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**Does the introduction of the ISTD South Asian Dance Bharata Natyam
Examinations spell the death of the traditional Arangetram in the UK?**

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Introduction

“*Gajavadhanaa beduve gowri thanayatrijaga vanditane sujanara porevane...*” (Anon, 2001) the customary prayer to Lord Ganesha, remover of obstacles, begins as the red curtain rises. Enter, a young teenage girl dressed from head to toe in the finest kancheepuram silk sari, orange and white plastic flowers in her hair, adorned with temple jewellery, bells on her ankles, *alta* staining her finger tips and toes, face made-up to enhance her big, almond eyes and red lips. With flowers in her hands she makes her way to stage left and drops flowers at the feet of the icon of Nataraja which itself is covered in a garland of flowers and has lamps lit besides it. The dancer then walks to stage right, palms together at chest level and performs the obligatory *namashkaram* (greeting) to the musicians and her Guru. Her debut dance recital – her *arangetram* has begun.

Google the words *arangetram* and its plural *arangetrams* and one gets 34,400 and 10,400 results respectively. On the internet one can find websites announcing up-coming *arangetrams*, showing pictures and clips of *arangetrams* already performed, historical accounts, debates and more interestingly “How to...” websites telling you how to run an *arangetram* from start to finish. The *arangetram* phenomenon has taken the world by storm. It is an industry in its own right with Bharata Natyam dancers all over the world constantly preparing for or performing their *arangetrams*.

This essay looks at the history of the *arangetram*, looking briefly at the first known mention of it, and tracing it through the times of the hereditary dancers – the devadasis – through to the time of Rukmini Devi, and finally to the modern day setting. In recent years the

arangetram has received much attention and the notion that it is an outdated tradition has been bandied around. With the introduction of examination systems like the ISTD, the validity and relevance of *arangetrams* has been questioned. Is it time for the *arangetram* to be banished to the history books, or is it a strong enough tradition to withstand the changes in modern day life and still have some relevance in this globalised, transnational world that we live in.

History of the Arangetram

The classical dance form Bharata Natyam has its roots in *sadir* or *dasi attam* performed by hereditary practitioners known as the *devadasis* in temples and royal courts until the anti-nautch campaign in the late nineteenth century managed to abolish such practices. Native to South India and in particular to the Tamil Nadu region, Bharata Natyam is taught and performed all over the world today (Pillai, 2002).

The dance went through a huge transformation in the early nineteenth century going from *nautch* to Bharata Natyam, from an unacceptable activity to a national artform (Allen 1997). The name, the hereditary system that determines how dancers and teachers were recruited, its status in the Indian and global arena, the reasons for performing – have all evolved. As Coorlawala (2005) suggests, *sadir* was renamed as Bharata Natyam to disassociate it from the stigma attached to its earlier names. Also, as Gaston, (1996) points out, the hereditary system that determined how the *devadasis*, were recruited is no longer applicable. Today, anyone can study, perform and teach Bharata Natyam as long as they have the means to.

The *devadasis* were dancers from the *isai vellala* community a, “distinctive group of hereditary performing artists” (Gaston, 1996, 15). The *devadasis* role in society was an

important and specific one with very definite rituals that they had to go through to be accepted. Only after the six ceremonies, namely marriage (*kalyanam*), dedication (*muttirai*), first dance lesson, presentation of ankle bells (*gejjaipuja*), debut dance recital after completion of training (*arangetram*) and finally the selection of a patron, could the *devadasi* then take part in temple rituals. The *arangetram*, or debut performance, would have implications on the *devadasi*'s secular role as a courtesan. It was only after the *arangetram*, when it was publicly acknowledged that she was ready, that the *devadasi*'s family would choose a patron for her (Gaston 1996).

The word *arangetram* is a Tamil language one and means the '*etram*' or ascending of the '*arangu*' or performance stage by a dancer for her debut performance on completion of her training (Bharadvaj, 2001).

Gaston describes the *arangetram* as:

the formal presentation of the first full dance performance. It is regarded as the culmination of the training phase for a Bharata Natyam dancer, and a landmark in her/his dance career. The term *arangetram* is widely used for any debut recital.
Gaston, 1996, 224

A Dictionary of Bharata Natya defines *arangetram* as:

the maiden performance when for the first time, bells are tied to the feet. Usually takes place on an auspicious day in the presence of critics, artistes and well-wishers, after the dancer has acquired a sizeable repertoire of dance items. After the customary obeisance to God, guru and audience, the performance takes place and the guru is honoured with *guru dakshina*.
Krishna Rao, 1980, 8

'The Story of the Arangetram' or the *Arangerrukatai* is one of the earliest mentions of this type of performance, told in the third-century Tamil classic *Silappadikaram*. The poem vividly describes the graduation of the young dancer Madhavi who after seven years of

full-time training is graduating at the age of twelve and performing in front of the king (Gorringe, 2005; Bharadvaj, 2001).

The ritual of the *arangetram* was so entwined into the lives of the *devadasis* that until the 1940s, all the teachers and most of the dancers involved in *arangetrams* were from the *isai vellala* community. As a result of the passing of the Devadasi Bill in 1947, the numbers of *isai vellala* women who learnt dance dropped sharply. The Devadasi Bill banned dancing as part of a temple ritual in the Madras State. In the 60s only very few *isai vellala* dancers had *arangetrams* and it was only in the 1970s that the numbers began to increase as there was renewed interest in teaching girls from this community dance. By the 1980s, dance teachers and *nattuvanars* from the *isai vellala* community began to conduct their own daughters' *arangetrams* and began to see them as educational, universal accomplishments (Gaston, 1996).

The change in the 1940s of more dancers from non-hereditary families beginning to perform debut performances came as a result of the dance revival that began in the 1930s. However, they refused to call them *arangetrams* as they did not want to be associated with the *devadasis* and their traditions and rituals – and of course the stigma that went with it. Rukmini Devi, notably a South Indian brahmin woman – from an upper class and caste – was an exception and acknowledged that her debut performance, dedicated to god, was indeed an *arangetram* (Srinivasan, 1984 in Gaston, 1996). This decision probably helped the concept and the term *arangetram* gain some acceptance, but it was only in the 1950s and 60s that *arangetrams* became a feature found so readily in modern day Bharata Natyam (Gaston, 1996).

People like Devi and E. Krishna Iyer wanted to give the dance a respectability that they felt could only be brought about by taking the dance away from the temple to a secular stage. However, encouraged by dancers and program presenters, they realised the need to introduce a spiritual aspect to the new stage setting. Devi thus began to work at creating a temple atmosphere on the new proscenium. Although there is no definite evidence to show who started the trend of placing a statue of Nataraja on the stage, Devi was probably one of the first dancers to do so. Even today, Nataraja is considered the symbol patron deity of dance and can still be found on the corner of stages of Bharata Natyam dance recitals all over the world (Allen, 1997).

In fact, it was probably Devi's institution Kalakshetra that helped popularise *arangetrams* and make them the world-wide industry that they are today. When Devi was alive, she decided whether a dancer was ready or not for an *arangetram*. She did not approve of girls as young as fifteen or sixteen having an *arangetram*, but preferred them to wait until they were eighteen and above.

As a student from Kalakshetra in the 60s and 70s recalls:

I certainly was ready for an *arangetram* and entitled to a diploma but it didn't work that way with Rukmini Devi. If she thought you were mature enough then you gave your *arangetram* and got your diploma. Now it is more unionised (i.e. more regularised) and after four years you get it but in those days it depended on her stamp of approval.

Gaston, 1996, 228

Arangetrams in the Modern Setting

By the 1980s and 90s, Bharata Natyam was being seen as a viable profession and could be found world-wide in places as far apart as Japan and Argentina (O'Shea, 2003). This increase in dance teachers around the world meant there was a rise in number of dance students, and so naturally a rise in the number of *arangetrams* performed. Originally

restricted to the hereditary dancer, this once important validation ceremony was now open to all and not confined to the one community. In fact, it is probably the first *devadasi* ritual to be absorbed by modern Bharata Natyam – and has become so important that dance styles like Odissi and Kuchipudi have adopted it. The only criteria now is whether or not you can afford an *arangetram* – background and heritage have become irrelevant (Gaston, 1996).

For many diasporic South Asian communities, Bharata Natyam provides a symbol representing their culture. The need for ‘cultural reproduction’ encourages young South Asian diasporans to take up Bharata Natyam and show their dedication to the dance form whilst at the same time cementing their association with their communities and reiterating their belonging to particular diasporic social groups by having debut dance recitals (O’Shea, 2001). Needless to say *arangetrams* play a big role in this cultural reproduction. *Arangetrams* are well-attended with friends, family and other acquaintances being invited free of charge to them. This, therefore, encourages the bringing together of a South Asian diasporic community who away from their ‘homeland’ find cultural continuity through the debut performance (Sindamani in Bakht 1997, 8; in O’Shea 2001, 187).

Even though *arangetrams* are performed in cities and towns around the world, Chennai (formerly known as Madras) continues to be seen as the origin point of Bharata Natyam. Dancers will travel to Chennai for training before *arangetrams* or other performances, often immersing themselves wholly into dance for intense periods of time. Their parents look at this as a time for their daughters to also immerse completely into the Indian culture (O’Shea, 2001).

Interestingly, *arangetrams* are now being adapted to suit the religion, social and even political contexts that one finds themselves in. Religious identity plays a big part in the *arangetrams*.

As discussed earlier the presence of an icon of Nataraja on stage was introduced during Rukmini Devi's time and although it is not universal, it is an extremely common feature today at dance recitals. This is even more true in the case of *arangetrams*. Dancers and their teachers often believe that having Nataraja's statue on stage will add a spiritual aspect to the dance. Others, see it as purely there for aesthetic and decorative purposes. Upon entering the stage the dancer first drops flowers at the feet of the Nataraja image, before crossing the stage towards her teacher to greet her in the customary manner (Gaston, 1996).

David (2005) describes an *arangetram* brochure for two sisters in USA. A full-colour glossy affair, the brochure pages each had a temple background on them with the sisters posing as deities on them. Through these images in the brochure, the dancers and their family, not only portrayed the Indian origins of the dance, but also brought to the forefront the religious and spiritual aspects of the dance.

On another occasion David (2005) witnessed a performance in Croydon in the UK, of a young Tamil Roman Catholic girl. Prior to the performance two prayer ceremonies were conducted – the first one by the Tamil Hindu priest and the second by the Catholic Tamil priest. On stage, not only was there an icon of Nataraja, but a framed image of Jesus Christ. When the dancer came on stage she did her traditional bowing to Nataraja – dedicating the stage and performance to him, and then prostrated a second time, crossing herself as demanded by the Catholic religion. Within the *margam* that she performed was

a specially choreographed Jesus *stuti*. Gaston (1996) describes how a dance teacher talks of her Christian student having both the statues of Nataraja and Jesus on the stage, and of her having to compose a varnam for the dancer on Jesus.

Similar to the religious influences, political contexts also affect the dance. O'Shea (2006) describes an *arangetram* that was held in Jaffna in Sri Lanka, a city that has been under military occupation for many decades now. Through the arts, Tamil revolutionaries have cultivated a Tamil identity – and the use of Bharata Natyam is a key to this. Militant, separatist dance pieces have been choreographed using Bharata Natyam movement vocabulary to show the oppression of the Tamil minority by the Sinhalese and Sri Lankan military. She suggests that Bharata Natyam in Sri Lanka not only reflects social, political, cultural and economic issues, but is also a means to negotiate through them. Dancer-choreographers, by using Bharata Natyam to create work that is politically situated, are in their own way answering back to the militants in Sri Lanka. The dancer-choreographer Harikrishnan talks of an *arangetram* in Canada where he was chief guest and where the dancer came on holding a plastic toy gun and performing a dance which portrayed the fight of the Tamil Tigers (personal correspondence, 2006).

Arangetrams – An Outdated Tradition?

In the 1980s the recreation of classical dance began to be questioned by dancers many of whom had believed in the myth of the dance's antiquity, had gone through the *arangetrams* and worn the customary costumes and jewellery. However, these same dancers were now being educated in higher education institutions which were encouraging critical thinking and historical research. At the same time, feminism was beginning to take off in India. These dancers began to realise that their dance – Bharata Natyam – was not an ancient artform, but a “contemporary interpretation” of the dance performed by the

devadasis. The notion of “antiquity as legitimacy” was being questioned (Erdman, 1996, 297).

Today what is seen as traditional Bharata Natyam (and often referred to as a temple dance) does not have the ritual functions that were found when the dance was still in the temples (Gaston, 1996). Whereas in the time of the *devadasis* the *arangetram* was publicly acknowledging her as an accomplished and professional dancer, today it is a means of showing how much the dancer has learnt – and seen as the finishing block rather than the start of a dance career (O’Shea, 2001). Often the young dancer will stop dancing after her *arangetram* and go to university and pursue a more lucrative career and become a doctor, dentist, accountant or lawyer (David, 2005).

Gaston (1996) suggests that an *arangetram* has become a social accomplishment and huge amounts of money are spent to ensure that the first public recital is a success. The financial aspect is probably where the concept of the *arangetram* receives most disapproval. By having such lavish occasions, does the practice of having an *arangetram* – at huge expense - discriminate against those who can’t afford to spend so much on one?

David (2005) discusses the exorbitant cost of an *arangetram* for Tamil dance students in London. The dancer’s family will hire a hall or theatre, organise refreshments for hundreds of guests, ensure that the dancer has enough silk costumes to change into during the performance, have the right dance jewellery, commission full colour brochures and glossy invites and all for the one night. These are the more tangible expenses. What is often not acknowledged is the 'hidden' costs which include fees paid for additional training, payments to musicians, the dance teacher and the priest who performs the prayers, as well as the purchase of gifts for all those involved. Gaston (1996) suggests that

arangetrams have become so commercialised that they can cost just as much as a wedding whilst David (2005) cites the example of an *arangetram* in 2004 costing £27,000 and the parents having to re-mortgage their house to pay for the performance. Grau (2002) recalls dancer Anita Ratnam making a comment at a conference when a relative asked her daughter if she wanted a car or an *arangetram*!

A student from Mumbai said that the minimum cost of an *arangetram* in India would be around 87,000 Indian Rupees or £1000. For many dancers' families this is not possible and so some dancers pool together and do *arangetrams* in threes or fours – thus ensuring that the practice is not restricted to the financially well-off. The 'showiness' of the event will range from small and simple where guests are given a packet of sweets or snacks to a full-blown dinner party after the show. There are set venues for the rich, and less expensive venues for those who can't afford the dear ones. Invites, brochures, even the choice of the chief guest all portray the importance and 'richness' of the *arangetram* (personal correspondence, 2006).

A teacher's success rate is often measured by how many *arangetrams* he/she conducts and both teacher and student have an understanding that finishing one full set of dances (known as a *margam*) and getting the student ready for an *arangetram* is extremely vital. For the teacher, the rewards are financial and for the student social, cultural and even sometimes political as discussed before. Whereas in the past the *arangetram* was an occasion where the teacher was presenting their accomplished students to a knowledgeable audience, today it is more about how much the family can afford and who they know. It is becoming less and less about how well the dancer dances and how extensive her knowledge may be (Gaston, 1996).

Gorringe (2005), a Bharata Natyam dancer herself questions the relevance of the *arangetram* as its raison d'être has changed so much from the days of the *devadasis*. No longer a dedication ritual and the beginning of a dance career, no longer linked to the livelihood or patronage of a *devadasi*, has the *arangetram* become redundant?

Similar to a *devadasi's arangetram*, today's Bharata Natyam dancer's *arangetram* does mark the graduation from being trained to being able to publicly perform. So the *arangetram* is a form of examination and some teachers in Chennai will not accept students unless they have completed their *arangetram*. It thus works as a benchmark in that context. At the same time, the *arangetram* is the public acknowledgement of the hardwork and dedication put in by both dancer and teacher. The dancer is given a performance platform in front of a fairly sympathetic audience – thus boosting her confidence as a performer (Gorringe, 2005).

Nagarajah (1999) argues that young children learning Bharata Natyam in the UK can not comprehend the meaning of the repertoire that they perform in *arangetrams*. They tend to rely on their teachers' interpretations possibly affecting their development as dancers. She goes on to say that there is no spirituality left in an *arangetram*.

Chandratheva (1999) argues that the principle behind having *arangetrams* is a good one with students being able to show what they have learnt from their teachers over many years of training. It is seen as a milestone that one works towards. She goes on to say that children learning dance in the UK have many hurdles such as being in an "alien culture" and not being in a position to learn dance full time, having conflicting demands on their time.

This, Gorrige (2005) remarks, leads to another flaw in the *arangetram* – especially in the diaspora. *Arangetrams* are often seen as the end of training for the dancer – and so they consider themselves to be ‘professional’. They set up classes without having the skills and discipline to ensure that the standards of the danceform are maintained. Flaws in footwork and bodyline are not corrected and so lead to bad practice. Nagarajah (1999) agrees and questions too the authority of the *arangetram* as a qualification for a young dancer – as the audience judging the performance is made up of a variety of people – some well-versed in dance and others not. The *arangetram* is not a teaching qualification and neither is it evidence of the dancer being able to choreograph dance pieces and yet many dancers who finish their *arangetrams* start calling themselves choreographers.

As a “commercial commodity” it has already been mentioned that vast sums of money are paid towards *arangetrams*, thus showing the economic wealth of the dancer’s family and providing “a great opportunity for conspicuous consumption. If one wants to flaunt their success, an *arangetram* is an ideal opportunity. However, at the same time, the *arangetram* has also become a “cultural commodity” Gorrige (2005).

In terms of a cultural commodity – one must also look at the fact that the *arangetram* is seen as an opportunity to reinforce culture – especially in the diaspora. O’Shea (2001) discusses Arjun Appadurai’s notion that the diaspora will seek out cultural symbols through very specific, national practices which thus fixes ‘home’ as unchanging and culturally authentic. The domestication and revival of the dance in the early twentieth century all played a part in making the dance acceptable to what eventually became the South Asian dance diaspora. At the same time as welcoming the dancers accomplishment in the dance form itself, the diasporic community also acknowledge her knowledge of ancient Hindu

myths and legends based on the Ramayana and Mahabharata as she performs dance pieces telling stories from these epics (Gorringe 2005).

This, whole concept of linking an 'artform' such as Bharata Natyam to a specific culture or community – in this case the South Asian communities – is what Ramphal (2005, 253) questions. She suggests that in Rukmini Devi's time there was a division between the devadasi community and the middle and upper class communities by associating Bharata Natyam with the 'good families' and anything that came before – with the devadasis – therefore forming a hierarchy. Similarly, today if Bharata Natyam becomes only about reaffirming identity, be that cultural or national, does it do so to the exclusion of others? She goes on to say that although she does not want to "deny the specificity of any dance form – cultural or otherwise" she feels that by having this particular set-up one creates "outsiders and insiders – those who belong to the culture of dance and those who do not". Gorringe (2005) agrees and says that "art should not only represent, but should also transcend and challenge a culture". She suggests that by defining Indianess through *arangetrams*, is doing so with a very narrow outlook on the artform and to the exclusion of all the other dance traditions in India. She suggests that Bharata Natyam should establish its identity without the trappings of cultural identities that are signified in 'cultural commodities' like the *arangetram*.

The ISTD Examinations

In 2003, the exams for South Asian dance available in the UK included those at the Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan – probably the first institution to conduct exams for Bharata Natyam in the UK; the ISTD exams – the most recent addition for exams in Bharata Natyam in the UK; and others including the Oriental Fine Arts Academy (OFAAL) exams and the Sangit Preparatory exams (Gorringe 2003).

Rukmini Devi's motivation to give Bharata Natyam international status was achieved through classicising it. She did this by "giving the notion of dance classicism an Indian identity, through searching in textual tradition on the performing arts for indigenous aesthetic concepts which could be regarded as the foundation for an Indian dance classicism" Lopez y Royo (2004). At Kalakshetra the curriculum was not just based on in-body practices but also on text-based methods which included studying aesthetic theory from Sanskrit texts such as Nandikeshwara's Abhinaya Darpana and the study of musical accompaniments to dance. Whereas in the past male teachers "controlled access to the repertory, monitored the art and established continuity", the introduction of this holistic curriculum meant that the material became accessible to all. This institutionalising of dance education encouraged dancers to become fully versed in the theory and music of dance and thus enabled them to implement change. By using Sanskrit (a root language for many dialects and dance languages) and English as the means to communicate, this local dance flourished into a global dance with students from all over the world accessing it. And, "eventually this curriculum would become the model for academic certifications in Bharata Natyam" (Coorlawala, 2005, 180).

The syllabus from Kalakshetra "was most suited for the kind of institutional adaptation" required by the ISTD syllabus for Bharata Natyam to ensure that criteria equivalent to levels of accomplishment expected in other British forms similarly examined was fulfilled. (Coorlawala, 2005, 189 – notes).

With the introduction of the South Asian Faculty at the ISTD, there was increased interest in the training standards in South Asian Dance in the UK. For many years now, the

institutions teaching South Asian Dance have increasingly tried to motivate students and give them a means of assessing their achievement (Gorringe 2003).

The South Asian Faculty at the ISTD was set up in 1999 following a research project and proposal by the organisation Akademi, South Asian Dance in the UK. The aim was to examine students in two of the most popular classical South Asian dance genres in the UK – namely Bharata Natyam and Kathak. In 2000, examinations became available to the dance community. These examinations consist of six grades ranging for students with only one or two years dance experience giving exams at Grade 1 level and going up to the accomplished, experienced dancers giving exams at Grade 6 level. Age is not a factor as merit is given on the level of maturity and dance accomplishment. The syllabi were developed by dance teachers in the UK after many years of research and are available to the general public free of charge. Also available are the Examination Specifications which outline what should be learned for each grade – the skills, movement vocabulary and repertoire that will be tested. Other aspects covered included health and safety requirements, procedure for entering exams and a list of resources necessary (Anon, 2005).

According to Prickett (2004, 2) with the backing of an institution, South Asian Dance is more easily accepted into a wider culture. By codifying technique and standardising teaching practice, the ISTD works “alongside a range of cultural institutions which provide a network of support for those working in the South Asian arts communities”. It is important to note that the ISTD has been approved by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority in England and so is a good ambassador within the British education system and British arts internationally.

Nagarajah (1999) extols the virtues of the ISTD exam as a system of assessment which will be recognised around the country and prove to be a reliable way of establishing the level of training received by a student – and her capabilities.

Anusha Subramanyam, a Bharata Natyam dance teacher herself, was involved in the process of developing the ISTD syllabus and suggests that formalising the evaluation process provides an unbiased assessment for the students as well as the teachers – thus leading to higher standards (Ghosh, 1999).

As part of the ISTD examination, a dancer has to produce a portfolio evidencing knowledge that may not be examined on the day of the examinations. The requirements of this portfolio are extremely detailed and students will have to show that they have a good understanding not only of dance movements, but of the music and textual elements that go hand-in-hand with the dance (Prickett, 2004). According to the Vice Chairman of the South Asian Dance Faculty, Pushkala Gopal, the idea was to give a “holistic appreciation of the form” to the student’s by encouraging them to conduct independent research and observation within the cultural context that they find themselves in (Ghosh, 1999).

Although all the aforementioned exams have merits and demerits, the ISTD was the one that was thought to be less theoretical and had an emphasis on the practical aspect as well. Although not everyone involved in the examination system is convinced by this, and the notion that it is more about training teachers rather than performers has been discussed. The ISTD’s introduction and emphasis on body conditioning introduce a new aspect to South Asian Dance that is very relevant to colder climates and introduce safer, healthier practices. The main limitation to all the exams, including the ISTD, is that none of

the training structures are full-time and don't lead to full-time training for students (Gorringe 2003).

Also, there has been some opposition to the ISTD from the South Asian community involved in dance. One of the main concerns is the setting of exams by a fundamentally “white organisation” when exam systems are already in place by other Indian organisations as discussed above. Also of contention is the name of the organisation – The Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing. Here the word ‘Imperial’ automatically conveys notions of a colonial relationship from the past (Prickett, 2004). Ironically, the history of the colonial power in India and its relationship with Indian dance is a troubled one.

Conclusion

The tradition of the *arangetram* has a long history in the danceform. It's introduction into the globalised world proscenium brings with it issues of cultural identity, commercialisation and competition from institutionalised examinations like those of the ISTD in the UK.

One of the many criticisms of *arangetrams* today is the amount of money spent on them.

The answer to this could be that if people have the money and time to spend on *arangetrams* – then that is their choice. If parents want to fund an *arangetram*, and the community backs it then there really can be no reason why this should not happen.

However, what should be mentioned is that it is those who do not have the money that may be penalised – but as can be seen in the case of Mumbai, students pool together and find a way around this.

The other issue that arises is that of an *arangetram* being there to enhance, reproduce or represent the Indian culture. There have been questions about whether Bharata Natyam is an artform as performed professionally by companies in Britain like Angika and Sankalpam or whether it is a danceform that is steeped in culture and traditions as seen at an *arangetram*. Again, one would argue that there are two sides to the coin. Bharata Natyam did originate from India and in some form or another was linked to a rich history and heritage. As Hall (1997, 1) says, culture is about “shared meanings”. Through language we represent what we stand for, or show other people what our ideas and feelings are. An *arangetram* can be seen as a language – a way of using signs and symbols to convey what one believes in – what they stand for as an individual within the community. By unmarking Bharata Natyam – removing its cultural history – and only making it about the movement – are we denying it its history – are we denying the South Asian community a language that they can communicate in. Is the issue that the tradition of an *arangetram* challenges Western notions of what art is? But, at the same time, if we say that Bharata Natyam is all about the culture and traditions are we doing so at the exclusion of others?

Finally, the ISTD has now brought in a new dimension to the *arangetram*. Now that there is an institutionalised, standardised method of assessing a student, does it displace the *arangetram*, or can they both be run side-by-side. The ISTD does bring with it a formality and standardisation that can only be good for the danceform, ensuring that students are learning and performing high quality Bharata Natyam. It also, keeps a check, to an extent, on what the teachers are teaching. However, it may be presumptuous to suggest that exams like the ISTD would take the place of an *arangetram*, or that in the future only ISTD qualified teachers can teach Bharata Natyam. At the end of the day, surely the option of whether a student wants to do an *arangetram* or take an ISTD exam should be between her and her teacher. If a student feels that they can further enhance their professional

career by having a qualification like the ISTD, then that may be an option they pursue. But, if at the end of the day, the students learn dance as a means of keeping in touch with their culture and having an affinity with their 'homeland' then one should not deny them that choice. At the end of the day, surely it should be about just that – choice.

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