

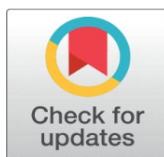
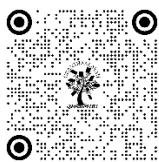


# HANDS UP: WHAT'S UP WITH HASTAS REVIEWING THE DISCOURSE OF INTRODUCING HAND GESTURES TO CODIFY WAACKING

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## ABSTRACT

Waacking/Whacking as a 70s Los Angeles disco gay dance form is consistently being discovered and localized in different dance ecosystems of the world. The Indian chapter of its trajectory is uniquely drawing a certain kind of display which is in direct cognizance of its own codified forms of hand movements. The present study focuses on the seepages and abstinence of hand gestures through understanding the impetus to do so. Based on the analysis of the occurrences associated with its usage, through detailed conversations, literature review and reading of performance texts, several inferences can be drawn, and a better understanding of the genre can be further achieved.

**Keywords:** Waacking, Demographic Shaped, Hand Gestures

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Waacking as a style was born in the gay clubs of the 70s, as a result of a socio-political setting that ostracized and marginalized the non-white cis men (mainly gay, black, Latinx, and Hispanic men). The setting of discotheques as the primary socializing spaces for this demograph shaped the movement. The movement is particularly dictated by the music in these spaces. The style is therefore peculiarly marked by strong and sharp movement of the arms over the shoulder which expands on the foundation of dramatics and posing. With its increasing popularity, the style is being pollinated with hand gestures (referred to as Hastas) that are

recognizably different from its inception. Thus, there is a relationship being built between the kinesthetics of the form and the geographic location of it. By correlating the two, the cultural reterritorialization of the dance and the new entrants of its vocabulary can be focused on.

Without having to evade its inherent disposition, it must be clarified that the form being practiced here confers to the phenomenon, structure, and experience it was originally built on. The introduction of mudras has been expertly explored by the practitioners in the Indian subcontinent and diasporic dancers who are introducing it. The local specificity of these articulations through the Hastas may be seen as altering its universality. Therefore, can it still remain the genre as a whole or does this marked distinction denigrate it to the category of a sub-style?

## 2. BACKGROUND

The original form of Waacking is characterized by its artistic, dramatic, and theatrical interpretation of the music. Inspired by silent films and old Hollywood glamour, the dancers were literally acting and storytelling on the dance floor. Arms were later incorporated into the movement which evolved into the style of Waacking.

In this particular research, we will be talking about the vocabulary based on stylized movements of the arms already existing as a body of knowledge is being supplemented with a certain set of hand gestures codified in ancient Indian performance texts and how this feature is affecting the dance genre. Is the 'localisation' a response to a cultural need? Are there other ways of looking at this infestation? This will be done through different case studies, which will help us understand the various factors that are important for the creation of performance material. It will also look upon the compilers of this phenomenon of contribution and address the process of creation which is being generated.

## 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

[Sweet \(2016\)](#) in *The Anthropology of Dance: Textural, Theoretical, and Experiential Ways of Knowing* speaks of dance as a culture existing by and of itself. To extend the idea of Waacking as a culture needs further understanding but as a dance form, Waacking heavily emphasizes identity and self-expression, therefore performing this dance necessarily requires one to mediate upon identity where socio-cultural pinning can manifest itself. According to [Bragin's research \(2014\)](#), waacking has its roots in Los Angeles centering on the Latinx, Hispanic and Black communities. These marginalized communities were further ostracised by the repressive government policies concerning the lives of 2SLGBTQIA+. Back then, collectivizing publicly was barely an option. After the 'Stonewall Riot' a congregation aiming to end discrimination based on gender-sexuality was ignited. This encouraged people to present themselves in ways that were deemed indecent. It's in this (re)presentation that one can link the foundation of the dance itself. Waacking, therefore, finds an undeniable connection with the movement surrounding gay liberation. This strand shapes the conceptual analysis of the data collected alongside the work of Yuen Chun Ting whose detailed understanding of location and its impact on the form deeply interested my practice and which I am curious to investigate further.

The dance and its movement philosophy reside in co-creation and improvisation [Bragin \(2014\)](#) The complexity of this concept involves many spheres; the term improvisation is used to describe and theorize on not just the spontaneity

of the movement but also add to a certain queerness [Croft \(2017\)](#) in its tenets. The individuality and its persistence in innovation within a vocabulary familiar to the group. [DeFrantz \(2004\)](#)

The dance, therefore, in the performance of it, becomes susceptible to a certain kind of instinctive gestures and figures that are in alliance with the fabric of body movement cultivated. An artificial embedding in a loosely bound structure would substantiate a collective consciousness of placing an Indian version of the genre. In multiple dance traditions located in India and its allied forms, the hand gestures are in conjunction with the affective charge of the narrative built towards meaning making. The performed “flow” of communicative action [Bagchi \(2010\)](#) is therefore meticulously aspired for when entering the dance ecology of this part of the world. This requires practitioners far and wide in their approach to have prior knowledge and exposure of this information. We must consider the diversity and lack of institutional training for the agenda to be deliberated upon. Particular attention must also be given to those without any prior training who are adopting these gestures.

### **Hastas and Hands: go hand-in-hand**

It is a very important to ask how a dance finds its specificity in a different cultural landscape and what controls the key to its pinning. The idea of traditional and contemporary defines the idea of pure and profane. How are certain movement influences and their histories are termed as evolved and pure and how other approaches are categorized as intrusive and somewhat fusion. A varied range of compositions in the classical dance forms holds in their ‘unpolluted’ form [Banerji \(2021\)](#) principles and conventions that are clearly being challenged in the insertion of gestures in this amalgamation.

This reiterates the need to think and evaluate how, in India, there has always been a project to assemble movement veracities of different communities under the one grand emblem and the impact it has had on the ecology of it in order to chart a sense of belonging to the one nation.

Waacking is a club dance that emanated in the disco clubs of Los Angeles during the 1970s. It's mainly distinguished by rotational arm movements overhead with the addition of posing an emphasis on theatrics and expressiveness; To emulate a way of being which is otherwise restricted and not allowed in public. This was an unencumbered expression of personality and allowed as a device for the recognition of the unhindered self.

By the early 2000s, Brian Green (A waacking elder who abstained from teaching and practicing the style due to the stigmatization from the AIDS epidemic which forced many stalwarts to give up practice and take to hiding) was being ‘provoked’ [Suraj \(2016\)](#) to bring back the elders to the community to fill the void of information with regards to the dance style called Whacking/Waacking. In a few years, the dance was being practiced in the metropolitan city spaces of India like Mumbai, Kolkata, etc. and was categorically building an niche for itself. As the style started penetrating the dance routines, the propagation was spread over large demographics of young women and queer folk who were simply walking in and owning [Suraj \(2016\)](#) with major forums, associations with waacking as their predominant style. The rising influx of dancers hailing from traditional form training with deft hands and with the elaborate history with ‘Hastas’, now made for seamless assimilation.

In describing the localization of Waacking, Yuen speaks of a phenomenon called the 'Vernacularization' of Waacking in Hong Kong Ting (2021). While Waacking enunciates force and extravagant gestures of punching and hitting DeFrantz (2016) it also disseminates the propelling and vigorous arm movements. Therefore, the mudras may seem to proliferate a certain kind of Vernacularization but in very diluted ways due to the varied and vast history of power, revivalist, and reformist nature of the Classical dances in India.

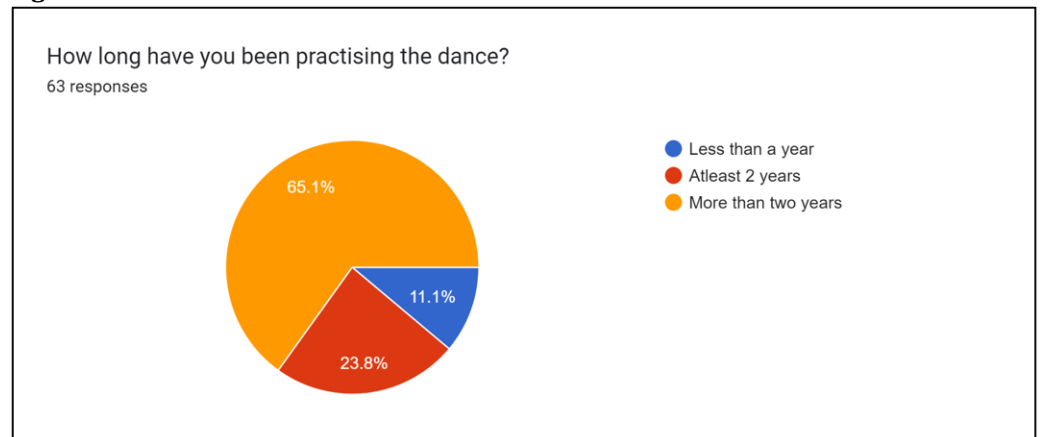
#### 4. METHODOLOGY

The reflections and additional comments through the informants' stories allow for a qualitative reading of the work which is preceded by data collected through participant observation and auto-biographical ethnography. In order to understand and comprehend individual experiences and opinions, questionnaires were used as the appropriate method. In September 2022, various interviews were conducted with Movement artists/dancers who identify themselves as Whacking/Waacking practitioners in order to obtain a more quantitative assessment. They were approached via networking platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp.

The survey conducted for 63 persons recorded their responses on how they navigate their individual practice as well as how the collective landscape of the movement vocabulary is shaping up to be.

Around 76.19% (48 respondents) recorded a person of Indian origin had been their initial influence on the dance form and 19.04% of people (12 respondents) recorded otherwise. The rest (3 respondents) spoke of multiple influences of different origins. Another important facet of this demographic is that 88.9% of the total respondents have been a practitioner of this form for at least two years or more. This speaks of a correlation between the vernacularization of the dance and its new entrants.

**Figure 1**



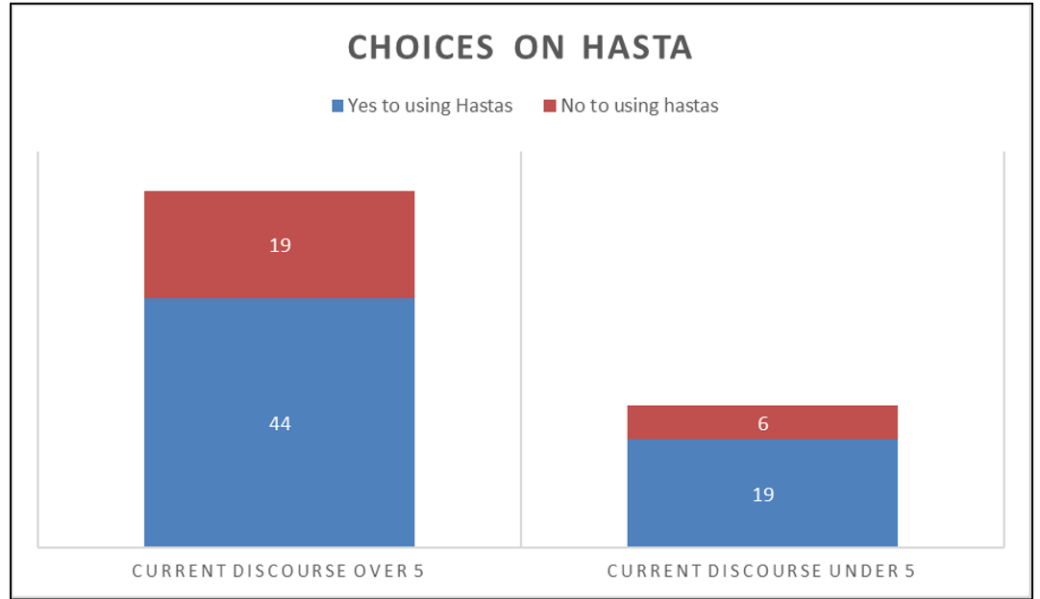
**Figure 1**

This leads us to understand how the form is not only being shaped by the practitioners of Indian origin but also populated by them.

The survey also points towards an interesting phenomenon. 69.84% (44 respondents) believe that the current discourse in comparison to the global movement phenomenon is above the average (six or more on the scale of 10). Out of which, only 38.6% from this group (17 respondents) have abstained from using hastas in their practice. To put it in perspective, out of the 30.15% (19 respondents)

who ranked India's enactment of the form lower than the average (on a scale of ten, 5, and or less), a similar ratio of 31.57% (6 respondents) have not conferred to the language of mudras.

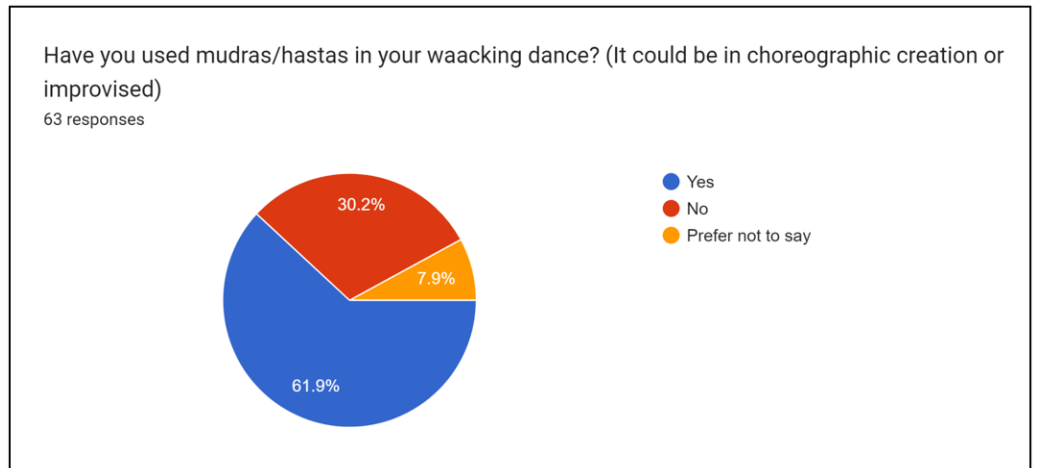
**Figure 2**



**Figure 2**

This culminates in the fact that a total of 39 respondents (61.9%) have used the Hasta vocabulary in some form or the other in conjunction with their Waacking practice.

**Figure 3**



**Figure 3**

## 5. DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

The analysis carried out during the survey presented ways of performing and contextualizing a dance form without having to obliterate its primal meaning yet find ways of integrating it into the specific dance ecologies it proposes to enter and navigate. Results obtained from the descriptive analysis provides an arc for the pollination and the possibilities it can refurbish without disrupting its cadences.

While over 76% of the respondents trace their influences to makers of Indian origin, 88.9% of respondents themselves have been affiliated with the form for 2 years and more. This gives us not only an insight into the current body of practice and performance that is present and promising but also the causality in adapting to the hand gestures that was otherwise not part of its lexicon.

The use of hastas in the responses has been described as 'natural', 'aesthetic', 'creative', and 'show of versatility'. While there's an overwhelming agreement of how it ratifies a certain 'Indian' taste and enhances expression, brings the quintessential grace and beauty ascribed to Indian Classical dance, and makes Waacking feel a lot 'closer' to the body, some have pointed their previous training in Bharatnatyam, Kathak and even the occasional and ambiguous semi-classical status of it to justify the tendency. One respondent uses the word 'ornament' to describe how arms are to waacking. It opens up a new perspective as to when a dance form is marked primarily by hand movements, there may be a perceived aesthetic shift to categorise specific articulations as ornaments of the form. Another respondent conjectural reading of Waacking 'as an Indian form' declared how mudras would have found their way into the dance in its very early stages of its inception. This familiarity and wide consonance of hastas not only as dance symbols but also as social and cultural markers makes for an indelible contribution to the practice in lieu of the form.

## 6. CHALLENGES

The important critique of this study, like many such questionnaire-based types of research, is the database. Having surveyed almost a quarter of the practitioner population, I am curious to know how else could have the other practitioners contributed to the study effectively.

My pursuit is to think about how cultural knowledge is produced through assimilation. With a specific kind of vernacularization situating itself in the larger structure of hastas and hand performance, what is being looked at in dance in terms of its formulation of identity and interculturalism. Another intriguing facet of the findings is that even practitioners who graded the Indian discourse on the lower side of the slide had an even lesser ratio adapting to the use of mudras. While this could reveal the focus on looking at the other parameters like Arm movement, Grooves and feeling the music, Agility of the body, and Understanding of the form, the choice could simply be artistic or stand to have little to no correlation for the small fraction of the respondents.

Sonia, a prominent practitioner, and pioneer from Paris points out in an interview, "You need to make understand the people watching it that you know what is the basic.... you decide to make it like a round on purpose you could see it when you give foundation.....and the person the dancer decides to put this extra little thing into it."(SDF, 2021) She speaks of retaining a certain inherent quality and then opting for exploration. The necessity to communicate a certain fundamental to go beyond becomes critical to establish proficiency and communicate mastery of the skill.

## 7. CONCLUSION

As argued, the idea of vernacularization needs some reformulation in the domain of hip hop and its allied forms, more so, in the discourse-centered around Waacking. There are multiple ideas of the vernacular as there are the ideas of expressions and therefore the instrumental usage of hastas. As the dance of the

social margins is not only moving from the West to the East but now is moving rapidly to the centre stage of Indian dance macros, the constituents of this central position need to be careful about the histories of making and manoeuvring embedded in the margins. How necessary was it to adopt hastas to locate the cross-filtering of cultures associated outside the classicalized worlds, both East and West? It is important not to be consumed by the past and therefore this paper proposes to critically map the rapidly changing nature of the form as it deepens its formation. It shows how Indianness is easily designed on certain markers synonymous with Indian tradition and culture and how its pollination comes to represent an authentic Indian identity within the dance, so much so that the authenticity of it can be destabilized. It analyses how the discourse of "hands" and "hastas" fused proposes to form both an emerging ideology of the Indian Waacking phenomenon and reconstruct a linear progressive history for the incipient Waacking community. The landscape of the form in its localization and seamless assimilation of tradition still captures the imagination of the West as a subset of the form; Kumari Suraj's work on BollyWhack is an astounding example. With the increasing visibility of dance works from India to the West, a more open and discursive intercultural dialogue needs to be considered without being subsumed completely in the Western centres of knowledge production or patronizing the emergence of extractive inductions.

### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

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