# DANCING DIASPORA, PERFORMING NATION:
## INDIAN CLASSICAL DANCE IN MULTICULTURAL LONDON

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the performance of Indian classical dance in the contemporary 'diaspora space' (Brah 1996) represented by the city of London. My aim is to analyse whether and how performances of 'national' art, assumed to represent an equally 'national' culture, change when performed in transnational contexts. Drawing upon theories of postcolonialism, multiculturalism and diaspora, I begin my study with an historical analysis of the reconstructed origins of the dance in the intertwined discourses of British colonialism and Indian nationalism. Using this analysis to ground my ethnography of the present-day practice of the dance, I unearth its relation to discourses of contemporary multiculturalism and South Asian diasporic identity. I then demonstrate specific ways in which the relationship between colonial and postcolonial artistic production on the one hand and contemporary performances of national and multicultural identity on the other are visible in the current practices and approaches of diasporic and multicultural Indian classical dancers.

My thesis advances the scholarship that has demonstrated the link between the construction of Indian classical dance and the Indian nationalist movement by highlighting particular ways in which historical narrative, national and religious identities, gendered ideals and racialised categories are constituted through, and help produce in turn, contemporary Indian classical dance practices in the diaspora. Locating my study in the UK while still accounting for the Indian nationalist aspects of the dance, my contribution to the scholarly literature is to analyse its performance in relation to both Indian and British national identity. My research demonstrates that Indian classical dance is co-produced by both British and Indian national discourses and their respective cultural and political imperatives, even as the dance contributes to the formation of British, Indian and South Asian diasporic politico-cultural identities.

Keywords: Indian classical dance, postcolonial, multiculturalism, diaspora, nationalism, performance.

# Glossary

***ashtapadi*** A dance choreography based on the lyrical poems written by Jayadeva (12th Century) to which many of the Odissi *abhinayas* are set.

***abhinaya*** Narrative dance that acts out a story; the *nritya* form of dance.

***bhangi*** Literally pose; *bhangis* are often based on temple sculptures and what has been outlined in the Natyashastra.

***bol*** The 'speech' of the drum; also the phonetic sounds that a percussionist will call out (i.e. what a percussionist is playing on the drum), as well as what a dancer will dance out with their footwork.

***chauk*** The foundational 'square' position of Odissi dance, formed by the dancer standing with out-turned feet approximately 6 inches apart, knees bent and torso straight. The arms are held at shoulder level parallel to the ground, with a 90-degree bend in the elbows. Thus a square shape is produced along the lower half of the body (the diamond produced by the legs), along the arms, and along the total body axis that results. See Figure 1.

***devadasi*** The overarching category referring to women dedicated to the service of the temple, which included dance performance. The word comes from *deva* (god) and *dasi* (server in the feminine form), and has been translated to mean anything from temple dancer to 'sacred prostitute'.

***dhoti*** A garment that is tied around the legs, typically by Hindu men.

***gotipua*** A young boy trained in martial arts and dance in Orissa.

***gharana*** Similar to 'schools' in English; this term refers to specific sub-styles maintained across a dance lineage. Although specific to Kathak and North India, this term is noticeably increasing in use for Odissi as well.

***ghungru*** The bells that are worn around a dancer's ankles so that the rhythmic footwork is emphasised. The number of bells can vary from approximately 50-200, and are most often tied together on a thick string. Kathak dancers will wear more bells reflecting the emphasis on footwork that is characteristic of their dance form. Some *ghungrus* will also be tied to leather straps that can be buckled, as worn by Bharatanatyam dancers.

***kathaka*** The storytellers or bards said to be the precursors of Kathak dance.

| | |
|---|---|
| ***kurti*** | Short *kameez* or tunic. |
| ***mahari*** | A woman who was dedicated to the Jagannatha Temple in Puri, Orissa. A regionally specific term for *devadasi.* |
| ***margam*** | The repertoire format established for Bharatanatyam by the Tanjore Quartet composed of both *nritta* and *nritya*. Odissi and Kathak have also developed similar formats for 'full-repertoire performances'. |
| ***mudra hasta*** | Hand gesture; there are roughly 30 single hand gestures that are used in total. Mudras signify meaning in *abhinaya*, but do not in pure *nritta.* |
| ***nautch*** | Anglicised term for the Hindi/Urdu word *nach* (dance). This term was used to refer to various entertainment events as well as in the backlash against dance in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Both *devadasis* and court dancers would fall under the 'nautch' category, making their histories difficult to disentangle. |
| ***nritta*** | Non-narrative dance referred to as 'pure' dance. |
| ***nritya*** | Narrative dance that tells a story. |
| ***pallavi*** | A term used mostly in Odissi to refer to a piece of *nritta* or pure dance. It is set to a specific *raga* and *tala*. Often the analogy of a blossoming flower is given to reflect the meaning of the word (blossoming/growing), for this type of dance commonly begins slowly and gradually increases in speed and rhythmic complexity. It also has another meaning in music to refer to the part in a song where musicians will improvise. |
| ***raga*** | (Pronounced raag) Melodic type. |
| ***rasa*** | Literally meaning juice or essence, *rasa* is commonly described as emotion or sentiment. It is what the dancer is meant to produce through their dance, and what the audience is in turn meant to absorb and experience. It is based on a complicated theory system first outlined in the Natyashastra. |
| ***rasika*** | Literally one who absorbs *rasa*; the connotation of this term is similar to 'connoisseur'. |
| ***sadir attam*** | The dance of *devadasis* in the South said to be the precursor to Bharatanatyam. |
| ***salwaar kameez*** | The dress typical throughout India, though heavily identified with Northern India. It consists of trousers (salwaar) and a long tunic (kameez). Women will wear a third piece, the *dupata* or scarf. |

***shastra*** Refers to rules and various texts of theory. It often appears as a suffix, as in Natyashastra – the rules of performing arts.

***tala*** (pronounced taal) The rhythmic structure.

***tawa'if*** Overarching category to refer to courtesan or court dancers.

***tribhangi*** The second foundational *bhangi* or position of Odissi. It is often translated as the thrice-bent pose, due to the bend that happens at the knee, hip/torso, and chin. The weight of the dancer rests mostly on the back leg, and it is the hip of this leg that is deflected outward. The torso extends in the opposite direction from the hip, as does the chin. Thus a 's' shaped-curve is produced along the whole body axis. See Figure 3.

## Setting the Scene: A Theoretical Introduction

*In the historical situation of colonialism, both white rulers and indigenous peoples were constantly involved in representing to each other what they were doing… Hence, one of the primary subject matters of an historical anthropology or an anthropological history is, to use Balandier's term, the colonial situation. This is not to be viewed as 'impact', nor as 'culture contact', nor is it to be viewed through a methodology that seeks to sort what is introduced from what is indigenous. It is rather to be viewed as a situation in which the European colonialist and the indigene are united in one analytic field.*

*- Bernard Cohn, History and Anthropology, 2004: 44*

It is difficult to encounter representations of India or Indian culture without coming across some reference to dance, whether in the subcontinent or abroad. Waiting at the Indian High Commission office in London, the hopeful traveller applying for a visa is offered an array of coffee table books on topics ranging from the ancient Hindu temples that prominently feature sculptures of dancers, to the 'nautch girls' who danced at various elite social gatherings until the early twentieth century. Upon arrival in one of the many international airports in India, the traveller is likely to see posters featuring classical dancers dressed in full costume, often posing in front of an historic temple or at an iconic natural site. In the states with which particular dance styles are associated, the regionally specific form will be on display – for example posters of Bharatanatyam dancers are profiled in Chennai Airport in Tamil Nadu while posters of Odissi dancers decorate Bhubaneswar Airport in Orissa. More general references to Indian classical dance will appear on the wall above the customs desk at Delhi

International Airport in the form of giant sculptures of *mudras*, the hand gestures common to all forms of Indian classical dance.

Depictions of dancers are further pervasive on the streets and in the markets of major Indian cities; both government and private stores associated with regional handicrafts, jewellery and textiles often make use of such images on their signage and other promotional material. Indian television also makes constant reference to dance, whether in the plethora of dance competition programmes currently on air or in the numerous advertisements that correspond with the heightened consumerism of a globalising India. While on fieldwork in India for example, I regularly came across one advertisement for Cadbury's chocolate featuring two Bharatanatyam dancers missing their stage cues due to their inability to resist the temptations of a Dairy Milk bar. In short, it is likely difficult to travel to India and not think of dance as an integral part of the national cultural landscape.

Such conceptions of Indian culture and its close association with dance are not, however, limited to India. Indeed, classical dance continues to be a strong cultural symbol for Indian identity in diasporic communities; classical dance performances are highly visible in events such as celebrations of Indian Independence Day, Hindu religious and cultural holidays like Diwali and Rath Yatra (see Figures 9 and 10), as well as in advertisements for Indian businesses, consumer products and tourism (see Figures 11-13). The growing visibility of Indian cinema in the UK and the increasing presence of Indian-themed mainstream shows such as Andrew Lloyd Weber's *Bombay Dreams* (2002) or the more recent production of *Wah! Wah! Girls* (2012) – for which posters flanked various tube stations across central London – strengthen the link drawn between Indian culture and dance. In the multicultural context, dance becomes one way in which individuals and communities – both South

Asian and non-South Asian – can acquire what is perceived to be immediate access to a generic Indian culture. "So you're studying weddings?" was a comment I received on several occasions while explaining my research on Indian classical dance in the UK. The connection that is made between Indian culture and dance thus runs deep in the various cultural imaginaries that are explored in this thesis.

This contemporary presence of Indian classical dance in both Indian and British representations of Indian culture leads me to ask whether postcolonial productions are limited to, or extend beyond, national boundaries. Central to this thesis then is the question of how national identity is constructed in a postcolonial transnational context. As I demonstrate in the following chapters, despite the mobility of people, ideas and images that provides the very context of this study, concepts of nation continue to be circumscribed and reinforced through the very transnational politics and processes of migration that traverse the nation. Furthermore, by illustrating how this transnational production of national identity presents continuity with processes of colonialism, this thesis helps complicate the very concept of transnationalism by drawing attention to its longstanding history of empire. In other words, transnational politics of colonialism *and* contemporary multiculturalism are both shown to be productive in imagining the nation, Indian and British.

There are currently eight styles of dance included under the Indian classical umbrella, but these distinctions are often made secondary to the homogenising category of "Indian classical dance" presented to mainstream and multicultural audiences outside India. My research considers the three most popular styles of Indian classical dance in the diaspora: Bharatanatyam (originating from South India), Kathak (originating from North India) and Odissi (originating from the southeastern state of Orissa). These three styles boast the largest number of practitioners and teachers

(especially Bharatanatyam and Kathak), and have the greatest visibility in the various performance contexts in the UK[1]. Although they differ in their historical and stylistic particularities (see Figures 3-5), the three are often treated as synonymous due to their more general categorisation as Indian classical dance; it is in this particular term and its attendant discourses that I am interested, for such classification presents one example whereby the diaspora contributes to the production of a coherent and unitary image of a national homeland with a distinct identity expressed in its arts, culture and tradition.

Now contained under the rubric 'classical', these three dance styles underwent significant (re)construction[2] during the period of twentieth century nationalism that saw the creation of a coherent cultural and national identity in the struggle against, and with the decline of, British rule in India. Dance – now linked to mythology, scripture, art, music and language through the process of reconstruction – was central in the production of this national identity. This reconstruction is examined in greater detail later in this chapter and again in the next chapter.

Although dance seems to have enjoyed a privileged place within ancient Sanskrit texts (Vatsyayan 2007), its social status had deteriorated dramatically during the colonial period with Victorian morality and elite Indian attitudes both associating it with vulgarity and sexual promiscuity. Dance, whether in temple or court, became associated with prostitution and defined as degraded until prominent dancers and

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[1] During fieldwork, the only performers I came across who did not practice one of these three styles were a Kuchipudi dancer and two Sattriya dancers (one of whom was also an Odissi dancer).

[2] The term 'reconstruction' is contentious, especially as it suggests a stronger sense of continuity with earlier dance forms than can be corroborated. While the project of 'reconstruction' did indeed produce Indian classical dance styles in the twentieth century, I hesitate to replace the term with construction for the latter can elide the importance of historical narrative to this project. Furthermore, 'reconstruction' is also the term used by the dancers with whom I worked to refer to this phase of their dance histories. I therefore use the term reconstruction throughout the text, which seeks to unpack the very complexities and implications of its use. While I drop the parentheses around the 're' in an attempt to make the text more readable, every usage of the term 'reconstruction' in this thesis is meant to signal its contentious and problematic construction.

reformists began to take interest in it during the first half of the twentieth century, viewing it as something that could be salvaged and made respectable (Soneji 2012; Roy 2009; Chakravorty 2008; Meduri 2008a, 2005, 1996, 1988; Shah 2005; Coorlawala 2004, 1992; Walker 2004; Allen 1997; Srinivasan 1985). As I demonstrate later in this introduction as well as in Chapters Two, Four and Five, those aspects of the dance that could be celebrated (such as its idealised femininity and spirituality) were maintained and held up in this project, while those aspects that could not (such as its associations with sexuality) were denigrated and cast aside.

This renewed interest in reconstructing dance led elite, internationally mobile and educated dancers and scholars to consult evidence from what they perceived to be the Golden Age of Hinduism, namely Sanskrit texts such as the Natyashastra (generally dated to the beginning of the Common Era[3]), alongside oral tradition and temple sculptures depicting various dance poses. The dance, it was said, had deteriorated in the hands of its degenerate practitioners who had become corrupted for various social and political reasons; if only it could be codified and reconstructed, nationalist logic went, dance could be restored to its previous status as a pure art form, encapsulating the spiritual and artistic merit Indian culture had always possessed and could now offer to the new nation.

These reconstructive movements distanced the 'tradition' of dance from its hereditary performers – namely the female temple and court dancers now seen to have fallen into disrepute – and aligned it instead with "an ancient heritage of theory and practice, posited as residing in an authoritative Sanskrit treatise from antiquity"

[3] The actual date of the *Natyashastra* is not known for sure; Chakravorty (2006:119) and Walker (2004:23) claim this treatise originated in the second and third century CE respectively. Roy (2009: 6) is more vague, stating the *Natyashastra* was composed "between the 2nd Century BCE and the 2nd Century CE". David (2009:228) provides a similar gloss, dating the *Natyashastra* to the "first centuries AD". It was not until 1865 that individual chapters were 'discovered' in various locations in Europe; these chapters were then published in 1890 (Chakravorty 2006:47; Walker 2004:23). Chatterjea (1996:120) dates the first publication of the *Natyashastra* in its entirety to 1957.

(Peterson and Soneji 2008:17). Such restoration of prestige offered a cultural counterpoint to salve nationalist concerns and anxieties regarding the purity of the nation's identity; reclaiming dance traditions rooted in a history that could be grounded in text offered one site for the expression of an unadulterated Indian culture that predated colonisation, while redeeming the dance's essence and presenting it as high art served to disprove normative ideas of Indian incivility.

It is this reconstructed and sanitised form of dance that is now celebrated in the various posters, advertisements, book covers, performances and promotional material that contribute to representations of Indian culture in a myriad of contexts. While the reconstruction of the dance has been analysed by scholars in great detail (as cited above, and as I will discuss further in the following pages), particularly with regard to Bharatanatyam, the implications of this process for contemporary dance practices outside India has received little detailed attention[4]. In particular, while studies on the history of Indian classical dance have analysed the role of colonial and nationalist politics in shaping classical dance historically in India, studies of contemporary Indian classical dance practices do not centre these politics and their current incarnation in the diasporic and multicultural context. My project makes these politics central in order to trace their continuities in the present.

Furthermore, by focusing on diasporic dance practices in isolation – and not diasporic practices as part of and in relation to a wider multicultural context – the few studies of Indian classical dance in the diaspora do not examine whether and how contemporary dance performances engage the cultural politics of the dance's colonial

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[4] Srinivasan's (2011) *Sweating Saris* is an exception and draws important attention to diasporic Bharatanatyam practices in the contemporary US, rooting these in an in-depth historical analysis. David (2010, 2008), Meduri (2008b), Katrak (2004) and Erdman (2000) have also drawn attention to Indian classical dance (mostly Bharatanatyam) in the UK and US in their articles, with Meduri providing an historical overview of institutional support for British South Asian dance. Finally, Ram (2005, 2000) analyses Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi amongst diasporic South Asians in Australia in her articles to theorise the affective experience of migration.

history *in the present*. This thesis addresses this gap by examining current dance practices in the context of the South Asian diaspora and British multiculturalism through a case study of the contemporary performance of Indian classical dance. In so doing, I advance a larger argument to illustrate the ongoing relationship between coloniality and postcoloniality, not only in the national context of India but in the transnational context of diaspora and multiculturalism. The colonial/postcolonial and the diasporic/multicultural are revealed to be intimately related in this thesis.

My research is thus motivated by the question of how continuities of colonial constructions of India can be traced in the current transnational moment. What role do Indian classical dance performances play in sustaining these constructs? What does the current confluence of past and present discourses in Indian classical dance tell us about the larger relationship between colonialism, postcolonialism and contemporary multiculturalism? Furthermore, how do these discourses impact upon constructions of race, culture, gender and religion, and how do these constructions lead in turn to the formation of national and cultural identity? The detailed and ethnographic analysis that this thesis undertakes can, I argue, shed light on the relationship between British colonial and Indian nationalist discourses on the one hand and contemporary diasporic and multicultural dance practices on the other. Given the symbiotic relationship between colonial Orientalism and Indian nationalism in the construction of Indian classical dance – a relationship I will examine in detail later in this chapter – the diasporic *and* multicultural context of the UK makes this a prime location for a study of the historical, cultural and political continuities I seek to trace.

Based on two years of ethnographic fieldwork, this thesis examines whether and how diasporic and multicultural dance practices rely upon and reproduce the very ideas of Indian culture that informed the reconstructive movement outside its specific

historical and political context. Analyses of nation, ethnicity, gender and religion are particularly fruitful in revealing the manner in which the reproduction of these constructs is sustained, constructs that stem from the colonial encounter and the nationalist project invested in nation formation. Tracing these constructs ethnographically, I thus draw attention to the lived ways in which they are reproduced and re-performed – even if unwittingly – in the context of contemporary British multiculturalism.

## A Situated Present

In the following sections, I develop an interdisciplinary theoretical framework to ground my study in an historical analysis that accounts for the deep and symbiotic relationship between 'East' and 'West' in the production of Indian classical dance and subsequent constructions of Indian national culture. I do so by providing historical background to the different dance contexts in India; to the dancers who, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, were publicly reviled as prostitutes while their dance was 'reconstructed' as classical; to the multiple ways in which these women were represented in the cultural imaginaries of both colony and metropole; and to the transcultural production of Indian dance that resulted from the work of both Euro-American and Indian dancers and scholars.

By drawing attention to this history, I aim to refashion the way in which Indian classical dance is studied in the context of contemporary multicultural and diasporic politics. I do so by troubling the conventional status of Indian classical dance as emblem of a 'pure' and unadulterated Indian national culture, beginning instead with the transnational production of the dance in the colonial context. While questions of intercultural hybridity and Indian classical dance may be more readily associated with

the present multicultural context where the dance is practiced by South Asian and non-South Asian performers, these questions – and the politics by which they are shaped – are not new. Indeed, the historicity of the dance that I present in this thesis, traversing colonialism, nationalism and contemporary multiculturalism, suggests that Indian classical dance (standing in for constructions of the Indian nation) has always been a transnational affair. My study of the dance in the diasporic and multicultural context therefore situates the present in this larger history of transnational politics.

My interest in this project emerged from my experiences as an Indian classical dancer, first in Bharatanatyam, later (and more extensively) in Odissi. In particular, I wanted to understand what audiences meant in their remarks that "it was nice to get some culture" after attending one of my performances, a comment I received quite often (and have since overheard at many of the performances I have attended). Was this intended compliment meant in the Bourdieuian sense of class tastes and high art, or in the Orientalist terms of experiencing essentialised cultural difference in a multicultural context? I was troubled by both possibilities, albeit in different ways.

Moreover, I wanted to understand my discomfort when I would see pictures of dancers, some of whom I had worked with, posing in the *bhangi* positions of their Indian classical dance forms while dressed in costumes alluding to highly exoticised and sexualised interpretations of forms such as belly dance (another Orientalist construct). Were these examples of artistic expression? Cultural appropriation? Fetishisation? I wanted to make sense of why I was jarred by a Kathak dance performance that was accompanied by live opera that I had attended at a mainstream London venue. I wondered where one could locate such a performance in which the soprano singer of South Asian origin sang an early twentieth century French song written from the perspective of an 'ancient' Hindu woman; a song that, in the present,

was accompanied by a Kathak dancer performing before an affluent British audience. I was struck by how this performance, celebrated in the programming material and subsequent reviews as an example of innovative artistic collaboration and cross-cultural hybridity, appealed to (and seemed to produce) a sense of cultural nostalgia, both for an ancient India and an imperial European past. I wanted to understand why, sitting in that theatre, I felt as if I had been transported to the salons of the British Raj in the not-so-distant past. Was the salon – intricately associated with *nautch*[5] performances – a construct in my own imagination to represent the romance and sensuality associated with the Orient in multiple streams of this discourse? Was this a re-making – or a reliving – of history?

Rather than focus on these overt – and admittedly less frequent – examples of the reproduction of Orientalist tropes in contemporary Indian classical dance performances, I found it necessary to examine the dynamics of more quotidian dance practices to explore whether and how dancers negotiate the legacy of Orientalism and the history of colonial/nationalist constructs that shape their dance practice in the present. Indeed, as I demonstrate through the ethnography that follows, studying the quotidian reveals more concretely the capacity of Orientalism to both endure and transform in its contemporary articulations.

In presenting my critique of Indian classical dance practices in this thesis, I do not exempt myself as a dancer from the processes I analyse. Like the dancers with whom I worked, I too perform my art in a larger system of cultural representation that is hegemonic and longstanding. The aim of this thesis then is to better understand this

[5] As I discuss in greater detail below, *nautch* is an ambiguous term that referred to a variety of dance contexts in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The term *nautch* dancers usually referred to women who would dance as entertainment, either at private parties or in royal courts, but could also be extended to refer to women who would dance in association with temple practices. The social stigma that would come to be attached to *nautch* dancing in the early twentieth century appealed to – and therefore reinforced – connotations of *nautch* with prostitution.

system of cultural representation, the location of dancers like myself within it, and the impact of the one on the other. While categories such as East and West, South Asian and non-South Asian/white, classical and contemporary, colonial and nationalist, femininity and masculinity may appear somewhat stable in this text – for their very articulation works to once again reify their categorisation – these concepts are approached as unstable and changing, and are used in an attempt to aid a more thorough investigation into their construction and representation in the context of Indian classical dance production. While these terms are neither perfect nor exhaustive, and each is integrally connected to the other, each plays a critical conceptual role in the cultural dynamics with which this thesis is concerned. My aim is not to essentialise such categories, but to question their mutual constitution.

Taking British colonialism as a starting point, this thesis does not intend to reify it, attributing it sole responsibility for all that followed; nor does it assume a uniform and liner relationship between the colonial and the postcolonial – an assumption that Breckenridge and van der Veer warn against (1993:6). Rather, my point is to explore whether and how the logic of colonialism, imbued by both nationalism and multiculturalism, endures in the present despite the precariousness of all three categories (the colonial, the national, the diasporic/multicultural). Why is it that, in relation to specific cultural practices and performances such as Indian classical dance, differences of lived experiences, cultural background, geographical and temporal situatedness, race, gender and class are subsumed into master narratives of ancient tradition? An analysis of colonial conceptualisations of culture as essentialised and representable, buttressed by a contemporary multicultural discourse that overdetermines the culture of some and not others, points us to an answer. To study this historical construction of cultural identity ethnographically enables us to observe

both the particular nuances and the wider hegemonic relations that are at play in its production.

**Postcolonial Cultural Production and the Construction of Nation**

Although Indian classical dance performance and practice constitutes the central focus of this thesis, I approach dance as a lens to examine larger questions of postcolonial cultural production and performance as they contribute to the present constellation of diasporic and multicultural relations and identities in the UK. For example, some of the issues that are raised in this work regarding diasporic cultural identity, its relationship to an Indian 'homeland', and its situatedness in multicultural society, have been examined in studies of the British South Asian and World Music scenes (Murthy 2009; Hutnyk 2000, 1997), diasporic literature (Grewal 2008; Ghosh 1989), and religious practices (David 2008; Vertovec 2000; Banks 1992; Knott 1986). Studying these different forms of cultural practices similarly reveals the complexities of national production in the context of migration and transnationalism, as well as the limits of cultural essentialism. My work places Indian classical dance within this larger field of cultural production and politics.

Furthermore, the British South Asian diaspora has been studied more generally by various scholars, including Avtar Brah (1996), Gerd Baumann (1996), Rozina Visram (2002, 1995), and Dhooleka Raj (2003), and in the edited collections by Peter van der Veer (1995) and Roger Ballard (1994). Reading these and other theorists of diaspora (Falzon 2005; van der Veer 1995b; Clifford 1994; Safran 1991) in tandem illustrates how the construction of a coherent national and cultural 'homeland' is necessary to maintaining a link between this and the diaspora. As I argue in this thesis, it is precisely in the construction of India as 'homeland' that diasporic and

multicultural dancers (and British society more generally) contribute to the ongoing production of colonial discourses and nationalist ideals that shape constructs of 'India'.

This link between India and its diasporic communities can, however, be precarious given the regional, linguistic and religious diversity – and corresponding politics – of the subcontinent. Moreover, despite particular cultural, religious or ethnic attachments to the subcontinent, the South Asian diaspora does not necessarily subscribe to a myth of return (Vertovec 2000; Baumann 1996; Ghosh 1989) and is simultaneously established in the country in which it exists (Brah 1996). According to Ghosh (1989), the South Asian diaspora is thus not necessarily oriented to its regional roots or a desire for return, but is rather produced through its ability to recreate a national 'culture' in diverse locations. For Ghosh, "the links between India and her diaspora are lived within the imagination. It is therefore an *epic relationship*" (ibid:76, emphasis in original). The diaspora thus produces India as an imaginary national homeland at the same time as it is itself the product of this imagination (see Axel 2002). The relationship between diaspora and homeland can therefore constitute "long distance nationalism" (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002:323), such that the nation is imagined as unified and organic even as it extends beyond territorial borders (ibid:324). This historical transnational production of nation – the 'homeland' in dancers' imaginaries – is traced in this thesis through a case study of Indian classical dance performance.

Crucial to understanding diasporic constructions of nation, however, is examining their colonial antecedents. The South Asian diaspora are not the first to imagine a coherent Indian nation given the colonial desires and nationalist discourses that preceded them to construct 'India', both in terms of 'national' identity and

‘cultural’ traditions. Indeed theorists of anti-colonial nationalism have aptly demonstrated the ways in which newly independent nations actively sought to produce a cohesive and unified ‘culture’ (which would include dance) in order to rally the sentiments of national unity (Fanon 2004; Chatterjee 1999; van der Veer 1995b; Ludden 1993). It is this independent nation – another ‘imagined community’ (Anderson 2006)[6] – that becomes the homeland for the diaspora. The ‘India’ that is conjured as homeland is thus *doubly* imagined, first within colonial/nationalist discourses and subsequently within diasporic/multicultural imaginaries.

Although the primary focus of this thesis is on the way in which Indian classical dance performances negotiate and/or reproduce constructs of Indian national culture in the diasporic/multicultural context, the relationship that dancers have to Britishness cannot be ignored. Important to my study then are the ways in which Britain is also engaged in a process of re-imagining itself as a nation in its post-Empire phase. While a detailed theorisation of British nationalism is unfortunately beyond the scope of this current work, I do identify the production of British multiculturalism as a way to imagine the contemporary British nation. I further develop this point in Chapter Three, where I show how British national identity is celebrated as multicultural through the performance and consumption of ‘ethnic’ arts such as South Asian dance.

Therefore, even as I refer to dancers throughout my ethnography as South Asian-origin and non-South Asian, I nonetheless recognise them as living and participating in the British national context. Indeed, I found that even those dancers who did not have British citizenship were nonetheless invited into the category of

[6] In the revised edition of *Imagined Communities* (2006), Anderson argues for a genealogy tracing official nationalism in the colonised world to “the imaginings of the colonial state” (163), conceding that his previous application of a Western model of nation to Asia and Africa was “hasty and superficial” (ibid). Having made room for an analysis that accounts for colonial power, Anderson’s revised theorisation of the nation as imagined community remains noteworthy.

Britishness through their recognition (by audiences, peers, programmers and funders) as British South Asian dancers. This categorisation – in reference to a genre of dance in the mainstream arts scene – however serves to blur the lines between citizenship and national belonging, even as it demarcates the limits of such belonging (through the designation of British *South Asian* dancers). It is therefore both an inclusive and exclusive term. The boundaries of the British nation are once more brought into view in my analysis of Indian classical dance as diasporic/multicultural cultural production.

Given the diversity of diasporic cultural practices circulating in the present multicultural context then, the issues discussed in this thesis pertaining to Indian classical dance resonate with analyses of other sites of cultural production. And yet, while Indian classical dance is not the only site for the cultural processes I analyse here, it does present certain distinctive features that make these processes particularly evident. The performative nature of the dance, and the inclusionary attempts made by dancers to engage practitioners and audiences from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds – for no longer is Indian classical dance regarded as the strict purview of South Asians – make it a prime example of the 'cross-cultural dialogue' that is central to the multiculturalist paradigm.

Moreover, as Soneji and Peterson (2008) have argued, unlike the twentieth century 'revival' of Indian literature and visual arts with their emphasis on modernity and innovation, the performance arts (such as music and dance) placed emphasis instead on a supposedly longstanding unchanging history of classicism and tradition. This initial emphasis on the 'purity' of tradition and antiquity, I argue, makes Indian classical dance a convenient representative for Indian culture, tradition and identity not only in the Indian national context, but – and perhaps even more starkly – in the diasporic/multicultural one as well. The spectacle of performance, the costumes and

mythologies, the appeal to ancient tradition, spiritual practice and courtly splendour – all combine in performances of Indian classical dance to represent an idealised yet static Indian culture.

Another feature that makes Indian classical dance a particularly fruitful case study for the cultural processes I examine in this thesis is the extent to which Indian dance has historically been a feature of colonial and nationalist imaginings of an essentialised Indian culture, much like in the present multicultural imaginary. Representations of Indian dance (and the Indian dancer) have appeared in sources ranging from colonial writings, ballets, literature and painting circulated in Europe from the eighteenth century onwards, as well as in Indian art, literature and cinematic representations right into the present. With the early twentieth century push to reconstruct dance as classical in India, dance also found a place in British and Indian social imaginaries through political campaigns and cultural 'revival' movements. As I detail below, temple dancers and *nautch* women have thus been popular archetypes in the stereotyping of India, shaping ideas about the sensuousness and mysteries of 'the East' for over two centuries.

It is the longevity of Indian dance (and the Indian dancer) in these various imaginaries, I argue, that makes classical dance performances particularly fruitful for a study of postcolonial cultural production and identity formation. Such longstanding presence in colonial and Indian imaginaries reflects the role of Indian classical dance in producing constructions of Indian national and cultural identity. Moreover, in the multicultural imaginary, Indian classical dance serves to represent Indian history, tradition and religion such that colonial constructs of India become cemented once more.

Beginning with an analysis of this *living* past is essential to ground the ethnographic material that I have collected and will analyse in the coming chapters. Recognising this history as central to my anthropological study pushes the limits of ethnography. In other words, I am not content to simply study dancers' practices in the present but rather seek to understand the historical and social politics that make these practices possible, to understand from where the *meaning* attributed to these practices are derived and the relations of power they sustain. Given that the early genealogy of anthropology has been found closely related to the colonial encounter (Asad 1973; see also Thomas 1994), the question remains as to what a postcolonial ethnography might look like. This thesis is a contribution towards such an ethnography. Historicising and highlighting the postcolonial re*production* of Indian classical dance – therefore never taking its existence for granted – I draw attention to the relationship between the contemporary moment and coloniality as well as the latter's ongoing power to reproduce itself in the present.

To approach a study of Indian classical dance performances from this perspective therefore enables me to pursue my research questions regarding the continuities between colonial and nationalist constructions of India (and its relation to the West) on the one hand, and contemporary diasporic and multicultural constructions of 'Indianness' and 'Britishness' on the other. The contemporary manifestations of this longevity can be seen in the pervasive representations of Indian dance ranging from the airports of major Indian cities to the tube stations of London discussed above. It is to this longevity that I now turn in order to set the scene for my study of contemporary Indian classical dance performances.

### *Nautch* and the Colonial Imaginary: A Living History

My study of the historical representations of Indian dance – and the Indian dancer – begins with the many instances in which both appeared in colonial and nationalist imaginaries, instances that I argue are foundational to the present performance of Indian classical dance. As I show in this chapter, Indian classical dance was produced through the mutual efforts of Euro-American and Indian dancers, audiences and scholars. While this particular history of the confluence of Western and Indian ideas and dancers is not prioritised in the master narrative of Indian dance history that I discuss in Chapter Two, its traces are nonetheless apparent. This past – a mixture of colonial and Orientalist discourses – is evident in the extravagant examples of overt Orientalist production I described above. The very conditions of possibility for contemporary Indian classical dance, this past helps explain the longevity of images of Indian dance/rs that are always already present in the various cultural imaginaries that are brought together by these performances in the present.

The contemporary performance of Indian classical dance regularly calls upon a history that relates to either Hindu temple practices and the *devadasis*[7] who danced as part of religious ritual, or to 'secular' royal courts and the *tawa'ifs*[8] who performed for various Indian and British elites. Indian classical dance is thus coded through this history as religious (Hindu) and/or feminine. As I show, particularly in Chapters Four and Five, this coding has consequences for how the dance is perceived in the present.

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[7] *Devadasis* were women associated with Hindu temple practice. The term literally means servant (*dasi*, feminine) of god (*deva*, masculine).

[8] Although *tawa'if* is a more ambiguous term than *devadasi*, I use it to refer to the courtly Muslim/Mughal counterpart to the *devadasi*, often referred to as courtesan dancer (see Chakravorty 2008; Walker 2004). As I will discuss in Chapter Five, the association of the *tawa'if* with Indian Muslim culture makes possible particular religious ambiguities that I argue to be reflective of the Indian political landscape. For the moment, let it be noted that the association of the *tawa'if* with the court and the salon is simplistically made to contrast the 'religious' associations of the *devadasi* and her dance as part of Hindu temple practice. The Sanskritisation and Hinduisation of her dance made possible the emergence of classical Kathak (see Walker 2004).

In this section, I examine the place of the *devadasi/tawa'if* in Western imaginaries to locate the role of Indian dance in European constructions of Indian culture. In so doing, I bring attention to the mutual constitution of Indian and European perspectives of the *devadasi/tawa'if* figure as metonym for India. To do so demonstrates what Bernard Cohn (2004) and subsequent anthropologists and historians have argued, namely that the colonised and the coloniser must be examined as inhabiting the same analytic field (van der Veer 2001; Dirks 2000; Metcalf 1998; Breckenridge and van der Veer 1993; Balandier 1966).

European responses towards Indian 'dancing girls' were varied during the Raj. It appears that, prior to the mid-eighteenth century, Europeans in India did not seem particularly interested in or aware of dance to make mention of it in their accounts. However, after this point a significant portion of the plethora of colonial letters, diaries and travelogues begin to include details about dance performances, costumes and musical accompaniment (Walker 2004:69-71). While some Europeans were enamoured and full of praise for the beauty and skill of the dancers they witnessed – "their bronze tint" proclaimed to be "more agreeable to the human eye than the fair skins of Europe" (cited in Nevile 1996:45) – others expressed contempt and held them in ridicule (Vijaisri 2004:134). For example, an account from 1893 gives the following description: "A Nautch dance is performed by Hindu prostitutes who usually sing songs of the most lascivious character accompanied by gestures and movements of the body having an obscene meaning" (in Ballhatchet 1980:58). Already, we begin to see the emergence of contradictory representations of the Indian dancer as celebrated or profaned in these accounts.

According to dance historian Mohan Khokar (1996:19) "the one word, the name, by which Indian dance as we know it today was known universally right into

the first quarter of this [twentieth] century was *nautch*". This Anglicised version of the Hindi word for dance[9] – *nach* – is problematic for it carries within it the very ambiguities about 'Indian' dance given that it was applied to numerous contexts, both positively and negatively. As such, the Indian term *nautch* is problematically vague, much like the English term *dance*, which can refer to a range of activities from improvised social dancing to highly choreographed professional performances, abstract movement patterns or codified ritual practices. (Kaeppler 2000; Grau 1993)

Further complicating the term *nautch* however is the association with prostitution that it would develop in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While Khokar's claim to universality therefore requires unpacking – particularly in its privileging of North Indian culture and the Hindi language *via its English translation* – the general applicability of the term *nautch* and the variety of practices and practitioners it includes is nonetheless noteworthy. Unpacking this generic term can help shed light on the complicated amalgamation of dance practices and practitioners that occurred in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries through such universalising gestures. The subsuming of dance practices ranging from temple to court to private home under this category of *nautch* makes understanding the modern history of Indian classical dance, with its associations to antiquity as well as prostitution, all the more necessary to untangle.

Despite its connotations with antiquity, the generic term *devadasi* gained popular currency during the colonial era; prior to this, there were many categories referring to these women and their communities in numerous texts, which distinguished one from another in terms of status and relation to 'prostitution'

[9] This suggestion glosses over the heterolinguality of pre-colonial and colonial India by privileging Hindi, a language that developed through the colonial encounter and the Indian project of nation formation. For more on the construction of Hindi, see Lelyveld (1993). The point remains that Indian variations of the word for dance were translated into the English *nautch*; for example, Marglin (1985) claims that the Oriya word *naca* was the origin of *nautch* in Orissa.

(Vijaisri 2004:1; see also Soneji 2012). It was during the colonial era that the term *devadasi* was applied to these various women and communities as a whole, thus complicating attempts to understand their particular status and forms of identification and subjectivity. This generalisation – further legitimated through the project of dance reconstruction – served to produce the *devadasi* as figure by subsuming a diversity of women into an "Orientalist representation of a 'pan Indian transhistorical' *devadasi*" (Coorlawala 2004:50). This is the figure of the *devadasi* recalled in the present.

Like the category *devadasi*, *tawa'if* too is a generic term that came into use as a descriptor for courtesan women in the early nineteenth century (Trivedi 2012:52-3; see also Walker 2010, 2004; Chakravorty 2008). Often, the communities represented by these women were matriarchal, with both *devadasis* and *tawa'ifs* in control of their finances and decision-making responsibilities (Soneji 2012; Roy 2009; Oldenburg 1990). This status however can also lead to an overdetermining of the *devadasi/tawa'if*, presented as a role model of female empowerment and independence by the dancers who celebrate her, as demonstrated in Chapter Four (see also Chakravorty 2006). Either way – described as hapless victim or empowered matriarch – the *devadasi* and *tawa'if* have entered the annals of history as fetishised figures[10]. My analysis shows this fetishisation to be ongoing in contemporary performances and narrations of Indian classical dance and history.

[10] In theorising the *devadasi/tawa'if* as fetish figures, I refer to McClintock's (1995) assertion that the fetish stands at the intersection of psychoanalysis and social history. Tracing Western discourses of fetishism to four centuries "before the phallus was singled out as its single, organising principle" (ibid: 185) in reference to Freud and psychoanalytic theory, McClintock argues that "fetishes can be seen as the displacement onto an object (or person) of contradictions that the individual cannot resolve on a personal level…Fetishes may take myriad guises and erupt from a variety of social contradictions. They do not resolve conflicts in value but rather embody in one object the failure of resolution" (ibid: 184). Furthermore, fetishes are also associated with "intense passion (erotic or otherwise)" and "the repetitious, often ritualistic recurrence of the fetish object in the scene of personal or historical memory" (ibid:184-185; for more on fetishism, especially in the colonial context see ibid:185-189). To approach the *devadasi/tawa'if* as fetish is thus to draw attention to the contradictions she represents regarding both sexuality and spirituality (to be rejected and celebrated respectively in the new nation), as well as her place in historical imaginaries and her construction as the site of passion and desire.

The fetishisation of the ancient Indian dancer was not limited to narratives in India alone. In other words, the symbiotic and dialogical relationship between Britain and India regarding perceptions of Indian classical dance *outside* India that I seek to trace in this thesis do not begin in the contemporary era that is the primary focus of my project. According to Soneji (2012:29) for example, the *devadasi* was already a transnational figure by 1838, at which time *devadasis* were brought from Pondicherry to perform in European cities including London, Brighton, Brussels, Berlin and Vienna. Moreover, according to Srinivasan (2011:60), that all-too-universal term *nautch* was also utilised to refer to some Middle Eastern and all Indian dance forms in the nineteenth century, providing an important example of the Orientalist generalisation that surrounded Indian dance.

Furthermore, although the word *devadasi* was known to and used by various Europeans who recorded her activities in their accounts, Europeans also made frequent reference to the *bayadères* of India. The word *bayadère* came into French through Portuguese influence and although it generally means 'dancer', it came to connote more specifically a range of Indian temple dancers as early as the eighteenth century (Ravi 1999:132).

Like much Orientalist knowledge, the term *bayadère* was decontextualised and widened to describe a host of colonised women; for example, the term appears in reference to women in the Middle East and North Africa as well (see Alloula 1987). As the satirical Dictionary of Received Ideas based on the notes of Gustave Flaubert reads: "Bayadères – all the women of the Orient are bayadères. This word carries the imagination very far" (ibid: 85). The slippage between regional and 'national' (for India was not yet independent at this time) is quickly shown to slip once again, this time in reference to the generic Orient. That the *bayadère* became a symbolic

metonym for India in all its Orientalist glory is seen in numerous if seemingly unrelated sources; Karl Marx's 1853 essay *On Imperialism in India*, for example, made reference to "the religion…of the Bayadère" to capture the "sensualist exuberance" and "self-torturing asceticism" he believed to be characteristic of Hinduism (Marx 1978: 577).

Even more illustrative sources demonstrating the place of the Indian temple dancer in Western imaginings of India can be found in the representation of *devadasis* in the ballets of Europe, the most popular and long lasting of which is *La Bayadère*. Choreographed by the celebrated ballet master Marius Petipa[11], *La Bayadère* premiered in St. Petersburg in 1877 and continues to be an established component of the ballet canon in the present (for more on *La Bayadère*, see Srinivasan 2011:52-3; Siegel 1980). Incidentally, this ballet premiered the same year that Queen Victoria was crowned Empress of India at the Delhi Durbar, a title she had already taken with the dissolution of the East India Company three years earlier. The emergence of the *bayadère* in European cultural production is thus contemporaneous with imperial expansion.

Highlighting the relationship between the various European ballets and suggesting that Petipa's work in Russia is meaningful for a study of English colonial subjectivity, scholars have noted that Petipa's Romantic ballets were not dissimilar to those presented concurrently in British music halls (Carter 2005:13). Although *La Bayadère* would not be performed in London until the mid-twentieth century, it drew inspiration from Taglioni's *Le dieu et la bayadère* **(**also known as *The Maid of*

[11] Petipa is also known for choreographing such ballet classics as *Sleeping Beauty*, *Swan Lake*, and *The Nutcracker* (Wulff 2012:48).

*Cashmere)* and Lucien Petipa's *Sacountala*[12], both of which premiered in Paris in 1830 and 1858 respectively. Notably, shortly after the premier of *Le dieu*, *devadasis* from South India performed in both Paris and London in 1838, with London newspapers (*The Times* and *The Examiner*) pointing to the presence of specific *devadasis* by name (Srinivasan 1985:7). The figure of the Indian dancer thus had a presence in Europe by the nineteenth century, circulating in contexts beyond the immediate realm of colonial travelogues and accounts.

Furthermore, according to Jowitt (1988:50), many key texts of Asian literature had been translated for Europe by the time tensions were brewing around the propriety of Indian *nautch* dancing in the early twentieth century. These literary pieces, many available from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, were then adapted into operas and ballets, including those cited above. The figure of the 'temple dancer' was regularly featured on stage and was even added to enliven those scripts that did not originally include her (ibid:54).

These various ballets and operas cannot be separated from the historical experience of colonial domination. As Said (1993) notes in his study of European operas and their Orientalist representations of the colonies, "the malleability and transportability of secondary or lesser cultures was underlined. These subaltern cultures were exhibited before Westerners as microcosms of the larger imperial domain. *Little, if any allowance was made for the non-European except within this framework*" (ibid:112, emphasis added).

The Indian dance figure was thus ensconced in the larger realm of European cultural production through these performances, indicating its position in European imaginaries. These performances could work to 'educate' European audiences about

[12] Shakuntala is referenced in the Mahabharata, and is also the character of the 1st Century CE Sanskrit poet Kalidasa's (1912) play Abhijnanasakuntala (see Krishnamoorthy 1994:10-12). It is upon the latter text that the ballet *Sacountala* is based.

the marvels of the 'East' that were being produced through these very presentations; they also provided the reference point against which Europeans could judge their presumably superior sense of morality and culture. It was through such performances that Europeans could know themselves *as Europeans*. The fetishisation of the *devadasi* can thus be regarded to be as complicit in the formation of colonial subjectivity as it was of nationalist Indian identity, albeit in different ways.

Calling attention to this history is not to exaggerate the existence of the European ballet as a monolith and to thus essentialise Europe (and America) as one Occidental entity; rather, it is to suggest that the transferability of images, stories and fantasies across Euro-American boundaries cannot be underestimated[13]. Indeed Stoler (2002) cautions against an anthropology of colonialism that reifies the coloniser at the same time as it strives to unpack the category of the colonised (see also Gosden and Knowles 2001; Stoler 2000; Cooper and Stoler 1997; Thomas 1994; Balandier 1966) by directing attention to the ways in which 'colonisers' were themselves stratified by class and gender. Furthermore, she demonstrates how even the demarcation 'European' was flexible and based on the cultivation of 'cultural' practices and behaviour.

For Stoler, it is important not to fictionalise the distinction between coloniser and colonised but rather to ask why the Manichean dichotomy of the colonial encounter – described so forcefully by Fanon (2004) for example – has endured (Cooper and Stoler 1997:9). Attending to the figure of the *devadasi* in Indian and European imaginaries – a figure that was constructed in and through colonialism – is to draw attention to the intimate relationship between both colonised and coloniser. At

[13] Carter (2005:81) argues that, "in its passive acknowledgement of social class differentiation, rigid gender roles and imperialist ideology, the ballet endorsed rather than challenged the status quo". The relationship between the ballet, the dance hall, imperialism and Orientalism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is further apparent when one considers the names of popular dance halls in London, with the *Empire* and the *Alhambra* being favourites (ibid:11).

the same time, given the extent to which this figure featured in European imaginaries beyond Britain illustrates how hegemonic Europe could be and was despite its internal diversity and differences in forms of colonial rule.

**The Anti-Nautch Movement and Beyond**

The exoticism and sexuality associated with the *devadasi* in Europe was around the same time forging the grounds for her debasement in colonial India. Indeed the ambiguities about the status of the *devadasi* and *tawa'if* were distilled into prohibitive attitudes via the anti-*nautch* movement that shaped the beginnings of the modern construction of Indian classical dance. This movement inserted the figure of the Indian dancer into a history described as "a linear deterioration of aesthetic quality and personal agency, from temple to courts and from courts to streets and to (deserved) abandonment from where the dancer and the dance must be rescued" (Coorlawala 2004:50). This history, transformed into the master narrative of Indian classical dance by the reconstruction movement that sought to 'rescue' the dance, was used to legitimise this very movement in turn. As I demonstrate in the next chapter, the hegemony of this narrative continues in the present.

Connected with the temple or the *bazaar*, identified as *dasi* (servant) or prostitute, '*nautch*' dancers were overwhelmingly maligned in India by Indian and British elites by the early twentieth century (Morcom 2013; Tambe 2009; Oldenburg 1990). In an attempt to demonstrate Indian compatibility with Victorian morality, Indian social reformers took to the anti-*nautch* movement with vigour, targeting diverse women who danced at public events associated with temple or court, as well as at private events in the homes of prominent Indian and British elites (Soneji 2012; Knight 2010; Chakravorty 2008, 2006; Marglin 1985; Srinivasan 1985). The anti-

*nautch* movement capitalised on – and thus affirmed once more – the social stigma that equated *nautch* dancing with sexual deviance.

The first concrete attempt to tackle the prevalence of *nautch* dancing was initiated by Viresalingam in 1881 and received impetus by both "missionary and Hindu cooperation" (in Vijaisri 2004:145). By 1892, anti-*nautch* supporters (largely educated professionals and Hindu reformists) launched a series of petitions and protests to the homes of those elites who did not adhere to the boycott on *nautch* performances; they also presented memoranda urging legislative action to the Viceroy of India. Such was the culmination of reformist momentum, key anti-*nautch* campaigner Mathulakshmi Reddy could confidently declare before the Madras Legislature in 1901 that "now the appellation of the devadasi as every one of us here knows, whatever the original meaning may have been, stands for prostitute" (in Meduri 1988:6).

By the 1920s, a heated debate was taking place in the public arena about dancing women. Reformers such as Reddy, many of whom had ties to the Theosophical Society and Congress politics (Soneji 2012:122), were in favour of abolition while many *devadasi* women and even some Brahmin men – the latter concerned with an extension of state intervention and a subsequent loss of national heritage – were in opposition to reform (see Soneji 2012:123-132, 227-234). There was also dissent within *devadasi* communities for many of the men – sons and brothers of *devadasis* – saw in the anti-*nautch* movement the opportunity to benefit from the decline of *devadasi* women's authority that a legislative ban would entail[14] (Soneji 2012; Srinivasan 1985).

[14] Katrak (2011:31) has commented on the privileged status of *devadasi* women within their communities prior to reform (see also Oldenburg 1990).

In 1911, the government yielded to this pressure and finally took a stance by issuing a despatch that urged nationwide action against such performances (Srinivasan 1985:1873). The anti-*nautch* movement would continue to gain vigour, culminating in the 1947 Madras Devadasis Prevention of Dedication Act (cited in Soneji 2012: 235-6). The variety of women and dance contexts to which this Act applied reflects the ambiguity that surrounded the *devadasi* figure[15]. Moreover, the fact that the Act was eventually passed in Independent India indicates the extent to which its sentiments were part and parcel of nationalist politics.

While administrators of the colonial government initially took an official position of non-involvement at the onset of the anti-*nautch* movement[16] in India, with some citing their own attendance at such performances to claim that *nautch* was not as immoral as reformist accounts suggested, there was an outcry against *nautch* practices amongst many missionaries, abolitionists, feminists, parliamentarians and temperance unions in Britain (Vijaisri 2004:148). The 1890s was thus marked by a volatile tension between the imperial state and the colonial government regarding the status of *nautch* practice (ibid). As discussed above in relation to the European tours of *devadasi* women and the production of ballets depicting Indian temple dancers, European audiences could 'know' about Indian dance and its practitioners without ever having visited India. It can therefore be inferred that by the late nineteenth century, the *devadasi* was fetishised on both sides of the colonial divide, a result of both performance and protest.

[15] For example, the Act decreed "Any custom or usage prevailing in any Hindu community such as the Bogum, Kalvanthula, Sani, Nagavasulu, Devadasi and Kurmapulu, that a woman of that community who gives or takes part in any *melam* (nautch) dancing or music performance in the course of any procession or otherwise is thereby regarded as having adopted a life of prostitution and becomes incapable of entering into a valid marriage, and the performance of any ceremony or act in accordance with any such custom or usage… are hereby declared unlawful and void" (Section 3.2 cited in Soneji 2012: 236).

[16] According to the Madura Mail, "[s]urely, the anti-nautch movement is in the long run bound to succeed, the neutrality of the Government notwithstanding" (*Madura Mail*, 2 June 1894, cited in Marglin 1985:7).

While it was hotly debated through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries whether *devadasi* practice constituted ordained religious rituals or was the result of an institution that exploited women as hapless victims (see Soneji 2012; Roy 2009; Chakravorty 2008; Marglin 1985), such debate pivoted around overdetermined notions of religiosity, sexuality and *devadasi* practice. In other words, the contradictory associations of the *devadasi* with either religious devotion or illicit sexuality were articulated in a particular (colonial) idiom that helped fix concepts of 'religion' and 'sexuality' in alignment with elite Indian and Victorian perspectives.

As becomes evident in the ethnographic data I present in later chapters, especially in Chapters Four and Five, these overdetermined and contradictory categories – the direct result of the anti-*nautch* movement – continue to inform the ways in which dancers understand and present the history of their dance in the current moment. The figure of the *devadasi* has thus been bifurcated such that she continues to be recalled in terms of either her depraved sexuality or her faithful spirituality. While the former characteristic is cast aside in favour of the latter, neither exists without the other and both persist in the present. Such bifurcation, I argue, obscures once more the complex subjectivities of the actual women allegedly represented by this term.

Present attempts to understand the *devadasi* are further complicated by the extent to which she has at times been conflated with the *tawa'if* under that all-too-universal category of *nautch*. Such conflation is problematic for its dependence on discourses of prostitution and religiosity that did not necessarily develop from the context of *devadasi* and *tawa'if* practices, but were rather projected onto such

practices by hegemonic Victorian values (Tambe 2009; Oldenburg 1990) [17]. It is not then the interest of this work to determine the 'real' role of *devadasis* and/or *tawa'ifs* in historical times, as if such 'truth' could indeed ever be determined.

Although careful historicisation of the actual women who were *devadasis* and *tawa'ifs* can indeed help unpack the fetishisation of both figures by illustrating the diversity of their actual life backgrounds, practices and beliefs (see Soneji 2012), my work on the contemporary practice and performance of Indian classical dance interprets references to *devadasis* and *tawa'ifs* as *fetish figures* in the contemporary imaginaries of those who reference them. These imaginaries, the lasting presence of the anti-*nautch* movement, are produced through the wider relations of power that shape specific narratives of history and processes of identity formation (both individual and collective). I therefore maintain that, in order to understand the various ambiguities that circumscribed the *devadasi*, the *tawa'if* and Indian (classical) dance[18], these constructs must first be situated within the entwined social, historical and political contexts of British colonialism and Indian nationalism.

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[17] In her study of colonial law and prostitution in India, Tambe (2009) argues that the term "prostitute" first appears as a criminal figure in the mid-nineteenth century. Thus "comparing prostitution in ancient, medieval and colonial periods is fraught with the danger of presentist interpretation, since several activities ranging from musical and dance performance to sexually serving soldiers have been translated from ancient and medieval texts as 'prostitution', 'harlotry' and 'courtesanship' by latter day historians" (ibid: xxii). Moreover, as Webb (2008) has shown, the Western construction of prostitution has its own history, derived from its association with performance. Webb traces the term *porne* – meaning 'harlot' or 'prostitute' – to references about female performers in Late Greek (ibid: 49). She attributes the term to two sources: first, *porneia*, which entailed illicit sexual conduct, but not necessarily the sale of sex; and second, the Hebrew term *zanah*, which ranges in meaning from unfaithfulness to God to the total desertion of one's religion. Thus concludes Webb, "the two meanings converge to create a forbidden realm of moral danger and sexual allure which is highly significant for the image of the actresses" (ibid:50). The analyses of Tambe and Webb thus complicate further the late nineteenth century equation of *devadasi* practice with prostitution.

[18] I place classical in parentheses here to make inclusive room for the early twentieth century precursor to Indian classical dance (*nautch*). I use Indian classical dance to refer specifically to those styles that were reconstructed as classical in the mid-twentieth century.

**Dance, Reconstruction and the Study of Post/Colonialism and Nation**

An analysis of the anti-*nautch* movement and the classicisation of dance to which it led likewise brings attention to the hegemonic politics of colonialism and processes of nation formation, as enacted by both European and Indian elites. In other words, my study squarely situates the development of Indian classical dance within this shared field of colonial power. Simultaneous with the anti-*nautch* movement that climaxed in the first half of the twentieth century, Indian scholars and artists were raising concerns regarding the potential negative effects the legislative ban might have for the future of classical dance (Srinivasan 1985:1873). As a result, concerted efforts were undertaken to 'revive' the dance as it was practised in ancient times, and to cleanse it of the vulgarities said to have been introduced into its nineteenth and early twentieth century performances. Both the anti-*nautch* and revivalist movements rearticulated colonial and Orientalist discourses, either by shunning a sexuality deemed to be obscene or celebrating a spirituality and 'pure' femininity identified as the essence of Indian culture.

The most codified and extensive of reconstructive projects occurred in the South, with what was to become known as classical Bharatanatyam (Meduri 2008a, 2005, 1996; O'Shea 2003, 1998; Chakravorty 2006; Allen 1997). Arguably, the project to reconstruct Bharatanatyam conceived of it as a pan-Indian dance form despite being situated in the southern state of Tamil Nadu (Meduri 2008b)[19]. This project subsequently influenced dancers and scholars in the eastern state of Orissa to 'reconstruct' Odissi based on the regional manuscripts, oral traditions and temple sculptures particular to the region (Lopez y Royo 2010; Roy 2009; Pathy 2007;

[19] This projection of Bharatanatyam as *the* national dance of India is no longer a part of current attitudes toward the dance form, as India is now acknowledged to have eight styles of classical dance (Samson 1987). However, Bharatanatyam nonetheless enjoys a privileged position as the quintessential example of Indian classical dance, especially (as I will discuss in Chapter Five) in relation to Kathak.

Citaristi 2001). In North India, Kathak was likewise gaining recognition as a classical form as the dance of the *tawa'ifs* was transferred into the hands of the *ustads* (masters) who taught it (Chakravorty 2008; Shah 2005; Walker 2004).

With its emphasis on respectability, the classicising project of all three forms of dance was heavily gendered as male teachers became the predominant custodians of these newfound traditions, now taught to and performed by the women and (some) men of the middle classes. As I demonstrate in greater detail in the next chapter, 'appropriate' dance technique was wedded to 'ancient' Sanskrit texts such as the *Natyashastra* in an attempt to codify classical dance and locate it in a Golden Age of Indian tradition. Moreover, erotic themes perceived in *devadasi* and *tawa'if* practices were replaced by the architects of classical dance, who focused instead on Hindu mythologies and the supposed refinement of 'high' art. This sanitised incarnation of dance was presented on national and international stages as Indian classical dance was supposedly restored to its 'original' prestige in the new nation.

This reconstruction and institutionalisation of Bharatanatyam, Kathak and Odissi – a project of national and cultural identity making in India – presents striking parallels with the nationalisation of forms of dance elsewhere in the world. For example, Susan Reed (1998:506) has argued that dance in other locations represented both a threat to colonialism (in its ability to create cohesion through social bonding and the strengthening of cultural and national identity), and a site of (racial/sexual) desire. Likewise in India, dance became one aspect of the larger anti-colonial challenge to reclaim a national identity, while simultaneously presenting complex relationships of desire (as seen in the various accounts bifurcating the Indian dance figure above, for example).

Providing the nation an arena to rehearse the very characteristics with which it seeks to identify, dance can thus reinforce if not outright produce a strong grounding for performances of the nation and its aspirations. In so doing, dance can play a powerful role in the creation of national subjects (Neveu Kringelbach and Skinner 2012; Wulff 2007, 2003; Askew 2002; Desmond 2001, 1993; Ramsey 1997; Daniel 1995; Cowan 1990). For example, Yvonne Daniel (1995) demonstrates how post-revolutionary Cuba used rumba to promote egalitarian ideals of national unity that did not discriminate against those who had previously been marginalised due to their class or racial status, thus aligning them – and rumba – with revolutionary ideals. Although rumba is not necessarily performed amongst all ranks of Cuban society today, its status as a national dance that is specifically Cuban – and not just African or European – brings to light the relationship between dance and nation. Likewise, Reed (1998:511) further illustrates this relation by arguing that the dancer comes to stand in for the nation in many decolonised contexts given the influence and impact of the state on dance practices and institutions. The many examples in which Indian classical dance is present in Indian and British imaginaries discussed at the beginning of this chapter shows just how much the Indian dancer comes to stand as metonym for Indian national culture, contributing to its construction in particularly racialised, gendered and religious ways.

However, if dance can create national subjects and their corresponding sense of national belonging, it can also work to delineate those who are excluded from the mantle of the nation, those who are marked as not belonging. *Devadasis* and *tawa'ifs*, cast aside by a classicising project that could only tolerate these women as figures in its ancient history, are perhaps the first examples of this exclusion. Other examples of national exclusion, premised upon this intimate relationship of dance to nation –

including on the grounds of ethnicity, gender and religion – are demonstrated in the following chapters of this thesis. As I show, these other forms of national exclusion occur in the transnational context of postcolonial multiculturalism and diaspora.

Dance can also provide a response to cultural and political marginalisation in the colonial context, as Helena Wulff (2007, 2003) has demonstrated in relation to Irish dancing. According to Wulff, the English depiction of the Irish as unruly was internalised by the latter and translated into an emphasis on strict erect postures to suggest good manners in compensation. The strict disciplining of the body as a direct response to counter ideas of the vulgarity of the colonised has strong parallels with the reformation of Indian classical dance and its focus on classicism and respectability. Often, this disciplining is gendered such that notions of female propriety are made central in the development and teaching of dance technique. This point is made clear in Chapter Four, where I examine the sanctioning of the female body through dance techniques that limit the use of the hip, for example. Colonial assumptions remain within the very attempt to negate them.

Moreover, government support at the state and national level (for example, through the establishment of organisations such as the Sangeet Natak Akademi[20]) not only furthered the professionalisation and institutionalisation of Indian classical dance post-reconstruction (Katrak 2011:36; Chakravorty 2008:68; Meduri 2008b), it also made the position of the classical arts in the nation all the more secure[21]. Similarly, Kate Ramsey (1997) shows how the Haitian state was central to the development and performance of Haitian dance. By elevating folkloric dance to the pedestal of national

[20] The Sangeet Natak Akademi was modelled on Western examples of state patronage, especially the French Academy, but was 'Indianised' by its spelling of the word as Akademi (Meduri 2008b: 231). For more on the Akademi, see also Erdman (1983).
[21] Arguably, the institutional support and funding of British arts organisations and councils for particular types of dance performances (i.e. Contemporary South Asian dance) enacts similar processes, as I discuss further in Chapter Three.

emblem, the twentieth century post-US occupation Haitian state endeavoured to create a national identity based on a supposedly unified cultural heritage. The concern surrounding Haitian dance was thus not only to preserve it as a cultural 'tradition' but also to propel new politics and identities in the post-invasion era. According to Ramsey, by presenting the dance in this manner, the Haitian state was able to construct a shared national identity rooted in history and opposed to the culture of the occupier, as well as manage dissent from within by decontextualising and depoliticising the dance. Both aims were achieved by extracting the dance from Vodou practice, marking one as safe and the other as deviant.

Ramsey's study of Vodou has parallels for a critical examination of Indian classical dance, its reconstruction and its promotion as an art form to be widely marketed as representative of Indian culture. By incorporating Vodou into the fold of nationalist folklore and symbolism through dance, the independent Haitian state was able to subdue the threat of further subaltern resistance, increase its surveillance of particular bodies and relegate the threatening aspects of Vodou (as a religion) to the margins once more. Like the Vodou religion, *devadasi* and *tawa'if* practice (imagined as sexualised and/or impure) had to be extracted from the dance in order to make the latter respectable. The classicisation of Indian dance thus enabled the promotion of a cultural identity distinct from that of the coloniser whilst still maintaining the social and political interests of the nationalist elite.

In India, this appropriation disenfranchised hereditary dance and music performers who were not invited into the elite project of nation formation even as their art forms were celebrated as emblematic of the nation in specific (upper-class, Hindu) ways. Manuel (2005:123) for example argues that prior to its classicisation, North Indian (Hindustani) music was "indissolubly syncretic", with Muslim

musicians playing in Hindu temples and Hindu musicians performing the *qawaali* music associated with Muslim culture. This religious syncretism made Hindustani music – like dance (especially North Indian Kathak) – more 'secularisable' than the Karnatik music of South India – as well as the dance forms of Bharatanatyam and Odissi – which were more closely associated with Hinduism. However, this very secularisability later exposed Hindustani music and dance to critique for being overly sensuous and decadent given its perceived lack of religious (Hindu) grounding (ibid: 123-5). Classicisation and respectability were thus interpreted in terms of a Hinduising project, aligning dance with nationalist and Sanskritised narratives of historical and artistic legacy, culture, prestige and discipline.

**Ethnographies of Indian Classical Dance**

With specific reference to Indian classical dance, three ethnographic accounts have given particular insight into the practices of dancers. First, Soneji's (2012) *Unfinished Gestures* is a masterful attempt to deconstruct the *devadasi* by identifying the diversity of the women who were subsumed into this category. Focusing on one such community in Tamil Nadu, Soneji grounds his contemporary ethnography in an historical account based on archival material. He then traces the dance repertoire that has been preserved in the women's contemporary practices to examine how dancers in South India had historically been in conversation with both North Indian musical and dance traditions during the nineteenth century, as well as with the European conventions that these dancers were exposed to as a result of European expansionism.

This ethnography undermines the construction of these women's dance as 'pre-modern' or 'traditional' – constructions of *devadasi* dance that dancers with whom I worked maintained, for example. Indeed Soneji demonstrates that the dance

vocabularies that were produced as a result of the colonial encounter were actively excluded from the classical canon for they were considered ‘untraditional’ due to their ‘cross-cultural’ nature. In short, the figure of the *devadasi* emerged as ‘traditional’ while the real-life *devadasis* were regarded as not traditional enough. The construction of classical Bharatanatyam was thus a modern project of strategic differentiation and exclusion that projected the ‘traditions’ of its elite custodians.

Second, Pallabi Chakravorty has studied the contemporary Kathak practices of middle-class women in Calcutta in relation to tradition and modernity in her ethnography, *Bells of Change* (2008). Gender and class are the prime focus of Chakravorty’s work, which begins with an historical analysis of Kathak’s reconstruction. This study outlines in great detail the gendered nature of this project, as male *ustads* (masters) replaced hereditary performers to become the custodians of the dance.

Chakravorty then uses ethnography to analyse how Kathak both speaks to and is affected by the social and cultural identities of the women she worked with in relation to the heightened consumerism of a globalising India. *Bells of Change* thus illustrates the merging of discourses of tradition and modernity in the making of an Indian cosmopolitan subjectivity. In many ways, the issues this ethnography raises resonate with dance practices in the diasporic/multicultural context, especially around issues of gender. It therefore becomes clear that an analysis of Indian classical dance in cosmopolitan India is part of the wider transnational context with which this thesis is concerned. Indeed, as I show in Chapter Three, cosmopolitan India is brought to the UK by the Indian dancers travelling here to perform and teach, as much as it is visited by dancers from the UK who travel to the ‘homeland’ in order to gain greater dance proficiency and legitimacy.

Finally, the only full-length ethnography to examine Indian classical dance practices outside India is Priya Srinivasan's *Sweating Saris* (2011). In this study of Bharatanatyam in the United States, Srinivasan combines an historical analysis of Indian dancers travelling to America in the nineteenth century, the relationship between Indian dance and 'ethnic dance' (and later modern dance) in America, the effects of American immigration policies that allowed certain dancers (and thus forms of dance) to remain in the country, and contemporary Bharatanatyam practices amongst the South Asian diaspora. Her analysis thus attempts to situate contemporary dance practices within historical, socio-economic and political discourses.

While Srinivasan's analysis is insightful for highlighting the historical power relations that determined what kind of Indian dance would be successful in the United States, her focus on contemporary Bharatanatyam amongst young diasporic South Asian women (and not, for example, in relation to mainstream/multicultural American dancers in the present) in her contemporary ethnography leaves room for further investigation regarding the continuity between the historical development of Indian dance she describes and the present. In other words, her analysis locates the dancers of her ethnography only within the context of diaspora and not the wider multicultural context that both produces and results from the presence of diaspora; once again, diaspora and multiculturalism are treated as two separate categories, overlooking their mutual constitution and deep entanglement.

Crucially, this separation of multiculturalism from diaspora leaves unexamined a key articulation of the relationship between coloniality and postcoloniality. As I demonstrate in this thesis, approaching dancers as not only diasporic but also multicultural can lead to a more in-depth analysis of the ongoing and mutually constituted formations of race, ethnicity and culture. Such an approach

can thus enable a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the contemporary context of Indian classical dance practices and the history Srinivasan points to. The historical analysis she provides is so complex that there remain many strands to explore in the present.

My project examines this relationship between the historical and colonial development of Indian classical dance and the contemporary postcolonial and multicultural context by analysing the practices of *both* South Asian-origin and non-South Asian dancers in producing constructs of Indian and British national identity simultaneously. My aim is therefore to draw attention to the symbiotic construction of race, gender, culture and nation that is ongoing in contemporary Indian classical dance performances. Moreover, my project differs from the abovementioned studies on dance and nation formation by considering the productive role of Indian classical dance performances on nation making in a *trans*national context.

While the link between dance and nation has been so clearly demonstrated by the scholars already noted, the question arises as to whether diasporic and multicultural dancers play a role in producing a nation (India) that they do not inhabit or even explicitly lay claim to. If they do, what is this role and how is it enacted? What then is the relationship of Indian classical dance to the nation in which it is currently performed (Britain)? Pursuing these questions, I argue diasporic and multicultural subjects produce India by sustaining colonial assumptions of Indian identity and culture. Moreover, I demonstrate how performances of Indian classical dance in contemporary London serve to produce the British nation as cosmopolitan and multicultural *at the same time* that they construct the Indian nation as traditional and timeless. This is made evident, for example, by the fact that several of the dancers with whom I worked would present their classical dance performances as a way to

'educate' British society about the 'traditions' and culture of India, and by extension the South Asian diaspora. In so doing, these dancers contribute to the construction of British society as multicultural, while simultaneously delineating between British national identity and its multicultural Others.

Addressing questions of nation formation in a multicultural/diasporic context through the ethnographic material analysed in this thesis, I demonstrate just how complex is the relation between dance and nation. My focus on the diasporic *and* multicultural allows me to demonstrate the various levels at which this relation is enacted and the transnational politics by which it is shaped. The spatial and temporal nature of these levels – spanning the local and the global, as well as the colonial past and the postcolonial present – is further revealed through an analysis of the relationship between coloniality and postcoloniality to which I now turn.

**Post/Colonial Discourses of Indian Nationalism**

Given that the mid-twentieth century reconstruction of dance forms such as Bharatanatyam, Kathak and Odissi coincided with – and hence occurred within the context of – the Indian nationalist movement, this movement must also in turn be placed within the context of the post/colonial moment in which it was situated. The myriad forms of the dialogical relationship between colonialism and the nationalism of the colonised has been noted by various scholars. According to Chatterjee (1999), anti-colonial nationalist logic created two domains: the material 'outer' realm in which the West was emulated, and the spiritual 'inner' realm in which India's 'distinctiveness' was preserved (ibid:6, 26-7). While the colonised appealed to similarity in the outer realm in order to claim their rights as citizens, they maintained the idea of difference in the inner realm to preserve cultural 'authenticity'. The outer

domain can thus be seen as a place of alliance while the inner domain represents a site of contestation.

The inner domain of 'true' Indian culture represented that area to which the coloniser was said to never have gained access. Moreover, nationalist and patriarchal concerns for the purity of the nation, coupled with Orientalist constructions of a feminised India, gendered this realm of tradition as feminine (ibid:116-35, see also Ramaswamy 2010, Inden 1990). The visual performance and spectacle of dance – now directly linked to the antiquity of 'pure' pre-colonial (and presumed unadulterated) Indian tradition as a result of the reconstructive movements' successes – suggests that the role of dance in this realm may have been of great import. However, as Chatterjee indicates, this nationalist conceptualisation of tradition occurred on the same discursive field as colonialism. That is to say, it assumed the same characteristics of India as traditional and spiritual that had been ascribed to it in the Orientalist imaginary; the only difference was the normative values that were attributed to either side of the East/West binary.

Preceding Chatterjee and analysing colonialism more generally, Fanon (2004) warned against nativist forms of nationalism that similarly inverted notions of value for he perceived these to be a re-implementation of the colonial script. For Fanon, the establishment of a nativist nationalism could not lead to decolonisation, hence making it crucial for anti-colonial movements to distinguish national-consciousness from nationalism. The latter is also referred to as 'cultural consciousness' for it presupposes an uninterrupted cultural ontology that is presumed to precede the formation of the nation. It is in this capacity that nationalism runs the risk of reasserting the colonial script; as Fanon highlights, the histories of the colonised have been 'distorted', 'disfigured' and 'destroyed' by the 'perverted logic' of the coloniser such that they

can never be truly known (ibid:210). Thus any nationalist attempts to return to the pre-colonial past must be tempered by the fact that “[t]he efforts of the native to rehabilitate himself and to escape from the claws of colonialism are logically inscribed from the same point of view as that of colonialism” (ibid:212).

Likewise, the very conceptualisation of Indian subjectivities, converging around identities of caste, religion and regionality, has been shown to share the same assumptions of colonial logic, especially as they developed from colonial governing techniques. For example, Bernard Cohn (1996) and Nicholas Dirks (2001) have brought attention to the ways in which social relations and the modern caste system in India were crystallised through the colonial census, while Pandey (2006) has demonstrated the ways in which categories of Indian communalism developed out of colonial governing techniques. Inden (1990) has studied the effects of Indology on Western understandings of India in the social sciences, noting how such historiographies have worked to associate India with the ideas of casteism, village life, spiritualism and divine kingship. Furthermore, Ludden (1993:252) has shown how Orientalist and colonial knowledge about India was produced “under the Enlightenment rubric of objective science”, shaping the ways in which political and communal identities were formed, and regional (village) and national affiliations organised, through what he calls ‘Orientalist empiricism’.

According to Ludden, “[i]n nationalism we find the vitality of Orientalism today” (ibid:271). This observation, like those of the postcolonial scholars cited above, opens the door to an analysis of the exclusions that are facilitated by a nationalist politics that has imbibed the gendered, sexualised and patriarchal assumptions of Orientalism. This point is made explicit in Lata Mani’s (1998) seminal essay on the responses to *sati* (widow immolation) of both Orthodox Hindu

traditionalists and social reformers. Mani (ibid:118) demonstrates how women were neither subject nor object of these debates, but rather the grounds upon which questions of scripture and what constituted 'true' Indian tradition were addressed. Similarly, Chatterjee (1999:116-135) has shown how Indian nationalists consolidated their (male) identity in response to the 'women's question' – a longstanding Orientalist trope (Yeğenoğlu 1998) – and thus reasserted once more patriarchal control in the new nation. Indeed nationalist logic moved women from "the real to the discursive" as symbols of culture and tradition, thus minimising their agency (Chakravarty 2000/01:112).

Feminist critiques have also revealed the elite subjectivities that are privileged through their generalisation as model national subjects via Orientalist logic; for example Geetha (1999:201) has argued that the condition of upper caste women was made representative of a more generalised Hindu/Indian womanhood against which male Brahmins – the reformers and the Orthodox – could define their self-worth and privileged place after the dismantling of the Raj (see also Ramaswamy 2010). Even when woven into the fabric of Indian nationalism, Orientalism (as a complex and multifaceted discourse) thus enables exclusion and sustains privilege. As Dirks' (2005) argues, nationalism is "recognised both to have constituted the single most important site of resistance to colonialism, at the same time that it provides the most salient demonstration of the power of colonialism to reproduce itself, spawning myriad clones in new nations throughout the postcolonial world that have often been as repressive as the worst colonial regime" (ibid:15). The discourse of Orientalism has

outlived its initial authors through a continual process of citation, right into the present transnational moment[22].

## Indian Dance as the Contact Zone

The discussion thus far regarding the circulation of the fetishised figure of the *devadasi* and *nautch* dancer and of the interplay between colonial and nationalist discourses producing constructions of Indian classical dance as examples of 'authentic' tradition and culture is further supplemented by Marie Louise Pratt's (1992) concept of the 'contact zone'. Identifying the "obsessive need" of the colonial metropole to continually "present and re-present" its Others to itself, Pratt argues that the contact zone is an area of knowledge production in which the coloniser and the colonised symbiotically participate, albeit in varying ways depending on their position within the power relations of colonialism (ibid:6). It is in the contact zone that Europe is produced as much as the colony.

For Pratt the production and consumption of a certain genre of writing – what she calls the 'anti-conquest' writing that appears to have sympathy with the colonised – enables Europeans to "secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony" (ibid:7). This is an important point for, even in these anti-conquest texts, one finds an imperial gaze that is no less possessive even if its actions are passive in relation to the brute force of colonial domination. This notion of an imperial gaze that furthers the very colonial hegemony that first makes it possible is useful in understanding the dynamics of meaning making that produced Indian (classical) dance in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

[22] Said (1978) described Orientalism as a citational discourse given that it was produced and re-produced through the continual referencing of its ideas as facts, a process that both increased its authoritative claims and its longevity.

An investigation into many of the key actors of the supposed revival of Indian classical dance reveals an array of elite, transnational and culturally privileged subjectivities. While scholars have, to some extent, brought attention to the translocal/transnational aspects of Bharatanatyam and subsequently other forms of Indian classical dance, these various instances have not been consolidated to demonstrate the magnitude of transnational (European and Indian) relationships that produced Indian dance. By bringing these instances together, I illustrate the extent to which Indian dance was and is the result of the colonial encounter. To think of both European and Indian dancers and audiences as inhabiting a contact zone is to recognise their spatial and/or temporal co-presence, as well as the influence that each has on the other in the production of Indian (classical) dance, a point to which I now turn in some detail.

Meduri (1996, 1988), who was among the first to bring attention to the relationship between the reconstruction of Bharatanatyam and the production of a national Indian identity, has focused much of her work on Rukmini Devi, the celebrated architect of classical Bharatanatyam. More recently, Meduri (2008b) put forward the argument that Devi should not be regarded as simply a nationalist icon, but rather a global figure. Indeed, it has been argued that Devi's background as the daughter of an upper class Brahmin family and the wife of Theosophist professor George Arundale "represented the ideal confluence of the ritual traditions of ancient India and the emancipated sensibilities of a Western-educated, upper-middle-class woman" (Chakravorty 2006:112). For Meduri, a 'translocal' approach that enables us to understand the relationship between the local and the global is most beneficial to understanding Devi and her impact on classical Bharatanatyam (2008b:16).

Attending to the complexities of Devi's subjectivity should not, however, obscure her relation to the Indian nation for Devi emerges as a cosmopolitan subject *at the same time as* she is seen to project the ideals of a coherent national-culture of India. Her biography thus brings into view the very tension between the national and the transnational with which this thesis is concerned. Indeed, it is in their transnational mobility and cosmopolitan status that artists such as Devi were able to represent dance – and by extension India and its culture – abroad. This ability was not shared by local artists (for example, *devadasis*[23]), indicating the power differentials between them and the elite artists who came to define the classical forms. Moreover, presenting dance as emblematic of a *national* culture and identity would not necessarily have been a concern for local artists in the same way it was for those performing Indian dance globally. It is thus precisely in these transnational encounters and through these cosmopolitan and mobile artists that concepts of Indian dance and nation take shape.

Like Meduri, O'Shea (2003:178) has argued that the transnational circulation of Bharatanatyam and its *sadir*[24] precursor in the 1930s and 40s has made it "always already global". Furthermore, Chakravorty (2000/01) suggests that Indian classical dance be seen as an 'intercultural' product given that it cannot be viewed as independent of the Indian nation, which in turn is the product of 'intercultural' discourses of 'East and West'. Similarly, Allen (1997:64) has shown how dance revivalists such as Rukmini Devi were social actors in an intellectually and culturally

[23] Balasaraswati, the renowned South Indian dancer who came from a *devadasi* family of hereditary performers, is perhaps one exception. Indeed, Balasaraswati is popularly recalled as challenging Devi's interpretations and approach to classicism. However, Balasaraswati also attained international mobility, forged relationships with influential dancers such as Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham, and became affiliated with several universities and dance institutions in the United States where she taught Bharatanatyam from the 1960s-80s. In short, she too became a transnational actor. For more on Balasaraswati's life, see Knight (2010).

[24] The term *sadir* refers to the dance of *devadasis* in Tamil Nadu.

hybrid world. As evidence, Allen offers the example of Anna Pavlova who first 'discovered' the Indian dancer Uday Shankar and brought him to tour with her in duet as Krishna to her Radha [25] (ibid:93). Although Shankar is said to have tired of playing the same role repeatedly and wanted to pursue other forms of choreography, Pavlova is reputed to have told him that such pursuits were not possible for him; "there are such wonders in your country", she is alleged to have told Shankar, "and you want to try our things? Never, never, never" (cited in Allen 1997:93). This instance is but one example of the exchange between European and Indian dancers and demonstrates the critical power differentials that were at play in the production of Indian (classical) dance on the international stage.

In addition, Pavlova is also cited as inspiring Rukmini Devi to return to India to resuscitate the dances of the country; this after Devi had first approached the ballerina to study ballet and had taken up training with the ballerina's student, Cleo Nordi (Meduri 2004:14; Coorlawala 1992:142). Of much interest to the analysis I am forwarding here regarding the interconnectedness of the fetishised *devadasi*, colonial representations and the production of Indian (classical) dance, is the point that Pavlova was herself cast as the temple dancer-protagonist Nikiya in the 1902/03 production of *La Bayadère* (Crisp 1983:9), more than twenty years before her encounter with Devi. The circulation of Euro-American and Indian dancers cannot therefore be separated from longstanding Orientalist constructions of Indian 'culture'.

While Meduri cautions against overemphasising the influence of Devi's ballet background on her classicisation of Bharatanatyam (2008b:17-19), this instance is not the only example of the influence of Euro-American dancers and scholars on the 're-discovery' and 'reconstruction' of Indian (classical) dance. Ruth St. Denis was

[25] Pavlova and Shankar performed the duet at the Covent Garden Theatre in London in 1924 (Pathy 2007:30).

already aestheticising Indian dance for a Euro-American public prior to her Indian tour in 1926[26], and was influential in shaping perceptions of 'Indian dance' outside India for generations to come (Coorlawala 1992:147). Her attraction to Indian dance was sparked by Orientalist writings on India, photographs stored in the New York Library, and her visit to a Coney Island Exhibition in which the 'streets of Delhi' had been recreated[27] (Allen 1997:86-88; see also Whitmer 2004:498; Srinivasan 2011:75); her representations of Indian women also drew inspiration from further afield in the form of a cigarette poster depicting an ancient Egyptian deity (Srinivasan 2011:67).

In her detailed examination of Western dancers engaging in Indian dance, Desmond (2001) has analysed specific choreographies of St. Denis and the Orientalist desires that she suggests shaped both Western audience receptions of the dancer as well as St. Denis herself. In Desmond's analysis, St. Denis' performance as Radha results in the racialised identity of the latter sexualising St. Denis herself as a performer (ibid:266). Indeed, Desmond indicates that St. Denis would initially perform in dark makeup to accentuate this racialised identity (ibid).

While the interplay between race and sexuality is striking in this example, Desmond nonetheless leaves the analysis incomplete for not examining how St. Denis could symbiotically be sexualising (and thus racialising) Radha through the same performance. Orientalism is left in this analysis as a discourse that St. Denis could internalise and project once more, rather than a process St. Denis actively contributed to producing. A more nuanced analysis would see St. Denis and her performances as

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[26] St. Denis premiered her Nautch choreography in London in 1908 (Carter 2005:91)
[27] St Denis notes: "During these days someone took me down to Coney Island. I was mildly intrigued by the sites and sounds, but my whole attention was not captured until I came to an East Indian village which had been brought over in its entirety by the owners of the Hippodrome. Here, for the first time, I saw snake charmers and holy men and Nautch dancers, and something of the remarkable fascination of India took over me. When I reached home that evening I determined to create one or two Nautch dances" (cited in Allen 1997: 86).

one point in the Orientalisation *and racialisation* of India/n dance, a process that I will demonstrate remains ongoing.

Despite the fact that both Pavlova and St. Denis toured India at the height of the anti-*nautch* movement, both are said to have met with great applause for their performances and to have sparked nationalist pride amongst Indian audiences for the arts they supposedly represented (Rahman 2004:25, see also Chakravorty 2008:48). Although their involvement in the 'revival' of Indian dance has gained the greatest scholarly attention (almost every major study on Bharatanatyam and Kathak reference Pavlova and/or St. Denis), there are records of other Western scholars and dancers who were also involved in this project and who find lesser mention. I give some examples of these actors in order to demonstrate the magnitude of this 'contact zone'.

Pavlova and St. Denis are also reported to have inspired Madame Menaka in her efforts to classicise Kathak (Chakravorty 2008:50; Warren 2006:107). Born as Leila Roy to an English mother and an Indian barrister father, Madame Menaka is credited with being one of the first performers to purge Kathak of its social stigma and association with prostitution and *nautch* (Chakravorty 2008:50; Walker 2004:209-211). Roy was an accomplished classical violinist and had even debuted at Queen's Hall in London prior to taking up dance (Joshi 1989:9), which she learnt from various male gurus (Chakravorty 2008:51). Part of her classicising attempts included moving away from the *thumri* and *ghazal* musical forms that were previously associated with *nautch* performances, opting instead to work with professional musicians on orchestral arrangements (ibid:50). Such a move provides another example of the shift from Muslim hereditary culture (associated here with *ghazal*) to an elite Hindu identity that marked the classicisation of Indian dance and music, a point to which I return in Chapter Five.

In keeping with the ideology of Indian arts revival, Madame Menaka used narratives of Sanskrit dramas in her choreographies (Joshi 1989:12-16). By 1936, she had begun her ascent to international acclaim, receiving a prestigious award at the International Dance Olympics in Berlin at which she also performed; according to Chakravorty, this performance was likely "the first international dance event to feature an Indian troupe and the first time the West was exposed to Kathak" (2008:52).

Although introduced to the professional stage slightly later than Bharatanatyam and Kathak, Odissi too brought together internationally mobile (Western) critics and scholars with local and national level artists in its reconstruction. Most published accounts on the reconstruction of Odissi make reference to Dr. Charles Fabri, described as "a Jewish refugee from Budapest… an eminent Indologist, a self-proclaimed Buddhist and New Delhi's most influential art and dance critic" (Rahman 2004:94). Fabri is regularly cited as pivotal in bringing attention to Odissi as a classical dance form.

References to Fabri do not detract attention from the key architects of the dance's 'revival' or the dancers who performed on national (and later international) stages to great acclaim; these references do however credit Fabri and the dance review he wrote for *The Statesman* in 1954 as constituting "the first major national breakthrough" (Roy 2009:30) that "led to a resurgence of interest in the lost art form in Orissa" (ibid:122; see also Pathy 2007). Hejmadi (2011) further claims that the attention Fabri paid to this 1954 performance was the "[m]ost important of all" (ibid:59) factors in gaining official recognition for classical Odissi and later explains that Fabri "not only gave wide publicity to the dance form but also *gave us the self*

*confidence* to tide over all the obstacles and criticisms that were levelled against Odissi as a self-sufficient dance form" (ibid:62, emphasis added).

Furthermore, Fabri is credited with insisting that the Odissi costume be simplified in an effort to make it more 'elegant' (Hejmadi 2011:65-67), and with having the social connections to bring official figures such as the future Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, to Odissi performances in the early 1960s (ibid:61). Somewhat like Pavlova, Fabri is also said to have "requested the great danseuse, Indrani Rahman, to pursue the possibility that Odissi was one of the lost classical traditions" (Roy 2009:106) in the mid 1950s. Rahman had already made a name for herself as a Bharatanatyam dancer and as winner of the first Ms. India beauty pageant before she began learning Odissi, which she is credited with popularising at the international level[28].

Rahman's mother was Esther Luella Sherman. Born in Michigan and deeply interested in India and its arts, Sherman married a young Indian man who had fled to the US to avoid the British government's accusations of sedition against him. Sherman was inspired by the "Orientalism [that] was all the rage in the early twenties" (Rahman 2004:10). Indeed, this was a time when "[s]ocialites in Boston and New York dabbled in Eastern mysticism and philosophy. Prima ballerina Anna Pavlova, after her tour to India, was inspired to create ballets with Indian themes; Nijinsky manifested himself as the Blue God; and Ruth St Denis captivated audiences with exotic and decorative ballets that exuded an Indian aura" (ibid).

Sherman soon recreated herself as Ragini Devi for she felt that in order to reveal the spirituality and beauty of Indian art, one would have to first be Indian (ibid:11). As part of this effort to recreate herself, Ragini Devi told *The American*

[28] Among her many performances, Rahman also danced for such dignitaries as US Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy and Nixon, Ethiopian Emperor Haile Salaisse, and the British monarch Queen Elizabeth II (Rahman 2004:111-129).

*Weekly* in 1926 that she “was a girl of Kashmir, a high-caste Brahmin, who had spent much of her childhood in the secret sanctuaries of India and Tibet, studying the invisible dances and inaudible music of Tibet – dancing that cannot be seen by the untrained eye and music that cannot be heard by the untrained ear” (ibid). Pregnant with Rahman, Ragini Devi left her husband and fled to India where she stayed at the Aurobindo Ashram, met Theosophists such as Annie Besant[29], and studied dance with Kathakali[30] exponent Vallathol. She became the first woman and first foreigner to study Kathakali (O’Shea 2003:177) and would later perform in America (Samson 1987:30) and Europe[31] (Rahman 2004:37-9). Like Fabri, Ragini Devi is also credited with altering the Kathakali costume to make it more pleasing to a wider audience and was later identified by her peers as contributing to the professionalisation of the form (ibid:31).

Western dancers travelling to India do not present the only instance of the confluence of ‘East’ and ‘West’ in the production of Indian (classical) dance. By the twentieth century, as the reform movement was picking up pace in India, dancers participating in the ‘revival’ of Indian classical dance also began travelling to various cities across America and Europe. Notable amongst these were Ram Gopal and Uday Shankar who were touring internationally as early as the 1930s (Srinivasan 2011:81; see also Abrahams 2007), a century after the first *nautch* tours mentioned earlier.

[29] Annie Besant is another European figure who features regularly in historical narratives of Indian classical dance, particularly in reference to her relationship with Rukmini Devi. References to her in relation to South Asian dance can be observed in the present; for example the offices for a South Asian arts organisation in Yorkshire feature quotes attributed to Besant in the murals painted on the walls.

[30] Kathakali is a form of Indian classical dance that originates from Kerala.

[31] Rahman (2004) provides an adventurous account of colonial border crossings. For example, Ragini Devi’s 1939 European tour was cut short in Paris due to the outbreak of World War Two. Devi, with a young Indrani, then smuggled herself and her daughter out of the Paris hotel in which they had been stranded and came to London to renew contacts and perform at the Universities of London and Oxford, and at Dartington Hall (ibid: 37-9). Devi finally ended up in Canada and smuggled herself back into the US with only her birth certificate. Back in America, Ragini Devi is said to have satisfied audiences who had tired with the ‘Oriental dances’ of Ruth St. Denis, La Meri, Jack Cole, and the Kraft Sisters and were now ready for “the real thing” (ibid: 43).

Kumudini Lakhia – a dancer who would later be regarded as revolutionising Kathak through her choreographic innovation and ability to produce intricate and precise group pieces, and a dancer with whom many of the Kathak dancers I encountered in London had studied in some manner – was a member of Gopal's 1948 European tour (Shah 2005:48).

As Lakhia recounts, the construction of race in relation to Indian dance (and culture more generally) was central in the cultural encounter of which her performance was a part, a dynamic I examine in greater detail in Chapter Three:

> In Scandinavia when we walked through the streets people wanted to touch us, to touch our clothes, our skin. They were fascinated by our colouring, by the colours we presented, and by the fact that we were from so far away. On stage I felt like we were objects rather than dancers.
>
> But then there was also a parallel audience forming at that time in Europe, an intelligentsia who wanted to see the dance forms in us. They were interested in how the energy we projected was different from the energy of classical Western ballet. Ballet was ethereal, presented in white with movements generally in the air, while Indian classical dance was more grounded and sprung from the earth (Lakhia cited in Shah 2005:52).

Strikingly, the use of ballet as a point of reference for comparisons with Indian classical dance demonstrated in this excerpt continues in contemporary articulations, even among the British-based dancers with whom I worked. This comparison also has a longstanding history; for example Tambe (2009:39) refers to *nautch* dancers who argued affinity with ballet dancers to justify claims they should be exempt from the medical tests required by the Contagious Diseases Act passed by the colonial government in the 1860s. Implicit in this comparison is the larger relation between 'East' and 'West', a relationship that is shown to be exceptionally intimate in the construction, professionalisation and performance (national and international) of Indian classical dance. Deeply entangled, the two however are not equal; the historical construction of 'East' and 'West' is wrought with power differentials.

To draw attention to the interconnections between Euro-American (white) and Indian dancers and scholars is not to discount what eventually became Indian classical dance as 'inauthentic' or to suggest that it be regarded as derivative of Western ideas[32]. Rather, it is to point to how the dance, in its very inception as classical, was reflective of the already ongoing (and uneven) dialogue between 'East' and 'West' enabled through colonial and Orientalist discourses and shaped by racialised constructions of Indian culture. The irony is that, in the present, dance styles that brought together a diversity of people and were produced in the context of colonial transnationalism are now held as examples of unadulterated national culture in the strictest sense. My study of the practice of Indian classical dance in the current context of multiculturalism and diaspora thus grounds this cultural and artistic practice in its complicated historical inception.

**From Contact Zone to Diaspora Space**

If Indian dance and its classical successor can be regarded as originating in the contact zone instantiated by British colonialism, Indian nationalism and Euro-American Orientalism, the traces of this relationship are also discernable in the present context of diaspora and multiculturalism. We are now brought from the colonial contact zone to the multicultural present, for the ideas and tropes produced in the earlier encounter – in the colonial situation, to use Balandier's (1966) term – continue to be refigured in

[32] For more on discourses of authenticity in performance see Schechner (1990), who has analysed the 'normative expectation' of performance 'traditions' from the colonised world. According to Schechner, such an expectation is "an agreement, spoken and unspoken, among artists, scholars, publicists, bureaucrats, patrons, students and spectators… to maintain a specific kind of performance" (ibid: 32) that is invested in and contributes to notions of 'authenticity'. In his analysis, Schechner highlights the great irony whereby those who prefer the normative expectation view themselves as anticolonialist for valorising the traditional. However, as Schechner argues, by maintaining normative expectations of 'traditional'/ 'originary' performances, scholars, performers and audiences perpetuate colonial thinking by applauding one performance as 'true' and dismissing others as corrupted.

contemporary dance practices and discourses. The continuity between coloniality and postcolonial multiculturalism is revealed once more. Not surprising then is how dynamics similar to those described by Pratt can be observed in the present realm of what Avtar Brah (1996) has termed ‘diaspora space’.

For Brah, diaspora should not be viewed as “transhistorical codifications of eternal migrations”, nor as “the embodiment of some transcendental diasporic consciousness” (ibid:196); instead, diaspora defies a search for absolute origins and pristine pasts and constitutes “historically contingent ‘genealogies’, in the Foucauldian sense of the word” (ibid). Brah demonstrates how diasporas are produced culturally, politically and economically at the same time that they are internally differentiated along class, gender and sexuality. Furthermore, diasporic communities interact with other diasporas, inhabiting and thus producing the cultural space that is Britain; for Brah, diasporic subjects contribute to the production of ‘Englishness’ in the diaspora space called England (ibid:209), just as the diaspora is produced by the cultural and historical parameters of England. To conceive of the ‘diasporic’ is therefore to simultaneously consider the ‘multicultural’. This relationship grounds the ethnographic work that is presented in the following chapters.

Brah conceives of a diaspora space that is constituted by both ‘diasporic’ and ‘native’ subjects. However, the native is a shifting category in this conceptualisation; Brah notes that, while the colonised ‘native’ was a pejorative construct, the metropolitan (English) ‘native’ is regarded as superior in its sense of national belonging (ibid:191). The diasporic subject, descended from the colonised native, is thus constructed as incapable of ever becoming native in the sense of the latter (ibid). Each subject position produces and is produced by its relation to the others in this analysis. Diaspora space thus enables one to recognise the triangulated relationship

between the colonised native (Indian), the diasporic subject (South Asian) and the metropolitan native (the multiculturalist in the present case at hand) in the conceptual production of both 'home' and 'host' cultures, without presupposing the essentialised identities of these various subjectivities.

Like Pratt's contact zone, Brah's diaspora space is "a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural, and psychic processes" (1996:208). It is in diaspora space that "processes of cultural fissure and fusion… underwrite contemporary forms of transcultural identities" and that tradition is continually reinvented, even if it is presented as "originating in the mists of time" (ibid). Like the contact zone, diaspora space is constituted by a variety of actors with differential relations to power, political or cultural. To consider the two in tandem is not to draw an ahistoric or simplistic relationship between the historical colonial contact zone and the contemporary metropolitan diaspora space, but it is to examine more deeply the processes whereby culturalised identities such as those emphasised in the practice and performance of Indian classical dance are produced. With its bifocal emphasis on both the past (history) and the present (contemporary performance), along with its appeal to a 'home' culture (India) despite its grounded situatedness (Britain), the current sphere of Indian classical dance that is the subject of my study reveals the ongoing politics of coloniality in the present. Produced in the contact zone, Indian classical dance is now performed in diaspora space.

**From Theory to Method**

The theoretical concerns that I have outlined in the Introduction inform the methodology of my project, namely a study of the relationship between colonial and postcolonial discourses of Indian culture, between contact zone and diaspora space,

and between constructions of cultural specificity and multicultural identity though the lens of Indian classical dance. In other words, my methodology insists on attending to the temporal and spatial parameters that produce the very conditions of possibility for the dance practices I analyse in this thesis.

The methodological implications of migration, diaspora and multiculturalism require ethnographers to reconsider how they approach cultures of the 'homeland' to understand better the migrant ethnic identities they seek to study (Banks 1996:107-110; see also Vertovec 2000; Baumann 1996; Banks 1992). Moreover, as Ralph Grillo (2002) has noted, multiculturalism presupposes a politics of difference that can be situated in recognisable social and political processes through ethnography. The challenge for such ethnography however is to capture the variation and specificity of the local that is, at the same time, related to the hegemonic similarities of the global and the power that is at play in such constructions. For example, New York and London can be recognised as different locations even though the US and the UK share similarities due to their status as powerful Western nation-states (ibid:7-8). My study thus recognises the specificity of social, cultural and historical processes even as it brings attention to the larger cultural hegemony that makes these processes possible.

In this vein, the spatial and the temporal are both crucial to the analysis of postcolonial, diasporic and multicultural relations I present in the following pages. In his ethnography of multiethnic Southall, Baumann (1996) noted that most studies on diasporic/ 'ethnic' groups tend to focus on one group in a multicultural sea of others. His innovation was to select one site, Southall, and study the various groups living within it. In so doing, he brought attention to the "communities within communities as well as cultures across communities (1996: 10)" that exist in Southall. Baumann thus

demonstrates the transmobility and diversity that exists within – and indeed produces – a single spatial site.

Although presenting methodological challenges to conventional ethnography, Baumann's observations resonate strongly with my study situated in London. I selected London because it is one of the largest and most established sites of the South Asian diaspora and is regarded internationally by dancers as having one of the most thriving Asian arts scenes outside India; it also has historical connection to India as a result of British colonialism. However, the network instantiated by Indian classical dancers is not limited to London for dancers regularly travel beyond the city, both within the UK and abroad, as well as come to the city from various other locations. As such, my ethnography also follows some of these routes to locations outside the city of London. Thus, London is viewed as a hub that influences dance practices in other regions of the country (for example Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham) as well as a centre that is shaped by the dancers who come here to train and perform from India and other locations in the global South Asian diaspora. This is the London that is referenced in the title of this thesis.

The city's cosmopolitanism at times renders London invisible; however, even in this invisibility, London remains present as the very condition of possibility for the cosmopolitanism that characterises the transnational dance practices I describe in Chapter Three. Focusing on London as a central node for a larger and more mobile network of dancers thus provides an interesting example of the relation between the local and the global with respect to contemporary dance practices. My research also presents evidence for the diversity that now exists amongst Indian classical dance practitioners, bringing to the fore questions of identity, culture, race and ethnicity in the current multicultural context.

In presenting my analysis, I do not intend to perpetuate the notion of a complex diaspora and a stable national homeland. While a more detailed study of dance performances in India is unfortunately beyond the scope of the present work, I steadfastly resist this assumption for the complexity associated with multicultural/multiethnic environments discussed above, though specific, is not unique. Indeed, an analysis of India quickly reveals its own multicultural/multi-ethnic specificity and suggests complementarity with the issues I raise in this work. For example, citing Gupta (1998), Favero (2005) argues that colonial dichotomies continue to operate in the present and underscores the interplay between categories of 'tradition' and 'modernity', 'India' and 'the West' in the formation of young middle-class men's identity in Delhi. Moreover, Favero captures the capacity of these men to repeatedly enact switches between seemingly contradictory categories without suggesting any sense of 'lost roots' (ibid:90). Despite the contradictions in their positionalities, these men are brought together in 'communities of imagination' (ibid:7), which includes constructing a 'traditional' India alongside complex cosmopolitan urban identities.

For Favero, "[a]n appropriation of the past is constitutive of the present, and a nostalgia for an imagined past appears central to 'modernity'" (ibid:23). His recognition of the power of nostalgia in Delhi (read here as 'homeland' to the diaspora) is striking for nostalgia is regularly attributed to those in the diaspora. Indeed, the very fact that Favero perceived his subject matter of Indian modernity as negating the possibility of him studying a 'classic' ethnographic field given the constant interplay between the local and the global (ibid:30) – much like Baumann and his multi-ethnic fieldsite – highlights the complexity and interrelatedness of time, space and identity in the current globalised context. His methodological approach to

and concern with temporality informs the theoretical framework I aim to develop in this Introduction.

While Baumann's ethnography points to the challenging necessity of attending to the relationships between and across various 'ethnic' groups in one location, Favero highlights the multiple temporalities that exist in any given site. It is in relation to both cultural diversity and layered temporality that I pursue my investigation of Indian classical dance as a site of national, diasporic and multicultural production. Tracing these dynamics through ethnography and studying the ways in which dancers simultaneously produce categories of 'Indianness' and 'Britishness', antiquity and modernity, I bring attention to both the cultural and temporal underpinnings of postcoloniality and its relation to diaspora and multiculturalism.

**Methodology**

Notions of a bounded fieldsite have rightly been called into question, especially in this time of transmobility and multi-sited ethnography (see for example, Gupta and Ferguson 1997). My study of Indian classical dance performances in London presents another example of deriving ethnographic data from a fieldsite that I, as researcher, have helped construct by piecing together various fragments of performances, narratives and events. This aspect of my project is due in part to the temporal and spatial complexities discussed above. My ethnography draws on fragments that span different geographic spaces as well as historical moments to make sense of the contemporary relationship between diaspora, multiculturalism and post/coloniality.

Furthermore, the Indian classical dance 'scene' that is my fieldsite is itself the product of those who participate in it. Some in this scene may know each other intimately and work together regularly, while others may know only of another's

reputation, or indeed nothing at all. This scene can thus be regarded as, borrowing from Anderson (2006), an imagined community. Piecing together its fragments, my analysis of it in this thesis also contributes to its production.

Fieldwork for this project took place between January 2011 and October 2012[33], with two months (September-October 2011) spent in India. During this time, I conducted extensive participant observation with an emerging Odissi dance company and other freelance choreographers based in the UK; in dance workshops in the UK as well as dance classes in India; and as an audience member at numerous dance performances at Festivals in India and at different (South Asian community and mainstream) venues across London. I thus brought to this research my 20 years of experience as an Indian classical dancer.

Workshops I participated in as a dancer varied in size and duration. The workshop described in Chapter Three, for example, is by far one of its kind although other organisations and institutions do organise smaller-scale workshops, often when dancers visit from India. Over my research period of 21 months, I participated in five such workshops in London. I also worked on two large group projects during this time; the first entailed regular rehearsals with four dancers and two choreographers for 4 months, and the second significant work with a company of five dancers for roughly 14 months. Six weeks of my fieldwork in India were spent in daily classes (6 days a week) at two different institutions.

In addition, I attended approximately 60 dance performance events in London, and 10 in India, as an observer. I call these dance events as they ranged from the performance of a single dance in the midst of other performances (including non-South Asian dance forms), to full-length solo performances, company performances,

[33] This was preceded by preliminary fieldwork from October to December 2010.

performances in daylong/weekend festivals and performances in non-conventional settings (such as fundraisers, street performances and at art exhibitions). I took detailed notes after each performance, paying particular attention to the ways in which performances/dances were introduced and presented, as well as costuming, venue information, programme notes and audience demographics. I also participated in approximately 20 dance events as a performer, which both enabled me to observe 'backstage' processes and to experience audience responses directly. As a result of the varied nature of dance events I cover, quantifying and organising performances is somewhat of a challenge. Sometimes I reference single dance pieces while other times I analyse entire productions. Both are important to piece together in order to bring the wider British South Asian dance scene into view.

I also conducted 50 in-depth open-ended interviews with dance performers, teachers, students, enthusiasts and critics. Every interview was recorded and later transcribed. Of these interviews, 35 were with dancers in London and 7 were with dancers in India. I categorise interviewees with any dance training as dancers primarily; the remaining 8 interviews were thus conducted with promoters and other dance enthusiasts with no training in Indian classical dance. The majority of interviews in London were conducted between March and June 2011, and interviews in India between September and October 2011. Often I would contact dancers with a request for interview after having observed their performances; I also sent out an email requesting interviews via two listservs for South Asian dancers and enthusiasts, and would request interviews with dance colleagues and other dancers, promoters and enthusiasts I came to know through various social networks (such as through other colleagues or repeated meetings at performances, workshops and lectures).

Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Interviews with dancers covered questions of dance biography, perceptions of dance forms, and approaches to practicing in the British context. By comparison, interviews with promoters and enthusiasts centred on perceptions of Indian dance and reasons for their interest. Although my interview sample by no means covered the number of dancers and enthusiasts in my fieldsite – a figure that would number in the hundreds – I perceived it to be representative of the general community as various themes were repeated by respondednts throughout the different interviews. Indeed, it was this repetition that in part led me to determine the 'end' of this phase of ethnographic research. Furthermore, the status of many of the dancers I interviewed as leading performers and teachers in London suggests their accounts provide insight into the general trends present in this community.

As mentioned earlier, my research took me on occasion to sites outside London, including as far away as Belfast in Northern Ireland. Other sites included larger cities such as Liverpool, Manchester and Leeds, as well as smaller towns in Staffordshire and Hampshire. All of these locations have active South Asian cultural and/or arts organisations, which although autonomous, can and do work together by sharing dancers' contact information, organising tours, etcetera. These organisations vary in size, with some consisting of a small group of people working on a voluntary basis, and others including full-time employees with access to regional funding schemes. The largest British South Asian dance organisation, and one with which most dancers I encountered had some association, is located in London. The city is also home to two large Indian cultural centres that act as hubs for the arts, including dance. Working in or shadowing these organisations was never part of my research plan, and my interaction with them was primarily as a dance performer. I have therefore selected

to preserve their anonymity to the best of my ability, and have not used their real names when I do make reference to them in my ethnographic accounts. Likewise, all of the names that appear in this thesis relating to dancers with whom I worked directly are pseudonyms.

The majority of the dancers I encountered were of South Asian origin, the upwardly mobile children of immigrant parents now pursuing university degrees or working as young professionals. A small minority would identify as practicing Hindus, and the majority of South Asian dancers do come from Hindu families. Most of these dancers were British nationals, although several (9) had immigrated to London from other locations in the diaspora (Malaysia, East Africa, North America). The remainder were of Euro-American (white) origin and similar class backgrounds, participating in this transnational circuit of lessons with teachers in India and workshops by Indian dancers abroad. A relatively small number of these dancers were British by origin as most had immigrated to the UK from elsewhere in Europe, as well as from the US and Canada. Few (approximately 10) of the dancers I interviewed and/or worked with dance exclusively as professionals. Although the majority of the dance students with whom I worked were female, when narrowing in on professional dancers, the gender divide is not as stark (a point I will examine in greater detail in Chapter Four).

I am cognisant of my position as both an insider and outsider in my research (Narayan 1993). As such, I am also invested in the dance practices that I critique and participate in the social constructions that such practices facilitate. Problematising these practices has led me to undertake the research that I present in this thesis, but this does not mean that I have been able to reconcile in my dance practice the issues that are raised here. I have no solution to offer but to advocate careful and detailed

interrogation of the ways in which the dance is practiced and performed, from its historicisation to its presentation as representative of an essentialised Indian culture. While my 'insider' status may bring with it limitations of familiarity, it also situates me to take the critical stance that I do.

The pub and club were as much a place to socialise as were the theatres that dancers attended as audience members and the dance studios in which they worked. This disrupts notions of any pretence of a cultural split that suggests the two realms (British social life and South Asian cultural life) are incongruous. Noticeably, most dancers, especially of diasporic backgrounds, did not articulate feelings of being caught between two cultures, despite their discussions of tradition and modernity pertaining to their dance. In this sense, the dance scene I analyse in this thesis is very firmly fixed in the 'British' lives of the dancers I examine. Indeed their idealisation and prioritisation of supposedly Indian cultural practices in relation to religion and gender (as I discuss in Chapters Four and Five) 'on the dance floor' were not necessarily of concern or made explicit in their daily lives to the same degree. Rather than minimise these idealisations, this contradiction brings their appearance in dance practices into starker relief.

Finally, while this work is a critical examination of dancers' investments in the 'authenticity' of their dance forms and the culture from which they are said to derive, this is not to suggest dancers with whom I worked and interviewed were unreflexive in their practices. As I demonstrate in the ethnography that follows, dancers would often critique master narratives of their dance history, for example, while simultaneously taking for granted the very social constructions pertaining to tradition, ethnicity, gender and religion upon which this narrative rests. This incongruence is the subject of study in this thesis, leading me to focus on *how* dancers present their dance to

themselves and their audiences. My aim to excavate contemporary dance practices in order to trace their historicity from colonial discourses to the present leads me to employ discourse analysis as a major aspect of my methodology. Thus while contradictions may remain between what dancers do and say – or between what they say and do not say – it is in the discursive constructions that present Indian classical dance as integrally tied to an ancient Indian culture that one clearly gleans the longevity of colonial and Orientalist discourses. The questions I raise regarding these constructions are indeed larger than any individual dancer, pertaining instead to the larger system of meaning in which each participates. The analysis I present centres on this system of meaning, a system that both shapes and is shaped by the dancers in this study.

**Chapter Synopsis**

I begin the presentation of my ethnographic work with an analysis of the ways in which the historical master narrative of the dance is reproduced by dancers in presentations of their art as 'timeless' and/or 'ancient' in Chapter Two. I analyse texts written by dancers about their particular dance form, as well as at how dancers present their work to students, audiences and in interviews. I also explore how the 'history' of the dance is embodied in the dance itself and thus serves to reproduce this official narrativisation.

Chapter Two also engages with the slippery debate currently existing in the British South Asian dance scene between preservationist proponents of classical dance and those who call for innovation and the development of a Contemporary South Asian dance platform. Contemporary South Asian dance is currently celebrated by many dancers, presenters and audiences as breaking from what is perceived to be the

confined traditions of Indian classical dance. Analysing the ways in which dancers compare and contrast the two forms, I show how they produce an evolutionary schema that presents India as timeless relic and Britain as active historical agent. Furthermore, too often the classical/contemporary binary translates into an amateur/ professional distinction whereby those who seek to develop Contemporary South Asian dance instead of Indian classical dance are able to call upon greater access to resources, funding and institutional support. The temporalised inclination to 'be contemporary' is thus an expression of greater social and cultural capital, as well as an extension of colonial logic.

In Chapter Three, I examine the various routes dancers take in order to teach, learn and perform their art form. This chapter thus analyses the transnational networks that are activated by teachers travelling from India to conduct workshops in the UK, students travelling to India to undertake intensive training in the 'homeland' of the dance, and performers touring the world in multiple examples of cross-cultural exchange. This transnational network suggests that the dance does not simply exist in terms of East/West, but of rural/urban as well. It is therefore important to ask what metropolitan London has in common with urban Delhi as the politics of cosmopolitanism take centre stage (Mitter 2007).

This chapter also examines the construction of 'foreignness', referring to both Euro-American and second/third-generation South Asian dancers in different ways. By analysing the different experiences and perspectives of both groups of dancers, this chapter links the transnational nature of contemporary Indian classical dance practice with the politics of multiculturalism and the formation of racial/ethnic identities. Thus if Chapter Two analyses the formation of the Indian nation as traditional through the production of historical narratives, Chapter Three considers the production of the

British nation as multicultural through the importation of culturalised practices such as Indian classical dance.

Building on the discussion of culture, race and ethnicity from the previous chapter, Chapter Four focuses on the production of particular gender roles in dance performances as well as in the dance more generally. Interestingly, approaches of both South Asian origin and non-South Asian dancers to their classical dance forms offer insight into idealised constructions of Indian femininity, for both tend to see the 'authentic' performance of this femininity as inherent to the art form and thus essential for artistic proficiency. This chapter therefore analyses how an ideal Indian femininity is constructed and maintained through attributions of coyness/shyness that dancers argue are unique to Indian women, and finds that its contemporary performance in Indian classical dance presents continuity with the gendered ideas key to the formation of the Indian nation.

The historical and political context in which the reconstruction of the dance occurred is furthermore shown to be intimately woven into its contemporary performance in the ways in which dance is used to discipline both the bodies and moral ideals of dancers. A direct link is therefore revealed between contemporary dance practices and concerns that arose during the mid-twentieth century reconstruction regarding female propriety and respectability. It is thus through gender that the relationship between dance and nation is further revealed. Furthermore, reading Chapters Three and Four together demonstrates how it is in relation to a feminised India that Britain is constructed as dynamic and hybrid, continuing colonial tropes of gendered nations.

In the final chapter, I draw upon the theoretical and ethnographic framing of the preceding chapters to forward an analysis of how the dance is perceived –

wittingly or not – by both dancers and audiences as predominately Hindu. That this is the case even if the subject matter of the choreography or the identity of the dancer is not related specifically to Hinduism indicates the complex entanglement of culture, religion, and national identity that lies at the heart of the dance. The historical practise of dance as part of Hindu temple ritual in the past, and the mythology used to explain the origin of the dance and much of its narrative content today, might explain why the dance and Hinduism are perceived to be so integrally related. But I argue the complexities of this identification run much deeper. Dancers I worked with often attempt to make the dance more accessible in a multicultural context – to make it 'universally relevant' – by moving away from the specificity of the presumed Hindu identity of their dance in favour of a more abstract spirituality. However, this spirituality nonetheless rests upon a predetermined Hindu discourse, which means that the religious identity assumed in the dance ironically remains intact – the dance can only be 'spiritual' because it is already 'religious'.

This chapter further analyses the ways in which the assumption of a more universally available spirituality-cum-Hinduism that is accepted in the dance excludes the experiences and contributions of dancers from other religious backgrounds, namely Islam. In this chapter, I therefore analyse the ways in which Kathak (a form of dance from North India with a strong Mughal influence) is discussed as being more than just technically different from Bharatanatyam and Odissi (forms of dance from South and Southeast India respectively with claims to connections to Hindu ritual practices), which are seen as more 'Indian'. It is these slippages, I argue, that reveal the anxieties related to communal identities and politics in India and thus determine the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion for the nation-culture. That they occur in the diasporic/multicultural context, arguably at considerable distance from the on the

ground ‘communal’ politics of India, make such Othering all the more insidious; the shifting terrain of communal politics in India are cemented into cultural facts in the diaspora through the specific presentation of the three dance forms.

## Conclusion

It has been necessary to cover the range of topics presented in this Introduction for, when read in tandem, they provide the point of departure for the ethnographic analysis that follows. A major outcome of this work is to demonstrate the deep relationship between diaspora, multiculturalism and postcoloniality. Although detailed studies of the three concepts often treat them as somewhat independent, I argue in this thesis that they are deeply enmeshed through concepts of race, ethnicity, gender and religion. My ethnography of diasporic and multicultural dance practices provides a case study through which to study this mutually constituted relationship.

In focusing on this relationship, I forward two overarching yet related arguments. The first is that the twinned concepts of diaspora and multiculturalism demonstrate the contemporary manifestation of the colonial/nationalist relationship. By analysing the discursive constructions of Indian classical dance in the present, I show how in postcoloniality we see the longevity of colonial logic and Orientalist assumptions. The power relations that contribute to and are the result of British multiculturalism thus present continuity with longstanding colonial hegemony; diaspora and multicultural society are shown to be productive mechanisms in the reproduction of colonial representations of India in contemporary imaginaries. This point leads to my second argument, namely that in transnationalism we see the further cementing of national identities. Indeed, as I demonstrate in the following pages, it is through the work of South Asian and non-South Asian dancers – brought together as a

result of migration and mobility – that India is essentialised in particularly racialised, gendered and religious ways.

This transnational production of nation, however, is not new. As I demonstrated above by presenting historical accounts of Euro-American and Indian representations of India through images of the Indian dancer, the very production of Indian dance in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was a transnational project. Indeed, the ultimate irony of the present moment is that a historically transnational dance now stands to represent tightly bounded notions of national (Indian) culture. Arguably, the performance of this dance in the current transnational context of diaspora and multiculturalism leads to its nationalisation as Indian once more, only furthering this irony.

Although I focus on the reproduction of colonial and Indian nationalist scripts through contemporary dance practices in this thesis, by locating my study in the context of the South Asian diaspora and British multiculturalism, I demonstrate how constructs of the Indian *and* British nation are mutually constituted. The very same performances that construct India as static and ancient in its traditions present Britain as modern and dynamic in its cosmopolitan hybridity and multiculturalism. Just as the Indian nation and British Empire were produced through the transnational politics of colonialism, constructs of India and Britain are currently formed through transnational performances of art and culture. In both instances, performances of dance claiming to represent the ideals of the nation obscure the violence of nation formation – from imperial expansion, colonial power and partition in the past, to migration, structural inequality and racism in the present.

So forceful is the project of nation formation, however, its violence is made visible even in the sphere of Indian classical dance through a critical analysis of its

performance in the present. As I show in the following chapters, the idealisation of historical narratives and particular ethnic, gendered and religious identities that is evidenced in constructions of Indian classical dance all relate back to the Indian nationalist project built on the logic of colonialism. Implicit in these performances, as in nationalist and colonial discourses, are constructions of Indian culture that privilege some while excluding Others. As my study shows, these politics of exclusion – part of the violence of nation formation – continue outside the immediate social and political context of the subcontinent. These are the ongoing transnational politics of national formation.

## Keeping Time:
## Constructions and Performances of Historical Narrative

*Expecting history to reach the reality of the past is to allow oneself to be seduced by a mirage arising not from the past but from a historical imagination run amok.*

*-Constantin Fasolt, The Limits of History, 2004:40*

It was almost the end of September and one of the dance Institutes with which I was working in Orissa was preparing for its upcoming performance at a prestigious festival in Delhi, a two-day train ride away. I had found out about this performance from my teacher and Director of the Institute, Parbati Das, and asked if I might be able to watch as the subject matter of the production aligned well with the topic that I had travelled to Bhubaneswar to better understand. Fortuitously – for this production was the first that I have come across to do so – the Institute was preparing a feature show depicting the historical trajectory of "the dance"[34] known as Odissi. It was to be an extravagant performance, featuring an orchestra with nine musicians (two percussionists, four vocalists, one sitarist, one violinist and one flutist) and fifteen dancers.

The troupe was led by Das, who had recently taken over the Institute after the death of its founder and her teacher. Das is a petite woman who is quick to take

[34] This term was used throughout the production to refer to the styles of dance that can be classified as both historical and classical Odissi. Although implying a larger category of dance than just classical Odissi, and therefore capturing the complex and multifaceted history of the dances of Orissa, this term is no less slippery for it is often used interchangeably with classical Odissi in the present. Thus while the ambiguity of the term is useful on the one hand, in that 'the dance' can suggest different kinds of dance subsumed into one overarching category, it nonetheless problematically conflates different strands of history and different dance forms by privileging one category of dance (Odissi) and presenting it as having experienced an unbroken continuity from time immemorial.

charge of any situation, holding attention in the room filled with musicians and dancers. As the senior disciple of her *guru*, a soloist who has made a prominent career over the last four decades (she began training as a young child), and Director of the Institute, she commands respect wherever she goes. Referred to as Appa (older sister) out of affection and respect, she is keen to take her dance in what she calls "a new direction", to make her mark on Odissi, and to explore her interests and desires through the form and institution she has inherited[35].

The performance for which they prepared that day was one of her first full productions as Director of the Institute, although she shared much of the Director's responsibility while her *guru* was still alive. For Das, this performance was particularly innovative because she saw it as presenting the history of Odissi through the dance itself. The result was a presentation of different dance variants related to classical Odissi woven together by narrated text to create a seamless trajectory of 'the dance' from the ritual performance of the *mahari* temple dancers to the folk dance of the *gotipuas*, to the classical dance seen on contemporary stages worldwide. Das wrote a script in English to be read by one of the two female vocalists in between each dance to explain its historical context; the performance began, said the narration, "like everything else in Orissa, with Lord Jagannatha". It was in his honour that the performance would begin with an *abhinaya* (narrative dance) from the *mahari*[36] tradition – a devotional piece about Krishna, an *avatar* of Jagannatha highly celebrated in the Bhakti[37] traditions that are so prevalent in Orissa and Odissi dance.

[35] This was to come out in several conversations that I had with Das, including one in which she described drawing from her own real-life desires when portraying feelings of love on stage.
[36] *Maharis* were the '*devadasi*' dancers in the Jagannatha Temple of Orissa. For more on *mahari* practice, see Marglin's (1985) ethnography *Wives of the God-King.*
[37] A branch of Hinduism, Bhaktism emphasises religious devotion and a personalised relationship to the divine. As a medieval movement, Bhaktism was regarded as a rejection of a Bhraminical Hinduism that prioritised social hierarchy and the privileging of specialist knowledge (see Samson 1987:75-6).

There is little evidence of what *mahari* dance in the temple was actually like aside from the oral tradition that produced its contemporary re-construction (Coorlawala 1993:272), and yet it has re-emerged as a sub-genre of Odissi dance at the beginning of the present century. This style is increasingly performed on stage alongside classical Odissi, at least in Orissa, and at least one dancer in Puri has begun to teach Mahari dance exclusively rather than as a complement to or part of a more general Odissi curriculum[38]. Characteristics attributed to Mahari dance today include an enhanced softness of body movement – especially in the torso and wrist – fewer dance poses, and more emphasis on expressional dance rather than pure dance movement.

Das' inclusion of Mahari dance in her performance alluded to the sanitised image of the pristine tradition of servitude, dedication and devotion encapsulated by the salvaged image of the *mahari/devadasi*. Furthermore, her decision to begin the show – and therefore the troupe's narration of Odissi history – in this manner prioritised the apparent connection between Odissi and the religious/ritual traditions of its dance predecessor.

The Mahari section of the performance was danced by two of Das' senior female students, Manisha and Anushka, both of whom were extremely talented and well trained from a young age. Appearing to be in their early-thirties and mid-twenties respectively, Manisha and Anushka captured the serenity and devotion that has become synonymous in popular post-reform depictions of *maharis* as pure and devout, as opposed to vulgar and degraded. The gentleness of their hand gestures and body movements, captured mostly in the subtle movements of the chin, wrist and

[38] In this section, I am distinguishing between *maharis* and *gotipuas* as people and Mahari and Gotipua as styles of dance, alluding to the ways the latter two are thought of as forms of dance akin to Odissi.

torso, were able to convey the love a *mahari* is expected to have towards her Lord according to the stylised norms of the dance form.

Their proficiency as trained Odissi dancers however ensured that their bodies moved with the utmost control so that any exaggerated movements that might allude to a certain type of sexuality were entirely avoided. This of course set up a scenario in which cause and effect were quickly confused; the *maharis* must have been (according to this interpretation) pure in their devotion for 'their' dance was devoid of any overt sexuality in this performance, which was actually the result of the rigorous classical training of Manisha and Anushka who represented them. In this performance, the sexuality of the *mahari* was actively downplayed as the vocabulary of her movement was presented as akin to and within the confines of a classical and sanitised Odissi form.

Furthermore, the dance of the *maharis* was presented as inherently spiritual in its prioritisation of narrative expression and physical simplicity. There was none of the complex rhythmic patterns or quick footwork often displayed in Odissi; the story was told and the mood established entirely through Manisha and Anushka's abilities for facial expression. The dance they performed, *Bonsi Teji*, was choreographed by Guru Pankaj Charan Das, the son-in-law of a *mahari* and one of the founding gurus of classical Odissi[39]. This made it an appropriate selection. The subject matter of Bonsi

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[39] Choreographies are transmitted from teacher to student, beginning with the choreographer. Dancers who have learned choreographies can also teach them to their peers, in addition to their students. Thus, the transmission of dances relies heavily upon the social relations between dancers. Knowing one's teacher's choreographies (or one's teacher's teacher's choreographies) grounds one in their particular lineage. Also, who will teach whom, as well as who will learn from whom, are social relations that are taken into consideration when learning a choreography. When transmitted from dancer to dancer, choreographies remain, for the most part, constant. That is, great care is given to teach a choreography as it has been learned. However, slight changes may be introduced as a result of different dancers transmitting the dance (i.e. the emphasis placed on torso movement, the proximity between feet). The choreography is nonetheless regarded as constant, identified by one name, and always attributed to the choreographer.

Teji – lamenting as Krishna prepares to go to war – furthermore underscored the strong Bhakti traditions of Jagannatha worship in its celebration of Krishna.

After this dance, the vocalist spoke once again to explain that after the *maharis*, the dance had degraded into the *gotipua* tradition of young boys dressed as girls in dance performance. Although a close relation to Odissi, Gotipua dance is not regarded as a classical form in the same way nor is it performed as frequently as its classical counterpart in the present. Rarely is it seen outside India, except in documentary footage on Odissi where it is prominently featured as a precursor to the classical form. This is in contrast to the status of Gotipua dance in the first half of the twentieth century, before the codification and classicisation of Odissi.

While the ritual dance of the *maharis* was performed within the precincts of the temple in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, *gotipuas* were at this time being encouraged to dance as substitutes for the *maharis* outside the temple. In a time of political uncertainty resulting from various changes in rule, *gotipuas* were also trained in different forms of martial arts so that they could protect both the temple of Jagannatha and the surrounding town of Puri if the need arose. More accessible to the public and thus increasingly more popular, *gotipuas* were often patronised by landowners across coastal Orissa and formed professional groups that would be called upon to provide entertainment at various public functions. This supposedly led to a degeneration of the dance form by the beginning of the twentieth century, as exaggerated mannerisms and showmanship made its way into *gotipua* performance (for more on *gotipuas* and their dance, see Roy 2009; Pathy 2007; Citaristi 2001).

Gotipua dance in the present is characterised by its acrobatic qualities; boys are trained from a young age to be incredibly flexible and strong. Their dance consists of simple dance sequences used in Odissi, interspersed with various acrobatic

formations, each more elaborate than the last. Bridges, handstands and flips are popularly featured, as are multi-level formations.

To represent this phase of Odissi's evolution, Das featured five young *gotipua* boys from nearby Konark. Standing in a line, the boys began to dance with the younger ones looking over their shoulders at the older ones with innocent uncertainty. The vocalists began singing '*taka ta tam karatake tamm thai-i thai*', the *bol* or speech of the syllable sounds made by the accompanying percussionist with no literal meaning. This line was repeated as the boys executed simple dance patterns, slapping their feet to the four-beat rhythm cycle and demonstrating the foundational poses or *bhangis* of Odissi. They then began to create the elaborate acrobatic formations for which their dance is known; adhering to the beats set by the singers repeating the *bol,* the boys first lay their bodies flat on their stomachs, head towards the audience. They then proceeded to lift their legs and curve their backs until their feet were flat on the ground at either side of their head. From this pose they quickly lifted themselves up, only this time keeping their feet on the ground and rolling up their bodies from behind. Keen to keep time with the musicians, they quickly gathered in line ready to pick up the first beat of the next cycle. As soon as their music was over and their formations complete, the boys ran off to the side with the youngest looking pleased and the elders nonchalant.

After the Gotipua dance, the vocalist introduced the next phase in which the dance had been "transformed through the work of several great gurus into *pallavi* " – the pure dance or *nritta* aspect of classical Odissi that explores various rhythms, melodies and aesthetic non-narrative dance movement. This phase referred to the reconstruction of Odissi, begun in the 1940s by a few performing artists; these artists

would later form Jayantika, a group that included four main gurus, as well as scholars, students and other dancers (for more, see Roy 2009; Pathy 2007).

Classical Odissi is characterised by its statuesque poses, which draw inspiration from many of the temple sculptures of the state. The most iconic of these poses or *bhangis* are the *chauk* (square) and the *tribhangi* (translated often as the tri-bent or thrice bent pose) (see Figures 1 and 3). While these poses are similar to those found in some other forms of Indian classical dance, what differentiates Odissi is the soft movement of the torso and upper body juxtaposed against the strong slaps of the footwork. Thus the lower body must remain grounded and centred (avoiding hip movements in line with reformist ideals), while the upper body flows freely to soften the visual aesthetic. As was often explained to me by my first dance teacher and subsequently corroborated by others to whom I repeated this formula, the feet are to match the beats of the drummer, the torso the melody of the instruments, and the face the emotion of the singer. To capture such variety of movement in one dance form requires great training and discipline of the body. Misplaced emphasis on one part of the body could easily make the dance seem too rigid and harsh, while on another part movement may seem too 'loose' and lacking in structure. Odissi dancers thus strive to maintain the form of the various poses as they constantly move between them to retain the cleanliness of their lines and therefore the integrity of the dance.

The final section of the performance concluded with *abhinaya* or the expressive aspect of classical Odissi, described as the pinnacle of the dance in the vocalist's introduction. This finale consisted of the entire cast of Odissi dancers depicting the nine *rasas* or emotions explained in the Natyashastra that provide a reference point to all styles of Indian classical dance. The nine *rasas* – love, laughter,

fury, compassion, disgust, horror, heroism, wonder and tranquillity[40] – were depicted through nine vignettes taken from the Ramayana and Mahabharata epic mythologies.

It was logical for the performance to conclude with this *abhinaya* as it built on the pure *nritta* that came before; maintaining the physicality of the dance, the final piece added the element of mime to make it *nritya* or narrative dance. This narrative aspect is perceived as the pinnacle of not only Odissi dance, but also of a dancer's career; performers are celebrated as much for their dance technique as their abilities to act. This is especially true for soloists who, as they age, tend to perform more *abhinaya* dances – partly because they are less physically demanding (though not always), and partly because their abilities in *abhinaya* improve with experience. Indeed, proficiency in *abhinaya* is seen as the mark of a mature (in terms of ability and not necessarily age) dancer grounded in themselves and their art. Concluding the production, the *abhinaya* was meant to present Odissi at its highest point of evolution[41].

**Regional Dance, National History**

I begin this chapter with this performance for it presents the official narrativisation of the history of Odissi dance, which is strikingly similar to that of the other two classical forms I look at in this thesis. The result of the twentieth century reconstruction discussed earlier in the Introduction, this master narrative locates Indian classical dance in a history dating back to antiquity. However, as is suggested

[40] For more on *rasa* and its technique, see Vatsyayan (2007), Bose (2001) and Muni (1998).
[41] The linearity of this historical narrative was further enhanced in the promotional material that would circulate for the later US tour of this production. The Sanskrit title for the performance invokes in meaning 'the story of Odissi', and includes the English subtitle 'A Journey from Temple to the Stage'. The poster features black and white images placed at varying levels of distance to the viewer; a picture of a temple sculpture is placed in the furthest background, next to which is that of Manisha dressed in *mahari* costume slightly closer. Next is the image of a *gotipua*, placed even closer to the viewer. In the foreground is the only image in full colour, a picture of a dancer in classical Odissi costume, completing the representation of the historical evolution of 'the dance'.

by this performance – as well as this historical narrative – to analyse Indian classical dance requires coming to terms with simultaneous references to both the specific and the general; categories slip into one another so that temple dancers and court dancers quickly become subsumed under the catch-all category of *nautch,* while linear progressions from temple to court to proscenium stage become a common method for assessing and organising a complexity of histories and experiences. Furthermore, regionally specific dance styles and histories are projected onto other forms of Indian classical dance, and are shaped by them in turn. Thus generalising the specific to the pan-Indian is once more reflected back onto the regional, obfuscating further this multiplicity.

In this chapter, I analyse the construction of this history as dating from antiquity by the dancers with whom I worked. Although I begin with an example from India, the history presented here is reproduced in the UK by dancers of South Asian and non-South Asian origin. The British context with which this thesis is concerned is however further complicated by the prevalence of Contemporary South Asian dance in this location and the impetus to contemporise Indian classical dance that many dancers articulated[42]. As I will demonstrate later in this chapter, rather than break with the master narrative of Indian classical dance history, this contemporising gesture simply reinforces the construction of Indian classical dance as ancient. Genres of 'contemporary' and 'classical' become temporalising categories in the British context to produce Indian classical dance (and by extension, Indian culture) as static. Before turning to the specific ways in which dancers construct the history of their dance, I provide the historical context of the three dance forms, as well as a theoretical frame

[42] In this thesis, I specifically consider Contemporary South Asian Dance (British) and not Indian Contemporary Dance (Indian), which has emerged as a prominent genre in the last three decades. Although Katrak (2011) includes diasporic examples in her study of Indian Contemporary Dance, I maintain the importance of studying the specific contexts of such production – the UK, in my case – in order to trace the social and political implications of its performance.

to analyse the politics of historical construction. Both are necessary to understanding the ways in which dancers produce their histories in the present.

## The Pre-History of Indian Classical Dance

In grounding the historical origin of Odissi in the mythological by starting "with Jagannatha" and a re-presentation of the dance of the *maharis*, the Institute's performance enacted the pan-Indian narrative that posits the origins of Indian classical dance in the divine. Accounts of the history of Indian classical dances often begin with some discussion of ancient dance practices, often in ritual, religious or courtly contexts. Connections are regularly drawn to the mythical origins of dance, associated with the cosmic dance of Lord Siva, the Vedic writings of Lord Brahma, the enchanting Apsara dancers in the heavens, and the sage Bharata Muni (for example, see Roy 2009; Samson 1987).

Often repeated in dance classes and performance introductions today, this narrative is no less present in writings on the histories of the various dance forms. For example, noted dance critic and scholar Sunil Kothari (1990:1-12) begins his book on Odissi with a chapter titled 'Myths, Legends and History'; this chapter smoothly weaves together the legends said to explain the founding of the Jagannatha Temple in Puri, and the role of dance as it was performed and taught by divine figures and preserved in ancient texts, inscriptions and royal histories. Even though such an introduction clearly highlights this history as steeped in myth and legend, thus leaving open questions of interpretation, it nonetheless cements the relationship between dance, religion (Hinduism), mythology and antiquity as the master narrative and therefore actually forecloses the possibility of alternative histories; this association of

dance with mythology leaves obscured the actual history of the dance, of which little may actually be known outside of this narrativisation.

Although dance has been documented in the subcontinent by various sources suggesting an ancient past (see Vatsyayan 2007, 1982), Indian classical dance as we know it today began to emerge in the second quarter of the twentieth century, coming into fruition in the second half. Certainly dance has been a documented part of religious/ritual practice and courtly performances in various parts of South Asia; royal and temple inscriptions speak of dancers as far back as the Chola dynasty (Kersenboom-Story 1987:27) while numerous temple sculptures dating "from the earliest times to the sixteenth century" (Vatsyayan 2007:263) – with the 2nd century BCE Ranigumpha and Udayagiri caves in Orissa being the earliest of which remain in the present (Vatsyayan 2007:290; Samson 1987:95; Kothari and Pasricha 1990:13) – suggest that some form of dance was an important, and institutionally sanctioned, endeavour (see also Dennen 2010:152). Emphasised during the reconstruction of Indian classical dance by revivalists, this ancient history remains murky, left to be re-told, re-interpreted and re-imagined by the contemporary dancers who have absorbed and internalised it through their dance training, ready to project its narrative outward once more.

Prehistoric references and artifacts relating to dance are popularly cited as evidence of the longevity of the art on the subcontinent[43]. As discussed earlier, most cited however is the *Natyashastra*, the Sanskrit treatise on dance and dramaturgy (Hejmadi 2011; Meduri 2008, 2005, 1988; Roy 2009; Vatsyayan 2007; Pathy 2007; Lopez y Royo 2004; Chatterjea 1996; Coorlawala 1993). Indeed, it is in their close

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[43] The famous bronze figurine of 'The Dancing Girl' found at the ruins of Mohenjo Daro, site of the Indus Valley Civilisation (2600-1900 BCE) now in present-day Pakistan, is one such example (Roy 2009:20; Vatsyayan 2007 [1968]: 271; Meduri 2008b). For the ways in which archaeology has been called upon to 'prove' the historical continuities of Indian classical dance, see Lopez y Royo (2007).

association to this text that the various Indian classical dances are designated as such; these dance styles, as is often explained by dancers in India and abroad, are classical because they adhere to the text's *shastric* principles.

The *Natyashastra* also provides dancers with a reference by which to date their art; according to one Odissi dancer I interviewed, the history of the dance "starts 3000 years ago with the *Natyashastra*". Indeed, as I quickly discovered, references to the *Natyashastra* were quite common, with another Odissi dancer explaining to me that the dance came "from the mythology I would say, from the *Natyashastra*…That was our starting point of classical dance – Bharata's *Natyashastra*". In speaking with dancers and observing the ways in which they presented their dance to audiences, it became evident that the standard narrative presented a history of two to three thousand years, despite the fact that most dancers were aware of and made reference to twentieth century reconstructive movements.

The next stage of the generalised history of the dance is its alleged fall from grace. Shifting socio-political and cultural systems of rule are often cited as one explanation for the decline of the dance; for some, especially in reference to North India and Orissa, the Muslim 'invasion' ushered in the end of the Golden Era of Hinduism whereby dancers were forced to leave the spiritual domain of temple dance for the debauched realm of entertainment in the court[44]. I will return to this point in Chapter Five where I examine the construction of Islam as foreign to Indian classical dance in greater detail.

British colonisation is regarded as another force that brought about a phase of change in both North and South India. Samson (1987:30) captures this in her analysis of Bharatanatyam, which is representative of this argument:

[44] For a discussion regarding Odissi, see Kothari and Pasricha (1990:12), Samson (1987:96) and Patnaik (1971); see Chakravorty (2008) and Walker (2004) for Kathak.

> During British rule however, a period of degeneration set in. Devadasis began to dance in the courts of princes and in the homes of rich landlords. The religious significance of dance was forgotten… The temple dancer became a court dancer, often of ill repute. Political instability and a change of social and cultural values among educated and well-to-do Indians resulted in a withdrawal of support to the arts. The dancer's status fell, a stigma came to be attached to the art itself and society was denied the opportunity of enjoying it for many years to come.

I encountered a similar narrative from dancers I worked with; for example, one Bharatanatyam dancer explained, "…in the British Raj everything was messed up, the temples were taken over, and the devadasi was put into the court, in front of the king or whoever. A part of the form then became sexual, the devadasi then became a divine prostitute" (from interview). Such accounts parallel that of E Krishna Iyer, active in the 1920s nationalist revival, who claimed that "the dance art in India as a whole went into oblivion in the later part of the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth century, chiefly as a result of British rule in India" (cited Knight 2010:67). For many, the presumed decline came to represent a clash of cultures marking native tradition and foreign corruption. Restoring Indian classical dance thus presented one way to counter British domination.

Whether or not the dance and its practitioners were degraded as alleged, the shift in attitudes and subsequent withdrawal of institutional support and patronage did in fact force many dancing women into actual prostitution in urban Red Light Districts (Morcom 2013; Soneji 2012; Tambe 2009; Chatterjea 1996; Oldenburg 1990).[45] The backlash against dancers is most readily evidenced in the anti-*nautch* movement, discussed in the previous chapter. Although originating in South India, this movement both reflected attitudes towards and held consequence for a variety of women dancers across India with the development of the generic category of *nautch*.

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[45] The slippages between *devadasi* practice and sex work continues to be complicated as evident in recent discourse surrounding child prostitution in India. The term *devadasi* is often used to refer to sex workers while the ritual history it conjures acts to culturalise and exoticise this kind of prostitution further. For example see the BBC Documentary *Sex, Death and the Gods* (Kidron 2011), and accounts of the 2006 World Peace Forum (Birdi and Prahst 2006).

Moreover, the pan-Indian reach of anti-*nautch* concerns not only conflated various types of dancers – *devadasi* and *tawa'if* – but also linked to larger reformist discourses on women that sought to abolish practices of *sati* (widow immolation), child marriage and female infanticide (Soneji 2012:112; Chakravorty 2008:44). As Mani (1998:118) has eloquently shown with reference to *sati*, women were neither subject nor object of these debates but rather the ground upon which larger questions of tradition, custom and culture were staged.

Concurrent with the rise of reformist discourse in the early half of the twentieth century was a revivalist push that deemed it necessary to rehabilitate dance to its original status (Knight 2010:75-6; Srinivasan 1985:1873). For example, in 1926 E Krishna Iyer began presenting his now famous performance of *sadir*, the form of temple dance prevalent in South India and commonly perceived to be the precursor to contemporary Bharatanatyam. Iyer's performance was especially controversial for it was presented at the Madras Music Academy which was (and still is) considered to be an institution of 'high art', something with which dance was not associated at that time (Coorlawala 2004:52).

In an attempt to remove the stigma associated with the dance, Iyer dressed as a woman to draw attention to the merits of the art in a way that would not be distracted by the 'profane' sexuality of the *devadasi* (Kothari1979). This performance prompted an historic debate in legislative circles as well as the local media about the generations of aesthetic tradition and knowledge that would be lost if morality and art were to be conflated. According to Coorlawala (2004:52), Iyer's attempt to salvage the dance and bring it into propriety suggested the 'morals' of the *devadasi* were assumed to be beyond defence. Iyer and his colleagues were not interested in engaging with the

*devadasi* and did not consider the validity of the charges laid against her; their concern was solely for the dance and its purification as property of the nation.

The reconstruction of Odissi enacted a similar philosophy to Iyer's by distilling the dance of the *devadasis*/*maharis* and presenting it as classical. The sanitisation of the dance that resulted meant that the celebrated qualities of spirituality and devotion associated with the *devadasi* figure remained while the impropriety supposedly suggested by her sexuality was cast aside. This dynamic continues to be apparent in many dancers' explanations of their dance histories in the present, including in the following excerpt from an Indian Odissi dancer now living in the UK; in this interview, the dancer recounts working with a key architect of classical Odissi:

> Guruji had told me that the Batu piece [a particular choreography and accompanying musical composition] of Odissi used to be small, small songs. [It] used to be music that devadasis used to do. And then, [he told me] how he took that music and, based on the Konark Temples [as well], he had composed this Batu. So… we represent that kind of dance, but in a different way. We are following all the techniques; we are following all the gestures. We are trying to imbibe that Swastik [higher] essence, which a devadasi used to do by worshiping the Lord. We are trying to do, but as a tradition changes, it [the dance] has been changed. Because now we have to think more [about] how our stage is, what our audience is.

In this account, the dance is recuperated from that which the 'devadasis used to do', while emphasis is simultaneously placed on recreating the essence 'a devadasi used to do by worshiping the Lord'. With her dance purified through the process of reconstruction, the *devadasi* finally emerges as a 'pure' figure in this 'historical' and nostalgic narrativisation.

**Reconstruction and the Politics of History Making**

To understand the presentation of the 'history' of Indian classical dance, as well as the dance's actual historical construction, it is important to first address the power embedded in the term History as a form of knowledge production. The discipline of

history weaves together past and present and is therefore deeply political. According to Fasolt (2004), more than the fact that history has tended to focus on things political, the basic fact that all history *actively looks to* the past is what deeply entangles this discipline with politics; "nothing keeps history more firmly in the grip of politics than the self-discipline with which historians devote themselves to the pursuit of historical truth" (ibid:xvi). History is that which determines and shapes our experiences, as well that which we create through specific attachments of meaning to certain events (Davis 1989:104); history is thus made through the active recollection and retelling of its agents in the present.

History is therefore central to the construction of subjectivity, especially when it enjoys the hegemonic status of master-narrative (Chakrabarty 2008; Fasolt 2004). This production of subjectivity through History (master-narrative) is especially discernible in the context of colonialism – through which Europe emerged as pre-eminent Historical Subject – as well as in nationalist struggles for Independence (Nandy 2009; Lal 2005; Fanon 2004; Chatterjee 1999; Sarkar1998). As discussed in the previous chapter, the production of historical knowledge about the colonised was crucial to the colonial project (Inden 1990; Said 1978). It was also through such production that the identity of the coloniser and their world came into being (see also Nandy 2009; Metcalf 1998). Historical production simultaneously demarcated those to be denied historical subjectivity and thus cast out of the category of modernity as history-making (Chakrabarty 2008; Wolf 1997). This suggests one reason why the establishment of Indian classical dance was so entwined with nationalist discourses; in supposedly re-asserting a dance that fell victim to colonial rule (as suggested in the accounts discussed above), claims to artistic, cultural and historical agency could be reclaimed.

The construction of national identity thus relies heavily upon the production of history, as is strongly evidenced in the postcolonial project of nation formation (Fanon 2004). For Werbner (1998), postcolonial memory is the result of particular historical processes; more than an artefact created in the here and now, postcolonial memory is inscribed on the body, landscape and souvenirs of a people and "perceived as the tough moral fabric of their social relations" (ibid:3). The heart of postcolonial studies thus rests on the politicised memory, "with subjectivities in the making through nostalgia, through buried, suppressed or textualised and Scripturalised memory, through remembering the present, and through the memory work of rupture with the past" (ibid:15, see also Rijk van Dijk 1998:155).

Memory and national history are thus contingent upon as well as instantiating of national inclusion and exclusion through the process of remembering and preserving certain people's stories while repressing and forgetting those of others (Natzmer 2002:161). This resonates strongly with analyses of the reconstruction of Indian classical dance, premised as it was on both continuing a perceived historical trajectory and breaking with a specific historical moment. However, as Meyer (1998) has shown in her ethnographic study of Ghanaian Pentecostalism and its insistence on breaking with the past, even this results in repeated practices of remembrance, for "the notion of rupture becomes meaningful only because it urges people to remember what links them with their past in order to forget it. The break with the past, as it were, presupposes its prior construction through remembrance" (ibid:202). Indian classical dance is thus tied to its history, not only in the sense that it reinterprets and re-presents the dance as ancient, but in that it attempts to re-perform itself as the negation of all that is and has been considered debased in Indian culture as well.

There is a strong performative relationship between dance – as a social practice and a form of creative expression – and the construction of national history (Neveu Kringelbach 2012; Wulff 2003; Askew 2002; Ramsey 1997; Daniel 1995; Desmond 1993; Cowan 1990). Furthermore, Natzmer (2002) has shown creative expression to be a key arena where events of the past are interpreted and transformed into social realities premised on the twinned activities of remembering and forgetting. It is through such performances that "memories are given physical substance and become history" (ibid:161), suggesting that, for both individuals and society, the past must be constructed, reconstructed and continuously reinterpreted in light of both present occurrences and a vision for the future. Rather than inherited, the past is created in "a vast array of creative cultural expressions" (ibid:164) and thus encompasses more than linear or oral history.

Important to note is that the power of creative and cultural expression in the production of history and memory is not limited to Third World, colonised or non-Western societies, but is rather a key site of contestation between dominant and subordinate groups in all societies (ibid:164-65). History and memory are thus inseparable from the (historical) power struggles that produce them, both here (the UK) and there (India). The construction of Indian classical dance history amongst South Asian origin and non-South Asian dancers in the UK, as I will show later in this chapter, is thus implicated in the production of both Indian and British national identities.

Part of the reconstruction of the dance was to re-focus attention onto its perceived spiritual roots rather than its outright religious functionalism now considered reprehensible as a result of the association of dance with prostitution, in temple and court. Spirituality thus became the middle ground that simultaneously

salvaged the dance from *devadasis* regarded as caught up in mutated religious ritual (too religious) as well as the courtesan *nautch* dancers perceived to be interested only in bodily and/or material gratification (not religious enough). It was through this shift to spirituality that women of the middle and upper classes could access the dance while maintaining their own respectability (Katrak 2011:30; Chakravorty 2000/01).

Furthermore, as it did in the reclamation and classicisation of Indian music (see for example Bakhle 2005), the articulation of spirituality as a primary aim aligned this revival with a larger political agenda by taking away the arts from hereditary Muslim practitioners in the North and non-Brahmin practitioners in the South, thus claiming them for a Hindu elite (Walker 2004; Allen 1997). This point will become central in Chapter Five; for now, however, focus is on how these processes of selectively memorialising cultural practices continue in the present. As I will demonstrate towards the end of this chapter, this historicisation occurs beyond the realm of classical dance in the production of Contemporary British South Asian dance as well.

Finally, central to the construction of historical narratives is collective memory and how this in turn contributes to the discursive production of the meta-narrative that becomes History. "Memory is history located in relatively subjective space; history is memory located in relatively objectified space. History is memory inscribed, codified, authorized; memory is history embodied, imagined, enacted, enlivened" (Lambek in Palmberger 2010:19). Memory and history are thus as intimately linked as the individual and the collective (Palmberger 2010:23; see also Fabian 2007; Davis 1989); it is through social history that the contours of individual subjectivity and group belonging are formed and it is through social relations and within a collective group that History is presented. Indeed, Indian classical dancers

not only learn the 'history' of their dance from one another and present it to a wider audience, they identify with each other as a result of the histories they arguably share. By generalising specific histories of particular dance forms to a pan-Indian narrative no longer primarily concerned with the specificity of time and place, dancers make more accessible their art form by claiming its history for themselves and therefore finding points of identification with it. That they can do so despite the fact that most do not come from or have any relation to the original (regional) 'home' of their dance speaks to the power of this historical narrative that allows them to both distinguish themselves and identify as Indian classical dancers.

**Performing History**

According to Davis (1989:206), history is a social and cultural product that not only relies upon the occurrence of events but on the structure of relations between those who interpret and reproduce this history as well. That is to say, the authority of – and trust in – the person from whom a history is learned is crucial for its legitimation. This is apparent amongst the Indian classical dancers with whom I worked, both in India and the diaspora; for most dancers, it is their *gurus* and teachers who provide the primary source of knowledge regarding the history of their dance.

Part of this historical telling is the ability to recount pedagogical lineage, and most dance students are able to work back from themselves to their teachers, and to their teachers' teachers. Indeed, many of the dancers I interviewed offered this information voluntarily without any prompting. Dancers also include this information as part of their biographic data on programme notes and sometimes in performance introductions as well, particularly in more 'traditionally' presented classical dance performances (as opposed to Contemporary South Asian dance performances). This

indicates one way in which a sense of historical continuity is suggested and preserved, although the lineages dancers present are never very long and usually stop at the reconstructing generation (on average three generations back from the dancers I interviewed and encountered).

It therefore appears that the tradition of knowledge dissemination suggested through the recollection of these lineages – represented in the *guru-shishya parampara*[46] relationship that so many dancers speak of whether positively or negatively – is what marks the historical significance of these genealogies. Of course, it is important to know from whom one's teacher learnt as this will likely affect the *gharana* sub-style of dance that is taught. But more than this, that every dancer can produce a dance genealogical tree regardless of the different styles of dance they practice helps to unite them in a grounded sense of being related to an ongoing historical tradition.

When asked to explain the history of their dance, dancers present two narratives (often in tandem), as became evident in interview contexts as well as from observing dancers responding to audience questions and conversing with other dancers; first, the dance is presented as ancient and somewhat enduring, linked to temple ritual and sacred texts. This history is ambiguous and becomes difficult to pinpoint in detail upon further inquiry. Second, most dancers cite the history of reconstruction as something that is closer to the present day and therefore more

[46] This relationship between teacher (*guru*) and student (*shishya*) is characterised by complete loyalty to one's *guru* with whom one is to spend maximum time, preferably living under the same roof. It is thought that the *guru* would share all of their knowledge with the student while the student would dedicate his/herself entirely to the *guru's* service. Today, this relationship is recalled by some dancers with fond nostalgia – a beautiful and personalised pedagogy focused on the betterment of the self and one's art (for an example, see Doshi-Dandavate 2004) – while others regard it as an arcane tradition involving emotional blackmail and the abuse of power. Although this kind of live-in *guru-shishya* relationship rarely exists today, even in India, it is still invoked as a pedagogical style that can be adapted to contemporary teaching practices. For more on the changes in the *guru-shishya parampara,* especially as a result of modern teaching requirements and diverse student backgrounds, see Morelli (2010).

tangible. The two histories are not mutually exclusive but neither are they presented as seamlessly connected with absolute certainty.

This double narrative is evident in the following excerpt from an interview I conducted with a Kathak dancer in London of non-South Asian origin:

> I remember when I was discovering the things [about Kathak] because my Kathak teacher, she said that the first mention of Kathak as a kind of dance form is actually in [the] Mahabharata. [That was] the first known mention. But it means, it [Kathak] could exist before the Mahabharata was written, which means very, very, very long ago [sic]. So we can't really know the exact age of the classical dance forms, on the one hand. On the other hand, because of this like huge British period in India, we can say that most of the dance forms, not exactly disappeared, but almost. And it was only the middle of the, the beginning of the middle of the twentieth century, the revival actually started. So, say Kathak, as it used to be known a thousand, two thousand years ago and Kathak now, [they are] definitely two different things. And same also with Bharatanatyam and Odissi [sic]. But on the other hand, there are still things that kind of bring them together … two thousand years ago and now.

This excerpts corroborates Walker's (2004:46-51) observation of dancers attributing the origin of Kathak to the *Mahabharata* – the Sanskrit/Hindu epic compiled in the 4th century CE (ibid:46) – due to the fact that the text makes reference to *kathakas* as story-tellers (based on *katha* as Sanskrit for story). There is no reference however to Kathak as a dance form in this text, or indeed subsequent texts prior to the twentieth century (ibid)[47]. The dancer cited above, while maintaining the origins of Kathak in a time 'very, very, very long ago', nonetheless identifies this 'ancient' dance as different from classical Kathak in the present. However, even this suggested difference is called into question at the end of this excerpt by the claim that there is something that brings the two styles (and historical narratives) together.

Indeed, as I discovered, drawing a connection (however ambiguous) between dance practices in the present and conceptions of dance in antiquity was a common form of historicisation amongst dancers. Noting that the dance of antiquity had deteriorated to a state of near-extinction, dancers place its second history in the more

[47] According to Walker (2004:28), it was only in 1937 that Kathak as a dance form first found reference when it appeared in a newspaper article in the *Hindustan Times*.

recent past, some fifty to sixty years ago. They note the work of key figures in reviving the various dance forms from obscurity by basing their knowledge on oral traditions, temple sculpture and ancient text. Despite this detail however, notions of continuity remain. Take as another example the following (South Asian) Bharatanatyam dancer's response when asked if there were any commonalities between classical dance in the present and its historical precursor; the response was that

> The [dance] positions are common, but the way they are executed are different. I wouldn't say it's completely different. Oh the form is changed [said sarcastically] – no. The form is there, but the way in which it was executed is different. The form is the same, but the use of the hips was more common back in the day. I think now we've got a lot of 'don't do that, don't do that' because Rukmini Devi changed those things.

As is demonstrated in both accounts, the two histories – ancient and post-reform – are held simultaneously such that transitions between the two are sometimes murky, sometimes seamless. Dancers will often slip into one history while speaking of the other. The most common example of this is the use of the term 'classical' dance in relation to that of the ancient era. Given that for many dancers the designation of classical relegates the dance to a timeless category, this may not be that surprising but rather indicative of the extent to which the term carries temporal signification.

## Defining Classical

The revival of the dance ushered in the role of the state as primary patron of the form, replacing the earlier infrastructure of temple and court and thus becoming a key actor in determining what would and would not constitute classical representations of national art and heritage (Meduri 2008b, Chakravorty 2006, Marglin 1985). The Indian classical dance designation is today conferred by the Sangeet Natak Akademi,

an organisation formed in 1952, five years after Independence, by the then Indian Ministry of Education to act "as the apex body in the country for carrying out the task of preservation and promotion of the performing arts of India" (Sangeet Natak Akademi, n.d.). It is composed of an autonomous body of dancers, musicians, actors, dance and theatre critics and other connoisseurs and is today funded by the government of India (Pathy 2007:62). Awards are made yearly to masters in music, dance and drama, carrying with them the tremendous prestige of national, institutional and governmental recognition[48].

Despite each style of classical dance's regionally specific label (Odissi, Bharatanatyam, Kathak, etc.), the English term 'classical' is nonetheless utilised in order to highlight the status of the dance forms and distinguish them from other styles such as folk and tribal dance. Indeed, it is commonly observed that there is no true translation of the term 'classical' in the Indian/Sanskrit context (Dennan 2010:160; Roy 2009:5; Pathy 2007:56). Furthermore, use of the term classical further enables equivalence to be drawn between Indian classical dance and ballet, as mentioned previously[49].

One of the most crucial qualifications of the classical designation is the extent to which the dance forms draw upon and adhere to the technique and aesthetics detailed in the *Natyashastra*. Part of adhering to this text, as well as referring to the historical temples perceived as centres of ancient dance practice, is to pay particular attention to the *bhangis* (poses) used in classical dance. As noted earlier, temple sculptures were a key source upon which the reconstruction of classical dance was

[48] The first Sangeet Natak Akademi awards made to dancers were in 1955 – to Balasaraswati and Shambu Maharaj, Bharatanatyam and Kathak dancers respectively – suggesting that by that time dance had, in certain forms, made a definite mark on the national and therefore 'respectable' scene.
[49] For example, one South Asian dance producer in the UK explained, "you will not be funded and supported because you are brown and bad. You have to be as good as the best of the ballet dancers". Although somewhat extreme, this statement does reflect the tendency of South Asian artists (especially Indian classical dancers) to draw equivalence with ballet as a point of comparison.

based while the *Natyashastra* provided detailed instructions on how the body should move and pose. As a result, many dancers I worked with presented the *bhangis* as evidence of the longstanding history of the dance.

Some dancers gave functional explanations of the origins of certain movements performed today; for example, a male Bharatanatyam dancer proposed that the position in which both hands are held in *kathakamukha* (index and middle finger rested on the thumb with ring and pinky fingers fanned out) in front of the chest with elbows pointed outward "literally comes from the temple dancers holding their necklaces to show what king they are assigned to with the kind of centre-piece [of the necklace]". Temple architecture and sculptures also provide dancers with a reference point by which to analyse, understand and ground their own work. For example, when asked if she thought there was any continuity between Odissi dance today and an ancient dance form in Orissa, one dancer based in the UK drew upon her experiences during a trip to the Indian state to respond:

> …For example I went to the Konark Temple in December. Looking at the sculptures and the poses, [I asked myself] 'can I identify with that? Does it look familiar?' I'd say yes. I mean, not exactly. But you know, in terms of thinking this is where this dance has been derived from? I can see the similarities, I can see the *bhangi*, the *chauk*, and all that. I can see it in those sculptures. For me it makes me think, yeah this is where this comes from, I can see that. Unless I'm doing something completely different. If they start saying you know, 'we do Odissi standing now, don't sit [meaning don't bend the knee].' Then I'd be a bit worried [laughs]. You know, if I went and saw these sculptures, I'd be like 'hang on, is that really it?' So for me, that is the telling sign that you know, it has evolved but it has come from somewhere.

The parameters of what constitutes Odissi dance are made clear for this dancer because of the alleged relationship between dance positions and temple sculptures. The congruence between the two provides a sense of origin and therefore belonging for the dance that can be extended to the dancer as well. This dancer knows what is and is not classical Odissi; indeed, it is written in stone. The dance form itself can

therefore be and indeed is seen to contain accounts of its history, although even this remains shaped by the narrative constructions that tie classical dance to temple.

While attempts have been made by scholars to align the classical/non-classical distinction to the indigenous categories of *margi* and its *desi* variants (see Trivedi 2012; Meduri 2008; Vatsyayan 1983, 1982; Bose 2001), the constant and insisted-upon use of the term Indian *classical* dance reflects the modern parameters that inevitably circumscribe and define the 'ancient tradition' of the form[50]. It is telling that none of the dancers I worked with, both during my fieldwork and in my prior experience, referred to this dichotomised description of their dance as *margi* or *desi*, save one male Bharatanatyam dancer from India now based in London who mentioned it in his interview as a possible alternative to the term 'classical'. *Margi*/*desi*, it can be said, has little currency in the day-to-day practices of dancers today.

In the context of multicultural London, the term classical has a temporising effect. Dancers – even those who express a need and desire to break from essentialising categories and engage in contemporised work – equate classical with classic, another synonym for timeless. A sense of timelessness is also conjured when dancers present their classical art as more enduring than passing trends in popular culture that constantly fall out of fashion. For example, a British Asian Kathak dancer explained her vision of classical as enabling her to encompass the vast history she associated with her dance in our interview:

> Classical to me is something … that has been through you know, through its own ups and downs. It has been through its own history, it has been through so much. And it has survived. It's here. It's something that has evolved. And I think it's something that was closer [to a natural essence], it was born during a

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[50] Among those that use this terminology, m*argi* is described as the grand-narrative tradition and approximates more closely the category of classical dance as it is currently used. The term implies pan-Indian applicability, is related to and grounded in text and governed by strict rules of form. In comparison, *desi* designates variations of *margi*, which are often described as regional.

> very different time. So naturally, there's a lot of meaning there, within it. There's a lot to unveil. It's one of those forms that you [pause] whilst it can be innovative, it's actually the opposite – where you're trying to go down and dig and dig and dig. To me, that's what classical is.
>
> Question: When you say born in a different time, what time are you referring to?
>
> Response: I'm thinking of, kind of like second century [chuckles]. You can vision [sic] [pause] I guess the time that Kathak, specifically Kathak was born, it was there to communicate and inspire people. And it was done through simple narrative, and the *kathaka*, storytelling. But it was when the world – there were yogis, there were people, you know, who had clear pure objectives. Society was at a place where, you know, humanity was still there. There's so much, so much more, on a simplicity level. I think it was simplistic. Things grew from that, wonderfully.

For this dancer, Kathak inspired her because it was something she could posit as closer to nature for its origins lay in a pure, unadulterated and tranquil past. While she began by describing the term classical, she quickly slipped into describing her particular dance form, projecting it back onto the idealised past about which she reminisced.

More striking therefore than simply the temporal associations of the word classical are the ways in which dancers, even when aware of the reconstructed nature of their dance forms, use the specific terms Bharatanatyam, Odissi and Kathak to name their ancient predecessors. For example, when I asked an Odissi dancer if one could trace continuities between her dance today and that performed in Orissa's ancient past, her answer was qualified with: "I haven't seen Odissi dance being done all those centuries ago. It would be interesting if we had some footage". While, this dancer's reference to recording technology confuses further her historical periodisation of the dance, it is important to note that she uses the current classical term Odissi for a dance that was performed 'centuries ago'. Likewise, in narrating the history of the two dance forms he studies, a professional Bharatanatyam dancer who also trained in Odissi explained that, "from what I understand, Bharatanatyam and

Odissi have fairly similar backgrounds in that *they were* temple dances" (emphasis added). Names, as the very evidence of the reconstruction of these dance forms, quickly amalgamate centuries of dance practices to present them all as seamlessly one and the same.

Arguably, such contemporary usage of classical terms for a relatively unknown dance form from ancient times could be seen as a kind of shorthand meant to aid a complex conversation, a place-holder for a dance we can see in ancient records but not necessarily anywhere else. Such slips have also appeared in the literature written on the dance (for an example with regard to Bharatanatyam see Knight 2010). Importantly, all of the dancers I have just cited made reference at some point to the reconstruction of the various dance forms about which they spoke. Indeed the professional Bharatanatyam dancer just quoted above went on to discuss the complexity that must have arisen in viewing a traditional culture from a colonial vantage point. However, if terms such as Odissi, Bharatanatyam or Kathak are used to name the dance forms of the past without clarification, this history remains obscured by suggesting a longstanding and uninterrupted history. Dancers may speak of the reconstruction, but this does not clarify (even their own) notions of the antiquity of their dance. Indeed, when a young Bharatanatyam performer acting as emcee for his colleague's classical Bharatanatyam performance in London introduced the dance as "old, very old, let's say three thousand years old old", none of the dancers in the audience questioned his statement.

This confusion of ancient and contemporary histories is a testament to the ability of the reconstructive movements to weave into their narratives ideas of an ancient history while at the same time downplaying their productive role on Indian classical dance in the twentieth century. For most dancers, to recall their predecessors'

work today emphasises the narrative of revival of an ancient dance form rather than the production of a twentieth-century performance art. So strong is the narrative of an ancient history, it becomes a template through which many dancers interpret their contemporary practice, frequently attempting to make their contemporary knowledge fit the ancient mould. This is evidenced most clearly in an interview with one Bharatanatyam dancer who claimed that it was extremely important to know the history of one's dance because

> …you have to know how it developed for you to have a deeper understanding of it. But also for the performance of Bharatanatyam, especially if you're doing very traditional ancient compositions that were made by the Tanjore Quartet – I'm not sure exactly what century but it was two thousand years ago – so you have to know the history to relate to those things, to how they lived back then.

By citing the Tanjore Quartet, this dancer is making reference to the active codification in the nineteenth century of what would later become classical Bharatanatyam in the twentieth century. However, not being sure of exactly in which century the Quartet lived and worked, this dancer then throws out the standard 'two thousand years ago' date used for the more intangible history of Indian classical dance as ancient tradition; the point is not that this dancer was mistaken about the historical facts of the Tanjore Quartet, but that he resorted to the narrative of a tradition that goes back two millennia. The two histories, ancient and recent, thus remain side by side, leaving un-interrogated the narrative of antiquity.

**Interrogating History**

Until now, I have focused on the discursive production of history for and by Bharatanatyam, Kathak and Odissi dancers. For some dancers, especially those who profess a more academic interest in their dance, adherence to this ancient history is no

longer viable[51]. Several dancers even spoke in their interviews of having once believed and presented their dance as an ancient practice, but no longer being able to do so as a result of their increased awareness of the contentious nature of such claims. For these dancers, a number of whom articulated visions of themselves as having advanced in their careers artistically and philosophically, it is now more desirable to speak about visual aesthetics and artistic theories when describing their dance to those unfamiliar with the form. For example, one Odissi dancer explains her experiences and shifting approaches to explaining the dance to audiences in this interview excerpt:

> Usually what I try to do is make it clear that this is a classical tradition. I used to be very particular about saying it was an ancient tradition, but my opinions have recently changed on that just because there's all that kind of contentious stuff that even though it might have ancient roots, it's not necessarily an ancient practice. I don't want to get stuck in that. But I try to highlight the properties of movement, such as [telling an audience:] 'you will see strong footwork, soft upper body movement, lots of sculpturesque poses'.

Although dancers such as the one quoted above say they no longer feel comfortable presenting the dance as ancient, they nonetheless make the conscious decision to not go in the opposite direction of purposefully presenting the dance as the product of a twentieth century reconstructive movement.

When asked if it was the job of the dancer to challenge the anachronism associated with their dance form and challenge perceptions of its current performance as inextricably linked with an ancient past, all of the dancers with whom I spoke and worked answered resoundingly that it was not. Dancers see themselves as first and foremost responsible for producing and delivering a performance and leave it to the audience to interpret and believe as they will. Some dancers go even further, arguing

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[51] It is interesting to note that awareness of the reconstruction of one's own form did not necessarily mean one was familiar with or even considered other forms of Indian classical dance as similarly produced. Take for example this excerpt from one of my interviews:

> I had a conversation with my mum about [the history of Odissi] actually, like half an hour ago [before the interview]. Cause [sic] I was saying how Odissi was mainly reformed again, like in the 1950s, and she thought that it went back – *as far as Kathak and Bharatanatyam* – and that it was due to your religion. And that you got into it because of your religion. And I was explaining that that's different.

that it is not their place to take away from the audience the perceived experience of witnessing something pure and ancient. For example, a professional Bharatanatyam dancer who has trained in London since childhood and is very adamant about experimenting with contemporary work and articulating it as oppositional to constructed and constrictive notions of tradition described a similar shift in her approach before ultimately forgoing the responsibility to dispel any historical misunderstanding:

> But [Bharatanatyam] has gone through a massive reformation which is actually pretty recent. So you can't really say that what we see today is the oldest thing; actually what you see today is quite new in the history of dance. So people who say it's the oldest dance style – I stopped saying that in workshops, even to children. I just say it's one of the classical dance styles of India, there are six forms [sic], blah blah blah blah blah. But I stopped saying it's the oldest form... When you're teaching very young children, I don't even go into it, but when they're old enough to understand or [if you are speaking to] adults, then you do say 'well, what you see today has gone through lots of changes'. So originally, a long time ago it was done in the temples and courts but what you see today isn't necessarily exactly what you would have seen [then]. Yeah, depending on how much information they can take in, you can talk about it being taken away from the social fabric of India for a period of time and then resurrecting itself in very Brahminite [sic] form in the proscenium theatre. But I don't want to remove the romanticism that people like and find magical about it. It has its place but I, I personally don't always include it in my descriptions of it.

In this excerpt, leaving room for a romantic interpretation is important. For this dancer, Bharatanatyam is "classic" in the sense that it has tradition and is "heavier and weightier" thus making it comparable to other forms of art that are difficult to understand, such as opera (continued from interview).

It is interesting to note that she and others use the idea of a romantic or classic era in which their Indian classical dance form can be grouped alongside, therefore finding equivalence to, other Western classical traditions. What this analysis misses however, is that the Romantic Era was a particular historical moment with its corresponding aesthetics and philosophies in Europe. Occurring in the second half of the eighteenth and early parts of the nineteenth century, the Romantic Era saw the

production of art and literature in Europe that privileged the experience of emotion as a source of aesthetics; this privilege of course was not accorded to the colonised cultures that were *simultaneously* being defined as too emotional through Orientalist logic (Mehta 1999).

To appeal to the Romantic Era today on behalf of Indian classical dance is to beg entry into a movement of which Indian classical dance cannot be part[52]. By alluding to such romanticism and appealing to the sense of nostalgia it conjures, Indian classical dancers once again position their work as historical artefact (without the specificity of a historically defined period) even when they seek to get away from the untenable narrative of antiquity. Taking the dance out of an abstract ancient era situated in India and placing it in a seemingly more universal (although not really) Romantic Era continues to historicise the dance as outside the fold of contemporaneity. This is evidenced by the fact that all of the dancers whom I interviewed, many of whom drew comparisons between their dance forms and Western ballet, maintained that their dance was in fact older than ballet, even after they spoke of its reconstruction. Drawing romantic equivalence between the two forms does not seem to deliver Indian classical dance from its anachronistic confinement to antiquity.

Striking in the interview excerpt above is how this dancer does not wish to take away the romance or magic thought to accompany ahistorical narrativisations

[52] There is an interesting similarity here with the ways in which Western Contemporary dance alludes to both a temporal moment and an artistic genre. Although British South Asian dancers claim that the temporal and aesthetic connotations of the word Contemporary poses an annoying if only coincidental confusion and often differentiate between big 'c' Contemporary (Western dance form) and small 'c' contemporary (of the moment), the fact remains that these dancers nonetheless rely upon *both* connotations; as will be discussed later, the incorporation of Contemporary dance aesthetics (genre) results from the desire/need to be recognised as part of the contemporary moment (temporal). Dancers thus access the latter through the former. That this is achieved through the proclaimed neutrality of Western Contemporary dance, seen to be free of cultural markings and historical ties unlike Indian classical dance, makes its position as something to which to aspire all the more impossible to reach. The West is once again definitive of historical periodisation as well as artistic categorisation.

and performances of the dance. In so doing, she appears to allude to something desirable in her dance that is somewhat like the state of nature desired by the Kathak dancer quoted earlier. Aiming to leave intact the romance and magic associated with the dance sustains the ambiguity surrounding its history even as dancers themselves begin to reject it on an individual basis, leaving some room for desire and fantasy to remain in place. Using a supposed ancient history that can help to exoticise the dance can also be one way in which dancers market their work. Indeed numerous workshops, classes and dance companies are advertised with some reference to the supposed historical tradition of the dance[53]. History in this sense can be used to make Indian classical dance appeal to popular interest in the midst of many other forms of dance and cultural performance.

**Embodying Time**

A popular method of attempting to move away from the difficulties of narrating an ancient history, introduced already by the Odissi dancer quoted at the beginning of the previous section, is to focus on the form itself. Dancers who take this approach argue that the form is capable of 'speaking for itself' through the movements that make it distinctive. For these dancers, words of introduction at the beginning of performances are not necessary and audiences should be able to focus on and appreciate solely the physicality of the form[54]. Interestingly, this focus on physical movement and

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[53] Examples include marketing strategies that refer to the temple origins of Indian classical forms; for example, one British dance company uses the subtitle "Temple Dance for the 21st Century" in their promotional material.

[54] O'Shea (2003) suggests such introductions to explain Indian classical dance choreographies began abroad in the 1980s and argues that this practice then moved back to India. According to her, these introductions act as a translating device through which the English language is used to make Indian classical choreography intelligible. This dynamic, however, presents English as purely verbal with no cultural coding while the Indian classical dance performance is seen as entirely cultural with no room for choreographic interpretation (ibid:177-8). However, foregoing the use of introductions does not

embodiment is made to stand in contrast to the mythological aspects of the dance associated with its prehistoric origins; an evolutionary schema is thus established from ancient mythological/ religious/ cultural dance to contemporary corporeal/ physical/ aesthetic dance. This is evident in the historical overview offered by an Odissi dancer with some Bharatanatyam and Western Contemporary dance experience:

> Yes, [the dance] started off in the temple, where the dancers, the devadasi dancers, they performed to the gods, just as an offering to the gods. And every time, during the prayer time, they danced for the gods. And their whole lives were devoted to the gods. Only in late… I don't know how many years ago, just within this century I think, Rukmini Arundale changed the whole thing and brought it to concentrate on the technical form rather than the spirituality of the dance. So that's where all this stylised version of Bharatanatyam actually started. So knowing this change… she's the one responsible for bringing it out of the spiritual context and making it a form like [pause], to concentrate more on the dance itself rather than [pause]. Although the spirituality exists a lot, I think she concentrated a lot more on the training, the technique and making it a pure dance rather than tying it [pause], because I think she was influenced a lot by the ballet world which is a lot [sic] concentrated on the physicality, and then the emotions come in on top of that. Which is a great thing. Because the body is the first thing, the body could convey anything in the dance form. So I think that is very important as well. So coming out from there, so we have come from entirely religious, spiritual to half way now with the spiritual half *and* the technical form. And now I think we need to have the technicality and relate it to human beings rather than still holding on to the past (emphasis in spoken original).

Ballet for this dancer represents a halfway point between a spiritual dance that was not advanced in its technique and a contemporary dance that is focused purely on the body. This comparison simultaneously calls upon temporal and cultural differences to posit the East (Bharatanatyam) as the emotional and ancient antithesis to the technicality (science) of the modern West (Ballet and Contemporary dance). Despite this particular dancer's comparison, his and other dancers' determined focus on the body and physical characteristics of their dance appears at first glance to offer an

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dispel the overdetermined connections drawn between Indian classical dance and culture, leaving the task of contextualisation incomplete. The debate remains ongoing.

escape from the discursive entanglement of the ancient histories they claim to want to avoid.

By focusing on aesthetics and body movement alone, dancers argue that they are levelling the temporal playing field and are thus able to present their dance styles alongside other contemporary art forms. A focus on the form should deculturalise it and ground it in the present without worrying about historical analyses, it is thought. However, despite the intention and commitment of dancers to do so, the very ways in which all of the dance forms used in this comparative approach – from Bharatanatyam, Kathak and Odissi to Western Contemporary and Ballet – are socially, historically and discursively constructed foreclose the possibility of this endeavour.

Dancers with whom I worked in rehearsals, choreographic workshops and performance productions would overwhelmingly resort to Western Contemporary dance aesthetics and exercises to explore the contemporary potential of their Indian classical dance practice. An annual workshop offered to professional and aspiring South Asian dancers to engage in contemporary work is demonstrative of this; held at a performance venue in a large town outside London, the workshop began with a session led by a dancer trained at a leading London (Western) Contemporary dance school who introduced exercises specific to her form. She led the dozen participants through a series of improvisational exercises and Contemporary dance techniques.

For example, dancers were made to experiment with group work with each individual freezing in random positions at particular rhythmic intervals to draw attention to the larger group formation that resulted from each individual body. The stop-start nature of this exercise and the group orientation made it impossible to use only conventional Indian classical dance movements, be they Bharatanatyam, Kathak

or Odissi. Some dancers would incorporate *mudras* into their frozen poses, therefore integrating slightly their Indian classical dance styles, however this did not change the basic grounding of the exercises in Western Contemporary dance.

Most of the participants enjoyed this exercise and the rest of the workshop; so much so that one troupe that was participating in the workshop included the exercise as the finale for a production they would later tour. What this workshop did however was establish that in order to be contemporary, and by extension creative, Indian classical dancers had to seek and participate in exercises and movement patterns already *defined to be* contemporary; the Western Contemporary dance training of the workshop leader was passed off as culturally and temporally neutral in its improvisation compared to the cultural and historical particularity of Indian classical dance.

While the nature of this workshop was understandably determined by the training and objectives of its organisers and facilitators, many of the dancers with whom I worked in other situations would voluntarily refer to Western Contemporary techniques in movement on their own. In other words, aspects of Western Contemporary dance regularly feature in Indian classical dancers' attempts to 'be contemporary' in the British context. Brainstorming sessions at dance rehearsals meant to experiment with innovation often featured exaggerated inhalation and exhalation to accompany dance movement, as well as collapsing the body and including floorwork in ways that broke with the Indian classical form focused as it is on erect bodies that rarely sit and never lay on the ground. In another example, a duet that was re-staged as part of one troupe's production that went on tour introduced contact work into the original choreography, as well as one dancer lifting the other in

the air, both of which are not part of the conventional Indian classical dance repertoire.

It therefore appears that embodying contemporaneity in Indian classical dance is overwhelmingly interpreted by British South Asian dancers as utilising movements they have either acquired through training in Western Contemporary dance, or that they associate with Western Contemporary dance. Classical and contemporary dance are therefore presented as antithetical by many dancers; as one Odissi dancer summarised: "When you have the word contemporary and classical, I don't think they come together. Because contemporary means current, which is what's happening now. Classical meaning, for me, it is very much linked to the tradition. So if you say classical *and* contemporary, you're kind of pulling the string from both ends" (emphasis in original speech).

Even dancers willing to concede that their classical dance is 'contemporary' in the sense that it is 'of the moment' remain adamant that their dance is different from other Contemporary South Asian dance; for many of these classical dancers, their style is most accurately described as 'neo-classical'. There seems to be as many places to draw the line separating classical and contemporary as there are dancers, for neither category can be abandoned in search of something else. What remains constant therefore is the fact that these very categories of dance represent discursive constructions that demonstrate the immense power of the discourses of modernity, tradition and contemporaneity on embodied practices of British South Asian and Indian classical dance. In one dancer's words: "Contemporary, yeah, very interesting isn't it. For me, contemporary is anything that's not classical".

**A Search for the Illusive Modern**

For many of the soloists currently engaged in the project to contemporise their dance and make careers as British South Asian dancers, some training in Western Contemporary dance has become part of their repertoire. These dancers are able to draw from a variety of experiences and knowledge to create their works, which are most often performed at prominent London venues. Performing at these venues and being included in their festival line-ups invests these dancers with a particular prestige and confirms the professionalism of their work.

Dancers in London often contrast such 'professional' performances and venues with their 'community' counterparts, often in disparaging ways. The latter encapsulate classical performances presented to mostly South Asian audiences, often in tandem with religious celebrations, holidays and other community events; in contrast the professional designation is most often reserved for performances of contemporary South Asian dance, more likely to take place in venues within the city centre and draw more mixed or predominately white audiences with an interest in dance despite a lack of familiarity with Indian classical/South Asian dance specifically. The community/professional distinction parallels that between classical and contemporary performances, aligning the binary distinction of tradition and modernity with that of amateurism and professionalism[55].

[55] While the community-professional distinction may manifest in other arenas, including other forms of dance, music and sport, its articulation in relation to Indian classical and Contemporary South Asian dance is distinguished by the double meaning of 'community'. In the case of South Asian dance, this 'community' is more closely aligned with the 'community' of multicultural discourse; that is, it has connotations with ethnicity, religion and migration. This is evidenced by the fact that 'professional' dancers (i.e. Contemporary South Asian) can do 'community work' in the mainstream sense (i.e. offer workshops in London schools), but this does not make them 'community dancers'. In fact, that professional dancers work with mainstream communities (and not the South Asian community) can lend them further credibility *as professionals*. Although beyond the scope of the present discussion, the colonial and postcolonial construction of 'community' as a way of signifying cultural difference is relevant to this construction (for more on the colonial construction of community, see Chatterjee 1999:234-5; for continuities of this discourse amongst diasporic Indian communities, see Banks 1992:4; Baumann 1996: 28).

This is not to say that 'community' dancers do not attempt to make Contemporary dance. Indeed, given the association of Contemporary South Asian dance with professionalism, many 'community' dancers see the contemporising project as a chance to achieve success. Contemporising one's Indian classical dance thus becomes an expression of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986). It is perhaps in the work of these dancers that the confusing entanglement of classical and contemporary in British South Asian and Indian classical dance is most evident. By presenting the tensions between the two categories as such, it is not my intention to dichotomise further 'community' and 'professional' dancers; rather, I maintain that by analysing how 'community' dancers who have not had access to training in Contemporary dance *perceive* of Contemporary dance, we might better understand how dancers produce both categories and thus locate themselves and their work.

To demonstrate this construction, I focus on one of two major projects I observed in which the expressed purpose was to present Contemporary Odissi dance[56]. It was over the Christmas holidays in 2010 that an email was circulated through an arts organisation listserv asking for South Asian dancers to audition for a new project outside London. The call for dancers was vague, only stating that it was for a production that would be called Transcending Borders and would be directed by two choreographers. It simply asked that dancers have at least five years of performance experience and stated that those with some experience in or knowledge of Odissi would be particularly welcomed. Auditions were held by Deepa, who learnt Odissi in India (where she grew up) before moving to the UK as an adult. The project was to be choreographed by herself and a Western Contemporary dancer, Susan; it

[56] As opposed to contemporary (of the moment) or 'neo-classical' Odissi as discussed earlier.

would include four dancers and premier at a major mainstream theatre in the area later that year.

Auditions ran smoothly and each prospective dancer performed a choreography from the Odissi repertoire they had previously learnt from other teachers. The group would eventually consist of Rupa, Samantha, Daina and Kiran. Rupa was a young woman studying at a London university. Of mixed European and Indian parentage, she learnt Odissi while living in India before moving to Europe. Samantha appeared slightly older, roughly thirty years old, and had grown up in the area. The third dancer in the group was Daina, a woman who had moved to London a few years previously, before which time she lived in various cities across Europe. Daina was extremely enthusiastic about Indian classical dance, and trained in Kathak, Bharatanatyam and Odissi simultaneously. Prior to coming to London, she would travel a great deal around Europe in order to learn dance from a (often scarce) range of teachers. Finally, Kiran was in her mid-twenties and had trained in Odissi since she was a young teenager in North America. She too had moved to London to pursue a university degree.

The project was interesting for the diversity of people it brought together. While Rupa and Samantha had been learning Odissi for quite a few years, there were gaps in their training when they had stopped learning and in many ways they were still refining their technique. Daina was more confident about her knowledge of the form, yet as is visible in many dancers who take on so many forms, her Odissi had a quality that was obviously influenced by the other styles she learned. This is not to suggest that the movement quality of someone who studies multiple forms of Indian classical dance is inadequate; on the contrary they are able to draw on the various forms they learn to complement one another. But it can nevertheless be evident – the

rounded movement of the chin and torso can look forced when a Bharatanatyam-trained dancer does Odissi as the former is much more angular; similarly, the hands can look too soft and less defined when a Kathak dancer does Odissi given that the former does not emphasise the *mudras* to the extent of the latter.

The greatest challenge of this project appeared to be working with the two choreographers, each of whom knew nothing of the other's dance form. Deepa knew Odissi and was comfortable with the basics of *chauk* and *tribhangi*. However, she was not meticulous in correcting dancers' positions when they were visibly off balance or in exploring the intricacies of the various *talas* or beat cycles used in the dance. On the other hand, Susan was a Western Contemporary dancer who continually performed and choreographed. Although she said that she did not wish to exoticise Odissi, she knew nothing about the form and admitted to Southeast Asian dance being her closest point of reference. She knew of Shobana Jayasingh and Akram Khan, two dancers who have been successful in building on their classical Bharatanatyam and Kathak respectively to launch into the Contemporary dance scene, but that did not make her any more familiar with classical Indian dance forms, including Bharatanatyam and Kathak. This greatly frustrated Susan, for she felt there was little she could do to choreograph the piece with Deepa without knowing the Odissi medium from within. Deepa in contrast was happy that the piece was coming out of what she saw to be collaborative efforts, relying more, it seemed, on the skill and knowledge of the dancers involved than on her own vision for the piece.

The piece started to develop out of a series of exercises that Susan led. She knew that hand gestures were an important component of Indian classical dances and felt that this would be a good movement to distil – in her interview she would later say that when she thought of Indian classical dance, she first thought of hands and

feet. And so the piece began with the dancers standing completely still in a semi circle moving nothing but their hands as they changed from one of four designated *mudras* (out of the thirty that are most commonly used in Odissi) on the first beat of a four beat cycle. The point of this was to do something random, as everyone would choose different gestures each time and no one knew what the others would do, but in unison.

Susan also led an exercise to introduce floor work, something that is much more common in Contemporary dance as compared to Indian classical. But as rehearsals progressed, Susan became less and less active as a co-choreographer, offering dancers input on what she liked and did not like rather than suggesting choreographic moves. None of the dancers had any Contemporary training and as such could not provide her with the skills or ability to do what she wanted. At the same time, her limited knowledge of Odissi meant that her directions were incredibly vague; "do some of that lovely fast footwork" she would often say, leaving dancers with no better idea as to what she was looking for. It took time to explain that, unlike Contemporary dancers, most Indian classical dancers were not used to spontaneous improvisation, that most Indian classical dance pieces, especially in Odissi and Bharatanatyam, are highly choreographed and thus set to the last detail. As Odissi dancers, the four felt they needed more direction.

Deepa also built on what the dancers would suggest in rehearsal, yet she knew the idiom in which they worked. She could therefore suggest movements in *chauk* and count out the rhythms with which they were familiar. To Deepa, Contemporary dance was "about how not to dance", as she would repeatedly state. When dancers did a sequence that was incredibly repetitive for example, Susan said she liked it because the viewer could get lost in thought as a result of the repetition of movement while Deepa liked it because it was "boring, and that's what Contemporary dance is about".

The point of the production, it seemed, was to be Contemporary for the sake of being Contemporary. Indeed, as Deepa often stated in rehearsal, the venue at which the piece would be performed was noted for its professional standards and the 'Contemporary Odissi' they were producing would have to live up to the high expectations this implied.

Working on the project was often frustrating for the dancers as well, and this only increased as the project progressed. Without the clear direction they were used to in other rehearsals and classes or, more importantly, without knowing exactly what it was that they were doing (as they often discussed after rehearsals), they did not always know what was expected of them. There was a lack of structure, especially when it came to rhythm, and this made it difficult to coordinate with each other. Deepa was going to commission a piece of music for the project, but the dancers did not hear it until the final few rehearsals. These rehearsals were thus marked by a scramble to adjust all of the movements they had previously created to fit with the new composition[57]. A simple four-beat cycle was kept throughout the piece, and this is what dancers used in their rehearsals when they had no music. However, without music or someone constantly counting out the beat, the tempo varied with each dancer, leading to increased frustration. This particularly bothered Daina (the dancer who appeared to adhere most closely to classical dance theory), who once stopped in the middle of rehearsal to proclaim "this just doesn't work!"

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[57] An interesting commonality in both of the major group projects I observed where attempts to contemporise Odissi were expressed as primary was the disjuncture between choreography and music. While both projects had limited resources, both were able to commission new music compositions. In both productions however, the music was introduced in the last stage of production, after the choreography had already been created. This stands in contrast to the choreographic approach to conventional Odissi, where the music and dance are heavily dependent upon one another to the extent that choreography is always taught, learned and practiced in accompaniment to the particular music for the specific dance piece. Furthermore, this separation of movement from music seems to have resulted in a context where dancers in both projects appeared to be more comfortable relying upon choreography rather than musical accompaniment, suggesting that familiarity with and competency in musical theory is no longer a priority for dancers in attempts to contemporise their forms.

By the time the performance was approaching enthusiasm appeared to be dwindling; seeing the finished costumes was the final straw for dancers. Deepa had stated she wanted a design that would recall the Odissi costume without appearing to be traditional. While she wanted a costume that would be ‘contemporary’, she did not seem able to articulate what that meant. In the end, she selected a roll of navy blue crushed velvet and a roll of silver satin to give to her tailor, an elderly English woman who had stitched clothes for her before. The result was a pair of navy blue trousers with a silver sash draped from the left hip to the side of the right thigh and a sleeveless silver blouse that ended just above the midriff. The costumes were far from flattering and all of the dancers were visibly upset by the results. Dancers attributed the unattractive aesthetic of the costume to Deepa’s uncertainty about what the piece was; “she didn’t know what she wanted” claimed Samantha, who worked closely with Deepa in designing different costume options. The performance was something the dancers could not wait to be finished with; indeed, they often joked about how they would never want to be reminded of the production again[58].

**Perceiving Contemporary**

Despite the stated aim to create a contemporary piece with different music and costumes, which everyone involved in the Transcending Borders project was aware of, the piece constantly referenced Indian culture and tradition as defined by a variety of people outside the immediate production group. For example, a photographer who knew Deepa well and had been hired to document the creative process and performance by attending many of the rehearsals (including the dress rehearsal) repeatedly asked whether dancers would be wearing “the red dot” when performing,

[58] The production was however re-staged later that year with three of the four dancers.

by which she meant the iconic *bindi* that marks traditional Indian/Hindu ways of dressing and is included in most classical dance costumes.

In the end, Deepa still identified the finished piece as "Odissi, just a different kind of Odissi", raising the important yet difficult to answer question of where one draws the line between dance styles. For the dancers, the piece was completely different from what they were used to yet for many in the audience, it was nonetheless interpreted as something traditional. After the show, Deepa asked a friend in the audience, a woman who had attended Deepa's previous performances and who used to be a member of the Arts Council Board, what she thought of the "contemporary Odissi piece"; the response was a prompt "no, no it's not very contemporary, is it?" The emcee of the show, which featured several dance schools from the area in many different styles, introduced the piece "as cultural, as emotional, as combining East and West". With music that had no Indian influence, a diverse cast of dancers, and a bizarre space-age costume, how the emcee found more 'culture' in this piece compared to the others on stage was perplexing.

I would soon discover that the experiences I observed during the Transcending Borders project appear to be common for many dancers embarking upon similar (even if more successful) contemporising projects. Often, what dancers intend to be – and indeed reasonably consider as – contemporary is not interpreted as such by audiences and promoters who are unfamiliar with the intricacies of the various dance forms and therefore unable to recognise these articulations of contemporaneity. Dancers and promoters are aware of this bind, but what varies is their reaction to it and the work they produce (or do not produce) as a result.

A presenter working with one of the largest South Asian dance organisations in the UK aptly captured the challenges of having work *interpreted* as and therefore

*considered* to be contemporary when recalling the evolution of the relationship between a leading Contemporary dance venue and South Asian dance, a relationship that continues in the present:

> The director of [the venue] in London decided to do an Indian Summer Festival. So first year was Indian Summer and he had brought in a whole host of theatre groups and dance groups, visiting groups and local groups [and put them] together in the Indian summer festival. That year he came back to me and said, well actually we are a dance venue. We should be doing a dance event only. So theatre was out. So that year we had dancers, local dancers and visiting dancers. Classical, traditional, all sorts of dancers … were programmed in. It was [after] the end of that festival that he came in and said well, that's rubbish, we are actually a Contemporary dance venue, we should be programming a contemporary dance festival. Fine. So he asked all the dancers to make bids and tell him what was going to be contemporary about their work. So one dancer … applied and said I want to work on Ashta Nayika, which is a new [interpretation] and I would do a show with 8 heroines. She was in. A Bharatanatyam dancer applied and said I want to work with Hindustani music – an experimentation. Well, she was in. And so on. There were lots of kinds of experimentation happening within the dance form. And they were all in. It was the end when this man came and said to me, 'well what is experimental about it?' This was a white man who didn't understand the language, he didn't understand the context. What he was watching was people, these beautiful girls dressed up in all of this costume and jewellery, a lot of it, doing the same kind of technical routine. He didn't understand the context of Ashta Nayika or Hindustani music. It was the same. Now juxtaposed against that was another contemporary dancer, a classical dancer who was starting to create her contemporary shows… She was someone who understood the trends within the contemporary dance. Who understood that contemporary dance audiences cannot have an informed journey into Hindustani or Karnatik music. Understanding that you cannot bring in stories with which we have grown up in South Asia – and we know all the stories, you know, through a variety of routes, from comic books to cartoon films. But these audiences had no insight into Indian philosophy. Understanding Shaivism or Vaishnavism, understanding those two philosophies and identifying with the emotional baggage, which these very specific philosophies bring into the art form, was something very foreign for these audiences. So she created the whole piece, which didn't have stories, she used local Western musicians, and she was a hit.

I have quoted this excerpt at length for, even though it discusses a particular experience from twenty years ago (and is therefore still significant), it remains relevant as manifestations of the issues raised then continue to impact dancers now. The bids to reinterpret the Ashta Nayikas – eight types of heroines in love outlined in the *Natyashastra* – or to combine Bharatanatyam (based on South Indian music systems) and North Indian Hindustani music are undeniably innovative; indeed on

paper, they were innovative enough to be successful in the application process for the Contemporary dance festival being organised. Ultimately however, these projects remained confined within their presumed tradition for it was the dancer who conceptually, visually and aurally discarded her classical dance to adapt her performance to the requirements of the festival, venue and audience that became successful. The point is not to deny her artistic creativity or aptitude in knowing and anticipating her audience, but to indicate the extent to which audience receptions determine which performances are contemporary and which are not. For Indian classical dance, contemporary innovation is not only about the creative process but the external gaze. As a result, dancers often make more exaggerated and therefore more visible attempts to present their work as contemporary.

**Wearing Tradition, Marking Contemporary**

As suggested by the collaborative project discussed above, one of the most popular and indeed immediate ways to indicate that one's work is contemporary is to alter the costumes particular to one's style of dance. Costumes are very specific in Indian classical dance and are one indication by which styles of dance can be differentiated from one another (see Figures 3-5). Furthermore, costume choices – as Susan Reed (2002) has shown in the case of Kandyan dance in Sri Lanka – can make the body the site of respectability, as well as its converse, disrespectability.

Typical classical dance costumes do not only indicate the regional origins of the dance, but they are designed to recall, and therefore work to situate, the dance within a particular historical narrative[59]. For example, often the filigree work of much

[59] However, even here lies a tension between what *is known* and what *is perceived* of the past; a couple of dancers I spoke with discussed the belief that *devadasis* did not wear a sash that covered their torso, something that would and has been considered wholly inappropriate in regards to classical (read traditional) costumes in the present. For example, in 2005 Malaysian Odissi dancer Ramli Ibrahim

of the Odissi jewellery (specifically necklaces and *bengopati* belts) is based on the architectural designs of the Konark Temple (13th Century) in Orissa, said to be a key site for performances of ancient Odissi dance. Similarly, the Bharatanatyam costume, designed by Rukmini Devi, was meant to transform the classical dancer "into a proxy devadasi" (Meduri 2008a:138), adorned in jewellery and ornaments popularly associated with temple dance (ibid). Referencing a relatively more recent history, Kathak costumes nonetheless help present the dance as part of a longer historical tradition, based as they are on Mughal fashions observable in the present in North Indian miniature paintings (see Walker 2004). All of these references to history exist in components of the costumes that were nevertheless deliberate additions in the last decades (for more see Meduri 2008a; Pathy 2007:205-248).

Despite the allusions to the historical master-narrative suggested by dance costumes, there are still traces – however subtle – of the actual historical situatedness of the dance; it is thus possible to trace the historicity of the dance in the materiality of the costumes themselves. For example, the stylised make up used by dancers, the most recognisable and iconic of which is the extended fishtailed eyeliner, is strikingly similar to the fashions in vogue during the reconstruction. More remarkable is the shift to stitched costumes, prior to which Bharatanatyam and Odissi dancers would tie entire saris to suit their needs. Although some dancers continue to do so even now, the

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caused much controversy in Orissa for presenting his female student without the *odhni* sash (see Nartakhi.com 2005; Pathy 2007:247). This controversy is still discussed amongst dancers, in India and abroad. One Odissi dancer captured this tension in her interview:

> In fact, the images I have seen [of *maharis/devadasis*] are quite un-dance like because the ladies were older and they weren't perhaps practicing any more. So it's quite a mystery to me, it's not something I have a lot of detail about in my mind. But, like reading about the costume, I think they wore black velvet blouses and tied saris. So that's quite different to what we wear now. I don't even know if they wore a shawl [*odhni*] over. Some of them did. And now if you don't, it's seen as a very outrageous thing. Like, I sometimes think if someone used that [*mahari*] costume [today], it might be seen as more outrageous. Which is interesting because it is more traditional in a way.

Ironically, the *devadasi* is constructed as ultra-traditional and yet signalled as inappropriately sexual in comparison to the traditional classical dance costume of today; the bifurcation discussed in the Introduction continues.

majority wear tailored costumes professionally stitched from saris that have been appropriately cut to pattern.

The stitched costume can therefore be regarded as a modern adaptation for the dance meant to facilitate a performer's need for comfort and practicality. The Bharatanatyam stitched costume, like many other innovations brought about by the performance context such as stage lighting and props, was itself the product of collaboration between Indian and European performers and artists; indeed, Rukmini Devi collaborated on the costume she designed with an Italian seamstress working at the Theosophical Society as well as with Western musicians and lighting designers to create the proscenium experience (Meduri 2008a:138, 142). Likewise, Kathak and Odissi dancers also made use of modern light, stage and stitched costume designs as they too professionalised performances to the extent that there is today an entire industry based on costume design and creation. For dancers in the UK, access to costume production in India is still important while in India, tailors who specialise in costume stitching have established businesses that only produce these goods.

Despite subtle shifts in costume trends – usually instigated by celebrity dancers in India who select specific designs for their costume jewellery or decide to play with different patterns for sari borders and blouses – classical dance costumes are nonetheless considered to be unequivocally traditional by most dancers. Dancers may partake in certain trends, but the overall appearance of the costume remains intact. As a result, the costume (at least parts of it) is usually one of the first things to go when a dancer decides to contemporise their work in the British South Asian dance context.

For one troupe I observed working on a production marketed as Contemporary Odissi, costumes proved especially challenging. In an initial workshop at which the troupe began experimenting with various concepts for their production, the workshop

leader – an internationally successful Bharatanatyam dancer who has done a lot of work experimenting with Contemporary dance and the Indian classical form – suggested the dancers perform in street clothes. This however did not sound appealing to the group, primarily because it was felt that the basic *chauk* and *tribhangi* positions of Odissi did not appear flattering in trousers and t-shirts, and skirts or dresses would limit movement. Other options were suggested, but the group remained divided. After much debate and discussion, the troupe was finally able to reach a compromise – they would wear cotton saris, similar to the more formal rehearsal attire that dancers wear, especially in India. The heavy jewellery and headgear typical of Odissi costuming would be too much for the simplified look that would result from the dancers wearing saris, so certain pieces were omitted, including the floral headgear (see Figure 6). This seems to be common practice for dancers who wish to contemporise the costume, as I have seen many Bharatanatyam and Kathak dancers minimise their jewellery and hair ornamentation in similar fashion.

In the end, the costume to which the troupe agreed, however begrudgingly, was not something that had been created to suit their needs or vision for the show but rather something that had been thrown together out of necessity. Why they could not present a contemporised show in full costume was never really explored except for the assumption that it would confuse audiences. Like many other dancers, some in the troupe thought that the conventional costumes of Indian classical dance are too overwhelming and outlandish – 'just too much' – especially for audiences with sensibilities presumed to be particular to the British mainstream.

Such opinions were further corroborated by other dancers I encountered who claimed to have been discouraged on different occasions from wearing full costumes for performances in which professionalism (and its association with contemporaneity)

was primary. Dancers often suggested full costumes would overwhelm audiences, often due to the colourful nature of the textiles. Colour, it seems, is a key marker for Indianness, sometimes to be played up when the need is felt to celebrate Indian culture, other times quelled in order to present the dance as more serious, contemporary, professional. For example, one Bharatanatyam dancer of South Asian origin speculated on what attracted audiences to Indian classical performances:

> I think the intrigue is the, for me, I'm speaking as a British person – if they see a poster and they see something really ethnic, or something really colourful that's beautiful, the colours and the jewellery, whatever, Indian classical, that might attract them… But, that's what it is; it's the attraction of the jewellery and the colourfulness, the ethnicness [sic] and the beauty.

Indeed, this dancer appears to have reason to associate colour with 'ethnicness', especially in relation to representations of Indian culture; dancers, producers and audience members I encountered often spoke of the 'colours of India' to refer to anything from the exotic to the kitsch. For example, one non-South Asian dancer claimed in an interview that, during a visit to India, she "saw the dancing and kind of fell in love with the culture, the colours, you know everything", thus prompting her to learn Indian classical dance upon her return to the UK.

Another Kathak dancer, also not of South Asian origin, recounts a similar experience:

> When I went to India, I would have been happy to try any of the Indian classical dance styles, I just wanted to learn one of them. It was just the, it just looked very challenging. All the rhythm – especially Kathak – all the rhythm things, which we didn't have in ballet, and the hand gestures, the *mudra hastas*, the eyes, and just the whole, the mad colours that you wear in your costume [laughs].

Given this connection between bright colours, Indian culture, and Indian classical ('community') dance, it is no surprise that dancers wishing to emphasise professionalism in their performance regard colour as something to be downplayed. As one dancer discussing ways in which to contemporise and professionalise Odissi

performances advised, “if you know who your audience are, you can manage expectations. You know, I would strip things down. Simplify costume, simplify lighting, colours that you choose to wear, keeping it very sleek… almost to the point of being bland… that’s what they [the audience] want” (from interview). Colour becomes the fault line between cultural practice (India) and performance art (Britain), between classical dance (tradition) and its contemporary counterpart (modernity).

**Conclusion**

As I have sought to demonstrate in this chapter, various dancers – Indian, diasporic and non-South Asian origin – participate in the re-production of a historical narrative that presents Indian classical dance as timeless and ancient. Indeed, this narrative is sustained even as dancers distinguish between classical and Contemporary dance in an effort to counter the essentialism produced by this very construction of antiquity. In so doing, dancers appeal to a past with a sense of mystique and nostalgia – recalling either the romance of a classic era or the innocence of a time untouched by modernity.

In *Culture and Truth* Resaldo (1989:70) identified as ‘imperial nostalgia’ the curious mourning for that which people have themselves transformed or destroyed. He notes that this nostalgia enables individuals to experience both a sense of innocent yearning as well as of concealing one’s complicity in what can be quite destructive violence. Others have linked this concept of imperial nostalgia to tourism and travel (see Kaplan 1996). As will become clearer in the next chapter on the transnational network that is currently produced through Indian classical dance, this nostalgia applies to dancers travelling from places of privilege to learn dance in its ‘native’ context, just as it does to British (diasporic and non) dancers and audiences now consuming ‘authentic’ and ‘traditional’ Indian classical dance in the UK.

However, much like colonial discourse with its multiple perspectives sometimes diverging and sometimes converging, the nostalgia that surrounds Indian classical dance is also shaped by the nationalist context in which it was produced. In continuing to project onto antiquity a history we know to be erroneous, dancers contribute to the reassurance of/to the nation that colonialism did not mark the end of their culture, however constructed it may be. The props of history utilised in the dance performance thus simultaneously act as supporting devices to alleviate nationalist anxieties, even once dancers travel and live abroad.

In the current multicultural context of British South Asian dance, this multifaceted nostalgia continues to be significant. As I have argued in this chapter, the relationship between Indian classical and Contemporary South Asian dance in the British context is temporalised; this is a relationship that operationalises discourses of tradition and modernity and projects onto Indian culture an evolutionary schema that presents it as static once more.

Just as classical dance in the twentieth century was defined in reference to the parameters of Western classicism by *Indian dancers themselves*, so too is Contemporary South Asian dance *despite* its insistence on maintaining a link to South Asian culture however loosely defined. Furthermore, just as Contemporary South Asian dance must now stand in this (Western) Contemporary shadow, Indian classical dance also exists within the context of and in relation to Contemporary South Asian dance. This is not at all to discount the merits of either, nor to suggest that South Asian dance – classical and contemporary – exist merely as derivative forms. Rather, it highlights the extent to which the very definition of dance styles is an enactment of a historical narrative that comes from a particular context, that of cultural imperialism, nationalist reclamation, gendered and caste-based dispossession and the subsequent

contemporary politics of identity formation. This history – and the power relations that sustain it – is still in the making.

## Covering Space:
## Mobility, Transnationalism, Ethnicity

*Perhaps there are just too many celebrants of the East, like Madonna [with her bindis, slokas and Indian classical dancers]…,with their transparently naïve but mass media resourced pantomime, as well as too many celebrants of 'more authentic' desi sounds, such as bhangra purists or strict Qawwali devotees, or even too many enthusiastic sociology department fans of Apache Indian. All these, however, participate in a 'cultural' exchange that assumes a level of equivalence – a terrain of mutliculti creativity – which occludes the underlying structural inequalities of the contemporary field.*

*-John Hutnyk, Critique of Exotica,2000:117.*

It was a late summer evening in August 2011 and I was taking the train three hours from London to attend an annual weeklong intensive summer camp organised by Sangam, one of the leading Indian Arts Development Trust organisations in the UK with bases in two major cities in the country. Sangam is known to encourage the development and propagation of Indian music and dance; the group regularly organises performances for British and India-based artists, offers scholarships for students of music and dance to travel to India to pursue further training, and hosts international residential schools and intensive workshops for students who travel from across Europe and North America to attend. This last programme, known as Dance India, brings together renowned gurus of Kathak, Bharatanatyam and Odissi from India to deliver classes, lectures and performances for the roughly 80 students in attendance. This was to be my first Dance India experience as a student, although I had heard much about it from other dancers who had attended in previous years.

The strict focus of the summer school on Indian classical dance – as opposed to its counterpart of Contemporary South Asian dance that I will soon discuss – corresponded with the school's emphasis on propagating Indian culture, as was evidenced throughout the week. The school predominately attracted South Asian diasporic dancers, although there were also a few dancers of non-South Asian origin in attendance. Despite its focus on Indian culture and its targeting of diasporic students, the summer school was at the same time participating in the British multicultural landscape given its very establishment as a means to provide British students an opportunity to study Indian classical dance intensively. An attempt to recreate India in Liverpool, the summer school was also contributing to the production of a multicultural UK. This transnational co-production of Indian and British identities, through the construction of Indian classical and Contemporary South Asian dance, is the focus of this chapter.

I checked into the accommodation late that night and started to prepare for the next morning. We were told we would need to arrive at the venue half an hour before the opening ceremony in order to register and pick up our welcome packs and programmes. When I got there the next morning, there was already a small group of young dancers at the registration table in front of me. They were probably 15 or 16 in age, and included a mixture of boys and girls, Asian and white. Perhaps this would be a more diverse group than I was expecting, in terms of both gender and ethnicity.

The steep cost of tuition, despite the offers of partial bursaries for some, combined with the subject of what brought us all together, suggested there would be a certain uniformity in terms of the class backgrounds of those in attendance. Although there were several white British and European students and a handful of young men in the full cohort, I would soon find out that the students were in fact not as diverse as

this initial group suggested; the overwhelming majority of students were females of South Asian origin. Those whom I had met before at different performances, classes and workshops in London formed part of the older half of the group and were either completing their studies at university or embarking upon professional careers. The remainder were in their teenage years. The vast majority of students were UK based (a few had travelled from Canada, and a few from elsewhere in Europe), and many of them went to established teachers with whom they studied during the rest of the year. For the younger students, this really was a summer camp in the typical sense; part of their excitement came out of being away from home and staying with friends during their summer holidays. Needless to say, the experiences of the two groups were quite different, although both saw this as an opportunity to socialise and catch up with old friends.

The opening ceremony on the first morning was to take place in the performance theatre, a beautiful building with which I was familiar as the troupe of which I was a part had performed there the previous year. Even from outside, I could see that great care had been taken to decorate the venue for the week's proceedings; long colourful saris had been draped over the three flights of stairs inside and were visible through the tall windows of the exterior. Beautiful silks in yellow, blue, fuchsia, gold and red – many of which were desirably wearable – transformed the building into a site specifically designed for Dance India. Full-length banners promoting the organisation were placed on each floor of the building – the ground-floor lobby, the second-floor mezzanine and the third-floor entry into the theatre itself. These glossy banners had pictures of various dancers in different styles, with phrases such as 'Indian Dance: A Divine Experience' and 'Timeless: New Talent, Age Old Tradition' printed in bold lettering. The intent of the summer school was

made clear – this was a place to learn about the traditions and heritage of Indian culture, central to which was Indian classical dance.

As part of our welcome packet, we were given a programme that outlined all the events that would take place over the next week. Students were to be separated according to the dance form they wished to study. Bharatanatyam and Kathak composed the two largest cohorts, and as such their classes were divided into beginner, intermediate and advanced levels. These students were assigned to teachers of varying seniority, with the most advanced students learning from the most established dancer-teachers and so forth. Reflecting its actual demographics in the UK, Odissi had the smallest representation with only fourteen students, one teacher and her assistant. This posed a great challenge for the group as the levels of training of the dancers varied from those who had learned it since childhood some fifteen or more years ago, to those who had learnt and then stopped for significant periods of time, to one who had never danced before.

In the end, the one who had never encountered Odissi was assigned to the teaching assistant, Cvete, a woman who appeared to be in her early 30s and travelled between her home in Russia and India to teach and train. The rest of us remained in the class with our teacher, Madhu Patnaik. Related to one of the most important figures in the reconstruction of Odissi and responsible in many ways for the way in which it is performed on stage today, Madhu Appa is celebrated internationally as the leading Odissi performer of her generation. Her dance is regarded by dancers (in all styles) as well as critics to be perfect in technique and her classes are, as to be expected, demanding.

Browsing through the programme, I could see that the week ahead would be extremely busy. Mornings were to begin with a class called Morning Prayer and

Warm Up, followed by a core class in Strengthening and Refining Dance Technique[60]. After these morning classes, a further thirty minutes would be allocated for Q&A with teachers before lunch. Afternoons would begin with a Lecture Demonstration for the entire school on one aspect of dance and performance, after which students would return to the classroom for two hours of Repertoire Work, followed by time allocated for Self-Practice/ Consolidation. The day would conclude with dinner and the evening's performance, delivered by each of the teachers from India as well as a selection of UK based performers.

While the teaching schedule was meticulously organised, it was ultimately left to the discretion of the individual teachers to organise their time and Madhu Appa would take up every opportunity to have us dance. Despite the naming of the first class, there was no actual prayer, although Madhu Appa sometimes played Hindu *slokas* from the music on her iPod as we followed her through the warm-up exercises. Officially, the association of dance and religion was made clear and even institutionalised; yet this did not necessarily translate neatly into practice.

The three morning classes were in effect combined to become one four hour block, quickly flowing from the initial warm ups to the strenuous strengthening exercises to the rigorous choreography we were learning describing the god Shiva. Although Madhu Appa would regularly explain this choreography with reference to the religious significance and meaning of Shiva, there was scope for dancers to approach it as merely another narrative *abhinaya* depicting a given mythology. This reflects the ways in which dancers are able to selectively choose how they relate to

[60] Although dance classes do not regularly allocate time for prayer and warm up, the provision of such time at Dance India was not surprising; including it at Dance India successfully contributes to situating the dance within a particular cultural and religious narrative. As such, workshops meant to give participants a 'taste' of the dance and its cultural relevance often make reference to meditation or prayer. Moments like this thus contribute to the Hinduisation of Indian classical dance, even if dancers do not participate fully in the religious practices such exercises suggest, a point that is pertinent to the argument I develop in Chapter Five.

the religious nature of a choreography while the dance form itself remains coded as Hindu, a point to which I return in the final chapter of this thesis.

I showed up for the morning class on the first day wearing my running trousers and a cotton *kurti*; we had been instructed in our registration packet on proper attire for classes and were told to wear comfortable clothing for the morning yoga and then to change into cotton saris for the dance classes. I made an effort to get to class early, knowing from my previous experience with teachers of Madhu Appa's stature that etiquette required arriving before the teacher. It is common knowledge amongst dancers that working with gurus is a more formal procedure and requires a demonstration of etiquette, discipline and respect. This is not to say that it is considered tolerable to be casual or disrespectful to other teachers or dancers one may be working with, but it is to highlight the level of formality associated with learning from a guru.

A couple of students were already in the room, warming up in the corner, while the rest filtered in after me. Everyone arrived before Madhu Appa. Like me, most of the others were wearing some combination of exercise clothes, except for Sarah, Alexandra and Elena (the three European students in our group), who were already in their practice saris. I sat down next to Rupa, knowing her from our work on a previous project, and Sarah soon joined us. Like me, Rupa had never been to Dance India and was visibly nervous as well as excited. Sarah on the other hand had been to every summer school since its inception in 1998 when it was organised by another arts organisation under the auspices of the British Arts Council. The Bhumi summer camp was meant to bring together complementary forms of physical training in South Asian dance, incorporating Pilates, aerobics and physiotherapy alongside the dance itself. Bhumi ran the school until 2005, when Sangam came on board as co-organiser.

In 2008 however the two organisations split, with Sangam overseeing the summer school, now called Dance India, and Bhumi going on to organise a new annual event called Unlocking Creativity. The emphasis of the former on classical dance and of the latter on Contemporary South Asian dance might offer some insight regarding the differences between both organisations.

Madhu Appa and her assistant were the last to arrive to class. As soon as they entered, everyone stood to attention. Both were in the saris they had worn at the opening ceremony earlier that morning. We were asked to introduce ourselves and say something of our experience with Odissi. Most students were Asian women who appeared to be in their early twenties, although there were a few who appeared in their late thirties and early forties. Of the fourteen students, four were white women – from the UK, Italy, Belgium and Sweden. The class had only two men, Jai and Rahul, both of whom came from twice-migrated South Asian families and were now settled in London. Madhu Appa had taught at Dance India on previous years, and recognised some of the returning students. She also remembered students she had encountered previously, either when they had visited India or had hosted her on one of her trips to the UK. Although the network of Odissi dancers within the UK is relatively small, it is nonetheless part of a larger and more international network in these moments of transnational encounters.

Madhu Appa also inquired about the teachers of those of us who had had considerable training in our introductions, information that no doubt helped her to assess our levels and styles of training as well as our personal connections. Dancers, both in Orissa and abroad, often complain about how "political" the Odissi scene is; nonetheless, who one knows and learns from defines how one will be approached, for

even one's teacher's relationships with other dancers is taken into consideration very seriously.

As we were to find out over the week, Madhu Appa's ability to remember dancers was determined by their appearance; in our class, the colour of our saris became our name for the day, resulting in several jokes about confused identities and new names each day. Such might be understandable for a teacher/dancer who spends much of her year flying between India, North America and Europe to deliver similar workshops to hundreds of eager students, although some in our class were perturbed that addresses were still being made to 'yellow', 'green' or 'blue two' at the end of the week.

As soon as introductions were out of the way, we began class. Madhu Appa promptly tucked her sari into the waistband of her petticoat to lift it a few inches from the ground and led us through the Surya Namaskar, one of the more popular yoga sequences. It was obvious that she was used to practicing in a full-length sari, for the heavy silk material was no obstacle for her as she smoothly transitioned from one stretch to the next. After twenty minutes of yoga and a quick cool down session of *prana* breathing exercises, Madhu Appa launched straight into the technique class.

I quickly became aware of and began to envy those in the class who had arrived already in their practice saris[61] for there was not enough time to change and I was uncomfortable dancing in my running trousers and *kurti*. These clothes did not limit my movement, and yet I felt embarrassed at my inappropriate attire. I am used to practicing in my sweats when I dance alone and had worn the same *kurti*/trouser combination to many rehearsals with my peers; but something about dancing in front of Madhu Patnaik in this setting made me hyper-conscious of how exposed my body

[61] Unlike full saris, which are tied to drape at the feet, practice saris are folded horizontally before they are tied so that they come to approximately six inches below the knee. They are worn over *salwaar* trousers and facilitate greater ease in movement.

was when not dressed in a sari. In this I was not alone. “She didn’t let us change!” protested Rupa after class ended while Radhika, one of the students who had not danced since she was a child, fretted that the Resource Centre which was set up downstairs to sell drinks, books, clothes and DVDs, would not have saris to sell for two days.

I quickly changed into my practice sari after lunch, vowing that from the next day, I too would come to class appropriately dressed. Others in the class had obviously thought the same for all but three of the women (including Radhika) were wearing saris for the next morning’s yoga. The two women who did not were two of the oldest in class (appearing to be in their mid 30s and 40s respectively) and had an obvious relationship with Madhu Appa that dated back several years; by the second day, they were confident enough to request five minutes to change between yoga and dance classes. Although they were granted this time, it did not result in any suspension of the class and the rest of us routinely began without them.

Madhu Appa was really going to make the most of every minute of our classes; rather than using the whole time allocated for strength and technique work, she began teaching the choreography in the morning class. Likewise, as soon as we returned from the afternoon lecture, we were expected to pick up from where we left off that morning and continue until the dinner break. Only once did Madhu Appa adhere to the schedule that allocated a half-hour question and answer period. It was evident that her priority was to dance and teach us the correct technique she had ‘inherited’ from her *guru*.

As the smallest group, the Odissi class was relegated to one of the smaller studios upstairs and it was often difficult to fit thirteen dancers into the space. Madhu Appa would constantly arrange us in different formations, staging us as one would

when creating a group choreography, even though we had not yet finished learning the piece. At times she would divide us into smaller groups of three so that she could watch each dancer individually. These were times to be dreaded, for she could be unforgiving in her critique despite her otherwise warm demeanour. Often when breaking the class into these small groups, she would arrange students according to their training level, making the advanced perform first and so on. However, this did not do much to inspire comfort amongst students either as we were made even more aware of our limitations relative to one another; in a class so demanding for the most advanced dancers, it was simply overwhelming for some of the others.

The classes soon became exhausting, physically, mentally and emotionally. As the week progressed, several students began to express their frustrations with the strict teaching style and demand for perfection and uniformity. Jai was particularly upset, feeling that he was being forced to compromise himself and lose his individuality as Madhu Appa attempted to discipline him into her mould. There was no artistry, no creativity he felt in this way of learning. He began to reflect that perhaps he had moved beyond Odissi, that it was time to shift his focus entirely to the Contemporary South Asian dance he was interested in developing. He began to detach himself from the class and quickly disappeared at the week's end. Even Sarah and Geeta, two of the advanced students dedicated to the classical style of Odissi and most enthusiastic about the summer school felt that perhaps Madhu Appa was too interested in producing dancers that were replicas of her style. They kept recalling previous Dance India summers with other teachers, comparing and contrasting their different approaches to teaching and creating comfortable learning environments.

The only opportunity to interact with students from other dance styles came during meal breaks and lectures. This meant that for the most part, people stayed with

the friends they knew from before. There were many jokes about the various cliques that emerged and the stereotypes associated with each dance form were transferred onto that form's students. For example, as a group of Odissi and Kathak dancers (including myself) sat on the grass outside one lunch break, relishing the last few minutes of sunshine before having to trudge upstairs to class, some of the Bharatanatyam dancers were taking the opportunity to practice what they had been learning on the adjoining pavement. Seeing this, one of the Kathak dancers observed to everyone's amusement that "the Bharatanatyam students practice their dance while the Kathak students work on their tan!" Known for its straight lines and precision, Bharatanatyam was thus constructed as attracting (and producing) single-minded, determined and almost ascetic-like dancers while Kathak, with its associations with grace and flare, was presented in relation to students regarded as more laid-back, fun, and even at times vain.

By comparison, Odissi, smaller in representation, was seen as somewhere between Bharatanatyam and Kathak with no fixed identity. Both Bharatanatyam and Kathak dancers would remark on how much they liked the form, and how good it was that it was gaining greater exposure. 'Odissi is so beautiful, it's so very graceful' I was often told when introducing myself as a dancer of the form. The other students were particularly enamoured of Madhu Appa's skill having seen her perform on the first night and heard of her reputation. After all, she had been selected by her *guru* to carry on his legacy, the story went. Other dancers were curious about her as a person and teacher, as we were of their gurus in return. For many at Dance India, this was an opportunity to come face to face with the celebrity dancers we so greatly admired.

Even though the aim of Dance India was to bring together teachers and students in an intensive setting, and while the teachers seemed extremely

approachable in class and lecture situations and were clearly comfortable in teaching workshops such as this, when teachers were seen at mealtimes they were always seated together engaged in conversation on one topic or another. Rarely did a student approach a teacher to socialise; more often, any intimacy or familiarity that was cultivated in the classroom was suspended outside for it seemed students and teachers both preferred to stay in their relative spaces. For many of the students, this was safest as it minimised the chances of saying or doing the 'wrong thing' and offending senior dancers. Cvete, the only non-Indian teacher, was rarely with her colleagues and would often eat alone if not disappear completely during breaks. In addition to Madhu Appa, there was Leela Samson and Priyadarshini Govind teaching Bharatanatyam and Kumudini Lakhia teaching Kathak. The latter, now in her 80s, is regarded as having revolutionised Kathak by introducing group and abstract choreographies to its performance and is known and loved for her firecracker personality (for more on Lakhia see Shah 2005). The atmosphere of celebrity was thick for some of the biggest names in Indian classical dance were present.

**Annexing Dance/India**

I begin this chapter with Dance India because it captures succinctly the transnational networks that come into play in the learning and performing of Indian classical dance in contemporary Britain. As such, it provides one example of what Avtar Brah (1996) has called 'diaspora space', a concept distinct from that of diaspora for it brings together diasporic, 'indigenous' (home culture) and 'native' (host culture) subjectivities. As I will show in this chapter, not only Dance India but the larger transnational network that is the current Indian classical dance scene can be regarded

as diaspora space constructed at the interstices of travel, historical knowledge and cultural subjectivity.

For many dance students in the UK, as well as in North America and Europe, Dance India is part of their annual dance calendars, similar to the number of dancers in the diaspora who plan their trips to India around the annual festival season held there every winter. However, despite regular student participation from other European and North American countries, Dance India is indeed a British (albeit British South Asian) institution. This is due not only to the fact that it is organised by a British organisation and supported with money raised in the UK; the very demographics of the South Asian community established as it is in this country make events such as this possible in the context of the UK.

Students travel from elsewhere in Europe and North America because they have no such equivalent event available in other countries. Furthermore, it is this Britishness that provided a sense of tailored normality and enabled many of the participants – especially the younger ones – to see it as a weeklong getaway, a place to socialise with friends, a summer camp similar to ones their school friends might attend but specific to their cultural needs and interests. Indeed, one of the most noticeable disconnects at Dance India was between the younger students for whom dance was a hobby funded, if not also enforced, by their parents and the older students who not only funded their own training but also recognised the magnitude of this opportunity to work with dancers they idolised. This is not to suggest that dance for the more mature dancers was not a hobby, or that they did not take time to enjoy themselves, but it is to suggest that their experience of Dance India was different. This difference might explain why Dance India was such an emotional (and sometimes emotionally draining) experience for many of the older dancers.

Just as Dance India provided a normalised British experience of summer camp to its young diasporic participants, with sandwiches and pasta salad for lunch and rice and *daal* for dinner, it also presented – thereby constructing and representing – the 'indigenous' dance elite, the expert teachers who travelled from India to give students a level of training presumed impossible to acquire otherwise in the context of the UK. Even though Dance India – like Sangam year-round – promoted dancers trained and based in the UK (some of whom are established professionals) and featured them in performances over the week, the opening remarks of the Director stressed the importance of Sangam in filling the presumed lacuna caused by what he described as the inadequate training offered in this country. Despite there being some good dancers in the UK, the Director did not consider them in his speech at the opening ceremony to be of a high enough standard, making Dance India necessary in the organisation's view for giving students access to 'authentic' teachers from India. It therefore presented India as the source of tradition, standard of measurement and leading authority on the dance in a global context.

Despite being marketed as an international school and drawing students from several different countries, the deep alignment of Sangam's project with hegemonic constructs of Indian nationhood and culture was continually highlighted. For example, it so happened that the sixty-fourth anniversary of India's independence corresponded with the second day of the summer school. In honour of this, the performance that evening began with the screening of a music video for Academy Award Winner A R Rahman's re-composition of the Indian national anthem, which featured some of the most famous singers and musicians of the country in both the recording studio and at some of India's iconic landscapes. While evening performances were open to Dance India participants, tickets were also sold to members of the public and attracted some

of the regular (white) audience demographics of the theatre. The playing of the national anthem was therefore not only a commemoration of India for those with connections (real or perceived) to the country, but also a way of situating the performance – and by extension the summer school – within a specific national/ist framework for the mainstream audience.

The transnational context of the summer school meant that the diversity of countries represented and backgrounds of those involved could not go unacknowledged, yet even this was done in a particular way that simultaneously foregrounded India as central. Participants and theatregoers were constantly informed by one of the banners outside the theatre entrance that 'Indian culture is both timeless and universal. They travel and find form in new places.' India, it would appear, was primary and making it accessible to students and enthusiasts here in the UK is what made its scope global.

Unlike the striking fixation with producing Contemporary South Asian dance that dominates the scene in London that I discuss below, there was very little scope to explore contemporary trends in any of the dance forms at Dance India. This can explain why many of the professional South Asian dancers working in London (and therefore working on Contemporary South Asian dance) were not in attendance, as well as Jai's visible frustration by the end of the week.

This is not to say there was nothing 'contemporary' at Dance India; the question of contemporaneity was raised after one of the lecture demonstrations in the Q&A, and many of the performances by the teachers displayed sophisticated examples of their approaches to contemporise the dance form from within, especially with regard to costuming, music and thematic content and presentation. However, these were rarely discussed as part of the actual curriculum. The response of the

teachers in the Q&A suggested that contemporaneity went without saying, implying that it did not need to be spelled out as it is in the British South Asian dance context; for the teachers, their dance had contemporary relevance because it was practiced by themselves 'in the present'. The Q&A ended when one teacher described the classical/ contemporary distinction as "a pain in the butt. Tradition, modern, classical. We are contemporary. Our musicians are contemporary". While this treatment of contemporaneity as a non-issue spoke to the difference in discourses between India and the UK, it nonetheless served to annex Dance India as part of the Indian dance context while still in the UK. This transnational school nonetheless operated on very national terms.

**Tracing the National in the Transnational**

As suggested in the previous chapter, the distinction between Indian classical and Contemporary South Asian dance is dominant in the British context. Moreover, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, this distinction is shaped by and contributes to racialised constructions of culture. Thus, even the relative absence of articulations of this distinction at Dance India were telling; by not considering the relationship between Indian classical and Contemporary South Asian dance in the British context, the summer school could produce itself in relation to Indian national identity (read Indian classical dance) and not cultural hybridity (read Contemporary South Asian dance), despite its location in the UK and its transnational pool of students. However, as I will argue below, even this production of national ties facilitates discourses of cultural hybridity (paradoxical as they may be) and is part of the multicultural context of the UK.

This chapter considers the transnational space in which Indian classical dance is currently produced and its impact on the construction of national, racial and cultural identities. I begin by analysing the spectrum of British South Asian dance from Indian classical to Contemporary South Asian performances in order to trace the relationship between these genres of dance and the construction of ethnic subjectivity. I then explore the journeys of diasporic and non-diasporic dancers to India to examine how they produce India as the 'homeland' of Indian classical dance, as well as how they construct Indian classical dance performances as intrinsically cultural – a euphemism for processes of racialisation. This journeying to India, I argue, contributes to shaping the British multicultural landscape as Indian classical dance is performed here in strict relation to the cultural and racial identities of its performers, identities that are solidified in reference to the subcontinent. This chapter therefore concludes by returning to the British multicultural context with which it began in order to demonstrate more fully the mutually constitutive relationship of British and Indian national-cultural identities.

### British South Asian Dance: Classicism, Contemporaneity and Racialisation

When I commenced my fieldwork on Indian classical dance in London, I did not expect to encounter Contemporary South Asian dance to the extent that I did. I soon realised that the relationship between 'classical' and 'contemporary' dance was further complicated by the lack of clear definitions regarding the latter, with dancers defining Contemporary South Asian dance in as many ways as there were dance performances.

Although Indian classical and Contemporary South Asian dance are expressed as distinct genres, they nonetheless co-produce one another. To study one thus

requires an analysis of the other. In the previous chapter, I discussed the temporal construction of the relationship between Indian classical and Contemporary South Asian dance as constituting an evolutionary schema that reified notions of tradition and modernity. Apparent in this relationship are the ways in which this distinction also aligns with the production of 'Indian' and 'British' national identities; while Indian classical dance is associated with constructions of the Indian nation, through discourses of culture, tradition and religion, Contemporary South Asian dance contributes to the production of the British nation as multicultural, cosmopolitan and celebratory of hybridity.

Thus, despite its close alignment to constructs of the Indian nation, the production of Indian classical dance (as demonstrated at Dance India, for example) becomes central to definitions of a multicultural British identity *in its contrast* to Contemporary South Asian dance. As such, the distinction of classicism and contemporaneity are shaped by and help shape processes of racialisation, as I will demonstrate later in this chapter. In short, Indian classical dance relies upon racialised discourses of culture and ethnicity, while Contemporary South Asian dance articulates a desire to transcend these discourses (although it remains questionable whether it is equipped to do so). Having examined the relationship between Indian classical dance and the production of Indian national-cultural identity above, I now turn to the relationship between Contemporary South Asian dance and the construction of British multiculturalism.

The connection between South Asian dance – both classical and contemporary – culture and ethnicity is simultaneously local and global. In the current context of globalisation, transnationalism and multiculturalism, the South Asian dance scene in London has developed in ways that make it appear the quintessential form of ethnic

dance, despite its practitioners' stated intentions to move away from playing 'the race card'. The paradox of this aim for interchangeable equivalence with other dance styles is demonstrable in the fact that South Asian dance is both presented as one form of dance amongst many as well as the minority dance *par excellence*.

This construction is perhaps most evident in those dance performances that exist at the extreme end of the spectrum between local and global that characterise the current transnational moment (Brah 1996; Clifford 1994; Hall 1991a, 1991b); that is, those dance performances that seek to interrogate subjectivity and identity politics in the context of multicultural dialogue and antagonism in the UK. It is this spectrum that unites Dance India with the Contemporary South Asian performances I now turn to, as well as with dance classes and performances in India, which I will discuss later in this chapter. For example, one of the first performances I attended during fieldwork in London was by an "Asian-inspired dance company … showcasing their new innovative and collaborative work… featuring a triple bill of 5 female dancers, fus[ing] the ancient South Indian classical dance Bharata Natyam with contemporary techniques" (programme notes). New to the dance scene in London, I was to first learn from this production just how much Contemporary dance dominates South Asian dance in the city.

The performance consisted of three pieces, the last of which demonstrated more explicit choreographic references to Bharatanatyam than the first two. Perhaps the most successful – based on audience response – was the first piece, which featured four of the five dancers. The piece began with the dancers physically struggling with one another for the microphone so that they might be able to tell the audience about themselves; as soon as one got the mic, the others quickly stole it away so that each of their stories was told in segments. The audience was thus introduced to the dancers

who appeared to be playing themselves: a Chinese Canadian woman, a white American woman who introduced herself as Hindu (although her family had "left the temple"), a French English woman and an "Anglo-Indian" woman who (nonetheless) identified as English (she was the only British woman on stage).

During her speech, the white Hindu woman spoke of how she felt lost when her family had left the temple when she was a child and how people would react oddly to her Hindu name; the Anglo-Indian woman responded that she did not know what it meant to be "part Indian" and wondered if that was why she was "so hairy". Comedy was used throughout the piece to explore the complexities and absurdities of cultural essentialism, often eliciting laughter from the audience in response.

At another point, the white Hindu woman began to dance a Bharatanatyam piece (she was the only dancer of the four trained in any style of Indian classical dance, although all four were very clearly trained in Western Contemporary dance to professional standards as was evident from their biographic information). The Anglo-Indian woman quickly grabbed the microphone to act as interlocutor for the Bharatanatyam dancer's movements, calling out possible interpretations as if she were playing charades: 'she's picking flowers', 'she's happy', 'she's getting married', 'she's determined', 'she's on a boat', 'she's stomping because she is determined'. The last comment was in reference to the stylistic feature common to most forms of Indian classical dance (including Kathak, Bharatanatyam and Odissi) whereby dancers make rhythmic patterns by slapping their bare feet on the ground.

This sequence brought attention to the potential for observers to misunderstand and outright mock Indian classical dance forms (many an Indian classical dancer's fear) while at the same time making fun of the spectator's random if not outlandish speculations. The conjecture that 'she's getting married' in particular

resonated strongly with the stereotyping of South Asian culture and its assumed obsession with matrimony and grandiose weddings. Interestingly, a similar sequence was to occur with the Chinese-Canadian dancer, with 'she's getting married' offered once again as a possible explanation; such did not happen however with the other two dancers.

The piece ended with the use of props through which dancers could further express their cultural identities; somewhat predictably (and perhaps once again drawing attention to and finding amusement in the cliché), food became a major cultural signifier. At one point, all of the dancers were on stage, improvising movement individually so as to be dancing around themselves within the group formation. Each would again grab the microphone to announce their favourite cultural foods. Chicken tikka masala and balti were those of the Anglo-Indian-as-English woman. Next, the dancers each brought a basket to the front of the stage to empty and display their contents. Along with food, they also used clothing and other material objects that held personal or cultural significance. The French woman pulled out a bottle of wine, a baguette, a beret and some sausage, while the English woman pulled out a box of PG Tips tea bags and a picture of the Queen. As the piece concluded the lights dimmed, leaving the focus on a pre-recorded conversation between the dancers discussing their experiences of immigrating to the UK and their understandings of home. Such were the cosmopolitan identities in the making.

Despite its very literal performance, the piece was nonetheless able to demonstrate the absurdity and humour of clichés without necessarily becoming one itself; it therefore was an insightful exploration of the composite identities that come together in the context of multiculturalism. However, notwithstanding the diversity of the dancers and their ability in different dance styles (the Chinese Canadian woman

performed a ribbon dance in her solo while the French English woman performed ballet in hers), the performance was still marketed as – and reduced to – Contemporary South Asian dance. This is not to say that Contemporary South Asian dance is not capable of complex investigations on its own, but it is worth asking why it was selected – or at least articulated – as the medium from which to explore a multiplicity of cultural forms and identities.

I observed a similar occurrence a year later when a Kathak company presented a production that sought to explore the complexity of cultural identity as essentialised through the phenomenon of 'ticking boxes', referring to selecting one's ethnic identity on census forms. In this production too, the only practitioner of Indian classical dance was the founder of the company, who danced with three other dancers (two of whom were trained in Western Contemporary dance and one in b-boy/break dancing). Both performances, although powerful and engaging, were much more than performances of South Asian dance. Yet, by presenting them as South Asian-inspired (even if they were indeed South Asian-inspired), naturalised the connection between South Asian dance and anxieties of cultural identity.

The performances were sophisticated for demonstrating that people from a variety of backgrounds could and did experience the same questions of cultural essentialisation, stereotyping and angst. Yet foregrounding them as South Asian dance-inspired did not allow for the complexities demonstrated by the individual performers to be projected back onto the dance form or its larger culture; that is to say, people 'of other cultures' were shown to encounter the same problems as South Asians (and visa versa), but South Asian dance was not shown to share its problems with other dance forms. Indeed, to reflect this complexity onto the dance form does

not appear to be the aim, as is captured in the closing lines of the promotional material for the Bharatanatyam-inspired production discussed first:

> Expect to see precise and well articulated movement which challenges ideas of form, identity and artistic freedom, all executed with the utmost grace. By reducing the cultural specificity and religious associations of Bharata Natyam, [the Company] revives the language of South Indian dance and makes this unique art form more accessible.

Here, South Asian dance remains the ethnic dance *par excellence* as Indian classical dance – strongly associated with Indian 'cultural specificity and religious associations' (as also demonstrated at Dance India) – becomes the grounds from which Contemporary South Asian dance can emerge to explore perceptions of cultural anxiety.

**Producing Multiculturalism**

While it remains questionable whether it is even possible for Contemporary South Asian dancers to escape the specificity of their cultural identity (see Norridge 2010), the fact that they turn to Western Contemporary dance is indicative of a political turn. The Contemporary South Asian performances I have described corroborate Erdman's (2000:182) observations that South Asian dancers appear only to collaborate with Western dance forms, indicating that their goals are more political and economic than reflective of the pursuit for artistic expression. For Erdman, "the asymmetry of South Asian dance culture with Western dance categories reveals the relationship between dance and a society's cultural categories: in Britain, Indian dance is seen through a *British* lens and can never gain legitimacy as a British dance" (ibid, emphasis in original). Thus Contemporary South Asian dance – a category that emerges in Britain – is never fully part of British national identity; it makes possible British claims to

multiculturalism, but ultimately remains tied to Indian classical dance and the cultural identity this relation entails.

Performances such as the two described above are situated squarely within multicultural politics, even if they exist as critiques of the reifying nature of multicultural discourse. Attempting to undermine cultural essentialism, these performances and others nonetheless overdetermine it, for they present a harmonised multiculturalism rather than probe how multiculturalism is itself productive of cultural identity, structural inequality and racial marginalisation (see Kapoor 2013; Bannerji 2000; Ahmed 2000; Hage 1998; Gilroy 1992; Hall 1991b). In so doing, these performances do not continue the work of earlier South Asian artists who worked out of a position of active anti-racism, as can be seen in earlier issues of *ADiTi*[62], as well as in the work of musicians and other performing artists (see Thomas 2012; Hingorani 2010; Murthy 2009; Hutnyk 2000). This is not to say that performers in the present would not identify with particular (albeit more polite perhaps) positions found in the expressions of their predecessors; but it is to suggest that the turn to Contemporary South Asian dance articulates a different political alignment.

Herein lies the crux of the matter, as multiculturalism has displaced the politics of anti-racism. In the British context, the shift from anti-racism to multiculturalism (as an expression of 'post-racialism') is associated with the policies of New Labour at the end of the twentieth and start of the twenty-first centuries (Kapoor 2013; Gilroy 2012). This shift is further strengthened by the more general advancement of neoliberalism, which according to Goldberg (2009, 2008) relegates

[62] ADiTi, the National Body of South Asian Dance, published what became the leading British magazine for this dance from 1989 to 1999. Published quarterly, *ADiTi* featured articles by dancers, critics, board members and other invited writers, as well as reviews of and advertisements for performances, workshops and conferences. In 2000, the magazine was re-branded and *ADiTi* was disbanded; in 2001, the magazine was re-launched as *Pulse*, which continues to be published by Kadam.

race to the private realm as a result of the privileging of the rights-based and agentic approach of neoliberal politics. As Kapoor (2013) has shown, the rise of neoliberalism in the UK has led to 'de-racialisation' as a means to promote 'post-racialism'. Furthermore, the institutionalisation of anti-racism and the mandate of the state to promote diversity and 'community cohesion' – all of which were a part of New Labour's emphasis on "national economic growth in a globalised economy alongside an ambivalent melancholic desire for an imperial past" (ibid:1030) – has simultaneously led to the silencing of 'race' in public discourse as well as its further entrenchment (ibid; see also Ahmed 2012).

In this context of British multiculturalism, South Asian dance performances (classical and, perhaps especially, Contemporary) work to demonstrate that 'ethnic' dancers are capable of integrating into the mandate of community cohesion. Indeed, audiences at these performances can participate in and thus produce British multiculturalism for, as Gilroy (2012:387) has noted, the "appetite for the exotic pleasures of multiculture" can be used as a helpful index for congratulatory perceptions of how far society has moved 'beyond' race.

Dancers similarly celebrate the presumed move beyond racialised culture; as a Bharatanatyam dancer of South Asian origin explained to me, arts funding "used to go to big brown fish in a small pond doing mediocre work" as an expression of "middle-class guilt". For this dancer, her perceptions of professional success were marked by her feelings of not having "played the brown card" to secure funding for her solo tour. While this might be the case with funding emphasis shifting from cultural preservation to innovation, the racialisation of the dance has become further entrenched at the same time as references to it are being rendered less visible. Indeed, where whiteness is interpreted as culturally neutral (Hage 1998), discourses of visible

(minority) culture are always already discourses of race (Fanon 2008, 2004; see also Puwar 2004).

## South Asian Dance and Discourses of Multiculturalism

Comparing constructions of Indian classical and Contemporary South Asian dance in the context of British multiculturalism, the former emerges as representative of an essentialised and static Indian culture – one that is in line with Indian nationalist discourses – while the latter is presented as emblematic of the culturally liminal (though by no means acultural) space of London where it is regarded as particular to the experiences of British Asians as cosmopolitan subjects. Indeed in London, dancers and promoters whom I encountered often spoke of Contemporary Indian dance performances falling flat in the UK because these performers are not familiar with the contemporary British context and therefore do not/cannot produce work that is deemed relevant; often such performances are described as "what was happening in the UK 15-20 years ago" (from interview with a London-based dance promoter). Indian dancers are thus produced as incapable of existing in the same contemporary moment as British South Asian dancers, while Indian culture is once more presented as timeless and unchanging.

As noted in the previous section, the shift from anti-racism to multiculturalism has nonetheless resulted in a dynamic whereby 'race' remains entrenched in the very structuring of society; "race, a core feature of state modernisation, now operates on a register less obvious than before, if still crucial" (Goldberg 2008:1713). This persistence of racial discourses is evidenced in the field of Indian classical and South Asian dance that I analyse in this thesis. Crucially, the racialisation of Indian classical dance that emerges in the current multicultural context, buttressed by transnational

mobility, is not new but a continuation of colonial and nationalist articulations of Indian culture as essence.

What emerges in the contemporary context however is the way in which the formation of British multicultural identity, through the performance and consumption of Indian classical and Contemporary South Asian dance, is facilitated by (and thus requires) the racialisation of a static Indian culture. In short, the performances inspired by Bharatanatyam and Kathak described above rely upon the existence of discourses such as those produced at Dance India. This dynamic has similarity with the colonial situation discussed in the Introduction whereby Europe came into being in relation to the cultures and people it colonised.

It is to these processes of racialisation in the context of a diaspora space that encompasses Indian, diasporic and non-South Asian dancers travelling between India and the UK that I turn. This diaspora space produces India (with varying levels of regional specificity) as the 'home' of Indian classical dance as well as the discourses of racial and cultural difference that operate in both India and the UK. Given that this production of India as cultural home occurs in India as well is indicative of the interrelatedness of both contexts. To demonstrate this, I will now examine the construction of India as homeland for the dance and the experiences of diasporic and non-South Asian dancers who travel there to train. It is the culutralising of the dance in India, cemented through the transnational travel of dancers between the UK and the subcontinent that I analyse in the following sections, that shapes the status of the dance as ethnic/cultural in British multicultural imaginaries. I conclude this chapter by returning to the British context to trace the impact of this construction of India on the multicultural politics of the UK.

**Constructing the Homeland of Indian Classical Dance**

Placing Dance India and the examples of Contemporary South Asian dance discussed above on a spectrum that results from the larger context of postcolonial transnationalism and British multiculturalism, it becomes evident that the concept of diaspora space is a fruitful point of departure, as well as an informative amendment to the way in which diaspora has conventionally been described. As discussed in the Introduction, despite the undeniable link between diaspora and homeland, the return to a place of origin is not necessarily a primary concern for many diasporic groups, if a concern at all (Koshy 2008; Falzon 2005; Brah 1996). This is particularly evident in the British South Asian diaspora, with several generations now settled in the UK, and has prompted Koshy to argue "a weak myth of return can constitute a strong diaspora" (2008:7).

More important to the diasporic experience than an actual homeland then is the *construction* of homeland, and the South Asian diaspora exalts this construction in abundance. The production of a utopic homeland (in both senses of utopia as an ideal place and an impossible place) can be described as having a key hold in the diasporic imaginary (Falzon 2005; Axel 2002; van der Veer 1995; Ghosh 1989). It is this production that enacts a process of identification that is itself generative of diasporic subjectivity. Crucially, the South Asian diaspora is not the first to construct a coherent India given the colonial discourses and nationalist desires that preceded it, as was discussed in earlier chapters. Furthermore, this project of conceptualising India continues in the multicultural context; the diaspora is therefore not alone in producing India in a particular way, as I will demonstrate in the remainder of this chapter by analysing the relationship of both diasporic and non-South Asian dancers to Indian classical dance.

According to Falzon (2005), the construction of a site that can be collectively identified as a cultural centre or 'heart' of a diasporic group – and not necessarily a 'homeland' in the strictest sense – is central to diasporic identity. Although Indian classical dancers might demonstrate a deeper investment in (the construction of) India than the Sindhis living in Bombay, Malta and London whom Falzon describes, his analysis nonetheless provides another way of thinking about the diaspora in its relation to its perceived place of origin.

For Falzon, the commercial activity that produces Bombay as the "cultural heart" (ibid:86) of the Sindhi diaspora highlights the modern neoliberal underpinnings of this translocal node. The relationship of the diaspora to this 'homeland' is thus not necessarily one of nostalgia but of dynamic activity and mobility, both spatial and social. This resonates in particular with the relationship between Indian classical dancers abroad and the India revered as the homeland of the dance. Given the transmobility of these dancers who can afford to travel between the perceived and constructed peripheries and centre of Indian classical dance, their professional and social backgrounds shape the extent to which they view their participation in the international Indian classical dance circuit as a sign of their cultured status. Thus contemporary globalisation processes and neoliberal economic policies cannot be ignored for they make such activity possible (for more on the relationship between neoliberalism and diaspora, see Koshy 2008; Ong 1999; Appadurai 1996).

Brah's diaspora space and Falzon's translocal site of interconnectivity therefore facilitate greater understanding of the international Indian classical dance scene. Emotionally and historically tied to India, Indian classical dance nonetheless provides a field or 'scape' that connects people in various locations in a very modern

way[63]. Furthermore, as Mitter (2007) has argued in his study of Indian art and modernism, the circulation of and influential relationship between various artistic expressions does not only occur along an East/West axis but through the alignment of urban centres as opposed to constructions of rurality; in this analysis, urban Calcutta and Delhi (and their elites) may have a lot more in common with metropolitan London than Puri or Bhubaneswar.

It is thus within one field that Indian classical dance teachers located in the diaspora will take their students on fieldtrips to India so that they can better understand the dance, an activity that at once engages transnational links and yet relies on the specificity of locatable culture. Such trips are not meant to invoke a desire for return to India as homeland in students – most of whom are either second or third generation South Asians who identify the UK as their home or Westerners with no familial links to India whatsoever. Rather, such trips are a way of tying diasporic and multicultural dance practices to the pan-Indian culture of the subcontinent, enabling dancers to perceive of and perform them as one and the same. As we shall see in this field that is Indian classical dance in the present, "imaginary homelands blend into their real homelands without the subjects realising that transmutation" (Khondker 2010:139). The Indian classical dance community is imagined on a global scale across spatial boundaries by the dancers who form its network.

However, like those of the diaspora, non-South Asian dancers also contribute to the construction of India as a 'cultural heart' or 'homeland', demonstrating the success of longstanding narratives of Indian dance discussed in the Introduction. Some go so far as to identify with that homeland themselves and claim it as their own; for example one European dancer described her first journey to India:

[63] For more on cultural flows across global and local boundaries that produce alternative conceptualisations of space in the example of mediascapes, see Appadurai (1996).

> I remember the first time that I came there [sic]; I came with a friend, also a girl from my dance studio. And when we just went out of the aeroplane – and you can smell the air in Delhi, which is actually very dirty – I felt like I was at home.

The wide spectrum of identity encompassed in the category of foreign dancer, as I describe below, thus enables dancers of both diasporic and non-South Asian background to simultaneously experience the dance as theirs and not theirs. In constructing varying levels of local specificity and global traversability, dancers produce categories of belonging and non-belonging, of rightful ownership and access to a homeland through the acquisition of Indian classical dance (and its accompanying cultural knowledge) as cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986). The diaspora space of Indian classical dance is home to many subjects indeed.

**'Foreign' Dancers Travelling Home to Indian Classical Dance**

While the various actors participating in this field come from different backgrounds rooted in specificity – differences between second or third generation diasporic dancers, twice-migrated South Asian dancers and white dancers with national ties to Europe and North America performing in the UK for example – the dance exemplifies in itself a site from which to study the translocal and the transglobal. According to Brah (1996:196), "diasporic identities are at once local and global. They are networks of transnational identifications encompassing 'imagined' and 'encountered' communities". By virtue of their interest in and detailed knowledge of Indian classical dance and its cultural accoutrements, dancers of non-South Asian origin similarly construct their identities as Indian classical dancers on multiple levels. As such, they too are part of the diaspora space of Indian classical dance.

Until now, these various identities and forms of subjectivity have been mentioned in passing; I will now turn to them in greater detail in the following

sections in an attempt to show both their overlapping similarities and differences. But given that so much of a dancer's identity is produced in respect to their relation to India and their ability to travel, I begin with a brief look at the type of dance 'tourism' that results from these training practices[64].

An Indian classical dancer's credibility and sense of accomplishment is often premised upon whether or not she or he has travelled to India for training; those who have spent extended periods of time there as well as those who travel frequently and maintain personal contacts with teachers there are considered especially proficient. Part of this is to do with the fact that more often than not dancers will apply for and receive some sort of funding – be it Arts Council funding or fellowships such as those offered by Sangam – to mitigate the cost of travel, boarding, and training[65]. A dancer's success in securing funding further lends an aura of professionalism and serves to validate their work.

More central to the importance placed on training in India is the assumption that the quality and intensity of training is in fact different there, as was suggested at Dance India described earlier. Indeed, upon travelling to India, students will often find themselves in daily dance classes as compared to the weekly ones they might take at home. Furthermore, the training is seen as more holistic; it is expected that

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[64] I use the term tourism here deliberately to invoke the privilege of power experienced by the tourist; as Kaplan (1996) notes, "[t]ourism heralds postmodernism; it is a product of the rise of consumer culture, leisure, and technological innovation" (ibid:27), and enacts parallels to the nineteenth century upper- and middle-class travel thought necessary for the cultivation of well-rounded agents of knowledge (ibid: 50). Tourism is furthermore fuelled by the insatiable search for "verifiable markers of 'authenticity'" (ibid: 60). "For the tourist, a souvenir or photograph, developing relationships with indigenous people, documenting customs, manners and landscapes, or learning a language will serve to mark the portals of 'entrance' into the 'authentic'" (ibid). Travelling to India to learn from the native 'heirs' of its traditions, purchase costumes and jewellery, and learning and embodying different customs, dancers today engage in a particular kind of tourism when they return 'home' and market their credentials of 'having undertaken intensive study in India'. Reaping benefits of my sojourns to India, I too am complicit.

[65] The fact that dancers apply for and receive funding does not retract from my earlier point that the mobility of dancers indicates their relative class privilege; indeed such funding is often insufficient and has to be supplemented by personal income. Furthermore, dancers must be in a position where they can take off extended periods of time from work or school to travel and pursue an already expensive hobby.

foreign students will participate in the group technique exercises in which dancers go through the core strengthening exercises that one learns as a beginner. These exercises will often be forgone abroad, where a limited amount of class time means that teachers and students must move quickly through choreographies and do not repeat the basic exercises to the same gruelling degree. Many 'foreign' students – as diasporic and white dancers are often collectively referred to in India – will also take advantage of the opportunity to study music and theory in order to complement their dance training, further establishing important connections with musicians with whom they or their teachers might later work. It is also on these trips that the practicalities of procuring costumes, buying and repairing jewellery and *ghungrus*, and making provisions for recorded music are made for the dancer to take back for their performances at home.

While the category of foreign dancers in India can encompass both diasporic and non-South Asian Western identities, this is not to suggest that diasporic and other Western dancers are regarded as exactly the same; both subject positions entail their respective benefits and disadvantages. Commenting on diasporic identity, Brah notes that individual subjects can simultaneously occupy both 'majority' and 'minority' positions (1996:189). This is apparent in the analysis of the interlocking processes of subject formation (race, class, gender, ability, sexual orientation, religion, etc.) and can therefore be applied to the larger transnational analysis at hand. In the case of Indian classical dancers training in India, diasporic 'foreign' dancers might be in the minority relative to 'native' dancers, however they have more access to, and are expected to understand better, the cultural resources that facilitate dance learning (such as language, knowledge of Hindu mythology and belief, an understanding of cultural norms and etiquette) than their non-Indian counterparts.

That diasporic dancers experience and benefit from increased access compared to their white counterparts places the former in a majority position in this instance. At the same time however, white 'foreign' students benefit from their closer association to the West and are thus placed within a larger majority of globally hegemonic communities. Their expected lack of knowledge of Indian culture and traditions can engender greater oversight if they make mistakes while their demonstrated proficiency in learning about these cultural traits can be celebrated even more enthusiastically for having supposedly traversed a greater cultural divide. The two categories of 'foreignness' thus revolve around notions of race and ethnic identity, demonstrating the blurring culturalisation of race and racialisation of culture in everyday practices (Baumann 1997; Banks 1996; Gilroy 1992). What becomes important then is not only to look at how South Asian origin and non-diasporic Western dancers occupy both minority and majority positions simultaneously, but to also observe and interrogate the genealogical trajectories of power that inform these subject positions and therefore attempt to understand better their very production – a point that is a running theme throughout my analytical project.

## Indianising the Dancer: From Nation to Village

So tied to Indian culture is Indian classical dance in the eyes of teachers, students and audiences that the extent and nature of one's foreignness is understood through one's dance proficiency and in turn informs opinions about how one's dance is received. Importantly, this is true for both diasporic and non-diasporic Western dancers as became clear to me during fieldwork in Orissa[66].

[66] The ethnographic data for this section comes primarily from Orissa. Bhubaneswar is less metropolitan than the other cities to which dancers of other styles travel, and the regional identity of Odissi as the dance of Orissa is perhaps even more stressed. Kathak is seen as a North Indian dance; as

Two months after Dance India, I performed at an annual award festival in Bhubaneswar. Each year, a young and upcoming dancer in one of the forms of Indian classical dance is given the Devadasi Award and invited to perform along with eleven other young soloists over the three-day festival. The 2011 recipient was Ananya Subramanian, a young South Asian woman from Los Angeles who now lives half the year in Chennai to further progress her professional Bharatanatyam career. Her mother is also a well-known Bharatanatyam dancer who established a school after migrating to LA when Subramanian was a young child.

Subramanian has made the transition between life in India and the US smoothly and is as comfortable in Chennai as she is in LA (likely facilitated by her class privilege that enables such easy mobility). Whether in Bhubaneswar or Chennai, every time I met and saw her engage with other people, often locals, she would speak in unmistakably American English. As such, she might be seen as part of a new generation of internationally mobile dancers as distinct from earlier generations of foreign dancers who moved to India and 'went native'[67]. Indeed, upon returning to London and telling a young Bharatanatyam dancer based here wishing to embark on a professional career about meeting Subramanian, I was told how great a role model she is for proving to the conservative and puritan Chennai dance scene[68] that an "outsider

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such it covers a larger region and boasts multiple centres in different cities. Bharatanatyam is of course associated with the South, particularly Chennai; its status as one of the longest established Indian classical dance forms however might deliver it from some of the cultural anxiety encountered in relation to Odissi. However, as I move at the end of this chapter towards a more general analysis of the diaspora/UK, where regional specificity is surpassed by more general national/ethnic categories, many of my observations about foreign dancers in Orissa remain relevant to the larger discussion at hand.

[67] There is a history of dancers, mostly from America and Europe, moving to India permanently for dance and adopting various aspects of the "Indian lifestyle" including, dress, language, cooking skills, eating habits and other local craft activities. One of the earliest examples might be Ragini Devi, discussed in the Introduction, who moved to India in the early twentieth century (see Rahman 2001). The practice of 'going native' was of course not specific to dancers, having been preceded by some of the earliest arrivals of the East India Company (Hutnyk 2000:91).

[68] The Chennai dance scene is notorious for its exclusive nature and authoritative claim in assessing Bharatanatyam, both within India and abroad. One British South Asian dancer captured this in her interview:

– especially one as LA as Ananya" – can become a successful Bharatanatyam soloist. However, her introduction by the Oriya emcee on the opening day of the festival did not try to capture the nuances of her identity, describing her instead as "basically a Chennai girl, but her family relocated to LA". This introduction seemed to be another example of how Indian dancers and presenters try to 'Indianise' non-native classical dancers when appreciating their dance; Subramanian was a dancer to be celebrated and was therefore undoubtedly Indian (not even diasporic).

Other examples of 'Indianising' celebrated dancers include descriptions of successful American Odissi dancer Sharon Lowen as "an American Jew [who] possesses startlingly Indian looks. With dark hair, a pair of large eyes, and typical oriental features she has the looks of an Indian dancer. She has imbibed the spirit of Odissi and is a serious exponent of the form" (Kothari and Pasricha 1990:130). Noticeable in this account is the extent to which 'Indianising' entails racialising. Written by one of the leading dance critics and scholars in India today, this account was clearly intended as a compliment, but it raises questions as to the priorities for assessment regarding a dancer's skill and commitment, not to mention the multiple and symbiotic levels of Orientalism that are in play.

Such forms of praise are not rare and many foreign Odissi dancers have encountered similar experiences, as is demonstrated in the following excerpt from a group interview I conducted in India with three dancers, two of whom had moved to

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> Chennai is undoubtedly the home of Bharatanatyam. So there is a root and something very grounded about that… I'm hopefully going to perform there this December. It will be my first time performing in Chennai; I finally feel ready after however many years of dancing. And it's going to be scary. Undoubtedly…it's going to be a scary process because, I mean when I go to India, I feel like I can perpetually be a student there because all the grand old masters are there. They'll always be there, because if they're not there, they'll be replaced by the next generation. And so there's always that aspect to it as the centre of the Bharatanatyam universe.

Note how this dancer slips between Chennai and India (although this does not diminish the role of Chennai in the 'Bharatanatyam universe'), as well as how she constructs Chennai/India as timeless by stating that 'the grand old masters' will 'always be there' even when they are 'replaced by the next generation'.

live there permanently; the first, Sally, is a white woman from North America; the second, Lucia, a Latina woman from South America; the third, a woman who frequently travels from her home in a neighbouring state to study dance at the same institution as Sally and Lucia, remained silent during this part of the interview:

> Sally: For me, because I have this theatre background, I think I'm playing a character, you know. Even as an Odissi dancer, that's one mask. It's also one character. You know, being an American, learning this form. When I go on stage, people say to me, why don't you dye your hair black? Why don't you wear black lenses? You'll look so pretty. Thanks [sarcastically]! But it is an aesthetic. There is a real set aesthetic for Indian beauty. It should be like this. Even if you look at the *shastras*, it says the dancer has to be like this, have black hair…
>
> Lucia: Be this dimension [in size].
>
> Sally: So it's very codified, it's very exact. And obviously we don't all fit the mould.
>
> [Group Laughter]

Note how for Sally, Indian aesthetics translate into racialised features of dark hair and eye colour, but for Lucia who interjects and can much more easily 'pass' as looking ethnic 'enough', it is a question of physical dimensions (height, waist, hips – a reference to some of the other *shastric* conceptualisations of ideal beauty). When Sally picks up her sentence again and says 'we all don't fit the mould', she is making inclusive room for the preceding comment, however it is fair to assume that she is continuing to talk about the racialisation with which she began.

This excerpt is not unique for discussing the praise implied when audience members and dance critics in Orissa respond to foreign performers as 'looking Oriya' or 'looking Indian'. Unlike in theatre, a dancer's costume does not normally change depending on what character they are portraying and often a dancer will play the role of several characters within one choreography. This statement is however further complicated by the extent to which 'looking Oriya/Indian' is simultaneously associated with body language, demonstrating the extent to which the physical body

can be trained into behaving in certain culturally prescribed ways (see Csordas 1990; Connerton 1989; Bourdieu 1977; Mauss 1973). Indeed, this is suggested in the statements that immediately followed the excerpt cited above, at which point I offered a similar experience:

> Question: That reminds me of when I performed here [in Bhubaneswar] a couple of years ago, and the one thing I took away as a compliment was 'you looked so Oriya, like a girl from Puri.'
>
> Sally: But you know, even I get that. I obviously don't look Oriya, but when I do *abhinaya*, the main compliment I get is, I get a surprised good comment, which people don't expect, is 'you looked totally Oriya, your expression was totally Oriya'. But like when you look at Guruji doing an *asthapadi* [about a young girl], you don't see an old man. This is about the depth and strength of an artist. And an artist is always playing a role. You're always playing a role. So for me, that's in the artistry and that's always relevant. That's as relevant as playing any role and I love playing the role of these village women. It's fun to me because it's a huge challenge. I remember [my teacher in America] used to pull her hair out because she's a real stickler for *abhinaya*, and when I would do this very American stuff, she'd be like what are you doing!

The transition from looking American, to looking Oriya, to looking like a girl from Puri (more rural than an Oriya girl) is swift indeed, and requires interrelated discourses of racialised appearance as well as culturalised body language. Indeed, Sally's observation that '*even I get that*' can be interpreted as referring to the differences she perceived between herself as a white American woman and myself as diasporic South Asian. Interesting in this excerpt is the way in which Sally herself internalises this criteria of 'looking Oriya' (whether in hair or eye colour, or in body language) by viewing it as 'playing a role' despite her initial bemusement.

In the multiple layers of locality that operate in the field of Indian classical dance, ranging from the global to the local, the village that Sally refers to takes on particular importance in this analysis. At times, the village appears particular to the Indian context (Puri compared to Bhubaneswar or Delhi), while at others it becomes a metonym for India in its entirety (compared to the UK, for example). Rurality becomes associated with tradition such that 'village girl' becomes code for femininity,

ahistoricism and pan-Indian culture and racialisation, a point that becomes significant in the next chapter.

Further, as Pratt (1992:10) shows in relation to the production of knowledge in the colonial contact zone, Europe's peasantry was treated in similar fashion to the colonised Africans and South Americans described in the travel writing of the time. A striking parallel to this construction emerges in the following excerpt from an interview I conducted with a British Asian Kathak dancer:

> "[the] majority [of my students] yes, they are Asian. But a few from other backgrounds and two who are doing very well are English. And it's really interesting because they are English and yet they have such a feel for Indian culture which is quite remarkable, because one of them lives in a rural village and has never been to India.

English village life is here placed on par with Indian cultural life. Furthermore, this 'village India' is regarded as static such that rurality comes to be equated with tradition; as this teacher continued to say:

> …it's unfortunate that here [in the UK] when we say Indian classical dance, then people are saying it's traditional. And we have to then, in a way, prove that it's not just traditional – yes, it's one aspect of it, where you can decide to portray rural India 500 years ago, which probably rural India today is very similar – but it has the capacity to reflect modern society, modern issues.

Despite her insistence that Indian classical dance '*has the capacity to* reflect modern society', this dancer nonetheless produces rural India in the present as 'very similar' to 'rural India 500 years ago'.

In the excerpts of both dancer's comments, appearing Indian and/or accessing Indian culture (whether regionally specific or nationally generic) become the primary artistic challenge, although how the supposed Indian femininity of a 'village woman' is to be conceived of and presented in the conventional Indian classical dance format (that is, based purely on mime and not relying upon speech or costume) remains a question. What, one might ask, is the 'character' that the dancer plays when not

performing a narrative *abhinaya* piece but rather a *nritta* ‘pure dance’ instead? Is the dancer then American, English, European, Indian, Oriya?

As will be discussed further in the next chapter, the very construction of Indian classical dance forms as ethnic *and* gendered make it impossible for even its performance in the most abstract, non-narrative sense to be viewed as gender and race neutral. This is indicated by the fact that it is not only the dance choreography or its execution that carry the imprint of racialisation; despite Sally’s sarcastic response to inquiries about her (lack of) hair colour, in my experiences working with white dancers, I was surprised to have encountered several (although not all) who had indeed dyed their hair darker shades before performances[69]. Even though Sally rejects dying her hair, her internalisation of the racialisation of the dance by excusing it as the professional and artistic challenges of ‘authentic’ role-playing provides sophisticated cover to similar processes. Indian aesthetics are thus transformed into racialised qualities drawn out on the female dancing body[70].

## Constructing Foreignness, Celebrating Indianness

When a dancer is appreciated for their work, their foreignness can be cited as an asset. Foreign dancers are more technically meticulous and hardworking, I have heard several Indian teachers say both in India and the UK. These descriptions however evoke a stereotypical binary of the West as technical and the East as emotional;

[69] See also Rahman (2004:82) who recounts the time when Indrani Rahman, daughter of an Indian man and white American woman, attempted to darken her hair after being criticised for not looking ‘Indian’ enough.

[70] The gendered nature of this racialisation cannot be ignored, a point that becomes central in the next chapter. Interesting to the discussion at hand is the extent to which, of all the dancers I have encountered, it is women who have discussed such experiences of racialised and culturalised appearances. Although many more foreign women take up Indian classical dance than foreign men, this does not explain the gendering of this kind of racialisation for reasons that will become clear in the following chapter.

foreigners work hard but cannot do good *abhinaya* is the common assumption, for they are too closed emotionally and think rather than feel[71].

On the other hand, when a dancer is not appreciated, their foreignness can be a disadvantage. While in Orissa I heard various accounts from different people about how foreign students, mostly novices, would cause trouble in the neighbourhoods where they stayed by drinking, going out with strangers, and wearing short clothes in public. Landlords were becoming increasingly wary of renting rooms to foreigners for fear of the problems this might cause. These were not the foreigners dedicated to learning the dance but were rather out for an adventurous romp in an exotic land. Theirs was a bad and undesirable kind of foreignness, one of excess and impropriety. These kinds of foreigners it seemed were the opposite of those who were dedicated and hardworking, those who prioritised and valued the dance they had come to learn. Despite these conflicting connotations of foreignness, premised upon one's proficiency in dance, the double meanings of foreignness were never described as contradictory by the teachers who taught them.

Perhaps the greatest collective value attributed to 'good' foreigners is the privileged validation that their dance interest provides to the appointed cultural heirs of the dance, however they might be defined; this helps explain their increased visibility in the Indian dance scene. Foreigners often receive opportunities to perform in India that would likely not be offered to their Indian counterparts for whom such opportunities are much more competitive; several of the foreign – diasporic and white – dancers who made reference to this suggested some discomfort with the advantages

[71] For example, according to one Kathak teacher (who had trained in India but has since immigrated to the UK) who spoke at his student's performance in London, "in technique, Western students are quicker than I and other Indians ever were. The problem is in teaching *abhinaya*. Westerners are too reserved, you can't even teach them to smile properly. In India, people push each other over to get on the train and within ten minutes they're sharing food; in the UK, everyone sits with an iPod or book on the tube, no on looks up, they are so closed".

they perceived to result from their positionalities. Moreover, one foreign (white) professional dancer with extensive performance experience in India suggested to me that festivals receive increased funding from the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) for presenting foreign performers[72]. Indeed, during my stay in India, I was strongly encouraged by an aggressive promoter to register as a foreign dancer with the ICCR so as to benefit my performance career.

It is often assumed – not just by local dancers or teachers, but by landlords, *rikshawallas*, store keepers, and anyone else one might encounter on their study trip to Orissa – that if a foreigner takes interest in Odissi dance and expresses the desire to learn it, then the student must be interested in all things 'culturally' Oriya. This mirrors assumptions in the UK that non-South Asian dancers must be attracted to Indian culture more generally for their interest in Indian classical dance. This is a testament to how deeply entangled are dance and cultural identity, such that it becomes inconceivable to separate the two. It is no surprise then that so many of the dance festivals organised annually, in Orissa as well as in other parts of India, are state sponsored and bear the logos of various tourism and brand India campaigns[73].

The foreign (diasporic and white) dancer travelling in India for training thus experiences an odd parallel with Indian women tourists who toured Europe in the early-twentieth century. According to Lahiri (2010), Indian women travelling to the West in the 1930s were regarded as both "seeing subjects", in that they made and recorded their observations as tourists, as well as "mobile exhibits" or "sites to be seen" (ibid:6, 83). The constant and awkward visibility experienced by many foreign

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[72] The ICCR was inaugurated in 1950 with the objective to establish, strengthen and maintain cultural links between India and other countries; unlike the Akademis funded by the Ministry of Education, the ICCR is funded by the Ministry of External Affairs (Erdman 1983:255).

[73] Part of standard practice at many Odissi dance festivals in Orissa is to felicitate the performer with a token gift at the end. Sure enough, the gift I received on my last performance in Bhubaneswar during fieldwork in 2011 was a picture book for Orissa Tourism.

dancers in Bhubaneswar, over which they can and do bond, might be similarly described at first. Striking at many of the performances and festivals that I attended in Bhubaneswar was the disproportionately large number of foreign students asked to act as emcee or host on stage to felicitate chief guests; this despite the fact that most of the time, all of the participants, chief guests and audience members were Oriya. Similarly on display were foreign audience members who could be easily spotted in a crowd by the bright camera lights of whatever media were in attendance to cover the events. Foreigners (whether dancers or not) and local celebrities are the ones most often solicited for interviews. Furthermore in Bhubaneswar, it is not uncommon for the local media to approach foreign dance students and feature short newspaper pieces on them, despite their arguably ambiguous status as students. It remains difficult for a foreign dance student in Bhubaneswar to maintain anonymity.

However, while for the early twentieth century Indian women travelling in a foreign land meant that they experienced the gaze of a scrutinising Europe convinced of its cultural and racial superiority, the foreign student travelling to India for dance allows this gaze to ultimately be reflected back onto Orissa/India. In all of these encounters, what is emphasised is not so much the foreignness of the foreign student, but their ‘insiderness’ due to the fact that they would take interest in a dance form and a culture to which they have no personal or familial ties. That is to say it is through the foreign dance student that Oriyas/Indians can see their traditions and cultures, as an extension of the dance, as validated and thus truly worthy. This is why foreigners are on constant display in India, both as performers and students. They become a sort of credential for the dance, as well as for Oriya/Indian culture more generally. That many of them opt to learn to read and speak Oriya, adopt Oriya/Indian clothes and food further enhances their role as cultural validators. The nationalist inversion of value

(Chatterjee 1999) completes its full circle while foreigners (read Westerners) maintain – even if unwittingly – a particular relation of power.

**Being 'Foreign' in the UK**

As discussed in the previous chapter, the slippages between regional and national identity associated with various forms of Indian classical dance, often expressed in terms of pride, can be especially difficult to disentangle. The cultural and ethnic diversity of India, along with the nationalist project of creating and maintaining a unified nation, further complicate this dynamic. Furthermore processes of migration, experiences of being immigrants in a new country, and the need to establish common identity with other members of the diaspora braid even more tightly regional and national cultural identities (Vertovec 2000; Cohen 1997; Baumann 1996; Parekh 1994; van der Veer 1993; Banks 1992; Knott 1986). For Koshy (2008:10), this makes the South Asian diaspora inclusive of both "endo-diasporas" and "exo-diasporas" where the former refer to movement within and across regional borders of South Asia (including Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka) and the latter to movements across greater distances and national/cultural borders. Thus "[t]he perplexities of belonging signified by theses histories of displacement point to the difficulty of accommodating the multiple and layered identities of South Asians into the singular loyalties of nationhood in home and host countries" (ibid). Having examined the complexities of foreignness in India, I now turn to examine it within the context of the UK.

While diasporic dancers often fall into the 'foreign' category in India, their interest in Indian culture is taken for granted due to their perceived cultural heritage and familial history. It is in these instances that regional differences take on greater significance; a student of South Indian heritage might take up Bharatanatyam with

little passing remark, but a student of Bengali or Punjabi heritage learning Odissi may not go as unnoticed as is suggested in this interview excerpt with the British South Asian dance promoter introduced in the previous chapter:

> I think [the form of dance you produce, i.e. classical or contemporary] is much more to do with where you are coming from. And Chandralekha[74] is a very interesting example for me. Chandralekha was Chandralekha Patel, a Gujarati woman who turned up to live in Chennai, a foreign land. She had her own kind of language, her own upbringing, her own context in which she was thinking. So she was an outsider in Chennai and she was negotiating with the Chennai local rasikas [connoisseurs] to get herself acknowledged and established in a very traditional and a very conservative society. Her relationship with Bharatanatyam was shaped by her relationship with another outsider Harinath Chattapadhyay, who was a scholar, an actor, a poet and many more things, who was Bengali. So Bengali meets Patel in Chennai and you are trying to do something with Chennai market, loving them and hating them more than you love them. What do you do? You start to think and you start to create. You're a Sindhi girl, aren't you?
>
> Me: Gujarati through East Africa.
>
> Ok, Gujarati through East Africa. And as a Gujarati through East Africa, when you start to do Orissa [sic], Oriya dance form, your insight into Odissi is going to be very different from the gotipuas and others and maharis and others who are … really growing up in this.

Revealing of the larger field of Indian classical dance is the way in which this excerpt swiftly moves from Chandralekha as a foreigner in relation to her dance *within* India to me as a foreigner to my dance based on my cultural heritage and familial history of multiple migrations. What this construction does is produce very local sites – Chennai with its *rasikas* and Orissa with its (more ahistorical) *gotipuas* and *maharis* – as indigenous points of origin to which dancers from outside might relate in various ways and to varying degrees.

It is important to consider that this excerpt comes from an Indian woman now settled in London who is very familiar with the cultural history and diversity of India, as well as the Indian arts scene in both the subcontinent and the UK. She is thus able

[74] Chandralekha was trained as a Bharatanatyam dancer and became one of the most prolific creators of Contemporary Indian dance. Rejecting the elite classicism she saw associated with Bharatanatyam, Chandralekha produced choreographies that drew from a variety of Indian dance and martial arts forms (see Barucha 1995). Well-respected by Indian dancers in the diaspora as well, it is curious that her work was not referenced more by dancers engaging in British Contemporary South Asian dance.

to narrow her analysis down to the specificity of region in ways that others in the UK cannot or do not do. For this second group, more general categories of nation and culture – euphemisms for race – constitute the axis along which they operate. In this analysis, whether or not one is of Indian heritage becomes the determining factor in securing one's relative position and proximity to the dance.

Take for example another excerpt from an interview with one Tamil dancer based in London:

> I think when you are Indian, you're really lucky because – as Madhavi Mudgal once said – if you are Indian you have the natural rhythm of India. If you are Western, I don't know, depending on how early you learned as well. Because you know, as you're Indian, you're born in the Indian family, you have the Indian rigour, the Indian way of life, you have the praying, the language, you listen to music. If you're Western, and when you learn the dance and then you go back home, you're very Western again. Your parents don't have that kind of thing. But [the dance is] for everybody. Everybody can learn the dance. What I'm trying to say is, classical Indian dance – like [names a white dancer in London] for instance, she's a wonderful dancer but there's *no dance* [speaker's emphasis], there's no soul in it. It's just movement. Because she doesn't have that rhythm, that attunement [sic] with the classical Indian music. For example when you dance [to me], you can tell you're at one with the music because you can feel it…You can see in [her] that's lacking. She's very English. She wants to do [her style of dance] but she does [it] using… well, she does her *bhangi* quite nicely but you don't see the *bhangi* has an Indian thing any longer, you see [her] dancing [her dance style] with a *bhangi*.

Race of course is a social construct; it is produced through its articulation in the act of differentiation (Fanon 2008; Balibar 2004; Banks 1996; Hall 1996,1991a, 1991b; Gilroy 1992). Elsewhere this dancer has presented his regional Indian identity as primary over and above a pan-Indian identity; his more generalised reference to me as Indian is thus indicative of the extent to which the slippage between regional and national permeate interactions between dancers. We cannot be sure what distinguished Odissi dancer, choreographer and teacher Madhavi Mudgal meant by the comments he attributes to her; what is important is *how* he has interpreted them. Although it must be noted that many other diasporic South Asian dancers insist that no such difference exists between them and their white counterparts, and that even

this dancer goes on to say "we should be open to everybody... As teachers and givers, we have to give them [white students] 110% of it", this dancer nonetheless expresses opinions of cultural/racial difference that exist amongst many in more subtle ways.

For some, the cultural difference is articulated in terms of good teaching, as it is for this Eastern European dancer in London describing her learning experiences:

> It was definitely harder for me than say people born in India or in the Indian, the South Asian community. Because, when I came to India for the first time, to learn, I could very clearly see the difference. Because even if you are practicing for a long time, but if you are kind of not within this environment, if you don't really have Indian teachers, Indian performances, if you don't come to performances often, then you kind of – you're basically on your own… You can't really develop as fast as people who have good teachers, who are in the right environment. That's probably the most important thing.

Although this dancer makes reasonable observations about access (or lack thereof) to accomplished role models and choice of teachers in the West, she nonetheless conceives of the problem as unique to her as opposed to people 'born in India or the Indian, the South Asian community.' In expressing as unique the challenges of learning dance that she encountered as a non-South Asian dancer, this speaker is not alone. In addition, many white dancers confessed hyper-awareness of their identities and how this depended upon the particular context of performance:

> Sometimes I did feel a bit conscious that I was doing something outside of my own culture, but rather than [pauses] I was only uncomfortable with that sometimes when I was performing it to someone within the culture. So, I was just worried that I was understanding it and doing the right thing and not stepping on somebody's toes or being an impostor or something like that. But where I was performing it to people who it was new to, no it was just a case of I think most people found it interesting. Some people found it odd, but then they would just not watch (interview excerpt with white British dancer).

Despite the perceived difference in experiences for non-South Asian dancers, it appears that the difficult and longstanding dance training that results in their proficiency legitimises the grounds for their entry into the dance field. This is true for dancers of South Asian origin and is therefore equally important.

However, the racial politics of contemporary British society, along with the historical construction of everything South Asian as *essentially* South Asian, renders the fact that white dancers can claim Indian classical dance as theirs – through their acquisition of knowledge and skill – noteworthy and thus celebrated to a greater degree. This celebration of non-South Asian dancers does not however disturb notions of cultural authenticity or belonging for it invariably serves to mark even further Indian classical dance as ethnic. White dancers can and do succeed in Indian classical dance by taking on its cultural attributes, thus culturalising the dance once more[75]. The same is not possible for a South Asian dancer taking on Western Contemporary dance as a result of both the social construction of the dancer's ethnicity and the perceived, however erroneously, cultural neutrality associated with Western Contemporary dance (Norridge 2010). The ability to enter different dance worlds comes with all the trappings of border crossings.

**The Ethnicity of Professionalism**

What was presented in the previous section as the perceived 'natural' advantages and disadvantages of being foreign in a more abstract sense is nonetheless often experienced in actuality, even if based on *perceptions* of difference. Dancers, both South Asian and white, often spoke of the fact that it was more difficult for white dancers to secure performances and teaching positions in the UK because of their perceived lack of authenticity compared to South Asian dancers. For example, according to one South Asian Bharatanatyam dancer:

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[75] Once again, parallels to the past emerge as this recalls the work of dancers such as Ruth St. Denis, discussed in the Introduction. As I will elaborate below taking examples from theatre, the notion of 'colour-blind casting' can serve to accentuate even further the racial identities of the performers, thus reinforcing racialisation even as attempts are made to de-emphasise it.

> If I was teaching a workshop and I couldn't do it, I would sub-out to someone who was not Indian because those are the people that I know do it best. And I don't see that [amongst other dancers]. But they [the white dancers] will still have problems, both here and [in] India, because they're not Indian and this idea of authenticity comes up. So I feel, and I get some flack about authenticity because I'm not from India, but not as much as those people [white dancers].

That South Asian dancers did not speak of their 'authenticity' being questioned in the UK in the same way as non-South Asian (white) dancers, despite the fact that their families often came from regions different than those with which their dance is associated, did not necessarily speak any Indian languages, or were second or third generation migrants, is telling. It also suggests that racialised identity overrides the acquisition of cultural knowledge and bodily training in this instance for it is on the basis of racialised assumptions that dancers are or are not offered opportunities and their dance practice taken seriously.

However, just as Indian teachers found merit in the foreigner's ability to persevere and study dance more rigorously than 'native' students mentioned earlier, many Western non-South Asian dancers perceive their ethnic and cultural background (or presumed lack thereof) as advantageous:

> It's strange that as a [North European] dancer I've been able to make a living out of Indian classical dance. I think it's partly to do with the fact that dancers with an Indian background see it as a mediated dance. They see it as something to link their background, cultural heritage and they don't see it as an art form, they don't take it as seriously. Whereas dancers from other backgrounds, they see it as an art form and they take it seriously. And also they have to do more research, you can't assume that it's in my blood or I just know it because I grew up with it. You have to look for the answers, you have to do much more research. Yeah, I was just thinking that at some point we had a group of dancers; we weren't a company but we were just dancing together. And we had this one black guy from Trinidad, there was one girl from Brazil – an Italian background from Brazil – and there was a Japanese girl and there was me, doing Kathak. And a Bangladeshi, still not the most typical background for Kathak dance. But there were five of us who didn't have an Indian background and we were all dancing together. And there has been space for us because so many dancers with an Indian background don't see it as a profession, whereas we saw it as something we really wanted to do and as a profession. So our approach was different.

Many of the dancers this speaker mentions are no longer based solely in London, and none of the groups of non-South Asian dancers that I have met have been quite so diverse. Relevant to the topic at hand is how being Western (and not Indian, even if diasporically) is here presented to suggest a greater proclivity towards professionalism.

Although it is undeniable that a great number of South Asian dance students do see their dance as a way of providing/maintaining a link to their cultural background, it is equally undeniable that many more South Asians have made professions out of their dance practice than non-South Asians. Furthermore, the claim that South Asian dancers do not take seriously their dance as an art form elides the active struggle of British Asian dancers, musicians and theatre performers from the late 1970s to the 1990s to have their work recognised as legitimate art as evidenced in the earlier issues of *ADiTi* magazine (see also Hingorani 2010; Khan 1976).

It is not that this speaker is entirely unaware of this history; the woman with whom she began her Kathak training is one of the most successful British South Asian dancers to establish her own company and dance school and explicitly presents her work – and therefore demands it be seen – as art (indeed, she often refers to herself as an artist to emphasise this). But for the speaker, her teacher was appealing for her "perfect lines" – according to her, the teacher "is a very good dancer, but again it may be because she's been born and brought up in this country, she has been influenced by the West and [the] sort of aesthetics and lines that I was more familiar with". Westernising the South Asian teacher enables this dancer to include her in the professional fold, just as Indianising Subramanian enabled the emcee who introduced her at the festival in Bhubaneswar made her a legitimate performer of Indian classical dance. The shades of South Asianness/foreignness are many and shifting indeed.

Besides their own self-identification and struggle for artistic legitimacy, South Asian dance performers too will lament the lack of professionalism, support and patronage of the British South Asian community at large, further feeding the community/professional divide. It is a common complaint amongst many professional dancers and presenters that South Asians do not buy tickets to attend shows, mistreat and take advantage of performers by not paying adequately or providing hospitality, or do not treat performances with the level of respect that would reflect their artistic integrity.

However, part of this equation is the way in which such performances are marketed, as well as the venues at which they are presented. As professional dancers, these performers are ones to engage much more with Contemporary South Asian dance. As such, they are likely to perform at professional mainstream venues in Central London. The correlation is not therefore between the non-attendance of South Asians and the contemporised nature of the work, as much as the fact that rarely do these venues market to audiences outside of the (Western) Contemporary dance community which is overwhelmingly white, cosmopolitan and economically privileged. Real economic and residential differences are thus camouflaged in perceptions of the South Asian community that further culturalise and racialise their art/ performance consumption patterns.

**From Ghettoisation to World Dance (And Back Again)**

Despite cultural ties to India still being perceived as strong for Indian classical dance and dancers claiming the dance has not yet "left India" in many of the interviews I conducted, the vast majority of dancers I encountered were prepared to grant greater autonomy to South Asian dance outside of India. Dancers were particularly adamant

in taking such a position when placing Indian classical dance within the wider category of South Asian dance, which encompasses both classical and contemporary styles. Thus, despite views such as those expressed at the opening speech of Dance India cited at the beginning of this chapter, dancers in the UK overwhelmingly seem to believe that Indian classical dance is becoming better able to stand on its own away from India through the work of diasporic and non-South Asian dancers.

The mainstreaming of Indian classical/South Asian dance relies upon and enables further its construction as – and subsequent inclusion into the fold of – the category of World Dance, a cosmopolitan project that suggests codification, translatability, and exchangeability. As such, parallels can be drawn with the codification, objectification and ultimate commodification of the various belief structures that are made intelligible under the banner of World Religions, a category that fallaciously presents various and complex belief structures as equivalent, knowable and interchangeable. As theorists have shown, this categorisation serves to produce various belief structures as 'religion' while simultaneously foregrounding the West as definitive, the very ground upon which comparison is possible, whether in its religiosity or secularism (Mandair 2009; Masuzawa 2005; Dubuisson 2003). Premised on ideas of inter/exchangeability, this operation nonetheless relies upon notions of difference.

A similar dynamic and pretence of exchangeability can also be seen in the currency of World Music in the CD stores and music festivals of the West where the music of Others is simultaneously marketed as exotic and yet made accessible, knowable and thus open for possession by the predominately white consumer (Hutnyk 2000, 1997). In *Adorno Goes to Womad*, Hutnyk (1997) notes how the hegemony of music consumption in the West is ironically premised upon the careful management

and production of difference as exchangeable; "[d]ifference within the system is the condition and stimulus of the market – this necessarily comes with an illusion of equality, of many differences, and in the bastardised versions of chaos politics which results, the image is of 'crossed' cultural forms merely competing for a fair share" (ibid:119; see also Murthy 2009).

Dancers I encountered similarly spoke of the exchangeability of their dance forms (as art forms) as marking their mainstream success. For example, one London-based South Asian Bharatanatyam dancer who has also trained in Ballet and Western Contemporary dance stated:

> A Western [white] dancer may want to be very true to Indian dance and go to India and learn, and feel and learn Indianness by osmosis, but I don't really see – I mean it's nice, but I don't really see the point in that… For example, take ballet. Ballet started in France and then went to Italy and Russia, each school. And there are Brazilian dancers now and they bring their Brazilian identity to that [ballet]. Why can't that happen to Indian dance? Why when we learn Indian dance do we have to learn Indianness? Why can't a Czech girl learn Indian dance but have a Czech identity.

This statement demonstrates the extent to which Indian classical dance is presented as equivalent to ballet, just as Indian identity is made similar to that of 'Italy and Russia', by those who celebrate the cosmopolitanism of its current performance. What this statement does not do however is question the ways in which the culturalisation of the dance comes into being, how particular (European) identities are rendered neutral and universal, or how power is differentially enacted in all of these artistic transactions.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, dancers today know themselves to be successful for securing funding from national institutions without "playing the brown card". South Asian dancers, now part of a Cosmopolitan Art scene or a World Dance community, see themselves as – or at least *argue that they should be* – simply competing for their share of funding, performance platforms and recognition.

However, the notions of free choice that this implies is but the myth of a free market, a “trick” that “is nowadays articulated through the rhetoric of the ‘open market’, the ‘level playing field’ and ‘a fair day’s work for a fair day’s pay” (Hutnyk 2000:104, see also 100-105). Eliding but by no means resolving issues of race, an acceptance of commodity exchange models in favour of marketability whitewashes the systemic disadvantages encountered by ‘ethnic arts’, such as South Asian dance, and enables their ongoing marginalisation.

What was a radical call for affirmative action in the British Arts scene in the 1970s (Khan 1976) had, by the 1980/90s, turned difference into a virtue such that South Asian arts remain paradoxically marginalised, not having been integrated fully into the British art scene specifically nor society more generally (Hingorani 2010:4). Although perhaps an invitation into the mainstream, decorated with gold leaf and hand delivered, the construction of Indian classical/South Asian dance as World Dance does not de-ghettoise it but rather produces it as always already different.

This narrowing of the spectrum between cultural specificity and a more cosmopolitan ambiguity is also reflected in non-South Asian audience responses to Indian classical dance performances. For example, part of one dance group’s funding application (which they shared with me) proposed to solicit the audience for feedback as well as answer their questions so as to facilitate greater awareness of the dance style. Most noticeable in the feedback sessions I attended was how members of the audience would regularly preface their comments by claiming to know little or nothing of the particular dance style or indeed Indian classical dance more generally, before proceeding to situate the performance in relation to a larger World Dance genre.

Anxiety was further demonstrated in audience questions regarding the ethnic demographics to which the group 'normally' performed; the predominately white audiences frequently asked whether they were right to assume that a South Asian audience would understand the meaning of every gesture or lyric or the symbolism and references behind every narrative text that they had performed. While dancers would resoundingly answer in the negative, these responses focused on dispelling the assumption that South Asian audiences were more knowledgeable rather than examining questions of the performer-audience interaction that occurred in these multicultural encounters. That is to say, the essentialised cultural moorings of the dance remained intact despite the more cosmopolitan ambitions of the performers and audiences that were reflected in the feedback sessions.

Such questions of identity-based understanding never foreclosed the ability of non-Asian audiences to participate in, comment on or assess the performances they witnessed, therefore demonstrating the potential for dialogue that exists between performer and audience, even in cross-cultural settings (see Cooper 2013). Indeed, starting with such a confession of ignorance appeared as a rhetorical device frequently used by audience members as well as in published dance reviews to begin dialogue [76]. Arguably, the question of authority in regard to commenting on the arts of another culture is a point that many critics are also aware of and have grappled with publicly (Mackrell 1993). Already expressed by the early 1990s – a time during which crises of representation were being articulated in several academic arenas as well, including anthropology (see Clifford and Marcus1986) – this reflexivity signals a greater

[76] In one review, the critic begins with "now I'm no odissi specialist" (Hutera 2011:21) before proceeding to remark upon the production. Similarly, audience members would often begin remarks with apologetic statements such as "I've never seen this kind of dance before but…", or "I don't know much about this style of dance but…" That audiences would interact with performances despite their articulated lack of familiarity is heartening; yet the regularity with which such feelings were articulated demonstrates ongoing perceptions of cultural difference in performance.

mainstreaming of South Asian dance, for it demonstrates critics actively stating an intent to not ghettoise South Asian performances by treating them 'differently'[77]. As I will now discuss, this mainstreaming requires careful consideration for its racialised implications.

Further demonstrating the mainstreaming of South Asian dance are the current hiring practices of many of the leading South Asian dance organisations, the majority of whose employees are white British arts professionals with little or no background in the dance styles they are hired to promote. This is not to say that these employees do not learn quickly or are not proficient in their work, but it does signal the ways in which these organisations are aligning themselves today towards the mainstream arts cultural paradigm. Those who began these organisations – overwhelmingly South Asian women with backgrounds in Indian classical dance – continue to play active roles as consultants, board members, etc. However, these organisations continue to move towards the mainstream through various outreach programmes and professional recruitment. South Asians are thus placed in a position to instigate outreach, while non-South Asian (white) staff, funders, and audiences are evidence of this outreach's success. Overcoming (as well as enabling this overcoming of) the initial anxiety of not knowing about South Asian dance, whether amongst audiences or promoters, is quickly achieved in ways that appear beneficial to the professionalisation of the dance within the British mainstream.

Notwithstanding this move towards the mainstream, Indian classical/South Asian dance is nonetheless produced from, productive of and reliant upon constructions of cultural difference. Even efforts to avoid ghettoising the dance mark it as an object of difference from the very inception of these attempts. For example, in

[77] Whether this is possible of course is another question. Indeed, as will become apparent, even this articulation can be an act of ghettoisation when occurring within current hegemonies of culture.

his examination of British Asian Theatre, Hingorani (2010) sees colour-blind casting as generating a paradox in its infrequent and celebrated nature; that these performances stand out as such only serves to emphasise *even further* the racial identity of the non-white actors in these productions. Ironically, a similar paradox can be seen in the presentation of white performers and the hiring of white promoters despite their technically inhabiting a 'minority' position within the field of South Asian dance. While overtly visible in one sense, white dancers and organisers nonetheless contribute to a further culturalisation of the dance, for questions of how or why they first got involved take on greater significance. Just as it is assumed that South Asian dancers take to their dance out of cultural loyalty, so too is it supposed that white dancers and organisers have taken a certain if not curious interest in the culture of the dance. Therefore, although white performers and organisers are highly visible in the British South Asian dance scene, it is the ethnic/cultural nature of the dance that is ultimately highlighted, underlined and circled.

**Indian Dance and Multicultural Imaginaries**

As discussed earlier in this chapter, British South Asian dance – the result of the relationship between Indian classical and Contemporary South Asian dance – can be viewed as the ethnic dance *par excellence* in the current multicultural climate. This construction is premised simultaneously on the mainstreaming *and* continued visibility of the dance forms, as discussed in the previous section. This twinned process can be seen in an interesting manner in the Opening and Closing Ceremonies of the 2012 Summer Olympics in London.

By the time the Opening Ceremony was presented on 27 July 2012, curiosity was intense amongst many South Asian dancers and enthusiasts about the

involvement of Akram Khan, one of the most successful South Asian dancers to have crossed over into the mainstream British arts scene. Would his performance reflect his initial training in Kathak or the Western Contemporary dance in which he later grounded himself and his dance company? What did it mean for Danny Boyle, director of the ceremony, to feature Khan in this blockbuster event outlining his vision of Britishness to the world? Khan's performance was presented towards the end of the ceremony in a section meant to commemorate the 7/7 terrorist attacks on London that, as the ceremony commentators reminded audiences at home, occurred the day after the success of the city's Olympic bid had been announced in 2005. His performance as a Contemporary South Asian dancer, and as a British Asian man, contributed to the ceremony's overarching theme of multicultural Britain. The ethnic and cultural diversity of London, standing in for what is by comparison a less diverse and integrated Britain, was celebrated to the extent that conservative critics of the ceremony dismissed it as "leftie multicultural crap" (Watt 2012) in the controversies that followed.

In the Khan sequence, the brisk sharp movements of the dancers in the piece, choreographed to a pulsing drum beat, created a sense of tension and urgency while the prop of the sun that rose as the piece began and the colour scheme of the costumes and lighting created a sense of fire and heat. In the piece was a young boy over whom Khan seemed to wheel an invisible yet disturbing power, evoking tension through the fluid rotation of his hands just out of reach above the child's head. The mounting tension only stopped when the child suddenly embraced Khan in a hug (see Figure 7). A focal point of the entire piece, this sequence seemed to allow the British nation to identify with a sense of innocence and love through the child as it recalled the events of the London bombing. A British Muslim born to Bangladeshi parents and raised in

Southwest London, Khan was invited to mourn with the nation as a representative of a particular Asian identity – one that existed as part of the larger multicultural fabric Boyle wished to present to the world. That this was done without any performance of Kathak meant that Khan's identity as a South Asian dancer *trained in but not performing* his initial art form, as a British Asian, as a young Muslim male, appeared to provide the link between this performance and the attacks.

Two weeks later, after the euphoria of Britain's proclaimed success at the games – as host and as athletic competitors – had become pervasive in the media, viewers sat down to watch the Closing Ceremony. Little was known publicly about this grand finale except that it would be, according to its title, 'a symphony of British music'. This time round however, controversy would come not from the ceremonies and readings of their implied or perceived meanings but from Prime Minister David Cameron who, two days before the Closing Ceremonies, had said that classes including 'Indian dance or whatever' did not constitute exercise and should not be included in school physical education curricula[78]. His comments were widely denounced as politically incorrect and led to outrage (albeit articulated in a humorous manner) amongst many.

One London based Bollywood dance company (who had incorporated Indian classical dance workshops in their teaching the year before) publicly challenged Mr. Cameron to take one of their classes before jumping to his conclusions about the dance (Rojas 2012). This same company was invited to perform that night on BBC's Newsnight (10 August 2012) and later on Russell Howard's Good News Show on BBC Three (1 November 2012). The problem it seemed, was not necessarily that the

[78] Indian classical dance has since the 1990s been included in primary school programmes, and some of the dancers whom I interviewed either delivered such classes or were the recipients of them. Unlike the association of Indian dance with physical education suggested by Cameron, past participants in these classes and workshops I encountered presented them as examples of cultural education, indicating the ways in which the dance is defined in different ways according to different needs.

Prime Minister was advocating even further cuts to school budgets, but that he was not articulating himself in a manner that was multicultural enough or reflected the image of London/Britain that Danny Boyle had created only a fortnight before. Mr. Cameron, it was argued, had spoken from a position of ignorance and cultural chauvinism.

The question that remained unasked was why it was Indian dance that was marked out in an offbeat, flippant remark when any other practice could have been mentioned, as is suggested in Cameron's use of the word 'whatever' immediately after mentioning Indian dance. How close to the surface of a British cultural imaginary does Indian dance sit so as to be so readily available for 'spontaneous' remarks such as those of the Prime Minister? While I will try to address this question in the next chapter, what this incident demonstrates is the extent to which discourses of multiculturalism can be and are enacted through performances of South Asian dance. This enactment is not due solely or even primarily to the intentions or actions of the practitioners themselves (although they do enable it), but to the larger assumptions of British society as articulated by cosmopolitan celebrities such as Danny Boyle and the political correctness (sometimes) advocated by the BBC.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has covered a wide spectrum of dance practices, from the 'traditional' classical dance represented at Dance India, to the more ambiguous yet still culturally situated Contemporary South Asian dance that dominates the professional South Asian dance scene in the UK. In so doing, this chapter travelled between India and the UK – and thus the liminal and interrelated sites that are produced in between – to demonstrate the simultaneous workings of the local and the global in constructions of

diasporic and multicultural identities. Grounded in the history of colonial and nationalist narratives discussed in the previous chapters, the construction of Indian classical and Contemporary South Asian dance continues to rely upon essentialist discourses of culture that overlap with constructions of race. That these processes occur in India and the UK – producing constructs of national identity in both – demonstrates the complexity of their interaction.

Race and culture are indeed social constructs. In the diaspora space of Indian classical dance, these categories are slippery and changing. Furthermore, they are performed into being, as both diasporic and non-South Asian dancers construct particular subjectivities as Indian classical/South Asian dancers. That the cultural efficacy of the dance – so strongly associated with a codified and coherent Indian culture even in attempts to escape cultural essentialism – carries over so strongly into British mainstream and multicultural society is both telling of the will to appropriation of multicultural society as well as this society's methodology of culturalising certain performances in order to consume them safely in ways perceived as non-threatening.

But the analysis presented here is not a polemic on the status of South Asian dance or ethnic arts within British multicultural society. It is an exploration into the construction of identity as racial-ethnic-cultural in the diaspora space that is instantiated through Indian classical and Contemporary South Asian dance practices. As Baumann (1997) suggests, exposing categories of race and culture as reified constructs does not absolve the ethnographer from studying their production or implications; "culture-making, after all, is not an *ex tempore* improvisation but a project of social continuity placed within, and contending with, moments of social change" (ibid 214). This then is the story of cultural production and the making of ethnic and racial identities and their articulation of social belonging.

## Playing Roles:
## Postcolonial Performances of Gender in Indian Classical Dance

*The charm of their dance is entirely in the loose movements of their body, elegant and flexible, in the grace and the variety of attitudes, in the delicious expression of their half-closed eyes, and in the remarkable beauty that they generally possess.*

*- Eighteenth century French account of devadasi dance,*
*cited in Ravi 1999:132*

*This mini-tour of classical country stopped at Kathak, Odissi, Manipuri, Kuchipudi, Bharatanatyam (the best-known in Britain) and Mohiniattam. All the forms tell stories, most of them about gods (Krishna, Shiva, Vishnu, Parvati), and the ordinary people (fluttery, butter-churning milkmaids being a particular favourite) who encounter them… Of them all, it was the temple dancers who shone brightest. The Bharatnatyam of Malaviki Sarukkai was flawless, her divine performance as intricate as lace. Dressed in orange, she brought elephants and birds to life in her hands. The Odissi dancer Madhavi Mudgal, moved with easy precision, red-painted fingers and flashing eyes sculpting her stories, while the white and gold skirts of Bharati Shivaji and her disciple-daughter flowed harmoniously in the undulating circles of Mohiniattam, the most sensual of the styles. It was a graceful end to an enlightening trip.*

*-Alice Bain, Guardian Review of Indian classical dance*
*showcase at Edinburgh Festival, 28 August 2002*

*But then I have always felt that India, for all her manly qualities, is especially noted for the feminine virtues – gentleness, tenderness, a certain patient resignation and a quiet and sometimes amazing courage of a somewhat passive kind. I say this realising that I am generalising when I should not do so, because there are all kinds of men as well as all kinds of women in this country. But I suppose it is true that the idea of women in India is chiefly connected with these feminine virtues as well as, perhaps, with some feminine failings… Thousands of years have moulded and conditioned our race. Today we pass rapidly through various phases of transition. That is inevitable and not to be regretted. But I doubt if all these coming changes, big as they are, will uproot us from our old foundations. Someone said about another country words which may be applied to India: "She lives in her own time, in the rhythm of her own history, which does not quite keep time with the clocks of the twentieth century [kept anonymous]".*

*-Jawaharlal Nehru, Introduction to Women of India 1957:vi*

It was a cold morning in February and I was making my way through the townhouse lined inner streets of Kensington from Earl's Court station to the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital, suitcase filled with costume and portable speakers in tow. This was the second time that Simran and I had been commissioned to give one of the weekly lunchtime performances and ward visits that the Hospital organises as part of its mandate to bring the arts into its space. The first time, almost exactly one year earlier, Simran and I had visited children in the outpatient ward. This time, we would take our performance to the mostly elderly inpatients on the second floor. Prior to this however, we would give a 45-minute performance in the Hospital lobby, with staff on their lunch breaks and casual patients making their way to and from appointments stopping to watch us for as long as they were able. The affluent and racialised demographics of the area were reflected in the mostly white audience in attendance.

After performing the two dances we had prepared, we were asked by the organisers to fill an extra ten minutes for the lunchtime performance. With no music to perform a third dance, we decided that Simran would improvise a demonstration to show the audience how stories can be and are told through Odissi and thus other Indian classical dance forms.

With pointed index finger indicating the space behind her, Simran began telling her story with the corresponding *once upon a time*. The story was about *a beautiful princess*, depicted with left hand in *mrigasirsa hasta* (middle three fingers bent perpendicular to the upright thumb and little finger) that represents a young woman. *This princess went for a walk in the forest, where she felt the breeze brush against her, saw the birds that flew in the sky and stopped at a little pond in which she washed her face to refresh herself.* As she spoke, Simran demonstrated with her arms the swaying of the tree branches, her hands in *tripataka hasta* (ring finger bent

perpendicular to the rest of the fingers held upright) with a slight bend at the wrist representing the leaves. She enacted the delicate shiver of a body encountering a gentle breeze and formed birds by crossing both palms of her hands at the thumb so that her fingers curled like wings as the bird they represented flew through the air.

*The princess was followed by her friend, who startled her at first. She smiled at this friend but then sent her away while she waited for her charming prince to come to her*. Again, Simran enacted this scenario as she spoke, indicating her shoulder where this friend had placed her hand thus waking the princess from her reverie. She then waved the friend away, adjusted her hair as she gazed at her reflection in the pond, and finally leaned slightly to the side to peer into the distance, indicating that she was looking for the prince who was represented by Simran's right hand in *sikara hasta* (closed fist with upright thumb). Her face conveyed the emotions of the story, from the pleasure and wonder of being in the forest to the intimacy shared with her friend, to the loving anticipation felt for the prince.

A simple improvisation, Simran's demonstration helped make apparent to the audience the narrative process that occurs within *abhinaya* performances of stories. Concluding our performance, this presentation was followed by a question and answer session with the audience who, similar to other audiences we had interacted with in past post-performance discussions, responded by saying that a deconstruction of the story gave them insight into the intricacies of the dance and led them to better appreciate its complexity. Several said that they had seen Bharatanatyam and Kathak before, and asked for us to articulate the differences between these more prevalent styles in the UK and the Odissi that we had just presented.

The intimate proximity between the audience and the two of us seemed to encourage many people to approach us individually after the performance. An elderly

flower vendor – a white British man who appeared to be in his 70s – had watched our performance from the side where he sat with his stall of bouquets and was especially keen to speak with us after we finished. He told us enthusiastically that he had been born in Calcutta, and that his mother had lived there for some time. Presenting us each with flowers, he asked us questions about our costumes, which consisted of stitched Oriya saris and silver filigree jewellery, and of our personal backgrounds. He then told us of his mother who he said had worked with Gandhi during her time in India. We (for it was never clear whether it was to us or to our performance that he responded) seemed to have reminded him of his childhood in (colonial) India, a small part of which was brought into the affluent settings of the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital that morning.

As Simran and I packed up our portable sound system in preparation to move to the next location, we were approached by a white middle-aged British woman who asked us if we, as "modern young women" found it difficult to perform a dance that portrayed women only in roles of subordination. Simran and I were momentarily taken aback; the question was clearly in response to our performance, which the woman had just observed, but the question did not make reference to any specific examples from our performance with which we could engage.

Simran was the first to respond, saying that there was a plethora of characters and stories that we could portray, much like other theatrical and literary traditions. I then responded that it came down to a performer/choreographer's interpretation of the text; performers, I argued, can engage with the stories to interpret them however they choose. Indeed, one of the dances we had just performed had only been choreographed in the last two to three years, I told her, and was our re-interpretation of a story that had first been the interpretation of the original choreographer. Our

explanations did not seem to satisfy the woman who nonetheless concluded that "still, it must be difficult to balance being modern women and performing this dance".

In reflecting on this incident afterward, I could not help but wonder if there was something specific to our performance that had triggered this response. The first dance we had performed was an invocation that begins with a *bhumi pranam* or salutation to Mother Earth (*bhumi* 'Earth' is feminine). We had explained this to the audience and demonstrated the movements of the *pranam* (salutation) before we danced. The second piece was an *abhinaya* about two women who are disturbed by the thought that their lover might be with another woman, but soon realise that this fear comes from their own insecurity. The piece concludes with the two women facing one another, as if looking into their reflection in a mirror, unsure where the Self ends and the Other begins. Perhaps it was this piece to which the woman responded? If so, she was the first to do so in this manner, for Simran and I had performed this piece on many occasions and had received much positive feedback on the complexity of its representations.

Could it then have been the story Simran had narrated and performed? A simple story, it was indeed heteronormative with its beautiful princess waiting for the arrival of her prince. However, nothing about the story located it in a particular time or place. Our elaborate costuming and the style of dance we performed might have made it easy to assume that this was an Indian story, but there was nothing about the forest or the animals, or even the princess, that made it so explicitly. Perhaps this story was not so simple after all for it quickly appeared to be part of a complex interaction between performer and audience as each could interpret it in particularly gendered and cultured ways. The question, it seemed, related to something much larger than the material we had just presented.

Indeed, despite the particularities of the contexts in which performances of Indian classical dance occur, and despite the growing presence of male dancers, there remains an underlying gendering of the dance as feminine that accompanies its practice for both performer and audience. In the multicultural context, this gendering is further shaped by perceptions of India and its culture both within and outside 'its' community; that is to say, the gendered perceptions of both those familiar and unfamiliar with Indian culture – and by extension its dance styles – are significant factors that shape dance performances. The constructs of Indian culture as feminine, as well as conceptions of an ideal Indian femininity, trace back to Orientalist, colonialist and nationalist discourses that shaped the way India was perceived, in India and abroad (see Ramanarayan 2010; Chatterjee 1999; Grewal 1996). Even as (relatively few) dancers act to disprove the normative gendering of their dance styles by focusing on individual character development or exploring notions of female empowerment in their work, their very articulation of consciously breaking with tradition to do so attests to the discourses of gender that continually shape (and have shaped) codified Indian classical dance.

In the previous chapter, I discussed the ways in which ethno-cultural associations attributed to the dance influence the ways in which dancers construct and perform their art. As I will demonstrate in the pages below, this process is simultaneously gendered such that performances of Indian classical dance rely upon and contribute to particular formations of racialised *and* gendered identities. In other words, the coding of Indian classical dance as cultural and feminine – discussed in previous chapters in relation to colonial and nationalist constructs of Indian culture and arts, as well as to multicultural and diasporic constructions in the present – is central to its contemporary performance.

I begin this chapter by examining the ways in which dancers call upon historical narratives that produce their dance as always already feminine. I then turn to consider the cultural resources from which dancers draw knowledge of what they claim to be an authentic Indian femininity. Importantly, the interplay between race and gender becomes particularly noticeable in comparing the ways in which dancers of both South Asian and non-South Asian origin (white) construct the femininity to which they aspire in their dance practices. Despite these differences, I argue that both groups of dancers appeal to discourses of desire that stem from colonial and nationalist constructions of India, its culture and its women.

Part of this construction of ideal femininity enacts disciplinary measures upon female sexuality, both morally (in the sense of how 'proper' women should be) as well as physically (in the sense of how a dancer must (not) move her body to maintain respectability). The femininity constructed in Indian classical dance is thus shown to be part of a larger patriarchal project, and is therefore also productive of a particular ideal of masculinity, as I discuss at the chapter's end. To understand the femininity espoused in contemporary performances of Indian classical dance is thus to engage with discourses of gender, culture and race simultaneously.

## From Devadasi to Tawa'if: Indian Classical Dance as Always Already Feminine

As discussed in the Introduction, the contemporary performance of Bharatanatyam, Kathak and Odissi is shaped directly by the concerted efforts of various artists, intellectuals and nationalist social activists in the mid-twentieth century to 'revive' a tradition believed to have fallen into disrepute. It is in the particular trajectory of this movement, hinging as it did on notions of respectability, that we begin to see classical dance coded as feminine. By doing away with the specific sexualities deemed

inappropriate and opting instead for 'respectable' and idealised forms of femininity, the intelligentsia that came to define classical dance constructed very particular gender roles that continue to be enacted in performances today, in India and abroad.

As part of the reconstruction, the reformers who spearheaded this movement had to navigate the complex history of dance practice associated with the temple. In order to restore the dance to its position of prestige, these reconstructive movements sought to derive their dance from what they claimed to be its earliest roots, a time before the degradation of both the dance and the dancers who practiced it. The result, as discussed in the Introduction, was a sort of bifurcation of the *devadasi* figure. The inability to maintain in tandem the sexuality and spirituality of the dance resulted in the reconstructive movements' condemnation of the one extreme while emphasising the other. It therefore became possible for respectable middle-class married women and yet-to-be married girls to dance and perform, from the second-half of the twentieth century into the present.

Thus, whether associated with the divine *devadasi* figure or the profane courtesan, Indian classical dance and its predecessors were always imagined as feminine. The feminisation of the dance was further supported by texts such as the *Natyashastra* outlining the appropriate femininity a dancer should aspire towards, both in character and appearance[79]. The imaginary bifurcation of acceptable and spiritual sensuality on the one hand and improper and vulgar sexuality on the other can be gleaned in the ambiguity that surrounds the *devadasi* figure in dancers' explanations of the dance today. In asking dancers about their perceptions of the *devadasis*, I encountered a range of answers, all drawing from the revivalist logic that

[79] Recall the interview excerpt with Sally and Lucia discussed in the previous chapter regarding *shastric* conceptions of beauty. Furthermore, Bose (2010:76) has noted that while both men and women could and did perform dance in historical times, the *Natyashastra* only makes references to female dancers, further suggesting that Indian classical dance is seen as "women's art".

both praised and shunned them. For some, *devadasis* were morally and spiritually strong women, dedicated to their service and art. For others, they were irresponsible with their dance and had allowed it to decline in their pursuit of profit and/or pleasure. This ambiguity is evident in the following interview excerpt in which, as I often did, I asked the dancer what meaning they attributed to the figure of the *devadasi* and the courtesan:

> Question: What comes to mind when I say devadasi?
>
> Response: Umm [pause] female temple dancers who devote their lives to dance and dancing for [pause] sort of surrendering themselves for service to the gods through dance. Other words that may come to mind… devotion, sacrifice, I'm sure they were very beautiful. Yeah, it's like being a nun really, but for dance. Where you just devote your life to it. It's a way of you doing service for the gods and goddesses[80].
>
> Question: And how about if I say court dancers?
>
> Response: Like in the royal palaces? Yeah. Similar, to a certain extent, but the devotion [pause] it's a different context I think. Yeah. For me, I think the difference is like [pause] the devadasis, it's like, more like [their dance was] not so much for show. To me, the appeal [is that devadasis] danced a lot, but almost like they were dancing for themselves. Umm, deep spiritual connection. And they [devadasis] were basically performing in front of the altars where people who were watching would come and watch. But the intention of an audience watching in a temple is different from the intention of an audience watching … in a palace court or something… Umm, so I think that is the main contrast. As a court dancer you are on display. It's you. You are being watched. And yeah, I mean, they still did devote their lives, the sacrifice, [they were] still beautiful I'm sure. But again, yeah, it's almost the expectation of the audience is different so that sort of changed the definition of what you are and how your art is viewed.

Interesting in this excerpt are the similar ways in which the *devadasi* and courtesan are constructed by the speaker. On the one hand, the *devadasi* is figured 'like being a nun really', an association that has been made before and appears to act as a translating device to convey the nexus of devotion and performance attributed to the morally pure

[80] This account is unique in identifying services to goddesses as well as gods as part of a *devadasi's* duty. Although there are some accounts of contemporary 'devadasi' practice in dedication to the goddess Yellamma (Kidron 2011; see also Soneji 2012:7-9), these examples were not discussed by any of the dancers I interviewed and worked with. As will be discussed later in the chapter, most dancers conceptualise ancient *devadasi* practice, as well as any spirituality in their own dance practice, in relation to god (masculine), introducing a particularly gendered gaze.

*devadasi*[81]. On the other hand, this figure is similar to the courtesan for both are dedicated to their art and beautiful in appearance. What differs is that the latter dances for the specifically male (human rather than divine) gaze of the palace court.

This conceptualisation sets up a more sympathetic representation of the courtesan figure as artist and victim to the men who view her with negative intentions and seek to take advantage of her as represented in much Indian literature and cinema. Moreover, this interviewee is perhaps starting to draw points of self-identification with these two figures, discussing both *devadasi* and courtesan practice as '*you* doing service' and 'what *you* are doing and how *your* art is viewed.'

Indeed, striking in many dancers' accounts was how they would at times find points of identification with both the *devadasi* and courtesan figures. For example, one Bharatanatyam and Contemporary South Asian dancer prompted an online discussion on a social networking website when she posted an old black and white image of South Indian *devadasis*, with the caption ""Devadasis… If I were to be a dancer a century ago, I would probably be one of them…!" Of the several responses to the picture and caption, the comment of "sex slave and dancer?? tsk tsk…" quickly received the retort from the author that "we still sell our bodies and are slaves of capitalism right?" Throughout this exchange, the *devadasis* depicted in the photograph were simultaneously overly present and yet ultimately obscured while the dancer who

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[81] For example, a thirteenth century account attributed to Marco Polo described a group of temple dancers in very Christian terminology:

> …they have certain abbeys in which are gods and goddesses to whom many young girls are consecrated; their fathers and mothers presenting them to that idol for which they entertain the greatest devotion. And when the nuns [monks tr.] of a convent desire to make a feast to their god, they send for all those consecrated damsels and make them sing and dance before the idol with great festivity (cited in Mitter 1992:3).

Whether Marco Polo did in fact travel to India, a fact that has been disputed, his accounts were nonetheless influential in Europe (ibid). Indeed, this particular account inspired one fourteenth-century artist to paint the temple dancers described above as blonde nuns dancing in flowing habits (Mitter 1992:2; see also Metcalf 1998:5).

authored the post was able to directly position herself within a particular history of *devadasi* dance.

This linking of historical and contemporary figures occurred repeatedly as dancers I encountered would regularly draw upon *devadasi* or *tawa'if* figures, their cinematic representations, and contemporary actors and dancers in their descriptions; in other words, historical and contemporary figures were projected onto each other in an attempt to describe both. For example, consider another excerpt from an interview with a (male) Indian classical dance enthusiast who moved from India to London as a child some thirty years ago. I have included it at length for it introduces several issues that prompts a deeper analysis of Indian classical dance, gender and culture.

> Question: If I say devadasi, what comes to mind?
>
> Response: To me, I think it was a beautiful institution, because here you have a professional dancer, dedicated to the temple, and her only job was to dance and reinterpret the things that she was taught so that it made sense to her and her audience, which was god. Unfortunately, European bias and European prejudice against a female working in a temple, which is basically a Biblical bias – the idea of a temple harlot being very much a Biblical thing – they never understood how a woman could work in a temple and not be corrupting. Or how a woman could be unmarried and a professional. Because in the 1800s, that was not a possibility in the Western world. And therefore the idea of a temple dancer who was dedicated to her art and her profession and was a professional dancer was just unimaginable to the Western mind. So they killed off an institution because of their own prejudice without looking at the evidence. Now, anybody who is beautiful, talented, amazing is going to find admirers. And I'm sure that devadasis had admirers in terms of rich people and kings all of the time. But that doesn't mean they necessarily [voice trails off]… just like maybe Aishwariya Rai or Madhuri Dixit [two contemporary Bollywood actresses] of nowadays have a hundred and one admirers, that doesn't mean they are fallen women. They have their husbands and they have their friends and just because we comment [that] their friends are boyfriends and all that, that's just salacious gossip. I'm sure the devadasis had similarly fantastic admirers who were artists and fantastic people, but just because they were men, the Victorian society interpreted them as fallen women without appreciating that if you have an artistic bent of mind you go with artistic people.

Like the previous response quoted above, this account also describes *devadasis* in terms of their artistic talent, amiability and beauty. What is particularly striking is how the respondent at first critiques European misunderstandings and wrongful

comparisons before going on to draw new comparisons with contemporary Indian actresses and other artists.

As discussed in Chapter Two regarding the production of historical narratives which ground Indian classical dance in the present, we see from the above excerpt how the past is brought into the present in order to construct the two. Towards the end of this excerpt, and continued in this interview, the respondent attributes almost bohemian qualities to the *devadasi* as an artistic person who enjoyed the company of the other artists with whom she worked. In the interview, the respondent continues to explain that "[j]ust because you talk until the middle of the night [as the *devadasis* might have done with the "musicians, singers, painters… all talented people working in the temple"], doesn't mean you were doing anything else other than talking about art. That doesn't mean you sleep with them". Thus artistic passion – and not sexual relations – becomes the primary mark of the *devadasi* in the accounts that view her favourably.

**Dance, Cinema and Indian Femininity**

If the move from divine dancer to court artist/entertainer is slight and shrouded in ambiguity, the next step to cinematic actress is not all that far behind. Indeed, popular Indian cinema (also known as Bollywood[82]) has a long history of depicting *tawa'ifs* as key characters in films, from *Devdas* (most popular versions being 1955, 2002) to

[82] I use the term Bollywood to refer to commercial Hindi cinema (also known as Bombay cinema), as this was the term used by the dancers with whom I worked. While this cinema has a long history and relationship with Indian nationalism, the opening up of the Indian state in the early 1990s to globalisation and its concurrent economic liberalisation has marked a significant turn in filmmaking, with greater emphasis on commoditisation and transnational mobility (see Mankekar 2004, 1999). Indeed, Rajadhyaksha (2007: 453-4) distinguishes Bollywood from Indian cinema by dating the former to this period of social and economic change, placing emphasis on its international marketing. For more on Bollywood/Hindi Cinema see, Rajadhyaksha (2008), Rajadhyaksha and Willemen (2002), Dwyer (2000) and Chakravarty (1998).

*Mughal-e-Azam* (1960), *Pakeezah* (1972) to *Umrao Jaan* (1981, 2006). Notably, all of these films fall under the category of historical drama, occurring as they do in a (mostly Muslim) past remembered with much nostalgia[83].

These films, and the actresses who portray their courtesan protagonists, were intimately familiar to most of the dancers with whom I worked and interviewed, especially those of South Asian background. Both Madhuri Dixit and Aishwariya Rai – two favourite examples for the dancers I spoke with and the two actresses cited in the interview excerpt above – have played the tragic *tawa'if* character and are especially noted for their dancing prowess.

As film scholars have noted, the line separating the actor and the character is especially blurred in 'star industries' such as Bollywood (Gandhy and Thomas 1991; Dyer 1991); Dwyer (2000) has further noted that in Bollywood "the star text is created within the films themselves as vehicles for star performances which in turn build on images in other films and in other media to give them roles as national icons of beauty, desire and utopian beings" (ibid:118-9). Indeed to think of Umrao Jaan (the character) is almost synonymous with thinking about Rekha, the actress who famously depicted this fictional tragic heroine in the film's (1981) revival of Muslim artistic and cultural representation. These portrayals, especially when recalled by dancers today, thus combine images of star actors, film characters, and historical courtesan, further complicating the imaginary sphere of Indian dance that they all inhabit.

To nostalgically recall the celebrated figure of the *tawa'if*, as do these films and the dancers who reference them in relation to their dance practices in the UK, is to appeal to particular constructions of Indian femininity that trace back to Orientalist

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[83] Early twentieth century Bengal for *Devdas*; the reign of Mughal Emperor Akbar (r.1556-1605) for *Mughal-e-Azam*; mid-nineteenth century Lucknow for *Umrao Jaan* (the events of the 1857 Uprising mark a narrative turning point towards the end of the story); and late nineteenth or early twentieth century Lucknow for *Pakeezah* (only the trope of the railway train marking the advent of modernity helps to date this film).

and nationalist projections of Indian identity (see Jhala 2011). Indeed, the pre-Independence Indo-Islamic past to which these films appeal allows partitioned India – constructed as culturally Hindu in the present religio-political climate (Dirks 2002) – to be celebrated without posing a threat to the Hindu/Indian identity that is currently hegemonic; this point is central to the next chapter.

Furthermore, the courtesans that are represented in these films are figured as the opposite of the character of the modernised 'vamp', who, according to Mazumdar (1996:29), was "the visible intrusion of the West into the cinematic space of Indian films, signifying an unrestrained sexuality and license, given to vices 'unknown' to 'Indian' women". In other words, representations of *tawa'ifs* are always presented as emblematic of an aristocratic Indian culture untainted by influences of the West. Like the *devadasi* figure, this cinematic figuring of the *tawa'if* is both celebrated and condemned, an "ambiguous icon of Indian womanhood and female power-cum-vulnerability [that] serves as the analog of a national palimpsest inscribed with contradictory social meanings" (Chakravarty 1998:270). The cultural identity of the Indian nation is thus shown to rest upon specific representations of femininity. Appealing to the cinematic depictions of *tawa'ifs* as tragic figures[84], and indeed taking inspiration from their portrayal, the Indian classical dancers I encountered in the UK are thus able to access very particular role models of Indian (national and cultural) femininity.

Moreover, the association of the early Indian film and music industries with the real life institution of courtesanship aids further the conflation of this character/performer/courtesan triad[85]. The relationship between Hindi cinema – the

[84] For more on the construction of *tawa'ifs* as tragic figures ultimately averse to their trade, see Dwyer (2000:127-8) and Chakravarty (1998: 269-306).
[85] Gandhy and Thomas (1991:120-1) demonstrate how the image of Nargis, a leading star in the 1950s and 60s and most famous for her role in Mother India, was affected by her courtesan mother who was

most mainstream and globally available cinema of India – and Indian classical dance is most visibly manifested in relation to Kathak[86]. Indeed, many dancers I interviewed would refer to the style of particular cinematic dance sequences as Kathak and identify a connection between film depictions and the classical dance performed on stage. On occasion, music from (especially older) Bollywood films might be used for live classical Kathak performances, especially given the challenge of acquiring new music compositions that choreographers in the diaspora encounter.

Costumes also bear striking resemblance onscreen and on stage, with film representations taking inspiration from – and perhaps inspiring in turn – costumes for classical Kathak dance. Moreover, some of the most prominent and respected classically trained Kathak dancers have choreographed dance sequences for leading Bollywood actresses, including Birju Maharaj for Madhuri Dixit (*Devdas* 2002) and Kumudini Lakhia for Rekha (*Umrao Jaan* 1981). London-based Kathak dancers have had repeated opportunities to take workshops with both Kathak gurus when they have visited from India, and some of these dancers have gone to India to spend time studying at these gurus' institutions. This arguably increases the proximity between these dancers, their teachers, cinematic representations of their dance, its fictional performers, and the stars who portray them onscreen.

Of the three dance styles, Kathak is most regularly referenced in the 'semi-classical' genre taught by numerous Bollywood dance schools in India and the diaspora. This is a genre that is almost always associated with female dancers because of the connection drawn between it and the *mujra* performances – where a courtesan

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said to have 'tricked' her into becoming an actress. They stress that it is not important whether this was true, but how this was interpreted by cinema audiences of the time.

[86] Some Bharatanatyam dancers, especially those of South Indian origin, spoke of representations of their classical dance style in South Indian cinema. However, this cinema is much smaller and less popular compared to the Hindi/Bollywood cinema that is consumed across India and its diasporas. I have therefore not pursued these representations in further detail, although it would no doubt make an interesting study.

dances for her male patrons – that are re-presented on screen. In the hierarchy that is constructed between Bollywood and classical dance, semi-classical is considered more refined than the 'vulgar' and 'Westernised' Bollywood dance of the present day; for some classical dance enthusiasts, "Bollywood, [with] all of the hip-thrusting and the bosom-bobbing – it's just not very pretty to look at really" (interview with classical dance teacher and critic). Respectability is once more defined through the female dancing body.

Just as Indian classical dance is not static, neither is Bollywood and it quickly appears that both are treated with equal nostalgia[87]. Perhaps this explains further the attraction of the courtesan film genre for many dancers as these films appeal to a sense of the past that is no longer available, much like classical dance performances in real life. Similarly, a nostalgic past is attributed to Bollywood dance as well for it was the earlier actresses who are represented as really having had the ability and dedication to perform with integrity. For example, one Kathak teacher and performer who was quite critical of current Bollywood representations and dance styles explained:

> All the *nakhra* [coquetry], all the detail of the motion, all the *mudras* [in Bollywood], they come from Kathak. So [Bollywood] borrowed a lot from Kathak; in a way, sometimes it does look like Kathak. But, only recently because it's had modern dance influence, a lot of hip hop suddenly, it's beginning to say 'well, we do our own thing.' No you don't, you actually borrow a lot from Kathak. But, if you do it with an understanding, again, if you look at Madhuri Dixit or if you look at Rekha, they do Bollywood dance because they had classical training. That's why they look good on screen, because they actually are very aware of where they put what arm, how they bend, everything is in alignment.

For this dancer, as for many others, to speak of an Indian actress as 'classically trained' (whatever this might mean) becomes a major stamp of approval as well as a way to distinguish her from other current actresses now presumed to be more

[87] Cook (2005) argues that the rise of nostalgic films is linked to capitalism and consumerism. Although Bollywood has had a long history of nostalgic films and historical dramas, a comparison between the old and new *Umrao Jaan* or *Devdas,* for example, supports this claim as the homes in which the courtesans live and dance have become palatial, their jewellery and clothing more extravagant, and the romance that surrounds them more fantastical (see also Jhala 2011).

Westernised. It appears that grounding in classical training firmly situates these actresses (and dancers more generally) in Indian cultural and national identity. Given the construction of femininity upon which these constructs rely, the gendered contours of this project become particularly visible.

**Taking Cues, Learning Femininity**

The performance of semi-classical dance and the popularity of the courtesan genre of film is not the only relation between Indian classical dance and Bollywood, although it is the most apparent. In the economy of images in which Indian classical dance is situated, there are multiple representations deployed in dance performances, especially with regard to gender roles and constructions of an ideal femininity. Thus Bharatanatyam and Odissi dancers – in addition to the Kathak dancers discussed above – have also found points of identification with Bollywood in relation to acting or *abhinaya*. Indeed, one of the most common instances in which the topic of Bollywood emerged in many of my interviews and conversations with (mostly South Asian) dancers was in discussing what classical dancers could learn from the acting of their celluloid models.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, dance teachers often spoke of the difficulties faced by 'Western dancers' (both South Asian and non-South Asian origin) in portraying culturally accurate character depictions in their *abhinaya* dancing; moreover, many Bharatanatyam, Odissi and Kathak students also confessed experiencing this as a challenge in their dance training. Interestingly, every dancer who raised this point about *abhinaya* used a variation on the example of how an Indian woman is said to have a particular manner of being 'shy' or 'coy' in expressing her love or in receiving the attention of her beloved. These gendered traits of modesty and

shyness appeared to be idealised by the dancers with whom I worked, many of whom described these characteristics as foreign in a British cultural context where women are perceived to approach men openly about their feelings and desires.

Interestingly, despite most classical dancers' varying levels of disdain for current Bollywood dance as comparable to their own dance forms, several dancers confessed to drawing inspiration for their *abhinaya* depictions from women on the silver screen. As one South Asian classical dance teacher based in the UK explained:

> So… I think, I hate to say it but to some extent… [voice drops] I'm not saying my dance teaching is influenced in any way by Bollywood, I would hate to be quoted on that[88], but I think just [pause]. See, when a girl feels shy when her lover is looking at her, they [British students] don't understand that. They think 'why is she shy', you know? And I think a little bit of that will come across in an Indian movie, if you watch an Indian movie. And they just can, they can't relate to that kind of Indian coyness that we have, and I think by watching Hindi films it kind of helps them a bit on that front, at least when they are dealing with sringara [love in classical *rasa* theory].

In addition to this perception of cultural difference, there is also the notion of temporal distance and how this affects dancers' abilities (or lack thereof) to perform in culturally 'authentic' ways. For another classical dancer (male) based in London, the challenge of presenting 'Indian' courtship (an extension of representations of Indian femininity) is as much to do with time as it is to do with cultural space:

> For example the traditional Kathak abhinaya is always Radha being teased by Krishna and that [kind of teasing] doesn't happen now. But because you know, I've seen Bollywood movies, I've seen Madhuri… someone who is – well she is Kathak trained – Madhuri is a very good dancer and her expressions… are tied to like the lyrics of whatever song she is doing. I can understand you know that things are slightly different in India. And maybe you know, you have to be a bit circumspect about approaching women and teasing is one of the ways you can do it and so on. But yeah, I think that kind of awareness of the social background of what you are dancing, there's something that you have to be taught, you have to be familiar with. Before I started watching Bollywood, I wouldn't have known anything about that.

[88] This quote is important for demonstrating the connection that is drawn between Bollywood depictions, Indian classical dance and perceived notions of cultural knowledge and ideal femininity. Although several other dancers similarly articulated the issues that are raised here, this quote provides one of the clearest examples of this relationship. I have therefore chosen to include it and have endeavoured to ensure the speaker remains anonymous.

For this British Asian dancer, the past ('what doesn't happen now') is the same as contemporary India ('things are slightly different in India'). Temporality once more contributes to the production of the Other as the past of the present Self (Fabian 2002).

It is telling that dancers in India and the UK both strive for idealised feminine qualities in their classical dance performances, even if their distance to the 'authentic' ideal is articulated in different ways. For example, an Odissi teacher in India similarly confessed to having fewer reservations in turning to Bollywood as an aid in improving her *abhinaya* technique if and when it was appropriate. But while this teacher appears more concerned with improving her acting technique, the diasporic teacher quoted above saw cinematic representations as teaching her students behaviour believed to be culturally specific.

A second difference becomes evident in comparing the approaches of diasporic dancers with those of non-South Asian dancers. As I will discuss in the following section, the non-South Asian (white) dancers who discussed femininity in relation to their dance practice were much more general in articulating what this femininity was, both in their dance practice and beyond. In stark contrast, it was dancers of South Asian origin who overwhelmingly articulated aspirations to project a specific feminine ideal in their on-stage performances. Not once were these aspirations articulated in relation to diasporic dancers wanting to be coy (and by extension more 'feminine') in their daily lives. Rather than diminish the import of this idealised construction of Indian femininity, that diasporic dancers see it as something that *must be* performed even when it is not lived indicates just how entwined this particular femininity is with notions of Indian culture. To perform Indianness 'authentically', these dancers must perform gendered characteristics they believe to be particular to India. Given that Bharatanatyam, Odissi and Kathak dancers all subscribe to this logic, this ideal

'Indian' femininity appears to be associated with Indian culture more generally, suggesting that the roots of this representation lie deep in the (historical) nationalist imaginary, as I will soon discuss.

**Indian Femininity and Non-South Asian Dancers**

Although both non-South Asian and South Asian dancers in the UK discussed the challenges of performing in culturally 'authentic' ways, often in regard to character portrayal and constructions of femininity, the larger implications of this femininity aligned differently for the two groups. Compared to diasporic dancers, non-South Asian (white) dancers made references to a more expansive femininity that extended beyond the immediate context of dance performance.

This desire to heighten one's femininity was suggested to me by several non-South Asian origin dancers with whom I interacted. One such Odissi enthusiast and beginning student captured this preference, claiming that "for me anyways, I guess Odissi is the ultimate in terms of all the styles… because it's so feminine and it's much softer, it's more beautiful". When asked why this dancer (who appeared to be in her 40s) was drawn to the more feminine traits she associated with Odissi, she responded:

> I think because women, especially women now, women of my generation and maybe any other generation as well, have become very – I don't know if it's aggressive – but have had to become very strong, very cold, very… almost like men, if you want to look at it from an old school point of view, you know. And I think that we're moving away from our femininity a lot. And I think that Odissi celebrates it, right. And it allows you to be ultimately feminine. Yeah, that's a big part of it. And you know, it's a way to express femininity without shame. Without any, you know sexuality around it, and so with the sexuality can come the shame part of it. It's a way of expressing femininity that's pure, in my mind. And it feels so ancient, that it… that the part that it's so ancient kind of gives you that license to express that.

While this celebration exemplifies the bifurcation of the dance and its representation of an ideal femininity from its more sexualised connotations, it also projects this femininity back onto antiquity. For this dancer, the femininity that Odissi enables her to experience is articulated as a critique of modern (Western) variants of the feminine whereby women are seen to take on such 'masculine' traits as aggression and acquisitiveness in their desire to advance socially and professionally[89].

This excerpt suggests an interesting resemblance to earlier Euro-American dancers who would dance as 'Indian' women in order to access embodied experiences they would otherwise be denied on account of their ethno-cultural identities. For example, Jowitt (1989) has argued that representations of the *devadasi* in nineteenth- and twentieth-century European operas and plays attributed to the *devadasi* a passion and drama that was deemed inappropriate for 'proper' European 'ladies'. Performing the character of a *devadasi* thus allowed the European dancer to embody, and the audience to consume, an exotic sensuality/sexuality that did not compromise the dignity of the European women who performed and observed her in play. Might the quote cited above offer an extension of this exoticised embodiment in the present day: having been successfully sanitised in the mid-twentieth century, Odissi – a presumed modern-day incarnation of the ancient temple dance of the *devadasi* – enables an embodiment of a femininity that stands at odds with the modern neoliberal competitive, aggressive and careerist qualities women are said to have now taken on.

As is apparent in the abovementioned quote, this desire to be 'ultimately feminine' and not 'like men' reveals a complicated reaction to the rise of a particular form of Western feminism in the second half of the twentieth century. An ironic

[89] As such, a parallel can be drawn with belly-dancing and all its Orientalised associations; as Dox (2006) has shown, Western (white) dancers in the United States have similarly explained their desire to take up belly-dancing as part of their larger critique of Western consumerism and the Cartesian privileging of mind over body.

inversion of Jowitt's observations pertaining to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, its twenty-first century counterpart nonetheless pivots upon similar constructions of the exoticised femininity said to be at the heart of Odissi/Indian dance. That is to say, the *devadasi* figure discussed by Jowitt and the one alluded to now are both seen to be attractive for defying the social norm regarding 'Western' femininity; the terms of this difference may have changed – an exotic sexuality in the past compared to a demure coquetry in the present – but the assumption and allure of difference remains intact. Noticeably, Western femininity is also inverted in this description, as the nineteenth century 'lady' becomes the twenty-first century 'very strong, very cold' masculinised woman.

Notable in this account is how the discipline of learning Odissi is seen to engender the embodiment of femininity, a supposition I encountered elsewhere. For example, one Odissi teacher who heads a South Asian arts organisation based outside London explained to me in an interview:

> From my teaching of non-Asians… I think the non-Asian people [sic] are fascinated by the décor of Odissi, because it's very bridal make up, it's very feminine as a form. And I think that's interesting. And that's interesting about [one non-South Asian student's father], because [the student] is one of our very good dancers... Her father was very fascinated for [her] to do it [learn Odissi] because he just felt that that was going to increase her femininity. And it's beautiful. Because I think Odissi does it very gracefully.

This excerpt is interesting for it represents both the (white, male) father's perspective as well as the (South Asian, female) teacher's estimation. While a reading of this instance in which the father wishes for his daughter to 'increase her femininity' should be tempered by the fact that it is the teacher who tells it, it nonetheless supports the contention that a correlation is drawn between learning Odissi and accessing a particular femininity outside dance performance specifically (a correlation that South Asian dancers did not necessarily make in reference to themselves). Furthermore, this teacher's reference to 'bridal make up' is interesting for it simultaneously appeals to a

feminine propriety that can be traced to nationalist constructions of Indian women as good wives and mothers on the one hand, and Orientalist notions of Indian women as always being lavishly adorned on the other. Thus while sexuality is conjured in this excerpt through the use of bridal imagery, it is simultaneously confined within the conjugal bonds of respectability.

Discussing Egyptian women's veiling practices, Mahmood (2001) has noted how such acts are used to help cultivate embodied feelings such as piety and modesty. Building on Focauldian analyses of biopolitics and discipline as they relate to the formation of subjectivity, Mahmood suggests such bodily practices be considered a form of agency whereby veiling women are disciplined and discipline themselves as an expression of their choice to become more modest. While Mahmood's analysis may suggest a parallel to the dancers wishing to cultivate femininity by studying Indian classical dance, when analysing gendered constructions of this dance practice, the bodily discipline and choice of dancers to study Odissi/Indian classical dance as a method of heightening their femininity must also be placed alongside an examination of the historical construction of this supposedly 'Indian' trait. Considering the act of cultivating a particular femininity in tandem with the historical production of this femininity raises the question as to why Odissi/Indian classical dance is seen as enabling the gendered ideal such dancers seek[90]. The underlying Orientalist constructions of Indian culture, represented here by Indian classical dance, are central to such an analysis.

[90] Unfortunately it is beyond the scope of this work to analyse the ways in which Kathak, Bharatanatyam and Odissi are gendered in slightly different ways. When comparing styles, dancers (of all forms) will likely say that Bharatanatyam is the least feminine due to its straight lines. This does not mean however that discourses of Indian classical dance as ultimately feminine, supported by specific constructions of forms such as Odissi that can then be projected back onto other styles, do not apply as I discuss later in this chapter.

Indeed, it is significant that much of the discourse that constructs Odissi/Indian classical dance as enabling an ultra-feminine persona suggests this persona is unavailable in other (non-Indian) dance forms or cultural practices. This is a perspective often expressed most explicitly by non-Asian dancers, as suggested above. Thus, in comparing the perspectives expressed by South Asian and non-South Asian dancers, it appears that South Asian dancers, more familiar with the Indian cultural tropes discussed above in relation to Bollywood, articulate notions of femininity in terms of coyness and modesty (how to be *a certain kind* of woman); in contrast, non-South Asian dancers tend to express their desire for a more general femininity (how to be *like* a woman). Despite this difference, both groups of dancers rely upon Orientalist notions of India and its culture as feminine in their articulations such that the feminisation of Indian classical dance continues on multiple levels. It is to the construction of this particular femininity, and its sexualised connotations, that I now turn.

**Femininity and Discourses of Desire**

Apparent in the constructions of femininity inspired by the dance are continuities with discourses of desire that can be traced back to the colonial encounter discussed in the Introduction. As Yeğenoğlu (1998) has indicated, the desire for the Other – intrinsically linking Orientalism to discourses of sexuality – has been central to the Orientalist and colonial projects. Although largely theorised in the abstract, articulations of this desire are further apparent in non-South Asian dancers' narratives explaining why they first started learning Indian classical dance. In the words of one such dancer whom I interviewed, why she started dancing was "a difficult question because I don't have any kind of logical explanation to that at all. As far as I

remember, myself, there was always this idea in my mind that I want to do classical Indian dance, even when *I* didn't really know what is it [sic]".

In articulating a desire to learn a dance she knew nothing about, this dancer was not alone; an even more overt articulation of this desire is apparent in another (white) dancer's explanation as to why she began training in an Indian classical dance form:

> Well, I went to India in 2000 and just saw the dancing and kind of fell in love with the culture, the colours, you know everything. But being totally honest, which is I'm sure what you want for your [research], I saw a film, The Kama Sutra by Mira Nair. And in it was some dancing, and I thought that was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen... And as we do these days, we google everything don't we. So I googled it and found out it was Odissi, and then looked for a teacher in my area.

Surprising as it may first appear, this dancer's reference to *The Kama Sutra* (1996) was not the only instance in which I have come across a dancer citing this film as inspiration to learn Odissi. There are a couple of scenes in the film that feature Odissi choreographies, but these are not performed by dancers who have trained in the form extensively prior to or after the making of the film. The film is a reference to the Sanskrit text by the same name that dates between 400 BCE and 200 CE and that, in the contemporary context, is most often and notoriously interpreted as a 'manual' for sexual activity (see Roy 2000); in its cinematic version Nair presents a lavish depiction of ancient India in a highly Orientalised manner. The dancers who cite this film to explain their desire to study dance thus bring together discourses of desire, sexuality and Orientalism as they actively seek out and study Indian classical dance forms in the present.

Sexualised and gendered desire can also be gleaned in the reviews of Indian classical dance performances; for example, a 2011 review in *The Guardian* describes a performance by celebrated Odissi troupe Nrityagram in the following manner:

> South Asian dance is thriving in Britain, yet most of the work grabbing the limelight tends to be some form of contemporary fusion: classical Indian dance mixed with modern western moves, Kathak mashed with hip-hop. *So it's a*

> *particular pleasure* to see the Edinburgh debut of the Nrityagram Ensemble from Bangalore – a company dedicated to revivifying *the most ancient of Indian dances*, Odissi.
>
> Odissi originated from the Hindu and *tantric temples* of Orissa, and in contrast to the more chiselled angles of bharatanatyam (the form most widely seen in the UK), it celebrates the beauty of the curve. *Movement snakes and undulates through the dancer's body*: opening out in lavish sweeps of her upper torso, rippling in a gracious eddy along her arm, settling in the delicate curl of her finger.
>
> …*This is an ancient dance, joyously and sexily performed in the present tense* (Mackrell 2011, emphasis added).

The titillating interplay between Orientalism and sexuality is articulated here for the twenty-first century where 'the most ancient of Indian dances' provides a 'particular pleasure' when it is 'sexily performed in the present tense'[91]. Colonial desire finds its articulation in the postcolonial present.

Less overt perhaps – but no less historically grounded – are South Asian dancers' articulations of desire in reference to the femininity they idealise in the dance. Recall the South Asian dancer who suggested beauty was at the core of what *devadasis* and courtesans must have represented, cited at the beginning of this chapter. While such descriptions mark the restoration of the *devadasi* figure to respectability, they are no less complicated when articulated by dancers of South Asian origin. Indeed, these descriptions suggest continuity with particular politics of desire stemming from the colonial encounter.

For example, according to Alloula (1987), who studied pornographic representations of Algerian women in French travel postcards, sexuality and discourses of desire were central to colonialism. For Alloula "[t]here is no phantasm without sex" (ibid:3), hence the centrality of the harem in the colonial/Orientalist imagination. Alloula draws attention to the importance of staging in producing this

[91] The reference to Tantrism in this excerpt is particularly interesting in light of Urban's (2003) study of Tantra and the ways in which this practice was understood as representative of – and thus equated with – sexual indulgence verging on debauchery in both colonial and Indian imaginaries.

desired sexuality; for the postcards capture that which the photographer has consciously and laboriously created, not that which exists in the realm of the everyday.

However, as Chow (1993) has shown, even the attention that Alloula brings to the colonial desire of the French photographers who first took the pictures of semi-nude Algerian women is far from straightforward. For Chow, Alloula's re-publication of the images means his gaze remains aligned with the colonialist-photographer despite the former's anti-imperialist politics and identification as a colonised Algerian (ibid:38-41). Chow's critique demonstrates the discursive convergences of race, gender, sexuality and desire in the present. Orientalist desire is thus not exclusive to Europe, but can and does appear in – and thus help shape – 'native' subject positions. The positionality of the South Asian dancers I encountered are similarly complex; caught in the Orientalist discourses that have produced them, they once again reflect the Orientalist gaze back onto the dance (a metonym here for culture) of which they are seen as representative.

Thus, while a striking difference appears between dancers of South Asian and non-South Asian origin in the particular contours of their constructions of ideal femininity and the Other that it represents, there also emerges an overarching similarity. For South Asian dancers, the Other appears in the form of the coy/shy maiden, akin to the 'village girl' discussed in the previous chapter; for non-South Asian dancers, this Other takes on the form of a more generic femininity in contrast to the aggressive modern and masculinised woman discussed in the previous section. However, the ways in which these Others are internalised and performed by both groups of dancers share much in common in that they simultaneously project outwards what dancers from both groups have learned of their dance forms,

constructed as already feminine. For this reason, I now turn to the physicality of the dance performance to examine whether and how gender is made manifest here.

## Odissi and the Femininity of Form

Until now, I have been discussing contemporary gendered representations in Indian classical dance performances mostly in reference to *abhinaya* depictions of characters. Attempts to trace the gendered constructs of Indian classical dance are further complicated by the *nritta*/*nritya* (pure dance/expressional dance) distinction. The narrative content of the latter make gendered portrayals more overt as the dancer must embody the specific character he or she is depicting. Masculinity and femininity can therefore be overemphasised and indeed exaggerated in *abhinaya* performances; for example a heroine might be portrayed as extra coy or a villainous man as overly conniving. It is therefore in the *nritta* pure dance element that gender becomes particularly elusive to track for its portrayal is almost entirely premised upon supposedly non-gendered constructions of the dancing body.

Given the stylistic variation between Kathak, Bharatanatyam and Odissi, the gendering of *nritta* operates in ways that are highly subtle. As I will discuss next, the physicality of Odissi, the form for which I was able to conduct participant observation as a dancer, is said to be distinguished by a more 'feminised' aesthetic or sensibility especially, as many dancers (in all styles) will explain, when compared to Bharatanatyam[92]. While this manifestation of femininity can be said to have resulted

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[92] As mentioned in a previous footnote, dancers often suggest Odissi and Kathak are 'more feminine' than Bharatanatyam. This was exemplified by one Kathak dancer who claimed her style is "[c]ompletely different to Bharatanatyam. Completely. Like, so much more feminine. Graceful. Bharatanatyam [is] very masculine and strong and stuff". Although her Kathak teacher who was also present attempted to refine her student's description to explain what she "really mean[t]" by replacing the word 'masculine' with adjectives such as 'angular' and 'strong', this account nonetheless demonstrates how ideas of Bharatanatyam as 'not feminine' persist among dancers. As a form of

from the particular gaze of its original male choreographers, femininity has subsequently come to define Odissi today to the extent that its existence as such shapes in turn the embodied perspectives of Odissi dancers. For example, on my first day of fieldwork in Orissa in 2011, a teacher framed his correction of a dancer's technique by pointing out that "as you know, Odissi is called graceful and lilting so that is what you should be" thus highlighting the disciplinary slippage between cause and effect in dance training through the gendering of aesthetics. In his and other teachers' corrections of dance technique that I observed, Odissi was associated with feminine qualities such as lilting grace and soft *lasya* movements[93]; the particular femininity assumed to be inherent in the dance was thus presented as the reason its female dancers should and could *feel* feminine.

While the abovementioned desire for an exoticised femininity might explain one reason for Odissi's construction as ultra-feminine, more concrete examples – often cited as evidence by those who readily characterise the dance as such – are found in the movements of the dance form itself. Thus, it cannot be said that the psychological and theoretical reasons that can help explain perceptions of Odissi as inherently feminine are independent from the visual conveyances of the dance; rather, the two inform and reinforce each other. While the softer movements of Odissi may accentuate the female figure, as I discuss in greater detail below, these movements are no less constructed by particular practitioners at particular moments in history, and are therefore no less reflective of the particular ideals that shaped those moments.

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Indian classical dance, the issues of gendering that I discuss in this chapter still apply to Bharatanatyam, concerned as it is with female respectability, as discussed earlier in the chapter. The extent to which these gendered tropes of masculinity and femininity are paralleled by Western stereotypes of gender demonstrates the deep entanglement of both Western and Indian ideas, both at the time of their construction in the colonial era and in the present.

[93] Indian classical dance technique is divided into two categories, *lasya* and *tandava*. The former is often described as the feminine quality of the dance and relates to movements regarded as softer and gentler in quality. The latter is described as the masculine quality of the dance and is associated with more vigorous movements. In the mythology of the dance, *tandava* is associated with Hindu god Siva, and *lasya* with his consort Parvati.

In other words, an analysis of the gendering of the Odissi form reveals a tautology whereby, because the dance is described as feminine, its movements are required to be so as well; on the other hand, because the movements are regarded as feminine, the dance is similarly characterised[94]. If, as Said (1978) noted, the striking characteristic of Orientalism was how its fantastical representation actually came to have material impact, the relationship between discourses surrounding Odissi and its actual visual manifestations must be thoroughly investigated.

Over the course of my fieldwork, I encountered other examples in which Odissi dancers credited their practice of the form with enabling embodied feelings of femininity. In the previous chapter, I presented an excerpt from an interview conducted with three Odissi dancers residing in Bhubaneswar – Sally, Lucia and Sarojini – to discuss the racialisation of Indian classical dance styles such as Odissi, as well as of the dancers who practice them. It is evident from this interview that these processes of racialisation are not isolated from, but are rather deeply entwined with, a specific gendering of Indian classical dance and culture. I turn once more to this interview to demonstrate how, in addition to Odissi being seen as particularly feminine, this femininity is described as specifically Indian. Although the conversation began with and returned to a discussion about the portrayal of certain characters in *abhinaya* performances, it quickly turned to a consideration of *nritta* pure dances, thus demonstrating just how much Odissi in its most abstract (non-narrative) form is shaped by gendered/Orientalised notions.

[94] In this section, I am discussing more common perceptions of Odissi. There are of course a number of male Odissi dancers whose performances are not described as 'feminine'. However, their performances are not reflected back onto the form as a whole and thus do not shift perceptions of Odissi as more feminine, at least not yet. Choreographer Bichitrananda Swain in Orissa is working towards this project, for he is interested in producing dances specifically for the male body (for more, see Roy 2009:112). This interest, however, is focused more on adding 'masculinity' to the Odissi movement vocabulary and not on questioning the ways in which gender (masculinity and femininity) are constructed in the dance itself.

> Question: The point you brought up of playing a different character when you are on stage – how would you describe your character when you're doing a pallavi, when you don't have a text to refer to?
>
> Sally: Well I think, like, it's you [pause]. It's definitely your own individual self. But as an Odissi dancer you have to follow a certain mould. You have to present yourself on stage in a certain way that shows yes, I am an Odissi dancer. I am not a slob.
>
> [Laughter]
>
> Lucia: Yeah, yeah.
>
> Question: What would some of those ways of presenting yourself be?
>
> Sally: Like I think in a pallavi, there's that coquetry, there's coyness, shyness, there's that femininity, that idea of the feminine, which is again this Indian idea of what is femininity [sic]. The same time you have dances like Durga [an *abhinaya* about the goddess Durga] where you have strength in femininity. But in pallavis, the general aesthetic of Odissi specifically…
>
> Lucia: [Interrupts] Feminine

Like the dancers discussed earlier in this chapter, Sally and Lucia also identify 'this Indian idea of what is femininity' as central to their dance practice. The extended time they have spent living in Orissa might mean they have become more familiar with the particular tropes of this femininity (coquetry, coyness, shyness), although they mutually conclude the 'aesthetic of Odissi is specifically feminine'.

Implicit in this construction of femininity is the separation of spirituality and sensuality discussed in relation to the bifurcation of the *devadasi* figure, for the interview continues:

> Sally: You know you are dancing to attract… to charm god.
>
> Lucia: Totally!! Charming, charming.
>
> Sally: This is your charming approach.
>
> Question: When you do it to charm, you said charm god, is that how you think of it? Who are you charming?
>
> Lucia: I feel like that too. Because I feel like this dance is not just for people to watch, it is definitely for god so you're definitely charming to god. It's a divine charm. Because if I take the charm from South America [laughs], it would be totally different.

> [Laughter]
>
> Lucia: I still have to know, for me example [sic], if I am to charm a boy, it will be totally different if I am really in a divine charming [mood]. It is totally different.
>
> Sally: Actually, the vibration you're creating is different. You're not vibrating in some lower chakra charm. And actually you can watch that. I don't know, I actually feel for myself in terms of what energy it's creating in the body, where I want to … how I want to uplift. We were talking about pallavis, but actually if you look at erotic literature like [the] Gita Govinda, where do you want people's minds to be? Is it like this base level of love making, or is it…
>
> Lucia: Holy.
>
> Sally: I think the text itself, and the ragas themselves…
>
> Lucia: [Interrupts] The ragas, they're the conductor.
>
> Sally: They create the atmosphere, they create the… if you go with that, if you don't go against that, then it naturally comes.
>
> Question: So it's a reflection of things, a conversation of things?
>
> Sally: Music, text, yeah.

Sally and Lucia thus demarcate a fine line between spirituality and sexuality in their framing of Odissi as feminine, an esoteric ideal versus 'some lower chakra charm' or the 'base level of love making'. Furthermore, they distinguish between, and indeed appear to elevate, 'Indian' forms of seduction and charm as preferable to, for example, their South American counterparts (here, code for the familiar, less exotic, perhaps). The potential for different representations of 'strength in femininity' are raised in reference to representations of the goddess Durga[95], but this is ultimately presented as an exception to the more pervasive 'charming' femininity said to characterise the aesthetics of Odissi dance. It should be noted that both Sally and Lucia, as non-Indian, relate this to an Indian culture more broadly (*ragas*, music and text) rather than an Oriya culture more specifically, although their selection of Odissi

[95] According to Hindu mythology, when the gods could not defeat Mahesassura, they called upon Durga to take up the battle in which she was victorious.

as their dance of choice suggests that they find the combination of spirituality and sensuality they are looking for in this particular form of dance.

Interestingly, the Indian participant in this group interview was silent throughout this exchange; it was only after Sally concluded the abovementioned discussion of music and text that Sarojini interjected to say:

> It's definitely easier in text and lyrics, then you actually are portraying something. That has its own toughness as well. But in *pallavi*, at times I have asked myself the same question – my smile is superficial, why am I dancing? I am just a courtesan. I feel that. But then it just means you shouldn't go up on stage. I have to understand that it is nothing superficial, it is very deep, and you have to get into that. You have to just be an African sculptor who will unknowingly carve a beautiful sculpture, not knowing he has the technique, not knowing he has a proper set of rules.

In this excerpt, Sarojini similarly juxtaposes spirituality with sexuality and appeals to a sense of exotic artistry, but in slightly different ways. Her comparison of herself as a dancer to an 'African sculptor who will unknowingly carve a beautiful sculpture' suggests a kind of exoticisation; already intimately familiar with both India and Orissa, she appeals to the unfamiliarity of Africa to convey the exotic connotations of the dance. The idealised femininity that encompasses the coy and the charming while simultaneously rejecting the sexual and the vulgar that is presented in the above excerpt appears to be as central, if not more, to Odissi *in its abstract form* (*pallavis)* as it is to its narrativisations of mythological stories (*abhinaya*). The bifurcation of the spiritually pure ('it's a divine charm') and the sexually depraved ('I am just a courtesan') is made complete in its permeation of the dance such that textual specificity is no longer that which determines the mood, spirituality or sanctity of its performance.

**Grounding a Femininity of Form**

To understand the femininity attributed to Odissi by many dancers of the three dance styles I analyse, both in India and the diaspora, requires an examination of the form, the very movements of which are credited with making Odissi more feminine. Although it adheres to many of the same scriptures outlining procedures for Indian classical dance, Odissi makes more use of the *tribhangi* (tri-bent) position in which the hip and torso extend in opposite directions so as to accentuate the curves of the body. In addition, Odissi is unique in its emphasis on and isolation of the torso, used to shift the dancer's weight smoothly as well as to 'soften' any potential 'harshness' that can result from increasingly fast footwork. The torso movement is constant and yet, like the footwork, is matched to the rhythms of the accompanying music.

In addition to the torso, Odissi is also known for its wrist and chin movements. While the clarity of hand gestures must be maintained with each finger in taut position relative to the others, the soft movement of the wrist breaks up any severity as well as allows for what dancers describe to be the more 'fluid' movements of the hands and arms. These movements of the torso, wrist and chin are regularly cited as not only crucial to Odissi, but responsible for the 'fluid', 'gentle' and 'graceful' characteristics so often invoked to describe the form as feminine.

These characteristics are not only linked to an allegedly unique form of body language – described according to one's level of categorisation in either regional (Oriya) or national (Indian) terms – but also the character traits assumed to be culturally specific to the people of the area. In the previous chapter, I discussed the slippages between the regional and the national in discussions of Indian classical dance. Dancers will use one or the other depending on their background, relative knowledge of India, and the points they wish to make. This slippage provides another

example of the ways in which ideas of pan-Indian culture are produced through various Indian classical dance practices, as well as how such ideas are underpinned by varying levels of entitlement and foreignness.

Amongst those intimately familiar with Odissi for example (especially Oriyas), the chin movement is regarded as a characteristic of everyday Oriya body language, and thus particularly important in Odissi dance. For those less familiar with Odissi, such movement is regarded as more typical of the 'Indian head bob' said to characterise a supposedly pan-Indian embodied trait[96]. This physical ('cultural') characteristic of the dance is then associated with the 'gentle' quality said to be indicative of the sweet and demure qualities deemed unique to Oriya/Indian girls. However, rather than suggest a specifically cultural (Oriya/Indian) trait, the figure of the 'Oriya girl' alluded to in Odissi performances is constructed more in terms of the innocent *sidhi sadhi*[97] 'village girl' who contrasts her more urban and modern counterpart – the dancer who does not move her chin but must learn to in order to perfect her art. This is the same 'girl' who is coy when teased by her beloved as discussed by the numerous dancers at the beginning of this chapter.

In the diaspora, further removed from the Indian national context, this *sidhi sadhi* image appears even more abstracted and is made applicable to India more generally, as was discussed in the previous chapter. So prevalent is this image that one South Asian reviewer described a duet performance that was part of an Odissi

[96] This movement of the head is not necessarily gendered on its own. For example, when explaining the potential difficulties for non-Indian dancers in capturing the nuances of dance movement, one Bharatanatyam dancer gave the following anecdote:

> I remember a funny incident where we were in Sweden and they were closing the duty free and this Indian guy came in and said '*please*' [with head movement lead by the chin] and only I understood what he meant because it was the head and the eyes and because no one else in the world would move like that.

However, historical representations of the effeminacy of (certain) Indian men cannot be underestimated. As a stereotyped gesture – as well as in its performance in Indian classical dance where it combines with other gendering processes – this particular example of body language is rarely seen to exemplify a 'strong' masculinity.

[97] The literal meaning of this term is 'straight and simple/plain'.

programme in London as a "fresh and innocent approach to the dance piece [that] was reminiscent of a young maiden coming of age rejoicing in the spring festival" (Dutta 2011). The imagery of the young maiden and the spring festival, said to be inspired by the performance, nonetheless codes the dance as feminine and pastoral, despite the historical and contemporary relationship between Indian classical dance and urban centres, in India and the UK.

Moreover, these characteristic movements are also said to be linked to the natural and cultural environment in which the dance originates. For example, several Odissi teachers (both Oriyas in Orissa and non-Oriya Indians abroad) have attempted to explain the circular movements of the form to me by relating them to the circularity of the Oriya alphabet or the movement patterns of the waves that hit the iconic shores of the Puri beach[98]. Notable in these teachers' descriptions of the 'soft' 'feminine' movements of Odissi is how they tie together the dance with the female body as well as the geographic and cultural landscape from which the dance is said to originate.

This conceptualisation of Odissi as intrinsically connected to the land demonstrates striking similarities with discourses of the motherland as feminine made popular by the Indian nationalist movement in colonial and postcolonial India. Chronologically, it is important to note that the reconstructive movement for contemporary Odissi was in full force within a decade after India achieved independence in 1947. The pictorial image of *Bharata Mata* (literally Mother India) came into circulation earlier in the 1860s, and was rapidly integrated into geographic representations of India by the 1920s so that, by the mid-twentieth century, the image of Mother India and the geography of India became interchangeable (Ramaswamy 2010, 2002; Goswami 2004; Mohanram 1999). The Indian nation thus became

[98] Puri is an important location for Odissi as it is home to the Jagannatha Temple with which the history of the dance is strongly associated.

equated with the female body as iconic images of *Bharata Mata* – her body, flowing hair and sari – were creatively superimposed onto the cartography of modern India, demonstrating what Ramaswamy describes as the nation as bodyscape: “a species of the modern map that is put to work in ways that are different from the tasks of the disenchanted cartographic productions of the state” (2002:154). The Indian bodyscape thus inserted the woman as Mother onto an impersonal map, giving the landscape a living quality similar to the ‘life’ now inserted into Odissi dance, said as it is to be derived from the land. Indeed, the movements of the waves that the torso or wrist are meant to capture are identified by these same teachers as the very ‘breath’ and ‘pulse’ of the dance.

**Nation, Gender, Discipline**

It is in their concern to depict certain idealised forms of femininity that Odissi, Bharatanatyam and Kathak dancers demonstrate one of the clearest links to the nationalist politics in which the twentieth century reconstruction of the dance must be contextualised. Postcolonial and feminist scholarship on Indian nationalism has brought significant attention to the gendered contours of this political movement (Ramaswamy 2010; Chatterjee 1999; Mohanram 1999; Mani 1998; Grewal 1996; Sangari and Vaid 1989). Moreover, steered by a mobile, educated and elite intelligentsia, this movement – and the gender roles of feminine purity and propriety that it projected – reflected the particular religious, cultural and class ideals of the nationalists who rallied for national unity in opposition to British rule. The Indian nation thus came to be perceived through the specific lens of the upper-caste and upper class Hindu elite, despite the heterogeneity and unequal socio-economic status of the population this elite claimed, in theory, to represent.

Ironically, the ideal Indian woman in the nationalist imaginary was a reconstruction of the middle-class Victorian woman as morally pure and virtuous, indicating the complex co-production of British (colonial) and Indian gender roles in the imperial 'contact zone' (Metcalf 1998; Grewal 1996). By relegating the 'woman question' to the private and spiritual sphere of culture, said to be untouched by the influences of British colonialism and the advent of Western modernity, nationalists further cemented the relation between Indian (Hindu) women and the nation, identifying both as in need of patriarchal/patriotic protection to maintain the 'purity' of tradition (Chatterjee 1999:116-135; see also Ramaswamy 2010). Thus essentialised and glorified images of Indian womanhood were central to the politics of the nationalist movement even as the active and very public participation of women in this movement rose by the 1930s (Mankekar 1999:108-109). The contribution of women nationalists to this idealised construction – along with their consumption and internalisation of it – suggests that the glorified Indian woman associated with the nation was as much an aspiration then as it is today; indeed dancers in India and the British South Asian diaspora both continue to strive to project her ephemeral qualities. The propriety of the 'Indian' woman to which dancers aspire signals the success of the nationalist movement in conflating the morality and purity of the nation with its culture and its women.

Part and parcel of the constructions of femininity in Indian classical dance described thus far are the ways in which such forms are nonetheless (therefore?) designated as being in need of disciplinary sanction. As was discussed in the Introduction, part of the classicisation of dance forms such as Bharatanatyam, Kathak and Odissi required the reduction of any suggestion of sensuality in dance, thus signalling "middleclass housewifery respectability" (Coorlawala 2004:56). In order to

achieve this objective, the movement of certain parts of the body must be strictly contained to preserve the 'classical' refinement of the dance.

One way in which the concern for respectability and bodily discipline was maintained in the production of 'classical' dance is evidenced in concerns regarding the movement of the hips in dance (Pathy 2007). Although the temple sculptures that were consulted during the reconstruction of the dance showed many postures in which the hip was deflected, these did not indicate whether and how the hips moved as the dancer transitioned from one pose to the next. In the present, one of the most constant points for correction to come from Odissi and Bharatanatyam teachers is to not move the hips, something that is especially difficult for beginning students who have not built up the requisite strength in their quadriceps or the ability to isolate the torso to shift weight and thus prevent the hip from moving instinctively. This strict policing of hip movements and the connotations of its misuse are familiar to dancers and connoisseurs alike, as is captured in one review of an Odissi programme I attended in London that described one of the soloists as "charming but at times her hip movements were too amplified and if not cautious in future can trespass into bollywood glamour" (Dutta 2011). Although the vulgarity of the *devadasi* with which the reformists were concerned is here replaced by 'bollywood glamour', the censoring of female sexuality (represented in hip movements) remains in place[99].

The discipline of the body that is required to learn to dance without moving the hip is one instance in which an entire history of colonialism, power and normative

[99] It should be noted that knowledge of the sanctioning of the hip is not limited to Odissi or Bharatanatyam dancers; a Kathak dancer I often attended performances with would similarly make recourse to critiquing dance performances in relation to whether and how much the performer moved her hips. Given that Kathak dancers are mostly upright and rarely bend at the knee, the movements of the hip are not as pronounced, and therefore not as much a focal point. However, the discipline of the body required to retain respectability is no less a concern for classical Kathak dancers, as was suggested in the comparisons and contrasts drawn to 'bad' Bollywood dancing alluded to at the beginning of this chapter.

propriety is inscribed onto the modern dancer. Michel Foucault has argued that the body should be seen as "the inscribed surface of events" (cited in Mills 2003:83) referring to the ways in which "political events and decisions have material effects upon the body" (ibid). This brings attention to the memorialisation of power on the body (Mbembé 2004) and suggests that the very ways in which these dances were reproduced and performed were deeply influenced by their socio-historical and political contexts.

While conceptualisations of the body politic necessarily point to the disciplinary power that shapes bodies, this is also an important point for dance studies in particular, as discussed in the Introduction. Susan Foster (1997) suggests that the professional dancer's body is constructed through discipline, bringing into question notions of 'pure' and uninhibited movement (see also Wulff 2003). The emphasis on careful control of the torso and the absence of hip movements in Bharatanatyam, Kathak and Odissi (albeit with different visual manifestations according to style) are similarly reflective of the politics and histories that informed their constructions. The bodily discipline of the Indian classical dancer is also a way in which the 'impropriety' of the disgraced *devadasi*/courtesan (who might have/ is said to have moved her hip) is re-confirmed.

Such gendered discipline is not only enacted upon the body of the Indian classical dancer but is also apparent in the moral lessons the dance can be used to promote. Popular in classical dance performances are depictions of women characters from the *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, *Gita Govinda* and other (Hindu) mythological narratives. Like the ideal (Hindu) woman of the nation (see Geetha 1999), these characters are depicted in terms of their purity, chastity, devotion and controlled sexuality. The cultural specificity and morality of these feminised characteristics was

suggested in an interview with a male Bharatanatyam dancer of South Asian origin, now based in London:

> Because if you grew up in India or within Indian culture, you have Indianness, there's a certain – like a woman will have lajja. There's no word for lajja, it's not shame, it's not modesty, it's just a virtue, it's not even that. So that's a very Indian thing.

Indeed, the word *lajja* simultaneously conjures notions of honour and shame in ways that neither word can capture alone in English. But without careful historicisation and contextualisation, can such a representation of femininity as chaste, honourable and modest be considered (only) as a 'very Indian thing'? An analysis of when and why such attributes become celebrated, and to what end, is crucial.

Although the ideal, such representations of pure and virtuous women are not the only way in which femininity is conventionally depicted in Indian classical dance performances. Indeed, these 'virtues' can be highlighted just as effectively when they are absent. While it remains up to the dancer/choreographer to interpret texts and corresponding characters in a dance, when attempts are made to draw comparisons between the characters in the text and the contemporary context in which they are performed, these interpretations can and often do reinforce conventionally patriarchal readings.

For example, in one Bharatanatyam performance I attended in London – at a 'community' venue in a predominantly South Asian neighbourhood with an entirely South Asian audience – the soloist performer, a middle-aged woman who moved from South India in the 1980s, performed her own choreography interpreting the story of Kunti. The mother of the five Pandava brothers around whom the *Mahabharata* revolves, Kunti bore her first son, Karna, out of wedlock after having a brief relationship with the sun god Surya.

The Kunti choreography presented in this performance was accompanied by live music, and yet for this particular piece – unlike more typical performances of *abhinaya* in the rest of the programme as well as more generally – the vocalist did not utilise any lyrics but rather sang an extended *alaap* or elaboration on the notes of the *raga* scale. The dancer later explained in an interview that the lack of lyrics was in order to bring focus entirely to the *abhinaya* expressions as they were conveyed to the audience. Without lyrics and thus a particular script around which to construct the dance, the dancer portrayed a young Kunti as she was seduced by Surya, given a child without physical impregnation, and ultimately left to abandon the infant in a basket she placed along the riverbank[100]. Prior to performing the piece, the dancer introduced it as a warning to the young women in the audience (many of whom were her students) against the perils of teenage sex and the stigmas of single motherhood. Thus while this performance was interesting in highlighting how 'problems' more readily attributed to the present day were in fact issues in 'ancient' times as well, it nonetheless reinforced normative and patriarchal constructions of honour, respectability, and the control of female sexuality.

While this dance stood out for its obvious delineating of appropriate and inappropriate forms of female sexuality, it was part of a performance of five dances, which together highlighted further the convergence of mythology, patriarchy and Indian classical dance narratives. The entire performance was presented as a 'journey' meant to take the audience through the "evolving attitude towards the dance over time" (programme notes). The performance established a particular trajectory, with the first piece representing the 'supremacy of the divine', the second and third depicting

[100] Whether or not Kunti physically bore Karna is a question of interpretation, as is the question of whether or not Kunti willingly engaged in a sexual relationship with Surya. There is an Odissi choreography of the Karna-Kunti story in which the dancer depicts Kunti's experience of morning sickness as well as giving birth, for example.

the divine on 'more personal levels', and the fourth and fifth portraying human nature 'with all its flaws'. The gendered division of this linear schema from divine perfection to human degeneracy were striking, as the first three dances were entirely about male figures (gods), and the last two about women (humans).

While *Kunti* was the second to last dance, the final piece was a *javeli* (a poem in which a *nayika* protagonist addresses her beloved, whether human or divine) about a courtesan who greedily chastises her lover for not bringing the gifts of jewellery she had been promised. In the introductory demonstration, the dancer depicted some of the movements as she explained their context. Both this demonstration and the dance that was to follow solicited laughter from the audience, who had otherwise sat rather disinterestedly through the rest of the performance with several younger members occupying themselves playing games on their mobile phones. Indeed the climactic scene where the courtesan slaps her lover and slams the door in his face drew particular amusement from the audience when performed in the choreography.

The *abhinaya* expression and body language of this character conveyed the greed meant to be associated with the courtesan; the exaggerated movements of the chin and snide expressions of the face that conveyed no love served to depict this woman in all her arrogance. The dance concluded as the courtesan briskly marched off stage, having reached the limits of her patience. The intertextual representation of the greedy courtesan – with whom the audience would likely contrast the Bharatanatyam performance that evening as a more respectable and superior counterpart given hegemonic narratives of Indian dance history – was particularly striking as a juxtaposition to the classical dance presented on stage. In short, the representation of this character on stage recalled the negative connotations of the bifurcated *nautch* figure.

In a later interview with the performer, I asked about the organisation of the programme, to which she responded:

> That was the progression [of the dance], you see. Those days it was only on God… initially when it was performed in the temple. Then it was God on a more personal level. That is why I chose those two compositions, Rama and Krishna, where God was perceived as lover, as spiritual lover, more on a personal level. Then the next one [Kunti] is out and out worldly. [In] Kunti and the javali, the two compositions, you see an everyday woman relating to these concepts. So I wanted to show that, over a period, we have explored in Bharatanatyam field [sic], themes that are more and more human.

The first dance with which the programme began was an invocation to the gods in their absolute glory. The second and third dances – which were meant to represent the gods as approachable – were about the marriage between Rama and Sita and the love of a *gopi* (young maiden) for Lord Krishna. Although both of these dances involved depictions of femininity, these characterisations were used to foreground the venerability and divinity of the male protagonists loved and worshiped by these women. Notable were the similarities in the representation of these two characters and the coy femininity said to be a quintessential marker of Indian womanhood discussed earlier in this chapter. By organising the performance in this manner, divinity and infallibility were unmistakably marked as male, while the 'fall' from divine to human was associated with women, their promiscuity and greed.

### Tracing Masculinity In the Production of Femininity

Male dancers that I encountered during fieldwork have also commented on the ways in which certain vices have become associated with women in contemporary Indian classical dance performances, although for different reasons. Several male dancers (in all three styles) whom I interviewed and worked with said they felt disadvantaged by the limited male roles available to them in the mythological narrative canon; this proved to be a common topic in casual conversation, interviews and even in an online

blog for the main British South Asian dance magazine (Yajnik 2011). One dancer summarised these sentiments, noting how “the masculine character in Indian classical dance is never doubtful. He’s always self-assured. He always follows the righteous path. He knows the right decisions to make. He’s always controlled and collected”. Such a representation is consistent with that of Rama and Krishna in the second and third dances discussed in the previous section.

For many male dancers, the one-dimensionality of the heroic male character is not challenging enough to perform. Moreover, as these dancers rightly claim, this unidimensionality is certainly not indicative of the complexity of different forms of masculinity. By way of comparison, these dancers point to the female characters who “are allowed a bigger variety of emotion. The lust and the greed and the jealousy, and all the shades in between” (interview with male Bharatanatyam dancer). This comparison is drawn in order to encourage a deeper exploration of masculinity in Indian classical dance and the portrayal of more ambiguous and less infallible traits of male characters. However, such comparisons do not question why it is that attributes such as jealousy, greed and lust are readily associated with female characters (the greedy courtesan discussed above), or that the infallible qualities are associated with male characters, especially given that the poets of the overwhelming majority of these texts and the choreographers of these dances have historically been men. In searching for more complex depictions of masculinity, these male dancers did not pause to question the problematic forms of femininity presented in their dance performances.

Moreover, when efforts are made to make female agency central in dance performances, these portrayals all too often remain conscribed within particular patriarchal norms. To illustrate this, I now turn to the work of Jai, a London-based dancer who expresses a particular interest in subverting the heterosexual and gendered

associations of his classical dance form. For Jai, bringing the dance inspired by his classical training into different contexts explicitly associated with sexuality – including the cabaret – is one way to explore different forms of sexuality and gender roles through dance performance[101]. Like several other male dancers who are interested in relating their dance to contemporary questions of queerness (including cross-dressing and androgyny), Jai also identifies his location in London as crucial in enabling him to pursue such exploration.

Despite Jai's aim to subvert heteronormative gender roles however, his work – as well as that of others who are interested in similar projects – nonetheless relies at times upon specific gendered categorisation, complicating the professed intention of untangling heterosexuality and conventional gender roles through performance. In many of his pieces, Jai attempts to articulate female empowerment through 'masculine' tropes. For him, the history of cross-dressing in various Indian traditions enables the reconfiguring of ideas of tradition in which to situate his contemporary performance; indeed he has used performances 'in drag' and has included recognisably male articles of clothing for female dancers in his choreographies.

Although his choreographies are themselves moving and intimate, incorporating spoken word to draw the audience into the highly personalised narratives being explored through their performance, Jai often treads a fine line between subverting and sustaining normative gendered categories. For example, he uses the imposing height (over six feet) and physical strength of *his* body to represent an abstract feminine body, as he described in our interview:

> So for me in my height, in my body, I am male. To become a woman, I think that itself shows that women can be strong. Can be powerful. And that's what

[101] Although his work in the Contemporary South Asian dance genre poses an obvious challenge to conventional performances of Indian classical dance, Jai is not a marginalised figure for some of his main supporters and key mentors are prominent figures in the classical dance scene who regularly attend his performances.

> I'm trying to bring across. Not just to show the physicality of it but the emotion and everything. So at the moment I'm working on two pieces side by side. One is to show the power of female [sic] in the dance but because of the physicality. And the other one to show the power of female in a female's body, but using the strength of everything else apart from the physicality.

In his first example of showing that a woman can be strong through a male-dressed-as-female body, Jai could be seen as following in the footsteps of E. Krishna Iyer, the Indian lawyer, artist and nationalist activist who dressed as a woman in his dance performances in the 1920s to show that the dance could in fact be respectable, discussed in Chapter Two. The female exterior is celebrated and made proper by the male who dons it.

However, Jai's recognition and articulation of feminine empowerment as separable from physical strength is important and brings nuance to his work. His attempts to delve into complex questions of gender, sexuality and identity are continually being pushed and explored more deeply in the ways in which he articulates the concerns of both his past and current projects.  Despite this nuance, the gendered binaries within which Jai articulates his work as transgressive remain in place; even in separating femininity from physicality, the gendered presuppositions of both are sustained. In both of Jai's examples, physical strength is male while the female is regarded as lacking strength on her own terms. A parallel thus becomes visible with Indian nationalist reconfigurations of femininity; while the former sought to define female respectability through its association with male teachers and upper class women, this contemporary project defines female empowerment through the tropes of masculinity.

Jai's experiments in Indian classical and Contemporary South Asian dance with cross-dressing and gender swapping are not the only instances in which gender roles prevail despite the stated intention of breaking through their rigid boundaries; similar instances can be seen in the articulations of male dancers who advocate a more

ambiguously androgynous identity in their dance. For example, one male dancer described in an interview his views whereby the sex of the dancer was seen as irrelevant when performing characters of the other sex – exemplified in portrayals of Radha or Sita in his case – in *abhinaya*. The two women are popular archetypal depictions of Indian femininity; it is possible to trace a relationship between the feminine traits of coyness, fidelity and purity with depictions of Sita – celebrated as the ideal wife in the *Ramayana* who remains devoted to her husband through 14 years of exile, spurs the advances of Ravana who kidnaps her, and sacrifices herself when her fidelity to her husband is called into question – and Radha – who, together with her consort Krishna, symbolises ultimate and divine love.

As becomes evident in this dancer's discussion, although Sita and Radha are two distinct characters, there are significant overlaps between representations of the two for both women serve as symbols of Indian femininity:

> Because you're a dancer, you have to take that form. And that's where I become feminine. When I do Radha, I am completely a woman. I am Radha. I did this performance [where] I did Kuru Yadunandana [an *abhinaya* where Radha addresses Krishna after the two have made love]. And this very well known Odissi dancer … said to me 'when I heard that you were going to do Kuru Yadunandana, I thought you were going to be a boy trying to be a girl. But you were Radha.' Or you were Sita [sic]. You were Sita. And that's because I decided that when I am dancing, when I am going to be Sita, I will be Sita. I will understand her…In terms of what Sita is about. Where the context is, what has she just done – oh she just had sex with Krishna the night before. Krishna is a god and she is a woman so she has got to be coy. At the same time, she's reacting – because she's already had sex with him so she has got this authority. The play between these two. But then you have to be feminine, because she is a woman, she's an Indian woman from a certain period. There's a gracefulness about her. Long black hair. All distinctively pictured. So it's not about you becoming a girl. It's you playing a role. And you're playing a serious role. You know, cross-dressing has been done for centuries. The beauty of today's classical Indian dance is – if I am doing Radha – I don't dress up as a girl. I'm still naked, bare-chested [referring to the male costume that consists only of trousers]. But I have to portray a woman. My *bhangi* is changed. My body, torso changes to become even softer. When I do a *pallavi*, my torso is much harder, my technique is much stronger, my hands are more erect. There's a big difference, because the *rasa* changes, you change. With doing dance, you're neither male nor female. But when you're doing *abhinaya*, you're doing Krishna, you're a male; you're doing Radha, you're a female.

This excerpt raises a number of important points. First, in identifying the 'certain gracefulness' and 'long black hair' of Radha/Sita as 'an Indian woman from a certain period', this dancer combines notions of cultural/national identity, historical location and idealised aesthetics. The particularities of Radha – her age, the fact that she is seventeen years senior to her lover, her regional or class background, etc. – are made irrelevant, despite the dancer's desire to 'understand her'. Indeed, in this account, Radha appears indistinguishable from a number of other idealised female heroines as the dancer begins to refer to her as Sita in his description. A devout Hindu very knowledgeable about the religion, its traditions and culture, this dancer cannot be regarded as lacking awareness of the complexities of the different mythologies; rather his account demonstrates a slippage in which we can glean the extent to which representations of particular female characters are stereotyped such that the details of their character and the stories that describe them are rendered secondary to portrayals of their femininity.

Moreover, the manner with which Radha addresses Krishna after their lovemaking is referenced, thus recalling ideals of coyness. While this dancer raises another layer of characterisation by suggesting that Radha at the same time enjoys a sense of authority over Krishna – an interpretation that can and has been made by other dancers depicting this particular choreography, perceived to be one of the most erotic and risqué of the Odissi repertoire[102] – he nonetheless marks this sense of authority as an exception to the rules of Indianness and femininity (following his

[102] The choreographer of the dance, Kelucharan Mohapatra, was said to have been very cautious in how he taught this dance to his students. Citaristi recounts that the father of one of Mohapatra's students had reservations about whether the depiction of the naked heroine alluded to in the choreography was appropriate for a 'lady of a respectable family'; Mohapatra is said to have invited the father to see the dance, the nuanced and deliberate performance of which changed the father's mind (Citaristi 2001:122). Nonetheless, it is noted that Mohapatra would "talk to the students who were married (including the ones coming from outside India even if unmarried) and explain to them the subtle meaning of the *abhinaya*. The younger students would be asked to just copy his movements" (ibid). A portion of this particular choreography was also performed in Mira Nair's (1996) *Kama Sutra* in a scene in which the protagonist courtesan is dancing privately for the king.

description with 'but then you have to be feminine, because she is a woman, she's an Indian woman').

This account resonates with many of the discussions I had with other dancers regarding the portrayal of opposite genders in dance. On the whole, dancers with whom I worked did not have trouble playing characters of the other sex. Both male and female dancers I encountered claimed they were better at gender swapping in their character portrayals than dancers of the opposite sex who, in their opinions, too often relied upon caricatures in their performances. Despite this comfort, as demonstrated in the excerpt above, the very notion of 'gender swapping' in dance performances nonetheless contributes to the production of very particular, static categories of male and female.

Such constrained character development presents a similar scenario to what Emigh and Hunt (1992) describe amongst the Balinese dancers they studied; observing that both men and women could play male and female roles, they argue that the *attributes of the character* being played become the determining factor of the gender that is to be portrayed/produced in the performance[103]. Rather than gender being the main identifier then, the binary created between nobility, grace and refinement on the one hand and profanity, coarseness and a lack of culture on the other come to determine who would play what role. As women tended to play refinement and men coarseness, the gender of the performer was overwritten while at the same time used to emphasise the attributes of the character being portrayed. Therefore, despite the apparent gender crossing of these performances, specific (normative) gendered categories were nonetheless continually re-inscribed. Likewise, the dancer quoted

[103] See also Strathern (1988) who, in her work in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea, argues that characteristics of each sex – male and female – are contained within each person such that gender manifests in various instances of performance, interaction and exchange.

above may 'become feminine' in his performances, but this requires the gendered attributes of 'even softer' movements and postures.

Finally, this dancer's account is significant for the presumed gender neutrality it suggests for the (abstract/*pallavi)* dancing body. Despite its characterisation as a 'more feminine' dance form, Odissi is indeed performed by men, although those less familiar with it whom I encountered during fieldwork in London expressed surprise upon hearing this. Although men can and do perform *pallavis*, these dances are nonetheless more readily associated at present with the female body and the softness of *lasya* movements[104]. Indeed, even in this dancer's account, the softening of the torso and the inclusion of certain *bhangis* (notably the *tribhangi*) – both of which are aspects that are most often cited to describe Odissi – mark his dance as feminine. Although his methodology of viewing the *pallavi* dancing body as gender neutral is important in describing his personal dance practice, it nonetheless relies upon certain conventions that are indeed already gendered.

**Playing Roles: The Gendered Division of Labour**

In tandem with the focus on female respectability espoused by the reconstructive movement and still visible in the dance today were the patriarchal underpinnings of the political and social contexts in which this movement occurred. Not only did the anti-*nautch* movement disenfranchise the dancing women it targeted, it made social legitimacy of the dance the purview of male artists (as gurus) even as the dancers who performed it were overwhelmingly female. Across the styles of classical dance,

[104] As mentioned in a previous footnote (94), there are choreographers in Orissa beginning to choreograph *pallavis* tailored to the male body (*purush ang*). Of the choreographies that I have seen, these *pallavis* tend to incorporate more rigorous movements that include leaps and jumps with less emphasis on the torso and eye movements that characterise (more feminised) choreographies in the master-narrative of the Odissi canon.

severing dance from its women practitioners prioritised male teachers over the *devadasi* and courtesan performers who preceded them (Trivedi 2012; Bose 2010; Walker 2010, 2004; Roy 2009; Meduri 2008a; Shah 2005). With reference to Kathak, Walker has noted how the classicisation, modernisation and incorporation of dance into the national fold were premised upon "the twin facts that the hereditary men (the Kathaks) were Hindu and that the hereditary women [the *tawa'ifs*] seemed permanently removed from the dance" (2010:292). Thus the gendered division of labour, intertwined with discourses of Hinduism, was crucial to the classicising project, a point that takes on further significance in the next chapter.

Patriarchal control over classical dance performances was further affirmed on stage; the precedence that was introduced during Bharatanatyam's reconstruction of situating the male guru alongside the (mostly male) musicians to conduct dance performances, as well as prominently featuring the figure of Shiva/Nataraja, on stage bypassed the female dancer as original performer to highlight male authority as ultimate (Meduri 2008:143; see also Allen 1997; Meduri1996). These practices were adopted by Kathak and Odissi dancers as well. Importantly, dancers in India and the diaspora continue to place the Nataraja on stage (Jagannatha in the case of Odissi) and most dancers credit the religiosity/spirituality of their dance as deriving from the fact that it is performed for god (masculine). These combined practices serve to reinforce the power of the masculine gaze to which the dance is subjected, even as more women become teachers and gurus today.

However, patriarchy is not a unique phenomenon specific to a particular culture, although it may indeed have different cultural manifestations (Mohanty 2003; Moore 1988). Patriarchy exists within the particular historical and social circumstances that shape it; different 'cultural' gender roles such as the 'manly

Englishman' and the 'effeminate Bengali' thus exist as part of the same historical processes of economic, cultural and political transformations (Sinha 1995:184)[105]. It is therefore impossible to simply conclude that because the reconstructive movements that produced Indian classical dance were patriarchal so too is its contemporary practice. Although such an analysis explains in part how the dance was defined – for example, how the dance came to be coded as feminine – the approach advocated in this thesis is to consider the changing temporal and cultural discourses that converge in contemporary practices of Indian classical dance in the diaspora space discussed in previous chapters.

Thus, while the male authority established, for example, by the mid-twentieth century precedent of placing male musicians and gurus on stage to conduct performances is still practiced today, this dynamic is further influenced by the *current* economic context of the professionalisation of the arts. For example, one (male) tabla player who moved from India to London in the last few years and accompanies several of the most prominent Kathak dancers in the city in both performances and classes explained:

> You'll find tabla players in London but you'll see their level is rubbish. Even in India it's like that. Because only 2% of people understand what my guru or Zakhir [Hussein] Bhai or Suresh Talwalkar Ji, what they think and how they look at rhythmic cycles. The way they approach rhythmic cycles is totally different. They can play with any other tabla players. Very few tabla players will play with Kathak. The reason for that is they don't like dance first of all. They think '*ke vo larkiyon ki cheez hai*' [that that is a girls' thing]. You know. Like in this country [the UK], I asked a few of my friends 'do you want to play for Kathak?', and they all say 'no, no, it's all *bakwas* [rubbish]'. Now everyone wants to learn [to play tabla for dance] because they see – not because they learn Kathak, but they've learned that if you play with Kathak you get more

[105]Sinha (1995:184) notes that it is important to "…examine colonial masculinity as a historical phenomenon that responded to the economic, political, and cultural shifts in the imperial social formation in the late nineteenth century. The attendant stereotypes of the 'manly Englishman' and the 'effeminate Bengali' thus operated not only in many different and often contradictory historical contexts, but also as part of the same historical process: the changes of a global political economy". See also Nandy (2009), O'Hanlon (1997) and Caplan (1995).

> concerts. And you get more money. And you get to see pretty girls. So that's what the idea is.

Initially, this response vacillates between references to London and India, suggesting that musicians (tabla players) are not keen to play for dancers in both locations. Indeed, like other musicians with whom I have interacted both in India and the UK, this tabla player suggests that the artistry of accompanying dancers is inferior to the artistry required for playing music alone; musicians will often complain of the perceived lack of dancers' understanding of musical theory and rhythm, especially in relation to 'the young generation' of dancers.

While this perspective demonstrates musicians' frustrations with the limitations that are placed on their ability to deliver more complex musical performances, the gendered divisions upon which this perspective rests simultaneously serve to establish male artistic authority in the realm of classical arts more generally. Male musicians may be forced to accompany female dancers, but they do so because without performing for dance, their professional opportunities are limited. Such limitations are especially heightened in the UK, the site explicitly referenced in the second part of the quote cited above, where there is little scope for support for professional Indian classical artists (including musicians) who are not interested in contemporising their work given the community/professional and classical/contemporary binaries discussed earlier in this thesis. The artistic authority claimed by some musicians might therefore be understood as a strategy for dealing with the compromises that are felt have to be made in performing as accompanists, reinforcing the gendered division between male artists and dancing 'pretty girls' that remains intact in India and the UK.

## Classical Dance and the Female Bearers of Culture

As suggested in the quote above, despite the differences in the gendered associations between the three dance forms, Indian classical dance as a whole is nonetheless generally regarded as a feminine cultural activity (see Bose 2011), with more women than men dancing, especially in the UK. The feminisation of Indian classical dance as a whole is especially evident when associations are drawn between the ability to learn and perform Indian classical dance and marriageability, even if in jest; never did I come across an instance of a male dancer being described as increasing his prospects for marriage because of his artistic ability, even if only in sarcasm. In contrast, for example, in one of the Dance India lecture demonstrations discussed in the previous chapter, female students were not so jokingly advised by a senior dancer delivering a keynote lecture to 'marry well' as part of facilitating a dancing career.

Among those who perceive classical dance to be a method of (Indian) cultural 'retention', a striking correlation is drawn with the gender of those seen to have the responsibility for this task (see also Ram 2000:263-4). For example, one researcher provided this explanation in an interview after conducting a series of interviews with dancers in and around London:

> And of course when you're 4 and 5, it's your parents who take you [to dance class]. So very often it's the parents who take them and want them to understand the Indian culture, why else would they take their child to do Indian dance. There are so many dance forms, why Indian? So one of the main things is they want their children to connect. And of course you feel dispossessed when you leave your community and your country. You want to cling on and the gurus do say the further away you are from your country, [the more] you want to cling on. And you see memory as the kind of moment in time, heritage that will move on. So that's how it starts. And then, it's not really a boy thing, is it? Boys play football or sports, they don't go dancing. If they do, they're there to pick up their sister or whatever. Or they do music. So there is that sense that, I guess it comes from dressing up and adorning yourself. There's so much in terms of make up, jewellery and all that. The men don't have so much of that. Girls are like little dolls, in the family…And it happens usually in early teens because it's just before you go to university. Once you become serious, and you have to earn your living, you have no time for this frivolity unless you decide

> like some of them to do it as professionals… And so that's why I think the age groups and the sex of the dancers [are such]…

Striking in this excerpt are the ways in which Indian classical dance is completely feminised *and* culturalised in the British context – parents are said to want their daughters to dance in order to maintain a sense of heritage and connection to Indian culture; girls are 'like little dolls' who want to dance because they enjoy the adornments of jewellery and make-up. Moreover, this account tightly binds the preservation of culture with the labour of women and their bodily performance, thus supporting feminist readings of the construction of women "in the role of the 'carriers of tradition'" (Yuval-Davis 1997:61; see also Ramaswamy 2010; Chatterjee 1999).

The gendered division of labour is also evident in the teacher demographics in the UK as teaching is overwhelmingly skewed towards women, especially in the current generation. While there are a few male teachers from the first generation of dancers who established schools in London in the 1970s/80s, and a couple of young male dancers who teach workshops and classes for dance companies today, independent dance teachers are predominantly women. This is not necessarily surprising, given that the majority of dance students in India are women of the middle class, a demographic with increased access to immigration (see Bannerjee 2013:22; Katrak 2008:220; Erdman 1996:296-7). Dance, as a skill, hobby and passion, is for such women something they can continue to practice and teach after resettling in the UK.

Furthermore, as Indian classical dance became more recognised in the UK in the 1980s, acquiring governmental support through Arts Council grants and initiatives to include it in the multicultural curriculum in schools, more students took to learning dance. Again, these students were overwhelmingly female. This gendered division is

reflected in the demographics of the dancers I encountered; of the 35 Indian classical dancers I interviewed in London, only 9 were men. Although not exhaustive of the number of dancers in London, male or female, my interview methodology (of approaching performers after seeing them perform and 'snowballing' dancers I came across) suggests that this percentage might be a good proxy for a representative sample.

**The Gender of Contemporary Professionalism**

Perhaps the reader has noticed that, unlike the previous two chapters in which the relationship between Indian classical and Contemporary South Asian dance was a focal issue, this chapter has been structured almost entirely around classical dance. This is because it is in classical dance that the particular gendering that constructs notions of Indian femininity is strongest and most evident (demonstrating once again the link between classical dance and 'traditional' Indian culture).

Despite the fact that the majority of dance teachers and students in the UK are female, when one focuses on choreographers of Contemporary South Asian dance, the gender divide is not so stark. Indeed analysing the sample size of the dancers I encountered while on fieldwork in London suggests a near 50/50 split for male to female contemporary dance choreographers. Although both men and women are actively engaged in creating Contemporary South Asian dance pieces, women more often attempt to work within their classical forms to a relatively greater degree, as demonstrated in the promotional material for the Sonia Sabri Company or Nina Rajarani's Sristi Dance as well as by the classical dance schools that these women run in concert with their professional companies. The example of the Transcending Borders project discussed in Chapter Two is yet another example of a gendered

contemporising project that, despite its attempts to collaborate with a Western Contemporary dance style, continued to be deeply aligned with Odissi as a cultural dance.

Furthermore, South Asian dancers who are interested in contemporising their work but only choreograph within their form (drawing from other sources for inspiration perhaps, although not actually training in other styles) do tend to be women, whereas almost all of the men who create similar pieces have had some training in Western Contemporary techniques. Given that contemporised dance is more readily associated with higher levels of professionalism for South Asian dance in the UK when compared to its classical counterpart, and that more men perform dance under the Contemporary South Asian dance banner, a relationship between professionalism, dance and masculinity is therefore disproportionately manifest in the British context.

While migration appears to have rendered women the bearers of tradition and culture once more (as discussed above), men have become much more prominent in the professional (and therefore more mainstream) British cultural sphere. Indeed, in a report published after the *Moving On* National Symposium on South Asian Dance held in Leicester, the performance that ended the symposium and featured four male (and no female) dancers who each performed one classical and one contemporary choreography was described as follows:

> [The Symposium] was then followed by a sold-out evening performance as an ideal opportunity to showcase four young male dancers and their traditional dance skills and potential for creative work. Ash Mukherjee, Aakash Odedra, Revanta Sarabhai and Sooraj Subramaniam, in turn, provided a string of exhilarating displays. This offered much hope that future development and continued strength of South Asian dance forms in Britain, in their traditional and modern manifestations, may indeed be firmly in the safe hands of the next generation of dance artists – provided suitable conditions are created (Brown 2012:70).

It is striking how this description and the performance it celebrates undeniably mark the 'safe hands of the next generation of artists' as entirely male; indeed the description above makes a point to identify these dancers with regard to their gender. Classical dance (representing the past) remains feminine, while the innovations that are said to 'move beyond' it (present and future) are increasingly masculinised. The gendered division of labour that saw a male majority instigate the 'revival' of classical dance in India is paralleled by male artists 'paving the path' for contemporising South Asian dance, now in the UK. Women dancers may have caught up in the sense that they now form the overall majority of performers and teachers in the UK, however associated with the classical, they remain confined to the 'traditional' in this contemporising project.

## Conclusion

I began this chapter with an example of one way in which Indian classical dance, regarded as representative of Indian culture, can be perceived to be indicative of the subordination of women by those 'outside' its immediate community in the UK (i.e. those who are not performers, teachers, students or 'connoisseurs'). However, I went on to focus on the ways in which Indian classical dance is premised upon gendered divisions in its particular construction of femininity and patriarchal privilege from 'within' the sphere of dance itself by analysing contemporary constructions and performances of gender (specifically femininity) and tracing these to the Indian nationalist project in which the reconstruction of Bharatanatyam, Odissi and Kathak must be contextualised.

Broadly speaking, this chapter has thus focused on the gendered perspectives of those 'inside' the community of Indian classical dance in the diaspora space

produced between India and the UK. There are, even amongst those on the ‘inside’, different articulations of gendered practices and performances; for example between those who are more familiar with Indian cultural tropes (most often of South Asian origin) and who thus construct femininity in terms of certain desirable traits, and those less familiar with these tropes (often not of South Asian origin) who operate on broader Orientalised definitions of ‘Indian’ femininity as womanliness.

To focus on this inside world of dance, while necessary and central to my project, might at first appear to support the contention that related Indian classical dance to the patriarchal subordination of women cited at the beginning of this chapter. In other words, the discourses of the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ regarding constructions of patriarchy in relation to Indian classical dance (as culture) can and indeed do at times overlap. However, while the relationship between the two perspectives is complex, the distinction between the two is no less significant.

Central to the question that Simran and I were presented with was the premise that, *as modern women*, we *must* experience an incongruity between our ‘emancipated’ selves in the West on the one hand, and the cultural (i.e. Indian) practices that encourage female subordination on the other. It is in thus posing the problem as one of modernity in opposition to tradition that such a simplistic summary of Indian classical dance weaves into its analysis issues of cultural alterity. These issues of presumed cultural difference are integral to the binary logic that, in the context of multiculturalism, positions Western (non-racialised) women as liberated and secular in opposition to the racialised ‘minority’ women who are constituted in association to the ‘Third World’ and seen to bear the burden of its cultures (Mohanty 2003; Volpp 2001).

However, as becomes clear from a careful analysis of the patriarchy reproduced within the context of Indian classical dance in colonial, nationalist and multicultural sites, the patriarchal constructions that are sustained in this dance practice are inseparable from the politics of modernity and Westernisation that have shaped them. This is in part because the reconstructive project was itself a modernist exercise in the making of national identity and its disciplinary practices; it is also because these constructs are repeated by dancers in the contemporary moment who stand in particular gendered relation to India, as well as to the multicultural state in which they live and engage (even for those dancers who have moved to India). Despite the fact that the particular gendering described in this chapter is articulated in and through Indian classical dance, given the fact that most British dancers in the UK identify *as primarily* British – sometimes claiming little or no connection to India – requires that these articulations be placed in a context more expansive than the limited one provided by a purely 'cultural' (Indian) lens.

Indeed, the representational intersection between dance performances, Hindi cinematic portrayals and fetishised historical figures, hinged upon nostalgia as well as ideas of cultural difference, are aspects of modernity that greatly influence the gendering of contemporary Indian classical dance performances. These are elements that are brought together for dancers in the British context. Furthermore, the concerns over professionalisation – overlapping with the ambitions of contemporising British South Asian dance – contribute further to the gendered division of labour in current dance practices. Similarly, processes of migration and diasporic identity formation enhance constructions of Indian classical dance as the purview of young women, the bearers of cultural tradition now in Britain. The gendering of Indian classical dance is thus continued in diaspora space, a sphere that is constituted by diasporic South Asian,

‘native’ Indian, and multicultural (predominately white Euro-American) dancers in the contemporary context of modernity.

While Indian classical dancers – both South Asian and non-South Asian – do essentialise gender roles as inherently Indian, the constructed nature of these roles cannot be ignored in an analysis of contemporary Indian classical dance performances in the multicultural context. This is especially important given that such constructions are supported by the ongoing interaction (and sometimes co-production) of colonial, nationalist and multicultural discourses that shape ideas of India as feminine. For colonial administrators and Orientalist scholars, India was overwhelmingly effeminate in relation to the masculinist state of Europe and was constructed as hyper-feminine in its exotic sensuality (Inden 1990; Said 1978). Thus a prime location for articulations of culture and tradition, gender became for the Indian nationalists a site upon which to consolidate a national cultural identity; the feminisation of this national cultural sphere helped justify the masculinist politics of the state that were called upon to protect the feminine purity of the nation (Banerjee 2012; Banerjee 2006).

So successful were these two discourses, their legacy appears to be made manifest in Britain today where the perceived conflict of multicultural assimilation is often articulated in regard to the status of women, the supposedly incommensurable patriarchy of ‘ethnic’ men, and the reduction of ‘cultural’ practices to the feminised tropes of food, fashion and dance in relation to the masculinised political sphere of the British nation state (Banks 2006; Yuval-Davis 1997; Brah 1996). Indeed, the entangled nature of British (colonial) and Indian (nationalist) constructions of ideal femininity as discussed above – constructed in ironic opposition to one another for Victorian morality was idealised by both – is indicative of how the hegemony of gender cannot be naturalised through cultures defined as existing in isolation.

This co-production of gendered identities is no less obvious amongst dancers today; for example, one Kathak dancer described in an interview how, in learning Kathak, both her Asian and non-Asian students "develop the curiosity to learn about Indian culture and then say 'oh gosh, it's actually not so different from how we would like to be as people'". The aspiration to become the ideal exists for the various actors who participate in the sphere of Indian classical dance, even if the specific discourses that produce the ideal are differently shaped.

Dancers must thus contend with gendered constructions on two levels; the first, upon which I have focused, is within the community of Indian classical dance itself; the second is outside this immediate context and in relation to how Indian classical dance comes to interact with multicultural society. While the latter is largely beyond the scope of my current project and would entail a detailed study of audience reception, its influence on Indian classical dance practice can and does become apparent even in the limited analysis presented in this chapter. While dancers might have the double burden of both discourses to contend with, given that they participate in both, they also have the potential to shift the grounds of the debate in both.

The story that Simran presented in the lobby of the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital on that February morning was indeed a complex instance of converging and diverging cultural and historical discourses. A simple story with no obvious cultural markings outside the specificity of the dance style and costume in which she told it, this instance captures if only fleetingly the 'inside' and 'outside' worlds that together shape Indian classical dance performances in multicultural Britain. Like Simran's story, gender is constructed in Indian classical dance by those who participate in and interpret it, one way or another. Constructed as inherently 'Indian', such performances of gender are as much the result of the work of contemporary dancers who have little

or no connection to India as those who came to define its cultural identity through the nationalist reconstruction in the mid-twentieth century. The complex interaction between performer and audience is once more central as each interprets Indian classical dance performances in particularly gendered and cultured ways. The most simple of stories quickly becomes complicated by all that has made its telling im/possible.

# Marking the Stage:
# Finding the Religious, the Spiritual and the Secular in Indian Classical Dance

*If we want traditional art, we cannot get away from the spirit of religion. Many people may say that they do not believe in religion. But all the same, they want the Nataraja, they want other images which are all created by the spirit of religion. The tourists from abroad come to Ajanta and see the frescoes, which delineate the story of Buddha. All those things that attract the tourists such as Mahabalipuram were all created by those whose life was lived in religion. Please remember that when I use the word 'religion', I use it in the spiritual sense. For me, art is religion, beauty is religion. Ugliness is the opposite of it.*

*-Rukmini Devi Arundale, Lecture on Art and Culture in Indian Life 1975:10-11*

Over the course of my fieldwork, I attended numerous performances across London, at venues that dancers would refer to as both 'community' and 'professional'. One such performance took place at a centre for South Asian classical arts performances which also serves as an institution for lessons in classical music and dance. Located on the periphery of central London, this venue is accessible to anyone interested in the many performances that are on offer; however, the venue's establishment as an exclusively South Asian arts centre and its limited marketing (rarely are their programmes advertised in listings other than their own website and South Asian arts listservs) means that it tends to attract audiences from the British South Asian community and the school's own pool of students.

At this particular performance, the resident Kathak teacher and his students presented a full evening programme celebrating episodes from the life of the Hindu god Krishna. Like many Indian classical dance practitioners in the UK, this dancer too

was interested in presenting 'traditional' dance alongside 'contemporary' choreographies, situating both within the parameters of a 'classical' vocabulary. Whilst the classical/contemporary dichotomy continues to challenge dancers of all forms of Indian classical dance in the UK, with each distinguishing between the two in their own personalised manner, this performer sought to "demonstrate the contemporary potential of this dance form" (programme notes) through the form itself – that is to say, without stepping out of the dance's prescribed aesthetics or creating a recognisably different movement vocabulary.

In line with the two themes of this performance, namely stories about Krishna and the 'contemporary potential' of Kathak, one of the pieces presented was danced to the Colonial Cousin's rendition of the Kannada *bhajan* (devotional song) *Krishna Nee Begane* (Krishna, Come Soon)[106]. Prior to the dancers entering stage to perform the piece, the off-stage emcee introduced the dance by explaining "Krishna, as we all know, has become a universal God, known to East and West".

Choreographed to singer Hariharan's rich vocals at the beginning of the song, dancers performed movements that might be described as typical of Kathak *abhinaya*. As the song transitioned to its English lyrics, the dancers maintained the norms of the form, continuing to mime words with movement. Images depicting the various religious figures referred to in the lyrics were projected onto the screen behind the dancers; as singer Leslie Lewis called upon the different manifestations in which an abstract divine power could come down to humanity, pictures of Krishna, Jesus, Rama and the Arabic calligraphy for Allah were displayed. At the point in which Lewis called upon a teacher to disseminate wisdom, thus presumably providing a

[106] The Colonial Cousins are an Indian duo featuring singer Hariharan and singer-composer Leslie Lewis. Formed in the early 1990s, the band is celebrated as one of the earlier examples of blending Indian and Western musical genres.

more ‘secular’ alternative and maximising the song’s universalising ambition, a portrait of Mahatma Gandhi was projected onscreen.

The performance was noteworthy for several reasons. First, the original song was composed in Kannada, a South Indian language not associated with Kathak, which emerged in the North. This itself could be considered as stepping out of the strictest definition of Kathak as a dance associated with Hindustani music and the languages of Northern India. The subsequent use of English further extended this dissociation – Kathak danced to a language not only not of its region of origin, but also not of its country of origin. The incorporation of multiple religions in this performance was also interesting, although including Islam should not be so striking given Kathak’s historical association with Muslims in India, a point I will develop further towards the end of this chapter.

Most interesting about this particular performance however, given its incorporation of other languages and religions, was its apparent call to and reliance upon a seemingly ‘universal’ understanding of the supposedly generic divine *through* a distinctly Hindu idiom. Such reliance was evident in the very choreography in which worship and devotion were depicted through dance gestures representing rituals of Hindu religious practice (*puja*), including the lighting of the lamp (*diya*), circling it around the presumed deity as in the practice of *aarti*, and using a *mudra* to symbolise the ringing of a ceremonial bell. That this was done during moments of musical interlude – the *sanchari bhava* in which movement does not literally describe a song’s lyrics but is rather meant to invoke the general meaning and mood, often stylised during an instrumental interlude between verses – when any other action or meaning could have been depicted, suggests that despite its claims to ‘universality’, the primacy of Hinduism was maintained as *the* ‘religion’ of Kathak.

Speaking at the end of the show, the guest of honour – an elderly white British man introduced as Padma Shri in reference to his having previously been felicitated with the fourth highest civilian award given by the Indian government – described this piece as being "as relevant now as it was thousands of years ago as our tradition in India is one of the spirit". This spirit, re-interpreted in this particular dance performance and attributed to 'thousands of years' of Indian 'tradition', was thus presented through the lens of an Orientalised Hinduism/Indian spirituality, now in contemporary London.

Various styles of Indian classical dance, including Bharatanatyam, Odissi and Kathak, have long been associated with religion (specifically Hinduism) since their reconstruction as classical (Meduri 2008, 2005; Allen 1997; Kothari 1979). While these associations were seen to derive from the alleged 'ancient' past of the dance styles, they were nonetheless based on very modern understandings and performances of Hindu practice, especially in the context of the nationalist movement that saw (and continues to see) the convergence of Hindu identity with Indian nationality (for more, see Lal 2005; Pandey 1999; Geetha 1999; Van der Veer 1993). Having been shaped by both colonial and anti-colonial nationalist discourses, made to represent everything from the depraved vulgarity and erotic sensuality to the enlightened spirituality and artistry of the East, Indian classical dance thus brings together deep and historical connections between British colonialism, Indian nationalism, and contemporary multiculturalism, especially as their discourses converge to reproduce ideas of Indian religion, spirituality and culture.

As discussed in previous chapters, the hegemonic history of Indian classical dance that is preserved through its contemporary performance is the history constructed by an Indian elite in dialogue with colonial discourses. More than six

decades later, performed outside the immediate context of India, Indian classical dance in the diasporic and multicultural contexts of the UK appears to be conceptually circumscribed by the religio-culturalist constructs of India that resulted from the colonial encounter, despite the complexity of these contemporary performances. Thus, even as dancers attempt to reconfigure the religiosity presumed to shape their classical dance practices, such reconfigurations are limited to and help reproduce in turn popular constructions of India and its culture as inherently religious and specifically Hindu.

It is this complex entanglement of the representations of religion and spirituality in the context of the new secularism said to be provided by the British multicultural state that I will focus on in this chapter. As I will demonstrate, contemporary performances of Indian classical dance in the 'secular' and multicultural context of London reproduce this Hinduised 'history' even in their attempts to move beyond it. Indeed, the move from the religious to the spiritual or even the secular in Indian classical dance – often articulated through the emergent category of Contemporary South Asian dance in the UK – does not appear sufficient to move away from the problematic construction of religion as being at the root of Indian classical dance; introducing an evolutionary schema, as many dancers do, does not disrupt the colonial definitions of its point of 'origin'.

This chapter therefore analyses ways in which the dancers I worked with navigate the religious/secular divide in their dance. By concluding with a parallel analysis of the ways in which Islam is differentially perceived and presented by various Indian classical dance practitioners – with specific reference to the ways in which Kathak, with its associations to Islam, is equated with alterity – this chapter

further explores the political implications and underpinnings of diasporic and multicultural dancers' practices in contemporary London.

**The Religious, The Secular and The Universal**

Despite the established status of South Asian dance in the UK, which is one of the largest sites of South Asian dance in the global diaspora, it is impossible to understand contemporary Indian classical dance performances in London without reference to the history and dominant cultural politics of India. While contemporary dancers/scholars have claimed that classical dance in India now exists within "the secular world of dance schools, city stages and performers" (Marglin 1985:9) and "functions in a secular reality" (Meduri 1988:4), these claims rely upon the assumption of postcolonial India as specifically secular. However, as Lopez y Royo (2003) highlights, the Nehruvian state that was the context for the reconstruction of the dance was fraught with paradox as a result of its claims to secularisation in the midst of a Hindu majority and politico-cultural praxis (see also Pandey 1999).

As this chapter will show, Indian classical dance is no further removed from this paradox when performed in a multicultural site such as contemporary London, given the cultural and religious histories that shape its performance. Thus, even if an Indian classical dancer may not herself be Hindu, this identity is perforce inscribed onto her as a performer by the hegemonic Hindu/Indian discourse of which she becomes representative in diasporic and multicultural imaginings of India. Indeed, I have often been mistakenly assumed to be Hindu by both dancers and audiences given my dance practice, as have other non-Hindu South Asian dancers with ambiguous names that do not immediately signal other religious (for example Muslim) identities with whom I interacted. In this case, the dominant historical narrative is so

interwoven into the dance, it becomes impossible to remove or challenge without deliberate and constant effort.

Underscoring the blurring of religious identities and cultural markers in the diaspora, as in other postcolonial societies, are the difficulties of translation and the assumption of universality (Nye 2001, Baumann 1999). Such assumptions are particularly evident in the construction of 'religion' as a universal category with individual religions regarded as equivalent and comparable. However, a deeper analysis of the role of 'ethnic' religion in multicultural society can reveal the ongoing influence of colonialism on the present in which definitions of 'religion' continue to rely upon Western/Christian understandings of the world.

Moreover, the essentialising discourse that so often equates religious and cultural identity in multicultural society draws upon and parallels an earlier colonial logic that, in India, classified groups based on strictly defined religious affiliation through state measures such as the colonial census and judiciary systems (Dirks 2001; Cohn 1996). However, a growing number of scholars have begun to interrogate the construction of 'religion' as a universal category, suggesting that it is instead a recent concept born out of and inseparable from the intellectual history of the West (Mandair 2009; Masuzawa 2005; Dubuisson 2003; King 1999). In his pioneering work, Asad (1993) traces the very notion of religion to a Western Christian perspective located in the particular context of the fragmentation of the Roman Church. Arguing "there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but *because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes*" (ibid:29, emphasis added), Asad situates the very conceptualisation of religion within a "modern landscape of power and knowledge" (ibid:42-3) that had to respond to changes in the form of the state,

knowledge (science) and the legal and moral subjectivities these deployed in Europe. The conceptualisation of religion based on Western Christianity in turn shapes hegemonic constructions of secularism, further complicating the relation between the religious and the secular in both colonial and multicultural contact zones.

Focusing specifically on India, Mandair (2009) deconstructs the term 'religion' and the knowledge power nexus that is implicit in its application. He builds on Lacanian philosophy and the notion of the Traumatic Real to argue that the Indian response to the (Western) term 'religion' as a form of identity occurred through the colonial acquisition of the English language, especially given that there is no word equivalent to 'religion' in Indic culture[107]. According to Mandair, "the constitution of the Indian subject through the enunciation of 'religion' during the colonial encounter does not reflect the operation of a culturally universal meaning, but the site of a trauma that marks the nature of Indian engagement with European conceptuality" (ibid:11). Religion is here defined as a transposition from a Euro-Christian context to an Indian one where it is now presented as an intrinsically indigenous concept.

Mandair's theoretical argument works in tandem with postcolonial analyses that show the colonisation of India to have been an exercise in the production and control of knowledge. As Cohn (1996) has shown, in order to rule India, its laws and customs had to be made intelligible for the British. By classifying Hindu law as absolutely separate from Muslim law, colonial officials divided what had been syncretic practices and thus upheld the idea of Hindus constituting a distinct religious community. In addition to legalists, Christian missionaries and Orientalist scholars

[107] Mandair (2009) builds upon Lacan who posits that, although language is central to the production of subjectivity, language is nonetheless limited in that it is unable to completely capture human experience. That which is left out (i.e. that which cannot be symbolised in language) is referred to as the Real. But in order to maintain a sense of completeness and indeed understandings of the Self, the Real must be covered up. That which is constructed and symbolised through language – and therefore made intelligible – is referred to as the Traumatic Real.

also contributed to the codification of Hinduism (Vertovec 2000). Each treated Hinduism as a singular entity, an interpretation embraced by Indians to such an extent that, by the nineteenth century, the religious and cultural unity delineated in Western scholarship was welcomed in the struggle for national Indian (Hindu) identity and culture (ibid, see also Thapar 1989).

If, as these analyses show, the concept of an Indian religion (Hinduism) emerged out of the colonial encounter, what then does this mean for its practitioners today? To call into question the production of the religious as a category is neither to deny its existence in the present nor to negate the experiences and beliefs of its followers. As Urban (2003:3) argues about the similar (post)colonial construction of Tantrism, "[n]either simply the result of an indigenous evolution nor a mere Orientalist fabrication Tantra [similar to Hinduism] is a shifting amalgam of fantasies, fears, and wish fulfilments, at once native and Other, which strikes to the heart of our constructions of the exotic Orient and of the contemporary West". To call into question the production of religious categorisation is thus to highlight the messy, complex and inter-related field of power and representation from which such categorisation results.

Raising these questions thus complicates the field of Indian classical dance performances in London. Addressing the historically constructed nature of religion might help explain some of the ambivalences the dancers I worked with articulated regarding delineations of the religious, the spiritual and the secular in their dance practices. Given the messiness of these very constructions, no wonder it proves so difficult to dis/engage religion in diasporic and multicultural Indian classical dance performances.

**The Religion of Indian Classical Dance**

Differentiating between an enlightened and religious spirituality of antiquity on the one hand and the alleged corrupted practice of nineteenth and twentieth century temple dancers on the other became central to the reconstruction of Indian classical dance, as Hindu mythology and philosophy were entwined with the dance in its newest manifestation. Narratives from the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, and the *Gita Govinda* as well as stories of various other gods became some of the most popular and thus 'classical' themes of the dance in its new performance as already discussed in previous chapters. So successful was this association of 'classical' dance with Hinduism that it goes completely unquestioned today, whether or not individual dancers or choreographers identify with Hinduism as a religion. As one South Asian dancer from a Hindu family responded when asked what makes their dance *classical*, it is the "stories about Hindu gods, Radha Krishna, all things like that. Vandanas. Prayers. Yeah". Representations of the religious/spiritual, based upon established narratives of the dance, still take centre stage.

When interviewed, most dancers spoke of their own personal connections to and understanding of the dance and its religious/spiritual background, forwarding explanations that make the dance relevant to their lives in ways not necessarily dependent upon their own religious identities or practices. Thus dancers demonstrate the subjectivity of their dance practices by introducing varying degrees of religiosity. For example, one Odissi dancer of non-South Asian origin described the ambiguity of the religious connotations associated with Indian classical dance in response to the question:

> Question: What do you think is the role of religion in Indian classical dance today?

> Response: I think it varies a lot from person to person and to people who come from a Hindu background, their link to worship and spirituality and their link to spirituality and dance may be one and the same. Whereas someone from a different religious belief may take the idea of god or a higher being and relate to that, but might not specifically relate to an image of a particular god, but may look at it in a more kind of generalised way. This is one way of seeing god, or this is one way of analysing humanity and thinking about relationships and looking at behaviour and analysing that and celebrating that. So I think there are different ways. I think an atheist could look at it on a very human level because they [dances/mythological stories] all end up being stories about people in the end.

This account is fairly typical of dancers' responses despite the relative diversity in their cultural and religious backgrounds. Already, we begin to see representations of spirituality being posited as an intermediary between the religious and the secular, the divine and the human, the particular and the universal.

Moreover, the interpretation of Hinduism as *the* religion of Indian classical dance is brought to light when the respondent cited here refers to 'people who come from a Hindu background' when answering a question about the role of '*religion* in Indian classical dance today'. This too is a common slippage amongst dancers for whom the link between Indian classical dance and Hinduism appears natural. For example, when asked whether there is a relationship between religion and Indian classical dance, another South Asian (Hindu) Odissi dancer responded that initially religion was only the "language" or "medium" used by the dance and not necessarily definitive of the dance itself. When this response was followed by a question as to whether such a relationship exists in dance practices in the present, the dancer responded "I think today is much more liberal, we are not restricted to religion. We don't even speak about Krishna, we also have Kabir". In this comment, speaking of Krishna – an incarnation of the Hindu deity Vishnu – represents any and all religious practice associated with the dance (even if only as a 'medium') while the poetry of Kabir – the fifteenth century mystic poet celebrated for contributing to the synchronisation of Hindu, Sikh and Islamic philosophies – represents a move away

from religion. Even though such a move is described as 'liberal' and attempts to incorporate a variety of traditions, thus paving the way for a multicultural engagement with the dance (even within an Indian context), it nonetheless maintains the normativity of Indian classical dance as Hindu[108].

It is important to note however that the entanglement of Indian classical dance and Hinduism taken for granted by most dancers is not used by them to claim an essentialist and empathetic proficiency for Hindu dancers. Instead, religious/Hindu knowledge is regarded as something that must be cultivated, especially in the diaspora, even for dancers of Hindu background. One South Asian Kathak dancer, born and raised in the UK, discusses her development of religious knowledge as similar to that of a non-Hindu dancer:

> Like, the reason for performing a piece on Krishna, even me being Hindu, I don't have a natural connection to it. I have to… develop that. So what I develop is going to be down to who Krishna was. What is he about? What does he embody? What's his spirit? What's his message? What are these stories? Who was there in all of this? What's he going to teach us? And that's what I will deliver. Same with Shiva. For me, that devotional relationship to Shiva, because that idea of transformation, the idea that life is continuous. And these are all universal thoughts. We kind of use the word universal. But I think that's the exact problem. I think as an Indian classical dancer that that is your reason, to challenge that perception and show people, to a level. Don't, you know, almost don't deliver something that you don't really quite believe in yet, you haven't quite connected to yet… So I think, it doesn't matter who you are, where you're from. Ultimately the beauty is, and that's [pause], you see now more Europeans and other people practicing Kathak you know, and why. You know, it's because it's the spirituality and the practice they're after.

Like many other interviewees, this dancer posits spirituality as elevated above the specificity of religion (Hinduism), especially in reference to 'Europeans and other people practicing Kathak'. This distinction corroborates van der Veer's (2009) observation that 'spirituality' exists as an alternative to religiosity with the capacity to

[108] While this dancer's analysis can also be seen as enabling a shift from the sacred/transcendent to the mundane/ immanent, I include this incident here for the way in which this dancer defines Krishna/Hinduism as religious and the philosophies and teachings of Kabir, who represents an amalgamation of religious traditions, as not. This is not to debate whether either is or is not 'religious', but is rather to interrogate the constructions of each that lead to this dancer positioning them in opposition.

offer a more tempered, fluid perspective not at odds with modernity or Western science. Yet the break between religion and spirituality is not so neat here. It is interesting to note that dancers who see their dance as 'religious' and those who see it as 'spiritual' often speak of an internal purity or essence when discussing these aspects of their dance.

Take as another example the following excerpt from an interview with a dancer of non-South Asian origin who was raised in a Hare Krishna mission and left at the age of sixteen:

> With dance, it was like the only thread left for me that was still pure. It was the only thread still from my childhood, from … the belief system and the religion that I grew up with that I could express with no shame. When I left the Krishnas… if someone tried to say Hare Krishna, or tried to chant or started to sing the mantras… I would actually cringe. It was like if you would ask me to sing the mantras or say the mantras it would be physically painful for me to do that. And dance was the only way. I mean I could feel so much devotion when I danced… In some ways it was kind of a way for me to hold on to spirituality. And [pause] it's a funny thing, I didn't equate it with religion per se, after I left the Krishnas, I didn't think of [dance] as a religious practice at all, but I felt so deeply spiritual and so devotional when I danced, and I was OK with it.

Here again the spiritual offers an abstract, almost universal relevance for the dance that is not dependent (at first glance) on its Hindu identification. On closer examination however, these examples complicate van der Veer's discussion introduced above. On the one hand, describing the dance as spiritual rather than religious makes it more palatable and thus accessible to dancers and audiences outside – as well as inside (secular) – India. Yet, this universal spirituality is almost always referenced solely in relation to *abhinaya* dances that describe narratives taken from Hindu mythology; rarely are non-narrative or abstract dances focused on rhythm and melody (*nritta*) offered as examples of the spiritual in Indian classical dance. On the occasion that *nritta* is described as a spiritual practice, dancers nonetheless point to the Hindu underpinnings of their dance as emanating from ancient temple practice or related to the mythologies narrated through *abhinaya* performances to explain their experiences of spirituality in

the dance more generally. It therefore appears the religious specificity of Hinduism (its mythology) is required for the universalised spirituality to emerge in the dance performance.

The complex interrelation of spirituality (as universal) and religiosity (as Hindu) is evidenced again in the following excerpt from my interview with the Odissi dancer quoted at the beginning of this section; in attempting to tease out the differences between spiritual awareness and religious belief, this dancer concluded:

> Because I think, especially with dancers, there is a lot of spirituality in the process of learning the dance. The respect you have to have for the teacher, and that does come from the legacy of Hinduism, that comes directly from that. And that kind of approach is very different from learning in Contemporary – the idea of touching a teacher's feet and all that, they're directly related to the religious history of it. But they [these practices] don't necessarily mean someone is religious. So it's hard to tell, I think. Yeah, you don't have to be authentically Hindu to be authentically spiritual when you are dancing a Hindu dance [laughs].
>
> Question: You would still consider describing it as a Hindu dance today?
>
> Response: [Pauses] Yeah… yeah. In terms of the narrative, and the mythology, it is Hindu mythology. It doesn't have to be and as new people choreograph they start to use different narratives. But predominantly it is still.

Distinct from the religious, the spiritual here is nonetheless entangled with it[109]. This dancer references Hindu mythology and the practice of students touching their teachers' feet as a mark of respect as emanating from Hindu customs. While other dancers might not necessarily characterise the latter as religious *per se*, the point this dancer makes of tracing certain practices in Indian classical dance to religious Hindu practices is noteworthy.

Another example of tracing contemporary practice to religious custom would be the placement of the Nataraja/Jagannatha on stage by dancers for their classical

[109] Of course, it can be quite difficult to articulate an un-denominational spirituality and this is not meant to question the possibility of the experience of such spirituality. While the dancer cited in the above quotation can be seen to signal such a spirituality in the statement 'there is a lot of spirituality in the process of learning the dance', what is pertinent to the present discussion on the representation of religion/spirituality is how this dancer quickly jumps to practices and narratives that are said to be defined as religiously Hindu in order to locate the spirituality of their experiences in dance.

performances, discussed in the previous chapter in the context of establishing patriarchal authority over the dancer and her performance. Moreover, both Nataraja and Jagannatha are referenced as the original source for foundational dance positions in Bharatanatyam and Odissi respectively; as several Odissi teachers I have encountered have explained to me, the *chauk* square position that is the first position that all students of Odissi learn is inspired by the position of Jagannatha in all of his visual representations, pictorial and sculptural (see Figures 1 and 2). For one such teacher, it was especially important that a *chauk* be executed with technical perfection because it "comes from Jagannatha". Similarly, a Bharatanatyam dancer leading a workshop explained the *aramandi* position to participants by pointing to the Nataraja behind the audience, saying "you see Nataraja behind you, he's doing *aramandi* with his leg up" – this despite having demonstrated the *aramandi* himself immediately before. Such practices thus code the dance as Hindu before its performance even begins. Regardless of the dancer's personal connection to the dance, the apparently Hindu characterisation of the dance is therefore maintained; an appeal to spirituality simply allows dancers to perform the Hindu narratives of their form without personal conflict.

The difficulty lies in the fact that individual personalised approaches to religiosity/spirituality as described above are not/cannot always be visually communicated in conventional Indian classical dance performances, which so often begin with invocatory dances and include narrativisations of various religio-mythological stories. Thus in the Kathak performance of *Krishna Nee Begane* described at the beginning of this chapter, while the individual dancers could have and likely did experience any number of conflictual relationships to whether and how they conceive of the divine in their dance practice while performing the choreography, these remained invisible to the audience who only saw the performance of *aarti* and

*puja* on stage[110]. The visual associations of Hindu belief made manifest in a conventional performance thus present an obstacle in communicating the nuances of the dancer's personal relationship (or lack thereof) to the religious aspects of the dance and its history to the audience[111]. That is to say, what the audience sees on the surface – even if superficially – is nonetheless categorised as religiously Hindu. Indeed, this message is powerfully conveyed; as one (non-South Asian British) dance student starting to learn Bharatanatyam told me as we attended a South Asian dance festival in London together, "not being a Hindu, it's very difficult for me to understand a Bharatanatyam performance".

**Locating a Universal Spirit**

To point out the incongruence of what dancers may believe personally and what they perform visually is not to deny dancers and choreographers artistic agency. As Lopez y Royo (2010) suggests, while spirituality in Indian classical dance should be seen as an expression of artistic individuality, the discussion is too often "cast in terms of tradition and greater or lesser adherence to it," making the dancer "representative of his culture, and implying that an Asian modern artist, unlike his western counterpart, can never be an autonomous individual" (ibid:120)[112]. Keeping this in mind, the point is rather to explore the very context in which Indian classical dance performances

[110] The inherent irony of the reconstructive project has been noted in that many of the 'religious' rituals that are currently incorporated into performances of Indian classical dance (i.e. *pujas*) were rejected at the time of reconstruction; as Gaston (1996:312) notes, "Bharata Natyam has more rituals and ceremonies attached to it today than it had during the period of its revival, when strenuous efforts were made to dissociate it from *sadir*" (see also David 2010).
[111] For further discussion of the performer-audience exchange of a culturally specific practice in a foreign context see Coorlawala (1996).
[112] This is not to suggest that the Western artist (at the very least, the artist performing in a Western genre) is autonomous in his/herself, nor that his/her art is detached from other cultural practices or meanings. Rather, the point is to compare how the practices of the former are more often *perceived* to be individual choices reflecting artistic intent, while the 'traditional' artist is regarded as representative of his/her art *and* culture (including religion) as a whole. The former is universalised, the latter culturalised.

occur in present-day London, shaped as these are by histories of colonialism and Orientalism as well as contemporary multicultural politics.

While spirituality can be interpreted as a common 'bridge' between different religiosities, the very specificity of its manifestation and what it means in different contexts requires untangling; some people/countries/cultures are seen to have a stronger affinity for the 'spiritual' than others. That the spirituality attributed to Indian classical dance does not neatly sever ties with its religious identification brings us back to the central problem of its postcolonial performance. Given the strong relationship between the dance and its national origin, developing a sense of spirituality – albeit a more universal one – through dance training and performance still continues to produce India as a land of inherent spirituality in Orientalist terms[113]. After all, if this spirituality were so universal, why would people feel the need to turn to India and its cultures in search of it? One dancer offers this explanation for the increasing interest of white Europeans in Indian classical dance forms:

> ...in the West there are a lot of people who are not happy with Western culture. They feel it's stagnant or materialistic. Because I feel in the West people have lost religion quite a lot. And maybe religion and culture are different in their everyday life. So they go to church on Sunday and that's it... I guess these people are looking for something much deeper…whereas in the East, because our whole civilisation grew with spirituality, the being is in context with yourself and your spirituality…. This hippy type of people, like Hare Rama Hare Krishna, all of them, they're mostly [European], they all are really into religion… they want to tap into something much deeper, much less superficial and much closer to what might be the real being. And the real being is not like in other religions where it is away from you, but a part of you.

[113] Some (not many) white Christian dancers have choreographed Indian classical dance pieces depicting Christian mythology, and I know of at least one woman who has performed Christian-themed Indian classical dances in churches in Italy. Although these choreographies and the shifts in context they entail provide an interesting instance of artistic adaptation and meaning making, they ultimately still produce India, its culture and its classical dance(s), as more religiously inclined. Thus, even if the content of the dance changes to reflect Christian beliefs and practices (an arguably universalising gesture paving the way for a multicultural engagement within the dance), it nonetheless re-produces Indian classical dance as fundamentally religious in keeping with an Orientalist script.

This dancer generalises one category of Westerners interested in Indian classical dance, those supposedly seeking a spirituality assumed lacking in the 'West', while simultaneously stereotyping the 'East' as a civilisation that 'grew with spirituality'. Some Western dancers, notably in Odissi, have come from Hare Krishna backgrounds[114], whether they still remain in that community or not. Moreover, a connection between non-South Asian dancers and Hare Krishna is often assumed by many; for example, one of the dancers I encountered during fieldwork – a woman (not Hare Krishna) from Eastern Europe now living in London – first went to the Iskcon community in her hometown (where no South Asians resided) to inquire whether any Indian classical dance classes were offered anywhere in the city. Furthermore, most of the Western dancers I encountered while on fieldwork in Orissa who had moved there to pursue full-time training came from Hare Krishna backgrounds. However, these are by no means the overall majority of non-South Asian dancers and it is important to distinguish the many reasons Western (white) dancers – like South Asian dancers as well – offer to explain why they are drawn to learning one of the forms of Indian classical dance.

As mentioned in Chapter Three, Western white dancers often feel they have to justify their interest in Indian classical dances (varied as it may be), especially to South Asian dancers and audiences. Many are drawn to the dance as a result of their previous training in other, mostly Western, dance forms. These dancers tend to view Indian classical dance as another movement vocabulary about which they wish to learn. For others, the spirituality viewed as central to Indian classical dance practice does indeed make it an attractive choice. The two views are not mutually exclusive;

[114] This is partly to do with the connection of Odissi to Lord Jagannatha (an incarnation of Vishnu closely associated with Krishna), and to the *Gita Govinda* (a collection of poems celebrating the life of Krishna that form an important text for Bhakti worship).

for example, in a 1992 edition of *ADiTi* magazine, a ballet dancer who subsequently took up Bharatanatyam wrote an article on her experiences, commenting that:

> Many people ask me why I, a non-Indian, have chosen Bharatanatyam as my vehicle for creative expression. The answer is, apart from the fact that this dance form suits my body better than classical ballet, that I find spiritual values in classical Indian dance which I do not find in Western dance, and that is perhaps the most important reason why I enjoy dedicating myself to this noble style of dancing (Karpen 1992:6).

But even when a search for spirituality is not the driving interest, non-South Asian dancers often cite a certain depth of feeling that they do not identify with European culture. As a (non-South Asian) dancer who began training in Kathak after travelling to India and subsequently moving to London from northern Europe explained to me in an interview:

> I'm an agnostic or atheist. So I find it really fascinating, I've always been interested in religion in general… So when I'm dancing, and if I need to dance a dance about Krishna for example, I believe when I'm dancing and I enter a different world. And when I have to, I can do that and I enjoy that. I don't mind that. But it is not the main thing about my practice. I see it more as an art form. At the same time, because it has these spiritual roots, the way you practice the dance is quite different from ballet for example. It makes it less superficial, even if you don't believe in it… I think, even in ballet you do expend emotions and they can be very powerful. But it's still just about human beings. It's still about the character or Juliet, or whatever. It's very [pause] mundane. Whereas in Indian dance in general, whether it is Bharatanatyam or Kathak or Odissi, it's somehow more universal. Somehow it's more the core of the emotions... Whereas ballet is slightly more superficial, I suppose.

While maintaining some religious association of the dance as something that this dancer can participate in by choice, this dancer also describes being drawn to the emotive core of the dance deemed missing in Western ballet. The East/West binary that shapes this dancer's response corresponds further with distinctions of body over mind, emotion over reason, Cartesian distinctions that not only can be traced back to the colonialist framework (Mohanram 1999; Mehta 1999) but have since been readopted in the current context. Although defined as mundane and not preferable in this comparison, the ordinary humanism of ballet (the West) is still maintained while

Indian classical dance (the East) is seen to offer an inherent emotive essence of mystical proportion.

By preferring the generically spiritual over the specifically religious, dancers (both South Asian and non-South Asian) thus perform an inversion of value similar to that espoused by the Indian nationalists who prized the inner sphere of culture and spirit over the external sphere of impersonal science and rationality (see Chatterjee 1999). Yet given the present multicultural and transnational historical moment, dancers today attempt this reversal through an even more universalist discourse – theirs is an art practice that, though *available* to all, offers something they perceive to be lacking in Western culture and art. Indeed, dancers often speak of what Western Contemporary dancers could learn from them and their classical work. In so doing, they reproduce colonialist discourses of similarity and difference, thus maintaining the status quo.

**Location, Location, Location: The Religious, The Secular, The Multicultural**

The distinction between religion and spirituality appears particular to the diasporic condition as it emerges as part of dancers' needs to make their art accessible to multicultural society. Dancers (Indian-born and resident) whom I have encountered in India do not raise questions about the spiritual/religious identity of their dance as they perform in a context where religious experience, definition and ambiguity are part of hegemonic Hindu-national culture. More interesting than the simple homeland-stable/diaspora-anxious binary this might suggest however is the question why articulations of religiosity/spirituality appear so prevalent in the context of secularism in relation to multicultural Britain. South Asian dance is much more established in the UK – with its numerous arts organisation, its significant number of performers, and its

access to mainstream audiences and funding schemes – than anywhere else in the diaspora; as such it has a greater presence and attracts a more varied range of dancers. This visibility seems to compel dancers to first articulate their dance practices in a way that highlights their differences from other dance forms – by stressing its historical, cultural and yes, religious, roots – as well as to overcome these differences to make their dance more accessible to non-Asian and second/third generation students, performers and audiences. The colonial play of similarity and difference is enacted once more, now in contemporary London[115]. Hence a discourse of spirituality that does not deny the religious but does not limit the dance to its strictest confines either emerges as one possible solution.

Whereas scholars such as Thapar (1989) and Cohn (1996) examined the anxieties of Hindus in articulating their religious identities *vis-à-vis* other religions in India, as was previously discussed above, similar sentiments have been observed amongst Hindus in the British South Asian diaspora who are said to envy Sikh and Muslim diasporic communities for being more institutionalised in their worship practices and thus better able to transmit their traditions to their children (Baumann 1999; Banks 1992). Indeed, this unification of identity almost becomes more urgent as it encounters hegemonic definitions of religion outside India; Hindus in the diaspora "need a Hinduism that can be explained to outsiders as a respectable religion, that can be taught to their children in religious education, and that can form the basis for collective action... In an ironic twist of history, Orientalism is now brought by Indians to Indians living in the West" (van der Veer 1993:42-3). Thus Hinduism, a religion

[115] For a more in-depth analysis of articulations of similarity and difference in both the colonial and nationalist projects, see Mehta (1999) and Chatterjee (1999).

that consists of a diverse set of beliefs and is far from codified becomes so as it is made into an ethnic marker (through dance) in multicultural Britain[116].

Moreover, according to Knott (1986), the experience of Hinduism as one religion amongst others in Britain has led to a form of 'secularisation', where religious holidays become culturalised, blurring the distinction between religious and ethnic identity. For Knott, "an awareness of religious pluralism has affected the way Hindus think about themselves and their faith. Some are beginning to think of Hinduism as many people do Christianity, something to be remembered during large festivals and at births, marriages and deaths" (ibid:46). This view is corroborated when one considers contemporary celebrations of Diwali or Holi, two holidays that have increasingly gained visibility in mainstream British society with neighbourhood parties celebrating these holidays around London (even in non-South Asian areas). Dance performances are rarely far from such celebrations; Diwali is an especially busy time for many dancers with its various performance opportunities. Indeed Diwali has been celebrated in Trafalgar Square since 2002 with a cultural extravaganza showcasing Indian music, dance, costuming and food, and many dancers I encountered, South Asian or not, have performed there.

The link between national/ethnic culture and religion, originating in the communal politics of post-partition India where Hindu identity served as guarantor for inclusion into the 'secular' nation (Pandey 1999), is today reinterpreted yet still maintained in London through the secularising discourses of multiculturalism. In other words, the culturalising of religious holidays in Britain strengthens the bond between religious and cultural identity that, in the Indian context, signals national belonging. Thus, while the culturalising of Hinduism enables (relative) belonging for a religious

[116] Katrak (2001) makes a similar observation amongst diasporic Bharatanatyam dancers in the US, arguing that their overt presentations of (Hindu) religiosity work to construct their ethnicity in ways that are congruous with Indian nationalist identity.

minority in the British multicultural state, the Hinduisation of Indian culture facilitates the exclusion of religious minorities in India. While the blurring of religion and culture is brought about through different processes in both contexts, they are nonetheless connected in the larger globalised construction of India as culturally Hindu. The British and Indian contexts are thus two sides of the same coin in the diaspora space that is instantiated through, amongst other cultural performances, Indian classical dance performances.

Concerns over the dissemination of religious knowledge and the status of Hinduism as a religion in contemporary multicultural Britain are particularly evident when Indian classical dance is presented as an aid to religious pedagogy and practice (see also David 2010, 2008). Indeed, perhaps the most obvious connection between Indian classical dance and its association with Hinduism in the British South Asian diasporic/multicultural context is demonstrated through the ways in which dance is used to construct ideas of a coherent religious cultural community. While adult dancers themselves may not necessarily identify with Hinduism or view their dance practice as directly related to a Hindu belief structure on a personal level, parents – many of whom admit to lapsing in their practice of Hinduism themselves – often see dance classes as a way to teach their children about their religion in an environment in which they are not otherwise able to access it. While this may not translate into the desired objectives of the children who see dance classes more as social activities and places to have fun, the underlying assumptions of the dance as religious remain as they nonetheless filter into the students' ambivalent definitions regarding the dance and its religious associations.

Even if they do not place priority on encouraging their children in becoming practicing Hindus, many parents remain content with the belief that at least the dance

class links their children to a religious heritage that they can later choose to preserve should they so wish. As one mother[117] whose daughter studies Kathak in London said to me in an interview:

> I come from a Brahmin household [in India] and I chose not to indulge in any [religious] practices. But [I had religious knowledge and experiences and] my children haven't got that. So for my daughter, classical dance is a medium to have that knowledge… [Classical dance] is an insight into the language, into the philosophy, certainly into the religion. I don't think it's a very good way of dealing with it, but in my laziness and in my kind of limitations [it is] a good one for her … But then I have to… see whether I get her into the religion or get her out of it [laughs].

Whether parents identify as practicing Hindus or not, their approach to dance lessons as a means for their children to have the opportunity to make an informed decision about whether or not they wish to practice Hinduism suggests these parents squarely equate Indian classical dance with the religion. Dance becomes a pedagogical tool to impart religious knowledge in the minds of many diasporic parents so much that, despite the nuances of their own identification as culturally Hindu but not religiously so, the religiosity of the dance remains unquestioned, either by parent or child.

When asked about their relationship to the dance and its supposed connection to Hinduism, most dancers (many of them the grown-up children mentioned in the preceding paragraph) quickly point out that theirs is a personal understanding whereby they are free to interpret the religious according to their own beliefs and desires. Moreover, such ambivalence allows dancers to articulate a rejection of the religious, thus removing themselves from the obligation of religious belief or practice, while simultaneously upholding constructions of the dance itself as religious. This holding of apparently contradictory positions is captured vividly in one of my

[117] Out of my interview pool, four people brought up parenting and/or their children in relation to their perspectives of Indian classical dance. The views expressed in this interview are also consistent with informal conversations I have had with other parents as a researcher and as a dancer.

interviews with a South Asian dancer practicing classical and Contemporary South Asian dance:

> Question: How important do you think religion is to Indian classical dance?
>
> Response: It's almost 90% of the dance really. Because everything we do is related to all the characters… the mythological characters and the gods and the goddesses. Describing them, describing what they do and the love for them.
>
> Question: What does that mean to you today, in 2011 in London?
>
> Response: Because the past few years, I've kind of renounced my religion, and kind of become more spiritual rather than religious. It is quite tricky because everything – every dance, every classical piece, every expressive piece in the Indian classical performance – is to do with some god or another and showing your love. So somehow it is going to be related to the religion.
>
> Question: To Hinduism?
>
> Response: To Hinduism, yeah. So… it is quite a challenge because I'm trying to break away from that. And I believe now I can dance for the love for the space, for the people, for the environment, for what I'm doing rather than an external force that I don't believe exists in the first place.

Although describing a personal relationship to and break with Hinduism, this dancer expresses an ambivalence shared by many others, initially identifying religion, specifically Hinduism, as integral to the dance but then distancing themselves from this in their own personal dance practice. For this dancer, choreographing Contemporary South Asian dance is one method of increasing this distance. Thus the context that encourages the development of Contemporary South Asian dance practice in London facilitates dancers' rejection of the religious while at the same time sustaining notions of Indian classical dance *as religious in itself.*

At the same time however, the specificity of the diasporic context for British South Asians does not divorce contemporary performances of Indian classical dance from the religious politics of India. Rather, attention must be paid to how the ambiguities of dancers, located in the UK, regarding their personal relationships to the religious construction of their dance and its slippages into a universal spirituality can help disguise and thus further the politics of religious nationalisms, in the UK and in

India. In other words, by naturalising the link between contemporary Hinduism and forms of Indian classical dance, especially Kathak whose history of Islamic influence is often elided in this tautology, dancers in the UK contribute to the construction of Indian national culture as Hindu to the exclusion of the various other religious communities who reside in the 'homeland' and its 'diaspora'. It is to this crucial point that I now turn for the remainder of the chapter.

**An Exclusive Universalism**

In the winter of 2011, I was at a rehearsal preparing for an upcoming performance with a group of dancers when the casual conversation during warm up turned towards a well-known Kathak dancer who was then visiting London from Pakistan. The conversation began with one dancer describing how, the night before, she had attended an event at which this Kathak dancer had given an impromptu performance and – according to her – articulated a desire for "looking at the Islamic element in Kathak". Described as delivering performances "infused by a unique Pakistani style" (Prickett 2011), the Kathak dancer under discussion is indeed primarily identified as a Muslim dancer, an identification that is relatively rare amongst dancers in London, even in the Kathak style.

According to the dancer discussing the event in the rehearsal, the Kathak dancer's articulation of recalibrating this dance form to acknowledge its historical association with Islam had irked a good number of the people in attendance that night, which included local dance promoters as well as dancers. What was deemed to be particularly troubling was that in voicing his ambition as one of identifying the centrality of Islam in his dance practice, the Kathak dancer was "forcing" his religious beliefs onto the dance. Such an act seemed an affront to the secularisation that was

claimed to have been achieved in ‘normal’ performances of Indian classical dance where a more abstract and supposedly universally accessible ‘spirituality’ was said to be primary. For the dancer describing the previous night’s events, the Kathak dancer (and not those who had voiced their annoyance) had gone on a “religious tangent” because ‘religion’ is “only one aspect of the dance”; the Kathak dancer, recounted this dancer in rehearsal, should not have tried to impose religion (Islam) in this manner.

However, this view seemed to overlook the possibility that Islam could and likely did exist already *within* Kathak. From earlier conversations with this dancer, and from watching her perform numerous dance pieces that dealt with Hindu mythological narratives as I had done during the period of our acquaintance, I had witnessed her carve a personal understanding of – and position herself in relation to – the Hindu associations of her dance style. Indeed this was a dancer who had said that while Indian classical dance (in general and not just her specific form) was essentially Hindu, this did not mean that someone from another religious belief system or even an atheist could not find alternative points of connection when performing the dance, without detracting from the religious associations of its performance. For this dancer, not Hindu herself, engaging with the recognisably Hindu associations of her dance style was a matter of personal choice and she was very comfortable in practicing her dance on a ‘cultural’ (and not religious) level. Thus, what made her impassioned objection to the Kathak performer so striking was how a similar notion of choice and interpretation was deemed offensive when the religion being claimed in the dance performance was Islam. Hinduism, it seemed, had sanction to enter into the domain of secular/spiritual cultural practice whereas Islam was granted no such complexity and confined only to the overdetermined sphere of the (disturbingly) religious.

Throughout my fieldwork, I repeatedly encountered numerous examples like the one just mentioned of Islam being constructed as foreign to Indian classical dance, and indeed, to India. This construction was for me the most surprising and unexpected of all my findings over the course of my research with dancers, some of whom were Muslims themselves. Since the rise of right-wing Hindutva nationalist politics in India in the1980s and 90s, scholars have commented on the ironic relationship between religion and culture within Indian secularism; the association between Hindu culture and Indian national identity has become so entwined, the two appear synonymous in public discourse while other religious identities are afforded no such status within the nation (Lal 2005; Pandey 1999; Sarkar 1998)[118]. Moreover, in the Hindutva narrativisation of Indian history that seeks to assert Hindu national supremacy through claims of indigenous belonging, Islam is constructed as having come to India through invasion and conquest, thus eliding the ways in which Muslims and Islamic culture adapted and developed within the specific context of South Asia, and that indigenous communities converted to Islam.

Crucially, this Hindutva logic is shown to be an extension of the colonial historiography that aligned the historical trajectory of India with that of Europe. As Sarkar (1998) has demonstrated, British and Indian historigoraphic sources were produced in complement by constructing similar historical trajectories such that the classical age of Europe was regarded as similar to the Golden Age of Hinduism (which was at that time being 'rediscovered'). Furthermore, the Classical Age of

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[118] The term Hindutva is invoked by its adherents to denote a sense of 'Hinduness' that is said to be equated with 'Indianness'. First articulated in the early twentieth century, it gained following in the 1980s and 90s, particularly after the Ayodhya affair and the razing of the Babri Mosque in 1992. Invested in ideas of Hindu cultural and national indigeneity, Hindutva philosophies have been called upon by various factions such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the Bharatiya Janta Party (which led a coalition government from 1998 to 2004) and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. Diasporic (financial) support for Hindutva organisations in India has also been documented, especially from adherents living in the Unites States (Lal 2005: 238-252).

Europe was seen to have deteriorated by the advent of the medieval period, much like the Golden Age of Hinduism was said to have suffered due to the 'invasion' of Islam (note the parallels to the narrative of decline of the *devadasi/tawa'if*). These parallel trajectories both posited modernity as the solution to the stigmatised middle stage of history, whether this meant an outright justification for colonialism or the incorporation of its logic into nationalist discourses (see Sarkar 1998:17-20).

Striking to me was how strong the hold of this Hindutva narrative of Muslim invasion and foreignness was on the imagination of the dancers I encountered in the UK, even if they often celebrated the cultural innovations that were inspired by, if not the outright contribution of, Islam in South Asia. For example, one dance teacher who lived and trained in India prior to moving to the UK introduced the role of religion at the very onset of her interview when asked what Indian classical dance meant to her, subsequently distinguishing between the religious culture of her dance form and the 'invading' culture of Kathak:

> … But Indian classical dance has a slight slant towards religion because the majority of the dance forms, their roots are based in the temples. So it's to do with the culture, the religion, the language – a lot more comes into it. Whereas with other classical art forms you don't have so much of the religion [sic]. And it [Indian classical dance] has somehow maintained it [religion] as well.
>
> Question: What does this relationship [to religion] mean for Indian classical dance performances today?
>
> Response: Performance today, if it's looking at a traditional Indian classical dance, it's still very much taking the essence from that. Perhaps the performing arena has changed but the whole philosophies, the ideas behind it are still linked with the religion, and particularly the dance form I do [Odissi] is very much tied to the religion. Whereas other classical dance [styles], because of the invasions, etc. of other people and the cultural mix, they've been able to enrich different cultures into the dance form and I guess other religions as well.
>
> Question: Are you referring to Kathak?
>
> Response: Yeah [pause]. Which is very nice. Then you get a mix.

Indeed, as I will discuss below, whereas Bharatanatyam and Odissi were often spoken of in similar fashion and assumed to have much in common, Kathak was repeatedly defined with a sense of alterity, even by Kathak dancers themselves.

This narrative of Muslim invasion thus appears central to the setting apart of Kathak. For example, another Kathak teacher similarly described in an interview how she explained the history of her dance form when conducting workshops in mainstream schools:

> When I go to schools, I say that Kathak is [a] 2000 year-old dance form and it has originated in the temples. And then Mughal invasion in India and they were influenced by this dance, so they brought temples [dancers] to court, and they started to practice, and they started dancing in front of the emperors. And then the dance came to the stage where it acquired an art form of the solo art form [sic].

For this teacher, the equation of Muslim with Mughal, and the definition of both as invaders, appears to be so standard as to be thrown into this whirlwind historicisation of Kathak ('and then Mughal invasion in India'). Moreover, presented at dance workshops delivered in local schools, this is a narrative being introduced into the mainstream British school system as part of the multicultural curriculum.

## Setting Kathak Apart

Until now, much of this thesis has examined the umbrella category of Indian classical dance as an example through which various regionally specific dance styles are consolidated in order to construct a pan-Indian cultural identity. Part of the tension implicit in these pan-Indian constructions – and indeed making the task of writing about them all the more difficult – is the constant shift between the specific and the general required to highlight the differences between the three dance styles I examine here, as well as their overlapping similarities.

As suggested above, of the three styles, Kathak is the one that is constructed as most different in relation to Bharatanatyam and Odissi. The latter two are seen to share a direct link to *devadasis* and temple practice (although some Kathak dancers will speak of the temple origins of their form). As such, Bharatanatyam and Odissi are presented as outright Hindu dance forms (even when approached in relation to a more complex secularised Hindu identity as discussed in the preceding sections). Kathak, on the other hand is associated primarily with 'the court', which is imagined predominantly in association with the Mughal Empire; Kathak is therefore most often regarded as first and foremost a form of entertainment and not an inherently spiritual practice, despite its associations with Islamic culture (poetry, musical instruments, and dance technique).

Furthermore, as discussed in the previous chapter, Kathak is the dance form most readily associated with the *tawa'if* who is nostalgically recalled as a noble and tragic representation of a bygone era. Cinematic and literary representations of the *tawa'if* and her surroundings – almost always inflected with signs of Islamic culture through dress, language and etiquette – further this sense of nostalgia by celebrating a past perceived to be completely severed from the present. While these courtesans and the cultures they represent are most certainly constructed as Indian, the sense of their belonging is confined to the past, thus continuing the marginalisation of Indian Islamic culture in the present. Thus, while Islamic culture is today referenced by Indian classical dancers, these references are rarely articulated in relation to any religious (Muslim) attributes of Kathak in the present; at the same time, these references are also used to explain what makes Kathak 'different'.

While many of the Kathak dancers with whom I interacted over the course of my fieldwork discussed the spiritual and religious attributes of their dance as

discussed above, this was always done within the context of Hinduism and Indian classical dance more generally. In other words, Kathak dancers who saw their dance as connected to a spiritual practice overwhelmingly did so because Indian classical dance *as a whole* is said to make such practice possible.

Moreover, even Kathak dancers would reference their dance style as different from Bharatanatyam and Odissi, a construction of difference that hinges upon religious identities and notions of cultural belonging. For example, when speaking to a Kathak dancer who identifies as Pakistani British in the UK, I told her that Bharatanatyam was the prevalent style of Indian classical dance in Canada where I first began learning dance; her response was to ask if that was because "it is very Indian", thus signalling the implicit confluence of national and religious identities in reference to Bharatanatyam. Such a response both testifies to the success of the reconstruction of Bharatanatyam as the national classical dance of India (even if this construction is today downplayed by dancers in light of the classicisation of other regional dance forms), while simultaneously placing Kathak – the implicit point of reference in this comparison – as *less* 'Indian'. Of course, given that Kathak is taught and performed in Pakistan, it is likely to be associated with South Asia more generally and not just India. However, this is not enough to justify a description of Bharatanatyam as 'very Indian' in relation to other dance forms.

The extent to which Kathak is marked as different varies from the implicit to the explicit. While the abovementioned incident suggests a more subtle demarcation of Kathak as less 'Indian', other slippages I encountered included referring to Odissi and Bharatanatyam collectively as Indian dance (with its attendant Hindu connotations) while referring to Kathak separately as Kathak. One of the most lucid examples of how the use of particular names and categories can demarcate the

boundaries of inclusion and exclusion is evidenced in the following excerpt from an interview with a South Asian dance organiser who migrated to the UK from India some decades ago. Just prior to the excerpt I cite below, I had raised the issue of a dancer being mistaken as Hindu based on their performance of Indian classical dance. This point of religious difference prompted the following response, which I quote at length for it provides many fruitful examples of the ways in which Kathak is marked as different:

> I've started to think this more, almost 15 years ago, when I saw … [an internationally famous] Pakistani dancer who was one of the best, according to me. And [I was…] based in an office just next to the theatre entrance. So every often I would slip up into the theatre and watch the dress rehearsals. So whether I saw the final show or not, I always saw the dress rehearsal. And I remember I looked at the lighting designers trying out new things. And [this dancer] has [sic] kind of projected some calligraphy, something written in Persian from the top onto the floor. And I came in and I looked at it and I suddenly realised, 'what the hell is this' [voice rises in exclamation]. This is what I said, 'what the hell is this. I don't understand. I can't read this. I don't understand this.' And it's that, and that was my first experience of being an outsider. Not having access into what is happening. And that is what kind of really led me to think about everyone else who has not been able to have access into Indian classical dance and why… So when I was watching [this dancer], I realised that I had no access into that. God knows when that access stopped at my end, because I did not know. And then the piece that she created was about *darghas* [Muslim/Sufi shrines] and *mazars* [mausoleums]. And in *darghas*, it was about the dance of the *faqirs* [Sufi ascetics]. So you have this whole group of people who cover themselves and they start to kind of heave and do the whole performance, which was kind of done very much in a Kathak choreographic way. But what was happening, why was it happening and where it was going to lead was something completely unfamiliar to me, very foreign. And I had to sit and watch. It is when I go to see an Indian classical dance performance, I know what will happen. The margam [Bharatanatyam performance format]. I know how it happens, I know why it happens…
>
> Question: Her piece was strictly Kathak?
>
> Response: Yes, it was a Kathak piece. Created within the context of life and religion in Pakistan…

While this respondent is familiar enough with Muslim culture in South Asia to be able to refer to *darghas*, *mazars* and *faqirs* (all of which can be found in India as well as Pakistan), the encounter with Islamic calligraphy is what takes the respondent aback and results in the feelings of estrangement that are described. Indeed, the respondent

refers to the calligraphy as Persian and not Urdu, which is spoken in both India and Pakistan and uses the same script as Persian and Arabic, thus heightening the level of foreignness attributed to this dance performance. Note how, in this context, 'Indian classical dance performance' is used as an umbrella category for the dance with which the respondent is familiar, presumably based on its religio-cultural underpinnings. Only the reference to the *margam* identifies Bharatanatyam as the specific form being discussed, further conflating this particular dance form with Indian culture more generally.

Finally, what is also striking in this excerpt is the way in which the foreignness of this Kathak performance enables the (Hindu) respondent to identify with those for whom Indian classical dance would appear foreign ('And that is what kind of really led me to think about everyone else who has not been able to have access into Indian classical dance'). Indeed, being confronted by the unfamiliar represented in this Kathak performance appears to elicit a sense of frustration bordering on panic ('what the hell is this!'). The alterity of Kathak as a whole is thus strongly evident in this excerpt, for even the respondent describes the performance as having been 'done very much in a Kathak choreographic way.' In this particular description, Kathak is made to stand entirely outside the scope of Indian classical dance.

### Re-Orientalising Kathak

In articulating perceptions of alterity with regard to Kathak, dancers appear to be drawing on Orientalised representations of Islam that go beyond the immediate context of Indian classical dance; that is to say, while the performance of Indian classical dance is shaped by one set of Orientalist discourses about India and

Hinduism, the performance of Kathak (when marked as different), introduces a second layer of Orientalism. It is to this dynamic that I now turn.

Examining the nineteenth and twentieth century classicisation of music in India, a project that ran parallel to the reconstruction of classical dance, scholars have noted that this project – concerned once more with middle-class respectability – signalled the dispossession of the hereditary Muslim performers who came to be replaced by Hindu practitioners (Dennan 2010:162; Bakhle 2005:148). Furthermore, as discussed in the previous chapter, Walker (2004) has demonstrated how the classicisation of Kathak in the twentieth century required a shift from Muslim to Hindu identities. Such dispossession was achieved in part through the discourse of spirituality, which was used in the reclamation of Indian classical music as the purview of a Hindu elite and not a Muslim hereditary community (Allen 1997:68). Similarly in South India, non-Brahmin musicians were disenfranchised with the rise of Brahmin musicians (ibid). In both instances, spirituality was the cultural ‘bridge’ that enabled the dispossession of one group in favour of another[119]. With its ties to dance practice, this analysis of classical music has implications for the classicisation of Indian dance that occurred simultaneously; the anti-*nautch* movement similarly ushered in the Sanskritisation and Hinduisation of the dances of both Muslim and lower-caste Hindu women (as discussed in Chapter Two).

Analysis of the dispossession of hereditary artists by a Hindu elite further complicates the conflation of the *devadasi* (as Hindu) and the *tawa’if* (as Muslim) that was explored in greater detail in the previous chapter. On the one hand, relegated to the past, both figures can be seen to unite Hindu and Muslim ‘cultures’ in a pan-Indian manner, as is suggested by the dancers who today describe the *devadasi* and

[119] This further complicates van der Veer’s (2009) discussion of the spiritual as providing a bridge discussed at the beginning of this chapter by raising questions of how ‘spirituality’ can facilitate the enactment of power and dispossession through its universalising gestures.

the *tawa'if* as having shared characteristics. On the other hand, the dispossession of hereditary musicians and dancers – who were a diverse set of people coming from different regional, religious and caste backgrounds – by a Hindu elite complicates this conflation, for the two categories of women simultaneously appear to represent two different 'traditions' (Hindu temple and Muslim court).

While the celebrated *devadasi* figure is turned into a representative of the Golden Era of Hinduism, thus enabling the reconstructive project to align itself with some of her (desirable) attributes which allow them to code Indian classical dance as Hindu, the association of the eighteenth and nineteenth century courtesan dancer with the Mughal court appears to shroud her with yet another level of religio-cultural difference. The religious identity of the *tawa'if* thus appears incommensurate with the nationalist project that re-imagined the nation as Hindu and helped shape the reconstruction of classical dance. This is evidenced in the ways in which Hinduism is comfortably reconfigured as cultural/spiritual/secular by dancers while Islam is afforded no such complexity and nuance, and therefore is constructed as external to the culture and philosophies that inform their dance practice. The question of how an Orientalism positioned in relation to Islam (and not just India) operates *within* the context of Indian classical dance must thus be considered when analysing the relationship between Kathak, Bharatanatyam and Odissi.

Although a substantive analysis of this wider Orientalism towards Islam is unfortunately beyond the scope of this project, its workings can nonetheless be gleaned *within* the sphere of Indian classical dance that helps shape discourses that mark contemporary Kathak with alterity in relation to Indian culture. The ways in which contemporary dancers recall the Mughal Court and its culture, especially in light of the politicised histories that posit this culture as foreign to India, reveals the

presence of this additional Orientalising gesture. Such a doubled Orientalism is evidenced in the following excerpt from an interview I conducted with a dancer who identifies as South Indian Brahmin and was then resident in London:

> I think the religious ritual actually became [pause]. See I would say, from the temples to the courts and from the courts to what it [classical dance] is today. It's evolution. Progression. So if you want to see where it comes from, it did come from the temple. But where did it come, from where it got to, it came from the courts to where we are today, to the stage. Because the temples would have kept it [dance] the way it is [sic] and have left it in that form. But the kings would have experimented with it. Because they would think, ok lets do something – I'll pay musicians. Lets inaugurate the king. So the dancers inaugurate the king. You know, [the dancer] talks about the king. Kathak for instance, when the Mughals came in, the Muslims took it completely out of context. Kathak today is the only dance form that doesn't really, is not really devoted to god. It's the only dance form that's very arrogant. When you stand in the positions, you can see like [pause] you know what I mean. So, because the Mughal kings were interested in it [pause]. It's a beautiful dance form but I cannot, 'I'm a Muslim, I can't do this Hindu thing' [they said]. So they brought it to the court and it became a completely different thing.

This excerpt is quite complex for it begins with a general discussion of Indian classical dance before turning to Kathak specifically. Interestingly, immediately prior to this response, this dancer had discussed the role of Hindu royal patronage on Bharatanatyam and Odissi, although in much more positive ways, noting that:

> Because, if you were to see the evolvement of classical Indian dances you would see, or classical forms anywhere, you would find that that particular country has a king. Because the king has money, has got vision, and he wants beautiful things… Bharatanatyam had two great kings, Pandian and Chola… You have the Kings, I forget what they're called in Orissa... Where there were kings, you find there is a very powerful classical dance form.

Indeed, royal patronage becomes for this dancer a universal thread for the development of classical arts ('or classical forms anywhere'); French Kings, Viennese royalty and Russian Czars were also cited as facilitating the development of their respective forms of classical art in this interview. However, this universalising gesture makes this dancer's signalling out of Kathak even more striking for the general and shared history that this excerpt begins with quickly turns to stereotypical constructions of the Mughal court as proud and extravagant. Constructs of the

Oriental despot are recalled as this dancer describes the Mughal kings who are said to have elevated their inauguration above the religious context of the dance claimed to predate the Mughals 'coming in'.

Moreover, this history is said to be integral to the 'arrogant' postures of Kathak, which – unlike Bharatanatyam and Odissi – places emphasis on quick and dramatic stops at the culmination of the beat cycle, often after a series of rapid spins or complex footwork. The purported pageantry that is here attributed to Kathak sets it apart as the 'only dance form that is not devoted to god' and thus furthers constructions of the Mughal court as degenerate in its religious practices. When subsequently asked about the Hindu mythologies that are expressed in numerous Kathak performances in the present, this dancer suggested that, "when the Muslims left, a lot of Hindus brought it [religion/Hinduism] back in [to Kathak]. Krishna will always be part of classical Indian dance… Because Krishna creates lots of stories. You know, Krishna is like the god of today". The influence of Islam on Kathak (India) is here seen to be temporary, perhaps even damaging. According to this argument, the purity of the original form can be restored by the 'bringing back' of Hinduism in the present.

Of the dancers that I came across during fieldwork, this respondent was one of the most forthcoming in constructing notions of Muslim alterity to Indian culture and invested in concepts of Hindu indigeneity in India. Nonetheless, what is striking is how the abovementioned narrative of Kathak technique as developing out of the context of lavish (Orientalised) court performances is similar to the narratives told by many other dancers, including British born South Asian dancers who claim no such investment in the religious nationalisms of the subcontinent. For example, another Bharatanatyam dancer born and raised in the UK who identifies as British describes

the different forms of appeal that Kathak, Bharatanatyam and Odissi may or may not have for audiences:

> In this… celebrity culture [in London], I think what really works is the wow factor. So I think Kathak is doing extremely well, it's very popular simply because it's got a wow factor. Because you have the flurry of turns with a finish, and a 'pow' with the music. Audiences love that. Unfortunately, Odissi and Bharatanatyam has [sic] no such wow factor, so we're going to have to find it. And that makes a huge, huge difference. And I think that's what makes it popular. And we have to think about this history of it too. Kathak wasn't a temple form, it was a court form, it was for entertainment. Whereas Bharatanatyam, Odissi wasn't [sic]. It was more of a devotional practice and the wow factor is difficult.

Again the allegedly religious histories of Bharatanatyam and Odissi are called upon to explain their present-day dance technique in relation to Kathak, a dance that is perceived to have a dramatic 'wow factor' precisely because it is said to lack this religious (Hindu) precedent. This perspective is related to the 'celebrity culture' of London, indicating the extent to which the narrative of Kathak as entertainment, Bharatanatyam/Odissi as spiritual practice is ingrained even in the UK. Moreover, Bharatanatyam and Odissi are repeatedly conflated as one; indeed the speaker uses the singular verb construction in all of the references made to the two dance forms ('Odissi and Bharatanatyam *has*'/ 'Bharatanatyam, Odissi *wasn't*'/ '*it was* more of a devotional practice').

While it is undeniable that Bharatanatyam, Kathak and Odissi did come from different (yet inter-related and syncretic) histories and performance contexts, to project differences of 'religion' (as in some were 'religious', others were not) onto their historical predecessors is to project contemporary concepts of the religious that have been produced through the colonial encounter. This projection of the religious onto the past, occurring as it does in the contemporary moment, shapes in turn constructions of the various dance forms in relation to the 'secularism' of British multiculturalism. For, although both excerpts cited above reference political and

cultural developments in India, they are articulated by dancers *in* the British diasporic/multicultural context. The construction of Indian classical dance as historically religious cements its categorisation as ethnic art in the multicultural context, even though this religiosity is a modern incarnation reflecting contemporary politics, both Indian and global[120]. The complicated negotiation between the religious and the secular continues in contemporary dance practice.

**An Acceptable Islam**

During my fieldwork, I came across a few instances in which elements of Islam were referenced as a positive 'religious' influence on Kathak practice, although even these were tempered through universalising gestures and linkages to Hinduism. An interesting example of this was in references to the development and performance of a genre of dance referred to by performers as 'Sufi Kathak'. I first came across this genre quite by accident when I went to a concert by the Punjabi artist Hans Raj Hans, as part of a South Asian arts festival at the Southbank Centre in London in 2011. The opening act for this concert was a troupe of *qawwals*[121] who were accompanied by a (non-Muslim[122]) dancer credited with having recently created this new genre of dance performance. This performance was rare in bringing together dance and Qawwali, two forms that are usually performed separately.

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[120] This analysis suggests that the context of anti-Muslim sentiment as evidenced 'locally' in India (with specific articulations in relation to the Hindu mainstream) and globally (with the rise of current Islamophobia) should be considered in relation to one another. Although an in-depth examination of this relationship is beyond the scope of this work, it is nonetheless important to mention here.

[121] Qawwali is a form of music performed by a group of singers (*qawwals*), usually with one or two lead singers. It is associated with Sufism, and the content of the songs usually revolves around the love one has for god. Qawwali can be performed both as part of devotional practice, such as at Sufi shrines, as well as on stage. For more, see Qureshi (2006).

[122] The performer's name suggests she comes from a Hindu Brahmin background.

Nothing in this performer's dance signalled it as drastically different from classical Kathak, except that it featured more spins (perhaps to recall the whirling dervishes with which Sufism is also associated[123]) and emphasis was placed on repeatedly raising both arms above the head with palms lifted to the sky (an iconic reference to the spiritual realm above). The costume of the performer was also in keeping with Kathak conventions, although there was slightly more material in the skirt to create a more dramatic *gher* around the dancer as she spun, a wider *salwaar* (trousers) as opposed to the tight *churidar salwaar* worn by most Kathak dancers, and a larger *dupata* (scarf) that covered her head and draped across her chest and shoulders. The excess material of the costume contributed to the drama invoked in the performance, which was introduced as combining the "mysticism of Sufism" with classical Kathak (for an example of this mystical appeal, see Figure 8).

The next time I witnessed a performance of Sufi Kathak was a year later, when a British South Asian Kathak dancer performed one of his own choreographies in this genre as part of his solo performance in a platform that featured both classical and Contemporary South Asian dance pieces. The entire performance featured four performers, each of whom had been invited to present two pieces to a diverse audience that included the prestigious theatre's mainstream audience as well as many leading South Asian dancers, presenters and critics.

Like the Sufi Kathak that accompanied the Qawwali performance the previous year, this later performance was also difficult to distinguish from Kathak more generally. The overlap of the two dance styles was especially apparent in this performance as the soloist first performed a traditional 'Kathak' piece prior to the 'Sufi Kathak' piece, facilitating a detailed comparison. Although the technique

[123] While whirling is a practice associated with the Mevlana order of Sufism, the whirling dervishes have become an iconic symbol of Sufism more generally. For more on Sufi practices, especially in regards to music and dance, see Lewisohn (1997). For more on Sufism in general, see Ernst (1997).

between the two dances was not dramatically different (again, the Sufi Kathak piece did feature more turns, but it is difficult to define this as a qualitative difference), the costumes featured in the two pieces were noticeably distinct; the dancer performed the Kathak piece in a plain black *kurta* (tunic), but then changed into a baggier white *kurta* and tied a brown *kafia* scarf on his head, alluding to a convention that is more readily associated with some men in the Middle East. The *kafia* stood out especially because it is very uncommon for male dancers to cover their heads in Indian classical dance performances, and because the *kafia* is rarely associated with South Asian culture. It was thus the focal point of the costume, emphasised even more by the contrast of the brown *kafia* against the white *kurta*.

To introduce this particular piece in the showcase performance of Indian classical and Contemporary South Asian dance, the dancer described 'Sufi Kathak' as combining the mystical elements of Islam and Hinduism, reflecting an attempt to highlight a synchronicity between the two religions. Thus, while Islam was acknowledged and even invoked in this performance, this was done through stereotypical references to Middle Eastern dress and tempered by its association with Hinduism. This is evident in the ways in which Islam was made hyper visible – notably through the use of the *kafia* and the references to Sufism – while Hinduism was assumed to be implicit in the dance form itself.

To highlight this uneven treatment of the two religions is not to suggest they be treated as essentialised categories, but it does raise the question why stereotypical markers of Islam were utilised in relation to an abstract treatment of Hinduism. Perhaps the implicit association of Hinduism with classical Kathak – the result of the marginalisation of Islam in the classicising project – was enough to represent the Hinduism referenced in the introduction, complicating once more the relationship

between the religious (Hinduism) and the cultural (Indian). While Hinduism was assumed to be present in the performance and did not need to be made visible, Islam had to be consciously represented, even as the Sufi thematic of the piece made it already present in the dance. Thus, although Islam was celebrated through the references to Sufism, it was still treated as external to the dance. At the same time, the references to Sufism arguably made a celebration of Islam (at least one element) possible in this performance, signalling the palatability of this branch of Muslim theology and culture (instead of Islam more generally) in popular imaginaries[124].

**Conclusion**

The development of Bharatanatyam, Kathak and Odissi as performance arts in the twentieth century has altered the context of their presentations, thus complicating any analysis of them in 'religious' terms. This is evident when considering Sufi Kathak, the very onstage performance of which recalibrates (if not completely contradicts) the emphasis that Sufism places on the personal and internal reflections of the individual practitioner. A very similar complication would have occurred when the performance context shifted from temple to stage in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, even before this conversation regarding the 'religious' nature of Indian classical dance in various performance contexts can begin, it is already complicated by the very construction of the category of religion. This is because the categorisation of the 'religious' is the discursive legacy of the knowledge power nexus of colonialism, even as it is lived and experienced in the present day.

[124] Sufism thus appears as a more palatable version of Islam that is separable from the more rigid and dogmatic representations of the religion, both within the diasporic/national Indian context and at the global level. While this is again beyond the scope of the present work – and is connected to the previous footnote (120) regarding the relationship of local and global perceptions of Islam – the analysis presented here suggests a need for further study.

While some dancers argue it is impossible to compartmentalise Indian classical dance in terms of aesthetics, religious practice, physical technique, etc., this does not mean that its construction *as* religious cannot be interrogated. In fact, the very impossibility of compartmentalising the dance demonstrates the need to examine further its constitutive parts, and why these are sometimes emphasised, sometimes downplayed. Moreover, analysing the ways in which Indian classical dance is produced as Hindu in the contemporary diasporic and multicultural context of the UK – and linking this to the religious nationalisms of the subcontinent – is not to discount the beliefs of its practitioners, religious or otherwise. Social constructions are no less real when they are lived in the everyday. The task is rather to understand the political outcomes and constructions of national/cultural/religious belonging that are achieved through – and help produce – the construction of Indian classical dance in this way.

Signalling the alterity with which Kathak is treated, and the ways in which the Islamic influence of its history is elided in the master narrative of the dance, is another way in which the politics of belonging shaped by contemporary Indian classical dance performances can be understood. The point is not to show how Kathak can be or is 'Muslim'; such a project would entail the same problematic tautology that essentialises Hinduism as the religion of Indian classical dance by citing its cultural customs, dance techniques and narrative mythologies. Instead, the point is to question how the two, Hinduism and Islam, are constructed in relation to one another and to the dance; to ask why one is allowed to be complex, abstract and acceptable, while the other is treated with alterity and regarded as reprehensible.

At the same time, the mythological texts that dancers appeal to in claiming the Hindu origin of their dance are part of the present context and are made dynamic by the very fact that they await the interpretation of those that encounter or present them.

Furthermore, dancers may indeed experience personal relationships to the spiritual or the divine, experiences that cannot or need not necessarily be articulated. The 'religion' of Indian classical dance is thus made significant by the dancers who perform it as much as the mythological texts are given meaning by those who interpret them in the contemporary moment. The construction of the religious is constantly shifting, so too must the analysis.

# Conclusion

*Decolonisation, we know, is an historical process: in other words, it can only be understood, it can only find its significance and become self coherent insofar as we can discern the history-making movement which gives it form and substance... Decolonisation, therefore, implies the urgent need to thoroughly challenge the colonial situation.*

*-Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, 2004:2*

Towards the end of my fieldwork, as Olympics fever was on the rise in London, I had the opportunity to attend a performance that was causing great excitement for both the South Asian arts organisation that was producing it and the dancers who were performing in it. The performance was considered to be incredibly prestigious for it was to occur in Westminster Hall as part of the Arts in Parliament project. This project brought artists from around the UK into the British Houses of Parliament for various events to celebrate the Cultural Olympiad that coincided with the London 2012 Olympics.

In addition to the London-based Kathak, Bharatanatyam and Odissi dancers who were participating in this particular performance, two prominent dancers from India were also being brought in (by the arts organisation) for the event – a Kathak dancer who had recently moved from London to India and was tasked with overseeing the entire group choreography, and a very distinguished Bharatanatyam dancer who would present a solo piece at the end of the show. With much planning taking place via video-conferencing prior to the last-minute arrival of the two dancers from India, this was a performance produced in a diaspora space that was nonetheless intended to

celebrate British national culture. Indeed, one of the questions posed in a questionnaire circulated to the audience on the day of the performance asked if the event had made Parliament appear more accessible to them as members of the public. This, then, was a very British performance of South Asian dance.

After clearing security and asking the armed guards in the compound for directions, I made my way to the Hall where many people were gathering for the performance. Although presented as open to the public in the Arts in Parliament promotional material, the performance was mostly by invitation only. A small stage had been set up to the right and another space had been cleared at the bottom of the grand staircase at the far end of the Hall for the dancers to perform. The performance began with dancers entering from the top of the staircase in dramatic form; as each group made its way down the stairs, another entered at the top to take focus. The Kathak dancers spun in unison, the skirts of their costumes circling them as they turned in rapid succession. The Bharatanatyam and Odissi dancers likewise demonstrated aspects of their forms in costumes that had been improvised – contemporary takes on the *dhotis* (long cloths tied as trousers) and waist coats for the two male Bharatanatyam dancers, as well as for the one female Odissi dancer; form-fitting dresses with wide skirts stitched from silk *saris* for the remaining three female dancers.

While each performer danced movements based on their particular style, a 15-minute piece was created by the entire cast performing in unison such that no one style was definitive of the performance. If anything, the piece was described as Contemporary South Asian dance, even though the movements of the choreography did not deviate immensely from the classical forms being presented. In contrast, the score that had been composed specially for the piece was percussive but did not

feature many aspects of Indian classical music. The repetitive drone sounds in the music created an overall sense of mystery, while the purple lighting scheme, constant flurry of movement, imposing setting and rich costume textiles produced a sense of grandeur and extravagance. This was a performance larger than life, almost carnivalesque, a performance made to match the imperial settings of its location.

After the group piece had concluded, the audience turned to face the stage at the side of the Hall as Priyadarshini Govind, the Bharatanatyam dancer who had flown in from India, entered to perform her solo. This was one of the dancers who had taught at the weeklong workshop I had attended the previous summer discussed in Chapter Three. While hers was a classical piece, it reflected her interpretations of contemporaneity discussed in that chapter. Her stitched Bharatanatyam costume, classical in style, consisted of pieces from different saris so that the colours and patterns of each remained distinct. This was a variation on typical classical costumes, which are produced from the same sari and thus match completely. Moreover, the classical Karnatik music to which she danced sounded more minimalistic in comparison to other Bharatanatyam compositions, further adding to the innovative feel of her performance. However, compared to the group production the preceded her, Govind's performance of contemporaneity was somewhat lost on the audience, with one woman standing next to me telling me she thought this last performance was incongruous with the spectacle of the opening Contemporary South Asian dance due to its highly classical nature.

The Arts in Parliament performance demonstrates the simultaneous production of Indian culture (classical) and British national identity (when celebrated as hybrid, multicultural) that informs this thesis. This performance was produced in a diaspora space constituted by dancers located in both the UK and India, each of whom practice

and produce Indian classical and Contemporary South Asian dance styles to varying degrees. Notably, most of the British based dancers who performed engage in Contemporary South Asian dance as well, the genre of dance that was ultimately used to categorise this extravagant production for its incorporation of dancers from different styles and use of new music.

As mentioned throughout this thesis, the binary distinction that is produced in the British context between classical and contemporary dance is marked by temporal, gendered and cultural categorisation. This is because this distinction aligns with the separation of 'community' and 'professional' contexts that dancers use to differentiate their work. The construction of Indian classical dance as timeless, cultural, feminine and religious – as discussed in each chapter of this thesis in turn – is what strengthens this community/professional divide; as quickly becomes apparent, this distinction aligns the binary opposition of tradition and modernity with that of amateurism and professionalism, East and West, religious custom and performance art.

In this thesis, I have attempted to show how the construction of India as timeless and hyper-cultural – a construction that can be traced back to the colonial encounter and the Indian nationalist project of identity formation – both informs Indian classical dance practices in the present and is reproduced by these performances in turn. The ongoing stereotypes of India that are demonstrated in the ethnographic material I have presented in this thesis – stereotypes of ancient Indian tradition, femininity, and Orientalised spirituality – construct Indian classical dance (and by extension, India itself) as unable to be contemporary in comparison to British/Contemporary South Asian dance (and by extension, multicultural and cosmopolitan UK). As such, these performances are shown to be *as* situated in the

contemporary multicultural politics in the UK as they were in their colonial and nationalist antecedents.

This thesis has thus explored the ways in which notions of 'Indianness' and 'Britishness' are co-produced in the present, buttressed by the colonial relationship between India and Britain of the past. As I have shown, nostalgia for an idealised past plays a productive role in historical narrativisations of Indian classical dance as ancient. More than simply recall the past, such narrativisations serve to produce the present as well. As Hutnyk (2009) has noted in relation to reality television and travel programmes, the ossified manner in which Indian culture and history are presented can be used to demonstrate that "the traditional remains intact, [such that] the contemporary sensitivities of a caring sharing world sighs with relief that the violence of the past can now be safely ignored along with any recognition of current political contexts – for example, structural adjustment and ascendance *hindutva*" (ibid:98, italics in original). There is a striking parallel between the television programming described here and the performances of Indian classical dance analysed in this thesis. By re-creating (or at the very least by alluding to) the ancient past on stage, Indian classical dancers can situate themselves and their artistic practices within an uninterrupted history, as I demonstrated in Chapter Two.

Importantly, this history is sustained even by dancers who advocate the production of Contemporary South Asian dance in an attempt to move away from the cultural and temporal stasis implied by its classical counterpart. Furthermore, for British audiences viewing such performances – like the viewers of the television programme just discussed – observing and indeed consuming this 'cultural' presentation can mean "horror stories of imperialisms now past can be reassuringly

erased from the current guidebooks" (ibid). Indeed, South Asian dance is now brought into the British Houses of Parliament in extravagant splendour.

The appeal to a pristine and ancient past can also enable dancers (in India and abroad) to claim that the dance, as resilient tradition, is above contemporary politics. As this thesis shows, such claims are untenable for the very narrativisations of Indian classical dance history and its performance as cultural, feminised and Hindu, are deeply enmeshed in the politics of Indian nation building. The deep alignment between the mid-twentieth century construction of Bharatanatyam, Kathak and Odissi with Indian nationalist ideals is shown to continue in the present, outside the immediate spatial and temporal context of these politics.

**Summation**

Despite its iconic status as representative of Indian culture, apparent in the numerous references made to dance in India – and in references to India abroad – Indian classical dance resulted from the 'colonial situation' (Balandier 1966). I detailed this situation in the Introduction in order to lay the context for the contemporary production and performance of the dance I later examined through this ethnography; as I hoped to show, the contemporary social processes and relations of power analysed in this thesis have a longstanding history.

Thus, one of the most notable points to arise from the ethnographic material I presented here is the extent to which discourses of Indian cultural identity are co-produced by subjects of both South Asian and non-South Asian origin. Although the South Asian diaspora made possible the performances of Indian classical and Contemporary South Asian dance in the UK that were analysed in this thesis, they are not the sole participants in this project. Indeed, diasporic dancers both inform and are

re-enforced by non-South Asian dancers and audiences in this diaspora space. Given that non-South Asian dancers similarly produce 'India' as the 'ancient homeland' of Indian classical dance, uphold culturalist definitions of aesthetics and traditions, and maintain the religious associations of the dance even when they do not identify with them personally, they also contribute to the production and presentation of Indian classical dance in the ways discussed in this thesis. Indeed, presenting and consuming these constructs as 'fact' in the UK – constructs that are steeped in the political context of India – the diversity of people who stand in differing relation to India discussed here further their hegemonic status.

Chapters Three and Four addressed the similarities and differences between diasporic South Asian and non-South Asian (white) dancers, both of whom are constructed as 'foreign' in India. While the differences between the two were notable – particularly in their construction of Indian classical dance as 'feminine' in varying degrees of detail – the overarching similarity between the two is no less striking. For South Asian dancers, specific traits of womanhood celebrated in the Indian nationalist movement appeared to be most desirable; for dancers of non-South Asian (white) origin, a more generic femininity that countered 'modern' and 'masculine' expectations of women and reminiscent of Orientalist constructions was most appealing. For both however, the desire for the Other – modest and 'shy' or sensual and 'ultimately feminine' – was evident, despite differences in the ways in which this Other was conceived. Thus, the analysis presented here suggests that gendered Indian nationalist and Orientalist constructions continue to appeal in the present, in the dance practices of both South Asian and non-South Asian dancers. The deep entanglement between nationalist and Orientalist discourses remains intact, even as they are recalibrated by the dancers analysed in this thesis.

What emerges then in many dancers' approaches to their art can be regarded as complicated articulations of desire, whether they be nostalgic, emotional, gendered/sexual, or religious/spiritual. Chapter Two brought attention to a desire for the past in the construction of historical narratives that produce the dance as timeless; Chapter Three considered the racialised underpinnings of a desire for the scope of emotional expression said to be enabled by Indian classical dance but not Western ballet or Contemporary forms; as mentioned above, Chapter Four analysed the desire for particular forms of femininity which often overlapped with notions of female sexuality; finally, Chapter Five addressed a desire for the spirituality said to be facilitated by Indian classical dance with its religious/Hindu history. In all of these instances, dancers produce India in ways synonymous with the colonial discourse of the past that viewed it as ancient, emotional, feminised and religious/spiritual.

By analysing the convergences and divergences between diasporic and non-diasporic (white) dancers in this thesis, I also made room for an examination of the interplay between race and culture. If the relationship between Indian classical dance and Indian culture is as paramount as dancers suggest, the racialisation of this relationship is similarly significant. Theorists of race have demonstrated the ongoing production of this construct as well as the ways in which it merges with categories of culture and ethnicity (Banks 1996; Hall 1991a, 1991b). While race was activated in the relation between coloniser and colonised in the past (Fanon 2008, 2004; Stoler 2002; Thomas 1994), it continues to be produced in regard to 'visible' cultures in the current context of multiculturalism (Kapoor 2013; Ahmed 2012; Bannerji 2000; Hage 1998; Baumann 1997).

The relationship between race and culture is complicated, for both are shifting categories. The complications of this relationship are especially evident, for example,

when one considers notions of bodily training as part of embodied culture (Csordas 1999; Mauss 1973). While race is a construct often centred on physical appearance and its connotations, cultural embodiment appears (at first) to be more abstract and based on the acquisition of cultural knowledge. However, the two are intimately connected. For example, as discussed in Chapter Three, when 'foreign' dancers in India (diasporic and non) are celebrated for 'looking Indian' in their dance performance, this celebration simultaneously references racialised and culturalised tropes. Indeed, the 'foreign' dancer can train his or her body to move in ways that are considered culturally specific, but the ways in which racialised aesthetics are also called upon to describe such perceived cultural specificity cannot be ignored. Furthermore, that diasporic and non-diasporic dancers in the UK are differentially perceived regarding their ability to 'authentically' present the dance demonstrates that racialised identity, and not bodily training, is made the primary signifier in this instance.

As I argued in Chapter Three, the racialisation of Indian classical dance as representative of Indian culture continues in the present context that celebrates multiculturalism over antiracism in the UK. Furthermore, it works to support dancers' contentions that they must produce Contemporary South Asian dance in an attempt to overcome the limitations of culturally essentialised definitions of Indian classical dance. However, to produce dance that is considered 'contemporary', dancers overwhelmingly resort to dance technique proven to be 'contemporary', as was discussed in Chapter Two in relation to dancers using Western Contemporary dance techniques in their work. Thus discourses of temporality cannot be untangled from discourses of cultural essentialism, which in turn cannot be separated from discourses of racialisation; the three inform each other.

In progressing from Indian classical to Contemporary South Asian dance, dancers in the UK enact an evolutionary schema that does not question the colonial and nationalist assumptions that informed the inception of their current dance practices. As such, even in performances of Contemporary South Asian dance, the construction of Indian culture as static remains in the very negation of Indian classical dance. Colonial and nationalist discourses continue in the present, and are even woven into the very cosmopolitan desires of British Contemporary South Asian dancers. It is this negation that enables Contemporary South Asian dancers to participate in, as well as help produce, idealised constructs of the British nation as cosmopolitan and multicultural. That these dancers remain tied to the cultural identities of their dance antecedents however – that is to say, that these dancers remain to be Contemporary *South Asian* dancers – reveals this project of inclusion into the mainstream to be incomplete.

With its links to the nation – Indian as well as British – performances of Indian classical dance can also be analysed as a site for the demarcation between national belonging and non-belonging. As discussed throughout this thesis, the production of Indian classical dance required its antecedents to be purged of any social 'impurities', including the sexuality with which hereditary performers were associated. In this project, Indian classical dance became coded as feminine, upper class and religious (Hindu), while its hereditary practitioners were disenfranchised. This reflected the idealised identity of the Indian nation, characterised as chaste, pure, and Hindu, and personified in the figure of *Bharata Mata* or Mother India (see Ramaswamy 2010; Goswami 2004; Geetha 1999; Sangari and Vaid 1989).

However, to define a nation is simultaneously to define those who are excluded from the mantle of the nation. Thus Indian classical dance, with its intimate

ties to the Indian nation, can demonstrate ways in which certain subjects are figured outside the fold of the national belonging. This is most noticeable perhaps in Chapter Five, where I discussed the ways in which Kathak is treated with a sense of alterity that places Islam as foreign to the Indian nation. Articulated in the UK, these findings were the most surprising to me to come out of the ethnographic data that I collected. Furthermore, presented to dancers and audiences outside the immediate context of religious and communal politics in India, such articulations are even more cemented and thus further contribute to the ongoing marginalisation of Muslim culture in India by presenting it as culturally Hindu abroad.

**Replaying the Past in the Present – the Quotidian to the Overt**

In the Introduction to this thesis, I discussed my motivation to study the quotidian practices of dancers rather than the more overt and less frequent examples of the reproduction of an Orientalist script. To focus on the quotidian in an ethnographic study – I maintain – enables a deeper understanding of the ways in which discourses that emerged in the colonial context are sustained in the present, even when they are recalibrated towards contemporary circumstances. However, at the end of my analysis, I find that the two – the quotidian and the more overt – are indeed two points on a single discursive spectrum. The blatantly Orientalist photograph of an Indian classical dancer posing in a costume more readily associated with belly dance (itself a construct shaped by Orientalist fantasy, see Said 2001) is but an extension of the dancer citing Mira Nair's (1996) *Kama Sutra* as inspiring her to dance, which is but an extension of the dancer seeking a particular sensuality and femininity in Indian classical dance. The quotidian makes possible the overt, and grounds it in the everyday.

Striking in these instances, as has been mentioned already, is the replication of the past in the present. Indeed, over the course of my research I found myself in several situations where I experienced this replication in ways that were uncanny. I turn to one more in conclusion, for it demonstrates the coming together of the past and the present, and of the UK and India, that I have sought to trace in this work. I conclude with this example for it illustrates just how stark and visible some of these continuities are and how immediately they can be conjured in the contemporary moment.

The instance occurred at a South Asian Arts Festival annually presented at the Southbank Centre, a celebrated arts venue in Central London that attracts a wide mainstream audience for its various performances and activities year-round. Described as the "Southbank Centre's annual festival of music, performance, literature, debate, fashion and design", the Festival asks participants to "[j]oin us to explore the rich cultural connections between Bangladesh, India, Pakistan Sri Lanka and the UK" (from promotional material). Like Dance India discussed in Chapter Three, this Festival also brings together – constructing and representing – 'indigenous', diasporic, and multicultural subjects in its celebration of South Asian arts. It is a major event for many South Asian artists in the city, and many of the dancers and organisers I encountered in London were involved in the Festival.

A very successful event, the Festival appeared to increase in size and scope every year I attended (2009-2012). This growth was most evident during my final year of attendance, for that year the lobby of the Southbank Centre had been transformed into a real life exhibit of the people, customs and products of India. 'Native' men in Rajasthani turbans and dress played various instruments, while an elderly woman dressed in a cotton sari sat at a spinning wheel across from them

occupying herself with her work. Various Indian handicrafts and products were similarly on display, with some available for sale.

Behind this exhibition was the stage upon which various dancers and musicians would dance in turn (both from the UK and India). Saris were draped across the lobby to further create an 'Indian' feel inside the venue. Many of those in attendance snacked on various Indian treats that were being sold at the 'Festival Village' outside. In this moment, I felt as if I had been transported to Dilli Haat, the open-air market in Delhi where people from across India come to sell regional handicrafts. This market similarly presents cultural 'performers' – from musicians to puppeteers to artisans making their crafts – to the many tourists who come to visit. This is a market in which all of India can be observed (consumed) at once, something that was now being recreated in the lobby of London's Southbank Centre.

However, this was not the only example of reproduction I experienced at the Festival in that moment of cultural perusal. Indeed, walking around the lobby, observing the musicians and artisans – none of whom looked back at those who had come to view them – I was struck by the extent to which this occasion seemed to be reproducing an event with a much longer and deeply colonial history – the World Exhibitions. Indeed, in his study of the 1889 Paris Exhibition, Mitchell (2000:294) notes how "[t]he world exhibitions of the second half of the [nineteenth] century offered the visitor exactly this educational encounter, with natives and their artifacts arranged to provide the direct experience of a colonized object-world". These exhibitions created a paradox whereby the Europeans in attendance wanted to establish the 'objectness' of the Orient that would require their presence to be rendered invisible on the one hand, while simultaneously desiring to experience and thus become a part of this 'object-world' as if it were real on the other (ibid:307). The

World Exhibition, as the very fantasy of Orientalism, thus existed in the blurred space between representation and reality. Indeed it was at such an exhibition that the dancer Ruth St. Denis found inspiration to create her Indian dance, as discussed in the Introduction.

Attending the Festival in London was thus not only to be 'transported to India' in the present, but it was to be transported to colonial constructs of India represented by the World Exhibitions in the past. As Dirks (2000) has noted, such representations as those performed at these exhibitions were inseparable from the colonial project that was simultaneously premised on conquest and the acquisition of knowledge; "[b]rute torture on the body of the colonized was not the same as the public exhibition of a colonized body, but these two moments of colonial power shared in more than they differed" (ibid:5). Reproduced in the present, what did the exhibition of these 'indigenous' bodies, these producers of material goods that could be purchased by the multicultural consumers in attendance, mean in this moment of postcolonialism, transnationalism and multiculturalism? How far has the contemporary context really come from these examples of nineteenth-century colonial representation? Held at the Southbank Centre, the Festival marked a diasporic success in the multicultural context for through it, diasporic subjects could claim themselves to be accepted and desired by – and therefore established in – the British mainstream (represented, for example, by the venue). The exhibition at the Southbank Centre articulated the very history and relations of power that made this successful London Festival possible.

**Final Words**

I suggested in the introduction that the India that is conjured in the performance of Indian classical dance in the present is doubly imagined, by the sometimes

converging, sometimes diverging, but always interconnected relationships between colonial/nationalist and multicultural/diasporic subjects. Tracing this production in the ethnographic data that I collected has led me to take a critical stance. In presenting this analysis, I do not intend to reify once more the very categories that I have sought to contextualise. Thus although I question the relationship between Indian classical and Contemporary South Asian dance, I recognise that the two exist as artistic genres through which dancers – including myself – actively seek to explore and produce new choreographic expressions. I maintain that, through a careful and detailed analysis of the context in which dancers perform, alternatives for both dancer and audience can be discovered. Too often, conversations between dancers regarding the relationship between Indian classical and Contemporary South Asian dance are stalled when questions of artistic interpretation – and not political situatedness – are identified as primary. I have attempted to make the politics that shape and are shaped by such performances central in this thesis.

Although the production of the Indian nation constitutes much of the focus in this work, the ethnography I present here is grounded in the diaspora space made possible in the UK. As such, dancers draw their knowledge and ideas of their dance from both locations, constructing both in turn. Located in communities that are both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ the immediate context of their dance performance, dancers can help shape the ways in which their dance is presented and received, both from within and from without. Considering the politics of their dance practice – both in its mid-twentieth century inception and in its contemporary performance – is a necessary first step towards shifting the debate.

To be innovative and relevant is a driving inspiration for many dancers in the present. Challenging the very constructs that circumscribe their dance practices and

trap them into sustaining colonial constructs regardless of the methods they choose, thereby encouraging dancers and audiences to find alternative narratives, would be the most innovative of all dance projects. Indeed, recognising the complexity of such dance practices and the contexts in which they are performed can reveal larger processes regarding the ways in which previously colonised cultures are produced and presented in the contemporary moment. Such an endeavour also brings to light the methodological necessity for a postcolonial ethnographic approach that traces the ongoing reproduction of colonial discourses and relations in the present. An anthropological study of postcolonial cultural practices such as Indian classical dance must likewise consider the politics of their contemporary performances. This study of Indian classical dance in the diasporic and multicultural context demonstrates that much more is at stake than just dance performance. Indeed the context of its performance is produced well before the dancer ever enters the stage.

## Figures

Figure 1: Odissi Dancer in *Chauk* (square) Position. Photography by Simon Richardson.

Figure 2: Lord Jagannatha, Patron Deity of Odissi Dance. Photography by Lingaraj Pradhan.

Figure 3: Tribhangi (tri-bent pose), Odissi.
Photography by Simon Richardson.

Figure 4: Kathak Dancer in Performance.
Photograph provided courtesy of the dancer.

Figure 5: Bharatanatyam Dancer in Performance.
Photograph courtesy of the dancer.

Figure 6: Photograph of Odissi as Contemporary South Asian Dance
Photography by Simon Richardson.

Figure 7: Akram Khan at the London 2012 Opening Olympics Ceremony.
Photograph Available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-19037588
[Accessed 03/10, 2013]

Figure 8: Promotional Material for Sufi Kathak Performance.
Reads: “Sufi Kathak: Beyond Boundaries”. Available at: http://www.delhilive.com/image/sufi-kathak-200902053594
[Accessed 03/10, 2013]

Figures 9 and 10: Images of Rath Yatra Festival in Trafalgar Square, in which several Indian classical dance performances were staged. Photographs taken by author, June 2012.

Figures 11 and 12: Examples of product branding depicting Indian dancers as iconic of India. Photographs taken by author in two Asian grocery stores in London.

Figure 13: Example of Indian restaurant advertisement featuring Odissi dancer. Photograph taken by author in a Paris Metro station, September 2012.

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