

Media as Mediator: Intertextual Narrative in Digital and Performative Presentation

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Abstract

“Media as Mediator” tells a tale in two mediums: classical South Indian and Western dance in the seven-dance suite, *Liquid Gems*, and the fiction Tamil film, *Pancha Ratna*. Media as Mediator was an intervisual presentation that explored sacred characters in a contemporary story in two- and three-dimensions. Intervisuality compares and interprets visual images in a cultural context. This concept enhanced contemporary approaches to classical Hindu myths in *Liquid Gems* and *Pancha Ratna*. Media sources brought classical Bharatanatyam dance and Bollywood-style songs into conversation with Western dance forms in the dance suite, *Liquid Gems*, and the Tamil fiction film, *Pancha Ratna*. The story focuses on women’s issues in diverse marriage arrangements, dowry and murder/suicide. Contemporary media reports influenced the way in which sacred archetypes inform their modern counterparts in the narrowcast narrative.

Key words: India; Media; Multicultural; Marriage; Suicide; Theatre; Film; Dance

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INTRODUCTION

When B. G. Indiramma lit her father’s cremation, change in traditional Hindu customs seemed imminent (*Times of India*, 2010). Because the closest male relative traditionally performs Hindu cremation rites, Indiramma’s action challenged women’s roles in Indian society (Bennett, 2010). *Media as Mediator* emerged from Tamil media. The film *Pancha Ratna* and the dance *Liquid Gems* demonstrate the effects of dimensionality on storytelling. Immersion was achieved by reading sacred texts, learning Bharatanatyam dance, chanting Vedas, attending Indian music and dance concerts and plays, studying yoga and speaking with Tamilians. Practical and academic encounters with Hindu archetypes deepened understanding of classical meanings. The story, set in Tamil Nadu, served as the common thread that interwove content with characters.

Whereas Bollywood synthesizes drama, music and dance in film, Hollywood excels at action films. In Rituparno Ghosh’s film, *The Last Lear*, Lear was a terminally ill character on set. Vishal Bharadwaj adapted *Macbeth* to the haunted *Maqbool*. Peter Brook staged the epic dance-drama, *The Mahabharata*, and subsequently captured its mythic essence on film. Eastern and Western cinema reincarnated mythic archetypes in contemporary situations on film. While plays are frequently adapted to screenplays, the way dance performance and digital media interact is rarely explored. In these media, images take precedence. Whereas textuality mediates the meaning of words in specific circumstances, visual literacy interprets images in cultural contexts. Intervisuality compares and contrasts the legibility of images across mediums in a cultural context. The archetypal Hindu stories presented visual and textual narratives grounded in spiritual traditions. Bharatanatyam *hastas* (*gestures*) and language clarified textual and visual relationships in context. The interface between West and East synthesized traditional and contemporary culture through multi-dimensional imagery.

By subtly adapting the screenplay and dance to the cultural milieu, sensitivity to Tamil culture engaged the informed audience. As communication becomes increasingly virtual, the transposition of visual imagery from live performance to a flat screen format will enhance the performer-audience relationship and increase viewership.

Art Silverblatt's (2001) fifth principle of media literacy emphasized that "Media presentation can provide insight into the attitudes, values, behaviors, preoccupations, patterns of thought and the myths that define a culture". To validate intervisuality, consider the importance of familiarity of codes within a society. To assess these patterns, project sources included print, Hindu texts, and Bharatanatyam (classical Tamil dance). For example, the Tamil Nadu IT Minister's digital literacy initiative to decrease the 73% illiteracy rate led to the theme of a literacy project in the film *Pancha Ratna (India Online, 2011; Hindu, 2010)*. In Tamil media, marriage-related deaths are relegated to sidebars. Case in point: new bride jumped into a river because she wanted to be a nun (*Times of India, 2010*). Compared with their Western counterparts, Indian women commit suicide at a rate of 4:1 (Vijaykumar, 2007, pp.81-84). For every suicide in North India, five are committed in the South. Although banned in 1961, a bride's family often pays a dowry. After marriage, in-laws sometimes harass the wife for more money or property. When pressure is unbearable, she hangs, poisons or immolates herself (*Times of India, 2011*). In an extreme case, the groom's family set the bride on fire. Caste also plays a role. Traditionally, to marry outside of one's caste is punishable by death (Stearns, 2011). Nirupama Pathak, a Brahmin, fell in love with Priyabhanshu Ranjan, a *Kayastha* of the ruling/warrior caste. When her family objected, she allegedly hung herself (*Press Trust of India, 2011*). Then, an arrest warrant was issued for her father, boyfriend and brother (*Times of India, 2010*). Since Chennai leads Tamil Nadu in dowry deaths (Vasundara, 2010), such death and marriage stories provoke a cry for social justice.

1. PANCHA RATNA, THE SCRIPT

When Hollywood meets Bollywood, traditional archetypes become recognizable characters. Initially, characters' vocal and physical essences were distilled into thumbnail sketches. Though the content varied according to artistic needs of the medium, the scenes imaginatively translated the classical into a modern context. The narrative function of the characters becomes evident in the following synopsis. Three villagers, Aishwarya, Vinodha and Sangeetha, contemplated marriage without dowries. Aishwarya supported her ailing father by making beauty products. Vinodha sold milk and Sangeetha sold coconuts. Arjun, an IT entrepreneur, returned to his village start a literacy project with his friends, Raghu and Krishna. Aishwarya's late mother had arranged an unusual marriage between Arjun, a low-caste *sudra*, and

her *Brahmin* daughter, Aishwarya. Because his parents wished that he would marry a village girl, Raghu courted Sangeetha. Having dated Vinodha in the city, Krishna convinced Vinodha that he loved her. The inciting event is the return of Ravi, Arjun's half-brother, who kidnapped and allegedly raped Sangeetha in an inversion of a Tamil wedding tradition. Ravi wanted Sangeetha to clear his name so he could marry Aishwarya. The plot built to a climax: Crazed by Aishwarya's love for Arjun, Ravi killed Aishwarya's Brahmin father. The goddess Durga drove Ravi to commit suicide at the cremation. The couples became engaged. Since death is taboo in Bharatanatyam, *Liquid Gems* focused on marriage and *Pancha Ratna* addressed marriage and death.

A pivotal event led to the central image of the *Abhishekam*. After the Tanjore temple's 1,000th anniversary, a girls' chorus sang *Pancharatna Kriti*, the Five Gems of Ram. Priests poured rosewater, turmeric, sesame oil, coconut and river water, fruit, honey, milk, curd and sandalpaste over the deity. The outpouring of love to Ram led to aesthetic complexity. The female characters became the five gems based on events from *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*. The diamond represented unshakeable love of Sita for Ram. The ruby denoted Draupadi (Aishwarya). After the Kausavas attempted to disrobe Draupadi during the dice game, she vowed to bathe her unbound hair in her assailant's blood (Dharma, 1999, p.211). Blue sapphire reflected the cool confidence of Kunti (Aishwarya's late mother); the five Pandava brothers married Draupadi because whatever she said was right (Dharma, 1999, p.113). The opalescent pearl became signified the cowherd, Radha (Vinodha). The emerald connoted Durga who creates life and avenges injustice. The five gems symbolized women worthy to marry regardless of caste or socioeconomic status.

The implicit content enhanced episodes from Hindu texts on screen and in choreography. In *The Ramayana*, Ravana kidnaps and Ram rescues Sita (Valmiki, 2011). When Ram's subjects questioned her chastity, Sita proved her purity by escaping unscathed from the fire. In *The Mahabharata's Swyamvar*, the marriage competition instigated conflict between Arjuna (Arjun) and Karna (Ravi) (Dharma, 1999, p.114). Because Arjuna's mother, Kunti, concealed the birth of her first born, Karna, by the sun god Surya; Karna was known as a charioteer's son (Dharma, 1999, p.911). When Draupadi did not allow Karna to compete and Arjuna won Draupadi, the final battle loomed. In an intertextual sendup, Krishna, who served as Arjuna's charioteer in *The Mahabharata*, became the Raghu's driver (Dharma, 1999, p.603). Similarly, when Krishna became the divine lover of his *gopis*, Radha overcame her jealousy (Manzo, 2010, p.14). As modern avatars coped with contemporary situations, the characters benefitted from ancestral recollection free of karmic fate. Yet, present actions, such as Ravi's murder of Aishwarya's father, resulted in accountability. These hallowed underpinnings

shaped perceptions of the gender in the dance and film. In this qualitative media study, by unearthing the collective repository of sacred narrative, the characters imagined possible solutions to ancient dilemmas.

The cultural context invited the integral audience into the work. In concert with Tamil mores and the Indian Censor Board, marriage and procreation were emphasized. Because the *Visual Literacy* project advocated the right to choose how one marries, characters married for diverse reasons: love, arrangement or friendship. Following Herbert Zettl's support of the cinematic power of landscape (1995, p.95), the film was recorded in the Tamil village of Nembur during *Pongal*, the harvest celebration. This locale brought a social justice issue to the fore. Forced to pay exorbitant interest rates for subsistence loans, caught in the "debt trap", some Tamil Nadu farmers commit suicide (Gill, 2011). Although the landscape evoked nostalgia for pastoral life, the spacio-temporal link tweaked the viewer's conscience.

2. LIQUID GEMS, THE DANCE

Liquid Gems consisted of seven dances: *Abhishekam*, *Kauvery River Dance*, *Durga Advises Krishna*, *Raghu Courts Sangeetha*, *Aishwarya's Dream*, *Love is in the Air* and *Celebration*. In *Abhishekam*, the women poured libations to Durga. In *Kauvery River*, Krishna stole the bathing beauties' saris. In *Durga Advises Krishna*, Durga mediated a lovers' quarrel between Krishna and Vinodha. In *Raghu Courts Sangeetha*, Raghu fell in love with Sita. In *Aishwarya's Dream*, Durga manifested Aishwarya's dream man. Lovers united in *Love is in the Air*. In *Celebration*, the couples became engaged.



Liquid Gems. Women in Kuchipudi and men in Bharatanatyam style. L to R: Kailash Nathan, Nitya Seshadri, Jay Kumaren Iyasamy, Reshmi Nair and Rajesh Chenthy. Photo credit: United States India Educational Foundation (USIEF).

The second dance, *Kauvery River*, the women drew a figure eight with their toes in Kuchipudi style. Arjun meditated on marriage in Bharatanatyam *hastas*. When Krishna and Raghu spied the women, they tap danced and flew like *Garuda*. Krishna and Raghu begged Arjun to help with a flat tire in a syncopated Tango. Raghu and

Arjun danced the ball-heel Camel step. As the women bathed in blouses and petticoats, Krishna stole their saris. Arjun and Raghu leapt in a bent-kneed *Paidhal adavu*, lunged and perched on one leg to chide Krishna. When the women knelt in submission, Krishna acquiesced. The sextet dancers slid, rocked and jumped on their heels in *Sarakkal Adavu*. Women galloped joyfully. The men leapt upstage in *Paidal*. The women bounced on the balls of their feet to tease the men. The men knelt. The *Abhishekam* featured bent legs rotating around the chest's axis. The women posed flirtatiously with arms overhead and toes by their ankles. The men soared. The women struck their heels and spoked their hands like stars in the *Kuditthu Metta*, and stretched their legs in *Naatt adavu*. Arjun leapt to his new girlfriend. Raghu gamboled with his love. Krishna begged Vinodha for forgiveness. The women exited sensually in Kuchapudi style. The men pursued them in *Panchanadai ta-ki-ta*, stamp and a ball and heel, and matched the women's *Kuditthu Metta*. The women galloped away. The men stamped, jutted their heels side, lunged and spun with *Tath Thai Taam*. The women offered *Abhishekam* to Durga. Vinodha skipped, Sangeetha kicked, and Aishwarya leapt, with the men in hot pursuit.



Liquid Gems. The cast dances the *Sarakkal*. Madhvi Venkatesh, Nitya Seshadri, Reshmi Nair, and Rajesh Chenthy. Photo Credit: B. V. Mogadhar.



Liquid Gems. Krishna blesses the women by the *Kauvery River*. Madhvi Venkatesh, Jay Kumaren Iyasamy, Nitya Seshadri, and Reshmi Nair. Photo credit: USIEF.

In dance three, *Durga Advises Krishna*, Vinodha dipped, swayed and churned butter in Kuchipudi style. Krishna spun flamboyantly, arms tossed lightly in the Kathak style. Krishna's peacock plume bloomed in *alapadma*. The *leitmotif*, *Teermanam*, signaled antiphonal dialogue. The lovers competed for the floor. Durga leapt in to mediate. She backed them down with *Panchanadai ta-ki-ta*. Vinodha and Krishna argued with *Teermanam*. When Durga sided with Vinodha, they danced the elongated *Naatt adava*. Krishna beat his ankle with his foot balletically, turned and balanced with legs bent. Krishna and Vinodha revolved in paddle turns. Durga protected Vinodha with her bow in a *Panchanadai chatururam* rhythm, *ta-ka-di-me*, a stamp and heel strike followed by a ball and heel strike. When Krishna humbly beseeched Vinodha with squats and balances in *Mandi*, she turned away. Durga spun and balanced as she contemplated the dilemma. Krishna and Vinodha awaited judgment. Durga threatened the unfaithful Krishna with *naga hasta*, or cobra hoods. Durga caught the retreating Krishna and he prostrated himself. Durga warned Krishna with her celestial discus. Vinodha advocated on Krishna's behalf. Vinodha and Krishna waltzed in a *Panchanadai ta-ki-ta*. Appeased, Durga clicked her heels and taught them how to fight fairly with her weapons: conch, bow and arrow, thunderbolt, lotus, discus, sword, and trident. Durga concluded with *Teermanam adavu* and leapt offstage. Krishna lifted Vinodha and they skipped off together.



Liquid Gems studio. Reshmi Nair and Rajesh Chenthy in the Cakewalk dance. Photo Credit: Shanta.

In *Raghu Courts Sangeetha*, Sangeetha sold coconuts by the road. Raghu discovered Sangeetha and soared like *Garuda*. Sangeetha strolled, tap danced and cavorted. Raghu danced an exuberant *usi*, or paddle, accenting the back beat. Raghu's *mukulum* (bud) bloomed like champagne flowing from his heart in great *santosh* (happiness). He kicked his heels and tap danced. Sangeetha topped him with the *Mandi* squatting step. They turned and tapped together. Raghu tried to catch Sangeetha as she flung her arms in a Kathak turn. He caught her in flirtatious cakewalk and galloped together. Raghu lifted

Sangeetha a double stag leap in *swastika*. They glided upstage in a turning cat leap. Sangeetha's Bharatanatyam steps contrasted Raghu's flowing turns. They tap danced together and parted.



Liquid Gems: Monisha Chakravarthy (front) demonstrates a bow and arrow to Nitya Seshadri. Photo Credit: B. V. Mogadhar.

In dance five, *Aishwarya's Dream*, Durga pressed a sewing treadle to cast a spell. The unsuspecting Aishwarya paddled to sleep. Arjun strutted with a *kuluku* walk as Durga reeled him in. When Arjun spied Aishwarya, he jumped with knees like butterfly wings. Arjun promised a necklace to Aishwarya. Dreaming of the necklace, Aishwarya suddenly awoke and saw her dream man! Arjun showed off his celestial bow like his avatar, Arjuna. Durga promised children to them. Aishwarya and Arjun balanced in *arabesque*. Aishwarya circumambulated Arjun to capture his heart.

In dance six, *Love is in the Air*, Arjun spun Aishwarya in his arms and promenaded her. He leapt, kicked and turned to show prowess. Then, he carried Aishwarya to the fire circle. The youths tested their purity in the bonfire. Krishna and Vinodha emerged with writhing *sarpashira*, arms like hooded cobras. Raghu and Sangeetha cakewalked. Raghu partnered Sangeetha who signaled the fusion dance circle with a tap turn. This sequence epitomized fusion. The men danced toe and heel Bharatanatyam stamps in a sparkling *Kuditthu Metta*, stretched legs and spiraled in *Ett adavu*. The women swished, hopped, spun and leapt around them. Then, the women joined the men in Bharatanatyam. Then, Krishna lifted Vinodha as they skipped, turned and balanced. Vinodha teased Krishna with small leaps on her toes. Krishna's peacock feathers bloomed. Vinodha led him in an *Abhishekam*. Sangeetha and Raghu *chasséd* together, and Raghu whisked her away. Aishwarya offered *Abhishekam* to Durga. Arjun as Aishwarya performed *nagabandhe*, two serpents crossed. The quartet bowed to Durga and celebrated with dazzling *Kuditthu Metta* in syncopated Bharatanatyam. Arjun lifted and spun Aishwarya in a stag leap. The sextet flew Durga's flag and poured offerings to the goddess.



Liquid Gems cast: Madhvi Venkatesh, Kailash Nathan, Rajesh Chenthy, Jay Kumaren Iyasamy, Nitya Seshadri, Reshmi Nair and Monisha Chakravarthy. Photo credit: Shanta.

Celebration is a Kollywood send-up. The sextet circled their hands overhead, turned, strutted upstage, and advanced with the Camel step. The sextet turned, tap danced and whirled with Kathak hands. The couples followed with *Sarpashira* in canon, finishing in a warrior lunge. The couples kicked up their heels and flirted in character-based poses: Krishna played his flute in *Katakamuhkam* and Raghu posed in *Shikaram* (thumbs up). Durga taught marital tactics to couples. The pairs leapt, turned and galloped in unique Bharatanatyam phrases. As Krishna and Vinodha jumped and turned, Sangeetha and Raghu balanced and posed. The men displayed strength in the kneebends of *Mandi*. Flying Durga's flag, the women surrounded the goddess. In the final tableau, Durga conquered Aishwarya who reenacted the demon, Mahisha (Anonymous, 12th c.). Sangeetha and Vinodha posed as temple guards. The men recreated a Mamallapuram sculpture in human architecture. The goddess conquered the demon and Arjun, the lion, guarded Durga's heart.

3. INTERVISUALITY

Liquid Gems and *Pancha Ratna* shared images, yet the way in which specific narratives manifested depended upon the situation. An intervisual was the final tableau of Durga conquering Mahisha in the dance analogous to Vinodha conquering Krishna's heart in the song, 'Smile, Lotus Flower.' These images of Durga served as a *thirtha*. On the earthly plane, a *thirtha* is a ford in a river. In the dance, the men crossed the River Kauvery to meet their brides. Spiritually, a *thirtha* signifies the intersection of human and divine (Cushman, 2009, p.220). Thirtha also represents the union of lovers in marriage. Similarly, circumambulation raised human status to that of a deity. Whereas the women circumambulated Durga in *Abhishekam*, they circled men with ballet, tap and Kuchipudi styles as the men danced Bharatanatyam

in *Liquid Gems*. In the film, Krishna spun Vinodha on a pedestal in the finale. When the film and dance were premiered sequentially, circular repetition amplified the *Abhishekam*'s power. Double meaning marked the transcendent place where contemporary characters met avatars. In another intervisual instance, Raghu fused classical and folk steps. Whereas Raghu interwove Pongal folk dance and Bharatanatyam in the song, 'Bang On,' Raghu and Sangeetha mirrored each other with Bharatanatyam and American tap dance in the dance. Through the transition from classical to folk styles, the city boy accepted village life. This comingling of classical and folk elements in the authentic South Indian harvest dance in the film accentuated. Thus, fusion united character, content and context. Finally, *leitmotifs* of fire and water recurred in both mediums. As couples for marriage, water cleansed and fire burned away impurities. In *Liquid Gems*, the leg revolving around the body symbolized libation and *Sarpashira*, the cobra, symbolized fire. Moreover, *Abhishekam* heightened moments in the film: coconut water spilled through Raghu and Sangeetha's hand, blood trickled down the knife; holy water dripped through Arjun's fingers at the cremation, and Sangeetha trailed her fingers in the lily pond. Thus, water and fire served as catalytic agents in character transformation.

Visual treatments of the film and dance differed in two ways: casting and specialized performance. Because murder is rarely acceptable in Bharatanatyam dance drama, the dance had no villain. Whereas Aishwarya commemorated her mother's death anniversary on film, the mother figure was absent in the dance. For this reason, *Pancha Ratna* benefitted from a richer cast of characters. However, the high quality of dancers added professionalism to *Liquid Gems*. Smooth transitions complimented quick changes and articulate *abinaya*, facial gesture, illuminated the *rasas*, or emotions, in dance. In this way, inclusion of classical and folk forms and the central image of *Abhishekam* unified imagery in the *Visual Literacy* project.

The film *Pancha Ratna* and the dance, *Liquid Gems* were premiered for an integral audience of 250 at Kalakshetra Foundation in February 2011. Given that 50% of the audience danced Bharatanatyam, *hastas* shaped the narrative. Since 80% of Indians are Hindus (*India Online*, 2011), instead of broadcasting the production, the avatars of the dance and film were narrowcast for a sophisticated, informed audience.

While social justice issues informed the story, the light-hearted approach prompted a greater vocal response than anticipated from the audience. The international Chennai dance and music season and Kollywood (Tamil) film industry suited the project. During the film, the audience cheered for their favorite characters. In the dance, the crowd laughed at Bharatanatyam *hastas* in-jokes: the spectators applauded when Arjun gestured that he was strong, handsome and wealthy. Tamil film director

Abdul thought that a cinematic treatment of Hindu rituals would be of keen interest to a Western audience. Kollywood producer Zac Samuels found the evening “enjoyable.” Consequently, the research actively engaged the audience’s imagination in live and digital formats.

The intervisual exploration in *Media as Mediator* enhanced contemporary approaches to classical Hindu myths in the dance, *Liquid Gems*, and the film, *Pancha Ratna*. The archetypal Hindu stories presented imagery and text grounded in spiritual tradition. Visual relationships in filmic techniques, Bharatanatyam *hastas*, and language illuminated text in context. Therefore, the interface between Western and Eastern traditions crystallized traditional and contemporary cultures in multi-dimensional imagery. Inasmuch as the project challenged cultural mores, the net effect was compromise for the sake of social harmony. By subtly adapting the screenplay and dance to the cultural milieu, sensitivity to Tamil culture engaged the informed audience. As communication becomes increasingly virtual, the ability to transpose visual imagery from live performance to a flat screen will enhance the performer-audience relationship and increase viewership. In sum, *Media as Mediator* expects further intervisual exploration in dance, film, and digital media.

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CONCLUSION

The significance of the *Media as Mediator* is the intercultural and multimedia collaboration. While the popularity of Western dance has increased through Bollywood, Indian classical dance is often taught as a pure form. A true synthesis of styles demonstrates the impact

of the Fulbright-Nehru program, which is co-funded by the Indian government. Unity in diversity enhances relationships between Indian citizens and Americans by respecting both traditions to increase understanding.

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