

Eye contact and Social Stigma in Indian Performing arts:
The Case of *Lāvaṇī* dancer in Maharashtra, India

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This study examined the role of the glance within Indian performing arts. Many Indian performing arts transformed their bodily expressions and ‘de-sexualized’ their choreography to conform to social limitations prevailing in the early 1900s. Most noticeably, they controlled and abolished direct eye contact with audience members during performances. This proscription of eye contact deterred direct exchange of glances with the audience, which supposedly awakened ‘secular’ behaviour and reduced the ‘elegance’ of the performing arts. Reconstruction of the ‘authentic’ Indian classical performing arts was attempted through abandonment of the gaze/glance. However, the author’s research of a popular performing art known as *lāvaṇī* (a form of dance) in Maharashtra, India has indicated that the sense of the glance persists as an undeniable characteristic of the performance. Attractiveness of *lāvaṇī* as a part of popular culture necessitates a glance and an audience–dancer connection created through glancing. Every aspect of a *lāvaṇī* dance rests on seeing: the eye navigates the flow of the performance. The eyes determine how to move to the next body motion, while capturing the excitement or response of the audience. The eye also relates the whole system of the stage to one’s own body and the bodies of others. A *lāvaṇī* performance is best accomplished at the nexus between the dancer’s body, the audience and the stage, as mediated through eyesight (*nazar*). In that sense, the *nazar* is an issue of eye contact and glances, but also one of captivating and binding all these disparate dimensions of a theatre.