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Photo: Steven Pisano

Ankita Sharma's *dhoka/Betrayal*: Militarization and Myth-Making

by Brendan McCall

When I entered JACK's intimate performance space in Brooklyn for the beginning of Ankita Sharma's* *dhoka/Betrayal*, it felt like stepping into a sacred place. The theater was dark, and a fog floated in the air. Performer Eyner Roman sat on his shins, back to the audience, arching three times while audibly breathing, like a ritual about to begin.

As the sounds of a steady drum filled the room, Roman began placing cups of water around the space, his movements increasingly erratic. His breath quickened, his gestures trembled, his body contorted. When [Max Sarkowsky's](#) powerful score intensified, Roman's movements grew more jarring. He danced with an earthy elegance, low to the ground, arms swinging rapidly in windmill-like circles as if summoning a spirit.

That being emerges in the form of performer [Ankita Sharma](#), who also created this world-premiere performance. Crouched on top of a large blanket, their features hidden, Roman drags them to the center of the space as if they were an object. As the sound of buzzing flies tickles the ears, Sharma is suddenly revealed: nearly nude, splayed over what resembles a giant urn, amplifying the scene's sacrificial ritual. Their ambiguous gestures defy easy interpretation, the line between turmoil and pleasure growing blurry. One moment, they lean against the urn, covering their face before lurching forward in a dry-heave, clutching their stomach; the next, their bare chest exposed, they wince with pleasure, tugging at their own nipples as Roman watches from the shadows.

At first, Roman is in awe of this vision, perhaps seeing Sharma as an avatar of Devi or the embodiment of pure shakti. In their opening duet, Sharma displays tremendous raw power and beauty, stamping their feet and screaming. No longer a supplicant, Roman's gestures become aggressive as he tries to reign in this deity. Their struggle, set to Sarkowsky's haunting score with otherworldly vocals by [Saluja Siwakoti](#), evokes archetypal conflicts: man versus woman, flesh versus spirit, religious institutions versus the untamed

freedom of the divine.

In the end, Roman overpowers Sharma, and pulls them onstage, toward an entrance to a temple. There, during one of *dhoka/Betrayal*'s most uncomfortable and powerful scenes, he strips away the goddess's femininity and sensuality, transforming Sharma's body into a vision of Kali, the Hindu goddess of war and death. He unties the sari from their waist, leaving Sharma completely naked, then grips their jaw with one hand while using the other to force out their tongue. He then manipulates their limbs into positions that satisfactorily meet his demands. Next, Roman tapes their breasts flat, then covers Sharma's chest with metal chains. Around their ankles, he fastens bands with bells, ensuring that every movement now echoes with sound - denying them stealth, or grace.

Throughout this hour-long piece, Sharma's movement vocabulary blends elements of theater, kathakali, and urban dance, yet retains a distinct originality. The two performers arch into deep backbends, tumble fluidly over a single shoulder, can stage a theatricalized conflict, or can unsettle us when Roman touches Sharma's bare thigh. In this work, emotion and perspective are essential to communication as the choreography itself.

This exploration continues after the live performance, when a screen descends and a short film begins to play. Sharma reflects on the origins and motivation of the piece, including their ambivalence over their own South Asian heritage. Sharma's identity, as presented here, is complex and seemingly contradictory—how does one reconcile those tensions through art?

The film includes a compelling conversation between Sharma and journalist [Azad Essa](#) (*Hostile Homelands: The New Alliance Between India and Israel*). Together, they unpack the contradictions in how Indians construct their historical narrative, often presenting themselves as inherently "peaceful" until Islam's arrival supposedly disrupted its idealized identity. They also discuss how Prime Minister Narendra Modi has weaponized this narrative to promote an ethno-nationalist agenda. At one point, they note the disturbing irony of Israeli soldiers traveling to India for yoga and spiritual "cleansing" while on break from participating in military operations in Gaza. Though brief, their talk deepens the political reach of *dhoka/Betrayal*, revealing how religious nationalism can be used to justify violence against those deemed "other." During this informative filmic epilogue, as Sharma offered a window into their process, the intimate scenes I had just witnessed suddenly magnified.

dhoka/Betrayal is a courageous and powerful work, intended for adult audiences willing to contemplate horrors that go beyond storytelling metaphors. This was my first time experiencing Ankita Sharma's work, and I was deeply moved by their creative skill, their critical intelligence, and their open heart. Today, we need artists like Ankita more than ever.

[Ankita Sharma](#), JACK, Brooklyn, May 15-17, 2025.

*Ankita Sharma is a current writer with thINKingDANCE.

Homepage Image Description: *A person wearing a leather skirt and thick black beads around their neck like a warrior stares intently at the camera, one arm extended towards us with the palm out. An upturned golden urn is behind them.*

Article Page Image Description: *A man wearing a simple black robe kneels with his hands in prayer before a being standing atop an overturned metal bowl, who wears a leather skirt and who covers their mouth with their hands.*

By Brendan McCall
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