What prompted you to do your PhD in visual anthropology in the US?

I completed my schooling from Pathe Bhavan and my graduation in English from JU. I was attached to Children's Little Theatre and have trained for many years under guru Bandana Sen. I've also been attached to Padatik and have taken lessons from Pt. Vijay Shankar. Immediately after my graduation, I got married and shifted to the US. That was before the concept of a new India and liberalisation had hit the US shores. I was initially attached to the dance department of the University of Florida. What struck me there, was the fact that Indian dance has been attached to a stereotypical image.

During your research on Kathak, what are the interesting bits of information you gathered on the baijis?

When I was doing my research, I realised that Kathak was part of the baiji history that has been denied. There are huge historical events connected to this phenomenon. In the 1990s, India witnessed a social reform movement. Around this time, an anti-racism movement had also started.

But what prompted the downfall of the baijis?

Kathak was a popular form in the Mughal court. It was highly prestigious for baijis to pursue this dance form. Twainis, back then, were considered artists and were seen as icons of passion. They were also

What kind of image are you talking about?

People back then believed that if you pursued Indian dance, you had to be a spiritual person. They thought you must be doing pujas everyday. Somewhere, people in the West conjured up signs of traditional

spoken about Indian dance. But it would be hypocritical of me to say I indulged in all that. I saw a film by visual anthropologist Steve Lasing on Bell. That kept me thinking and in 2000, I did my PhD in visual anthropology from Temple University.

Visual anthropologist Pallabi Chakravorty tells Priyanka Dasgupta that Kathak was part of the baiji history.

Pallabi Chakravorty
What was the final nail in the coffin in terms of giving 
*baījis* their due?
- In the 19th century, the anti-nautch movement 
  started in Madras against the *devadasis*. The protest was 
  against women who were artists and served men as 
  well. Soon, this had an 
  impact on other cities too.
- The Brahma Samaj was 
  instrumental in protesting 
  against the *baīji* culture too. 
  Back then, sexuality had a 
  different connotation. Much 
  like the geishas in Japan, the 
  status of *baījis* remained 
  slightly hazy for many. One 
  must also remember that 

---

*It was the Victorian 
  influence of the time 
  that changed the British 
  and Indian outlook 
  towards *baījis*.*

---

*bāis* have freedom and are 
known to have multiple 
liaisons with other males, 
they are a different breed 
altogether. It was the 
Victorian influence that 
changed the British and 
Indian outlook towards them.

*bāis* were never a homoge-
neous group. While some 
were purely artistes, others 
danced. Some others sang, 
danced and also served as sex 
workers. The titles given to 
them were often symbolic 
of the kind of work that they 
were doing. Those with the 
title *jaan* were strictly 

---

with Islamic 
culture. The 
Hinduisation of 
Kathak happened 
during the Nationalist 
phase. By then, *baījis* had 
already become stigmatised. 
The revivalists decided that 
we have a golden tradition 
and hence, harked back to the 
*Nātya Shastra* to trace the 
roots of Kathak. They 
removed it from the practice 
of the dance form, textu-
alised it and said Kathak 
originated from the word 
*katha* and that *kathakas* 
were a Brahmin caste in 
north India. This narrative 
traces it back to the 
*Mahabharata*, giving it a 
patriarchal identity. When 
gharanas emerged, *baījis* 
receded to the background.

---

There are many theories 
about *baījis* also having 
lesbian tendencies...
- I haven't done any 
  research on that. There is a 
  book by Veena Oldenburg on 
  the courtesans of Lucknow. 
  There are chances of that 
  happening because 
somewhere, they share an 
  empathy for each other.