

South Asian dance in Britain
By Chris Bannerman

Exotic display?

“South Asian dance” as a designation evolved largely in the West in the 1980s, as an alternative to the term “Indian dance”, in order to embrace practitioners who may have had Pakistani or Bangladeshi roots. The term “Indian dance” is still used almost interchangeably, in part due to the origins of many of the forms in what is now present – day India, and in part due to the India dominance of dance activity in the subcontinent today. However, the term “South Asian Dance” also indicates a broader relationship to the subcontinent and has gained currency amongst the international diasporic community, as it is felt that it privileges progression and development.

The introduction of South Asian dance in Britain in recent times can be traced to the legendary performances of Uday Shankar and Ram Gopal in the 1960s, which attracted large audiences, but which were frequently seen as exotic displays from a far-away land. However, the 1970s saw the arrival in the UK of numerous families from the Indian subcontinent and with them came the dance practice of their homelands, largely at that point, the dance forms, Kathak and Bharata Natyam.

Kathak, a North Indian form stemming from a tradition of storytelling, developed through stylistic schools, or gharanas, led by families of dancers. Bharata Natyam, previously known as Dasi Attam or Sadir, developed in South Indian, and a relationship to sculpture is demonstrated through the karanas or poses, which are evident in both art forms.

Dance in the subcontinent

Kathak and Bharata Natyam dance forms were widely practiced in the subcontinent and had developed over centuries in what is now present – day India. In fact a myriad of forms had evolved, usually associated to a specific region, but common connecting threads were the focus on themes and narratives from religious mythology, the use of hand gestures to convey meanings and an articulated use of facial expression. Much of this can be related to principles set out in the natya shastra, almost certainly the world’s oldest text on stagecraft.

These forms had, however, undergone major change in the subcontinent, through individual contributions and a variety of interventions, including the Moghul period and the European, principally British, colonial period. Some results of the Moghul patronage of Kathak can be seen in the virtuosic quality of the form today and the presence of secular narratives alongside themes from Hindu mythology.

A decline in dance practice and an association with prostitution led to a colonial law which ended the institution of temple dancing. This impacted on the training and practice of older styles of South Asian Dance and a process of what is known as “recovery” was influential in the development of Bharata Natyam in the 20th century, Rukmini Devi was instrumental in the process and she did much to establish the current status of Bharata Natyam, and arguably dance in general, in India today.

This has stimulated debate about the authenticity of the current manifestations of these traditional forms, but there is no doubt that dance has had a long heritage in the subcontinent; in fact it is featured in the Hindu story of creation, in which the god Shiva, or Shiva Nataraja, dances the cosmos.

Since Indian independence in 1947, there has been an upsurge of interest in dance. This has taken place within a changing social context of rapid increases in global travel and communications, economic development, strengthening perceptions of national identity and lately, emerging political forces centered around religion, all which impacts, albeit at times indirectly, on South Asian dance.

Some developments in the dance forms mirror changes that have taken place in diasporic communities, with traditional solo practice giving way to group works and secular themes. Chandralekha, a Chennai (Madras) based choreographer is a key exponent of this trend and has created works that challenge traditional perceptions and which include references to issues of human rights and feminism.

Establishing a foothold

By the 1970s, many South Asian families had migrated to Britain, sometimes via African countries, and this led to a number of performances by locally based, or visiting artists. These were usually privately sponsored and typically held in either private homes or in community halls. From 1972 the Bhavan Institute provided both a venue and a focus for arts and dance activities, as a way of retaining links with the homeland. However, for the few students who wished to study dance in depth, one or more trips to India were considered essential, and the identities of the dance forms, and the dancers were inextricably linked to their country of origin.

Establishing a base for South Asian forms in the UK was an uphill task, as there was still much ignorance about these dance forms, and as theatre dance in Britain was dominated by large scale ballet companies and a newly emergent contemporary dance sector. Nonetheless, throughout this period a number of artists arts policy makers continued to champion the development of firm foundations for these forms. The establishment of Akademi, known then as the Academy of Indian Dance, by the Mohinattam dancer Tara Rajkumar in 1979, was a seminal event which contributed significantly to a firmer future for South Asian dance. The dance form Mohinattam, which originates from Kerala, has a slow and compelling quality and has risen in popularity and acceptability in recent decades after a period in which it almost became extinct.

One of the key milestones of the 1970s was a report written by Naseem Khan, *The arts that Britain ignores* (1976), which made the case for the development of strategic policies aimed at establishing a better environment and targeted funding for minority arts such as South Asian dance. The effects of this report were to be seen throughout the 1980s as it gave direction to individuals and forced agencies to reconsider their policies.

Growth and change

During the 1980s, a number of key agencies and individuals worked tirelessly to establish a South Asian dance ecology which included work from both a heritage perspective and work which reflected a contemporary UK Asian identity. Agencies such as AdiTi now disbanded, Akademi, Bhavan Institute and Sampad did, and continue to do, much to promote and develop South Asian dance. Sampad's strong presence in Birmingham and its cross arts role were especially significant for developments outside of London. By the end of the 1980s they have been joined by Kadam and more recently Kala Sangam. Their work has included various modes of engagement – theatre performance as well as community, education and recreational forms of dance practice.

Many of these embraced participants from a variety of ethnic backgrounds and this is one factor that encouraged the view of an emerging, specifically British identity for Asian Dance practice.

This did not mean that links with the subcontinent were severed and in fact, the establishment of the Nehru Centre in 1992 was designed to foster dialogue between India and Britain. However, there was a growing sense that this dialogue was a mutual exchange and that South Asian dance in the UK had something offer to India.

It is noticeable that the divide between the traditional versus contemporary expression of the forms was seen critical during the '70s and '80s and that more recent debate has sought to embrace a wide range of activity. This situation was exacerbated by policies of the Arts Council of Great Britain (now devolved into the Arts Council of England, Wales and Scotland) which during the 1980s prioritized innovation in its funding schemes for developing, project funded organizations.

This supported the emergence of choreographers such as Shobana Jeyasingh, whose work, although developed from Bharata Natyam base, was contemporary in its concerns and form. Both internal and external pressure lead to a reconsideration of this policy, but a momentum favouring innovation had been established, also enhanced by changing demographic factors which encouraged the continuing evolution of a British-Asian identity.

This emerging identity encouraged experimentation with contemporary music and enabled collaborations between South Asian choreographers and composers from western music traditions. Other links were established through collaborations such as Pratap Pawar's Triveni Dance Company, co-founded with Priya Pawar, who experimented with combining forms such as Flamenco with Kathak based work.

Confidence and celebration

The formation of new identities has become an increasing trend, and a notable strand of this has been the work of artists such as Akram Khan and Mavin Khoo, who are trained to a high standard in both classical South Asian forms, Kathak and Bharata Natyam respectively, and western forms such as contemporary dance and ballet. The heritage versus contemporary divide has become sufficiently permeable that they each perform traditional concerts as well as creating contemporary dance works.

The British context for South Asian work was further emphasized in the establishment of companies comprising only performers trained in the UK, such as Pushpalata Dance Company, under the direction of the Kathak and Odissi practitioner Priya Pawar.

There is also a small but growing number of artists who are not of South Asian origin, who either specialise in South Asian forms or incorporate it into their dance practice. Additionally, the recent trend in contemporary dance to draw on movement from martial arts has its parallel in South Asian dance and the Keralan form Kalari is particularly evident in some current works.

Seminal events such as Coming of Age, presented by Akademi at the South Bank Centre in August 2001, have furthered this trend to diversity by including traditional and popular manifestations of South Asian dance such as folk forms, 'filmi' dance, inspired by the Bollywood film industry, and dance from a growing club and popular dance sector. However, it was significant that the event also included work by senior artists who had contributed to

the earlier phases of the establishment of South Asian dance. Artists such as Pushkala Gopal, Pratap Pawar, Chirita Sundaram, Unnikrishnan and Sujata Banerjee performed alongside community participants in a celebration of the diversity and vitality of this growing field.

This mirrors the arrival of Bollywood musicals and an Asian presence in popular music and dance so strong that it is now impossible to imagine Britain without this rich vein of creative energy.

The state of the art – the present and the future

Perhaps as a result of this raised profile for South Asian arts in general, and dance specifically, there is clear growth in the number of students in schools and community centres and there are syllabi for both Bharata Naryam and Kathak as part of the ISTD (Imperial Society of Teachers Dancing) system of examinations. In addition, South Asian dance has a presence in educational provision from dance in schools to Higher Education in the form of undergraduate programmes as well as major research initiatives.

Another recent trend has been the establishment of international exchanges involving diasporic communities from, for example, South Africa, USA and the UK. These developments are establishing a globalised arena for South Asian dance activities and it is not entirely fanciful to envisage the day when there will be an international presence for these forms, comparable to that enjoyed by ballet. This may lead to a reconsideration of our terminology as the link to the geography of South Asian or India becomes more tenuous.

There have also been a number of key conferences which have served to develop both the artistic and intellectual underpinning for current South Asian dance, as well as effective networks for promoting it. In addition, another member of publications focused on South Asian dance have made their mark; ExTRADITION, initiated by AdiTi but called Pulse and under the umbrella of Kadam, is the latest of these.

Of course there are barriers to the continued development of South Asian dance in Britain. One of these is the lack of a school for professional training and, as a result of this, the lack of a clear pathway of professional opportunity. This will continue to be an inhibiting factor until proper provision, mirroring that available for ballet and contemporary dance, is established.

Another difficulty arises from a problem common to all of dance, but which is more acute for South Asian dance: the ephemerality of dance. This leaves the field with a paucity of history, no real means of measuring the distance which has been travelled and a lack of a record to demonstrate its importance and vitality.

Hopefully, this archive will address that concern and add significantly to the development of South Asian dance.