

Natya Dance Theatre:
A Bharatanatyam Dance Company within
the Indian Community of the Greater Chicago Area

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Within the larger context of the rapidly changing demographics in American cities, this case study explores the work of the Natya Dance Company as it has intersected with the immigrant Indian community in the greater Chicago area as well as the Indian population in the United States as a whole. This company started nearly twenty-five years ago as a school of classical Indian dance. It has grown to be a center of Indian dance arts, with a school and performing company, and has functioned to present Indian dancers not only in Chicago but on tours across the U.S. Natya Dance Theatre, in conjunction with Columbia College, Chicago, also galvanized the global Indian dance community by organizing an international conference on bharatanatyam with papers from dance researchers worldwide, performances of bharatanatyam and contemporary work based on bharatanatyam. Hema Rajagopalan, founder of Natya, and her daughter Krithika are involved with studying and transmitting the classical aspects of the form as perceived at the source in Tamil Nadu, India, as well as with creating new work.

Indians in Chicago

The 1965 Immigration Act abolished quotas based on national origin that had excluded persons from the Indian subcontinent in favor of preferences based on professional and occupational skills needed in U.S. This facilitated the immigration of persons of exceptional ability as well as the reunification of families that had been separated. It was during the post-1965 period that young, highly educated, professional Indians emigrated to the United States and established predominantly middle-class communities all around the country, with the highest densities being in California, New York, and Chicago.¹

Chicago has the third largest concentration of Indians in the U.S., with about 25,000 or a little less than one percent of the city's population, and over 100,000 in the Chicago metropolitan area, according to Census 2000. A majority of Indians are professionals, particularly prominent in the sciences, medicine, the computer industry, and management. The number of Indian students at universities remains large, but a working-class population is also emerging. As in other metropolitan areas, Indians are visible as taxi drivers, shopkeepers, and gas station owners. Many of the professional immigrants of the 1960s made efforts to disappear seamlessly into the fabric of American society, and when they congregated on a generically Indian terrain, their

¹ According to Rocher, "South Asian immigrants in the 1970s were among the best educated, most professionally advanced, and successful of any immigrant group, and their income recorded in the 1980 census ranked second highest among ethnic groups in the country." Rosane Rocher, "Reconstituting South Asian Studies for a Diasporic Age," *Sagar* (Fall 1994), <http://asnic.utexas.edu/asnic/pages/sagar/fall.1994/sagar.intro.toc.dec1994.html>

meetings included members from a variety of regions and religious affiliations. This also reflected the then current Nehruvian vision of a pan-Indian unity. However, as the numbers of immigrants swelled to include multiple classes, and as politics within India became more sectarian so, too, the Indians in the U.S. seem to have organized themselves according to regions, languages and religious affiliations.

The story of how Natya developed is integrally linked with the ways in which Indian institutions in Chicago evolved, as Hema Rajagopalan and, more directly, her husband Parthasarthy Rajagopalan, were actively involved in founding and supporting Hindu religious, cultural, and secular institutions in the city. In 1977, the Hindu Temple of Greater Chicago was established as a nonprofit organization which “would encompass the needs of all Hindus” and Parthasarthy Rajagopalan, along with others, played a critical leadership role in establishing its panoramic vision as “a place of worship, a place of cultural and fine arts activities, religious and language schools, and a library” and served as its treasurer for four years. Hema contributed to the growth of this temple, not only by allowing her home to serve as a meeting place for the Indian community, but by presenting fundraising performances, both as a bharatanatyam soloist and with a group of young dancers, the students of Natyakalalayam (as her school was then named), generating close to \$35, 000.00. By 1994 the temple plans had been realized, with several deities of both the Shavite and Vaishnavite traditions being installed. Temple activities included youth heritage camps, and cultural performances of devotional and classical music and dance by local devotees and well-known visiting performers from India.²

Current Perceptions of Bharatanatyam’s History

There are essentially two schools of thought about the history of bharatanatyam, one being primarily espoused by the first generation of post-Independence performers and scholars based in India. Their view is that dance as an art form has an ancient history that can be traced through sculptural artifacts, literary references, manuals for producing art (*shastra*) and aesthetic dialogues all the way back to 2000 B.C. (the Indus Valley civilization) or to 200 B.C. with the detailed descriptions of an art dance in texts such as the Sanskrit *Natyashastra* and also in the Tamil tale of the third century *Silapaddikaram*. The view of later generations of dancers and scholars, is, however, that the historical continuities have been overplayed, that the perception of bharatanatyam as an authentic, unchanging tradition, unsullied by external influences is an orientalist holdover; they posit that the reconstructive aspect of the dance form now known as bharatanatyam has been suppressed.³

Current among some middle-class Indians is the view that all dancers were prostitutes, and that it was the participation of Rukmini Devi Arundale (a Brahmin woman married to a professor and prominent activist within the Theosophical Society, Lord Arundale) who brought respectability

2 See the website of the Hindu Temple of Greater Chicago, <http://www.ramatemple.org/hisrevp1.html>

3 See, among others, Matthew Allen, "Rewriting the Script for South Indian Dance" *The Drama Review* (Fall 1997) 63-100; Mandakranta Bose, "Gender and Performance: Classical Indian Dancing," *The Routledge Reader in Gender and Performance*, ed. Lizbeth Goodman and Jane de Gay (New York: Routledge, 1998); and Pallabi Chakravorty, "From Interculturalism to Historicism: Reflections on Classical Indian Dance," *Dance Research Journal* (Winter 2000).

to dance as an art. The opposing view is that this perception was the result of a conflation of Victorian morals regarding social purity with Indian caste-based perceptions of purity and the body; because some temple dancers were supported by designated sponsors, this does not make them prostitutes, any more than a woman over whose body dowry is exchanged, or a woman who is remarried. Caste-based attitudes still surface in the guise of aesthetic criticism of content and execution. In the process of reviving the dance form *sadir* as *bharatanatyam*, Rukmini Devi Arundale revised aspects of transmission and presentation for a new nationalistic democratic and global context, so that this regional dance form came to be accepted as a representation of Indianness well before *Natya* was established.⁴

It is relevant to this study that historians have noted that the aesthetic tension between the dance as secular high art versus the religious and more popular aspects of the dance are not only not recent, but can be traced back to the Buddhist efflorescence in India (c. 300 – 400 B.C.) via the medieval period when the Chola temples were subsidized by the rulers who in turn needed the temples to sanctify their kingship.⁵ By the time that Hema Gopalarajan negotiates such issues as she performs both in temples in the U.S. and in high art circles, in India and the U.S., the performative strategies of this negotiation have become part of tradition. A detailed critical analysis of how she accomplished this through her own choreographed representations is still to be done and is beyond the limitations of the present case study.

With the East-West Encounter in Dance organized by the Max Mueller Bhavan in Mumbai (Bombay) in January 1984, the dissenting choreographers who questioned for various reasons the artistic validity of traditional forms came into their own as a collective movement towards contemporaneous modernist expressive activity. Their activity preceded the current diasporic wave, but has consistently dialogued with transcontinental representations of Indian dance. While India's nationalist policies gave marginal acknowledgement to such forms, the experimentalists were arguably better supported financially from outside India than from the official cultural agencies within—this despite the immense success of these artists in attracting urban audiences to their performances, as well as corporate sponsors and media attention throughout the late seventies and eighties. Meanwhile the performing strategies they initiated continue to be explored and extended by diaspora and indigenous performers.

One could ask if issues of ownership are not at stake in such divergent current views, but one can at least deduce that so far as dance is concerned, a dynamic of tradition, challenge, and transformation actively enlivens the practice and appreciation of *bharatanatyam* as an art both within India and beyond the subcontinent. Further, this is not an exclusively post-colonial process, as there is evidence of much dialogue and disagreements on aesthetic interpretation of the *shastras* in historic commentaries by philosopher-scholars of different schools of thought, temporal, and spatial locations in the histories of this subcontinent, for example, Bhatta Lollata

⁴ See, among others, Amrit Srinivasan, "Temple 'Prostitution' and Community Reform: An Examination Of the Ethnographic, Historical And Textual Context Of the Devadasi in Tamil Nadu, South India," PhD Thesis, Cambridge University, 1984; Avanthi Meduri, "Rukmini Devi and Sanskritization: A New Performance Perspective," in *Rukmini Devi Arundale* (New Delhi: Motilal Barnarsidass, 2005); and Uttara Asha Coorlawala, Editor, "Re-Presenting Indian Dance," *Dance Research Journal* (Winter 2004).

⁵ See Sunil Kothari, *Bharata Natyam* (Bombay: Marg Publications, 1979) and Mohan Khokar, *Traditions of Classical Dance* (New Delhi: Clarion Books, 1979), among others.

(ninth century), Abhinavagupta (late tenth century), and the numerous twentieth-century English translations of Sanskrit texts, from Coomaraswamy on. Contestations about the nature and history of the numerous dance forms of the Indian subcontinent include collisions with European Romantic notions of dancing women since the early eighteenth century, and the revisionist activity during the rule of Serfoji II in the early nineteenth century.⁶

Other twentieth-century writings address modernist visions of dance as high art, notions of dance as folk art, and as a countercultural expression of nationalism and Indianness. More recently, postcolonial and dance research studies in the United States have acknowledged that the development of modern American dance was profoundly influenced by Indian dance ideas, and that dance played a role in establishing an Indian cultural identity. Precisely because dances in India have captured such an exposed place in the cultural imagination over centuries, it is both a rich and tremendously complex area of research, rife with competing narratives and multiple performance styles that reflect various levels and regions of accumulations of past histories of both indigenous development and contact with outside cultures.⁷

Bharatanatyam in the United States

Within the United States, *bharatanatyam* (Tami Nadu) is the dominant classical dance form studied by young persons of Indian origin, although Kathak (north Indian with Islamic influences), Odissi (Eastern Indian), and most recently Kuchipudi (from the current state of Andhra Pradesh and the former state of Hyderabad) are also being studied. Many young women married and recently emigrated, become local authorities on dance upon arrival in the U.S. and have opened their own dance schools—in homes, shopping malls and dance studios. These women include those who studied directly from hereditary dance communities, and those were exposed to dance as enrichment, studying with other middle- or upper-class Indians. Bollywood dance styles and folk forms, such as *bhangra* and *dandiya*, have found expression in vernacular cross-cultural forms like disco-dandiya and rap. The latter are the forms that are broadcast on national cable television stations and private radio networks, accessed by installing a micro-chip bought from a local Indian store.

Most *bharatanatyam* dance students have tended to study only on weekends and without the kind of commitment required for artistic practice. Often dance is studied out of a sense of obligation to acquire Indian cultural and social values, and in obedience to the wishes of parents who are terrified that their precious daughters would play around with young men if they had time to spare... For a while *arangetrams*, with orchestras imported from India at great expense, were public presentation equivalent to a kind of coming out ceremony for the young lady.⁸ However,

⁶ Vincent Warren, Curator, Bibliotheque de La Danse, Montréal, Canada, delivered an illustrated lecture on images of Eastern influence in Romantic ballet, at the New York Public Library at Lincoln Center, March 27, 2004. See also Deborah Jowitz, *Time and the Dancing Image* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1988).

⁷ I am indebted to Professor George Yudice for pointing out the necessity for clarifying this at an introductory stage of this study, because the productions and reception of Natya Dance Theatre intersect with several notions of dance and culture that lie beyond the scope of a horizontal case study.

⁸ The *arangetram* is the first public performance of a dancer, once the teacher has determined that the student has reached the appropriate level. See Rama Bhardwaj, “The *Arangetram* Scene” (December 2001).

dance teachers note that the extravagance of the arangetram seems to be less prevalent now, and also that more musicians trained in accompanying dance have come of age within the United States.

The Natya Narrative

This narrative of the Natya Dance Theatre follows the founding of the dance school, Natyalayam, and its outgrowth, the Natya Dance Theatre, in symbiotic relationship with Indianness and the Indian community in Chicago. Then the scope of Natya's audiences widens to coincide with the wider framing in this study of Natya's location in the Chicago art-making community, and finally this narrative considers the ways in which Natya interacts with source dancers in Chennai (Madras). This narrative, then, has been structured with a focus on the Natya-community inter-relationships that in turn shape the structure of the organization in its various stages. Hence there no separate section on performer training. Woven throughout, where appropriate to the chronological or theoretical associations, are glosses on artistic productions but these come mostly at the end.

Initial Training of the Founder, Hema (Sunderajan) Rajagopalan

Hema Rajagopalan's (née Sunderajan) early training occurred in a significant transitional moment—the years when the traditional inheritors of the form were teaching in institutions to the lay public, sharing details of their art training. Hema's mother's family was already well acquainted with connoisseurs of Carnatic music and dance, and her performances were attended by such *rasika* as K. Subrahmanyam, the father of Padma Subrahmanyam, and Y.G. Doraiswamy, a pivotal player in the history of this transitional period.⁹ Hema's grandmother organized her performances in India, just as now Hema's mother supports Krithika's performances in Chennai! Unlike many post-Independence dancers, Hema's study and performance of dance were supported by deep-rooted familial participation, which could in part explain why Hema is comfortable within this system and its cultural network of associations. It would be difficult for non-Tamilians to acquire this sense of ease and appropriateness (*auchitya*) within the conventions of the form.

Hema's first public performance was in 1957 at the age of six, under the tutelage of Swarnasaraswathi, a former dancer of the Tamil Isai community of hereditary dancers; there are reviews and photographs that show her proficiency. Since training involves performing an interpretation of historical poetic songs in a way that would be appropriate to their social contexts, in addition to mastering a physically demanding dance technique, Hema's early

<http://www.narthaki.com/info/articles/article46.html>; and Anu Kishor Ganpati, "Selecting the Padam in Los Angeles," (September 2001), <http://www.narthaki.com/info/articles/article34.html>

⁹ K. Subrahmanyam was one of the pioneer film makers in India, and his daughter Padma is know for her research on *karana*—temple sculptures of dance movements that are said to be in the Natyashastra. Y.G. Doraiswamy recurs in the narrative of several dancers as being the link between the dancer and some very special teacher. Well connected in the Madras community, he also used to help to arrange performances for visitors such as the dance scholar Matteo Vitucci.

arangetram with its live musical accompaniment and elaborate costume becomes so much more of a remarkable accomplishment. Thanks to the critic Rashmi who reviewed her arangetram, Hema knows what she actually performed at that time and believes that probably the *nrrta*, or abstract dance combinations between narrative sections of the dance, were shorter and less complicated than they are now.¹⁰ Her surmise corresponds with the recent research on the historical repertoire of the Tanjore Quartet and early twentieth-century performers.¹¹

Shortly after this momentous event, Hema's family moved to New Delhi, where she continued her studies under K.N. Pakkiriswami Pillai and with his brother by Dandayudapani Pillai (of the Tamil Isai tradition of *nattuvanaars* who accompany the dance), and went on to present a second arangetram two years later.¹² We see that here, too, Hema continued her tutelage under teachers of long hereditary association with the practice and performance of what has become *bharatanatyam*.

Relationship of Natya to the Chicago South Asian Community

Despite her track record of performances and critical recognition, Hema found it difficult to negotiate a career in the intensely competitive and opportunist political environment of New Delhi. Her husband, then an executive employee of the Indian Railways, proposed a sabbatical in the United States to cheer her up and this gesture was to lead to a complete change for them both, and to their eventual assimilation into the life of Chicago. At first Hema found herself a position as a nutritionist at Loyola University Medical Hospital, having forsaken notions of a career in dance. However, a performance at the Chicago Institute of Technology led to more performances and to the beginning of her school and company. In Forest Park, Illinois, in a tiny 2-room apartment, and sitting on her bed so that her students would have space to dance, Hema discovered that she felt most complete when sharing her knowledge and love of *Bharatanayam* with her three or four students—and so began her school. After securing her guru's permission to teach, Hema named her own school after the institution where she had studied with Dandayudapani Pillai, *Natyakalalayam*.

At this stage, she did not charge fees, but soon discovered that this method was not conducive to commitment. As she grew more confident as a teacher, Hema's strategies changed. During Hema's first two years in the United States, Krithika had stayed behind in Madras with her grandmother, but very soon Krithika was participating in all of her mothers' activities. Families would drive considerable distances on weekends to bring their children to the Rajagopalan home for dance classes, and wait there for them to finish and then continue with weekend plans. Thus the school was an integral part of the immigrant community, providing a meeting place for families as well. One needs to bear in mind that this was itself a multicultural community of

10 "Hema's rendering of *abhinaya* for *Athunum solluva!* and *Thaye Yusoda* were really impressive. While her instinctive knowledge of rhythm in Kannada *Thillana* was indeed breath-taking." Rashmi in *Sport & Pastime* 3/8/57.

11 See Davesh Soneji, "Living History, Performing Memory: Devadasi women in Telugu-speaking South India," *Dance Research Journal* (Winter 2004). The Tanjore Quartet refers to the four dance masters at the royal court of Serfoji II in Tanjavur during the early nineteenth century.

12 See K.S. Srinivasan's review in *The Times of India*, New Delhi, 22/3/59.

professional persons from India who did not necessarily speak Tamil, nor share an interest in Carnatic music and its stylized dance form with its encoded gestures and conventions of representation. Yet parents felt that Hema's dance classes instilled a sense of Indian culture, the Hindu deities and languages, and, above all a sense of the spiritual in aesthetic endeavour.

It was during discussions with other immigrants from India that Hema realized how little some of them knew about their own culture, and how deeply ashamed they were of what some had come to see as their heathen and uncivilized arts. Committed to educating and introducing not only persons of Indian origin, but also her circle of friends, to the beauty and depth of Indian dance as a crystallization of Indian culture, Hema began to take advantage of Natyakalalayam as an organizational entity for presenting visiting artists, including Ritha Devi and many others. This was a time when it was unusual for Indian dance artists to tour the United States. 1980 was a landmark year in that it was the first time Hema was able to bring over musicians from India and produce about thirty-five performances with them across the U.S., presented by small Indian organizations in small community centers and school stages.

Hema found that in the New World, she had the freedom and community support to re-create and re-enliven a historic scenario that barely continues in India today—the performance of *nrityopchara* (dance as service to the deity). She danced at the opening ceremonies for the Balaji and Rama temples. With her students, Hema went on to stage dance-dramas about the exploits of the deities enshrined in the Chicago temples, where performances were presented during special festivals. For each of these events she would research the rituals and historic texts to create an appropriate dance. These religious duties are now carried out by other dancers in Chicago; they are performed on a volunteer basis with no remuneration. In addition, during the late 1980s she would often perform for the predominantly non-Indian devotees of meditation at the Maharishi International University in Fairfield, Iowa.

Wider Audiences and Cultural Performance Venues

The next milestone Hema recalls is 1986 when she won the Illinois Arts Council Choreography Fellowship and chaired the Midwest Committee of the Festival of India in the United States. This enabled her to communicate beyond the Indian community in Chicago and to participate in the wider cultural and artistic life of the city. As part of the Festival of India, Hema arranged performances at Palmer House, a convention center in downtown Chicago which received overwhelming support from the Chicago theater-going public. Such events included the bharatanatyam students of Kittappa Pillai and Menaka Thakkar from Canada, Kuchipudi dancer Shobha Naidu, Odissi dancer Sanjukta Panigrahi, and Carnatic music recitals such as P.N. Krishnan, violinist, as well as smaller scale fashion shows and folk dance presentations. In the wake of the Festival of India, opportunities arose for Hema to dance in colleges for Asian Studies, English, and theater and dance programs. For these primarily non-Tamil but committed audiences, Hema would select from her repertory of dances upon arrival, according to how she felt the dances would resonate in the new location. She found that audiences responded differently, but enthusiastically, and with sensitivity and knowledge. She recalled one occasion when she was discussing in Tamil with a member of her group, that a *padam* (a short poetic exploration of inner landscapes) might not be appropriate for the venue, when the world music

presenter, who was hanging stage lights at that moment, exclaimed that he would be most disappointed if she omitted to perform a padam. Hema was astonished that he not only understood Tamil but also knew what a padam might be! With such memorable moments she continued her presentations to culturally informed communities beyond the Indian immigrant organizations.¹³

Natya's Support System

Natya went on to receive several National Endowment for the Arts awards—the first for choreography in 1986 and again in 1987—for her creative work, productions, outreach workshops in *abhinaya* for the dance community in Chicago.¹⁴ Hema's students received city of Chicago apprenticeship awards to study with her and with Krithika, and Hema and Krithika also received several Illinois master teacher awards. Yet despite this acclaim and apparent success, it was not until 1994 that Hema, to her astonishment and dismay, discovered that her performances were not contributing to the household income, but rather had become an unsupportable expense. It was from the prospective Natya board of directors that she learned that the income from the awards and performance fees did not cover the expenses involved in promotional materials, airfares, and fees for musicians.

Whereas Hema had always been grateful for and depended upon her husband to make the connections that led to her performances, and leaned on him for organizational and financial work that accompanied the tours, he had never been able to disclose to her the extent to which his career had been underwriting hers. Their vision of artists is not out of keeping with the modernist vision of an artist as an individual who excavates inner depths to generate art while his/her worldly needs are met by society. To some extent, this corresponded with the vision of dancers being sponsored by wealthy members of society. Hema noticed how those who had sponsored Krithika's performances when she had been single, disappeared when she got married; therefore, the perception seems to be that single dancers are to supported by society, but the career of married ones are the responsibility of the husband. Indeed, the narratives of most of the recent generation of successful dancers show how their families supported their art in more than financial ways.

Provisionally for Hema, just after this momentous discovery, the frame of her activities widened further, as ArtsBridge, a service organization for fostering the organizational skills of artists, offered her training in administration and other aspects of running a dance company, including setting up 501(c)(3) documents for her dance company.

In 2001, when the tours that Natya had arranged for dancer Malavika Sarrukkai fell apart on account of the September 11 catastrophe, Natya found itself in a bigger financial hole than ever, and more beholden on support from Hema's successful husband and her local community of friends and students. As a result of this financial debacle, Hema was forbidden by the Natya board to sign company checks. At this time, Hema had also agreed to present a tour for Sonal

¹³ Based on interviews and discussions with Hema Rajagopalan in Chicago in January 2005.

¹⁴ Abhinaya means "to carry towards" in Sanskrit, so carrying an idea towards the audience, to educate, is abhinaya.

Mansingh, with whom she had danced early in her career in India, because she felt that an artist of Mansingh's stature would be supported. However, even this tour turned out to be far more complex and time consuming than Hema had imagined. Arranging the tour consumed the energies of her single full-time company administrator and, once again, she did not think to factor this expense into her working budget. Natya's board of directors resorted to stringent measures to curb her altruistic tendencies. Far from being an example of irresponsible management, this demonstrates the extent to which Hema believed that her art was a spiritual duty and service to society. We have seen how her husband supported this view, unstintingly providing his own services above and beyond his own competitive career in financial management. Both Rajagopalans are clear that this kind of commitment is part of their commitment to give back to the society that accepted them and to negotiate a more informed cultural understanding of Indian performing arts.

Since nonprofit incorporation, it is the income from the tuition of committed ongoing students that is the financial and organizational mainstay of Natya. There appears to be some kind of justice in this when one recalls how Hema made sure that even while she was actively touring, she would return to Chicago each week, incurring extra airfares, to ensure continuity in the weekly classes for her students. Hema currently meets with her regular students in dance studios in downtown Chicago. She no longer teaches in her home, and the studio in the basement, with its well-equipped kitchen and library of dance books, is reserved for rehearsals and as a live-in workspace for musicians during their regular visits to the U.S. Moving dance classes out of her personal space to more public dance spaces has made bharatanatyam accessible to a more diverse group of young dancers, some not of Indian origin. Most recently, Hema and Krithika have been teaching bharatanatyam at Columbia College on a regular basis. Here, too, Hema admits that the income from this adjunct teaching position is not commensurate with the commuting time and effort involved, but she relishes the opportunity to work in the environment of a community of dance professionals, and with students who might never visit the Hindu temples or attend events organized by Indian cultural organizations. In this way she continues to venture into financially unprofitable, but spiritually and artistically fulfilling spaces.

Natya's Relationship to Source Performance Activities in Chennai (Madras)

Throughout Hema's and subsequently Krithika's performing and teaching careers, the constant dialogue with dance in India has served many functions. Visits to India enabled each to refresh her studies of the new developments in technique and choreography. They studied repertory, recorded music, attended dance and music performances, and acquired costumes. Hema recalls happening upon a charismatic white-haired lady demonstrating a group version of a *Thillana* but failed to understand what was so revolutionary about such an idea!¹⁵ From her intercultural perspective such considerations of space were necessary. It never occurred to Hema that such ideas could be considered subversive of tradition.¹⁶ Nowadays with the trend towards group

15 The choreographer, Chandralekha, later went on to choreograph dances that would be acclaimed in Europe and East Asia

16 Hema's experience of Indian nationalist conservatism accords with Medhuri's observation that the new middle-class performers had become more conservative and protective about what they perceived as "tradition" than their teachers had been.

performances coming out of India and all over the United States, the Rajagopalans' continued experience in arranging and sequencing groups has placed their work in the forefront of the kind of tradition-based works that push the edges of the form without abandoning its characteristic movements, music, and formats.

During these visits Hema and Krithika also have performed in different venues all over India. Hema notes that the attitude to her work changed considerably over the years as the scene in India itself has become more international and less concerned, perhaps even bored, with the exclusive focus on recovery, nationalism, and perpetuation of repertory. Although Hema's dancing was highly regarded in India, her choreography had at times disturbed the conservatives. She recalled her decision to perform in Madras, her solo version of Sitaharan, based on a part of Tulsidas' Ramcharitmanas, a north Indian rendition of the Ramayana. The dance was accompanied by a local devotional (vernacular) style of singing known as Chopaa-ee rather than the usual Carnatic music that accompanies and structures bharatanatyam. For this departure, she endured the severe criticism of the traditionalists in the early 1980s. For the reverse perspective, Hema recalled that one of her advanced bharatanatyam students, visiting Chennai with her, had found the local concerts repetitious and uninteresting.

Living bi-culturally, both Hema and Krithika are sensitive to contexts and to the way that readings can differ, hence their desire to explain not only via program notes, but with narrations within the performance itself. While this works for audiences in Chicago, in Chennai, however, the tendency to explain was severely critiqued by the conservatives, because explanations were deemed gratuitous in the indigenous context, and also that a dancer ought not to be speaking about her art but only through her art.¹⁷

However, in India today, this kind of work would no longer be seen as heretical but rather as the current trend. In the recent review of Krithika's performance in Chennai, the writer is particularly appreciative of the musical support and the choreography of nrrta passages: "vibrant, with a good blend of the slower speed steps building up to a crescendo of pace and rhythm, without overdoing it." Her New World sense of spatial presentation was noted: the "penchant for presenting adavu-s on the diagonal, throwing fresh light on familiar movements," and her individualist interpretation to a traditional padam forgiven, finding that "the unexpected finish was especially moving."¹⁸

By the late nineties, the winter dance festival season in Madras had been a momentous and monumental event for over a decade, with literally more than a thousand music and dance concerts within the short span of the typical winter break, and sponsored by several private organizations known as *sabha*-s in Madras with occasional assistance from corporate donations. Another source of revenue for these organizations were the so-called NRI (Non Resident Indian) dancers, who would be charged fees (as opposed to paid) to present their work at the festival. The Krishna Gana Sabha's week with its daily morning lecture-demonstrations and evening dance performances has become an international event, followed by bharatanatyam dancers from

¹⁷ For the response of dance critics to explanations about the dances they were to critique, see the extensive dialogue initiated by Arlene Croce. See Uttara Asha Coorlawala, "Dancing Asianness," in *Narrative/Performance: Cross-Cultural Encounters at APPEX* (Los Angeles: UCLA Center for Intercultural Performance, 2003).

¹⁸ The review appeared in *The Hindu*, December 31, 2004.

the U.K., U.S., Australia, Malaysia, and Africa as a testing ground for presenting their own bharatanatyam performances. Sought after Madras reviews would validate performances in the countries where the NRIs were residing. This festival is still a hot marketplace for networking, locating musicians, and so on. Dancers and dance teachers from the global diaspora not only observe local dancers and vice versa, but the meetings also led to mutually beneficial exchanges of support and performances. Prospective sponsors and officers from arts councils of commonwealth countries in particular can be met here. Websites, listservs, magazines such as *Sruti* (Chennai) and *Pulse* (London) further serve global networking between dancers. With all this going on, it cannot be said that there is a lag between what is performed in India and what is performed in the United States, especially as there are so many groups and individual dancers who take advantage of diaspora connections to visit and perform across the United States. “Gone are the days,” wrote an Indian dance critic recently, “when a blanket statement could be made that artists who leave India are unable to retain the purity of their art. Hema Rajagopalan has obviously trained Kritika with meticulous care...”

In the fall of 2001 Hema and Krithika Gopalarajan, with the help of Professor Joan Erdman from Columbia College, and the support of the Columbia College dance program, presented a bharatanatyam dance conference; this was the first event of its scale with a focus on a single dance form outside India. The Navadisha 2000 (New Directions) conference organized by Piali Ray of the Arts Council in Birmingham, U.K. in 2000 had attracted a similar international audience of specialists, but the focus had been on innovation in Indian dance. Kalanidhi in Toronto, Canada had for years presented confests of Indian dance, but with an inclusive approach to all classical styles and to the more innovative Canadian cross-cultural dances. For their bharatanatyam conference, Natya found ways “to bring Madras to Chicago,”¹⁹ to show the Madras dance cognoscenti what they were doing in the new country. The success of this conference generated a sense among the transnational participants that bharatanatyam had arrived at a point of critical mass. This event stirred controversy in the ways that the critics and dancers from India perceived their counterparts in the United States, which led to a series of articles and debates in various dance publications, as *Sruti, Magazine for Indian Classical Dance and Music*, the *Narthaki* website, *The Hindu* (a Chennai daily), and the *Dance Critics Association Newsletter* (U.S.).

Natya and the Art Making Community

In fact this conference served Hema’s larger agenda of bringing Indian culture to Chicago rather better than she had imagined. She notes that until the 2001 conference at Columbia College, many of her colleagues on the board of the Chicago Music and Dance Alliance, had not really taken an in-depth look at her artistic production.²⁰ This despite the fact that Natya had been one of three dance companies (the other two were Trinity Irish dancers and the Elyo African Dance

19 The phrase was coined by Krithika Rajagopalan during a panel at the 2001 conference.

20 The Chicago Dance and Music Alliance (CDMA) serves more than 150 organizational members, acting as advocate and disseminating information to the general public regarding the activities of their member organizations. Formerly called the Ruth Page Awards, the Chicago Dance Coalition created in 1986 what are now the Awards for Excellence in Dance.

Company) represented on the Emmy Award-winning PBS documentary *World Stage Chicago*, and had, by 1999, performed on the Asian Images series at the Chicago Cultural Center.

Since the *Bharatanatyam in the Diaspora* conference of 2001 was held in the facilities of the Columbia College dance program and documented audio-visually for the college dance archives, Bonnie Brooks, Chair of the Columbia College Dance Program, was deeply involved in the organizational aspect of this conference. The global spread and diversity of attendees—from young students, seasoned performers, choreographers, teachers, master-teachers, critics, dance researchers—the diversity of ages, and depth of participation and discussion impressed her and other Chicago-based invited speakers, as well as casual drop-in local attendees. This resulted in furthering the Chicago dance dialogues with Natya. For example, Natya collaborated with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra to present *Mithra* (after the Jataka tales), further expanding Hema's artistic vision and concepts of performance. In 2004, Natya was awarded the Chicago Dance Award along with the Joffrey Ballet and Hubbard Street, the first Indian dance company to be so honored. Krithika is stepping out on her own as a young choreographer with cross-cultural collaborations with H.T. Chen in New York, a rock opera *Sita-Rama* in Chicago in conjunction with the Looking Glass Theater and the Chicago Children's Choir, as well as other Natya productions, including another PBS documentary, the six-part Chicago Dance Series, with Natya Dance Theater, the Joffrey Ballet, Hubbard Street, River North, and other Chicago performing groups of note.

The Natya Vision of Dance, and its Productions

Having summarized the career trajectory of Hema Rajagopalan and her dance company and school, Natya, I would briefly like to analyze some documentation of her work over time to see how the art evolved into an intercultural vision of the creative potential of bharatanatyam as psycho-physical training, acculturation, and as a path that calls for commitment even as it engenders self-discipline and self discovery. This vision of her dance is perhaps the most profoundly enabling meeting place between bharatanatyam and modern dance since it could equally pertain to modern dance as described in education manifestos. Perhaps this is not so surprising a meeting place, when we recall that historically, it was the idea of gods and goddesses dancing that sparked off the careers of Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn, the dancing duo who are credited, along with Isadora Duncan, as initiating the modern dance movement in America.²¹ Ann Cooper Albright, the dance scholar at Oberlin, had introduced Hema to American visions of India via Ruth St. Denis.

In the film, *Given to Dance*, there is a dialogue between a current Odissi dance star, Madhavi Mudgal, and an aged *mahari* (Odissi temple dancer) named Haripriya, in which Haripriya suggests that the substantial difference between *mahari* dance and that of Madhavi Mudgal lies in the audience for whom each performs, one for God and the other for a public. While the repertory and dance techniques remain the same, the implication is nevertheless that *intent transforms* the dance. Intent seems to be very important for Hema as well. Throughout her

21 Uttara Asha Coorlawala, "Indian Footprints in American Sands," *Pulse: Other Shades of White* (U.K.), Fall 2003.

career, the quality of what and how she will present her dances seems to have been more important than all other considerations. Krithika, however, having grown up in Chicago, sees it differently: she feels that professional artists should not have to deplete personal finances in order to perform, and that money management and what is presented should be commensurate. At the same time, Krithika is aware of the profound spiritual dimensions of her practice. Having married and relocated to Brooklyn, New York, Krithika is beginning to negotiate the future of Natya as a Chicago-based dance company and the contradictions of survival as a performer of a spiritual art in a capitalistic society.

The wealth that Hema wished to share has consistently been the Natya motivation for continuing to present this form. This agenda is very much apparent in the dance entitled *Amma*, an intercultural collaborative work based on the immigrant experience with a focus on the mother-daughter relationship. This work depicts Hema's efforts to teach her daughter to be Indian and Indian with pride, while the daughter is embarrassed to be different in school and with her social peers.²² The choreography is loosely structured around East Asian and Indian immigrant mother-daughter representations with original world music. Middle Eastern instruments were predominantly featured in a mix of instruments from different cultures. The mix of associations evoked by the music contrasted with the competitively austere choices of contemporary and traditional movement of the dancers, raising the specter of orientalist usage of world cultures in this particular setting.²³

In viewing a CVD of a Natya performance of their acclaimed work *Shakti Chakra*, one can see how their entire process of constructing this event is permeated with a desire to share spiritual ideals without preaching, share the excitement of following complex rhythmic footwork, and of generating rasa through individual improvisational performance as well as via the popular dance-drama. The focus is an universal theme, that of the spiratual journey towards self-realization, with recourse to Indian tales to exemplify typical pitfalls and travails of this odyssey.

Shakti Chakra involves group dances based on the vocabulary of bharatanatyam, which Hema has extended with her own versions of the *karana* as described in the Natyashastra and on the temple walls in Tamil Nadu. To the triangular austere symmetries of bharatanatyam, Hema adds visual variety by introducing sensual *tribhangi* (literally 3-bends in an S-shaped body pose) curves based on the temple sculptural poses, and hip and knee rotations and extended knees and ankles according to her reading of descriptions of the *soochi* (literally pointing or needle) movements in the Natyashastra. She is also familiar with similar parallel and preceding explorations by a former colleague, the much celebrated and criticized Padma Subrahmanyam. Alternating with the group dances are sections involving different types of narrative structures. In most of the episodes, the narrative is presented as dance-drama, where each role is presented by a separate performer. In dance-drama, usually each character is dressed according to his or her individual role and gender. However, in *Shakti Chakra*, all the dancers (and they are all beautiful young women) are dressed alike in identical bharatanatyam sarees, so that gender and

22 Newspaper articles on Natya refer to situations where the early students of Natya were confronted by teenagers throwing garbage, eggs, and exploding Coke cans at them. See, for example, Effie Mihoupoulos, "Devoted to the Dance: An Interview with Hema Rajagopalan," in *This Week On Stage, America's Theatre Guide*, 11/5/93.

23 This was the commissioned composer's choice for the score.

character are represented through action just as in the solo classical dance *abhinaya* format. Occasionally the height of the dancer will contribute to the role, with taller dancers playing male role; the tallest ones, particularly Krithika, play the menacing bully or bad guy parts and the more petite women play the female characters. Sometimes, a male character in a macho role will occasionally lapse into her habitual feminine posture and this too seems acceptably conventional—after all that is who they (supposedly) are, real Indian girls! Masculine attributes would be suggested through mime rather than make-up. In the episode where the story of Ahalya exemplifies the pitfalls of lust, the characters appear to be three facets of one personality, suggesting a psychological dimension to the narrative. The exceptional episode in this “ballet” is the use of the very well-known *padam* (particularly associated with the late Balasaraswati’s moving rendition of it) *Krishnane begane baro*. It is performed here (with excerpts of the original text) as a solo in the section marking the purification of the soul through the three kinds of love: motherly love (*vatsalya bhava*) where Krishna is a little mischief maker, sexual love (*rati bhava*) where Krishna is Lover, and finally love of God (*bhakti bhava*) where Krishna is transcendent. Here one sees the success of Hema the teacher: the emotional power and intelligent clarity of Krithika the performer. In this dance one sees a profound understanding of the traditional *padam* and the ways that a single line of the text (Krishna come) can support so many of life’s profoundest experiences.

In traditional *bharatanatyam*, men’s roles are confined to *nattuvangam* (providing cues to both the choreography and the orchestra much like a conductor) and playing musical instruments. However, in many of Hema’s newer ballets, it is Hema who is doing the *nattuvangam* and often singing the *swara* as well. Within the Natya Dance Theatre organization, however, the crucial role of organizing and money management were played initially by her husband, and now by the board and a full-time male administrative staff person.

Aesthetic Issues Pertaining to Culture, Production and Reception

The experience of Natya Dance Theatre in the United States and in India intersects with several broader issues of contact between source and Euro-American notions of art—of making knowledge, of creativity, and of acculturation. Performing texts, making them come alive through one’s own person, involves acculturation layered intimately on one’s own body, stance, and glance. The younger dancers growing up in America have to be re-educated into Indianness. Although the dance is an excellent medium for that, epistemological differences are so profound, that the depth of understanding of alternate modalities of being and thought cannot be accessed by just a few years of study, and require some kind of total immersive experience. Hema has ensured that Krithika has such experiences, but cannot guarantee it for all her students despite her own conscientiousness.

Bharatanatyam’s encounter with globalism is always already there when addressing its philosophical underpinnings, its Sanskrit, Tamil and Telugu literatures, its constructs of body, performance, and reception, in English. With this in mind, I will briefly attempt to describe how current *bharatanatyam* performances transform in response to global visions of modernity that are internalized, rather than geographically specific. Differences between production styles and techniques can no longer be relegated, especially in the case of Natya, to source-diaspora

formations, but rather indicate variations of the transformations, whether in Chennai, the home of bharatanatyam cognoscenti, or beyond India.

Within the United States, Natya seeks to establish bharatanatyam as art, beyond the ghettos of folklorized community expression. There is a sense that the space allowed by multicultural policies to this genre—as an ethnographic specimen rather than as an art with a history longer than classical ballet in Europe, with texts, artifacts, and sophisticated royal sponsors—diminishes the form.²⁴ Diasporic first generation committee members of *sabha*-s (presenter organizations, often run by volunteers) sense this, but have the formidable task of both seducing and educating audiences.

While there is a sense that one needs to re-situate bharatanatyam in the space of dance arts, I believe the following argument from the United Kingdom is particularly salient as it exposes chasms of cultural divergence that etiolate transplanted performance genres. With reference to arts councils policies and academic support for Indian dance, Gregory Sporton has argued that the demands of modernity ignore the ways that the *history of a traditional performing art form is part of its constituent form*; that modernity's imperatives effectively transform the form even as it also demands that the form remain other (against ballet and contemporary dance) and somehow “Indian” (here).²⁵

Demands such as universal access, individual creativity, institutionalized performer-training standards, and phenomenological critiques are actively in place in the case of Natya, as was noted during the 2001 bharatanatyam conference. It is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss all of modernity's demands here, but in order to better understand the pressures from the Chicago art community that Natya has negotiated, I will briefly attempt to contextualize how bharatanatyam may be received in diasporic spaces—defined as cultural rather than geographical spaces.

Within the complex interplay of cultural intertexts that shape audience and critical expectations are subtler cultural demands that have a way of masquerading as universal aesthetic principles, say for example temporal expectations. What is too long, or too short, too slow, or too fast? Should narratives progress in chronological sequences? Why are structures of memory privileged over realism? How can Krishna be a baby and an adult in the same song, and be both human and trans-human? These expectations are to some extent transparent in that while they filter audience perceptions, they are invisible to those who are looking and generating the demand. With the current changing demographics of urban audiences, profoundly conflicting constructs of perception, knowledge, and art can be read, misread, or remain unseen by persons sitting next to each other at the very same performance! In cross-cultural performance, spectacle prevails over historic intertexts, accessibility over complexity. Phenomenological reception effectively narrows the width of presentational options available to artists in layered traditional forms, and very few artists have been able to deconstruct and expose this demand. Thus

²⁴ I am indebted to Madhulika Khandelwal for this perception (March 2005).

²⁵ Gregory Sporton, “The Cultural Gesture: Policy and Practice for South Asian Dance in Britain,” *Congress on Research in Dance*, New York University, October 2001.

traditional narrative structures tend to be marginalized in the service of transnational communication.

In a proscenium theatre, the performer is separated from the audience, whereas in Indian aesthetic theory, this relationship between performer-audience/dancer-patron needs to be intimate. Spatial change affects how the stories get told. Spaces of intimate gestures (you, I) must be replaced by larger than life, bodily expression. The leisurely savoring of an emotion, that is associated with the traditionally solo forms, gives way to well-made “monodramas” as dancers have begun to call this approach. Circular and psychological delving is replaced by linear sequences of external events with moralizing resolutions, particularly in temple and educational venues. Here, too, derives the demand for varying spatial formations with multiple dancers, and for upbeat rhythms rather than rhythmic complexity.

Finally, despite all these accommodations, somehow the production *must be different*, and difference, too, needs to be made accessible via the materials at hand for the performer, usually a very different movement vocabulary, instruments, sounds, and costuming. I call these the opaque elements of performance in that they can easily be identified as tropes of difference. It is in response to such demands that Hema herself has ceased to perform her traditional solo repertory with its vertically layered textures of emotion and poetic sensibility—and this despite the superlative adjectives that pepper her reviews! Instead, she now focuses on training and translating what she knows into intercultural choreographies for the group. Krithika, too, is arriving at that place of mastery where she needs to be a soloist and explore the profound techniques of expressivity that her bi-cultural upbringing enables her to access. We see this in her rendering of a traditional *padam Krishnane begane* at the climax of Shakti Chakra.

Grant review panels have a variety of criteria by which selections are made. Multicultural representation and wider distribution of resources are among these. In the recent past, award panels uninformed about the histories and socio-aesthetic concepts that constitute the form have been unprepared to evaluate claims to originality.²⁶ Funding selects performances and thereby preferred criteria are re-inscribed till amnesia erases the more subtle layers of Indianness...One might argue that the cultural world would indeed be enriched if the styles of performing bharatanatyam multiplied according to locations. Unfortunately, there is also an opposite possibility. Because most Western funding organizations have more funds than are available in India itself, dancers from India, who constantly tour and wish to be seen abroad, must respond to this call for access so that it is not just the immigrant dancers but also the dance at source that is being transformed by this local/global demand.²⁷

26 This observation is based upon conversations with Hema and Krithika Rajagopalan, and further supported by the investigator's own past experiences as performer, site evaluator, panelist for individual artists funding, and as dance researcher and referee observing Canadian and local scenarios for funding South Asian dance. For my observations on the idea of “South Asian dance,” please see: Uttara Asha Coorlawala, “It Matters for Whom You Dance,” *Proceedings of the Swarthmore South Asian Dance Conference: New Approaches, Politics and Aesthetics*, 2002; and “Response to Dr. Andrée Grau's ‘Dance and Cultural Identity,’” *Animated* (Foundation for Community Dance, U.K., Autumn 2002).

27 The modernist presentation of Kathak made accessible by Aditi Mangaldas, “Hidden Stream, Rhythm and Sound,” at the South Bank, London is an example of the success of such a negotiation.

Countering the pressure towards dissolution might be as simple as rethinking the conditions of reception of Indian dance. Elsewhere I have proposed that Indian music and dance need to be discussed simultaneously as they are being received, greatly enriching perception, and performers with instantaneous feedback are able to perform better. This calls for re-envisioning audiences in social clusters rather than in a block of individually marked off seats that make for an isolated viewing experience. Pre-performance announcements and post-performance discussions serve similar needs.

Currently there is no gap between certain kinds of solo and group representations of bharatanatyam in India and the diaspora in the U.S. Ten years ago I wrote, “There is dance activity in India far beyond the traditional forms which are still in the process of being recovered. In addition to dances that faithfully reconstruct traditional inherited movements and forms, there are dances that innovate within these traditional boundaries; dances that adapt traditional elements for the urban public and proscenium theatres; dances that push the frontiers of the classical form by extending the traditional into non-traditional representations; and there are multi-lingual dances that reflect the churning fast-paced changes.”²⁸

Since then there has been a somewhat fractured move towards postmodernism, continuing explorations of plural intra-cultural and inter-cultural movement vocabularies, experimental musical instrumentation, and also an unprecedented flow of all the degrees of “classical” performers willing to put up with travel and logistical conditions that most artists of the developed world would shun.

Conclusion

The acquisition of the skills to bring to life upon one’s own being, socially constructed texts, emotions, and rhythmic forms, sensitizes perceptions to culturally inscribed ways to process experience. As the global diasporic presence of Indians has accumulated, so, too, has the symbolic capital of bharatanatyam as an expression of Indianness and as a way to re-acculturate oneself to Indianness, particularly if one has been born outside India. As this last generation accomplishes a kind of mastery of the form, its members have begun to negotiate for themselves and for bharatanatyam beyond the Indian community, an artistic space whose integrity, social value, and individual performers must be acknowledged by their local colleagues, funders, and art makers. The story of how Natya evolved, moving successfully into arenas of artistic excellence, performative presence, and honorary recognitions, exemplifies such self-conscious negotiations of place and identity.

²⁸ Uttara Asha Coorlawala, “Classical and Contemporary Indian Dance: Overview, Criteria, and a Choreographic Analysis,” Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1994.