

Nilimma Devi  
Director of Sutradhar  
Institute of Dance and Related Arts

The Communal Embrace: Classical Indian Dance  
in Washington Communities

by Nilimma Devi

Introduction

My examination of Indian dance in the Washington metropolitan area is founded on this insight by Paul Spencer: "Society creates the dance and it is to society that we must turn to understand it." Yes, Indian dance is 'created' by Indian society. Indian dance in America, however, is created by Indian society, and then recreated by an Asian Indian immigrant community that interacts with and adjusts to a larger American society. This three-way relationship between the Asian Indian community, India, and the larger American society is impelled by the social and psychic needs of Asian Indian immigrants. The immigrant is uprooted from his cocoon of what Durkheim called the 'gemeinschaft,' (i.e. the society of intimacy) and resettled in world of the 'gesellschaft,' (i.e. the society of autonomy). In this process, the immigrant experiences a "crisis of epistemology," and attempts to recreate a "known world" in an alien culture. (Raymond Williams 1988:31 as cited by Aparna Roy.) Viewing videos of popular Indian films, observing temple rituals, cooking Indian food, and attending annual festivals and dance performances help immigrants to reaffirm the Asian Indian identity and communal solidarity. Classical dance, with its roots in kinetic, linguistic and cosmological symbolism is especially powerful in its potential to create a world in which the community lives and acts out its identity.

This paper is based on my five years of participant observation of the Indian community in the state of Maryland, as well as the results of formal interviews conducted in that period. I have also called on my life-long training as a classical Indian dancer and my involvement in the sub-cultures of New Delhi, India and Nairobi, Kenya, to assess changes in the content and form of Indian dance in the United States.

The Asian Indian Community

The first Asian Indian community was made up of farm laborers, largely Punjabi Sikhs, recruited by Hawaiian planters in 1865. Although there are no records of the dances



performed at that time, it is reasonable to assume -- since it is traditional within that regional, linguistic group in India -- that there was enough leisure time to permit folk dancing.

Today's Asian Indian community is composed of a second wave of immigrants that arrived starting in 1965. According to the 1990 Census, there are 815,447 Asian Indians living in the United States. Out of this total there are 1,601 immigrants living in the District of Columbia, 28,330 living in Maryland, and 20,494 living in Virginia. These communities, according to ethnohistorian Ronald Takaki, never developed their own colonies and tended to integrate themselves into American society. (1989) In the last four decades, however, they have defined themselves through religious and cultural institutions, such as temples and dance academies. In the U.S. there are 75 temples, out of which 16 are in the greater Washington metropolitan area.

With increased money and time to devote to leisure activities, this community has injected increased vitality into the dance scene. Today, there are 25 cultural institutes that have incorporated dance as an integral part of their curriculum. There are at least 26 dance teachers teaching various classical dance styles, to a student body that collectively numbers at least 500-600 persons. In addition, 68 community associations based on linguistic subcultures in the metropolitan area, frequently feature dance in their community gatherings. Binding these disparate institutions to the community are three television programs, one radio station and seven community weekly newspapers.

#### The social function of dance

One of the most obvious reasons for the continuing vitality of the dance scene is that dance performances bring members of the Asian Indian immigrant community together. Indian dance is particularly efficacious since it is spiritual and religious in content yet secular in context and visually entertaining. Moreover, a dance performance incorporates a multiplicity of social functions. (See Anya Royce 1977) Indeed, dance performances are such powerful celebrations of community that ethnically and nationally separate groups (i.e. non-Indian immigrants) namely -- Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan, Nepalese and Pakistani immigrants -- frequently go to Indian dance performances. Likewise, Indian dancers also transcend ethnic boundaries. For example, a Kuchipudi (a South Indian classical dance form) dancer was asked to perform for the Pakistani Student Association at the University of Maryland on their Independence Day celebration, and did so, despite remarking that she: "felt strange dancing about Hindu mythological themes to a non-Hindu audience."

The community's need for establishing ethnic solidarity is also evident in its unusual openness to all styles of dance from India irrespective of regional and linguistic origin. The regional divisiveness of linguistic and cultural differences may be evident back in India, but here is diminished due by the need to reaffirm communal solidarity. For example, a Bengali (i.e. East Indian) association featured a Bharata Natyam dance of South India along with their own regional cultural activities.



### Affirming ethnic identity

Asian Indian immigrants deal with the psychological anguish of living in an alien culture by maintaining symbolic and emotional links with the past, becoming in many respects "a community of memory" (Robert Bellah 1985:153). The disorientation experienced even by the relatively 'integrated' Asian immigrant groups is well documented. (See Alan Roland 1988, Paramatma Saran 1943). One informant described feeling: "a social and psychic vacuum" even though he was a successful engineer and had lived in the United States for the past ten years.

Even as they celebrate their ethnic identity through dance, Asian Indians keep the expression of their cultural existence internalized (i.e. within the community) and apoliticized (i.e. without political interest groups). The pressure of keeping white collar jobs have encouraged Asian Indians to conform to mainstream American society. The Asian Indian balancing act of conforming to some parts of American society for material rewards on one hand, and maintaining a vital ethnic identity for psychic succor on the other hand, is mediated by the performance and transmission of dance. For example, a well-respected community member V. Balakrishnan, commented that maintaining such practices as: "making my South Indian style coffee, listening to taped music, drawing 'kollam' (i.e. floral designs in front of the house) and seeing dance performances, help to remind me that these things have not left me and I have not left them." Yet another doctor with a full-time private practice found the time to take Kuchipudi dance classes because: "I feel so happy hearing the songs about Shiva and Krishna and dancing their stories."

### Gender and dance

The relationship between Indian classical dance and gender is a complex one, and it should be understood from at least two major vantage points: one, the underrepresentation of male dancers, and two, the male bias in the literary content of the dance.

The earliest known forms of classical theatre dating from the second century B.C. oldest treatise on dramaturgy, the *Natya Shastra*, were originally dominated by male performers. Women were included when they were needed to fill a gender specific role. Classical theatre thus reflected a heavily patriarchal society. From the literary work by ancient economist Kautilya's '*Arthashastra*,' however, it is evident that as early as 4th Century A.D. an exclusive caste was created for women dancers called the '*devadasis*' (i.e. dancer dedicated to God). With the renaissance of the arts in the 1930s and with the legislated abrogation of the caste system, dance has become increasingly the province of women performers. (See Vatsyayan 1977). In recent times women from all castes have entered the dance profession.



Today, in urban India, dance is performed mainly by women while men play adjunct roles as organizers, videographers, and accompanying musicians. Dance is thus seen as a woman's profession. Dismayed by this perception, a famous Bharata Natyam male dancer, Dhanjayan has spoken and written passionately against the current gender stereotype: "This (attitude) is very surprising, since the very concept of Dance is masculine in origin" (1984:23). Public perception aside, in reality men do play a powerful role -- being dominant in the business arena -- as the main patrons of dance performances.

The gender representation of dancers and dance teachers in the Asian Indian community is similarly biased. There are approximately twenty-five women dance teachers in the Greater Washington area and yet only two of them are males. All of the classes are overwhelmingly made up of females. The social pressures from the community and mainstream American society make it difficult to attract boys to dance classes. In my five years of teaching here, it has only been this year that I have had two boys to my general Kuchipudi classes. In my personal experience, my own desire to teach both my daughter and my son failed when my son, the sole boy in the class, felt awkward and stopped dancing at the age of nine. Nevertheless, some men buck the pressures. One man who had been forced by his parents in India to give up dreams of learning to dance recently took up Kuchipudi classes, saying: "My father will not object to dance now, for I have a successful career"

While the dance scene appears dominated by women performers, the literary content of the dance itself is steeped in traditional gender norms. All classical dance forms draw on 17th and 18th century classical literature that is simultaneously romantic, devotional and mystical. These love songs of medieval India invariably paint the image of a bedecked, delicate woman in various attitudes of coy supplication. The heroines or 'nayikas' of these poems are classified into eight categories depending on their relationship to their lover and Lord, such as, "in waiting," "in separation," or "in anticipation." None of these classical characterizations depicts a self-willed or self-assured woman, except where the feminine principle is enshrined as a Goddess. (See Wendy D. O'Flaherty 1980)

The Hindu myths that inspire these mystic songs are intimately connected to the Indian ethnic identity. Scholars such as ethnopsychologist Alan Roland find that: "Integral to the socially contextual ego-ideal for Hindu Indians is a strong mythic orientation...the powerful incorporation of mythic stories helps orient the person throughout life." (1988:253)

The gender bias in the mythic content of dance has mixed implications for the Asian Indian immigrant. Only some members of the community really understand the poetry and music well enough to fully experience the meaning of an emotive dance. Nonetheless, even immigrants who do not understand Sanskrit, or Telugu or Tamil, do understand the basic mythological underpinnings of an emotive or nritya (i.e. expressional) dance as it is explicated through mime and mudras (i.e. gestures). Thus, for first generation Asian Indians Indian classical dance is indeed a powerful conduit of gender roles.



Today women like Chandralekha, Malika Sarabai, and Kumudani Lakhia are breaking new ground in the contemporary classical dance scene. By choreographing dances to contemporary poetry or to feminist reinterpretations of Hindu myths, they are redefining a traditional Indian woman's identity.

#### The role of dance as art

The philosophy of Indian aesthetics and the Indian identity are closely intertwined on many levels. In the *Natya Shastra* Indian dance is explicitly couched in an aesthetic philosophy called 'Rasa.' The theory of 'Rasa' or aesthetic bliss, is in turn deeply connected to the religious and symbolic world view of Hinduism, or as scholar Kapila Vatsyayan said in her book *Classical Indian Dance and Literature and the Arts*: "The aesthetic experience was considered second only to the supreme (spiritual) experience and was thus termed its twin brother (bhramanandasahodara)" (1977:5). Although 'Rasa' is explicated in the *Natya Shastra* as a theoretical ideal, it pervades the larger Hindu cosmology and therefore creates the expectations and suggests the perceptions of both dancers and audiences at a subconscious as well as a conscious level. Thus, a single gesture, a refrain of sung poetry, can potentially condense a myriad of symbolic and mythic expressions into one moment. (See Victor Turner 1972) While not all dancers or all audiences necessarily experience transcendent joy; their psychological attachment to Hindu myths and symbols potentially lets them experience 'Rasa.'

In spite of this kind of cultural preconditioning, aesthetics are not stressed here as they are in India. The overwhelming number of my informants do not go to dance concerts because of the promise of an aesthetic experience; rather they enumerate such motives as wanting to encourage cultural continuity in the community, or fulfill kinship obligations. One middle-aged South Indian scientist living in Virginia noted: "I have to go to this performance all the way in Maryland; I wish I could avoid it, but it is my friend's daughter who is performing." Yet another mentioned that she had only come to a performance because the dancer was her coworker and expected her to attend: "I know where she stands aesthetically, but I give her lot of credit that she can keep up dance with being a scientist and being thousands of miles away from India. She teaches dance to the community and works very hard." Many Asian Indians -- unless they are avid dancegoers -- judge performances not so much on the aesthetics of the dance technique but rather on contextual criteria such as the 'authenticity' (i.e. "Indianness") of the dancer's costume, the location of the auditorium, the availability of Indian snacks during the performance, the 'authenticity' and quality of the dancer's musicians; and the dancer's tutelage under a respected guru. This focus on the visual spectacle of dance led one woman to comment in frustration: "the dancer spent more time changing costumes than dancing on the stage."

Professional dancers living here express frustration with the apparent lack of "artistic stimulation." Indeed this is the *raison de etre* for the transnational existence of a dancer who was born and raised here but who has spent the past seven years travelling back and forth



between India and America in an effort to "learn the true form." Another male Bharat Natyam dancer, who came to the United States from Trinidad at the age of eight, spent thousands of hard earned dollars travelling to India and studying with a renowned guru because: "I wasn't going forward with my teaching here and I wanted to get the knowledge from the original source." In yet another example, a fourteen year-old girl has been sent to India by her mother every year for the past three years to study with a renowned guru. The absence of highly experienced teachers and the importance given to that which is connected to India compels dancers to make brief visits to India when possible.

It is difficult for dancers to replicate a dance tradition that is tied to live music and revitalized by the feedback of dance critics and 'rasikas.' (i.e. aesthetes) For a community that has seven weekly newspapers, three television shows on the weekends and sixty-seven monthly newsletters, the absence of dance critics is felt keenly by some in the community. Although taped music has been the norm for the past two decades, in the past five years some dancers have gone to great lengths to obtain either local musicians or highly trained musicians from India. This summer alone three resident dancers obtained their orchestra from India for a community performance. While some dancers upgrade their dance education by visiting gurus in India, others seek the umbrella of established dancers from India in an effort to increase their own reputations in the community.

#### The new meanings of dance

Driven by the need to affirm their identity, both first generation Asian Indians and their children have attached new meaning to dance. The insistent efforts of parents to send their children to local dance teachers and dance summer camps, and even abroad to India, indicates the growing popularity of dance used as a means of enculturation. Today, there are an estimated 500 to 600 students of classical Indian dance. All of these Asian Indian youths are given immense community encouragement to continue their dance education at least until they make a formal, public debut. Parents go to great lengths arranging their daughter's 'aarangetram:' mailing invitation cards, printing brochures, giving gifts to the teacher and the band of musicians, and buying the appropriate silk costume and jewelry from India. The community reinforces this endeavor by turning out in large numbers for each young performer. This year in the month of August, two aarangetrams fell on the same date and were held at two different auditoriums, and yet each was very well attended.

Many Indian parents send their daughters to dance classes with the intent of transmitting the Indian identity. They also send their daughters with the intent of teaching them how to behave and appear like the archetypical Indian woman: demure, soft and graceful. Asian Indian parental attitudes about feminine deportment can be attributed in part to the fact that Indian society is highly structured and hence "would invest great meaning and fine structure in the body's posture." (Mary Douglas 1982:xxiii) According to one parent: "I want my daughter to go to dance classes so that she will learn to be aware of her culture and begin to walk nicely and look beautiful." Yet another mother of a student complained: "my



daughter is so fat, which boy will want to marry her? A girl must be delicate." Dance is also used by parents to instill "discipline and respect;" a counterbalance to certain American norms for behavior.

Although an impressive number of second generation youth are learning classical dance at their parent's behest, many more of them choose to participate in performing folk dances. This is hardly surprising since folk dances as well as the all-pervasive Bombay film songs and dances are both easy to learn and participative in the true sense of the word. For example, the highly popular Punjabi folk dance called 'bhangra,' has already given rise to a new hybrid genre of Western pop music and 'bhangra' called 'disco bhangra.' Conceived in London and recently introduced in the United States, 'disco bhangra' still manages to incorporate dance movement characteristic of 'bhangra' dance.

A key factor motivating parent's efforts to enculturate their young is the opinion of Indians in India. Anthropologist Suzanne Lessinger at Columbia University, aptly identifies the source of this felt pressure to keep up with truly "Indian" values as: "Indian society's...intense conviction of superiority." (1990:7) The desire to continue to be accepted back "home" by friends, associates and family, drives Asian Indian immigrants to maintain ethnic identity through successive generations.

The current labelling of American born Asian Indians by Indians in India as "ABCDs," or "American-Born Confused Desis," betrays the prejudices that so frustrate individuals like Vasudha Raghunathan, a legal student at the University of California, Berkeley, who commented: "We second generation Indian Americans take a lot of pride in our Indian culture and we also see the advantages of our American culture." (India Currents 1992:M24)

## Conclusion

The new role of Indian dance in delineating ethnic identity and binding together community tells the Asian Indian story. The immigrant's nostalgic yearning for recreating his known cultural world, for maintaining community solidarity, and for passing on his own ethnic identity to his children, has propelled dance into a singularly important role. Whereas in India, classical dance has largely become fare for elite entertainment, here it touches the lives of virtually all community members. The inherent linguistic, caste and class divisions that affect society in India are factors that are diminished within the Indian immigrant community in the United States. In fact, Indian dance performances are now part of a collective effort to form an organic, harmonious community across both old and new social barriers.

In addition to its immediate role within the Asian Indian community, Indian dance is part of a new cross-cultural dialogue with the larger American society. Communication



across this cultural divide tends to be limited; more concerted efforts are needed, if not by first generation Asian Indians, surely by their children -- the inheritors of a truly bicultural heritage. A few dancers are already reaching out to American audiences. Some tend to mystify audiences rather than enlighten them; responding to public stereotypes because they are, as Alexander Alland put it: "affected by those market factors which pervade every other aspect of our daily life." (1977:120) Others like myself are grappling with the challenge of explaining the dance to an uninitiated audience without simplifying it technically or conceptually.

It would be encouraging for the members of the Asian Indian Community to note that this transplanted art form takes its own roots, bears its own fruits and enjoys its own glory without looking askance. To further establish this dance theatre as an independent art form, and heighten its relevance to the audience and dancers, it would be heartening if a new, contemporary poetry, written in the language of the dancer, would arise and nourish the soul of their dance as they retell their favorite myths.

The content labelling of American born Asian Indians by Indians in India as "ABCDs", or "American-Born Confused-Desis", betrays the prejudices that so frustrate individuals like Vasudha Raghunathan, a legal student at the University of California, Berkeley, who commented: "We second generation Indian Americans take a lot of pride in our Indian culture and we also see the advantages of our American culture." (India Currents 1992:M3-4)

## Conclusion

The new role of Indian dance in delineating ethnic identity and binding together community tells the Asian Indian story. The immigrant's nostalgic yearning for retaining his known cultural world, for maintaining community solidarity, and for passing on his own ethnic identity to his children, has propelled dance into a singularly important role. Whereas in India, classical dance has largely become rare for the entertainment, here it touches the lives of virtually all community members. The inherent linguistic, caste and class divisions that affect society in India are factors that are diminished within the Indian immigrant community in the United States. In fact, Indian dance performances are now part of a collective effort to form an organic, harmonious community across both old and new social barriers.

In addition to its immediate role within the Asian Indian community, Indian dance is part of a new cross-cultural dialogue with the larger American society. Communication



### Bibliography

Alexander, Alland

1977 The Artistic Animal Doubleday Anchor Books, New York.

Bellah, N. Robert

1985 Habits of the Heart: individualism and commitment in American life Berkeley, University of California Press.

Daumal, Rene

1982 Rasa New Direction Books, New York.

Dhanjayan, V. P.

1984 A Dancer on Dance Bharata Kalanjali, Madras.

Ghosh, M. M.

1952 The Natyashastra and Bharatamuni Calcutta, India.

Hanna, Judith

1989 "Classical Indian Dance and Women's Status" based on Dance, Sex and Gender: Signs of Identity, Dominance, Defiance and Desire University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

O'Flaherty, Wendy Doniger Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Puri, Rajika

1986 "Innovations in Dance" The India Magazine Vol. 6, No. 6 New Delhi.

Raghunathan, Vasudha

1992 "Who is Confused?" India Currents July, Vol. 6 No. 4, San Jose, California.



Rayaprol, Aparna

1992 Gender Dynamics in Cultural Practices Among South Indian Immigrants Unpublished, Paper at Association for Asian Studies, Department of Sociology at the University of Pittsburgh.

Roland, Alan

1988 In Search of Self in India and Japan Princeton University Press, New Jersey.

Royce, Anya Peterson

1977 The Anthropology of Dance Indiana University Press, Indiana.

Spencer, Paul

1985 Society and the Dance

Takaki, Ronald

1989 Strangers From a Different Shore Penguin Books, New York.

Turner, Victor

1989 "Symbols in African Rituals" Magic, Witchcraft and Religion 2nd Edition, pp. 59-63, Mayfield Publishing Company, California.

Vatsyayan, Kapila

1968 Classical Indian Dance in Literature and the Arts Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi.