vortex of the dance ideas. She used imaginative childlike expressions as ways to depicting love for the divine, created fresh stories around children's toys particularly dolls and incorporated the gait of animals in the kinetics. In this last part she drew upon anthropological studies that locate the origins of many dance movements in animal locomotion. What worked for Canadian children seems to work with Indian ones too going by the number of Indian Gurus who subsequently sought her guidance in building a child friendly repertoire.

In a continued commitment to her work in this direction, Mamata Niyogi Nakra created a comprehensive idea of dance and the happy child, enunciated in the evocative title "Stairways to happiness". In a daylong seminar in Delhi in 2012, she shared this vision with dancers, scholars and stakeholders in education, and to reinforce her point she also invited other experts to share their work in this direction. In this context, Mr. Anoop Wadhwa, associated with the initiative "Happy thoughts" shared his experiences about how the schools in Delhi were prioritising the happiness quotient in the curriculum for children. Hands on musicians G. Elangovan and Shubhendra Rao, and theatre practitioner Irshad Alam Khubi shared their experiences of using their art to light up the world of joyous childhood learning. Two presentations by medical experts Dr. Elavarasan, a renowned doctor of the Siddha school of medicine and Dr. Samanta Datta, a doctor and professor of Ayurveda gave concrete examples of how Classical Indian dance through its movements and mudras regulates the flow of energy by activating various pressure points in the body, and in the process augmenting intelligence, mental faculties and overall wellbeing.

### **The Science behind the Art**

In the closing part of my paper, I argue that there appears to be a science to what Nakra is doing. While Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences is well known, I would like to expand a bit on the spectrum philosophy of "whole child education", as argued by Dr. Harbans Nakra, an engineer by profession, a dance lover for over five decades, a member of ASCD, and Mamata Niyogi Nakra's husband and lifelong witness to her work. He made these observations in his book "Place for Dance in Whole Child Education- A Scientific Perspective", which builds on Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences.

The link between the 'Human Brain' and 'Behaviour System', emanates from the fact that the brain is an information processing system with an input from the sense organs and an output that represents behaviour. Between these two end points, Dr.

Nakra describes seven processing Functions that create an interesting acronym. PAIDEIA, which in Greek means general education.

**P**erception  
**A**nalysis & evaluation  
**I**ntelligence  
**D**ecision making  
**E**motional brain  
**I**magination and  
**A**ction or expression

Harbans Nakra argues that together these seven functions create cognition with empathy. Dance training contributes to the development of the perception function in two ways: it hones some of the senses and leads to perception and the sense of hearing sharpens as the accompanying music has to be listened to carefully to catch rhythmic pulse points and melodic cadences. The visual sense gets acuminated, because one has to observe the movements and also replicate subtle changes in the facial expressions. The sense of touch comes through the contact of the feet on the floor, and finally dance energizes the sixth sense as manifested through the response of the body.

Dance training offers various possibilities for sensitizing the somatic response. The mind is made aware of the sensations in each part of the body during various movements. All elements of analysis and evaluation, decision making, imagination, action and expressional cognition are all ways in which dance helps develop multiple intelligences.

### **Possibilities arising from the National Education Policy ( NEP) 2020**

Today India is getting a chance to relook at the role of the arts in the context of its new National Education Policy 2020, the most important feature of which is the fact that it has given equal weightage to the arts as it has to science and technology, converting the popular acronym of STEM- Science, technology, engineering and medicine to STEAM with the addition of the 'A' for the Arts. NEP has introduced two special ways in which it has incorporated the arts in a formal manner- through Arts in Education and Arts Integrated Learning. Although the arts the NEP refers to are many, dance is one realistic, and likely option, since India is a land that abounds in dances, and there is always a local variety making the training of it easy to access. The NEP has also taken care not to specify any privileged position to classical dance recognising that the number of far flung schools in rural areas will only be able to access local community dances.

Even if dance under the NEP 2020 were to remain a tailored physical activity, will dance grow in valance as a mainstreamed subject, a subject that more than adequately satisfies the criterion for its inclusion in the school curriculum? Or can we hope for more, to make dance serve as the new audio-visual tool for scholastic

learning? Much will depend on the creativity of the curriculum creators, but this is undoubtedly an opportunity to generate a critical mass of child friendly and age-appropriate repertoire. But for this to happen we must break through other regressive shackles of stratified social organization, and unchanging antediluvian ideas that have held the Indian people back for centuries, to imaginatively draw out the 21<sup>st</sup> century frontier for the field of dance. The challenge before us today to upgrade the content of dance for the child and imbricate a the living context with matching purpose, idealism and ethics.

I am happy to share with you that as an invited special member to the National Council for Education Research and Training (NCERT) Committee to draft the position paper for Arts in Education and Arts Integrated Learning, I have already been a part of this national discourse and hope to continue to ideate and influence where we go with Dance and the Child, in the formal curriculum. This is not the first time I have been associated with national level curricular efforts. In the past, twice I have been associated with the national level curricular efforts. In 2005 I was part of the Central Board of Secondary Education's (CBSE) Curriculum Revision. Later I was part of the NCERT's expansion of the curriculum to include dance and music as subjects, and now this. But my experience has been that large scale ambitious projects sometimes are just too ambitious. At other times they run out of steam or lose their focus. In contrast, the success of small pilot programmes serves as an inspiration. This is what makes Mamata Niyogi Nakra's pioneering work in moving away from the idea of the child being a miniaturised dance artiste, to creating a child friendly repertoire, so significant.

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<sup>1</sup> Nehru, Jawaharlal. (November 13, 1957). Nehru's note to his Private Secretary. JN Collection. Source: *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, Series 2, Volume 40, Page 263

<sup>2</sup> <https://ncrb.gov.in/sites/default/files/CII-2021/CII%202021%20SNAPSHOTS%20STATES.pdf>. See section F.

<sup>3</sup> The term "copycat" was first used to describe patterns of criminal behaviour by David Dressler, a former executive director of the New York State Division of Parole and sociologist, in his New York Times article "The Case of the Copycat Criminal" on 10<sup>th</sup> December, 1961. But the idea of copycatting is far older and does not always have criminal intent. Gabriel Tarde proposed that copycatting defined by "the influence of one brain upon another brain," has two stages: "(1) a model and a copy, that is to say, an idea which tends to reproduce itself by suggestion; and (2) an act of imitation by which the reproduction is accomplished." The latter, "an act of imitation," translates into copycat crime. Interestingly Gabriel Tarde was also a criminologist.

<sup>4</sup> As per the statistics put out by the government of India's IBEF, which describes Media and Entertainment in India as the sunrise sector, Television accounts for 40% share of the media well ahead of print, radio and cinema. <https://www.ibef.org/industry/media-entertainment-india>.

## Biography

Twice a Fulbright Fellow, Dr. Arshiya Sethi, established the Kri Foundation, which braids Arts, Activism and Knowledge creation. Formerly dance critic for the Times of India, she helped prepare the NEP's position paper for Arts in Education and Arts Integrated learning, her third such engagement with education policy. Author of popular and scholarly writings, columnist, co-editor and contributor to "Dance Under the Shadow of the Nation" (2019), a DSA publication, her 2022 co-written biography *Proceedings of Dancing into Communities 2022 -The 15th conference of Dance and the Child* 10 International

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of pioneering dancer Mohanrao Kallianpurkar, is India's first one with a cloud attached. She edits the new international academic Journal- South Asian Dance and its Intersections.

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