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# PRACTICING DANCE AND ANTHROPOLOGY

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This autoethnographical account is based on empirical fieldwork and personal experience as a dancer born in a Muslim family, and expresses the contestation of two separate world views and their reconciliation in the academic and intellectual world. Here, I trace the journey of my life - born in a Muslim family, training in Odissi dance, and becoming a performer. This autoethnography reflects on my struggles in breaking the stereotypical norms to establish my identity in a society where dancing by girls is not encouraged. The Odissi dance, dedicated to the worship of Lord Jagannath, was a temple dance practiced solely by the *mahari*s (female temple dancers commonly known as *devadasi*s in South India), and was a part of Hindu temple tradition. Islam as a religion does not endorse idol worship and dance and music are considered taboos. Many times, during fieldwork, values and norms were misconstructed leading to misinterpretation of cultural ethos, and I constantly had to negotiate my identity at various times. In India, many Muslim women are associated with art and dance, and some are well known in their fields, forcing one to reflect on the syncretic tradition of the sub-continent and the more liberal traditions of Islam.

## I

My identity as an Assamese Muslim[1] is always met with awed expressions. The first statement that comes my way is, "You don't look like an Assamese, you don't have the Mongoloid features". The next statement is, "Oh, you don't look like a Muslim either as you don't have the Pathan features - neither tall nor fair skinned". Usually, I have to deal with these two stereotypes during an introduction. When an introduction goes further, and I mention my tryst with Odissi dance, another stereotype comes up - "In Islam dance and music is not allowed, so why did you learn dance?" These statements and questions stem from the stereotypes of what one thinks of the other, and presumes as *the real* other. In this regard, Marranci (2008) has reflected on this stereotyping processes as often been related to the description and representation of social identities. Today I take this opportunity to explore these questions through an autoethnographic account as an anthropologist born in a Muslim family and an exponent of Odissi dance. To delve into the discussion of my identity as an Assamese Muslim and my involvement with Odissi dance herein, I will be presenting personal accounts and my empirical fieldwork experiences conducted for my doctoral research.

The paper is divided into two sections. The first section deals with my identity as an Assamese Muslim. In this section, based on stereotypes, I explore the question "who I am", my identity as an Assamese Muslim and how it differs from the

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perceptions of what a Muslim is. For this purpose I use the genealogical method and historical accounts to trace my family history. Through the presentation of personal accounts of my life, the endeavour is to draw out the contrast in the two cultures - Muslims in Assam and in other parts of India. Here, the pattern of realist ethnography is followed, tracing my family history and discussing on how different my family is from the Muslim culture in other parts of India.

The second section focuses on my training in dance and I bring herein the views reflected by some progressive Muslims and highlight on the verses of the Holy Book – the Qur'an - on dance and music. Emphasis is laid on how at times misconstruction of the values and norms lead to misinterpretation of cultural ethos. This part deals with rewriting memories as most of the incidences happened a long time ago - during my childhood and during fieldwork as a Muslim woman anthropologist inclined in dance. This autoethnography is evocative as it tells my relationship with dance.

## II

According to Marranci (2008: 97) the statement "I am a Muslim" refers to the *symbolic communication* of a person of his emotional commitment through which he experiences his autobiographical self. Let me first, however, reflect on the dogma of Islam and being a Muslim. The word Muslim means follower of Islam (submission). Islam is based on five principles or *pillars of faith* — faith in God (Allah), praying five times a day facing Mecca, fasting in the holy month of Ramadan, giving alms, and undertaking pilgrimage to Mecca[2].

Due to the complexity of the human mind and historical political events, diverse interpretations of the religious beliefs have led to the emergence of ideological and theological rifts leading to religious movements and the creation of religious traditions among the Muslims. The Sunnis (who believe in the elected successors [caliphs] of the Prophet) and the Shias (who believe in the hereditary successors of Prophet Muhammad) are the two major divisions among the Muslims following two distinct traditions.

In India, both traditions are found. In north India, the Sunni tradition was introduced by the Turks and the Mughals, and the Shia tradition by the Persians. While in south India, the Arab traders introduced Islam. Thus, when discussing Muslim identity within the Indian sub-continent it is necessary to make a distinction between Islamic ethnicity and the Muslim identity. Pandian (1995: 81) states that a significant number of Muslims in India use symbols of alien or foreign ethnic heritage as markers of their Muslim identity. He further expounds, Muslims in India are divided into caste-like endogamous groups that are hierarchically ranked with the upper-caste Muslims claiming alien or foreign (i.e., non-Indian) identity, thus leading to several Muslim identities in India. This diverse Muslim identity has led to a paradoxical situation leading to a collective stereotyping of Muslims

in different parts of India. Based on ethnicity, each group claims their way of life as Muslim identity — what Muslims should be or how they should behave claiming it to be authentic and discarding the other. In this section, I will establish my identity as Assamese Muslim by tracing my maternal and paternal genealogy. Using the concept of stereotypes I will address the variance in the cultures of the Assamese Muslims and those of north India.

In Assam, there are two sects — the Syeds and the Sunnis. The Syeds are the Ahoms[3] who embraced Islam under Shah Miran popularly known as Azan Pir[4] in the 17th century. The other sect Sunni traces their history to the advent of the Mughals into Assam during the first Mughal attack in 1615AD. The struggle for power between the Mughals and the Ahoms continued for many years with intervals in between, the last decisive battle being the Battle of Saraighat in 1671AD. This brief input on the sects in Assam has been provided for an understanding of the Muslims in Assam.

Since childhood *amma* (mother) would tell me stories of my maternal grandparents. She would proudly recount that one of her great grandmother was an Ahom princess, and that her family *silsila/shajra* (genealogy) was recorded by a noted historian of Assam, Surya Kumar Bhuyan. The basis of the maternal family genealogy presented herein has been traced from the copy of the said *silsila* in Assamese that my maternal uncle Sajidur Rahman copied from the original, and since updated by him.

My earliest maternal roots could be traced to Subedar Sher Khan, a general of Shuja al- Daula of Awadh, who fought in the decisive third battle of Panipat in the Hijri 1180 (1761). The third battle of Panipat in which Shuja al-Daula, an ally of Ahmad Abdali, played an important role finds reference in the works of Fisher (1987). Subedar Sher Khan's son Hussain Khan migrated to the Ahom kingdom and was later titled as Hilaidary (cannon) Baruah (priest) by the Ahom King Chandra Kanta Sinha. He was made the head of the cannon section as he was a part of the army of Nawab of Awadh who was trained by the East India Company. The Ahom rulers till that time had no experience in these kind of artilleries, and thus, when Hussain Khan came to live in the Ahom kingdom he was offered the title and was made in-charge of the artillery section so as to strengthen the Ahom army. The exact reason for the migration is not known though it is speculated that after the Battle of Panipat things had changed in Awadh and many of the loyal patrons moved out of Awadh when Shuja al-Daula changed his alliance from the Mughal King to the British Crown.

The last Battle of Saraighat was fought in 1671 and my maternal forefathers came to Assam in 1761 approximately 100 years after the battle, thus, establishing the fact that they were not a part of the Mughals who attacked the Ahom kingdom. Subedar Hussain Khan Hilaidary Baruah married an Ahom Princess, one of the nieces of Ahom King Chandra Kanta Sinha. Hussain Khan's son Ramjan Khan,

and later his grandson Dilbar Khan served the Ahom Kings. Ramjan Khan's three other sons did not continue with the title Hilaidary as they did not serve the Ahom King directly. Sikandar Khan Baruah, the third son of Ramjan Khan, moved from the capital of the Ahom kingdom to Khagorijan (presently Nagaon, Assam) within the Ahom kingdom and settled there. His son Julfikar Khan came to be known as Sardar[5] and the legacy was carried forth by his elder son Nadis Khan. Sardar's second son Khabiruddin had five sons and three daughters. Pirujuddin was his second son whose third son was Azizur Rahman who had five sons. The eldest son was Fazlur Rahman who had four daughters and three sons. The eldest daughter Nure Chashme Sultana married Anowar-Uz-Zaman of Goalpara district, Assam. She has a son and a daughter (myself). Thus, in my maternal family tree we belong to the eleventh generation in Assam.

My paternal forefathers were originally Kashmiri *pundits* (priests). Taufique-Uz-Zaman (my cousin) had the *silsila* prepared with the help of some of my paternal uncles. My earliest forefather Rabi Tiwari, a sepoy in the Mughal army, had come to Assam during the wars though the exact war is not known. As per family legends he fell in love with a Muslim girl. He converted to Islam for the marriage and settled in Lakhipur, currently under Goalpara district of Assam. Gul Mohammad, Afsar Uddin, Afar Uddin, Rabi Munshi, Abdul Munshi and Badiuz Zaman (grandfather) were my forefathers. It was my grandfather who moved to Goalpara town and settled here. He was the Estate manager of Nespara under the British rule. We are the ninth generation in Assam. Both my maternal and paternal families were migrants in Assam from different parts of India, so there is variation in the cultures of the two families. Many of the customs and traditions have the traces of local influence of Lower Assam (paternal hometown) culture that is vividly different from Upper Assam (maternal hometown) culture.

Tracing my family genealogy forms an important part of my autoethnography as it relates to my culture which is very different from the Muslim culture in other parts of India. As seen from both the genealogies (maternal and paternal) my forefathers had married Assamese women and settled here. Thus, many of our customs, rituals and traditions have traces of Assamese culture, the foremost being that of language. In Assam the mother tongue of the Assamese Muslim is Assamese. Lower Assam being close to West Bengal the influence of the Bengali culture and language is also seen in my paternal family. Moreover, Bengali was introduced as the medium of instruction in schools and colleges in pre-Independent era when Assam was annexed to North Bengal by the British Administration. Arabic is taught in the *madrasa*s and children are encouraged to read and write Arabic for the sake of reading the Holy Qur'an. Even, the Hindi spoken here is heavily accented as it is not used in our everyday lives. Urdu as such is also not in vogue in Assam though it is spoken by majority of the Muslims in North India. Thus, both Urdu and Arabic are less frequently spoken in the Assamese Muslim community. In

north India Muslims speak Urdu and are fluent in Hindi. However, in south India the upper caste Muslims of the Malabar Coast (Moplahs) speak Malayalam (with Arabic and Persian words) known as Arabi-Malayalam and the Muslims in the Coromandel Coast (Labbays) speak Tamil (with Arabic and Persian words) known as Arabi-Tamil (Pandian, 1995:87).

In terms of variation in food the first realization came when I joined University of Delhi, Delhi for my Masters programme and was staying in the University Hostel for women. Here I realized that the staple food of the North Indian Muslims is *chappati* (flat unleavened whole grain bread), while I was accustomed to rice. The staple meal of the Assameses Muslim families is similar to that of the people living in Assam – less spicy, and less oil in food. Only on special occasions traditional dishes are cooked, but these too are different from other parts of India. On the social networking site Facebook, the administrator of the page "Assamese Cuisine and Recipes", Sharmin says that, "… after over 50 years of interaction between Mughals and Ahoms … what we have today is a branch of cuisine in Assam that can be called Assamese-Mughlai cuisine or Assamese-Muslim cuisine". As an example, if we take the preparation of *korma*, a mughlai dish chicken or mutton dish with a creamy curry, made by Muslims in northern parts of India and Assamese Muslims, we can see the difference. The preparation in North India is rich in comparison to that in Assam. One of the major reasons for the preparation of the milder version in Assam could be the hot and the humid climate. This type of climate does not permit the use of heavy spices in food as it leads to indigestion and stomach infections.

Not only in food but in dress also, the Assamese Muslims stand out from their other Indian counterparts. The women wear *mekhla chador* (two piece *saree* with a lower covering called *mekhla* generally stitched on both sides giving the look of a skirt and a *chador* or chunni and a *riha*covering the upper part of the body) and *sarees* (seven to nine yard long material draped over the body in various styles). This is similar to the ones worn by other Assamese women. At present, the western dress has crept in and Muslim women today are seen wearing jeans, skirts, dresses etc. In my family, my mother and her sisters too wear *salwar* suits, typical of north India. However, there are many who oppose it as being un-traditional, eventhough it is a part of northern Indian Muslim dress.

Some of the integral aspects like the *purdah* or *burkha* system are missing in our family and in most Assamese Muslim families, except in a small town called Hojai in Nagaon district. Older women cover their heads with the end of the *saree* or *chador* as is the common norm among the Assamese. One of the reasons for the adaptation of the Assamese culture could be that during the war between the Mughals and Ahoms, the former whilst settling down in Assam married local Assamese girls. Thus, cultural assimilation is seen. This aspect is more vivid in marriage in terms of dress and ornaments and certain rituals which have been taken from the Assamese community.

For the last thirteen years North India has been home to me and I have seen the differences from a close proximity. Thus, herein I present the variations in terms of dress and ornaments of an Assamese Muslim Bride in comparison to a North Indian Muslim bride so as to bring out the differences in the two cultures[6]. The bridal wear for an Assamese Muslim bride for is silk *mekhla chador* with a *riha* in a white base with designs in golden *zari* or thread work. One of the main ornament sets consists of the traditional Assamese jewellery - *lokaparo* (two pigeons facing back to back) or *shen* (eagle) designs. The other traditional jewellery worn are *dhulbiri* (shape of a drum), *japi* (the traditional Assamese cap worn while working in the paddy fields), *bena* (crescent moon shaped) etc. *Gamkharu* (bangles) are worn in the hands traditionally made of silver while the rest of the ornaments are made of gold. The Assamese jewellery comprises of items that are mostly used in our day to day lives or inspired from nature. While among the Muslims of North India the dress worn by the bride is *gharara* (skirt like), *kurta* and a *dupatta* heavily embroidered with *zari* work in gold or silver threads, and sometimes has semi-precious stones embossed in it. The colour of the dress is always red. The jewellery is normally *kundan* (semi-precious stones) work set in gold or silver. Besides this, the *tika* (worn on the forehead) and *natha* (nose pin) are essential for a Muslim bride in Uttar Pradesh. The Muslims in Bihar wear the traditional *chapa* (block print) *saree*. Married Muslim women in Bihar also wear the orange *sindoor* (vermillion mark on the parting of the hair worn by married women in the Hindu society, while in other parts of India the vermillion mark is red for married women). *Sehra* (the floral headdress that covers the face of the groom and bride during entire marriage ceremony) is worn among the north Indian Muslims and is not worn among Assamese Muslims. Thus, it is obvious that the Muslims in India have adapted to the local cultures and the cultures of Muslims vary across India. If we try to look for an authentic Muslim identity it would be a tough job as assimilation is seen everywhere.

## III

As we have seen from the previous section the Muslim Assamese community adapted the dress pattern, language, cuisine and many other aspects of the Ahom community in Assam as well as certain rituals and norms in life cycle rituals like marriage. Thus, it becomes difficult to identify a Muslim within the Assamese community till the surname is spelt out. Yet again there are aspects where we can see the traces of orthodoxy. One such instance is dance and music. Though in many Assamese families dance and music is acceptable yet in some it is still a taboo. Herein, I will be describing my tryst with dance and music so as to facilitate understanding of my passion for this subject.

When I was six months old my *abba* (father) discovered that I had the sense of rhythm. One day he had the radio playing and noticed that I was moving my tiny

hands with the music. In order to ascertain that I was actually following the music he switched off the radio and saw that without the music, I stopped moving my hands and was looking at him with soulful eyes. When he re-played the music I started moving my hands again. It was then that he told my mother, "Rukshana will be a dancer someday".

In a traditional Muslim family learning music and dance is not treated with respect. Despite opposition from my extended paternal family, my parents decided to enroll me for dance classes, at Mitali Kala Kendra at the age of seven for training in Odissi dance. My mother chose Odissi for me, as she was enamored by the gracefulness of the dance form, which she had seen Garima Hazarika (who eventually became my *guru*) perform during the annual meet of Mitali Sangha, a ladies club. Since my mother was a member of the club it became easier for me to enroll for the dance classes. My first *guru* was Garima Hazarika who taught me Odissi dance for seven years. Later, I learnt from Sangeeta Hazarika in Sangeeta Nritya Academy and completed my *Nritya Bharati* (Bachelor in Dance) in the year 1994 with my *Manch Pravesh* (first stage performance) ceremony. It was a moment of great achievement and pride for my parents and me as I could live up to their expectations and complete my training in dance against all odds.

On the day of my *manch pravesh*, Garima Hazarika told me after the ceremony, "Do not give up dance. Today is just the beginning and not the end. I want you to continue in this tradition." The journey though was not an easy one. Today, I rarely perform on stage but with my research work in Odissi dance I have extended my relationship with dance and taken it to a new height.

Before we move on to a discussion on the legitimacy of dance in Islam, I would like to present here a brief description of the Odissi dance in terms of its origin and history so as to have an understanding of the dance form. References made in this section are from my empirical fieldwork conducted for my doctoral research. The origin of the Odissi dance has its roots in the *Mahari* dance which was traditionally a temple dance form performed exclusively in the temple of Lord Jagannath, situated in Puri, Odisha. In the Jagannath temple there were thirty six categories of temple functionaries known as *chhatissanijoga*. The *maharis* were a part of the temple *sebayats* (people who are engaged in the service of the Lord), an integral part of the temple administration system and flourished under the patronage of the King of Puri during the pre-colonial and post colonial period.

With the advent of British rule in India this temple dance tradition came under scrutiny but flourished till the temple administration was under the direct supervision of the King of Puri. The dance tradition in the Jagannath temple came to end when the temple administration became independent. Without the patronage of the King it was difficult to sustain the tradition and thus, removed from the list of temple *nitis* (rituals). In the early 19$^{th}$ century the rise of the middle class played a role as this class was influenced by western ideas, thoughts and beliefs. This was a phase

when aspects of Indian culture which did not conform to the western norms were condemned and criticized. Thus, the temple rituals of the *maharis* came under criticism and the anti-nautch movement saw the withering away of the dance and music tradition under the colonial rule as an impact of western education and lack of Indian patronage. The King of Puri who had been the patron of this dance form backed away under the force of westernization, Independence movement, and the creation of the state of Orissa (now Odisha) which saw a shift of power from the hands of the King to the State as regards the administration of the Jagannath Temple. Mohan Khokar (1983:41) writes, "Under the influence and governance of the British Raj many traditions of Indian culture were negatively affected, especially Indian dance. The combination of Victorian prudishness and the fact that the nautch girls were generally associated with women of low moral standing, caused dance to fall into disrepute".

The first half of the 20th century saw the decline of the *mahari* tradition along with the *gotipua* (male dancers dressed in female attires) tradition in Orissa, as the first was considered to be prostitution and the latter was looked down upon as cheap and vulgar. The extent of its condemnation could be felt in the Oriya society when Kelucharan Mohapatra's father Chintamani discovered that his six year old son was clandestinely taking dance lessons from Balabhadra Sahu, a *gotipua* master, his reaction was; "you would like to dance around moving your hips, pulling faces with your tongue stretched out, winking at the zamindar to receive garlands of flowers or to get banknotes pinned on your chest? This will not do!" (Citaristi, 2001: 15). Thus, from this statement it can be inferred that there was a time in the Hindu society also when dance was not held in high esteem. It was not accorded respect and people indulging in dance and music were looked down upon.

The dance tradition of the *maharis* was however revived during the period of cultural revivalism in the pre-independence era. This was the time of self realization when Indians across the country denounced everything not of Indian origin like clothes from the mills of England, food etc. and people accepted whole heartedly indigenous products. Among such things that were revived, dance and music also came to the forefront. In Orissa the cultural revivalism began with the struggle for acquiring Oriya language as the medium of instructions in schools and colleges of Orissa. The language movement strengthened the theatre movement. It was in these theatres that dance once again was taken up. The *gotipua* dancers and the *guru*s like Kelucharan Mahapatra were among the few who revived dance and music. Among the promoters of the dance form Pankaj Charan Das was the only one who had learned the *mahari* form of dance from his aunt *mahari* Haripriya. The present day Odissi dance as we know is a reconstruction of the *mahari* dance, along with inputs from *gotipua* and the temple cravings of Konark temple. It was not only the dance form but also the dress, ornaments, repertoire and the music that was revived and reconstructed. Today the Odissi dance is not a pure *mahari*

dance (temple dance) but a reconstruction to give it an identity that in itself becomes a representation of the Oriya society.

The Odissi dance with a background of temple dance was a concern in my practice of dance. My involvement in dance was rebuked by my paternal relatives. Even when I was a child, my paternal grandmother would say, "Aren't your parents thinking of your marriage? Where will we find a groom when people come to know about your dance?" My mother would brush off these, and say that it will be seen when time came. Others would cite the Qur'an (though not the exact verses), and say that dance and music cannot be entertained and is *haram* (an Arabic term meaning forbidden). One of my paternal aunts touched my forehead and said, "This is the place you wear a *bindi* (red vermillion mark between the two eyebrows) during performances, but after death this portion will be burnt with charcoal as a punishment, as *bindi* is not worn by a Muslim woman". As a child, I rarely pondered on such questions, but there were incidents which made me want to read the Holy Book. Recently, a faculty in the University said to one of my colleagues, "Rukshana is a Muslim, so why does she wear a *bindi*?" Personally, *bindi* is a dress accessory for me, and so I did not feel that it was *haram*. The *bindi* I wear is not a sign of my marital status. Even during my fieldwork in Odisha, my identity as a Muslim trying to understand the history of Odissi dance was met with a lot of speculations. Today, while writing this autoethnographic account, I would like to explore these questions. I am not well versed in Arabic and have read the translated version of the Qur'an years ago, thus, would not be an authority to cite it. Therefore, in order to understand the writings and the views presented in it on dance and music, I decided to seek information from a few learned people who have read and interpreted the Qur'an[7].

In the verse **21:79 and 38:18-19** mention has been made of Prophet Daud who used to sing spiritual songs in his melodious voice. Similarly, the people of Medina who had been waiting for years for the Prophet's visit, burst into songs when he entered the city. Young girls on seeing the Prophet burst into spontaneous song in his praise. Music is not banned in Islam but there are certain restrictions in the performance of the same. Music should not be loud and the accompaniment allowed is *daf* (a small drum made of goat skin). There were four conditions for listening to *sama* (music session). Firstly, *sama* is lawful only to *salik* (spiritual travelers). Secondly, it should be performed in a gathering and on an occasion. Thirdly, the content of the song should be in good taste and preferably spiritual. Last, the singer should have good reputation. There have been many arguments against citing the movements of the whirling dervishes as dance though in the academic world many have termed it as dance.

Shay (1995: 68) says, "To a pious Muslim, any activity, no matter how rhythmic or musical, in which the participants repeat 'Allah' or 'Ali' cannot be termed as dance. The performance of ablutions and the preparation for prayer, for instance, signal the devotee's intent to address God." Herein, reference can be made of the

*maharis*, as stated by Sashimoni Mahari (Zaman, 2007: 93), "on the day of *seba* one had to keep a fast and could only partake the *mahaprasad* (food cooked in the temple kitchen and offered to the Lord for blessing) after the ritual bath. On the day of the *seba* one had to be *suddha* (pure) in body and soul". Herein, *seba* refers to the service of the *mahari* as a temple performer and her performance at the offering of the midday meal to Lord Jagannath known as *sakala dhupo*. The dance is performed facing the south in the *natya mandap* (hall of dance/ space where dance is performed) whereas the deities are seated facing the east in the inner sanctum of the temple. Explaining this fact Sashimoni states, "We perform not to entertain the Lord but we are serving him. To dance at midday meal is a *seba*. I am trying to appease Lord Jagannath to have his food and not entertaining him" (Zaman, 2007: 96). Thus, in the Hindu tradition also though known as temple dance, the performances are not for entertainment but forms a part of the rituals performed for the deities. In Kerala, south India, on the day of the performance of the Krishnattam and the Kathakali dances, the dancers too keep a fast.

In the words of Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, "The Islamic concerns are more to do with the other world, life after death, the day of judgment with its reward of *jannat* (paradise) or punishment and that this world is a transitory phase. We are in a way preparing ourselves for the ultimate destination, a place in paradise and it is through our activities in this world that we would be able to make ourselves worthy of the same. Islamic concern is not just for entertainment but to develop personality, intellectual development, what is required to develop a purified personality to find place in paradise (the ultimate goal of this life for a place in paradise). Only those people who have been able to develop a purified personality will find place in paradise. This cannot be attained through dance and music. This is not an important criterion for personality development. Dance and music are neither *haram* nor *halal* but is rather a distraction. Dance and music lead to a deviation, a distraction from the path of purification of the soul. Thus, even though dance and music are not *haram*, nor mentioned as such in any of the *hadith* (collection of traditions containing sayings of Prophet Muhammad) or the Qur'an, one must refrain from indulging in it as it a source of distraction and one cannot utilize oneself fully. It has also been observed that reference to dance in any form stating it to be *haram* finds no mention in the Qur'an, but one should refrain from it as it is against *tazkiyah* (spiritual purification) strongly espoused by Islam".

With the above references it can be stated that dance in Islam has been left out from the acts that are seen to induce and develop the personality of a human being. To say dance is a taboo in Islam is a misnomer as nothing specific has been written about it in the Qur'an. Speaking about the patterned movement in Iran and Islam, Shay (1995: 65) states, "The Holy Qur'an makes no definitive statements concerning music or dance, nor does it overtly place prohibitions on either. Islamic attitudes toward dance and music are more complex than some of these writers would have

us believe. If the Prophet Muhammad had indeed explicitly forbidden music and dance, or if there had been a clear statement to this effect in the Qur'an, then the issue would have been resolved long ago and these performing arts would not exist".

However, when I come back to the Odissi dance and my performances, it definitely does raise a few questions. The first and foremost question that arises is that Odissi dance has its roots in the temple tradition of the *mahari* dance. Today even though this dance form has been reconstructed yet there are certain elements which still link the dance form to the Hindu god, Lord Jagannath. Firstly, even though the dance form has left its original abode of the temple, yet in every performance a corner of the stage is earmarked for Lord Jagannath. The *maharis* in the temple of Jagannath used to dance facing south even though the idols were in the east. This pattern is followed on stage too. During an Odissi performance in a theatre, the eastern side of the stage is earmarked for the idol of Jagannath. A dancer on entering the stage pays homage to Lord Jagannath with flowers and after seeking his blessings starts the performance. This is also symbolic of the sacredness of the dance form, to remind the artist that the dance is being performed for the god in front of an audience. In the repertoire, the first performance is the *mangalacharan* (invocation), seeking blessings from mother earth through stage *pranam* (bowing one's head for blessings) and finally the audience *pranam*.

So how does one tackle such a situation as a Muslim dancer, as in Islam idol worship is *haram*. From my own understanding of Islam for my first stage performance, the *Manch Pravesh* (the first formal stage performance), when I had to perform the *mangalacharan*, I had a rationale behind seeking his blessings, for I considered Lord Jagannath as one of the many messengers of Islam. In the Qur'an mention has been made of one lakh twenty four thousand messengers. Thus, while performing the *mangalacharan*, I did not completely bow down but showed my respect as I would show to any elderly person with the feeling that if he was one of the messengers I am showing my respect to him. I feel this act cannot be termed as a *gunnah* (sin) or *haram* as I have not accepted the religion nor indulged in idol worship but was paying my homage by greeting him. The problem would have arisen if I had completely bowed down in submission (*sajda*) as in Islam one can only bow down in absolute submission to Allah alone.

In terms of the Hindu sacred complex in India, the Muslims have been part of it in one way or the other. In the history of Assam, references have been made of Sufism and Sankardev's neo-Vaishnavite movement progressing hand in hand during the medieval period. Many Muslims became the disciples of Sankardev and some of them like Chand Khan, Joyhari, Haridas and Dheli Darji were well known for their contribution to the growth of neo-Vaishnavite movement in pre-colonial Assam (Barua, 1989). Reference can also be cited of Bismillah Khan, the noted Shehnai player from Benaras, whose forefathers were known to have played

the Shehnai on the ghats and also in the temple courtyards (Ganguly, 1994). In different parts of India, the performance of the rituals of Muharram also has traces of rituals imbibed from the Hindu culture. Both the cultures are closely intertwined. Be it Hajo in Assam or Vrindavan (the birth place of Lord Krishna) temples and mosques are seen side by side. A visit to the Poa Mecca in Hajo (1/4th Mecca) in Assam is thought to have some of the sanctity of Mekka. In Hajo a Muslim's pilgrimage is not complete without a visit to the *Hayagriva Madhava Mandir* (temple). Be it the *maulvi sahib* of the mosque or the *pundit* (priest) of the temple, they would definitely ask you to pay *darshan* (homage) to the other.

## IV

This autoethnographic account is a reflection on the self through ethnography. My emphasis in this autoethnography has been on my identity and my relation with dance. Taking cues from the work done on stereotypes by Marranci (2008), I have presented my case. Given the diverse ethnic and cultural composition of India, it becomes difficult to ascertain an identity. Each community is influenced by the neighbouring communities and the process of assimilation and acculturation leads to the creation of an identity, be it Assamese Muslim of Assam or the South Indian Muslims or the North Indian Muslims, which is unique in itself. Reference from the Muhammedan chronicler Shihabuddin, who visited Assam with the Mughal invading army led by Mir Jumla during 1662-63, noted that the Muslims settled here had assimilated themselves to such an extent that except the name nothing was left of Islam with them (Gait, 1981; Neog, 1985). However, much of the Muslim culture was revived in Assam during the time of Azan Pir thus creating a new identity of Assamese Muslim. This has today been stereotyped as the liberal Muslims of Assam.

As an Assamese Muslim growing up in a mixed community, my worldviews were quite different. My parents also had a great role to play. *Abba* was highly religious and so is *amma*. She performs *salat* (prayers) five times a day, yet we were never forced to adhere to it. *Amma* states *salat* comprises the good deeds that one will take to the next world but no one can be forced to perform it. It's a self realization and when that happens one would perform *salat* on their own. She further emphasis that one must be made aware of the goodness of *salat* but not forced. Islam is a way of life but one need not restrict oneself, the basic philosophy that one needs to follow is to do no harm to others and always be honest. Dwelling on the views on dance that has been presented in this autoethnography it can be summed up that dance has not been accepted as a part of *tazkiyah* (spiritual purification) in Islam and thus, Muslims refrain from it. Yet in my family, due to our being Assamese Muslim and our assimilation to the Assamese culture we have a different worldview. My maternal grandmother was encouraged by her father-

in-law to write prose and poetry. She has been awarded with *Sathiya Sabha Likhika* Award (literary award) from Nagaon district and had two published works in poetry. At the same time it is worthy to note here that my grandmother's mother had also performed Hajj. One of my cousins has done her masters in music and currently pursuing her Phd in music who is also a well known singer, while another one is an established singer in Assam.

This autoethnographic account is my understanding of Islam and dance based on my identity. Through this autoethnography with narrative accounts and self interpretations I have looked at one of the dominant religious myths that had restricted the freedom of social performance of dance. In the academic platform I leave this paper open for deliberations and discussions and would like academic interpretation as to how one can look into dance and music, not necessarily adhering to any religious norms.

### *Notes*

1. Due to inter-marriages, Assamese Muslims and Hindu Muslims in Assam, cannot be differentiated on looks alone. Their physical features are very much similar.
2. Along with five pillars, are the six articles of faith, namely, "There is no god but Allah and Muhammad is his prophet", "Qur'an is the word of Allah", "Angels are the instrument of Allah", "The just will be rewarded in paradise and the unjust punished in hell", "Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus were prophets who preceded Muhammad, the last prophet", and "Predestination of individual merit".
3. The Ahoms are an ethnic group in Assam. They originally migrated from Mong Mao, a small kingdom, related to Shan, in present day Yunnan Province of China, alongwith Prince Sukapha in the year 1228. The Ahoms ruled Assam for nearly six centuries. In terms of religion they traditionally believed in ancestor worship, but in course of time many of the Hindu rituals were incorporated. While some embraced Christianity and Islam during the later years. Since the Ahoms were from the Mongoloid stock one of the distinctive physical features is the epicanthic fold over the eye.
4. The legend goes that Azan Pir came to Assam in the 17$^{th}$ century from Baghdad and helped revive Islam. He settled in Sibsagar area of Upper Assam. As a Sufi saint, he became popular for his devotional songs and *Azan* i.e., the call for *namaz/salat* (prayers). The Ahom king being a staunch follower of Tai religion did not like the growing popularity of Azan Pir. The king ordered that Azan Pir be blinded. Azan Pir's eyes were plucked out and thrown in the river Dikhow in two earthen pots. As the pots moved downstream, it left in its wake heavy flood and numerous villages were destroyed. The king realizing his mistake repented and allowed Azan Pir to stay in Sibsagar and spread the message of Islam. It is believed that the followers of Azan Pir who converted to Islam were given the surname of Syed (the direct descendants of Prophet Muhammad).
5. The term *sardar* refers to a chief of a village. The Persian title meaning "leader".
6. The inputs on the dress and ornaments of an Assamese Muslim bride has been provided by Noureen Kausar, my maternal aunt. While the traditions of North Indian Muslim were reflected upon by my colleague, A.R. Khan, Professor of History in our University, and Itrat Jaffri one of my close friends.

7. This was narrated to me by Maulana Wahiduddin Khan and his daughter Dr. Farida Khanum. Maulana Wahiduddin Khan is best known for his translation of the Quran into English. Dr. Farida Khanum, a Phd in Islamic studies, and a faculty in Jamia Milia Islamia University for the last 18 years. She has been involved in the translation of the Qur'an, and is an author of a booklet on the Prophet.

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