

The gender paradox: professionalisation of a form of traditional martial arts, *Lathi Khela*, in the sociocultural context of Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

In the midst of a COVID-19 pandemic-struck India, this paper was born as an autoethnographic and analytical inquiry; it presents qualitative and multimodal research into a martial arts dance tradition, *Lathi Khela*, conducted from 2017 to 2018. This practice developed as a martial art, with little or no patronage, during the colonial days of the still undivided Bengal. Indeed, it still lives on as a popular martial arts dance tradition in many districts and rural communities of Bangladesh. Compared to other districts, the Lathi Khela group from Narail has continued this practice through innovative methods. The distinctive character of the district is governed by the multi-generational practitioners of Lathi Khela and their creative choreographies, as well as the knowledge it articulates and embodies. Moreover, in Narail, this previously male-dominated profession has also included women since 2008. The focus of this work was the role of gender in the continuity of the Lathi Khela tradition in this district. This was achieved through five semi-structured, demonstrative interviews intuitively applied in the field. The research also drew on an ongoing conversation on Facebook with M. Rahat, an experienced Lathi Khela practitioner, who took stock of the current cultural landscape of the practice in the context of COVID-19. On the one hand, the women of this district occupy a contested space when representing this male-dominated tradition, and on the other, they physically embody lives within the patrilineal boundaries of kinship and marriage. The performativity of gender is thus, directly connected to the symbolic meaning of *maan*, that is, the prestige attributed to the female body within the sociocultural contexts of the Lathi Khela.

Keywords: Lathi Khela, gender, female body, woman, autoethnography, prestige, gender capital

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INTRODUCTION

I was born in Berhampore, West Bengal (India) and have always heard stories about Lathi from my grandmother. She would tell me of the country of her childhood, now the country of East Bengal (Bangladesh), where she lived and spent her youth in Rajshahi. She had to immigrate to West Bengal before the Liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971.

For this article, my intention to write an autoethnography arose from an intuitive and immediate connection with autoethnography as a “cultural analysis through personal narrative” (Boylorn and Orbe 2014, p. 17). To paraphrase Ellis and Bochner, autoethnographers look back and forth through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on cultural aspects of personal experience; then inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by

and may move through, refract and resist cultural interpretations (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 739). The autoethnographic approach to this work, completed during the COVID-19 pandemic—as one of the most vulnerable moments of the human condition, placed me “in a matrix of always already political activities as one passes through a myriad of cultural experiences” (Ettorre, 2017, p. 2).

If “autoethnographers reveal several layers of consciousness that link the personal to the cultural” (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 739), it is important to highlight how I gained my knowledge of this form of martial arts. This further informs my “social positioning as well as experiences of the cultural freedoms and constraints one encounters” (Ettorre, 2017, p.3). Through autoethnography, I realised that this research went beyond the object–subject

distinction and “provides to intimate knowledge of sensitive issues and a powerful argument for its use as a tool for understanding self and society” (Ngunjiri, Hernandez and Chang, 2010). For this role, I wish to clarify my position as a South Asian student interested in *Lathi Khela*, as a researcher and a curious person exposed for the first time to a cultural practice remarkably close to home (which is now West Bengal). This vernacular culture is similar to my own but, remains divided by our political geographies. I am an outsider in many ways and an insider in others.

It should be noted that the current geopolitics etched in my mind a certain need to recognise that I could not conveniently use this culture as my own. I needed to unlearn and relearn and accept the possible results of overwriting my overconfidence as a vernacular Bengali with hitherto unseen realities. How then could I revise, rewrite, and re-investigate something that has been around for centuries and has been written about several times before? I tried to author this article during a pandemic—a time of crisis—both through the lens of my vulnerabilities and via the oral history of this ethnographic dance master’s degree project and performance analysis. I tried to understand the role of gender as part of a living tradition in Bangladesh, whose identity seems to fluctuate between nation, people, and place, much like the times we live in today. Thus, this work collects anecdotal references that serve as autoethnographic observations¹ about my knowledge, learning, and understanding of *Lathi Khela* from the year 2017 to the present.

1 The autoethnographic responses were derived from my conversation, during the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2021, with a social anthropologist and scholar of dance studies, Dr. Urmimala Sarkar. She asked me about my fieldwork related to *Lathi Khela* and I intuitively responded by navigating through the following questions: What is *Lathi Khela*? How did you come to know about *Lathi Khela*? What did you read before going to do the fieldwork? What did you understand based on what you had read? What did you see in Bangladesh? What did you do? These questions were used to refresh my memories of the fieldwork I did in 2017 in Bangladesh.

Through a total of 15 interviews and specifically focusing this article on five semi-structured interviews conducted in the Narail district, as well as personal communications, I aimed to trace different temporal dimensions of what *Lathi Khela* was and what *Lathi Khela* is, and thus, the paradox of its continuity. The interview questions were loosely structured around four thematic blocks: the history, narrative, performance, and future of *Lathi Khela*, also leaving room for intuition and improvisation during the interview process. Using a semi-structured, ‘demonstrative’ interview style that I invented during this process, my informants showed me, move by move, specific choreographies they considered meaningful to their community, as we had seen in the live performance the night before. The “interview responses can be seen as a form of ‘talking in action’” (Hillyard, 2010) in which the conversation through action occurs in both directions: the informants demonstrated and explained the movement and I questioned while simultaneously talking and recording the action with a camera, which further helped me keep track the timings and to take notes.

Lathi Khela was introduced to me through the physical experience of dancing capoeira in Trondheim while pursuing my master’s degree. That feeling, which was somewhere between martial arts and dance—the play between the two—made me curious to find out if there was any tradition of martial arts dance in my home state in India, West Bengal. The internet became the only means to connect to these different regions. The only links I found on the internet were the *Raibenshe*² and *Bratachari* movements. Further internet searches led me to a Bangladeshi Facebook group and thus, I was added to the *Dance Artists of Bangladesh* group.

I wrote a long post sharing my interest in researching this art form which led me to contact Lubna Marium, my informant and initial point of contact. Until then, the Lathi Khela was an art completely

2 Translated as ‘royal bamboo’.

unknown to me. We took the conversation to Facebook messenger; I provided a reference to the Bengali book, Ostro Charcha, and Lubna Marium's unpublished article on the 2008 revitalisation project called The Restructuring of Tradition as primary resources. Lathi Khela is a living tradition, with a past that evolved over centuries and now lives in different forms in different districts of Bangladesh but which has not yet been investigated. The fieldwork I undertook had already begun, even before I got there. Moving around in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, Kabila Bhai, a renowned practitioner of Lathi Khela became my interlocutor and also taught me the techniques involved in the 'play of sticks.'

Lathi Khela as a living tradition: a symbol of gender and culture

Lathi Khela or 'stick play,' is a traditional indigenous form of martial arts practice known by various names including *lathi-bardi*, *sardar-khela*, and *nurdi-khela* in Bangladesh. It currently constitutes a battle game with music involving the use of bamboo sticks. The Lathi Khela is an intergenerational, inherited, and transmitted form of Indigenous cultural knowledge of the martial defence skills used by *lathiyals*³ mostly from marginal and subaltern communities. That is, landless labourers, carpenters, pallbearers, masons, etc. Various historical sources⁴ indicate that the Lathi Khela of medieval Bengal was a highly skilled art because most feudal lords employed groups of its practitioners to defend their fiefdoms. However, due to declining patronage and for other sociopolitical and economic reasons⁵, there was a marked decline

in its practice during the British era. Lathi Khela returned to the spotlight through the *Bratachari Movement*⁶ spearheaded by an Indian civil servant, Gurusaday Dutta.

The Lathi and women

As stated by Rahat (17 July 2017) when I interviewed him, "*Ei Lathi tar onek Mulyo Ache*" (this *lathi* has a lot of value to it).

Each house used to be equipped with at least one strong and well-used bamboo stick (*lathi*) and one able-bodied man (*lathiyal*) who used the lathi especially for the purpose of settling domestic disputes (*jhogra*) on disputed land belonging to one of them. The lathi thus, became a symbol of prestige (*ijjat*), a morally defined paternal line (Kotalová, 1993). At the other end of the spectrum, it is considered common in Bangladesh that "a woman must be given in marriage at least once" (Blanchet, 1986); and, in addition, she must marry 'on time' since marriage is an important aspect of male honour and family prestige (Kotalová, 1993). The symbol of prestige is thus, repeated both in culture and gender.

Because of its martial aesthetic, Lathi Khela was inevitably associated with the characteristics of endurance, strength, and power most often related to ideals that only a man should 'naturally' possess: "the strongest, the one who takes risks and endures pain to assert his manhood" (Bank, 2012). Hence, power is inevitably associated with masculinity in this context. Discourse of the ideals of masculinity has been widely present where Lathi Khela developed in Bengal, Asia. The practice survived or was sustained after this movement and continues to be popularly performed, albeit with little or no patronage. My contact person was Lubna Marium,

3 The translation of *lathiyal* is 'one who wields sticks'.

4 Raja Pratapaditya of Jessore (17th century) is said to have had 52,000 *dhalis* (shield-bearing warriors) under his patronage according to S.C. Mitra in the *History of Jessore and Khulna* (in Bengali, vol. II).

5 British administrative reports during the colonial era also mention Lathi Khela as a local form of sport. A draconian law, the Dramatic Performance Act (DPA) of 1876 restricting the performing arts and a law banning arms together led to a decline in the practice during British rule.

6 The objective of this movement was linked to the revivalist movement of the 20th century as a postcolonial discourse "that implied the reorganisation of specific folk traditions to replenish the nationalist ideology" (Adhikary, 2015, p.670).

a dance researcher and academic as well as the artistic director and founder of the *Shadhona Cultural Circle*.⁷ She presented me with two primary resources. One was a historically significant book called *Ostro Chorcha*⁸ and the other was an unpublished article⁸ she had written about Lathi Khela within Bangladeshi society. The article constituted a detailed understanding of the 2008 revitalisation project of Lathi Khela called *Cholo Lathi Kheli*.⁹ directed by Shadhona.

Given that Lathi Khela still continues to generate enthusiasm in rural Bangladesh, in 2008 this project was implemented by Shadhona in partnership with the National Authority for the Arts¹⁰, to renew this ancient art, first by documenting the various styles of its practice followed by an infusion of pedagogical knowledge regarding its teaching, entailing both its analysis and the elaboration of a teaching methodology¹¹ The inclusion of women for learning and performance, as I understand it¹¹, began in 2008 during the revitalisation project, when Lubna Marium offered a cash prize to any group of Lathi Khela practitioners who could form a women's team in less than a year.

This standardisation of a pedagogical system and aestheticisation of forms was necessary to initiate a process of making Lathi Khela sustainable in this

context. That said, this process is not isolated and must be placed in the context of post-colonial cultures. The themes of revival and preservation of tradition through standardisation, patronage, and training are central to state policies for the arts. Indeed, the practices of recovery and preservation of traditional forms of art and performance gave rise to the imagined idea of the nation, as an experience of colonialism. The construction of an 'authentic' national culture has historically seen traditional practices as a way to resist colonial models of performative practice and the hegemony of western aesthetics. This is a widely researched phenomenon in postcolonial histories of theatre, dance, and artistic practices (Bharucha R., 1989).

Lathi Khela in the world of martial arts discourse

Martial arts research has become "powerfully associated with specifically Asian traditions and practices" (Farrer and Whalen-Bridge, 2011). In Asia, countries such as China, Japan, and India have "evidenced a long-standing and lively intellectual engagement with traditional martial arts" have also contributed towards a "martial arts discourse"¹² (Farrer and Whalen-Bridge, 2011). This kind of viewpoint is most often a western view of Asian cultures and traditions, tracing back to ancient and pre-modern practices, which can sometimes be exoticised. However, Bangladesh as a country seems not to be 'seen' in the field of martial arts discourse. Thus, a similar or alternative form¹³ of martial arts dance, the Lathi Khela, has not received any recognition and has not been part of the broader discourse of martial arts¹⁴, despite its popular practice and presence in Bangladesh. Nonetheless, a gap in

7 A centre for the advancement of South Asian dance and music, a local cultural organisation in Bangladesh.

8 The article, called *Restructuring traditions: an experiment in introduction of performance pedagogy in an indigenous performing art of Bangladesh*, considered it valuable to preserve the traditional knowledge, accumulated information, vision, and philosophy of life acquired by the local population in each place.

9 The literal translation is 'let's play Lathi'.

10 The national authority for the arts in Bangladesh is called the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy (BSA) and the project was funded by the Robi Telecommunication Company, one of the most well-known telecommunication providers in Bangladesh. The BSA has a countrywide infrastructure which will allow the project to permeate the benefits to most groups of lathiyals.

11 Personal communication with Lubna Marium.

12 For distinctions between martial arts practice and martial arts discourse, see Farrer and Whalen-Bridge, 2011.

13 The reason I say similar is because Lathi Khela is also a 'fight and dance game' in today's context, albeit with the use of sticks. Not to mention that the vocabulary used to describe the art form also drastically differs from that used with other martial arts.

14 Martial arts discourse and not martial arts studies, because "the boundaries between scholarly, journalistic, and private efforts in martial arts studies have become increasingly blurred" (Jones, 2002).

deep ethnographic research on Bangladeshi martial arts dance forms does not undermine the fact that such arts are present. Indeed, the martial arts framework allows us to understand how the body, performativity, and performance intersect in Lathi Khela.

Lathi Khela today

There are marked differences in the performance of Lathi Khela and there is no concept of a ‘typical Lathi Khela performance’ because it varies across districts in terms of performance aesthetics, repertoire, movement compositions, costumes, sociocultural context, and gender play. In fact, from an ethnochoreological perspective, the performance is the dance in itself (Bakka and Karoblis, 2010). For the fieldwork, I considered the following districts: Manikganj, Kishoreganj, and Netrokona (figure 1), where the performances could perhaps help me understand the distinctiveness of the Lathi Khela that is performed in the Narail district of Bangladesh. Manikganj maintains several dance-based narrative performances accompanied by music in which the men dress up as women with skirts and masks to play different characters¹⁵. I observed the Lathi Khela of Kishoreganj during a circumcision ceremony, where its performance was considered auspicious as the initiators of the program. The repertoire leaned towards a ‘battle game’ or ‘stick dance’ with humour as the central element during the commitment between the artists and the audience.

The Lathi Khela performance was very different¹⁶ in Netrokona, even though it is only 25 kilometres from Kishoreganj. Nonetheless, music was a common element in all districts and a necessary accompaniment for the performances¹⁷.



Figure 1 Lathi Khela practitioners from different districts in rural Bangladesh; top left: Manikganj group; top right: Netrokona group; bottom: Kishoreganj group. Photographed by the author.

15 Characters that include animals, elderly couples, and young women.

16 Lubna Marium had already shared a movement phrase with me that is unique to this district and its performances. The phrase, a high turn, is called *matiya polot* and is also seen in Manipuri dance in India and Bangladesh.

17 The Lathi Khela music-dance relationship in each district has potential as the object of further research but is not the focus of this present article.

METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Locating my nomadic subjectivity

During my stay in Dhaka, my safety was the most important thing for Lubna Marium, my contact person for fieldwork (even though she resided in

her own house). This was understandable from her perspective as a host of a female researcher from India. I was advised not to take any public transportation unless it was with a person whom Lubna already knew, and when I was not present at the residence, I was advised to inform her of my whereabouts. Moreover, she believed that Dhaka is not the safest place to move around in freely. I realised this later when I was subjected to a kind of disconcerting stare by a few men on the streets in broad daylight, even when I was wearing a full-length dress that covered me, and especially when I did not wear an onna¹⁸. At the same time, Kabila Bhai, one of my respondents, told me about his apprehension when he heard that a woman from *bidesh* or ‘a foreign land’ was coming for research purposes. He said that he had the stereotypical image of a foreign woman dressed in a ‘modern way’ in his mind, and I, with my modest clothing, had helped to allay his apprehension.

Contemporary philosopher and feminist theorist Rosi Braidotti suggested that nomadic subjectivity is one that is “in flux, never opposed to a dominant hierarchy yet is intrinsically other, always in the process of becoming, and perpetually engaged in dynamic power relations both creative and restrictive.” The notion of gender performativity places the female subject “in a highly regulated and historically determined framework” (Bala 2013). Therefore, the process of ‘becoming’ a female researcher is rooted in negotiating the middle ground between the space of having a female body and the way it is perceived.

Lathi Khela in Narail

Entering Narail, I experienced many flashbacks of my previous field visits and a redoubled curiosity about the only district where women are included in the practice of Lathi Khela. I do not know where the curiosity stemmed from. Perhaps the prospect of gender inclusivity in a predominantly male practice? Or my previous

ways of occupying an unusual, unfeminine space compared to other women, one in which I still had to fit into the feminine ideal of men? Or was it the desire to know how women could be included in such a practice? I wondered if it was it so simple? Who decides that they practice it and what happens to them after their marriage?

The last destination of the investigation, the furthest from Dhaka and the closest to the border of West Bengal (India), was Narail.¹⁹ The distinctiveness of the *Lathi Khela* there was multidimensional: (1) it embodied and articulated knowledge; (2) because of its multigenerational practitioners; (3) its creative choreography; and finally (4) the inclusion of women in this male dominated profession (see figure 2). In the following sections I will unpack some of the social, political, aesthetic, and performative shifts that occur when *Lathi Khela* is experienced, enacted, and reinvented to create a national identity.



Figure 2 The Narail *Lathi Khela* group, photographed by the author

THE PARADOX OF GENDER AS A FEMALE RESEARCHER

In all the districts I had so far visited, women, including me, were positioned in a certain way. Mostly in their domestic households or accompanied by their male counterparts as audience members. In the Netrokona district, women were still not allowed to come out from behind the purdah, the curtain

18 In Bengali this is a piece of cloth used to cover a woman's upper body.

that demarcated the boundary between the living space and the kitchen. Men did not enter this kitchen space either. I remember that when I entered this space, the women asked me so many questions; I told them about my grandmother, and we burst into laughter—although never too loud and always in a reserved way.

One of these women, the leader's wife, momentarily entered the room looking down, avoiding eye contact, and served me lunch, along with the men of the household, on their bed. I was the only woman, surrounded by five men eating with me. At that moment I felt genderless, an honorary male, which gave me an uneasy feeling of power to enter both these spaces. I could have a conversation with the men and dine with them. This was a space where no woman of the household was allowed to eat (Giurchescu, 1999). Had I been a male researcher, would I have been able to enter these two spaces? How do they perceive me now? Am I still an outsider, wearing a long dress that covers me and an Onna to cover my breasts?

This anecdotal memory steers a discussion about how, as a female researcher, I negotiated my presence in the field while being the outsider allowed me to move among men and access spaces that are normally off-limits to men and women, respectively. In the following section I briefly describe the Lathi Khela performance in Narail and investigate the act of including women in this predominantly male practice. On the one hand this paradox¹⁹ is one of invention within tradition, and on the other, it is of the performativity of gender and culture. By performativity I mean “in the sense of being [a] lived interaction and process and not a stable identity, so the subject is performative in the sense of being neither merely a natural body nor merely a social construction, but as the object of a gradual, compelling formation of acts” (Bala 2013).

¹⁹ I conceptualise paradoxes as statements that are essentially self-contradictory. Women in the Lathi Khela negotiate these paradoxes from one pole to the next within the ongoing hierarchical structures and forms of power that constitute and build off of each other in complex ways.

The gendered 'field' of Lathi Khela

This section aims to trace the process of performativity through a sociocultural analysis of the gender paradox and how it is realised through bodies, society, and nations.

On 16 July 2017, I remember seeing the performance in a maath, a space similar to an open field. The routine began, as I recall, with 12 players comprising girls, boys, men, and women whose ages ranged from 5 to 45 years forming a circle and then moving in pairs. Their sticks were continuously changing, and the rhythms altered according to the composition.

Each stick had its own associated choreography. The initial performances constituted a choreography with the sticks, the personal corporeal connection with the sticks and the space. The subsequent choreographies were based on attack and defence strategies but were always accompanied by the beat of the drum. The last part of the performance was unchoreographed and was more ‘dangerous,’ as mentioned by Ustad Bachhu Mia, the leader of the Narail group.

As the audience exercised “discernment, evaluation, and appreciation” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1999), the event moved toward the spectacular. It was a confrontational swordplay performance of female players against male players. The attacker/defender had to be extremely cautious and skilful to take and block the strikes. One small mistake could cause serious injury. The girls participate in most of the choreographies, while in some, only Tania performed with five other boys. Tania was the performer that Ustad Bachhu Mia considered the most skilled female *Lathiyal* because she participates in all the choreographies. However, the gender configuration changes with each choreography and over time.

The world in which Lathi Khela developed in rural Bangladesh, especially in Narail, had previously been a system of internalised structures, a habitus that framed the way Lathi Khela was transmitted through multi-generational practitioners. A world in which practitioners are inclined to “act and

react in specific situations in a manner that is not always calculated” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 5). As also described in figure 3, *Lathi Khela* as a habitus is related to people and their predisposition to action. In the rural households of Bangladesh, the habitus is perhaps in the internalisation of these structures of power and history and is nothing more than a “practice unifying and practice-generating principle” (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 101)

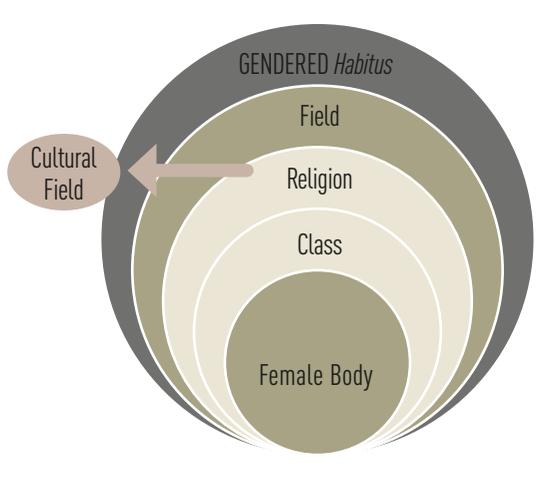


Figure 3 Schematic representation of the female body in the field of cultural reproduction as conceptualised by Pierre Bourdieu

The social world surrounding *Lathi Khela* is assimilated into a field where these structured power relationships have taken shape, making negotiation of the female body visible. The field constitutes agents that negotiate power within these settings. Furthermore, agents who are male practitioners acquire a certain social position within the social structure in which they are located, while the *shomaj*, or society, of Bangladesh places women in separate spheres. Women are considered to earn economic and cultural benefits by staying at home, while men obtain the same advantages by being outdoors.

Gender relations are, therefore, present in “perception, thought, and action” (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 8), through the habitus of culture and religion and the gender habitus thus constructed is “socially differentiated

from the opposite gender” (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 23–4). Hence, the female habitus is constructed in cultural opposition to the male habitus. In fact, Bourdieu (2001) argued that habitus ensures consistency in practice over time, such that gender dispositions often appear relatively stable. As with class, habitus ensures an inherent complacency that shapes “gender aspirations according to concrete indices of the accessible and the inaccessible, of what is and what is not ‘for us’” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 64). Therefore, the habitus assumes a relative consistency in what is considered masculine or feminine (Huppertz, 2012).

TRACING PRESTIGE

Two statements, taken from my interviews with Narail practitioners Rahat and Ustad Bachhu Mia, respectively (17 July 2017), highlight the reasons for including women:

“Ekhon to digital jug. Notun dekhte chaye dorshok” (This is the digital age. The public wants to see something new.) and *“Khelar maan ta bere jaye”* (The value of the performance increases). Thus, they saw it as an intervention born from a complex interweaving of the relationships of the female body with kinship patterns across the nation. Figure 4 traces how prestige is seen across multiple levels of the female body, kinship patterns, and the nation.

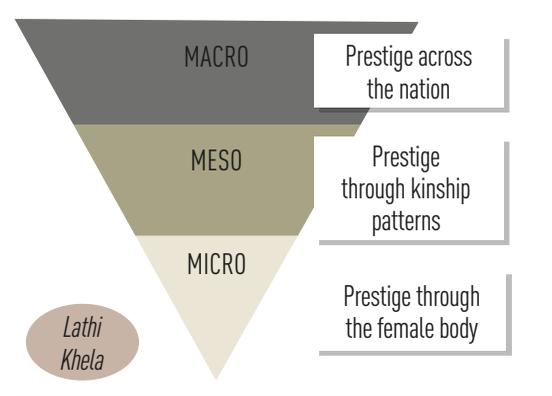


Figure 4 Schematic representation tracing the prestige obtained in *Lathi Khela* through the female body at multiple levels.

In the female body

The image of womanhood is a series of ‘contested’ images²⁰ which reveal an important distinction in the social stratification of being a woman in Bangladesh. *The Body in Asia* by Bryan S. Turner and Zheng Yangwen contextualises Pierre Bourdieu’s sociology of the body by understanding the habitus²⁰ with respect to the relationship between “practice, discipline, habitus, and self” (Turner and Yangwen, 2009). Whether as a “docile daughter, a compliant wife, [or] a dependent mother” (Chaudhary 1980), a woman’s role is decided through the socioreligious construction of gender in the culture she lives in, which is further defined by said culture. The subordination of women and their dependence on men is also pervasive in the patriarchal ideology of the prevailing *purdah* system in Bangladesh, which literally means curtain or veil. *Purdah* reinforces division in the embodiment of roles in society in different ways in public and private spaces. Doreen Massey teaches us “the intricacy and profundity of the connection of space and place with gender and the construction of gender relations” (Massey 1994 p.2). This further limits women to “secluded and stereotyped gender roles in the private, domestic arena, defining their mobility, clothing, and relationships” (Chowdhury, 2001)²¹

Similarly, women in rural Bangladesh are forced to marry, with the common consideration that “a woman must be given in marriage at least once” (Blanchet 1986). Moreover, she should also be married ‘in time’ given that marriage is an important aspect of male honour and family prestige (Kotalová, 1993). Especially in rural society, this is a traditional norm.

20 Habitus is specific to cultures and refers to the way people perceive and respond to the social world as embodied or practiced in different cultures. If culture determines the habitus in which the body is situated, what happens when culture and religion intersect in the construction of gender? Of note, Bangladesh is 88% Islam, and one of the seven countries where the population of men exceeds that of women; how does that affect the habitus?

21 Power relations “not only confirm the importance of kinship and residence patterns in the maintenance of the dance custom but also addresses the issue of social class” (Buckland, 2012).

The Bangladeshi marriage system is patrilocal meaning that a girl may be married off as early as 10 years of age in an arrangement made by her family—mainly the father—in which the subordination is further reinforced whereby the “wife owes a duty not to rebel against her own relatives or her husband” (Chaudhury and Nilufer, 1980, p. 9).

It is important to understand how the female body is situated in the ecosystem of the Lathi Khela, within a constant flow of gender-generating processes driven by the ideology of religion. Bangladesh’s social and gendered milieu requires women to constantly negotiate their position in the gender hierarchy. It is in this inconsistency in the perception of the female body at different levels that the performativity of gender lies. As shown in figure 4, Bourdieu’s analysis in the field of cultural production is the significant capital, contributed through gender. The habitus in which Lathi Khela developed does not imply genderless practitioners. “We do not evaluate each other as abstract, genderless beings, but as men and women” (D.L. Miller, 2014). Each practitioner is an individual who “possesses his/her own ‘individual system of dispositions that may be seen as a structural variant of all the other group or class habitus, expressing the difference between trajectories and positions inside or outside the class” (Bourdieu, 1990a, p. 86). For Bourdieu, these group norms are neither prescriptive nor restrictive (Huppatz, 2012), but are simply ‘potentialities’ (McNay, 2000, p. 40).

In a rural agrarian class, “women’s contribution is not recognised in economic terms” (Chaudhary and Nilufer, 1980). Their participation in the agricultural labour market remains insignificant, representing 1.07% of female agricultural workers compared to 23% of male workers in 2008 (Hossain, 2015, p. 1). Among this invisible participation of women, the *purdah* system also remains visible, further positing the meta-invisibility of women in rural Bangladeshi society. Because of the unseen but quite evident intersections, the construction of intersectionality “challenges us to look at the different social positioning of

women (and men) and to reflect on the different ways in which they participate in the reproduction of these relations” (Lutz, Vivar and Supik 2011, p. 8). The performance of women in the Lathi Khela, therefore, becomes paradoxical in nature. Social and cultural relationships are challenged, altered, and reversed in and through their performances, while these relationships still reproduce the prevailing hierarchical social and gender associations in the society to which they belong.

Through kinship patterns

The manufactured continuity of transmission through revitalisation and local patronage of embodied cultural capital²² has further provided practitioners with a legitimacy over this art form in Bangladesh and a derived competence in their field to claim the value it brought to the nation. Muhammad Lutfar Rahman started the practice of Lathi Khela in the Narail district as part of the first generation of practitioners of this art. He started learning Lathi Khela in 1951 and continued until 1969, before joining the East Pakistan Army. Now, he is almost 70 years old and says “I cannot, anymore, but I watch”²³ Girls, through the religious norms of purdah and subordination to male chiefs, were still included in the Lathi Khela when Ustad Bachhu Mia, the leader of the group, when they chose to do so, and the girls’ guardians were not opposed to putting them in a relationally larger power structure. Rahat, the director of the group added in my interview on 17 July 2017, “*Amader team ta nijeder bhetore... Shobai chilo amader nijeder log... amra bhaiera, chachato bon, mamato bon.*” (Our team is within us... Everyone is part of our own people... our brothers, cousins...).

This dance capital is employed to maintain the prestige accumulated by the very existence of female

gender capital, through their gendered habitus. Symbolic capital is “the prestige or recognition which various capitals acquire by virtue of being recognised and ‘known’ as legitimate” (Lawler, 1999, p. 6); symbolic capital is therefore powerful. Thus, the multifaceted negotiation of the power related to this symbol of prestige and with respect to the gender dispositions of women in terms of the female body, kinship, and nation, can be seen as the main factor contributing to the continuity of the Lathi Khela tradition in Narail. Hence, compared to other popular but moribund performances of Lathi Khela in other parts of Bangladesh, it appears to continue receiving local patronage and support.

On the one hand, the importance of women’s empowerment through this gender capital in Lathi Khela is an asset, but on the other, it becomes a liability. Gender capital therefore operates in contention with gender representations, shaping the female practitioner as valuable in the continued practice of Lathi Khela. A woman’s status is reflected in the authority and power she holds within the family, and/or prestige she commands from the other members of the family and the community. When I asked Ustad Bachhu Mia about society’s reception towards the decision to include women (17 July 2017), he said: “*Meye ra to shob pare, ta Lathi Khela o parbe? Tai na?*” (Women these days can do everything, so they can do Lathi Khela too, right?).

Ustad Bachhu Mia is a man of high reputation in his locality and for his previous accolades in Lathi Khela he has become a ‘harbinger of value’ to the practice. He is a person admired by the community and so the power of decision-making rests with him as ‘the man of the people.’ However, the choice of women who participate in this art, the agency they have to make their own decisions, and the reality of this situation of empowerment becomes paradoxical. If one day, Ustad Bachhu Mia decided that no women should be included, it is probable that women would stop performing the Lathi Khela because of the prevailing internalised structures. As stated by Kotalová (1993), “In agrarian Bangladesh, a person is always viewed as

22 This dance capital is an amalgamation of other economic, social, and cultural capitals (Bourdieu, 1993); I wanted to explore the cultural capital embodied and constructed through the practice of this symbolic capital.

23 In an interview with Mohammad Lutfar Rehman (2017) conducted by the author.

enmeshed in a complex network of family (*poribar*²⁴, *ghor*²⁵, *bari*²⁶) and the consensual moral community (*shomaj*). Connectedness with others possesses an intrinsic value, [...].”

When I asked the girls if their inclusion in the dance was considered objectionable by society, they replied: “It was *Chacha* [their uncle] who invited us, so nobody had a problem.” Clearly not all the girls in the Narail village were included and were not all related to the leader through a family connection. Some girls were allowed to participate because they belonged to the same family structure and the practice and transmission of Lathi Khela had been under the control of the *nijera*, or ‘their own people’ (Kotalová, 1993). During that phase, familiarity drives how the female gender is perceived. Once the girls are married, they become unknown as they then stay away from the *nijera*. Rahat says that when a girl from the *para* (neighbourhood) marries, she is considered under the guardianship of her husband, so she is no longer allowed to play Lathi Khela. Therefore, gender capital is used as a channel to acquire symbolic attributes such as honour and prestige.

Within the cultural field of Lathi Khela, another force of symbolic power arises from those already present in the field: *ijjat*, a term used to denote different meanings such as honour, esteem, and more succinctly, prestige in Bangladesh. The “degree of accumulated prestige, celebrity, consecration or honour” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 7) that a person possesses within a social space, generally a cultural field, is the reputation of a participant in Lathi Khela among other male practitioners. The evidence of such power relations not only posits “the importance of kinship and residence patterns in the maintenance of the dance custom but also addresses the issue of social class” (Buckland, 2001).

Within the nation

Ideology about the female body appears to have inconsistently percolated down to the female practitioners involved in Lathi Khela in Narail. Ustad Bachhu Mia’s decision, in 2007, to introduce something new by introducing women into the repertoire of the already existing tradition of Lathi Khela, made this group the only one to take such an initiative in all of Bangladesh. In 2018, Narail’s Lathi Khela group was selected to perform at the Nation Stadium in honour of the Prime Minister of Bangladesh. On this occasion, *Aprotiroddho or Joy Jatraye Bangladesh* (The Invincible and Victorious Journey of Bangladesh) was performed to mark the country’s progress over the past 10 years. Indeed, the inclusion of women in the current iteration of Lathi Khela in Narail greatly contributed to the cultural capital of Lathi Khela in Bangladesh. In this situation, the female gender was perceived as a conduit, advantage, asset, and as “gender capital” (Huppatz, 2012) that led to appropriation of the art form and production of a controlled and controllable aesthetic of femininity.

Thus, women’s gendered bodies seem to work to the advantage of Lathi Khela in gaining the status and prestige of representing the heritage and progress of Bangladesh at occasions like those mentioned above. The dual purpose of presenting the nation as both traditional and modern, as rooted in heritage and yet looking forward to progress is also a feature of post-colonial states in the sense that they tend to desire modernity while clinging onto tradition. Thus, bodies are integral parts of the social construction of gender (Bridges, 2009). Narail’s Lathi Khela team believes that—as also pointed out by Rahat—Bangladesh has progressed so much in 10 years that today women can be seen on *somaantale*, or on equal terms with men. Bangladesh sees the progress of women through the *oitijjo* (Bangladeshi heritage) in which women “have been largely visualised and projected as the careers/reproducers of culture and ideologies” (Munsi and Burrige, 2011, p. 139). A heritage that the government has no means of preserving but that has been “presented as euphoric spectacles of governmental creativity” (Chandralekha, 1980).

24 ‘For family’ in Bengali.

25 For home’ in Bengali.

26 ‘For society’ in Bengali.

Women remain subservient to the prevailing hierarchical structures prevalent in social spaces, thus experiencing a significant decrease in gender capital. As Puentes (2009, p. 94) stated, “Gender capital is also defined, employed and evaluated within a patriarchal gender order that values a hierarchical relationship between masculinities and femininities, regardless of contextual distinctions. Thus, domination, subordination, marginalisation, and complicity remain paramount in discussions of gender capital.” Despite the limited possibilities for true material social change at the macro level, the social and cultural sanction to train, perform, fight, and display strength and skill and indeed, to be present in public spaces, allows women to challenge the dominant and rehearsed gendered notions of vulnerability and physical frailty assigned to them. Indeed, Judith Butler introduced us to the question of gender performativity that allows women to reconstitute themselves through “a set of repeated acts” (Butler, 1990 p.43) in performance.

CONCLUSIONS

The pandemic and the advent of the Intangible Cultural Heritage-Paedia in Bangladesh

As Lubna Marium (2021) pointed out:

To Bangladesh’s credit, our constitution provides sufficient mechanisms for the preservation of culture. Article 23 states that “the State shall adopt measures to conserve the people’s cultural traditions and heritage”, while Article 23A says that “the State shall take steps to protect and develop the unique local culture and tradition of the tribes, minor races, ethnic sects, and communities”. Additionally, Bangladesh is a party to the “UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) of 2003”, signed by our State in 2009. The convention encourages Member States to safeguard ICH practices with the aim of empowering communities. The convention also provides guidelines for integrating ICH safeguarding processes with the ‘action and

delivery’ efforts to achieve [the] Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of 2030.

The truth though, is that in spite of the infrastructure for safeguarding communities being in place, Bangladesh is far away from the practical implementation of the tenets of the ICH convention. Truly, there are many slips between the cup and the lip, especially if the hand which holds the cup is both unaware and unwilling.

In her recent article, *Empowering Communities through Culture*, Marium discusses the Bangladesh Cultural Policy of 2006 and the reality in which it is applied in the field. The 2008 Lathi Khela revitalisation project also speaks to this same paradox, the need for intervention because of a significant gap in the “stated intent and actual implementation” (Kabeer 1999) of safeguarding Indigenous cultural traditions and heritages in Bangladesh. Similarly, the 2011 National Women’s Development Policy has primarily targeted women in the form of birth control and achieving population control goals. Last year, in 2020, the pandemic paved the way for an inventory of different cultural practices initiated by the *Shadhona Cultural Circle*.

As a member of that group, I became part of the ICH-paedia Consortium Workshop in Bangladesh to create an inventory of the Lathi Khela in 2020. As stated by Lubna Marium (2021):

As a first step, Shadhona has started training young academics about ‘ICH Inventorying’ and inspiring them to come up with ‘ICH Safeguarding’ strategies based on the ‘Four Goal Approach’ of (a) documenting ICH and living traditions in Bangladesh; (b) recognising and celebrating ICH with festivals and commemorations; (c) supporting and encouraging the passing on of knowledge and skills; and, (d) exploring the potential of ICH as a resource for community development and achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. The second step is the formation of a coalition of community-based organisations who will collectively undertake this task.

Secondly, On June 14, 2020, an informal, multi-organisation consortium, led by Shadhona—A Center for Advancement of Southasian Culture, a UNESCO ICH Committee accredited NGO, was formed with the intention of creating a community-led, digital and online ICH-paedia for Bangladesh, for inventorying all Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) practices of Bangladesh with the support of young students and academics. This consortium was named, ‘Consortium for ICH-paedia, Bangladesh (CIB).’

On the one hand, Lathi Khela, with its multiple names and existences as a cultural form, remains a type of Indigenous knowledge in decline in terms of its professionalisation and prospects for training and practice in the marginalised communities of Bangladesh through a “structured space with its own laws of functioning” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 6) economy. On the other hand, it continues to survive through interventions that, in the Narail district, include women. In the current context this practice has already been passed down through four generations. While the introduction of novelties in the Lathi Khela tradition orients it towards innovation, it has also presented itself as simultaneously resisting and continuing the same tradition. The innovation of including women in the predominantly male profession of Lathi Khela has been met with resistance to the continuity of its transmission because of its inclusion in a gendered environment.

This resistance, caused by advances in women’s inclusion, permeates the controversial image of women in Bangladesh. Hence, a fluctuation in gender capital is filtered through the voluntary and involuntary involvement of women in these structured spaces. Narail’s Lathi Khela was selected to represent the cultural progress of the nation of Bangladesh, in 2018. Nonetheless, some may accuse the nation of exploiting women in the name of progress. However, it should not be taken for granted that progress has not translated to the micro level in Bangladesh, especially when it comes to women. Lathi Khela has acquired prestige for

the representation of women, for a nation where these women continue to be a symbol of prestige and through the kinship patterns surrounding it, including women in *shomaj*—Bangladeshi society.

Tania does not question whether a girl should be married or not, but through her presence in Lathi Khela, she believes that future players, both men and women, will find their right to decide whether to continue participating in the tradition even after they get married: the choice to continue a tradition that witnessed the building of a nation, the nation of Bengal. Rahat argues that, at this point, Tania’s family does not see sufficient reason to continue the form of Lathi Khela that includes women. They do not see her establishing herself as an independent practitioner with the Lathi Khela as her main source of income. “But until when can we sustain it?” He questions me instead. “We have been sustaining this form by paying from our own pockets” and that is perhaps why Lathi Khela has remained an alternative profession. Translating what Rahat tells me, “We would not have continued this form up until now just because of money, but [rather] *Bhalo lage bole* i.e., because we love it, and that is why we continue to practice it, without any return.” As Chandralekha (1980) indicates: “Almost all of them still retain their dances and martial art traditions, but only as formal rituals without being able to transform them into real action to change their condition of life”.

These observations also hold true for the rural context of Bangladesh, given its shared cultural and political history with India. The Lathi Khela tradition continues without support or financial recognition from the government. As a result, practitioners do not see themselves earning a living through this art form, despite their sustained emotional attachment to it. Amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, Lathi Khela continues to struggle between the breath of tradition in its being and the contemporaneity of its existence. Thus, in a country like Bangladesh, with a history of state sponsored Islamisation and the absence of women in policy making, Lathi Khela has

become a collective and popular means of resistance to an oppressive unity. It continues to project itself in confrontation and in defence. On this note, I will

quote Rahat's interview (17 July 2017): "Lathi has always been about fighting, and we are still fighting for what we deserve".

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Notes

- i This manual is believed to have pioneered weapons training and was written during the Bengal revolutionary period of the 1700s–1800s. According to Jadavpur Press 2016, this volume brings together Pulin Behari Das' lifelong research and practice: unpublished manuscripts on training with "long pole, knife and dagger, archery, and hands-free self-defence". This society was a "training ground for raising a revolutionary force". At first, the students were trained with lathis and wooden swords. His vast illustrated manual recounting the use of weapons is unique in the history of armed martial practice in India. Das was largely responsible for the development and spread of an indigenous and synthesised tradition of armed martial practice. This collection is testimony to that almost forgotten history (JU Press, 2016). The book is an acknowledgment of the Lathi Khela for its historical importance as a 'martial arts tradition' that was a product of colonial rule, but it is not an exploration of the importance of the indigenous knowledge system in the current context and how it survives today as current practice.
- ii The objectives of the project were (1) to empower various groups of lathiyals with the benefits of the "pedagogical content knowledge" formulated during the project, thus enabling them to reorganise and strengthen their performance and revitalise an age-old art form; and (2) to generate interest among the new generation to learn Lathi Khela skills, thereby ensuring continuity of the tradition.
- iii Bangladesh is divided into divisions: 8 divisions (*bibhag*) and 64 districts (*jela, zila, and zela*), and *upazila* (subdistricts) and villages. The *Birsarto Noor Mohammad Lathial dol* are based in Narail District of Bangladesh in the Khulna Division, Gram-bogura.
- iv According to Sara C. White, in *Arguing with the Crocodile*, "the female gender has always been a 'contested image' in the public discourse of Bangladesh, ever since its independence in 1971". White refers to three controversial images that can be conjured up in readers' minds: "When you think of women in Bangladesh, it is that of (1) women pleading, hands outstretched, desperate in the wake of the latest disaster; (2) sari-shrouded women clinging to the shadows or hunched mutely over laborious work; (3) women working and demonstrating, in groups or defiantly alone" (White S., 2010, p.10).

Acknowledgments:

Dedicated to Dadin (1946–2022).

*To y/our fearless and graceful grandmothers
and their knowledge that we carry in our bodies.*

This manuscript is a tribute to all the *Lathiyals* and their families from all the districts of Bangladesh who strive to continue their passion for *Lathi Khela*. To the Choreomundus Masters' Program in dance knowledge, practice, and heritage for the research funding and scholarship support. My main support system, Lubna Marium in Bangladesh, as well as the research team comprising Bonna Apu, Biju Bhai, Kabila Bhai, Joynal Bhai, and finally, Karim Da, my mediator. To Professor Urmimala Sarkar for her constant support as a mentor, guide, and good friend. She taught me to question and think creatively and encouraged me to revisit this research during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. To Professor André Grau, who still breathes among us. To Gargi, for her profound guidance during the pandemic. The Ashoka University family, who brought me to Choreomundus. Lastly, to my best friend Sourabh, for inspiring me, always encouraging me, and helping me believe in myself; my parents, who have always encouraged me; and my gurus for trusting me with their knowledge of dance.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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