**Corpo-Activism: Dance and Activist Labour in the Work of Komal Gandhar (Kolkata)**

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**Abstract:**This paper considers the dance and activist labour of a group of cisgendered and transgendered performers who lobby for the decrimininalisation of sex work in India. Known as Komal Gandhar, the group operate out of Sonagachi, Kolkata and are the cultural wing of Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC), a collective of over 65,000 sex workers. Based on in-depth interviews with Komal Gandhar members and an analysis of their choreographic work, this paper proposes 'corpo-activism' - the activation of human rights through embodied aesthetic labour - as a crucial phenomenon that mobilizes the agency of minoritized groups.

**Keywords:**dance, activism, feminism, sex work, labour, performance, Kolkata, television, dance show, dance studies, performance studies

**------------------------------------------------------**

The song *Let’s Talk About Sex* exploded into the global music scene in 1991. Written and performed by Salt-n-Pepa, a hip hop trio of African American women, the song’s catchy tune and refrain was everything that a Bengali teenager like myself, growing up in a predominantly middle-class suburb of Kolkata and governed by its strict codes of *bhadralok* (or gentlefolk) “respectability,” was not supposed to sing:

Let's talk about sex, baby  
Let's talk about you and me  
Let's talk about all the good things  
And the bad things that may be

Let's talk about sex  
Let's talk about sex  
Let's talk about sex  
Let's talk about sex

As the song played on a not-so-modest volume through the cassette player at my home, I would censor the word “sex” while singing it, but would continue to bounce, arm wave, pop, jump and groove to the lyrics. At age thirteen, I was already several years into my “serious” dance training under Ranjabati Sircar (1963–1999), an internationally acclaimed feminist dancer-choreographer. Her dance studio at Dancers’ Guild, co-created with her mother Manjusri Chaki Sircar (1934–2000) was a five-minute walk from home. It was a space of creative freedom, experimentation, movement exploration and a deep critical engagement with the dancing body and its capacity for feminist action. Yet, this was worlds apart from another place of growing feminist solidarity among women, a mere seven kilometres away, which we were forbidden to enter— Sonagachi. The very name was uttered only in whispered code by my teenage classmates —"The Golden Tree”. The largest red-light district in South Asia, Sonagachi was an illicit zone, the antithesis of a class and caste privileged Salt Lake where I grew up in, carefully censored and excised from our lives. Yet, unknown to me at the time, this so-called shady underbelly of Kolkata was steadily growing its own feminist collective of subaltern sex workers, embodying a lot of what Salt-n-Pepa’s song called for. Sonagachi was getting ready to talk about sex, to dance about sex, and to vocalise all the good things and the bad things that (sex) may be.

In 1992, a medical doctor and field epidemiologist from the All-India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health in Kolkata, Smarajit Jana (1952–2021), became the director of the Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STD)/HIV Intervention Programme (SHIP) in Sonagachi. SHIP would lay the foundations for Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC), a forum of sex workers and their children established in 1995 to fight for the labour rights and dignity of women in sex work. Today DMSC is composed of approximately 65,000 sex workers from across the state of West Bengal. Despite losing Jana to COVID-19 in 2021, DMSC continues with its mission of collectivising women in sex work to promote their dignity of life, to end trafficking of women and underage children through its Self Regulatory Board (SRB), and to decriminalise sex work in India.

In December 2019, a little short of three decades since “Let’s talk About Sex” rocked my “respectable” Bengali boat, I met and interviewed Jana in Kolkata, who then introduced me to members of Komal Gandhar, the cultural wing of the DMSC (established in 1998). As a dance and performance studies scholar interested in the history of “nautch” and its afterlife in Kolkata, I was interested in mapping spaces in which former courtesans from Bengal worked or lived.[[1]](#endnote-1) I wanted to locate traces of the Bengali nautch dancer’s feminist worldmaking in repertoires that may have survived decades long legal prohibitions and bans in India. When I met Komal Gandhar, the group’s members were rehearsing for a show they were to perform in later that evening, at a Rajasthani Mela in a Kolkata suburb. The conversations with Komal Gandhar’s dancers, both cis- and transgendered artists and activists, and the subsequent witnessing of their performance that day, dispelled any possibility of finding a recuperable courtesan heritage held within a verifiable embodied practice. Komal Gandhar’s dancing did not evidence sustained training in *thumri* or any other *gharana*-based music/dance repertoirethat Bengal’s courtesans were renowned for. Yet, Komal Gandhar’s onstage and offstage work that evening revealed startling parallels between solidarities created by late 19th and early 20th century Bengali courtesans in the red light district, such as Rajbala and her daughter Indubala Dasi (Bhattacharya 2018; Purkayastha 2021), and those fostered by dancers and activists in Sonagachi today.[[2]](#endnote-2) This was a genealogy of feminist activism that was not handed down in an easily legible hereditary tradition of “high art” dancing, as many Indian dance forms are often known for. Rather these were practices of worldmaking emerging from the same neighbourhoods and communities, a century apart. Despite very different dissemination methods, they were tethered together by a common purpose — to give women in sex work the dignity of life they deserved.

This paper draws on the foundational research of dance scholars such as Ananya Chatterjea (2009), Urmimala Sarkar Munsi (2016) and Aishika Chakraborty (2022)

on subaltern/stigmatised dancers and their erotic labour in Bengal, to focus more specifically on dance as a form of activist labour through the work of Komal Gandhar.[[3]](#endnote-3) Based on in-person interviews and an analysis of choreographic work[[4]](#endnote-4), the paper tracks the ways in which Komal Gandhar’s dancers engage with questions of social justice and mobilise the labour and human rights of minoritised and stigmatised communities such as sex workers and LGBTQIA+ individuals. I propose the word “corpo-activism” (*corpo* meaning ‘body’) and define it as any rights-based activism that is contingent on the aesthetic labour of performing bodies for its efficacy. In the case of Komal Gandhar’s members and their movement practices, corpo-activism shows how an alternative vision of sex as labour can be crafted using the dancing body as a call for change.

While Komal Gandhar’s dance repertoire is diverse, ranging from short street performances to concert-length dance dramas, I specifically focus on a short choreography and performance that they staged for reality television audiences in the popular primetime show *India’s Got Talent* (2018). The essay therefore views Komal Gandhar’s dances as products of the labouring *corpo* (body) and also as aesthetic forms that (at times) subscribe to corporate forms of media consumption. In so doing, it draws attention to a politics of visibility as minoritised bodies negotiate and mark the capitalist ground on which mainstream television dances thrive. The intention here is to critically examine the rather complex duet ensuing between activism and consumer capitalism when the labour of marginalised practitioners such as Komal Gandhar’s dancers enter the popular television commercial space and are turned into a spectacular narrative of tragedy and triumph. Ultimately, the aim is to understand the place and function of dance as a form of corporeal and aesthetic labour in the collective movement of sex workers and trans communities, and in their call for human and labour rights in India.

**Corpo-Activism and Sexual Labour**

Arguably, any form of activism — whether it takes place live on the streets or public squares, outside parliaments or civic buildings, in the open seas or in busy cities, on mediated platforms such as television and radio or online/social media sites — is embodied, the result of human corporeal labour, or the actions of a *corpo* (body). Historically, durational and endurance based bodily labour has been deployed regularly as a protest tactic by constituencies as wide-ranging as the suffragettes in Britain, the Gandhian salt march participants during India’s independence movement and by civil rights activists in the United States (US) protesting racial segregation. What, then, is particular about “corpo-activism,” if all activist events are the result of some form of human bodily action? In envisioning “corpo-activism” as a specific ideation, I mean to signal those activist practices that are contingent on corporeal aesthetic labour to promote social justice, to rally for equitable action, and to mobilise the rights of under-represented constituencies. In other words, “corpo-activism” refers to forms of activism that rely on the labour of the performing body to raise civic consciousness of right-based movements.

Studying the links between the power of gesture or movement and protest-based activism is not new in dance and performance studies. Dance scholars Susan Leigh Foster (2003) and Anusha Kedhar (2014) have drawn our attention to how public protests have often deployed carefully considered strategies where the body and its gestures realise their transformative potential. Foster argues for the body to be an “articulate signifying agent” (2003: 396) in the event of a non-violent protest, drawing examples from the lunch counter sit-ins during the civil rights movement, and actions of HIV/AIDS and World Trade activists in the US. Foster (2003: 412) notices how

(i)n achieving this sense of agency, protestors are not enacting a script, where the body would function as mere instrument of expression, the meat that carries around the subject. Nor is agency the product of the heightened sense of physicality that results when the body steps outside the quotidian routines of daily life and into non-normative action. Agency does not manifest as the product of a transcendent state. Instead, the process of creating political interference calls forth a perceptive and responsive physicality that, everywhere along the way, deciphers the social and then choreographs an imagined alternative.

This study of the body as not merely a tool of protest but as a signifying, charged and volatile site of change becomes crucial for the corpo-activism that this paper envisions. The body is not just an aesthetic instrument in service of the activist’s protest event but is the vibrating, pulsating event itself. Kedhar (2014) notes how the “hands up, don’t shoot” gesture in Ferguson, Missouri’s 2014 public protests brought attention to institutional violence against black US citizens, and how Ferguson’s protestors became “quintessential dancers” (2014) whose defiant gestures could transform a space of policed control to a space of liberation. In both Foster and Kedhar’s readings, the happening of a protest is examined through the lens of choreography[[5]](#endnote-5). I build on these crucial studies to propose that in “corpo-activism,” a performance or choreography is the only activist event possible. The stamping, turning, bending, reaching, spinning, gesturing body is not merely a tool or medium through which important activist messages are conveyed. Rather the dancing body actively becomes or is the change that audiences’ experience.

Dance has been a capacious site and an invaluable prism not only for the analyses of various forms of human protest against oppressive systems of power but also of systemic socio-cultural conditions governing human experiences of gender and sexuality. In recent years, several noteworthy studies on Indian dance and performance have revealed asymmetrical power structures that operate on human bodies. These projects have shown how dancing — not just the kind we see on the formal concert stage but also those that we view on film or television screens, in nightclubs or dance classes, in village festivals or local neighbourhood events — exposes the complex dynamics of human interpersonal gendered relationships in particular communities.

Brahma Prakash’s (2019) important study on the cultural labour of folk performers refuses the bourgeois division between aesthetic practice as art/leisure and the work of marginalised labourers. Significant to this imbrication of culture and labour is Prakash’s analyses of performances by *bidesia* migrant labourers, for instance. Prakash throws light on how social power operates and organises particular communities of caste and class oppressed individuals, and how questions of gender and sexuality become crucial in the ways in which such power manifests itself. Kareem Khubchandani’s (2020) remarkable ethnographic research of nightlife economies shows how the dancing body becomes a powerful site for analysing ways in which queer, drag and camp identities are motioned into being. Khubchandani also shows how the labour of racialised and desexualised queer South Asian men offer unique insights into how social hierarchies operate in the global world. Both Prakash and Khubchandani have laid the foundations upon which this paper’s study of labour and performance rests.

**Dance, Sex Work, Labour**

Dance labour and sexual labour may seem far apart but there are some adjacencies or contiguities between these realms. While various aspects of gender and sexuality are now firmly lodged as foci within the domain of dance studies, sex work as bodily labour remains relatively underexamined. Perhaps this has something to do with feminism’s conflicting or diverse attitudes to sex work in general as I explain below, which has undoubtedly impacted on dance studies— a disciplinary field that owes much to feminist theories and scholarship.

Sex work, and those engaged in the sexual labour sector are viewed by many renowned and celebrated radical feminists as subjected to systemic patriarchal oppression (Kathleen Barry 1979/1995; Sheila Jeffreys 1997), whereas pro-sex work feminists consider consensual sex as paid work to be a woman’s fundamental human right, an extension and outcome of her autonomous choice as a free agent (see Kamala Kempadoo and Jo Doezema 1998). The contentious issue of women’s sexual labour or service has also long troubled and divided feminists when it comes to decriminalisation and legalisation of sex work. To some feminists, decriminalisation is a neo-liberal capitalist approach to a systemic problem of gendered violence, where responsibility to enter the sex trade or not is placed on already oppressed constituencies of women who do not have much choice. To pro sex-work feminists, decriminalisation is the only way towards improving the living and working conditions of sex workers (see Victoria Bateman 2021).

For dance scholars, the issue of autonomy or agency of the body that does the work or labours to produce aesthetic experiences are often quite fundamental to philosophical or analytical discourses on movement. Yet, such ideations of the dancing body are usually reliant on the human body’s capacity for free movement. But what happens when the body is not free but instead coerced to dance, or when the act of dancing produces not feelings of pride and joy but those of abject shame and humiliation (Prakash 2019). Or what happens when we see dancing not as a product of well-meaning progressive liberal practices of emancipation or liberation, but as the outcome of systemic violence unleashed by those very progressive institutions? (Arabella Stanger 2021) If we accept that such affective and material conditions do exist for some dances to work, then conversations about the body’s autonomy, sovereignty and ability to express its choices that haunt feminist debates on sex work are not that far away from those that haunt some dancers and dance scholars today.

When I met DMSC and Komal Gandhar’s dancers in Kolkata, I encountered a fierce, proud, confident collective of dancers and activists who unhesitatingly lobby for the decriminalisation of sex work in India and firmly believe in the labour rights of sex workers. “Sex Work is Work” is their call for change in public rallies and demonstrations. DMSC and Komal Gandhar are firmly opposed to the Nordic or Swedish model that criminalises clients and buyers of sexual services rather than punishing sex workers (see Nordic Model Now!). This, according to them, harms an already vulnerable economic sector by freezing up the only income stream that is viable for under-privileged women. Instead, they focus their efforts on educating and empowering women in sex work, and believe that consensual sex work, like the freedom to dance or move, should be recognised as paid labour.

Under the current legal frameworks governing sex work in India, such calls for the recognition of sex work as work becomes impossible to realize: The Immoral Traffic (Suppression) Act (SITA) of 1956 and the 1986 amendment, known as the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act (ITPA)states, among other things, that while sex work is legal in private, soliciting in public is a crime. Owning a brothel is illegal, but a woman can sell sex as an individual. Moreover, a sex worker is forbidden to work within 200 meters of a public place. These conditions make women in sex work more vulnerable to violence as they cannot under law benefit from the support of colleagues in their workplace, operate in well-lit, open or busy public places where they might feel safer, and are subject to arrests and further violence by the police when they seek work.

With this legal backdrop of sex work in India, the paper will now turn its attention to how DMSC and Komal Gandhar rely on dance as a mobilising aesthetic force to signal to audiences the sex worker’s need for volition, self-determination and labour rights.

**Komal Gandhar: Dancing Solidarities**

My interactions with Komal Gandhar in December 2019 led me to further interview two of its corpo-activists in February 2022: Lona Saha Bhattacharya, a transgender female and the child of a sex worker, who grew up in Sonagachi and trained at Komal Gandhar since its inception; and Rajkumar Das, a transgender female who has been associated with Komal Gandhar since 2014. Both Lona and Rajkumar, apart from their performance/workshop/activist commitments at Komal Gandhar, draw some financial sustenance from their independent business ventures and their professional work as *hijra*s (third sex/gender individuals). The conversations with Lona and Rajkumar took place online in Zoom meeting rooms and focused on two key areas— their lived experiences and their choreographic work/activism.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Queer shame is turned into a sustaining network of “queer attachments” (Munt 2007) as pride and self-belief inform almost every facet of Lona and Rajkumar’s lives, with both emphatically stating that it was dance that facilitated their individual journeys into self-determination. Lona was born male as Loknath Bhattacharya in a Sonagachi brothel. Her mother lived in rural poverty as a young girl and first worked as a domestic help in the city before entering sex work. After marrying one of her clients[[7]](#endnote-7), she gave birth to what Lona describes as a “cherubic, moon-faced boy”. Lona’s earliest memories of Sonagachi was of a life completely unperturbed by daily events happening around her. Her “aunties” would change partners every day and women dressing up and looking glamorous was a daily occurrence in her environment. It was only around the age of thirteen or fourteen, when her peers at school (which she attended outside Sonagachi) questioned her about her neighbourhood, that the reality of Sonagachi dawned on Lona. Her schoolteacher would call her a lotus in the marsh, and suggested that she acquire proper educational qualifications to get herself and her mother out of Sonagachi. While Lona started dancing at Durbar’s Komal Gandhar since the age of seven or eight, it was only in her late teens that she realised that Sonagachi was not a marsh but a place of work for many women like her mother, and that instead of spending her efforts in getting women out of Sonagachi, she had to actively work to get their sexual labour recognised as a formal, paid labour.

Today, Lona is a proud transgender woman, who has been married for the past seven years to Akash Saha, her gay husband who left his family and even suffered the loss of employment to be with her. She uses both surnames after her name — that of her husband’s and her *savarna* father’s (Bhattacharya is a Bengali Brahmin surname)— even though she reminds me that children of women in sex work are often not identified by their father’s surname.

Unlike Lona, Rajkumar (a name which translates as “prince”) has chosen not to change her given first name. While “princess” would suit her transgender female identity and personality more, Rajkumar says that her fight is to retain her gendered (male) name while inhabiting a trans body to show how language often masks reality, and how plural ways of being and living in this world can coexist in the same body. Rajkumar’s mother was born into poverty into a Brahmin family and married a bus driver from a lower caste, working hard sewing uniforms for railway staff to help raise her three children in Kolkata. From a young age, Rajkumar loved studying, and states that her mother (who herself was educated up to matriculation level) was a big influence on her life, worldview, and work ethic. When Rajkumar realised that dancing would allow her to wear make-up and jewellery, she began to train and perform as a dancer and found within her dancing body the ability to access her femininity. Rajkumar was also a keen social worker, and at age sixteen was already working as a counsellor for the state government’s Department of Health and Family Welfare (Swasthya Bhawan). Before joining Komal Gandhar in 2014, Rajkumar had worked across India as an evaluator for National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO) and in 2012 became a Team Leader for the National Integrated Biological and Behavioural Surveillance (IBBS) to help individuals struggling with drug abuse. After working as Secretary for Prothoma, Asia’s first short-term shelter for homeless transgender individuals, Rajkumar decided to follow a path in dance-based activism with Komal Gandhar in order to explore her combined passions for dancing and social work. Rajkumar has an undergraduate degree in Accountancy from the University of Calcutta and a Masters degree in Social Work from Rabindra Bharati University, both of which have helped her stay on top of her independent business ventures and her social welfare projects.

Dance has been at once refuge, home, and a profession for Lona and Rajkumar, allowing for their arrival at a true understanding of their sexuality and enabling them both to fight for the rights of stigmatised women and transgender individuals like themselves. Both Lona and Rajkumar have trained for a period of time in the Indian classical dance form Bharatanatyam and other creative dance processes in Kolkata. While Rajkumar trained under Arunava Burman, a disciple of Mamata Shankar (who herself has been continuing her father Uday Shankar’s modern dance legacy), Lona has trained and performed with established Bengali dance artists and choreographers such as Kohinoor Sen Barat (Kohinoor Dance Academy), choreographer and social activist Alokananda Roy and Sujoy Thakur (Shinjan Institute of Bharatanatyam and Creative Dance).

**Choreographing Legal Activism**

Komal Gandhar’s training in movement techniques and choreographic composition closely parallel their activism work as well as their professional contribution to legal justice processes— both Rajkumar and Lona joined the Lok Adalat (People’s Court) in 2016 as India’s first and second transgender judges for the system. The law and legal rights of women in sex work and LGBT individuals more generally are frequently a topic of the dance dramas that they stage. The dancing body, rather than a lecturing sermon, communicates to Komal Gandhar’s audiences important knowledge of their civil rights. For example, Rajkumar notes that under Section 46 (4) of the Code of Criminal Procedure 1973, no woman can be arrested after sunset and before sunrise “save in exceptional circumstances”. This legal knowledge becomes useful arsenal in empowering women in sex work who are often subjected to police arrests and raids (even though they can still be disadvantaged by the police’s interpretation of the phrase “exceptional circumstances”). Komal Gandhar’s members dance the law into focus for their audiences, to educate sex worker communities of their fundamental rights as civilians even though they are constantly criminalised under Indian jurisprudence.

These aesthetic methods of dancing legal knowledge into public platforms can be said to fall into a category or form of dance that has been described by Pallabi Chakravorty (2017) as “remix”. As Chakravorty notes, remix choreographies are distinct from the Indian modern dance forms that were crafted by early-to-mid-20th century figures like Rabindranath Tagore or Uday Shankar. Instead, remix dances are products of a new dance field in India that have destabilised previously ossified “Indian dance hierarchies of classical, folk, tribal and filmy,” and call into being a new era of “participatory democracy” (Chakravorty 2017: 2). Here, a new constituency of dancers hailing largely from lower, middle and working classes and occupying a broad spectrum of caste and religious identity markers are now both “cultural producers and consumers” of dance (Chakravorty 2017: 3).

Komal Gandhar’s choreographic works that I have witnessed, both live at the Rajasthani Mela in Kolkata in 2019, and via a video recording of their televised performance in 2018, certainly speak to such post-1992 economic liberalisation scenarios for Indian dance that Chakravorty notices proliferating across media channels, Bollywood films and reality television programmes. Chakravorty suggests that this energetic transmission of embodied knowledge and kinaesthetic information across mediated visual media has resulted in a breakdown of previously held cultural values ascribed to the singular authenticity of a particular Indian dance form, be it classical or folk, or even the largely class-privileged contemporary Indian dances. Komal Gandhar’s dances can therefore be defined as belonging to this new world of “remix” choreographies, combining Indian folk, classical, filmy, and even contact-based Euro-American kinaesthetic techniques, at once Indian and yet fluid in their refusal to subscribe to one particular regional style or form of dance. When Komal Gandhar dance in solidarity with sex workers and LGBTQIA+ communities on makeshift stages in rural regions, in fairground podiums, on international platforms or on television screens, they rely on the idea of a ‘participatory democracy’ as Chakravorty defines it. Komal Gandhar assemble audiences through their unclassified yet “fabulous” motions, where as Madison Moore (2018) shows, fabulousness is not merely a style choice but often a powerful political gesture of defiance and creativity embodied by the marginalised.

**Tragedy and Triumph: Komal Gandhar on *India’s Got Talent* (2018)**

The camera moves across the dance floor weaving its way in-between the bodies of dancers, who are dressed in white and standing in a semi-dark stage with iridescent blue lighting. As it closes in on each body, the camera picks up the dancers’ faces and bodies while they switch on, one after another, standing lamps that shine brightly on them as they appear to walk out from the gloom. These opening moments end with the camera arriving at a dancer standing with her back to the lens. She turns and starts lip syncing as she directly confronts and walks towards the camera, which retreats as she speaks:

*manawa mein mere aandhi hai uthi, bas stabdh khadi hu main  
sanson mein paar apani hi sans, nishabd khadi hu main  
duniya se jiti jiti, khud se haari bas dhwast khadi hu mein  
aaina main aur aks main, madmast khadi hu main*

There is a storm in my mind, I stand still

My breathing is ragged, I stand wordless

I win in this world and lose to myself, I stand destroyed

I am mirror and I am shadow, I stand intoxicated. (Komal Gandhar 2018)

The lyrics are from the title track of *Laaga Chunari Mein Daag* (translated “my veil is stained”), a 2007 Hindi-language Bollywood film that charts the trials and tribulations of a sex worker’s life. In 2018, the song is given a new danced interpretation by Komal Gandhar’s members, who have reached the semi-finals of the popular reality television show, *India’s Got Talent*. Part of the global Got Talent franchise, this competitive show placed Komal Gandhar on a national platform, streaming their dance to millions of homes. Judging their performance on this competitive show are Mumbai film industry heavyweights Karan Johar (producer), Kirron Kher (theatre, television and film actress and producer) and Malaika Arora Khan (actress and model), along with other celebrity guest judges.

The dancers take turns to lip sync to the lyrics as they walk across the stage and enact scenes of violence — their mouths are covered, objects are hurled at them, but they keep confronting the camera with their rage. As the first line of the title track, “lagaa chunari mein daag,” floats in, the choreography begins to pick up pace. The standing lamps disappear and a frantic choreography of jumps, floor lunges and formation work spill out on the dance floor as nine Komal Gandhar members perform under the studio lights. At one point, a duet occurs upstage, where a female dancer backward rolls on to her male partner’s shoulder. In another moment, a dancer is flung in the air and falls into another dancer’s arms. Contact work, some Bharatanatyam, and a dramatic enactment of scenes combine to create this furious remix choreography.

Here the paper explores if corpo-activist labour, when co-opted by commercial mainstream television programming and the capitalist frameworks governing these, remains efficacious or even vital to the political movement of sex workers in India. Can Komal Gandhar’s remix dancing succeed as activism on a competitive reality television show? A few possibilities emerge when we closely analyse the ways in which the collective’s dances were presented by the show’s producers to television audiences. One possible reading is that the show manages to keep the collective’s identity firmly ensconced within the narratives of sex worker tragedy and victimry. In one short interview sequence, a member of Komal Gandhar , Tanjila Khatoun , is filmed recounting her story of being molested and how her molesters mark her as the sexually available child of a sex worker. Tanjila breaks down as she covers her face with both hands and sobs loudly. Komal Gandhar members have revealed during our interviews how every word in the show was carefully scripted, so this scene would have been crafted by the producers to produce a particular affect. We as the audience are meant to feel empathy for a young woman who is traumatised because of her mother’s profession, and to view the child of a sex worker as one who is disempowered. This completely contradicts the pride with which Komal Gandhar’s members, many of whom are children of sex workers, claim their public and activist identities in the real world.

In another sequence, the judges invite the sex worker mothers of some of the group’s members on stage, and what follows is a series of close ups of weeping faces and hugs exchanged between Komal Gandhar’s dancers and their mothers, as sentimental uplifting music plays in the background. The show constantly vacillates between a seemingly progressive pronouncement of the dignity of sex workers and their children while yet showing them as women who are leaky. In my view, this attempt to ramp up TRPs by displaying the “tragic” lives of sex workers is indicative of a neo-liberal capitalist media’s refusal to centre Komal Gandhar’s goal of decriminalising sex work. Catering to the respectability politics of a primetime national audience, the show attempts to submerge Durbar and Komal Gandhar’s assertion of the labour rights of sex workers under a narrative of victimhood. This is more evident when contrasted, for example, with Shohini Ghosh’s remarkable and thoughtful documentary on DMSC’s sex workers, *Tales of the Night Fairies* (2002) which centres the sex workers’ collective resistance and organising and in which the pride, dignity, joy and humour of Sonagachi’s women shines through.

It is ironic, too, that the song that Komal Gandhar’s members danced to in the semi-finals is from a conservative rescue–rehabilitation film with a narrative arc that begins at societal rejection/stigma faced by the principal protagonist who falls into sex work, and ends in societal acceptance of this sex worker *as long as* she subscribes to the heteronormative institution of marriage. In *Laaga Chunari Mein Daag*, the character of Badki, the protagonist, is saved from sex work by marriage to a man who loves and accepts her despite her profession— Badki must be made decent again by the dignity offered to her by her heterosexual husband. It is unfortunate that the song, chosen by the producers of the show, and to which Komal Gandhar danced so powerfully and with such pride and ferocity, are filled with phrases such as “I stand still,” “I stand wordless,” or “I stand destroyed” — qualities that Komal Gandhar’s members consciously distance from in their daily activist work. So, the lyrics that Komal Gandhar are made to dance to in *India’s Got Talent* and the film from which the song is extracted ultimately misrepresents DMSC and Komal Gandhar’s rallying call of “Sex Work is Work”.

Yet, Komal Gandhar’s *India’s Got Talent* stint is anything but a failure of corpo-activism when faced with the pressures of media capitalism. One way to view Komal Gandhar’s participation in the showis to see it as activism co-opting neoliberal agendas. Yet, we must also recognize Komal Gandhar’s success in inserting sex work rights into prime-time television programming— an act that boldly disrupts the expectations of a “respectable” audience. I would argue that despite the cop out, tears, tightly scripted lines and sentimental scenes that the producers imposed on the group, it is the corporeality of the dancers that ultimately allow Komal Gandhar to present themselves as agents to be reckoned with. Their choreographic work never allows for a display of bodily weakness. Despite dramatising scenes of violence and terror through their bodies, the dancers appear as well-trained, taut, strong, energetic and flexible bodies, displaying remarkable feats of dance technique during the choreographed sequences. Perhaps, as Kedhar (2020) suggests, we should be wary of flexibility as a neo-liberal demand placed on labouring bodies, which ultimately curbs the labourer’s rights. However, as Kedhar (2020:4) astutely notices, “flexibility is not just a tool of labour exploitation but also a bodily tactic that dancers themselves exploit to navigate vexed and volatile economic and political conditions” .

Following Kedhar, I would argue that Komal Gandhar, too, use their dance labour to take advantage of mainstream media platforms so that, ultimately, they can accumulate their own cultural capital to lobby for change. Therefore, “sex work as work” does triumph even on commercial media, and it is the labour of Komal Gandhar’s dancing bodies that facilitates the sharing of this collective call.

**Conclusions**

In her book *Dancing Communities*, Judith Hamera (2007:4) notes “how dancers use aesthetics, and particularly technique, to build diverse and compelling communities within the larger global city”. Hamera (2007:4) writes that for all dancers,

relationships to aesthetics, learned and demonstrated through relationships to technique, are crafted through daily labours, with the physical often being the least of these. There are labours of employment and recreation, certainly, but more foundationally, the labours demanded by technique are affective and relational. They are social, political, spiritual […]

This paper, through an analysis of Komal Gandhar’s performance labour, notices how the group engages in the formation of a particular community through their aesthetic practices to reach towards a social and political goal, a community that dreams of ending the stigma attached to sex workers and hopes to infuse their life with dignity. Even if Komal Gandhar’s dance practices do not squarely fit the accepted classifications of Indian concert dance forms, they exhibit through their dancing bodies the capacity for sustained physical investment in honing various movement techniques. These are labours of the body that help minoritised groups to assemble and agitate, to reflect and resist, and to clamour and call to action a future that is yet to begin. Of significance is that “komal” in Indian classical music means a flattened or lowered note, while “gandhar” is the third full note on the scale. Komal Gandhar’s activism is the insistent hum of the minoritised that sharply brings into view practices of subaltern solidarity and collective resistance. This paper has attempted to show how Komal Gandhar’s techniques of assimilating various dance knowledges ultimately work to display the corporealities of their minoritised activist lives. By proposing to view Komal Gandhar’s work as corpo-activism, this paper reveals that without the techniques acquired through years of dance practice and rehearsals, the affective and relational activist labour that produces the Komal Gandhar community would remain incomplete and unmaterialised.

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1. **NOTES**

   “Nautch” (derived from the word “naach” meaning ”dance” in Hindi, Bengali and several other Indian languages) was a colonial and anglicised word which became an umbrella term used to denote a vast range of dance practices from across the Indian subcontinent in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The word “nautch” became associated with practices of female dedication in temples and with prostitution. An anti-Nautch movement was launched in the 1890s under British colonial administration in collaboration with largely class and caste privileged Indian cultural reformists and revivalists. This directly disenfranchised hereditary dancing communities in several regions of South India (see Srinivasan 1985; Parker 1998). Anti-Nautch legal regulation and its lasting after-effects extended to a diversity of dance practices across several other regions of India, including Bengal. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Indubala Dasi (1899–1984) was the only disciple of the legendary courtesan Gauhar Jan (1873–1930), and the first Bengali artist to record for The Gramophone Company of India. She fought for the rights of sex-workers in Kolkata’s red-light district where she lived throughout her life. Indubala first performed on stage for the Rambagan Female Kali Theatre, an all-female ensemble theatre company founded by her mother Rajbala in 1922. In the 1950s, Indubala was involved with the Sammilita Nari Samiti (United Women’s Society), which lobbied for the state and central governments of India to launch anti-oppression and anti-corruption programmes in red-light zones and which also pushed for the representation of sex workers on government committees on social welfare. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Both Ananya Chatterjea (2009) and Urmimala Sarkar Munsi (2016) discuss the precarious lives of *nachni* dancers in Bengal, while Aishika Chakraborty (2022) explores the work of popular yet stigmatised cabaret dancers of Calcutta. For more on illicit/erotic labour and performance, see Sameena Dalwai (2020) *Bans and Bar Girls: Performing Caste in Mumbai’s Dance Bars*; and Anna Morcom (2013) *Illicit Worlds of Indian Dance: Cultures of Exclusion*. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. I first interviewed Komal Gandhar’s members in December 2019 in Kolkata when I met the group, but materials used for this essay are mainly based on interviews with Lona Saha Bhattacharya and Rajkumar Das conducted on Zoom and analysis of dance videos shared by both of them in February 2022. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Another important study is Susanne Foellmer’s ‘Choreography as a Medium of Protest’ (2016), in which the author sees choreographic movements in particular scenarios (such as the ‘Standing Man’ in Istanbul’s Taksim Square) as ‘an embodied medium of political protest’ (68). Foellmer argues that in such scenarios, the ‘political potential of each act therefore become evident when the boundaries of dance and choreography as (embodied and structure giving) media become uncertain […]’ (68). In my discussion of Komal Gandhar’s choreography, instead, it is precisely the clearly demarcated space of dance that makes political activism possible. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Lona and Rajkumar’s names have not been anonymised; permissions were received to use their real names in this publication. Both Lona and Rajkumar lead public lives as activists and artists. Some confidential details from their narratives have been left out of this publication, as these were shared as a result of an already established and deep mutual trust between us. The final draft of this article was shared with them and received their consent prior to its publication. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. It is important to note that “marriage” in Sonagachi does not always follow the heteronormative and legal structures governing relations outside the red-light district. A wide range of conjugal relations can exist in the domestic sphere between sex workers, their clients and their families. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)