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### Research article

#### Abhinaya as Practice-as-Research

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What does a collaborative process of an artistic creation entail? How does the individual components of text, music, and dance weave in a solo choreography? This article brings together the voices of the dancer (Sarkar), the choreographer (Dandavate), and the music composer (Mirle) who has also sung and is the curator of the project called *Nachi Meera*. This project has commissioned multiple artists working in different dance techniques to present *Abhinaya*-esque (meaning expressive dance works) expositions on songs by the renowned historical saint-poet Mirabai. Sarkar, Dandavate, and Mirle reflect upon their collaborative journeys in this reflective essay where the process of creating an *Abhinaya* is theorized as research. The dance piece itself stands by itself as a scholarly product with historical, performative, and artistic research methodologies informing the process. This article documents the collaborative process borrowing from scholar Robin Nelson's Practice-as-Research (PaR) methodology and argues how the artistic product weaves verbal, kinesthetic, and aural communication in an iterative process of 'doing-reflecting-reading-articulating-doing' (Nelson 32). Movement layers the intricacies of South Asian aesthetics or the *Rasa* theory that governs the mood of execution by the dancer. Improvisation through choreography supplements Mirabai's lyrics and Mirle's musical composition.

**Keywords:** Abhinaya, Odissi, Practice-as-Research, Collaboration, Mirabai

## Introduction

*Abhinaya* or the expressional repertoire as practiced by traditional Indian dancers is a complex palimpsest of poetry, musicality, lyricality, expression, gesture, posture, and negotiations of stasis and motility. It is an integral component of the odissi (an eastern Indian dance form from the state of Odisha) repertoire and marks the most virtuoso piece of an evening-length showing.<sup>i</sup> Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra's renditions of twelfth century poet, Jayadeva's *Ashtapadis* or eight-versed songs of the twelfth century poetic masterpiece called *Gitagovinda*, are popular and canonized as masterpieces worldwide.<sup>ii</sup> In an *Abhinaya*, facial expression and gestural emoting translates the textual of the song-lyrics and the verses from the poetry into the presentational. Layers of music and percussion further complicate the rendition, which requires the choreographer to prioritize excerpts from the song into *Sanchari*—meaning dancic prose deepening a particular emotion or attribute. This article articulates the creative process of such an *Abhinaya* piece, *Meera*, that was curated by vocalist/scholar MA Jyothi, choreographed by odissi-scholar Rohini Dandavate, and commissioned on practitioner/ theorist Kaustavi Sarkar. Here, all three share their artistic perspectives in first person showing the collaborative through lines between the singer, the choreographer, and the dancer. The artistic process entails constant dialogue between the three individuals. The initial musical sketching leads to the preliminary choreographic hues. Further, percussive detailing by odissi Guru Poushali Mukherjee adds aural variations to the piece. The completion of the first draft of choreography along with the dancer's notes informs the final recording of the music. The final choreography is then set to a musical composition involving flute by Sameer Rao, sitar (a string instrument) by Shruthi Kamat, Pakhawaj by Guru Murthy Vaidya, and vocals by the project curator and music composer MA Jyothi.

Framing of this piece as research is primarily motivated by the field of Practice-as-Research (PaR) that refuses the possibility of complete analysis of embodied practice by scholarly reflection. Practice-as-Research (PaR) is a field of inquiry where the practicing body is not marginalized by theory. Rather, the written words supplement the creative process (Doğantan; Hanks; Nelson; Sullivan; Throp). This project is a PaR given its centering of the emotive dancing body supplemented by theoretical perspectives by the dancer, choreographer, and the music composer who is also the music composer. The dancing body of *Meera* precludes the possibility of co-optation by theory, which only serves as a supplement to demystifying the creative process. According to scholar Robin Nelson, PaR imbricates theory in practice maintaining a dialogical connection across the two. Nelson claims that his "use of 'praxis' is intended to denote the possibility of thought within both 'theory' and 'practice' in an iterative process of 'doing- reflecting-reading-articulating-doing'" (Nelson 32). In *Meera*, the primary motivation is provided by saint-poet Mirabai's sung lyrics. Mirabai is a northern Indian saint poet who attained enormous celebrity as a pan-Indian figure. According to John Stratton Hawley, "Mira's story has been enacted ten times on the screen, in a succession of films that goes back to the earliest days of sound cinematography in India" (120). Mirabai's songs are full of rich imagery of *Sawan* or the monsoons yearning for her lover, the male deity *Hari* who is also known as *Girdhar Nagar*.

The monsoon clouds are dark with rain;  
Sawan soothes my heart.  
My life brims over with joy  
In this season of the rains  
For I have heard  
That Hari will soon be here.  
Clouds threaten,  
Lightning strikes,  
The rains fall and fall.

Cool winds blow away my sorrows.  
 Mira's lord is Girdhar Nagar.  
 This is the time to sing his praise.  
 (Translated by Pritish Nandy 21)

In the dance *Meera*, the choral verse is *Nand Nandan Bilmayi*, in which Hari is referred to as King Nanda's son. The lyrics of Mirabai's song are elaborated with music, punctuated with rhythm, and repositioned according to the choreographic need. The verbal foundation via the poetics of Mirabai is repurposed through embodied praxis by the musicians, dancer, and the choreographer. The metonymic syllables, the poetic text, the vocalization, the gestural detailing, the percussive interjections, and the facial expressions focus on creating an embodied experience that is informed via the South Asian theory on aesthetics or *Rasa*; *Rasa* translates as sentiment or mood. Mirabai's devotional sentiment is the primary foundation for the aesthetic rendition of *Meera*. This article shows the imbrications of the various strands of theory and practice. On one end, this article reflects on the artistic process from three different perspectives. On the other, it shows the primacy of the artistic product, that is, the visceral dancing body as central to *Abhinaya's* layering of multiple modes of meaning—textual, musical, percussive, and gestural. This process is similar to dance-scholar Aadya Kaktikar's teaching of Abhinaya in liberal studies curriculum where students “think through dance and acknowledge multiplicity of layers, meanings and aesthetics that permeate its practice” (122). The article presents the choreographic process from the conceptual inception to the kinesthetic realization. It starts with the dancer's perspective. Then, it brings in the choreographer's framing and ends with the curator's thought process.

### **Dancing Meera**

As the dancer on whom *Meera* has been commissioned since December 2020, I develop a narrative regarding the creative process of working with the layers of poetics, musicality, rhythm, and expressive nuance. This process has been unique since it laid bare the symbiotic relationship of choreography and music composition. I have learnt and written about canonical and new choreographic experiments in odissi from the perspective of a choreographer / scholar / dancer focusing on aesthetics. However, this experience with Dandavate entailed a scholarly praxis since she asked me to incorporate my thoughts into the process by using story-boarding as a framing device. Dandavate's choreographic process did not feel like a physical exercise only. Rather, theory and practice imbricated within one another as I followed a cyclical process of embodying movement and then writing about it and eventually re-envisioning new material. Dandavate's choreographic inspiration from Kelucharan Mohapatra's imagistic vision informs her own choreographic framework and structure. Dandavate started this work on a Zurich-based artist, Dipti Abhilash. Her work on this project got halted due to an injury. I inherited this piece from Abhilash. Her videos animated the beginnings of my experimentation with Mirabai's text and MA Jyothi's vocalization. In this section, I layer the multiplicity of expressive categories, namely music, rhythm, text, and movement, reflecting upon my performative execution as a dancer.

The layering of the Abhinaya is an intense culmination of multiple hues from poetic, lyrical, percussive, emotive, and devotional aesthetics. The central guiding principle remains within the *Sthayee Bhava* or the dominant expression. In *Meera*, the *Sthayee Bhava* is a combination of devotion (*Bhakti*) and love (*Sringara*). Meerabai's intense longing for her beloved is affirmed through her lyrical expressions in the illustrated text *Krishna, Krishna: The Devotional Songs of Mirabai*. Expressions of life-affirming love are abundant in Mirabai's songs, especially in the signage when she says “in Giridhar's hue drench yourself,” or that “love has salvaged my heart” (51). Mira's identity as a woman, argues John Stratton Hawley makes her “words have an authenticity that no male poet can

match" (122). The *Bhakti* movement seeks a personal relation with God where the seeker accepts a feminine identity yearning for the male devotee. Famed saint poets such as Kabir, Surdas, and Nanak, among others, "had to go through all the work of 'becoming' women to experience God as husband and lover" (120, Hawley). Although, I do not comply with Hawley's essentializing of Mirabai's gendered attributes, I acknowledge her special status as a pan-Indian figure with an unparalleled devotional fervor. Devotion and love form an emotive dialectic in this Abhinaya as Mirabai's words render both *Bhakti* and *Sringara*. Odissi's curvilinear aesthetic of soft sinuous gestures, lyrical arcs, and dense filigree-work of embodied detailing further emboldens the *Sringara*, which also stands for ornamentation. Throughout the dance, I establish Mirabai's *Bhakti-Sringara* either in lyrical translation or metaphorical exposition. Searching for *Krishna* in the environment, external and internal, *Meera* centers the devotional yearning of the *Bhakta* or the devotee. The fervor is grounded in the materiality of her beloved as she declares that she is colored with the color of her lord (119, Hawley). The choreography culminates with Mirabai's yearning as a complete surrendering of her soul at the feet of the devoted.

Poetics remain the hallmark of Abhinaya pieces because it provides the foundation for the subsequent elaboration in gesture and expression. The song is a composition by Meerabai and the dance envisions a performance as the saint poetess. This is a departure from my usual performative avatar where I maintain a fluid role of the principal story-teller and the characters portrayed by the lyrics. Here, donning on the persona of Meerabai require a sense of gravity in mood and expression. This means the constant infusion of *Bhakti* or devotion as the *Sthyayee Bhava*, dominant mood, while the description of the environment, the flora, the fauna, the clouds, and the rains continue to deepen the primary devotional enterprise. As mentioned above, the *Sthyayee Bhava* of *Bhakti Sringara* delineates Meera's unwavering love and devotion for her beloved, lord Krishna. She sees him in the changing colors of the skies or in the leaps of the frogs. She experiences him in the rolling of the dark thunderous cumulonimbus clouds and makes flower garlands for his idol in the temple. The *Sanchari Bhava* or the elaborations beyond the literal translation of the sung poem further deepen her *Bhakti Sringara*.

While the traditional *Abhinaya* is mostly a weaving of the *Sthyayee* and the *Sanchari Bhavas*, this piece incorporates another important choreographic modality, which I theorize as dialogical progression. In this piece, Dandavate asked me to verbally describe my movement and include vivid imagery through adjectives and adverbs. The figure below is from a working session where Dandavate is modifying my languaging in order to find appropriate words for the *Abhinaya*. My words that were let go are in red. For example, I use words such as hastily, frantically, apprehensively, immediately, and earnestly were respectively replaced by devotionally, spiritually, satisfactorily, experientially, and carefully. This wordsmithing entailed finding the right descriptor in the dancer's psyche that translated in facial expressions. The lyrics were interspersed with such dialogical progressions while the *Sanchari* elaborates the primary mood of *Bhakti Sringara* that is the *Sthyayee Bhava*. The embellishing of text in the form of sung lyrics, internal dialogue of the dancer, and the foundation within *Bhakti Sringara* through *Sthyayee* and *Sanchari* shows the rich layering of multiple verbal codes embellishing this choreographic process and execution.

Meera (**hastily**) (Bhavapurna : lot of devotion) looks hither thither following the (**quaint**) (divine call) trail of the flute that brings her at an immense peace and a quiet joy. Eventually, she (**frantically**) arrives (spiritually to a fulfillment) at the (**auspicious**) doorstep of the temple. Fully satisfied and with eagerness **apprehensively**, she opens the door and her heart (**immediately**) feels a sense of relief (Santushti) (Thank God, I found you at last) **springs** with joy as she calmly (sufi) twirls around a few times. She realizes that it is time to make a lovely garland by showing the action of plucking flowers. **She (earnestly) tells the viewers that she is going to pluck flowers, make a garland, and return back in just a second.** She (carefully) holds out her anchal and ventures out into the forest to gather prized pieces to make the garland for her treasured one. She collects all her flowers on the ground and starts making the garland. **Just to be (more) safe**, Out of love and devotion, she creates one more garland to decorate her beloved with lovely fragrant flowers. Then, she takes the water jar and (softly) pours it over a sandalwood grinder. Gathering the sandalwood paste in her palms, she brings them to her face. The aroma lifts her spirits reminding her of the (excitement Umad-Ghumad Rolling of the feeling) **turbulent** heart within while noticing the dark **turbulent** clouds around.

Fig. 1. Screenshot from Google Document as an example of Choreographic Writing

Musicality remains a striking requirement for an *Abhinaya* as the lilting flow of the instrumentation lands, reflects, and refracts from the dancing body in nuanced ways. *Meera* is especially potent with musical imagery with the entry and exit sequences representationally showcasing the *Khanjani* and the *Iktara* respectively. Both are traditional Indian instruments and we see the use of these by *Meerabai* in popular iconography. Furthermore, Dandavate was deeply influenced by the aesthetic of the Baul singers of Bengal. The *Iktara* and its concomitant movements recreated the Baul feeling on stage. *Bansuri*, Krishna's flute maintains a strong presence in this as we see *Meera* pulled by the divine sound towards the temple premises. Finally, the percussion instrument or the *Mardala* adds further possibilities of staccato gesturing and posturing. While the string and wind musical instruments create a qualitative holistic feel, the percussion adds a quantitative and mathematical approach to the piece. Together the *Khanjani*, *Iktara*, *Bansuri*, and *Mardala* generate a musical semiosis as the lilting cadence or the staccato tautness of the various instruments signifies on their own. This metonymy connects *Krishna* and the *Bansuri* and *Meerabai* with the *Khanjani* and the *Iktara* generate what I call a musical semiosis. The piece starts with the *Khanjani*, lines with a percussive *bol* on the *Mardala*, and moves on to vocals. Throughout the duration of the work, the musical pieces remain fresh and alternate various strands of musicality to create musical semiosis alongside the verbal and the percussive.

Percussive interruptions showcase the Odissi style of movement by expand upon the text portrayed either before or after the *bol*. It expands upon the theme or bhava. For example, a rhythmic interlude between the repetitions of the sung line, *Umada Ghumada Kis Disi Se Aya* (where did it come from, circling here and there), expands upon the lyrics with percussive ornamentation to show the density of the rolling clouds, and the intensity of thunder and lightning. The first *Tihai* or the thrice repeated percussive section that marks a distinct change in the music paving the way for the new, focuses on the gait of the peacock and the koel. *Percussion* is also used to intensify the devotional elements as seen in the last *bol*. Here, swaying from side to side in trance, *Meera* visualizes Krishna everywhere finally surrendering her heart felt love at the feet of the lord.

Karataka Jhena Karataka Jhena  
 Karataka Jhena Karataka Jhena  
 Ta Thom Ta Gadi Ghene Dha  
 Ta Thom Ta Gadi Ghene Dha  
 Ta Thom Ta Gadi Ghene Dha

There are multiple planes of composition in this non-linear journey of *Meera* since the dance moves from description to imagination to visualization. Meera imagines her lord and visualizes him all around herself. However, there are times when she describes her immediate material environment while finding devotional synergy in it. She sees devotional synergy within the leaping frog, the magnanimous peacock, the chirping birds, the thunderous rain, and the rolling creeper. Only with the change in the look or the eye level, she personifies *Krishna* with his flute as well as adulates him as her sole beloved. She imagines *Krishna* standing right in front of her as the *Giri Govardhana*, the one who had saved an entire village from drawing by raising a mountain as shelter. Her trance like existence transcends from material description to imagining and finally visualizing her beloved for the rest of her audience. This maneuvering across planar modalities creates a non-linear composition that is primarily metaphorical. It is not composing a linear story. Rather, it composes an intensity of possibility that primarily foregrounds the *Bhakti Shringara* or Mira's absolute soul-surrendering love for her Krishna.

Finally, the kinesthetic pauses create the necessary communicative potential for the choreography. Moving from one *Bhangi* (postural stasis in Odissi) to the other with the *Sthayee Bhava* (dominant expression of *Bhakti Shringara*) requires a moment of physical silencing. This moment aligns the dancer's body-mind continuum to her choreographic reality--in imagination, visualization, or description--while simultaneously connecting it with the audience. The use of the eyes as a constant negotiator of being, seeing, and visualizing *Krishna* is paramount as the viewer is able to gauge *Mirabai's* actions and create an aesthetic tapestry of the *Sthayee Bhava*. Dandavate's positioning of conjunctions as useful tools in *Abhinaya* becomes another unique choreographic strategy since the conjunctive nuances translate to kinesthetic pauses for effective story-telling. Below, Dandavate shares her choreographic process detailing her framing across imagery and narrative.

### Choreographing MEERA in Odissi Style

In this article I share my recent experience of choreographing an Odissi dance *Abhinaya* in collaboration with a leading vocalist from India, and an Odissi dancer from North Carolina. For the past one year since the lockdown was first announced in the US, I have participated in a variety of online interactions between artists. This project has significance because despite the restrictions on in-person interactions the outcome of this collaboration through video conferencing has more value than just art making. It is evident that the lockdown, instead of stifling creativity motivated artists like me to connect and create across international borders with greater curiosity and enthusiasm. To me the experience served as a panacea during the period of lockdown.

Dr. M. A. Jyothi, a leading Carnatic singer from Bengaluru, conceived the idea of collaborating with dancers of five dance styles, Odissi being one, for choreographing select songs of Meera bai. Ms Dipti Abhilash, a student of Late Dr. Minati Mishra from Zurich, Switzerland, first approached me to work with her on one of the bhajans. I saw this as an opportunity for release of pent up creative energy and a reason for quiet contemplation. Though Dipti had to discontinue for health reasons, Dr. Kaustavi Sircar, from U.N.C.C. stepped in to continue the project.

The song was set to Raga Shudh Sarang, a melody usually sung before noon. As per mythological references, Swami Haridas (a spiritual poet and composer of a large body of devotional

music) brought Lord Krishna to earth by singing in this raga. The mystical quality and cadence of this raga makes it a suitable choice to represent Meera bai's song.

Through years of performance and practice of odissi dance, I have chalked the process of choreography as illustrated below.

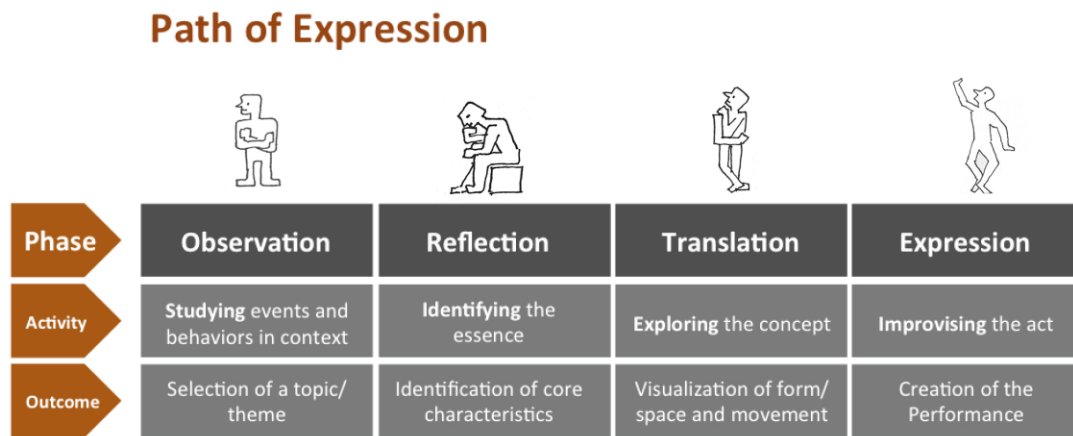


Fig. 2. Modular Representation of the Choreographic Process

As shown in the diagram, I follow the four stages: of observation, reflection translation and expression. Through activities one learns about the content and context e.g., Literature review on Meera bai and watching dances on devotional themes performed in other classical dance styles prepared me in envisioning my piece.

### Understanding the content and identifying the essence

I began the process with understanding the meaning of the song and discerning the broader context of Meera bai's life and her songs. The lyrics of the selected song refer to the omnipresence of Lord Krishna. The mood of Meerabai's longing for Krishna is set by she describing of the arrival of the rains with dark thickening clouds, dancing peacocks, swaying trees, with birds chirping and frogs jumping amidst loud thunder and lightning. The form, movement, sounds and sensations of the environment provide a backdrop in which Meera surrenders to her Lord. The simple words of the verse bring to light her deep longing for union with Krishna. The manifested emotion is of Shringar Bhakti, which is love and devotion. Keeping in perspective the theme it was evident that the intensity of Meera's emotional state could be adroitly communicated by evoking Shringar Bhakti (romantic devotion) using the intricate vocabulary of Odissi gestures and movements.

### Context



Fig. 3. An Artistic Representation of Meera Bai

Meera **bai**, was one of the poets of the Bhakti (devotion) movement. A princess of Rajasthan, Meera bai's profound devotion for Krishna led her to renounce the royal and comfortable life and become a Hindu mystic. The Bhakti (passionate devotion) movement which spread all around India from the 8<sup>th</sup> century reached its zenith in 15<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Century CE. It was inspired by many poets and saints and aimed to question and reform the ancient Vedic

traditions. Burgeoning in different regions of India, around the various Gods and Goddesses innumerable poets wrote devotional poems in the regional languages with a view to evoke shared religiosity. The Bhakti Movement became instrumental in bringing social reforms in the practice of Hinduism, and provided an individual-focused alternative path to spirituality irrespective of one's birth or gender. Meera bai's not following the patriarchal norms was also seen as a rebellious act but she stood firm in her convictions and followed the path of *self surrender* (the path of love and devotion) which was one of the main tenets of the Bhakti Movement. Meera bai wrote about 1300 verses in *Braj bhasa* or Rajasthani to exemplify her message with transcendental emotion.

### **Odissi's link to spirituality**

Dr. MA Jyoti's selection of presenting this particular bhajan in the Odissi dance style was befitting mainly because, for the people of Odisha, Odissi dance was a medium to connect with Lord Jaganath, an incarnation of Krishna. Singing and dancing flourished as a ritual in the temples of Odisha, under the strong Vaishnavite influence. Dr. Kaustavi Sarkar in her doctoral dissertation, *Mahari out: Deconstructing Odissi* (2017) discusses "Gaudiya Vaisnavism values, sentiment and embodiment of devotion, in which a spiritual union with Krishna is possible only when the devotee transforms into Radha by embodying the Sakhi Bhava, an understanding of the divine as a friend or a lover". Meera's song depicts a similar Sakhi bhava with the enigmatic yearning to become one with Lord Krishna.

The characteristic lilt and grace of the Odissi dance style lends a suitable stylized flow in the performance. It also provides ritualistic reference to illustrate Meera's innermost feelings with sublime grace. The convergence of theme, the selected raga and the embedded emotion was stimulating for envisioning the dance.

### **Exploring and Visualizing the Structure of the dance**

I chose to use a simple structure for the dance. Beginning with the dancer showing Meera chanting and dancing her way to the temple, every verse was interspersed with movement sequences which expanded the idea of the preceding verse. The entry and end of the dance projected the transcendental state of Meera. While Meera was shown playing the Khanjani in the entry, the dance includes a movement sequence when Meera is shown chanting the name of Krishna while playing the Ektara, a string instrument.

A narrative in nature, the structure focuses on showing the interplay of movements determined by the words, imagery and the imagination of the poet. Gestures and postures portray the icon of Krishna and his temple, describe the abundant beauty of nature to evoke the emotion of intense yearning. The entire piece was organically created from a continuous development of movement phrases, each movement working off of the movement that came before. We followed a democratic process, frequently discussing the best ways to express the main theme, the mystical mood, and rhythm. A key consideration was to evoke the imagery of Meera's surroundings and actions and to set the apt mood to transmit Meera's feelings to the audience.

### **Experimenting through imaging**

The dance sequences were developed by imaging movement. Selection of verbs, adverbs or adjectives which could succinctly portray both the word and the idea enabled me visualize the sequential imagery.

As mentioned in the previous para the following sequence of photos display the dancer entering the stage. The spiritual aura is established by portraying Meera, dancing to a meditative percussion beat and with the playing of the Khanjanis (percussion instrument).





Fig. 4: Meera dancing in a transcendental state on her way to the Krishna temple (artist: Kaustavi Sarkar).

Hand gestures, facial expressions and a series of *bhangis* (postures in Odissi) are used to project the metaphorical and literal translation of the words in the poem. Bhangis in the Odissi dance form can denote a mood, idea or an object.

The following images portray the icon of Krishna with the symbolic gesture of holding the flute. He was known to be an excellent flautist. Bhangis are also illustrated to represent a flower, a tree, and a peacock.

#### **Bhangis – Postures portraying**

1. Krishna
2. Pushpa, a flower
3. Vruksha a tree
4. Bird perched on a branch
5. Mayura, a peacock.



Fig. 6: Dancer showing ambient elements to enhance aesthetic mood (artist Kaustavi Sarkar)

The metaphoric ideas were exhibited using alphabets of body movements of the Odissi style set using basic positions of the dance form. The *tribhanga* (three bends) and *chowk* are the two main positions of the Odissi style. Translated from the words “*Badra ne gheri maayi*”, the sequence below illustrate “the engulfing clouds which feels like an embrace”.

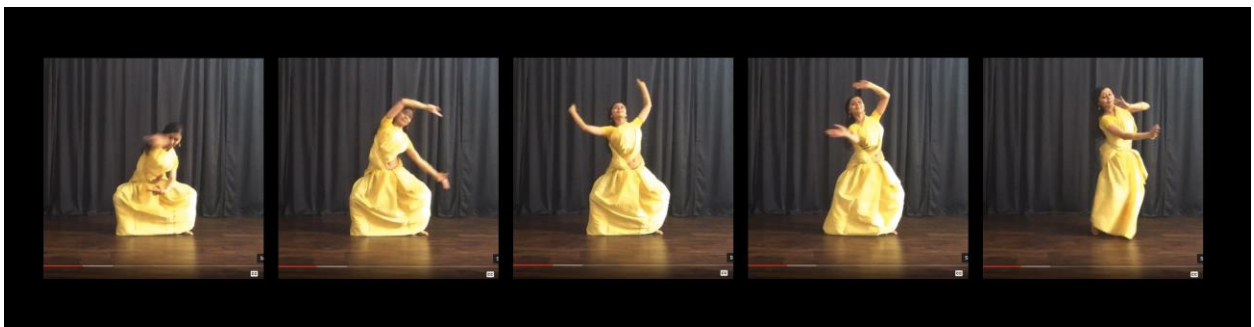


Fig. 7: Dancer showing the circular Movements of Clouds (artist Kaustavi Sarkar)

Image sequence 2: The dancer describes the engulfing dark clouds, using the position of 'Chowk' one of the basic stances of the Odissi style. The *anga* (body) *bhramari* (circular movement of the body) displays the encircling clouds.

### **Exploring form, movement and space**

The Odissi movement vocabulary extends the opportunity to communicate the minutest detail of any concept. The precise codification of the movement language for every part of the body (eyes, neck, head, hands, torso, feet and body) enables a proportionate, organic and aesthetic arrangement of the various parts of the body permitting the dancer to move to a rhythm and beat while expressing the meaning of a word.

This choreography is set following the stylistic norms of the dance form. The rhythmic patterns and corresponding footwork is based on Adi tala which is set to a count of 8. Keeping in view the backdrop of nature as described in the song, geometrical pathways of travel are incorporated to allow the dancer the flexibility in movement and covering of space in all directions.

### **Collaboration in the choreographic process**

Molded in Guru Kelucharan Mohapatra's lineage of Odissi dance both Kaustavi and I share similar influences in our training. My long performance and practice experience and Kaustavi's impeccable grasp of the Odissi technique enabled a strong interactive spirit. In the dance making process we would choose a path to go with and integrate it in the concept and core essence of the song. We adjusted and experimented with movements as we moved along from one word to the next until the end of the song. Guru Poushali Mukherjee's contribution of rhythmic pieces played by Guru Gurumurthy Vaidya provided the required meter, pace and lilt. The flute played by Sameer Rao and Sitar by Shruti Kamath in the backdrop sustained the mystical mood of the dance. Overall working on this dance was a joyous journey in building imagination and creativity.

This project conceived by Dr. M A Jyoti, and developed by bringing together people from different geographical locations, reflects her strong belief in the power of dance and music to help people rise above the pain of the pandemic and collaborate in a creative activity that gave us all a sense of purpose and satisfaction.

### **Curatorial Vision**

This collaborative project, I set out to invite Indian classical dancers to choreograph selected works of three women saints from the Bhakti movement - Akka Mahadevi, Meera Bai and Andal. Bhakti or devotion, being the essential ingredient of Indian classical music and dance, literature from the Bhakti movement lends itself to song and dance most naturally.

### **How the collaboration began**

When the pandemic began, existential questions arose in my mind: Who am I? What does it mean to be alive? What does it mean to be an artiste? How was I connected to the universe? How was this pandemic going to affect me, people around me, my loved ones and people I don't even know? A journey of looking within through art seemed the only way to understand what was happening in my life. Art cures and heals the body and mind, involving oneself in a creative exercise uplifts the spirit. With this thought, I set out to connect with artistes and engage with them in a meaningful manner. The idea of a collaborative project was born.

I approached some of my dancer friends if they would like to choreograph to the poetry of Akka, Meera or Andal. The response was overwhelming - not only did they embrace the idea of

collaboration, but also suggested other dancers who would join the project. Thirteen dancers from varied parts of the world have participated in this collaborative project.

My earlier experience in education leadership had taught me that connecting to a strong purpose motivates people to take action. The purpose was laid out – to understand the philosophical and emotional content of selected works of a woman Bhakti poet, and translate it to dance. In this process of inter-semiotic translation, litterateurs, musicians and choreographer/dancers work collaboratively to produce dance compositions.

### **Process and Outcome of the Project**

Primarily a musician, I played a different role this time – that of a curator of the project. As the project progressed, I had to play multiple roles at varied points of time – coordinator, music director, musician and editor. I will briefly describe the process of curating Meera's works here. Four dancers Odissi dancer Kaustavi Sarcar, North Carolina; Kathak dancer Anvita Pandey, Zurich; Bharatanatyam dancer, Raksha Jayaram, Bengaluru, India and Kuchipudi dancer, Shreelakshmy Govardanan, Thrissur, India participated in the project. The first two dancers were guided in choreography by Rohini Dandavate, USA (Odissi) and by Sharmila Sharma, Paris (Kathak) respectively.

#### **1. PHASE I Preliminary Study**

Firstly, dancers were given the *bhajan*,<sup>iii</sup> connecting them to the *bhakti bhav*<sup>iv</sup> (feeling of devotion) instantly. Jayaram and Govardhanan selected poems which held them captive. In my earlier work curating Akka's vachanas, I learnt that the human brain connects instantaneously to the musical element of a composition rather than to the lyrical element. Participants studied the lyrics of the poem scoping it for dance.

#### **2. PHASE II Conceptualization and Design**

The dancers were encouraged to choreograph the compositions on their own, while seeking the guidance from senior dancers/Gurus to aid them in reflection. This dialogue between dancer-choreographer has been documented in the earlier section of this paper by Dandavate and Sarkar. After arriving at a basic sketch for the dance, the dancers communicated their ideas to me and we worked back and forth on the music. I describe briefly the music composition process below.

With a preliminary audio recording of the song, dancers began detailing the music requirements for their choreography. For example, the number of repetitions of a line, instrumental interludes, percussion detailing, rhythm patterns to be played, specifications for pause, *alap* (music without lyrics) and *jhala* (fast plucking phrases played on the sitar) were worked out. Understanding the storyline and the choreographer's approach was absolutely necessary for me as a music director to visualise how the dance and music would play out together in the final production. This is usually an organic process, requiring intuition and creativity as dancers/choreographers and musicians sit together and design spontaneously. The geographical distance between participants was overcome, thanks to technology.

Putting myself in the dancer's shoes helped me, for example, to bring out the longing of Meera as she repeats *saanvaron saanvaron* in *nand nandan ditu padiya maayi*. To show the ecstasy in *Nand Nandan Bilmayi* chanting was added in two octaves. Vaidya the percussionist matched the intricacies of the footwork and rhythm patterns, Rao and Kamat, flautist and sitarist added flourishes to create the right mood – whether it was illusion (*maya*) or renunciation (*vairagya*) in Akka's vachanas or the state of trance that Meera was in.

### 3. PHASE III Production 1

The music was set and recorded in a professional setting and shared with the dancers through online means. Video -recording of dance performance and narration of the literary expert are yet to be done.

### 4. PHASE IV Editing & Publishing

The videos would be edited and woven together to make a strong narrative depicting the work of the poet. The videos will be released online, one each week.

### Outcome

Online Videos with music and dance and commentary on the select works of Meera. In the remaining section of the paper, I will be sharing some of my experiences as a curator of the dance pieces to Meera Bai's bhajans.

### Curating the project

#### Choosing the right literature

Literature from the Bhakti movement, which began around c. 8<sup>th</sup> century and continued till the 18<sup>th</sup> century, was chosen mainly for its unifying spirit. The movement was a concerted effort to bring the ideas of the Vedas and Upanishads to the common man. Inclusive in spirit, the movement sought to break all barriers of caste and language, abhorred rituals, textual knowledge and institutionalization of religion (Sudha, 2002). The Bhakti saints mostly moved from place to place, composing and singing songs in the local dialect, welcoming people to seek God through simple devotion. Song and dance were seen as an instrument for bhakti. This spirit of unity is symbolically represented through the project by curating dances of different forms, from different parts of the world.

#### Repertoire of Indian classical dance

Four different forms of Indian classical dance – Kathak, Odissi, Kuchipudi and Bharatanatyam are being showcased in this project. Each classical dance form has its own repertoire of compositions drawing heavily from the regional culture, language, customs and folklore. However, all Indian classical dance forms have some common aspects: For one, a common spiritual thread. Secondly, the dance forms draw from a common text - the *Natya Sastra*.<sup>v</sup> Three elements mentioned in this text- *Nritta* (pure dance), *Nritya* (emotive story telling) and sometimes *Natya* (drama) form the core of all Indian dance forms. Meera's bhajans lend themselves to be performed as an 'abhinaya' item with nritya component highlighted.

#### Musicality of Meera's works

Kishwar and Vanita, 1992, state that, "the outstanding melodic quality of her work, making it so suitable for singing and dancing, has ensured its wide reach, and the plain and direct language and sentiment its easy adaptability to many languages." For example, although the bhajans are composed in Hindi and not in the languages usually associated with these forms (Oriya, Sanskrit for Odissi dance, Telugu or Sanskrit used for Kuchipudi), the *madhura bhakti*<sup>vi</sup> in Meera's compositions and the sheer musicality of her poems appeal to the dancers immediately. As one of the dancers put it, 'When I listen to the music of Meera, my body just responds to the emotion, ... I am no longer conscious of the form of the dance; it is the soul responding to the music'. It is due to this quality of Meera's compositions that has made her a pan-India figure whose life is portrayed in films, dance dramas and bhajans performed in both Carnatic and Hindustani concerts and dance recitals.

### Selected Works

The selected works showcase Meera Bai's persona, give a glimpse of her life and some of the characteristic elements of her poetry. This is by no means exhaustive or complete. The four poems listed below:

1. *Nand Nandan Bila mayi* in raag shuddh sarang,  
Form of Dance: Odissi  
Dancer Kaustavi Sarcar, North Carolina; Choreography: Dr Rohini Dandavate, USA.
2. *Jhoolat Radha sang Giridhar* in Raag Sohni,  
Form of Dance: Kathak  
Dancer Anvita Pandey, Zurich, Switzerland; Choreography by Guru Sharmila Sharma, Paris
3. *Tum bin more kaun khabar le* – Rag Hindustani Kapi,  
Form of Dance: Bharatanatyam  
Dancer- choreographer: Dr. Raksha Jayaram, Bengaluru, India
4. *Nand Nandan Ditu padiya mayi* – Rag Gujri Todi ,  
Form of Dance: Kuchipudi  
Dancer- choreographer: Shreelakhmy Govardanan, Thrissur, India.

### Meera Bai's life

Meera Bai, born c. 1498 and died c. 1546 (Kishwar and Vanita, 1992) was one such woman bhakti poet, who belonged to the Vaishnav tradition and was a devotee of Lord Krishna. Married into a Rajput royal family, she decides to lead her life as an ascetic. Refusing to be contained in the towers of her fort adorned with silks and jewels or be a devoted wife ('sati' as a Rajput queen), she, instead, tied bells to her feet, with *ektar* and *kanjani* in hand, associated herself with other devotees and walked from town to town, singing and dancing in praise of the Lord! This aspect of her persona is beautifully represented by Kaustavi Sarcar's piece in the poem *Nand Nandan bilmayi*.

Being a *bhakta* was not an easy task for Meera. Meera was ostracised from her own family and community. She had to face a lot of hardships in her in-laws' place. In Meera's poems there are references to Rana being a figure of authority, though it is not very clear whether 'Rana' refers to her husband or her brother-in-law. The poems also refer to her mother-in-law giving her poison and sending her a snake. However, lore has it that the poison turned to nectar and the snake into flowers when Meera opened the basket. Bharatanatyam dancer Raksha Jayaram has taken up these aspects from her life in the poem *tum bin morey kaun khabar le*. Here, the dancer depicts the story of how Meera seeks refuge in Krishna asking Him to protect her as she literally has no one else! In this bhajan Meera sees Krishna as a protector, who saved Draupadi from shame.

### Imagery from nature

Meera uses a lot of imagery from nature as metaphors in her poetry. Rain is often used to depict pangs of separation as also the meeting of lovers as sky melts in the form of rain to meet the earth. In *Nand nanda bilamai* she describes the dark over hanging clouds remind her of being locked in Krishna's embrace; lightning and thunder reminding her of how she felt in his arms, the call of *dadur* (frogs), *mor* (peacock), *papiha* (common-hawk cuckoo) and *koyal* (cuckoo) birds, signs of the rainy season – which is the season when lovers meet. This scene is used by the poet and the dancer to express the sense of longing to unite with her Lord. The meandering notes in the phrase R – M – R in Raag *shuddha sarang* and the presence of two *madhyams* bring out this emotion beautifully. The shades of this raag were perfectly suited for the flowing and curvy movements of Odissi dance form.

### **Glorifying the love between Radha and Krishna**

In the poetry of Ashta Chap Kavis,<sup>vii</sup> c.15-17<sup>th</sup> century period, a common theme is the love between Radha and Krishna. Many a poem describe Radha getting drenched in rain as she stealthily steps out to meet Krishna in the night. There are also imaginary conversations between Meera and Radha as they discuss their common love. American-based Indian singer Pandita Tripti Mukherjee has showcased some of these poems in her album '*Kanh-kahani*'. *Jhoolat Radha sang Giridhar*, showcased here, has Meera picturing Radha and Krishna swinging away happily on a *jhoola* (swing). This *bhajan* is a challenge to the dancer as one minute she is playing Radha with Krishna, and then she is Meera longing for Krishna's love herself!

### **Representing local culture**

Holi is a very important festival in North India where young people and old people come together in fun and there is joy, abandon and flirtation. This also has a spiritual connotation of the *Rasa-leela* played by Krishna with his sixteen thousand women.

Depicting scenes from Holi is a very popular theme in kathak dance repertoire. This may typically have a couple dancing together or a group of young people coming together with Krishna in the centre (Rasa-Leela). A lot of joy and aplomb is shown as the young men fill their pistons with colour and splash it on the young women, as they run helter-skelter.

In *Jhoolat Radha Sang Giridhar*, the lines *Abir gulal ki dhoom machaayi, Bhar pichakaari rang giridhar*, Meera imagines Krishna and Radha playing Holi together. I felt this *bhajan* would be best suited for depiction through Kathak. Through this description of Radha- Krishna's love, Meera seeks to become one with Krishna. Raag *Sohni*, used for this poem is ideal for showing the pangs of love in its lower notes while the upper notes show the ecstasy as Meera surrenders herself to Krishna. The interesting rhythmic patterns framed by Sharma for this piece have added lustre to the lines *naachat taal aadhaar sur-var, dhimi dhimi bhaje mrudang giridhar* which refer to Radha dancing as Krishna plays on the *mrudang*, a percussion instrument.

### **Meera the mystic**

To Meera, Krishna was sometimes her lover, her husband or her Lord and protector. Meera was a mystic, often seen in a state of trance. In the *bhajan* *Nand nandan ditu padiya maayi*, this aspect of Meera is depicted. In the refrain *savron* (dear one, alternatively, dark one) which is repeated several times the mad love of Meera for Krishna is depicted. In another *bhajan* Meera calls herself *Diwani* – mad one. Set in the raag *gujari todi*, this *bhajan* shows the intensity of Meera's longing to unite with Him.

### **Moving from Saguna Bhakti to Nirguna Bhakti**

In Meera's compositions, we see her spiritual evolution as a saint. Her early works depict her *saguna bhakti*<sup>viii</sup> and it is said that as she met Kabir later in life, her *bhakti* moved towards *nirguna bhakti*<sup>ix</sup>. In *nand nandan ditu padiya maayi*, there is a detailed account of Krishna's physical looks and charm suggesting Meera's early days of composition. In the last line, Meera talks of giving herself to Him completely, body mind and soul! The intensely passionate love portrayed in this *bhajan* is aptly depicted in the Kuchipudi form, known for its *srungara* bhava.

### **Reflections**

Curating the work of dancers has been a truly uplifting learning experience for me. To me, as a musician, it was a beautiful experience working with dancers from the world over. Understanding their choreographing process was fascinating. All the four *bhajans* chosen had *raags* with a high

emotive quotient, bringing out the deep love, longing, surrender to the Lord in the poems. The musicians went out of their way to embellish the raags further. Working with them, I learnt what notes to emphasis in different raagas (say, *Sohni* and *Marwa*, two closely related raags) and which notes emphasize what emotion (*komal gandhara* for melancholy). Working with the percussionist helped me understand various nuances of the different forms, their unique terminology (*tihayi*, *lehera* etc).

The dancers unanimously stated how they enjoyed the process of choreography for both the projects - Akka and Meera. For many dancers, it was a first time they had played these roles. A few choreographers said that the process was a spiritual experience understanding Meera's love for Krishna. Dancers, while portraying the role, become Meera themselves.

### **Feedback from Participants**

What was most satisfying about the project was the feedback I have received from the dancers and musicians. The dancers told me that they enjoyed the process of choreography for Meera, and for many it was a first time they had played her role. A few choreographers said that the process gave them a very spiritual experience as they tried to understand Meera's love for Krishna, at that moment they become Meera themselves.

All the four bhajans chosen had raags with a high emotive quotient, bringing out the deep love, longing, surrender to the Lord in the poems. The musicians went out of their way to embellish the raags further. To me, as a musician, it was a beautiful experience working back and forth with the dancers and the choreographers in composing music for the project. Understanding the process of choreographing was fascinating. I also learnt what to elaborate in different ragas and which notes need to be emphasized for what emotion. Working with the percussionist helped me understand various nuances of the different forms.

### **Practicing together**

*Meera* is a process of multiple texts—kinesthetic, choreographic, and curatorial—facing a singular culmination. While this article focusses only on the art-making, its reception by the audience will further add to the complexity of this PaR project. Articulating the sequencing and the interweaving of the collaborative creations, grounds this work in *Sadhana*—daily ritual dance practice. Religious studies scholars Edward C. Dimock and David Haberman acknowledge the embodied dimension of *Sadhana* as a practice for spiritual attainment through a combination of ritual and aesthetic practice. As spiritual and cultural insiders working on Mirabai's devotional verses, both artistry and aesthetics find practical resonance in *Meera*. These processual narrative hopes to inspire more such collaborative writing and making within South Asian aesthetic principles. The pandemic allowed for an intermingling of minds and bodies from across geopolitical distances. While video-conferencing is not a technological invention during the pandemic, its scaling up during this period enabled collaborative outcomes that would not have been possible otherwise. In MA Jyothi's words,

*Finally, at a time of pandemic, there was this satisfaction of connecting with people far and wide at a very intimate level – through Art, spirituality and a common earnestness to give one's best. The essence of this collaborative project was continued learning, coming together of minds and spirits, give and take, solidarity at a time of difficulty and a deep sense of remaining connected.*

### **Annexure 1 -Meera Bhajan**

Raga Shuddh Sarang, Taal – 8 counts

*Nand Nandan bilmayi Badra ne gheri maayi*

*It ghan larje ut ghan garje Chamakat biju savaayi*



*Umad ghumad kahun Disi se aaya Pavan chale purvaayi  
 Daadur mOr papeeha bOle kOyal Shabad suNaayi  
 Mira ke Prabhu giridhar naagar charaN kamal chit laayi*

**Translation:**

When locked in an embrace with King Nanda's son (Krishna) and time stood still,  
 it was (as if I was) surrounded by dark rain-bearing clouds  
 I shivered here, as the thunder rumbled there  
 I was electrified by his touch just as lightning struck  
 It was as if there was thunderous noise (umad ghumad) from all directions  
 And the winds from the east (swept me off my feet)  
 As the frogs, peacocks, sparrow-hawks called  
 And the cuckoo sang  
 Meera thinks of her Prabhu, Girdhar, With utmost devotion in her mind

**Meaning of words:**

Bilmayi – caught in an embrace with Krishna and time stands still  
 Badra – dark clouds  
 Gheri – surrounded by  
 It – here  
 ut -there  
 ghan – clouds  
 larje – shivering uncontrollably  
 garje – thunders (verb)  
 chamakat biju – lightning strikes  
 umad -ghumad – sound of thunder  
 pavan purvayi – winds blow from east  
 Daadur -frog, mor -peacock, papiha – sparrow hawk (a small bird of prey with a cute call) koyal -  
 cuckoo  
 shabad suNayi – call  
 chit laayi – thought of you in my mind

## Annexure 2

Panels from the Konark Temple in Odisha: Odissi Postures



Photo Credit: Shailan Parker

Fig. 8: Friezes from Konarak Temple Sculpture (Picture by Rohini Dandavate)

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**Appendix: Lyrics of the four bhajans****1. Nand Nandan Bilmayi**

Nand Nandan bilmayi  
 Badra ne gheri maayi  
 It ghan larje ut ghan garje  
 Chamakat biju savaayi  
 Umad ghumad kahun  
 Disi se aaya  
 Pavan chale purvaayi  
 Daadur mOr papeeha bOle  
 kOyal Shabad suNaayi  
 Mira ke Prabhu giridhar naagar  
 charaN kamal chit laayi

**2. Jhoolat Radha Sang Giridhar**

Jhoolat Radha sang Giridhar  
 Abir gulal ki dhoom machayi  
 Bhar pichakari rang Giridhar  
 Naachat taal aadhaar survar  
 Dhimi dhimi baaje mrudanga Giridhar  
 Meera ke prabhu Giridhar nagar  
 Mohan murali bhujang giridhar

**3. Nandnandan dith padiya mai**

Nandnandan dith padiya mai saanwaro saanwaro  
 nandnandan dith padiya mai dariya sab lok laaj  
 sudh budh bisraaye saanwaro saanwaro  
 mor chandr ka kireet mukut jab suhaye  
 kesar jo tilak bhal lochan sukhdayi  
 saanwaro saanwaro  
 kundal jhalka kapol alka lahraye  
 meena taj sarvar jo makar milandhayi saanwaro saanwaro  
 natvar prabhu kesh dhariya rup jag lubhaye  
 giridhar prabhu ang ang meera balijayi  
 saanwaro saanwaro

**4. Tum Bin Morey kaun khabar le Govardhan Giridhari**

tum bin mErE kaun khabar lE gOvardhan giridhAri rE  
 mOre mukuT pItAmbar shObhE kuNDal kI chabi nyArI rE  
 bharI sabhA mE draupadI TADI rAkho lAj hamari rE  
 mIra kE prabhu girdhar nAgar carana kamal balihArI rE

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- <sup>i</sup> I am using a non-hierarchical naming convention for odissi as we would address dance forms, such as, ballet, modern, or contemporary.
  - <sup>ii</sup> Virtuosity in odissi is measured by one's ability to immerse the self and the audience within the *Rasa*, meaning flavor or essence.
  - <sup>iii</sup> Bhajan: Bhajan is a Hindi word referring to devotional poems which are generally sung together or sometimes as a solo piece.
  - <sup>iv</sup> Traditional Hinduism speaks of five different bhāvas or "affective essences". In this sense, bhāvas are different attitudes that a devotee takes according to his individual temperament to express his devotion towards God in some form
  - <sup>v</sup> The Nāṭya Śāstra is a Sanskrit treatise on the performing arts. The text is attributed to sage Bharata Muni, and its first complete compilation is dated to between 200 BCE and 200 CE, but estimates vary between 500 BCE and 500 CE.
  - <sup>vi</sup> Madhura bhakti refers to the attitude of a woman towards her lover
  - <sup>vii</sup> Ashta chap was a sect comprising 8 Vaishnava poets set up by Guru Vallabhacharya and his son Vittalnath in CE 1565. These poets belonged to the Braj region and were devotees of Sri Krishna. Surdas belonged to this sect.
  - <sup>viii</sup> Saguna bhakti: Devotion to God in a particular form
  - <sup>ix</sup> Nirguna bhakti: Worshipping a formless, limitless God