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## Traditions and transition in South Asian performing arts in multicultural Australia

*Purushottama Bilimoria*

### Brief history of Indian dance

The traditions of the performing arts in South Asia go back centuries before the name 'India' was even thought of. Panini, the great grammarian and linguist who wrote around 300 BCE, mentions the canon on dance and drama, *Natyasashtra* (MBhs 4.3.110; 4.3.111). There is much speculation on the question of the origins of the art, especially Sanskrit drama. Some trace it to fertility rites, not unlike those of Indo-Germanic people, and references can be found in early Vedic scriptures of the Brahmin caste. The Vedas, which date around 2500–1500 BCE, contain satirical hymns (such as the 'croaking of the frog' hymn, the fall of the Asuras or demon-gods, churning of the sea-nectar and burning of the three cities) and there are parts given over wholly to songs in praise of the deeds of the gods, a few of which, such as the primeval sacrifice ensuing in the creation of the cosmos, are ritually re-enacted in sacrificial rites to this day. It is not clear whether the priests who performed these rites were ever regarded as 'actors' and appreciated in any aesthetic sense. It could be that themes for drama enacted in everyday life were drawn from the highly suggestive rites and hymns of the Vedas. But drama or Nataka appeared always to be connected with religion and rituals.

If the priests were not regarded as dramatic performers then the gods towards whom the sacrifices were directed surely were. In Brahmanical mythology and cosmology some of the gods are depicted as having engaged in the most esoteric of performances, including dance, in heaven as well as on earth invariably with a telos associated

to the act. The great god (*mahadeva*) in the Hindu pantheon, Shiva, is associated with the 'Lord of Dance' (*nataraja*), for he is symbolised as originating, preserving and dissimulating the entire universe through a series of cosmogonic dance acts which he performs with superb dexterity and agility (Coomaraswamy, 1974, pp. 86–151). As the feisty Shiva moves his feet and swings his four arms, fire and rhythmic sound issue forth, the ether around him reverberates and an aura of magic engulfs his being. He transcends his own temporal *ontos* to achieve oneness with his ultimate nature. But only gods have the capacity to achieve this feat and humans are deemed as spectators and weaker imitators of this spiritual art whose mystery is not easily disclosed to the novice or the artist simpliciter, much less to the philosopher, who is not also skilled in the art of yoga (Bilimoria, 1985, p. 171).

Now, although the human origins of the artform remain shrouded in historical mystery, tradition has come to accept one Bharata as the founder and systematiser of Indian dramatic artform. Bharata brought together the growing literature (*Natyasutras*) into a harmonious compendium known as the *Natyashastras*. Bharata is dated between 200 BCE and 400 CE. Major playwrights, such as Kalidasa and Bhavabhuti, pay handsome tribute to Bharata, variously as the stage-manager of the gods in heaven or as the earliest authority on instrumental music. Bharata's work is the most detailed treatment of the technicalities of dance, dramaturgy and music known in South Asia. He also mentions different styles of dances in the north, south and east. Curiously, Bharata seems to have created this work for the use of gods, though shared equally by demi-gods, kings, and great sages (*rishis*). Even if this statement is taken metaphorically, it could well be inferred that because the texts privileged a certain class of performers and audience, Bharata's teachings never reached the popular masses and the technicalities were all but lost on performers outside of the Brahmin-dominated temples and courts. Nevertheless, it was widely recognised and reinforced in the *Natya* treatises that the art of acting had a prominent place in all Sanskrit drama, even in dance. Indeed, traditional theatre art combined both drama and dance in one artform, and the two could hardly be separated. Both acting and dancing were alike in principle and practice, comprising the rhythmic presentation of formal gestures, accompanied by instrumental music and singing. The traditional theatre (*samgita-shala* or *natya-mandala*) comprised a stage raised above ground level. It was open to spectators from three sides, the fourth side being the stage separated by a decorated partition shutting off the green room. There was no curtain between the stage and the audience. This classical theatre, however, scarcely survives, except in the religious folk plays of travelling troupes in north India and in the dramatic dances

presented by *devadasis* in temples (Coomaraswamy, 1985, pp. 84 and 140).

It was also recognised that the aim of all dramatic engagement was twofold:

- 1 transmitting or communicating information to the audience;
- 2 inducing aesthetic delight (*rasa*).

*Rasa* is a mysterious term, but all the nuances attached to it have been derived from the original meaning given to it in the *Natyashastra* and repeated by the grammarian Panini, as simply 'taste', based on the analogy of tasting food. In ordinary parlance *rasa* (or *ras* in Hindustani) has come to mean 'relish; sentiment; pleasure; enjoyment; taste or flavour', and its cognates in the broader Indian aesthetics are *harsha*, *priti*, as 'joy' and 'delight'; *vinoda*, 'diversion'; *vishrama*, 'solace'. Whatever the rendering, *rasa*, which is said to be perceived through the *bhavas* or emotions evoked through, say, a play or other forms of performance, is central to Indian aesthetics.

The utility of drama in disseminating religious truths, morals and ideals to the populace, on the model of the gods, great sages and virtuous kings, was well exploited in open theatre art, village and 'folk' performances, temple cult enactments (*lila*), festive rite dances, travelling musical and story-telling shows, puppetry, solo mime acts, magicians' antics and other forms of 'public discourse'. Highly allegorised religious and secular plays with a decisive role being given to the jester or 'joker' (*vidushaka*) in satirising the seemingly virtuous and wise became popular, and in a way never died out in South Asia. Drama as the performative representation of the psychical states, actions and conduct of people—a definition given by Bharata himself (Chari, 1990, p. 13)—was developed to a highly sophisticated level.

Bharata's already rich theory of emotions was developed beyond the dramatic art to impact on the broader literary and poetic practices, in hermeneutics and even linguistic theory. Bharata had identified some forty-nine emotional states (*bhavas*) which have evocative or suggestive value in stage presentations. Of these, eight were considered by him to be primary, each having a corresponding *rasa* or aesthetic potency: erotic love, comic laughter, grief, fury, heroic spirit, fear, wonder, and disgust or revulsion (Chari, 1990, p. 13; Bilimoria, 1994). To the eight primary emotional states evoked in dramatic performance or suggested via musical notes (*svaras*), later dramatic critics added a ninth—namely, serenity or peace (*shanti*). Bhavabhuti describes the sentiment of pathos (*karuna*) as the fundamental emotion that dominates all other emotions which help to

heighten *karuna* (Karmakar, 1971, p. 64). Culture and the arts help with the proper cultivation and maturity of *rasa* which, in turn, stimulates creativity, both aesthetic and intellectual or literary. The classical playwright Kalidasa, speaking through one of his characters in an erotic drama suggests that an art is esteemed on account of its intrinsic merit and that there is an element of universality in its appeal; no less for the art that idealises *kama* or desire (*Malavikagnimitra*, i.4).

The specific emotional or suggestive indices assigned to musical notes and melodic patterns came to be identified with the notion of *raga* in music. *Raga* is a multifaceted melodic formulae based on a scale or mode, that combines and orders the elemental notes, provides rhythmic harmony to its phrases, as well as ornamentation and timing of microtones. It has no equivalence in Western music or conceptualisation. Musical sounds, even though non-expressive, can be suggestive of *raga*; while plays or dramatic repertoire, by and large, exploit the expressive power for conveying *rasa*.

As was stated previously, Bharata saw dance, along with music, as an integral part of drama or dramatic context, which uses a series of highly stylised gestures, grimaces or facial expressions, eye and body movements to interpret moods of the song that accompany the expressive enactments and to translate their meaning into visual presentation. As Bharati (1964, p. 15) has suggested, 'the great emphasis placed on *abhinaya* or gestural enactment is a clear indication of the influence of the *rasa* concept on Indian dancing and playacting as well'. A tenth-century Sanskrit critic (who was also a philosopher of repute), Abhinavagupta, while anxious to distinguish dance movement from dramatic expression proper, conceded that dance can become a vehicle of *rasa*:

*Rasa* is manifested by dramatic action (*natya*); but the dramatic action itself arises from the play or song (that is, from the meanings of the verbal text) which is expressive of *rasa*. And, as a dance, introduced in the context of *rasa*, becomes the means of evocation, it also acquires a dramatic quality. (Bharati, 1964, p. 15)

Sculpture, also, is seen to emulate or reproduce the distinct elements of dance, from hand gestures and body postures to the sublime suggestiveness of emotions (*bhavas*) such as erotic love, devotion, valour, rage, and so on. Abhinavagupta extended the theory of *bhava* specifically to religious praxis, by suggesting an affinity between its dramatic or poetic manifestation to the mystical comport of *shantarasa* experienced by holy 'seers' and sages (Masson and Patwardhan, 1969).

The association of aesthetic experience with religious ecstasy, pleasure and peace, was not unusual in India, especially in the

ambience of Kashmir Shaivism, with its deep engagement in Tantric ritual and sanctification of sexual and other kinds of esoteric pleasures; but it was certainly something of a novelty in the austere philosophical academy (Masson and Patwardhan, 1969, p. x).

It is said that Abhinavagupta, well-versed in Tantric ritual, brought ritual to theatre—or rather, bridged the gap between the two performative domains—and suggested that the aim of all performances was to instil that yearning for tranquillity (*shantarasa*) which would turn one away from the fetters of human suffering and misery. In other words, the aim of a philosophically or religiously grounded aesthetics is to show the ‘soul’ the way out of the ‘soul-bottle’—that is, the entrapment of embodied existence (*samsara*). That, for Abhinavagupta, is the true sense of *moksha* or liberation. The great Indian epic ‘Mahabharata’ is perhaps the most accomplished example of imaginative creation in which the transcendent sentiment is drawn out from within the tensions and vicissitudes of empirical existence. Abhinavagupta’s influence on dramaturgy, poetics and literary criticism cannot be overstated.

Dance, however, at some point was singled out for suppression, surviving only on the fringes of the temple. Its re-emergence from this condition of exile, again in the theatre, is, in some respects, the elegant story of classical Indian dance in modern times.

### The emergence of temple dance

As Hindu temples grew and royal patronage extended to these religious centres, the arts also moved into the sacred space provided by the temples and accentuated by the ritual cosmology underpinning their practices (Bilimoria, 1989). Music and dance were recognised for their power to transport the devotees to the higher reaches of spiritual aspirations. Bharata’s principles of kinetic movements and aesthetics were embellished with more intricate layers of expressive sentiments which the growing temple literati imbibed from developments in other artforms. Profuse sculptures on pillars and architraves within the temple complex inscribed in all its subtle details the architectonics of dance and gestural movements which Bharata had codified. With Hindu and Buddhist expansion into what came to be known as the Greater Bharata, or Further India, extending from Thailand through Angkor Wat to the Indonesian archipelago in the south seas, Indian artforms, especially dance and music, travelled far. South-eastern performers, whether of dance or puppet-shows, acknowledge to this day the genesis of their art, perhaps also of the narrative context, in old India.

But with the arrival of the Moghul conquerors in 1200 CE and

1300 CE, the dance art that had grown to unprecedented heights in Hindu temple culture began to decline as Islam considered dancing in religious precincts to be a form of sacrilege. The Moghul courts, however, patronised a form of dance and music whose value, while given over to cultured entertainment, did heed the aesthetic of beauty and elegance, but from a purely secular perspective. The literary aesthetics developed under the impetus of Persian and Arabic poetics were to have a lasting impact on instrumental Indian music, especially in the north.

Temple dance remained a vestigial practice of *devadasis*, servants of the gods, who were female dancers 'considered to be married to the divinity (deity) of the temple'. As Chandrabhanu (1993, p. 113) has suggested:

Only *devadasis* were allowed to dance in this manner and their purpose was to communicate the artform in the ritual context, although there were people who would come to see the *devadasis* dance. There were sometimes public performances in the temple precincts for the general public, but the performances were always directed towards the divinities.

The *devadasis* never married, yet had many lovers and therefore attracted the stigma of 'temple prostitutes'—when in fact they were given to dancing for the gods. The dance was very much an integral part of, if not a form of genuine and often spontaneous worship, an intense emotional involvement with one's deity, and not just a fancifully choreographed performance.

The temple-cult drama enactments depicting the heroic struggles of Draupadi, the heroine of the 'Mahabharata', known also as Patukalam, have over a long time drawn both men and transvestites as actors and dancers for their key casts (Hiltebietel, 1991). Dance was no longer seen as a creation of 'high art' and this impoverished reputation resulted in the closure of a significant phase of centuries of development of this particular artform.

The hold of British colonial rule over India did not help the situation. In fact, it further suppressed this art along with all other native arts, as these appeared to the British administrators and educators to be incongruent with the goals of the (European) enlightenment.

In the late nineteenth century anticolonial protests and the attendant national enlightenment framework called 'Indian renaissance', with its persuasive discourse of cultural revisioning, promulgated a renewed interest in indigenous arts. Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy (who was originally from Sri Lanka and who later trained in England), along with the Tagores, led this movement from Calcutta, unleashing a decisive shift in attitude towards literary and visual arts,

especially painting. This renascent turn went hand-in-hand with the reformist zeal and revivalist spirit of neo-Hindu groups under the leadership of a locally bred intelligentsia. With Coomaraswamy's philosophical orientation, which was impeccably idealistic and perennialist, and his gaze turned to the spiritual and religious in the Indian *Lebenswelt*, his concern was to return art to the indigenous life which represented a continuing tradition of crafts and practices surviving from the past. Indeed, Coomaraswamy almost single-handedly created an entire discourse on philosophy, religion and art, unified in a transcendentalism. He concentrated on the dancing icon of Shiva and drew out the cosmogonic and cosmological implications of this brilliant representation.

The Bengali compatriots shared his conviction that there was a unifying factor in all Asian or Oriental art and in the character of its artists that made the Orient different from, yet equal to, the Occident. Coomaraswamy, then, thought it his duty to articulate an essentialist *meta récit* for the oldest among the Indo-Aryan traditions. But there was a strong element of 'invention' or even 'interventionism' in his strategy of harkening back to the glories of the medieval past and the 'traditional hieratic canon' of classical forms. He seemed to have had little understanding of non-iconographic art and paid scant attention to dramaturgy—except in so far as the theory of *rasa*, which he helped re-articulate, drew its original inspirations from drama as it moved towards a more sophisticated expression in poetics or the literary genre (Bilimoria, 1993).

Nevertheless, the spirit of revivalism and nationalist jingoism, along with the significant advent of modernism in the Indian cultural environment, of which Coomaraswamy was so much a part, had another benevolent effect. Elsewhere it helped draw attention to the lost art of dance.

This moment marked a watershed in the recent history of classical Indian dance. The style that attracted and lent itself rather more readily to the disposition of the revivalist was the Bharata-Natyam (a term coined to refer to the style inscribed and structured by Bharata). The harbingers of the revived dance form were, however, apprehensive of the social status of the *devadasis*, whose role in the transition of this artform from the temple to the world outside was indispensable. As Chandrabhanu (1993, p. 114) observes:

Transporting that artform onto the secular stage had its problems, and herein lies part of the enigma of Bharata-Natyam today. Many people are aware of its ritual origins. In the process of transferring that ritual process onto the stage there was a need to retain a spiritual context which did not necessarily entail a ritual or a religious context any longer . . . By taking the spiritual context the performers communicate the ideas within Hindu spirituality through

dance to a more general public. The dancer is no longer dancing to an image of a God, but dancing to a public, dancing on stage. This new audience has become a most important factor in the shift from temple performances to secular performances.

But it is not so clear whether the earlier pioneers of classical Indian dance who took the art to the West (such as Uday Shankar and Ram Gopal in London) were interested in retaining the 'spiritual', let alone the religious and ritual, aspects of the pristine classical form. Theirs was a single-minded endeavour to underscore the beauty and stylisation of the kinetics of the classical dance form on an equal footing with modern Western dance and theatrical forms. In this effort, they refined the classical form, almost removing dance from the Indian cultural context in which it once had meaning. Admittedly, however, interpretations of what the artist did with the dance form in a particular cultural location, whether in India or abroad, varied markedly. This was bound to be the case as classical Indian dance now claimed a place among the universal arts accessible to a wider range of performers and audience.

Indian temple dance had already made an impression on European choreographers in the middle of the nineteenth century, during the high period of Romantic Ballet. The new ballets ensuing from this fascination were named after the temple dancers—namely, *Bayadère* (French equivalent of the Portuguese for *devadasi*). There were certain marked Indian influences in costumes and decoration, and many *devadasis* were invited to visit Paris. Although, as Fernau Hall (1983) points out, the European choreographers were not prepared to incorporate the main elements of Indian classical dancing into their own dance. In 1900, Thai Royal Dancers arrived in St Petersburg and made deep impressions on Fokine, and distant suggestions of Indian hand movements were used by Anna Pavlova in one of her solo performances in 1907. Nijinsky also took to dancing in the Indian style in ballets, such as *The Blue God*, choreographed for him. The suites for 'Oriental Dances' easily lent themselves to an Indian flavour; these echoed in the spirited compositions by Rimsky Korsakov and Stravinsky, among others.

In the early years of this century, Anna Pavlova and Ruth St Denis visited India. So moved were they by their experience of the traditional Indian dance that had survived that they encouraged its revival. Ruth St Denis had first seen Indian dances performed in the 'East Indian Village' in an amusement park on Coney Island, near New York. Her Nautch dance was based on this experience, as it incorporated many visual ideas from Hinduism and Buddhism. It also influenced a number of prominent pioneers of modern Western dance, such as Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey and Charles



Weidman. Although Martha Graham used Greek mythology for her primary inspiration, the formative influence of Nautch dance was not lost on her artistic style; neither was it on Jean Erdman, who drew heavily on Joseph Campbell's works on Asian mythological motifs for her own invigorating dance creations.

In the 1920s Pavlova toured the world with her ballet company. During her Australian visit in 1921, she met Rukmini Devi, a young Indian woman married to an Australian theologian by the name of George Arundale. Pavlova inspired Rukmini Devi to learn traditional Indian dance. This she did upon her return to Madras in India and soon became a leading exponent of the revived and re-choreographed dance form—the Bharata-Natyam, which has come to be the best known among the classical Indian dances. It is indeed something of an irony that the Bharata-Natyam had its incidental beginnings in Australia through an inspiration provided by Pavlova who is little known in Australia (except for the unimaginative meringue named after this Russian visitor from Britain).

Rukmini Devi based her dance on the techniques, vocabulary and idiom of the *devadasis* and, while remaining true to the classical form, 'bracketed' some of its features, such as the excessively amorous and erotic (*sringara*) suggestibility. With subtlety and extreme dexterity she introduced certain new, or at least divergent, symbolic phraseologies into the structure. Her achievements opened up a new vista for integrating and absorbing fresh details on styles and techniques that came gradually to light from excavations of old princely empires like *Vijayanagara*; from further research into the social epistemology of dance performance; and from the decoding of hitherto undeciphered textual sources and unearthed temple sculptures.

Pavlova was to be a catalyst in bringing another great movement of Indian dance style to the West. This eventful story and its aftermath is colourfully described by Frenau Hall (1989, p. 6) in the following passage:

Pavlova discovered Uday Shankar, an art student in London, and asked him to choreograph for her company Indian dances [sic]. He created for Pavlova two little ballets: 'Hindu Wedding' for the company, and 'Radha-Krishna' for Pavlova and himself. Pavlova loved wearing a sari and dancing Radha. Uday Shankar eventually broke away from Pavlova to create his own style of Indian dancing. His first appearance was at the Olympia Music Hall in Paris in 1926 along with a number of music-hall artists. There he performed, together with two French girls trained by him, his own idea of Indian dancing—developed from the ballets he had created for Pavlova, and bringing together steps from Bengali folk-dances, movements from the Oriental dances of Ruth St Denis, ideas from

Indian sculpture and painting, and much else. He made a strong impression because of his magnificent stage presence—and soon he was appearing in fine theatres, dancing to Western music.

Uday Shankar trained and choreographed many gifted Western dancers. But when he returned to India, he immersed himself deeply into the classical traditions of Kathakali, Bharata-Natyam and Kathak. He could not, by his own confession, be considered a 'classical artist' in the sense in which classical maestros in India would have considered themselves. Nevertheless, Uday Shankar mastered hand movements and facial expressions which he was able to pass on to his Western students and associates. In this respect, he remains perhaps unsurpassed among modern male Indian dancers for he made Indian dance a central part of the British dance and ballet scene. His headquarters in Dartington, Devon, became a centre for dance, Indian and modern, in the 1930s. It is suggested that this was also the home of the first British modern dance group, the Dance-Drama Group led by Margaret Barr who had trained under Martha Graham in 1929. The leading German modern dance group, the *Ballets Jooss*, was also located here (Hall, 1983, p. 7). But things came to a hasty end when Uday Shankar returned to India in 1937, for there was no one sufficiently equipped to continue the company's work. Yet, his enormous impact on English and European choreographers, such as Antony Tudor and Nijinsky's daughter, immortalised him in the modern dance and ballet tradition. Through Tudor the influence of Indian dance permeated through to a vast number of artists and choreographers in the Western world (except Australia and New Zealand). The Shankar family of dancers and musicians have continued his adventurous forays into modern theatrical and musical forms, while remaining deeply rooted in the classical tradition.

In the 1950s and 1960s, during the hey-day of the so-called 'counter-culture revolution', Indian classical dance began again to make significant inroads into the American art scene. Bharata-Natyam was by now a well-developed artform in India and it attracted the attention of academics working in South Asian studies as well as choreographers, such as Jack Cole. Cole studied Bharata-Natyam with much intensity and adapted aspects of it in his choreographed musical *Kismet*. The Kathak style of dance which had survived in the *gharanas*, or the mansions of Muslim art establishments, was also introduced by one of his dancers from London. The academic interest in Indian classical dance forms, concomitantly with the philosophical interest in Indian aesthetics, has grown with considerable speed in the United States and Canada, where it is now possible for students to undertake doctoral programs in both the

practice and principles of Indian dance heritage and its aesthetics. The American Institute of Indian Studies and its Canadian counterpart, the Indo-Canadian Shastri Institute, vigorously promote learning and support research in these fields. In 1993, York University in Canada hosted a major conference on classical and contemporary Indian dance styles, consistent with the Canadian government's official policy on new directions in multiculturalism. The newly founded International Institute of Indian Studies in Ottawa and an endowed chair in Hindu Studies in Concordia University both promise more sustained attention to Indian multicultural artforms and attendant aesthetics.

Britain understandably has had a much longer relationship with Indian dance culture, given the long-standing Raj connections and sheer size of its domiciled South Asian populace. In more recent years, Britain has moved towards a more decisive policy of promoting both the applied and academic interests in Indian dance. But there has always been a tension, notwithstanding the legacy of Uday Shankar and Ram Gopal, between the culturally specific pursuits of the 'ghetto schools' or self-styled Indian ethnic/minority art groups (which are invariably marginalised as 'the amateur') and the elite/professionalist impulse to practice and present Indian arts as *art* first and an ethnic/minority product second. While not denying that a degree of skill and expertise is required in mastering the so-called ethnic art that is rooted in an ancient tradition, the argument that has been put forward is that traditional art:

... must be presented 'professionally' in Western theatre using proper techniques of sound and light so as to enhance the accessibility of the artform for foreign audiences without detracting from its traditional aura. (Hall, 1983, p. 11)

Although the urge towards this 'professionalism' is made in a paternalistic manner, it nonetheless echoes a concern that is widely expressed among Indian dancers working in the contemporary Western milieu. Hall sums it up well:

It was also felt that while traditional formats may be used for performances, artistes must also use more accessible themes with changing idioms for first-time venues/audiences. For example, universal themes should be selected of simple joy or a mother's love or a heroine waiting for a rendez-vous rather than those of convoluted love-cum-devotion to a humanised Godhead which inevitably imparts a 'religious' flavour. The 'dance-drama' format with its more theatrical overtones of a strong line and large casts and stage props, which has been very successful in India in bridging classical and folk styles, may also be an excellent way of reaching wider audiences in the United Kingdom. (Hall, 1983, p. 12)

To address some of the issues raised in the clash of perceptions, an Academy of Indian Dance was established in 1982 through a trust organised for this purpose, with the help of the then director general of the Commonwealth Institute. This was the first major institution for South Asian dance. Tara Rajkumar was its founder-director and, until her departure for Australia, devoted herself actively to building up the Academy to play a leading role in encouraging both heritage work and choreographic and collaborative work in Indian dance. The Academy, presently based at the London Contemporary Dance Centre, the Place Theatre in London, continues to flourish and boasts a significant place in London's cultural life. Earlier this year, its now legendary former founder-director 'returned in triumph' with her Australian-based dance company for a dance-cum-seminar tour of Britain. Their production of *From Temple to Theatre*, based on the classical style of Mohiniattam which Tara Rajkumar has helped revive and develop, was reported to have been 'received with enthusiasm by a full house of cognoscente'. What is significant is that due recognition was accorded her in the background of her past achievements in Britain by such august national bodies as the Arts Council of Great Britain, the London Contemporary Dance Centre and the Dance Umbrella.

Issues raised by the processes of transition and transmission of the arts in cross-cultural contexts are important for addressing the arts in a multicultural society, such as Australia. And so it is to a discussion of these issues and of the practice of Indian dance in Australia to which we now turn.

### The Australian context

The Australia Council in its revised charter in the 1980s gave recognition to three key principles: cultural identity and heritage; social justice (access and equity) and economic efficiency. This led to the formulation of an agenda for the arts for a multicultural society. However, the principle of ensuring wide participation and access by Australia's diverse communities in the arts was balanced by an emphasis on 'excellence', and the autonomy or centrality of arts and artists (Blonski, 1992, pp. 1-2). Critics have argued that the latter constraints augur for unintended marginalisation and the unhelpful rhetoric of 'community' or 'ethnic' arts vis-a-vis 'mainstream' (Western) arts. Indian dance arts have only contingently benefited from the Council's expanded policy strategy. But progress has been forthcoming due to individual initiatives and through other forms of support.

While there have been a number of dance groups involved in

different states in Australia in perpetuating, exploring and extending Indian dance arts, for the purposes of the present discussion we shall selectively focus on three specific groups. Two are based in Melbourne and one in Canberra, each led by dancers/teachers who have achieved many accolades both in Australia and overseas for their distinctive exploits in the Indian dance world.

#### *Bharatam Dance Company*

The Company was founded in 1987, following the success of the Bharatalaya School of Classical Dance (in 1980) begun by Chandrabhanu who not only holds a doctorate in social anthropology but, is also the Artistic Director and key artist of the Company. The Company has gained much prominence for its exotic and evocative dancing, with colourful theatrical sets, drawn from the Bharata-Natyam and Odissi dance styles. The classical productions of the traditional Bharata-Natyam program, such as 'Devi: Goddess Absolute' and 'Dance of Shiva', have made strong impressions on audiences. Producing two or so programs a year, attracting a significant profile, a large following and enviable box-office success with matching outside sponsorships, the Company has grown. While it has been among the most successful dance groups outside the 'mainstream' to attract funding, the artistic director states that the funding has neither grown proportionately, nor has funding policy changed sufficiently to recognise the significance of this and like groups as professional bodies of dancers of high standing. Chandrabhanu resists his development in the area of South Asian dance as falling categorically under the classification of 'ethnic' or 'multicultural' art, which is usually assumed to be for ethnic community consumption only and not necessarily engaged in the achievement of 'excellence' or high professional quality on a par with parallel 'mainstream' arts.

There is, at heart, the issue of the dual strategy of funding organisations—namely, the mandatory funding of long-established direct-line companies or ongoing projects (such as Western opera or ballet) and the competitive selection of individual projects for one-off funding. A consequence of this strategy is that the NESB groups are invariably disadvantaged, for they cannot assume long-term support in the same way as established companies. Indian dance groups have also been disadvantaged by uninformed assessment processes despite high degrees of professionalism and internal regulatory strictures to which the Indian dancers trained in the traditional mode are required to adhere—innovative excursions notwithstanding.

But this fact is lost on members of the arts funding committees who have no acquaintance with the praxis and aesthetics of the

traditional dance form, and the years of devotion that this Indian dance pedagogy entails. Nor is there an appreciation of the creative process by which the work is choreographed, incorporating other Asian and Western influences for an otherwise appreciative and heterogenous Australian audience. For instance, before a work is staged, the Company's artistic personnel spend months, perhaps up to three years, researching the historical background of the narrative theme chosen and the idiom mitigated by contemporary sensibilities in which the work is best communicable. Meticulous attention is paid to details of costume, artistic set, hand and body movements, lighting, music and other technicalities. Musicians are brought out from India to provide live accompaniment for certain works, and the scores may be entirely rewritten to accentuate the idiom, vocabulary and the cultural dimension thought most suitable for the traditional style and media for a contemporary psyche.

In its zeal to make its artform more relevant and responsive to the growing multicultural context, the Company has attempted rather more liberal experimentations combining Asian dance styles with narrative themes based on, for example, Greek tragedy, as in 'Medea', a work performed last year in collaboration with Turkish-Kurdish musicians. The difficulty with such experimental work, as critics have pointed out, is that while they are excitingly novel and entertaining, they also fall between the wedge, as it were, of heritage work and innovative work, and they come across as being an amalgam of different cultural artefacts and artistic techniques that barely hold together as a coherent whole. But this attempt at 'hybridisation' is inevitable, and arguably desirable, as the culture in which such artforms play themselves out is not an essential, static moment which resists forever the emergence of—what Nietzsche called—perspectivism (the art of looking at oneself from the position of 'the other'). Here, professionalism need not be compromised, although the achievement may fail to meet the standards of the Australia Council's narrow emphasis on 'excellence'.

The hardened traditionalist might still argue that this shift towards underscoring 'hybridity' hardly augurs well for heritage preservation or tradition in its own terms, inasmuch as this could be seen as a flight away from traditional artform rather than a dwelling upon it to further deepen its still-unfolding *pramana* or pragmatic epistemology, and strengthening its narrative base so that it may better serve development of variable vocabularies and movements within the same basic canon or framework from which a number of dance styles have evolved.

The present funding schemes provide support to companies and not to schools to develop and refine their training efforts, and this restricts participation by artists and researchers outside the company.

Not much exchange of ideas and props can occur under this arrangement. Confusion also arises when applicants are required to certify that their project, as well as the team involved, is 'Australian'. To take advantage of the existing funding criteria dance schools are often tempted into making broad sweeps and devise projects that would not stand up to scrutiny in India or, for that matter, in comparable multicultural arts boards in Canada.

### *Natya Sudha Dance Company*

Tara Rajkumar arrived in Australia in 1985 after abandoning her role as the founder-director of the Academy of Indian Dance, which continues to this day to be a flourishing centre for dance and Indian cultural productions in London. Earlier, she had trained in the classical Kathakali and Mohiniattam under pioneering teachers in Kerala, and soon earned the reputation of being a brilliant performer and exponent of Mohiniattam and Kathakali. But Tara considers herself, in her present predicament in Australia, an artist without a firm functional space: she discovered on her arrival that Australians were, by and large, untutored in the cultural and aesthetic values underlying the more traditional Indian performance arts. Natyam-Bharata and, to an extent, the Odissi style had been made popular, but there is more to Indian dance than these two styles. So she founded a dance company and began to train a handful of dancers in the Mohiniattam style as well as giving lectures in a university course on Indian dance. In a short time, she gained recognition and even sympathy for her 'purist' endeavours in the community, in theatre and arts centres, in universities—nationally and internationally. Accompanied by the Natya Sudha Dance Company and a group of Melbourne-based Indian musicians, she has performed widely around Australia and New Zealand, and returned recently for a tour of Britain (and Europe) as guest of the Academy she had founded eleven years before. She was invited in August 1993 to present a keynote address on dance at the Seventh International Conference of the Asian-Pacific Confederation of Art Educators held in Bangkok.

What is different about Tara is that she articulates a perspective from her own experiences in Britain and with scholarly correctness, which appear to be rather more orthodox than those we have so far encountered. She appeals to what, for some, might appear as an arcane concept—namely, tradition. The Sanskrit word for tradition is *parampara*, literally, that which goes from far to the yet further. She views the tradition from which the arts are derived as providing the authoritative criteria against which an artform can be judged, and legitimately extended. There is thus an organic link between the present and the past which is apprehended through a particular

intuition and which may escape outsiders altogether unless they are trained for it (Bharati, 1964, p. 83). Tara basically champions the view that a pluralist/multicultural society provides, or should provide, a fertile environment and ambience to give continuity to *tradition* so conceived and *a fortiori* to traditional artforms, where dance remains a vital means of cultural expression and identity. She is quick to explain that this position does not preclude, rather that it encourages, development of new styles, especially so in the transmigrant context, but within the terms and parameters of the traditional canon. She invokes the example of her own work in helping to revive and develop the classical Mohiniattam style, which is innovative in a number of ways:

- Mohiniattam literally means the dance of the enchantress, in which the male god, Vishnu, takes on the form of the enchantress, Mohini. It is, hence, best performed by a woman.
- It does not entail a diminutive and subservient place for women in terms of their social status (a 'sexist' theme that appears to be endemic, particularly, to Bharata-Natyam).
- The religious division between Shaivites and Vaishnavites (each commanding different thematic narratives) is overcome in its syncretic mythology.
- A new movement of the body as well as vocabulary was successfully and skilfully developed to accommodate the differential emphasis called for by its narrative theme.

This need not be seen as an exclusive achievement of the Mohiniattam style. Indeed, all of the classical dance styles that have become popular today—Bharata-Natyam, Odissi, Manipuri, Kathakali, Kathak—were developed out of the same set of canons, but with different vocabulary and idiom to suit the temperament of the dancers and the mythological themes being exploited. However, Tara is not one for experimentation for the sake of giving credence simply to 'multicultural arts' for its own sake. There are certain assumptions that must prefigure any attempt to develop a new style:

- a solid training base exists (i.e. there are skills that have already been learnt and traditional wisdom that is not a closed shop); and
- the theory of *rasa* forms a grounding framework for choreographing the dance movement and accompanying music.

Variables can then be built around these, both sensibilities and the range of emotions can be extended to suit the heterogeneity of the audience and the idiom of communication. This may lead to, as would indeed be desirable, the development of new movements and



extensive variations within the repertoire, such that a new genre of dance vocabulary emerges which is neither Bharata-Natyam, Odissi, Manipuri, Kathakali nor a 'hotch-potch; miss-mess' of bits of movements borrowed liberally from different dance styles, Asian or otherwise.

Tara believes, however, that new developments in this regard can emerge and have the prospect of continuity only if there is serious attention paid to research and if there is an infrastructure that can support the growth of, and actively disseminate for wider application and use, knowledge and the requisite vocabulary for the new productions. Much more research is needed in the areas of understanding and decoding the narrative techniques and theoretical troupes, which are the strengths of the Indian tradition. The research would then extend to finding new vocabularies for conveying themes and emotions that are of contemporary relevance to Australia in its Asia-Pacific context. This would be the distinctive contribution—if there is to be one—of South Asian dance art to the evolving genre of dance in a contemporary multicultural Australia. A new framework for dance may well emerge through these research efforts and practical application of the findings.

#### *Padma Menon*

The tension between the Chandra's open-ended experimentalism and Tara's more traditional sensibility come to a head in the person and work of the Canberra-based dancer Padma Menon. Padma was educated in a Catholic convent in Kerala (South India) and is an ardent student of English literature and Elizabethan theatre. This interest brought her to the Australian National University in Canberra in 1988. Having spent a good part of the past fifteen years learning (from Vempati Chinna Satyam of Madras) and performing dance in Kuchipudi, a highly pantomimic theatrical dance style evolved from ancient Sanskrit theatre, she could not resist the temptation of continuing her dance life in Canberra.

Padma opened the Kailash School of Indian dance in 1990 and taught for the Meryl Tankard Company, before becoming the Canberra president of the Australian Association for Dance Education (Ausdance). Padma's main focus and concern has been to make Indian dance accessible to a wider (non-Indian and Indian) audience, without compromising its philosophical and aesthetic base. Her company enlists dancers from varied dance backgrounds who are challenged to make sense of Kuchipudi in terms of their own training and sensibilities; the audience too are expected to gain some understanding of the classical aesthetics and techniques underpinning



*Padma Menon*

Indian dance in order to appreciate its innovative contemporary extensions.

Padma feels that this is not as difficult as protagonists, especially traditional gurus in the subcontinent, believe. There are certain universal emotions, character traits and signals which people, especially theatrical performers anywhere, appeal to: Indian dance embellishes these with a great deal of flourish, colour, elegant mimetic, dramatic movement and sublime music, while drawing on mythological motifs and narrative themes. Audiences reared in this environment find it easy to become involved in the emotions, sentiments and moods being represented. However, if care is taken to create a space for dialogue with the audience in the mode of communication and understanding best suited to its cultural background (or mixture thereof in the cross-cultural context), then a rapport can be established without the pretensions of an exotic performance, or extravagances of costume and technical complexities. Australia, for her, provides just such a space where 'hybridity' is not a dirty word to her ears, for she feels at home in both classical ballet and Elizabethan theatre and in a variety of classical Indian dance styles, while at the same time talking with local playwrights of incorporating Indian dance into a dramatic framework instead of

presenting lectures to explain Indian dance themes. She is also not shy of using English voice-overs in her productions where words might even appear to detract from the highly controlled and mimetic gestures that amply convey the pranks, say, of the infant Krishna to an Indian audience. She is cautious about such improvisations and cautions against superficial experimentations, examples of which apparently come in droves before the Dance Committee of the Australia Council of which she is a member.

But, most importantly, Padma emphasises that without integrity, honesty and a strong grounding in tradition it would be difficult to begin to think of pushing the boundaries of traditional forms to better reflect contemporary shifts in cultural and aesthetic discourses. In some ways there is far less 'tokenism' in India, or in Canada, and stepping outside of the boundary than in Australia, where the audience is not yet perceptive to the hasty (let alone subtle) shifts in idioms, technics and vocabulary that may be taking place and therefore do not voice undue concern. A good deal of self-censored, aesthetically measured and at the same time socially sensitive innovative work is going on in the subcontinent. She points to the Kuchipudi itself as an instance of how an original, rather exclusive, all-male poetic artform surviving in a small village setting, evolved into a separate theatre form, and is now being carefully developed along distinctive but well-defined lines by the disciples of Guru Vempati in different parts of the world (with his full encouragement). When Padma returned recently with members of her dance company and performed what could only be described as Kuchipudi suffused with Australian idioms, her Guru commended the company on its excellent work. In another work, Padma utilised translations by A. K. Ramanujan of Shaivite poetry, providing a principal expression of Sanskrit worship in the traditional context. Ramanujan, until he died in July 1993, was based in the University of Chicago and used a very modern form of English expression and vocabulary in his translations and prose style. This is one kind of infusion of traditional and modern patterns that Padma thinks can fruitfully suffuse the new aesthetics being explored in multicultural Australia. But she confesses that she has not been in Australia long and that she is still finding her way through the motley voices seeking expression in this country. Yet, it should be said to her credit that in a very short time since her arrival Padma Menon has achieved a great deal and succeeded in making a major impact on the field.

#### *Indian dancers in other Australian states*

With respect to the other states, space does not permit a detailed discussion except for a brief mention that there are several Indian

dance companies, dance schools and individual dancers practising in the South Asian style in New South Wales and Western Australia. Emphasis varies between the dancers, but by far the most popular style is the Bharat-Natyam, although other styles are also pursued as we have noticed in the case of Victoria and the ACT. Dancers based in Perth, given the proximity to the Indian Ocean countries, have a large number of dancers of Tamil descent originally trained in Singapore or Malaysia and in Sri Lanka. These dancers, with their distinctive Indian Oceanic flavour, feature regularly in the well-funded arts festivals and cultural events that continue throughout the year in Perth.

### Conclusion and a possible future trajectory

While contemporary experimentations continue in Indian and Asian dance, though with mixed results, recent developments in South Asian dance point us in two directions. First, there is a uniform call to continue the revival of traditional dance and, in some quarters, actively to deepen learning in traditional canons and styles through serious research. Second, new idioms and vocabularies are being developed within South Asian dance in experimental and collaborative efforts that extend the frontiers of traditional dance in the contemporary milieu, without sacrificing the theoretical basis, its unique *rasa* or aesthetics, and the cultural psyche from which these dances stem. The schools of dance-thought in Melbourne and Canberra that we considered are both open to and committed to these two directions—although the degree of emphasis and the weighting given to one over the other, varies significantly between them. This difference, which is not peculiar to the Australian scenario, opens up further areas of discussion with notably varied responses when considering the issue of future trajectories. We shall consider one such response, relating to the question of ‘excellence’ and ‘contemporary relevance’, in bringing this discussion to an end.

The movement given to the revival and strengthening of traditional dances answers the question of ‘excellence’ and ‘contemporary relevance’ in somewhat more academic terms. There is, admittedly, likely to be a hiatus when traditional dance styles that come from such a vastly different cultural language and frame of reference are appraised in terms of existing Western aesthetics and categories of performance. The intricate hand movements, sharp side-glances and long stoic pauses of the dancer (with the accompanying musician), may appear to be meaningless from the perspective of Western dance movements. And vice versa. Here again, a long-term process of education for the spectator community in the aesthetics, conceptual

and intellectual contours, and philosophy of Indian dance art is called for. Unless and until the so-called host society deconstructs its own colonial preconceptions and expectations of cultural forms that arrive from 'alien' and 'exotic' cultures, there is no likelihood of a satisfactory resolution. This issue is so irresponsibly managed by the media and its theatre/art critics who simply replay stereotypes and ignorance of highly sophisticated and developed (and developing) artforms, such as Indian dance.

As to the question of 'relevance', the response is that a 'dialogic' or interactive space has to be created which would feature collaborative works exploring narrative themes that attempt to address issues of, for example, social justice, sexism, racism, rootlessness, violence and so on, in contemporary life. But in order to bring about this spirit of co-operation between different artistic groups and cultural references, much research and reflection would seem to be necessary, contributing to a body of ongoing knowledge and archival sources, rather than simply making inputs into one-off, solo performances which secure or ensure little continuity.

In this regard, there is need for an establishment, a research foundation or centre, not unlike the Academy of Indian Dance in Britain, which can promote, across disparate dance companies and state-based groups, research, explorations and even appropriation of traditional styles for contemporary significance, but without losing its roots in the original classical canon. It may be well to mention that the recent establishment of the Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) funded National Centre for South Asian Studies, together with further support from the Australia-India Council, may result in a venue for fostering this work and encouraging collaboration with invited researchers, fellows and dancers already involved in these tasks in India (for example, at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts in New Delhi) and in other centres around the world. An immediate project that might be of interest would be to look at ways of reintegrating dance, music, theory, literature and poetry, as was originally the case in Chakyarkothu, dance theatre of Kerala, which was Sanskrit-based and which drew its themes from the legendary Kalidasa. Other projects would look at fostering ongoing interests of budding artists and students of arts in interactive and collaborative situations from a number of Asian and non-Asian art traditions towards redefining both the classical genre as well as the genre of the 'dominant' art culture nearer to home—indeed, a pluralist and multicultural home that Australia is to many who are from non-English speaking backgrounds.

Education has an important role to play at all levels of artistic encounter. A starting point would be an understanding of the theory

of aesthetics and the cultural psyche that are indispensably part of South Asian (indeed all Asian) dance and drama performances. Students can then appreciate how, in the case of one society, arts have affected culture and how culture in turn affects arts.

In order to foster a long-term appreciation of South Asian arts and to assist with the task of rendering it contemporary on the modern Indian model, there is, it is felt among the Indian dancers in Australia, a need for more training areas and diversification into Asian arts within, for instance, the Victorian College for the Arts (VCA), National Institute of Dramatic Arts (NIDA) and in tertiary curricula where performing arts and performance studies are taught. At least an introductory training course may provide certain checks on the possible distortions, tokenistic extensions, abuses and lack of regulatory process to which an imported artform can become easy prey, especially when a proliferation of small schools arises without any cohesion, communication or shared ideology, among them.

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