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**Issues of Cultural Identity in Relation to
South Asian Dance in the Global Diaspora
focussing on the UK**

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**Shalini Bhalla © 2006
Student No: 05149737**

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Introduction

As the dancer ties her hair back into a plait (a false one as her real hair is so short), she already begins to see in the mirror that she is beginning to look more 'Indian'. The flowers and temple jewellery in the hair, the *bindi* on her forehead, the bangles, the *alta*-stained fingers and the bells on her feet all add to the exotic, ethnic look that she wants to portray when she goes on stage and performs an evening of traditional Bharata Natyam.

Two hours later, as she tears off the plait and jewellery, removes the *bindi*, bangles and bells, washes her face of the heavy make-up and squeezes into her tight denim jeans, boots and a crop top, she is ready to go dancing of a different sort – clubbing for the night with her friends to celebrate a successful show.

The life that this British-born Asian dancer leads is one of negotiation and compromise. Straddling two worlds, she finds that sometimes her foot is more in one of the worlds and at other times more in the other. The challenge is to make this negotiation not just bearable but work well. In one instance she is the picture of a traditional Indian girl accepted in the Indian society, well-versed in their culture, and in the next she is a modern, westernised girl equally comfortable in the British society.

But how does a British Asian dancer today negotiate these two worlds? How do they use dance to identify with one culture? Where does dance come into in the whole question of cultural identity?

As Radhakrishnan (2003, 120) asks in his essay *Ethnicity in an Age of Diaspora*, "How could *someone* be both *one* and something *other*? How could the unity of identity have more than one face or name?"

This essay explores how South Asian dance, with particular reference to the classical dance style Bharata Natyam, is being adapted by dancer-choreographers in the UK. It also looks at the dance practised in its traditional form at community level by the diaspora. The main focus is on questions of cultural identity and how dance is linked to these questions in this global world. How do dancer-choreographers and the communities in the diasporas use dance to reflect their cultural identity – whatever that identity may be?

Globalisation and Diasporas

Globalisation, in its first instance, is usually thought of as in economic terms – with the very tangible presence of multinational companies in many countries world-wide. Anthony Giddens (1999, 8) states that there are those who believe that the global market-place is more developed today than it was in the 1960s and 1970s, and that it is “indifferent to national borders”. However, he cautions against seeing it solely as an economic phenomenon but a political, technological and cultural one as well.

In fact, Tabb (2005) goes on to suggest that globalisation is a term which describes the global society in which we live in, where an event, be it economic, cultural, political or environmental, happening in one part of the world may have a significant impact on people in other parts of the world. As a result of better communication, transport and information systems, people are all linked as individuals, communities, businesses and governments irrespective of where we are in the world. And, although most people do live as citizens of their chosen nation, they engage with the lives of other people in other countries culturally, materially and psychologically. This is especially true of diasporic communities living away from their ‘homelands’.

Cohen (1996) suggests that the concept of diaspora, originally applied to Jews, has in the late twentieth century become important again with around thirty ethnic groups considering themselves, or being considered by others, as a diaspora. Evans Braziel and Mannur (2003) state that the term diaspora is not unproblematic and cautions against using it indiscriminately to describe all movements between or within nations or cities. They suggest that two main issues arise when discussing diaspora – firstly that we need to look closely at the notions of nations, nationalism and citizenship and secondly that diasporas offer multiple, dislocated sites of contestation to the dominating, homogenising forces of globalisation.

Globalisation has meant that many diasporas now do not cut ties with their past, but rather work at preserving or reinventing their homelands. As social groups are now deterritorialised, the concept of national identity is threatened. Deterritorialization is a term applied when ethnic groups continue to transcend territorial boundaries and identities. Rather than communities being created as a result of place, they are being created as a result of shared interest, opinions, beliefs, tastes, religions, cuisine, lifestyles and ethnicities. Diasporas can be seen to be extremely adaptive as a result of having unstable points of origin, no final points of destination and disjuncture between social and national identities – so much so that some diasporas have changed so much that they have assumed different roles (Cohen 1996).

The movement of Indians to overseas countries is exploited by various interests both in India and abroad, leading to problems of cultural reproduction for Indians abroad. The phenomenon of deterritorialization is also responsible for creating new markets for the Indian Film Industry, travel agencies who sell tickets to those who want to keep in contact with their homeland and organisers of Indian-themed public events (Appadurai, 1991).

Cultural Identity of the Indian Diaspora

India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, and Bhutan make up South Asia and communities from these countries who have settled elsewhere are considered the South Asian diaspora (Ganti, 2004).

A segment of this diaspora, the Indian diaspora (the focus of this essay) is found all over the world including in the Far East, Africa, the Americas, Australia, Canada and Europe (Gokulsing and Dissanayake, 1998). In the UK there are over 2 million South Asians, of which the Indian Hindus (467,000) are the second largest community after the Pakistani Muslims (658,000) among South Asian faiths (UK Census, 2001). In the UK, British citizenship has been granted to almost one million foreign nationals since 1997. In 2005 alone, 161,780 British passports were issued of which the largest number of successful applicants (14,160) came from India (Anon, 2006).

According to Van der Veer (2001) The Foreign Exchange Regulation Act of 1973 discusses a new category introduced by the Indian government – the Non-Resident Indian (NRI). In this act, an NRI is an Indian citizen who lives abroad temporarily. However, more interestingly is the notion that a person of Indian origin, even if they are holding a passport from another country, is an NRI as long as either their parents or grandparents were Indian. The criteria for deciding on this category is neither citizenship nor residence, but 'origin'. Therefore, the geographical or physical state has no bearing on the term Indian. Rather, it is the mental state – one of shared cultural aspects that denotes what it is to be Indian (Aftab 2002). For the majority of Indians settled in places outside India, they come to consider them home, however, they still look to India as their spiritual, cultural homeland (Gokulsing and Dissanayake, 1998).

Cultural identity is an interesting and complicated notion. As Hall (2003) puts it, cultural identity can be looked at in two different ways. Firstly, cultural identity can be that gained from a collective and shared history among people who are linked by race or ethnicity. This cultural identity will reflect historical experiences and cultural codes that are shared and stable, providing us with the concept of belonging to that people. For someone in the Indian diaspora to be 'Indian', they would have to be either born in India, or have family who are Indian in the respect that their historical experiences and cultural codes are the same. They have the same history – linked by race. Their cultural identity would come from this 'Indianess'.

Interestingly, people in a diasporan community often stick more rigidly to tradition and identity than those people living in the original homeland (Chakravorty, 2004). Baumann (1999) describes a Tamil Hindu religious ceremony which took place in Germany in 1997 and suggests that Hindus are keen to continue with their religious and cultural traditions when living away from India. It is the women in the family who are usually responsible for worship in the diasporan homes, preserving rituals and traditions – sticking rigidly to them as they are keen to ensure that their religious and social obligations are correctly and carefully fulfilled (Diesel, 1996). The sense of upheaval and insecurity felt by people leaving a natural place of origin and going to a new, foreign place makes immigrants want to hold on to their culture. And so, when the diasporan community journey to the 'homeland' India, they find their counterparts far more open to new things – even more 'Westernised' than the Indian diaspora living in the West (Ram, 2000).

The second way of looking at cultural identity according to Hall (2003) acknowledges the differences and not just the similarities. When rupture happens, and there is discontinuity, identities change. Cultural identity then becomes not only about past experiences, but also about the future. In this way, cultural identity is a continuous process – transforming at all

times. This is an unfamiliar and unsettling way of looking at cultural identity. How can we understand cultural identity if one can't trace a clear unbroken line from its fixed origin?

And, as Grau (2001, 24) puts it, "...in the culturally diverse world of today's metropolises it is difficult to know precisely how cultural heritages are built and what belongs to whom".

Radhakrishnan's (2003, 122) research amongst the Indian diaspora in the United States of America throws out some valuable insights that may also hold true to the Indian diaspora in the UK and elsewhere. He mentions his conversations with young children who are 'natural' American citizens (that is they are born in America) and his surprise at being told that they felt that they had "a strong sense of being exclusively Indian" brought about by a feeling of being marked or different because of their skin colour, family background and other ethnic traits. They felt that they led a double life – the private ethnic life, and the public American life.

When Radhakrishnan (2003, 123) questions "What does 'being Indian' mean in the United States?" we too should ask 'What does 'being Indian' mean in Britain?' Are his concerns for the Indian living in America the same as those of the Indian living in England or in Kenya or in Singapore? When he asks "How can one be and live Indian without losing clout and leverage as Americans? How can one transform the so-called mainstream American identity into the image of the many ethnicities that constitute it?" are these the questions that we too should be asking in respect to Indians in Britain?

These questions show us just how much identities, perspectives and definitions change when people leave their homeland. The term 'Indian' is so natural, so definite in India – there is no question about what it means. Yet, taken away from its roots, the term becomes problematic. 'Being Indian' takes on a new meaning – and is not just about being

born Indian – but possibly about cultivating it – for different reasons. Fostering Indian identity could be to ensure that one does not lose the link with the past – and everything it stands for. Another reason could be ensuring that one does not just become a nameless homogenised entity within the society one finds themselves in. And finally, there may be the wish to actually emphasise the state of being different for whatever reason that may be (Radhakrishnan, 2003, 123).

For a British Asian born here in the UK, whose family may come from India, the question of cultural identity becomes more problematic. Are they Indian or are they British? If they are both – which comes first? Is the ‘Indian’ in India and the ‘Indian’ in Britain the same? To what extent does the ‘homeland’ affect the diasporan identities?

Tabish Khair suggests that:

When someone like Hari Kunzru defines himself as a British writer, he is only speaking the truth. What else would he be? What else can Zadie Smith be? What makes them British is not, however, the place of birth inscribed on their birth certificates. It is the influences that shaped them. In that sense one can be ‘British’ while continuing to live mostly in India, and one can be ‘Indian’ while living mostly in the ‘west’.

Khair, 2005, online

Musician Nitin Sawhney (1995) suggests that second generation British Asians “inhabit a lonely, yet exciting and largely underdeveloped world of huge artistic potential”. Born in Britain he says that his world was not about Bharata Natyam or Carnatic music, but neither was it about ballet or jazz. He suggests that through collaborating and dialogue one can create new vocabulary to express a ‘new’ cultural identity.

These different histories, unstable points of origin mean that diasporas are creative in how they adapt to the roles they find themselves in. They adapt their identities – both social

and national, their traditions and themselves to suit the place and time that they are in (Cohen, 1996; Radhakrishnan, 2003).

South Asian Dance

The virtual, floating and rather abstract sense of being Indian articulated through sensuous and visceral signifiers such as films, music or religious devotion appear more attractive and non-controversial than conventional notions of lineage, blood or political loyalty.

Blom Hansen, 2005, 259

Just like films and music, dance plays a role in expressing ones perceptions of cultural identity. In fact, post-independence, India used dance to portray an image of unchanging tradition, culture, identity and community, linked to the past, all part of a nation building programme (Lopez y Royo, 2004). The concept of Festivals of India were introduced in the 1980s which depicted continuity as well as change in Indian culture, and dance performances were an important part of this festivalisation culture (Singh, 1998). Grau (2002) suggests that by studying dance one can study culture and the transmission of cultural knowledge too. Dance is in a constant state of change influenced by physical, historical, social, cultural or political aspects. Similarly, traditions are not static either and change when passed from one generation to another usually influenced by the changing social contexts.

In Britain the term South Asian dance has been widely adopted by the dance communities (Grau, 2002). So, what exactly is South Asian dance?

Lopez y Royo (2004, 1) suggests that “the term refers to the multiple end products of the transplantation and growth of South Asian dance genres and techniques in the British context through the agency of diasporic South Asian communities”. It is also used to refer to dances performed by performance artists visiting Britain from the subcontinent. The

term is not used in India or America – where dance genres like Bharata Natyam are still referred to as Indian dance – emphasising the ‘Indianess’ of the dance.

As this single term does not sufficiently denote the complex, diverse dance forms that one sees in Britain, a new label has been introduced – ‘British South Asian Dance’. The British is derived from the fact that the dance is ‘made in Britain’ and the South Asian is because the dance techniques used originate in the subcontinent (Lopez y Royo, 2004).

“Although commonly used, the term South Asian dance is not unproblematic” (Grau, 2001, 23). As Hale (2004, 26) puts it “The very term ‘South Asian dance’ irons out its manifold roots, artistic lineages and regional affiliations and promotes a pan-Asian consciousness united in its post-coloniality”.

Just as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, and Bhutan make up the region of South Asia and communities from these countries who have settled elsewhere are considered the South Asian diaspora (Ganti, 2004), then too do all the dance forms from this region make up South Asian dance? Does this make this generic term too convenient and rather ambiguous? In the case of Bharata Natyam the form *does* come from India. Surely, denying it the term ‘Indian dance’, denies it its origins, its history. Granted that Bharata Natyam in Singapore, or in Kenya may be very different in style to Bharata Natyam in the UK or in India, but by categorising it under the generic term of South Asian dance does one not obliterate all that came before? Similarly, within India, there are many dance forms and systems that this term oversimplifies.

According to Grau (2002), the term was introduced as a political move only. Dance practitioners felt that the dances which fell under this category were not only practised in

India, but world-wide. A more generic term, they felt, would bring neutrality to the dance system, overshadowing the differences and highlighting the similarities.

In 2002 the SADiB report (South Asian Dance in Britain – Negotiating Cultural Identity Through Dance) came out. This report proposed to “look at the way South Asian migrant groups in Britain have used dance to construct their cultural identity at first, second and third generation level” (Hale, 2004).

For some dancers this emphasis on cultural identity as a reason for creating dance felt like their modernity was being cast aside as it went against the principle of producing dance simply as autonomous art. Similarly, at community level, there are issues as the diaspora tries to find a balance between tradition and innovation (Hale, 2004).

Dance at Community Level in the Indian Diaspora

Kothari (2000) identifies a phenomenon that he suggests is rather complex – that of the Indian diaspora who have migrated abroad and started performing and teaching Bharata Natyam. He suggests that they find Bharata Natyam a useful aid to maintaining their roots and identity. Although many maintain the *banis* (styles) that they have learned from their teachers back in India, others come into contact with foreign artists and explore and experiment, leading to new innovations.

As definitions of ‘home’ change, so too do the content and the form of the dance. As the points of reference change – be that of the past, present or future – new challenges arise and so the social contexts and audience expectations change (Lopez y Royo, 2004).

Grau, (2002) indicates that the demand for dance training in the UK is huge. There are around sixty dance schools in London alone, and a further sixty in the rest of Britain. So why do so many children in the Indian diaspora learn dance?

According to Chatterjee (2004), parental pressure seems to be the main reason that young children join a classical dance class. Parents from immigrant communities do not want their children to miss out on their culture and so invest time and money in sending them to dance schools. Through classical Indian dance, cultural heritage and national pride in India is fostered thus giving diasporan children a sense of belonging to an Indian community and the culture, both locally and transnationally (Chakravorty, 2004). Bharata Natyam is seen as a tool to educate Indian girls on Hindu myths and traditional social values. Transcending the artistic function, it provides a way for Indian girls to acquire cultural identity (Gaston, 1996).

As choreographer Niyogi-Nakra puts it

Prompted by a desire to maintain their cultural heritage and to reinforce their identity as belonging to an ancient culture and civilization, Indians of the diaspora have made Bharata Natyam an icon of their heritage.
Niyogi-Nakra 2003, 146

Ann David (2005) has done much research with the Tamil community in London and finds that their cultural expression and religious lives are heavily intertwined. As a result, much emphasis is put on children learning classical music and dance. Bharata Natyam plays a big part in the cultural activities for the young people in the London Tamil temples. In fact, the dance form is promoted as an important subject for study and/or key to religious festivals in many of the temples. It is taught in Tamil Saturday/Sunday schools and offers the migrant community “middle-class respectability, a highly-valued femininity, the absorption of traditional prayers and mythology and a spiritual/religious devotion to the deity”. It is seen as a “perfect carrier of tradition”.

According to Ram (2000), when immigrants come into a different culture, they experience an upheaval which affects their relationship with the past, the present and the future. Suddenly, the past seems to be a less secure, autonomous entity – the social context that they were once in is no longer there. Suddenly, the normal, everyday aspects of one's culture – become the aspects that need to be 'kept alive' – need to be reiterated to ensure that one's cultural self is not lost. It is this tradition of nationalism that ensure that diasporan parents send their daughters (and sometimes sons) to dance schools so readily. Classical dance is a recognised, understood and accepted representative of Indian civilisation.

Dancer-choreographer Chitrleka Bolar states:

We have to have our cultural identities. If we don't keep them – nobody else will! My neighbour is definitely not going to look after my culture! We have to keep it alive! Culture is important – you can't survive without having roots.
Bolar in Chatterjee, 2004, 18

When Gaston (1996, 334) was doing her research for her book *Bharata Natyam: from Temple to Theatre* she found that the perception of whether Bharata Natyam is ritual or entertainment was fairly equally divided into three. There were those who believe that the dance is entertainment, those who believe it is ritual and those who feel it is both. She mentions a non-hereditary male teacher who says: "It is neither ritual nor entertainment it is tradition", whilst a female brahmin dancer saw the dance as a way to show and feel her 'Indianess'.

So, one can see that when Bharata Natyam is practised by the Indian diaspora, it becomes more than just a dance style. Through the dance classes, students and parents begin to form communities based on shared languages, foods, social mores and other aspects like fashion, jewellery and the arts – thus becoming an important part of the "shared popular culture" for the diasporic communities (Katrak, 2004). As Hall (1997) says

culture is a complicated concept and to simplify it one could say that it is about "shared meanings". Similarly, through performances the audiences (made up of these communities) come together in these sharing patterns of appreciating the same things (Ram, 2000).

South Asian Dancer-Choreographers in the UK

Where the Indian diaspora at community level use dance to show their cultural identity, the same issue is treated very differently by dancers, choreographers and practitioners on the professional scene.

While some practitioners have stayed with their roots, others have turned away. And while others are attracted by the precision of the dance form, some have been stifled by it and have looked for their own style. Practitioners often grapple with the dilemmas of either preserving technique and maintaining tradition, or innovating and experimenting (Roy, 2003). Many have found the vocabulary of a classical form like Bharata Natyam inadequate to convey what they want to say in the social context that they find themselves in.

Professional dancers also want to distance themselves from the religious aspect associated with Bharata Natyam. According to Lopez y Royo (2004), South Asian dance has to be seen to be secular if it is to be mainstream. This would involve it disassociating itself from dance at a community level whether it be of the folk or social variety or Bharata Natyam performances in a non-professional capacity.

When talking about South Asian dance, it is difficult to separate it from issues of ethnicity. For example, even though a dance form like Bharata Natyam is transnational there is an

image of it being rooted in the ancient, traditional Indian past - even though it was more or less constructed in the 1930s (Grau, 2001). O'Shea (2001, 40) suggests that the association that Bharata Natyam has with tradition and culture is sometimes unwanted. The traditional, cultural aspects increases Bharata Natyam's popularity and so dancers are increasingly keen to produce new works that they are different to others.

Angika, a British dance company formed in 1997, performed *Triple Hymn* in 2000 which interweaved Bharata Natyam with European classical music. Instead of treating Bharata Natyam as a cultural icon, the choreographers placed two classical forms side-by-side, Indian and European, highlighting the cross-cultural aspect of the whole project. The piece was relevant and communicated well to the London audience that it was performed for. Work like this highlights the "dance form's history of strategic negotiation with globality and hybridity as well as with the staging of local, regional, and national affiliations" (O'Shea, 2003).

As a third generation British Sikh, choreographer Rashpal Singh Bansal says that much of his traditional Indian influences no longer exist. Because there is hardly any awareness or tradition of dance as an artform in the Sikh community, he decided to embrace contemporary dance as natural progression in his cultural development. He tells of his experience when an artistic director of a theatre was disappointed in Bansal's work. The artistic director, having never seen or heard about Bansal's work had assumed that he was going to see Indian dance – based simply on the very Indian name – Rashpal Singh Bansal! The main stumbling point the artistic director found was that there was no USP between Bansal's work and any other contemporary choreographer. In his eyes, the USP was the Indian heritage – and if Bansal didn't reflect that in his work then that USP didn't exist (Singh Bansal, 2006).

British Asian choreographer Shobana Jeyasingh has been quoted many times saying:

For me, my heritage is a mix of David Bowie, Purcell, Shelley, and Anna Pavlova, and its has been mixed as subtly as a samosa has mixed itself into the English cuisine in the last ten years or so: impossible to separate. But it is surprising how to many people my heritage could only be things Indian.
Jeyasingh, 1998, 48

Jeyasingh suggests that a production that is not culturally readable and that has less recognisable Asian characteristic is more difficult to sell. She asks the question “Do we have to reaffirm our Indianess in our work? Surely, it’s our choice” (Singh Bansal, 2006, 12). She goes on to say that she is trying to clarify her own location through her work. As an Asian living in Britain the question of place has always interested her and this is reflected in the names of her dance pieces *Making of Maps*, *New Cities Ancient Lands* and *Byzantium* (Hutera, 2005).

One dancer who worked in the Shobana Jeyasingh Dance Company said that as a company, what they found difficult wasn’t the cultural polarities or hierarchies that they found themselves in when working within the western and non-western cultures, but the struggle against the stereotypes thrust upon them and modes of behaviour expected from them. One main stereotype was that the dancers would be “pretty ethnic dancers performing ritualistic forms of worship through exotic movements that have a deep spiritual meaning”. She goes on to say that she was frustrated when asked about the history of traditional Bharata Natyam having just completed a performance in Indian contemporary dance. Even though she held a British passport, and the company received funding from a British organisation, she felt that this was not enough to stop her being seen as the ‘other’ (Bakht, 1997).

Young women in the diaspora who may go on to become professional dancers find themselves in a conundrum when they are stuck between the demands of the South Asian

community that they may live in, and the opposite demands of their audiences in a professional arena. Within the South Asian community they need to adhere to the traditional aspects of the form, but in the professional, mainstream field they find that they have to be innovative and original – so possibly straying away from the traditional community side of the dance to the “global autonomous art milieu” (O’Shea, 2001).

Ramphal (2005, 253) questions the merits of linking an artform such as Bharata Natyam to a specific community – in this case the South Asian communities. If Bharata Natyam becomes only about reaffirming identity, be that cultural or national, does it do so to the exclusion of others? If students of Bharata Natyam are required to attend class in a sari and wearing a bindi, for example, does putting the training of Bharata Natyam within these cultural contexts signify ownership by a particular cultural group?

Conclusion

This essay has looked at South Asian Dance, namely Bharata Natyam as a symbol for cultural identity. The very term South Asian Dance is problematic in that it erases history and denies the origins of the dance Bharata Natyam. By using this term are we denying and overriding all notions of place and disregarding history? Do we lose our anchorage with India and is this an advantage or a disadvantage to the danceform?

If the identity of the dance itself is problematic then using it as a cultural identity marker itself throws up its own issues.

In the first instance, the cultural identity of the Indian diaspora communities is complicated enough. In fact, one could go so far as to say that these identities are fragmented – neither here nor there, neither one nor the other, both one and the other, neither same nor

different. These split or even multiple identities means that diasporans may wear themselves situationally – depending on where they are at any given moment and what they feel comfortable with at that given time.

Using Bharata Natyam as a link to the culture, reinforcing the identity seems to be acceptable at community level. But, the story is different at the professional level. Dancer – choreographers don't want to be boxed in. They do not feel the necessity to have their identity defined by the dance. Many want to use the dance for the sake of its movement – the cultural, religious and traditional aspects are irrelevant to them. Yet at community level, it is these very aspects that make Bharata Natyam so attractive. After all culture, religion and tradition are great anchors and safety nets to for those who may feel displaced or in need of reassurance of a safe, definite, culturally authentic and unchanging 'homeland' – be that real or imagined.

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