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## **Dance in the British South Asian Diaspora: Redefining Classicism**

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In Britain, Indian dance praxes are referred to as South Asian dance by funders, academics, audiences, venue managers, social commentators, dance critics and the practitioners themselves — the latter recruited among “ethnic” South Asians and non–South Asians. South Asian dance is a very uncomfortable umbrella term, yet it continues to be used, often apologetically, because of a consensus on its “convenience.”

What exactly is South Asian dance? 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. The same term is also used to refer to the dances performed in Britain by touring performing artists from the subcontinent. It is increasingly apparent that a single term is insufficient to denote such complexity and diversity, thus another label has been gaining ground, that of “British South Asian dance”: British because it is “made in Britain” and South Asian because the dance techniques on which it is based originated in the subcontinent. It should be noted that the term “South Asian dance” is almost unheard of in India, where dance remains “Indian” and emphasises Indianness.





Chitra Sundaram (photo Satyajit)

Such apparently innocuous descriptive labels are full of significant resonances. Whether it is “South Asian dance in Britain” or “British South Asian dance,” though in saying it we may acknowledge syncretism, a shade of hybridity, and localisation, the terms mask another attempt at naming a complex phenomenon arbitrarily positing it, through western liberal-democratic discourses, as all-embracing and in the singular. Heterogeneity is being swapped for an enforced homogeneity.

South Asians find it politically contingent to use the “South Asian” label with reference to themselves (Sharma as quoted in Nonam 5) and by extension, to their dance praxes. By doing so, they consciously comply with the notion that somehow the distinct ethnic groups and nationalities from South Asia — Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, Bangladeshi and Nepalese, and migrants of Indian and Pakistani origin from Singapore, Malaysia, the Caribbeans and Africa — should all be perceived as one group on the basis of skin colour. The rationale is to ignore differences — which often reflect existing conflicts in the South Asian geo-political space — in the effort to open up a space for themselves in the socio-political landscape of contemporary Britain and participate in British political discourses.

The diversity of British South Asian dance praxes is but a reflection of the diversity of the British South Asian communities. Some have come to Britain via Africa or via the Caribbeans, some via America and Canada, some from the South Asian region. Some are simply “transiting” rather than “settling.” There are several “places of origin,” many “homes” and “homes-in-between” resulting in multiple and fluid identities and ethnicities, intersecting with racial, gender and class realities. The South Asian or Indian diaspora has many changing faces, sharing, not necessarily synchronically, features of a labour, trade, cultural and post-colonial type of diaspora (Cohen x-xii). The concept of diaspora is in itself problematic; it is important to be aware that diasporic is not simply another word for “being away from home” but, as Brah suggests, “the concept of diaspora signals processes of multi-locationality across geographical, cultural and psychic boundaries” (Brah 194) and can be better understood in terms of “diaspora space,” which goes beyond the idea of “borders,” presupposed by the idea of diaspora (Brah 208).

The discussion of ethnicity and cultural identity has grown in terms of the number of interventions over the past two decades, embracing a number of political shifts and positionalities. It is worth reiterating here that definitions of “ethnicity,” “race” and “culture” do not reflect absolutes, are not universal and unchanging conceptual realities, “on the contrary, they represent specific, historically contingent ways of looking at the world, which intersect with broader social and political relations” (Jones 40). Typically, historical, sociological and anthropological discourses have defined and redefined “culture” accordingly and continue to do so.

But the acknowledgment of dance and the performative as being inscribed in this political discourse has been a much more recent phenomenon. Yet, dance and the performative play a role in articulating self-perceptions of cultural identity. For example, after gaining political independence, the post-colonial governments of Asian countries such as India have used dance as part of a nation building programme, projecting an unchanging, essentialised vision

of tradition, culture, identity and community deep into the past, with the full connivance of historians and archaeologists. Changing definitions of "home" affect the content and even the form of dance and influence the organisation of dance and its points of reference, with changes determined by new challenges in a new and constantly self redefining social context and new audience" expectations. Those changes are engendered through a process of negotiation.

It is against this background that I broach, in this essay, a discussion of "classicism" in British South Asian dance praxes. Notions of "contemporary," "classical" and "traditional" dancing are regularly invoked by dancers, academics and dance critics in relation to South Asian dance works, dance forms and dance styles. The debate on classicism and contemporaneity is central to dance discourses but significations of these terms are contextually derived so that the terms resonate in different ways within contemporary British South Asian and Indian dancing in the subcontinent.

The idea of classicism in British South Asian dance genres has consciously begun to align itself, after a phase of postmodern rupture and hybridity, with western concepts of neoclassicism in dance and art, appropriating them in order to allow dancers to reclaim their artistic freedom and integrity and actively participate as interlocutors in British dance discourses. But these re-conceptualisations of neoclassicism need to be flexible enough to accommodate cultural specificity more explicitly. There are aspects of the aesthetic experience which are rooted in culturally specific conventions and these need to be addressed, for more than just aesthetics is at stake.

In this essay I propose to investigate the complexity of these debates and in order to bring out this complexity more fully, I will discuss a specific dance maker, bharatanatyam performer Chitra Sundaram, focusing on her recent production *Moham, a magnificent obsession* (2001). The essay aims principally at stimulating discussion and encouraging critical views, to counter dangerously apolitical stances which flatten out and suppress difference in the name of universalism. The discussion of *Moham* will help to foreground the negotiations that underpin it and the need to keep a space open for difference, to avoid the danger of reducing the breadth of the theatricality of South Asian dance genres and of muting the performers.

### **Classicism, Contemporaneity and Funding Bodies**

As noted, South Asian dance praxes in Britain are bound up with questions of identity. The Leverhulme funded project *South Asian Dance in Britain: Negotiating Cultural Identity through Dance* (SADiB) involved myself, my colleague Andrée Grau and bharatanatyam dancer Magdalen Gorrige, from 1999 to 2001, in an investigation of the process of the institutionalisation of South Asian dance genres, from kathak to bharatanatyam.[1] The institutionalisation was interpreted by our research team as the processes through which South Asian dance genres have been gaining status in the UK over the past 30 years, and are becoming integrated in the mainstream of British dance culture (Grau 28-29).

The research has shown how, in the unfolding of these processes, new genre configurations, such as Shobana Jeyasingh's and Akram Khan's choreographic work,[2] influenced in part by comparisons and analogy with western dance models, have come into being and have affected both educational/teaching programmes and dance making (Grau 6-12). There has also been "a process of adjusting to the requirements of funding bodies for the commissioning of new work" (Grau 29). Through the project, the different registers of the mutually entangled British dance and political discourse were more distinctly heard. Their mutual entanglement has unique dynamics which sustain and are sustained by different power networks.

In the British context, the issue of contemporaneity in South Asian dance praxes becomes indistinguishable from that of attitudes to modernity and postmodernity in dance and the search for a dance language which can articulate the specificity of being a South Asian in today's Britain (Roy 67-85, Iyer 1-4). Yet, there is also a call coming from within the British South Asian community to adhere to "traditional values" (variously interpreted), to preserve the "authenticity of the traditions" and to resist facile "dilutions" (Iyer 2). Whereas in India

contemporary Indian dance praxis is a continuum informed by “classicism,”<sup>[3]</sup> in Britain the relationship of South Asian dance genres with “classicism” is marked by ambiguity and ambivalence.

Consensus on what constitutes “classicism” and what is “contemporary” does not exist. Funding bodies, venue managers, dance audiences, dance critics and some of the practitioners themselves understand contemporary dance as engagement with hybridity, a juxtaposition of an unproblematised monolithic and conservative “classical tradition” with western contemporary dance aesthetics and techniques. This can be seen as the result of an interrogation of the forms which major funding bodies, such as the Arts Council of England, have come to expect, through the emphasis on funding “new, cutting edge” work (Gorringe 116). It is a rather complex and circular situation.

Our Leverhulme project findings seem to show that British South Asian dancers have to negotiate their artistic freedom and their identity — primarily as dancers but also as South Asians (Grau 44-50). In Britain the “South Asianness” is not only predicated on skin colour, gender and sexuality, and class (which in Britain obliterates caste),<sup>[4]</sup> but also religious affiliation (primarily Hindu, Muslim and Sikh). This contrived socio-political and cultural “South Asianness” superimposed on the other identities, masks underlying tensions.

Indian dance classicism in the contemporary Indian context has become increasingly entangled with the dominant Hindu discourse (Lopez y Royo 159-164).<sup>[5]</sup> In Britain, South Asian dancers strive to avoid such an entanglement. The terms of the often violent Indian debate on religious identity are perceived with discomfort by dancers in their diasporic British context, as somewhat irrelevant and to be bracketed off, not to be discussed in a public arena: if South Asian dance is to be mainstream, then it has to be uncompromisingly secular, in the western sense of being totally separate from religion. Being mainstream means to dissociate theatre dance from community dance, which reflects ethnicity and religious allegiance and to establish South Asian dance as a professional pursuit. The push to be mainstream is sustained by the lobbying of South Asian dance organisations, set up to cater to the needs of a growing South Asian dance profession.

There is thus a whole experience of South Asian dancing in Britain that is rarely talked about outside specific communities and this encompasses the dance activities in temples and at community functions. Much of this dancing is of a “folk” or “social” variety but it may include “traditional” bharatanatyam, for example. It is, however, strictly non-professional: a professional South Asian dancer (including well known professionals from India visiting Britain on a world tour) might agree to dance at one of such functions but this will not be regarded by her and her audience in the same way as a ticketed performance at a major theatre venue and dancers will not have expectations of reviews in the press or anonymous appraisals written for funding bodies.<sup>[6]</sup>

As already indicated, one of the main problems for South Asian dancers in Britain is the need to fight off funders’ implicit expectations that they ought to engage with hybridity in order to produce innovative, challenging work. There almost seems to be a double standard: Indian classical dancers from India are expected to perform “classical dance” and usually draw fairly large, mixed crowds when they dance at mainstream venues. They are, despite years of denunciation of orientalist attitudes, still perceived as a locus of authenticity, with a hint of exoticism. But British South Asian dancers are, by and large, more rarely encouraged, by public funders, to engage in “classical” work — perceived, negatively, as “heritage dancing,” the kind of dance better suited to a community celebration. Because they are living in Britain, South Asian dancers are expected to engage with a western dance aesthetics — constantly pushing boundaries in terms of presentation, stagecraft, music, the unfolding and development of the theme, and doing so in a fashion recognisably informed by western performance standards. The imposed goal is to create new, different, never-seen-before work, to experiment with hybridity, to break boundaries, bowing to western modernist and postmodernist aesthetics that seem to reign unchallenged.

Thus, for example, ideas of virtuosity and mastery, integral to Indian notions of classicism in dance, are rarely given due consideration, wholly rejected by postmodern attitudes. In India, to say that doing classical work involves being creative is almost a tautology — people

recognize that to make new work in old styles or to interpret and perform old work convincingly requires being creative; in Britain to say that classical work involves being creative is, for South Asian dancers, a necessity, constantly undergoing negotiation, in order to secure access to public funding. It is also an attitude which underlies a difference in conceptualising classicism and this difference needs, once again, to be addressed.

### **Classicism: One or Many?**

More recently, British South Asian dancers have begun to describe their relationship with their dance classicism as driven by a "neoclassical" approach. Dancer/choreographer Mavin Khoo, who is equally at home with classical ballet and bharatanatyam, has been leading the re-conceptualisation of classicism in bharatanatyam as neoclassicism, inspired by Balanchine's ideas. For Khoo, bharatanatyam and ballet are extensions of each other, although this convergence does not necessarily lead to hybridised work. He posits that this neoclassicism is a shared attitude of dancers who work, cross culturally, with forms based on "classical principles," implicitly assumed to have commonalities on the basis of being classical. Khoo's work *Images in Varnam*, presented in 2001 at the Royal Opera House in London, prefigured this more recent theorisation of neoclassicism, which is rapidly gaining ground as a new "paradigm of transformation" in South Asian dance (see Gorringe 111-113; and Khoo in conversation with McLorg at the Virtuosity and Mastery one day workshop at Middlesex University in May 2003).[7]

We see here the notions of classicism and neoclassicism being used with an emphasis on universality and being applied to a South Asian dance form such as bharatanatyam. It would thus seem that British South Asian dancers are not interrogating and directly challenging the underlying assumptions of classicism, as conceptualised in Euro-American discourses. Trying to fit within an all encompassing universal classicism does have its pitfalls and somehow, insisting on the absolute equivalence of South Asian dance genres' classicism with the western notion, has the counter effect of not allowing South Asian versions of classicism to be accepted on their terms, as the following discussion will clarify. I would argue that this lack of critique is at the root of the confusion which reigns supreme in current perceptions of what constitutes classicism and contemporaneity, with regard to South Asian dance praxes, in the British context.

Classicism (and neoclassicism), as we know it from Euro-American art and dance discourses, denotes

both an aesthetic attitude and an artistic tradition. The artistic tradition refers to the classical antiquity of Greece and Rome, its art, literature and criticism, and the subsequent periods that looked back to Greece and Rome for their prototype such as the Carolingian renaissance, Renaissance, and neoclassicism. Its aesthetic use suggests the classical characteristics of clarity, order, balance, unity, symmetry, and dignity. (ORO; see also Craine and Mackrell, and Macauley 39)

The notion of classicism is European and the aesthetic ideals of classicism carry with them the legacy of classical antiquity and the impact this has had as a model of perfection on European culture, European identity and European imaginings of the western past.[8] In a sense, classicism in a European context has always been a form of neoclassicism, a re-conceptualisation and a new take on the exemplary classicism of Greece and Rome, which found multiple articulations throughout European history, as highlighted by Shanks.

Classicism, in the Euro-American discourse, defines itself as universal: eternal values of universal validity. If we take this to its logical conclusion, there is room for only one classicism and its terms are those of Euro-American discourse. But there are other "classicisms," all of which have come about as a result of the colonial encounter: modelled on western classicism yet, and inevitably so, different.[9] There is here, in the Euro-American perception, an implicit hierarchy, with western classicism at the top as a prototype. The Euro-American notion of classicism as both artistic category and artistic mode has been transplanted and localised in non-western contexts and has become a way of articulating a universal view of art as striving for progress, in what Mitter calls "the universal validity of artistic teleology" (Mitter 1).



Dance classicism in India began in the early 20th century, culminating with Rukmini Devi's indigenisation of the European category of the "classical." In parallel, an Indian art history was being written, which followed a western blueprint: "perhaps more than any other non-European artistic traditions" writes Mitter "the study of Indian art is soaked in western art historical concepts that reflect an obsession with the influence of the West on Indian art" (Mitter 4). Seen in this light, it is hardly surprising that the systematisation of Indian dance should make use of concepts and categories borrowed from Euro-American art discourses.

Devi, a South Indian upper class and upper caste woman who had a prominent role in the revival of *bharatanatyam*, was motivated by the desire to give recognisable international status to the dance that was being reconstituted and this could only be achieved through making it "classical." She attained her goal of classicising *bharatanatyam*, and Indian dance by extension, by giving the notion of dance classicism an Indian identity, through searching in the Sanskrit textual tradition on the performing arts for indigenous aesthetic concepts which could be regarded as the foundation of an Indian dance classicism — an account of this complex process has been given, among others, by Coorlawala and Meduri in their doctoral dissertations.

Though Devi's classicism matched that of the west it was distinct from it, its terms of reference being Indian. It has led to what in India today is understood to be classicism in dance, following the post-independence restoration project of Indian dance. It is important to be aware here that by creating an Indian notion and category of classicism, western classicism was bypassed: once the notion of a classical canon was taken over and translated, it was no longer necessary to engage with European classicism in an Indian context; Indian classicism could grow independently. European classicism and Indian classicism are thus parallel in terms of the position they occupy in relation to Euro-American and Indian artistic discourse but they are different and self-contained artistic modes. Nevertheless, a problematic area is foregrounded when we begin to discuss classicism in a diasporic context. European classicism posits itself as universal and eternal. Its hidden assumption is the belief in the universal applicability of its principles. Where does this leave other classicisms? Indian classicism in India can ignore European classicism; it becomes more difficult for British South Asian dancers to do so in Britain, within the hegemonic paradigm of a western defined classicism (or, if in opposition to it, anti-classicism). The existence of "other" classicisms may be acknowledged, but their internal dynamics will automatically be assumed to be those of classicism as defined and understood in the west. In other words, there is again an issue of difference which needs to be addressed. A major point of divergence, for example, is the notion of conservatism, as will be seen shortly.

It is of interest to refer here to the discussion about dance classicism published in the winter 1999/2000 issue of the South Asian dance quarterly *exTradition* (now *pulse*). Dancer and academic Sarah Rubidge and dancer, singer and academic Pushkala Gopal give their views on whether classicism is equivalent with conservatism. Rubidge proposes that classical forms are conservative and she argues this on the basis of what classicism stands for in its western context (16). To this Gopal replies by giving her definition of classical, which reflects the process of translation from one context to another, in which British South Asian dancers are engaging, in an attempt to defuse their perception as an exotic Other (reversing, in a sense, what Devi did in India):

Classicism is "excellence" of style, conferred or derived over a period of time. A piece of dance can be perceived as being classical if the form adheres to definitions of known lines and principles, or if its approach is within codes well established by past practice. This certainly does not preclude the dimension of the creativity of the individual who makes or performs the work... Classical by itself does not become synonymous with conservative. (Gopal 17)

In keeping with Rubidge's definition and on the basis of the western artistic teleology discussed by Mitter, classicism in a British context is understood to be intrinsically conservative. The very question asked by *exTradition* foregrounds, in my view, a major point of divergence that calls for artists who work within the framework of non-European "classicisms" to challenge the underlying assumption of universality of Euro-American

notions of classicism, not necessarily □ here I am borrowing Rubidge's phrase □ for "the right to command the central artistic ground" 16), but in order to make room for multivocality.

In their efforts to be mainstream and participate actively in the British dance discourse, British South Asian dancers need to engage critically with Euro-American notions of classicism. They have begun to do so only indirectly by proposing alternative ways of understanding classicism and contemporaneity. This is only beginning to configure itself as a discourse in resistance; until now British South Asian dancers' engagement with the dominant classical paradigm has been very much a matter of adaptation and individual response, rather than sustained critique. The personal journey of choreographer Shobana Jeyasingh, whose recognition from the British establishment has been unparalleled, instantiates this individualism. Her trajectory involved moving from a "traditionally authentic" positionality in her late 1970s/early 1980s work to "neoclassical" approaches in her late 1980s/early 1990s phase (MacDonald 8) to a decidedly postmodern engagement which has led her to reject any form of labelling.[10]

Thus, when British South Asian dancers such as Khoo adopt neoclassicism as their new aesthetic paradigm, they are attempting to redefine Euro-American notions of classicism and neoclassicism, without overtly challenging them but reshaping them to include their own dance experience. In so doing they are using, subversively, the European philosophy of classicism and neoclassicism to mark out and set new parameters for themselves and thus reach out to mixed audiences. When Khoo starts a workshop with classical ballet steps, and then makes workshop participants use bharatanatyam *adavus* taking them through a journey from ballet to bharatanatyam, we see a process of transition and negotiation taking place in which Khoo, through a "postcolonial mimicry" (Bhabha 85-92), affirms the classicism of bharatanatyam, hitherto assumed only of ballet. In a sense he is making Euro-American classicism/neoclassicism more accommodating and flexible, and more useful to the South Asian dance experience in a diasporic context. Nevertheless, this is not enough: it needs to be accompanied by a ruthless critique of the underlying assumptions of hegemonic notions of classicism, introducing "difference" more forcefully as a term of the discourse.

In talking of South Asian contemporary dance genres in Britain, the issue of hybridity and, with it, that of interculturalism lurks in the background. As I mentioned earlier, South Asian contemporary dancing in Britain is understood as being principally hybrid work and a fusion of South Asian classical dance genres with western contemporary dance techniques. Interculturalism in Britain is largely perceived as engagement in dialogue with the culture of the predominantly white and male establishment. Intercultural performance in Asia is not the same as intercultural performance in Britain. "How can one presume to talk about interculturalism," asks Bharucha, "if one hasn't begun to encounter the diverse social and ethnic communities inhabiting one's own public space?" (Bharucha 3). In their effort to be mainstream, British South Asian dancers end up ignoring the enriching possibilities offered by other intercultural encounters.[11]

The issue that continues to remain implicit in all these debates is that of cultural specificity and difference. What is to become of the cultural specificity of the South Asian dance genres? Aesthetic enjoyment is imbricated with cultural specificity and somehow the above mentioned neoclassical approaches do not seem to have sufficiently engaged with aesthetic "difference." [12] Take, for example, *abhinaya*, the mimetic component of South Asian dance genres. Attitudes to *abhinaya* are crucial in this debate. A number of prominent British South Asian dancers increasingly choose to leave *abhinaya* out of their choreography when performing for "mainstream" audiences — Jeyasingh for example has discarded it and so has Khan — or try to keep it very simple (e.g. Khoo in his latest work). The reason for this "choice" invariably has to do with the reckoning that mixed audiences are not able to engage with *abhinaya's* complexity and thus are unable to appreciate it. We can certainly discuss *abhinaya* in terms of classicism and neoclassicism. It is, however, difficult to see what a neoclassical approach might be if one is unaware of the sophisticated system of references upon which *abhinaya* rests. Unless this difference is made explicit, the term neoclassical will be meaningless and even confusing. The participation of an audience, says Coorlawala, is an active one only if the audience shares with the performer knowledge of the conventions by which a choreographic or theatre piece is informed (Coorlawala 37-63).

And if a performer is unable to engage in a rapport with her audience, the performance will be doomed. The discussion in the next section will elaborate on this point.

### **Redefining Classicism: Chitra Sundaram's "Moham" Performance in Britain and in India**

Bharatanatyam dancer and choreographer Chitra Sundaram's recent piece, *Moham: a magnificent obsession*, as she says herself, could not have been made anywhere else but in the British context in which she now lives — London. Yet, despite finding her work beautifully crafted, British audiences also found it inaccessible, because of its complex and layered frames of reference. Through this work Sundaram attempted to revisit her own classicism, engaging with both form and content and in so doing, she found herself having to contend with the issue of cultural specificity.

There are two versions of *Moham*: one for the London premiere, which I saw live, and one re-choreographed for the Indian tour, which included a performance in Chennai and which I was only able to view on DVD. The two differ in some performance details, including the attitude of the performer to the work itself.

The process that led Sundaram to create *Moham* is important to understanding the choreography. Brought up in Bombay, she lived in Britain in the 1980s. She has "transited" in many other diasporic countries — US, Singapore, etc. She returned to live in London in 1999 after a long absence. Artistically, it was a challenging time for her. As a performer she has always believed in working from within the *margam* [13] but it was clear to her that in the British climate at the end of the millennium, there was no scope for dancing a *margam* on the urban stage.

Taking on board the neoclassical attitudes discussed earlier, Sundaram chose to dance a *varnam*, rendering it as a piece of theatre, reinterpreting the *varnam* with a new sensibility, aiming to accentuate abstraction in the narrative, with minimal decoration.[14] She decided on a choreography which focused on points of departures and arrivals and the trajectories between them, working with both *nrtta* and *abhinaya*, both integral to the bharatanatyam form. The *varnam* was *Mohamana*, in *Bhairavi raga*, composed by the celebrated Ponniah Pillai, a piece regarded with great awe because of its lineage. She overlaid this with a 6th century *Tevaram* poem, by Appar, which in the terse translation into English by Indira Viswanathan Peterson runs as follows:

Once she heard his name, — then learned of his lovely form. — Then she heard of his excellent town, — and fell madly in love with him. — That same day she left her mother and father — and the proper ways of the world, — lost herself, — lost her good name. — This woman has joined the feet — of the lord, her lover. (Peterson 245)

The *varnam* is linked with Siva as Tyagesa, worshipped at the temple of Tiruvarur, a temple that was once famous for its *devadasi* (temple dancer) lineage.

Sundaram worked together with Mavin Khoo who acted as her rehearsal director. The good artistic relationship they have with each other is noteworthy, in view of their reconceptualisation of classicism as neoclassicism — approached via ballet but ending in bharatanatyam with increasingly sparse *abhinaya* in Mavin Khoo's case, approached entirely from within the bharatanatyam form in Chitra Sundaram's case — and thus with a full blown *abhinaya*.

What was Sundaram's intention? She wanted to bring out and explore the emotion of love, the obsessive love of a young woman who decides to leave everything and everyone to follow her lover whose glory she had known about since childhood. *Moham* was built on a system of references which bore a specific cultural matrix. In a traditionalist interpretation of Sundaram's rendering, the young woman's love would be a metaphor for her quest for spiritual fulfilment; the *bhakti* (devotion) tradition of Tamil poetry, epitomised by the *Tevaram*, sustained this kind of interpretation.

The search for spiritual fulfilment is translated into the language of human love, and the



longing for physical union with her lover (*sambhoga sringara*) symbolises the young woman's longing for self-realisation. However, in Sundaram's interpretation it was not the religious experience that was emphasised, but the moment of protracted longing, full of angst. This potentially had the power to resonate with the audience as an existential marker, and from that point onwards other associations could be made, other metaphors could be imagined as the audience was led by Sundaram into an emotional journey of expectancy, without a resolution.

Sundaram felt that contextual knowledge was not a prerequisite for the enjoyment of the theatrical experience and she believed that even if it did not know what was being changed in the context of a traditional *varnam*, this would not stop the audience from feeling a new charge in the choreography, a new, classical, approach.

She did not want her audience to put up a barrier, thinking of her work solely as yearning towards god and being about a religious experience. She felt that this was in danger of reducing the enjoyment of the experience, which would become loaded with meaning. That the yearning should touch her audience deeply in ways that could be described as being akin to a spiritual experience may have been Sundaram's goal; however, she believed that outlining her expectations would have hampered the flow.

But what occurred was more complex than Sundaram had envisaged.

### **The London performance and the reaction of the audience**

At the premiere, which took place at the South Bank Queen Elizabeth Hall on 15<sup>th</sup> October 2001, Sundaram decided to keep the programme notes to a minimum description. The programmes were distributed late and many members of the audience did not receive them. Thus, only a handful of people in the audience knew what the song was about and could work out for themselves the conventions of a traditional *varnam* — unless they had a good knowledge of Tamil and of bharatanatyam. The delay had been unintentional but it fit in well with Sundaram's view that the audience would have to allow itself to experience the piece without being overloaded with information about its history and background.

In its final form, *Moham* was 60 minutes long, with no interval. During this performance the *varnam* was deconstructed. Some of its portions, including the traditional end, were left out. Other compositions were overlaid on the *varnam* structure. Gone were, for example, the fast and intricate *jathis* (footwork set to specific dance syllables), devised to bring out the virtuosity of the dancer: they were replaced by more austere, less ornamented ones. Gone were the highly stylised *hastas* (hand gestures): there was no gesturing, the modalities of *abhinaya* relied on a full exploration of the *bhava* (emotion), without frills.

Movements were linear, controlled and extended, and the choreography involved several shifts and changes of front, with the dancer at times showing her back to the audience. Though Sundaram switched character in some of the *sancari* passages,<sup>[15]</sup> she remained as much as possible in the young woman's character and the young woman's emotional turmoil and yearning were palpable. A *mallari* composition, overlaid on the *varnam* structure, was choreographed as completely abstract and involved an unusual movement along the diagonal, a metaphor for taking the shortest route to her lover, cutting through. Towards the end of the performance the male vocalist Chandrasekhar sang the lines referring to renunciation and enacted them, as the father who speaks to his daughter who is about to abandon the safety of the home environment to follow a life of uncertainty. He poignantly asks why, switching from being a musician to being an actor.

The London performance was minimalist and powerful, even majestic. All the contextual references were scattered throughout the *abhinaya* sections: references to the Tiruvarur temple and its imposing architecture, to Tyagesa, to the unique *ajapa natanam* movements, related to the yogic breathing of Lord Tyagesa, which are enacted in the temple processions, when Lord Tyagesa is carried by the devotees (Ghose 106). But the audience had to be ready to pick them up and many people did not — they were unable to.

A post-performance talk had been arranged for the denouement. Afterwards, Sundaram

decided that a pre- rather than post- performance talk would have been a better choice "or none at all. The right to know and the need to tell are both double edged. I had hoped for a privacy of sources" (Sundaram 50). During the talk some members of the audience felt almost betrayed that the piece had not been fully explained to them at the outset. A woman, on realising that the lover in the *varnam* was a god, not a man, asked why the audience had been kept in the dark, now feeling uncomfortable with her own enjoyment of the piece.

Sundaram's ambivalence towards her London audience was reciprocated. One reviewer felt she was only talking to the initiate (Saini 31).

### **The Performance in Chennai**

As already remarked, Sundaram made some changes to *Moham* when she took it to India. Among the differences one should note: "the costume, somewhat brighter; warmer lighting (except for the abstract parts), character interpretation ("young virgin woman") and nearly "full wattage" expressive face and *abhinaya* for the text; and the *nrtta*, even if not of the traditional "loud or busy variety" (Sundaram, email communication, 16/5/03).

When the work was performed in Chennai, the audience, it almost goes without saying, fully understood the references and relished them and in general responded positively; though not everyone was appreciative of Sundaram's ruptured interpretation of such a revered *varnam*. Interestingly, Venkataraman, in the *Hindu* newspaper, took Sundaram's interpretation as a metaphor for the *devadasi's* condition, her ecstasy and her downfall. The ambiguity of the ending was seen by her to convey the disillusionment of the young woman who now wonders whether loving her lord has been the cause of her ruin, and this resonated with the disillusionment of the *devadasi* in the face of her historical trajectory.

### **Concluding Remarks**

What is noteworthy about *Moham* is that in a context where the referential framework of the piece was understood, viewers felt empowered to venture more imaginative interpretations of their own experience of the dance performance. In a context where such referential framework was unfamiliar, though moved by the quality of the performance — Sundaram's mastery is beyond dispute — viewers felt unable to participate actively in a dialogic relationship with the performer, as "not knowing" was an impediment. Thus the performance was not a "success": the *abhinaya* was not understood and some viewers could not go beyond a generic appreciation of "poetry of the hands." Sundaram herself, reflecting on her performances in London and Chennai, writes that:

In London I thought I could (perhaps did) achieve "performance-theatre" of a bizarre post-modern kind; in Chennai it was a dance/dance theatre with a big difference: nobody complained that there was not enough "dancing," in fact they all liked my "dancing" but I must now do a "maagam." My Indian performance lost some of that unspeaking angst and majesty; I came out of my London performances tortured in some ways; from the Indian ones, released; more personally affected in the former than in the latter. (Sundaram, email communication, 16/5/03)

*Moham* aptly exemplifies the ambiguity of aesthetic difference and the need to address such a difference in the political arena. *Abhinaya*, says Coorlawala, writing for *pulse*

works only when audiences share knowledge of intertexts, the quick references, in order to appreciate what is being performed. Although inclusivity is a breakthrough for Indian dancers in the diasporas, this kind of multiculturalism is problematic in that the same tropes of "Indianness," originating as signs of difference during the Oriental period and now easily recognisable, keep circulating and get reified. (Coorlawala 17)

Thus, side by side translating western notions of classicism and neoclassicism as descriptors of their dance experience, British South Asian dance practitioners also need to deconstruct such notions, stressing the specificity of the aesthetics of South Asian dance genres, insisting that aesthetic difference be respected and refusing to allow it to be swamped by a universalising aesthetic discourse of "The Classical." This is a prerequisite for fighting back

artistic — hence cultural and social — marginalisation. Shaped and sustained by difference, this “other” aesthetics is thus transformed into a discourse of dissent and subversion through which, by creating contemporary practices of political artistic production, the performative can have an impact on real social space.



Chitra Sundaram (photo Satyajit)

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### **Notes**

- [1] In hindsight, the choice of name for the project was infelicitous: the use of the South Asian dance label was rightly questioned by practitioners and scholars, as reported in *Animated* (Coorlawala 30-33).

- [2] These are the examples that most readily come to mind but the variety of work is bewildering. Here one should also mention the series of "extravaganzas" at the South Bank Centre in London, *Coming of Age* (1999) and *Escapade* (2003) produced by Akademi with the specific aim of making South Asian dance practices more visible and mainstream.
- [3] Here the main thrust of the argument is that Indian dance classicism is a modernisation of dance forms and genres which in pre-colonial India were classified using indigenous systems as descriptors: until the 20<sup>th</sup> century there was no Indian classicism as such, in both art and dance.
- [4] Whereas in India class and caste are to be taken into account simultaneously, "the spectre of caste may not resonate in western contexts in the intricate and deeply internalised ways by which it continues to dominate social and cultural relationships in India" (Bharucha 22).
- [5] This is evident for example in the attempts to bring ritual dancing back into temples, from where it was outlawed with the *devadasi* act of 1947 in Madras and earlier, with the Bombay act of 1934. See Bird 54-78.
- [6] This leaves the performances programmed by an organisation such as the UK Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan in London in a kind of limbo. The Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan is an Indian organization, with headquarters in Mumbai and the UK Bhavan is one of its branches, albeit fairly autonomous. Its policy is to programme Indian classical dance and music from India, indeed its mission is "to train students to be able to uphold the traditions of India and appreciate her rich heritage in art and culture" (<http://www.bhavan.net>). The artistic standard of Bhavan's programmes is very high, with performances given by artists of international standing. Nevertheless, the Bhavan is perceived primarily as a community centre and venue, as an ambassador of Indian culture in the UK reflecting a view of Indianness and South Asianness entangled with the politics of the subcontinent. There is thus an underlying tension in Bhavan's relationship with British art funding bodies and with other British South Asian dance organizations.
- [7] The phrase was used by O'Shea, bharatanatyam dancer and academic, at the discussion which she facilitated in connection with Angika's *Urban Architecture*, a short residency at the South Bank Centre in summer 2003, comprising workshops, performances and talks.
- [8] A notion wholly embraced by North American culture.
- [9] What about classical dance or classical art in, say, medieval India? This is precisely the point I am making: "classical" is a western label; indigenous systems of classification encompassed classicism but did not fully coincide with it. Thus, there was no concept of the "classical" in pre-colonial South Asia, as the word itself was unknown.
- [10] Jeyasingh has repeatedly challenged the idea that her work should be seen as South Asian dance. To her there is simply British contemporary dance and her work is to be regarded as British contemporary within the framework of a postmodern hybridity. For a discussion of Jeyasingh's work see Roy, and also Briginshaw on hybridity and nomadic subject in Jeyasingh's work *Duets with automobiles*.
- [11] This is not to say that there are no attempts to reinterpret interculturalism in a less logocentric way. The work of Sri Lankan born British bharatanatyam dancer and choreographer Indra Thyagarajah with the National Dance Theatre of Jamaica (*Twilight Tempest*) is a case in point.
- [12] Though Gopal's articulation of what classical means to a bharatanatyam artist in today's Britain tentatively begins to address this issue of difference.
- [13] A *margam* is the set repertoire of a bharatanatyam performance, always comprising a *varnam*, a long dance composition which tests the ability of the dancer to engage in *nrtta* (pure dance) and *abhinaya* (expressive or mimetic portions of the dance).
- [14] It should be noted here that Sundaram regards her London *Moham* as coming out of a postmodern sensibility and as her postmodern take on bharatanatyam theatricality.

See Sundaram in conversation with Venkatharaman (<http://www.narthaki.com/info/intervw/intrvw46.html>).

[15] These are elaborations on the main emotion, known as *sthayi bhava*, around which the *abhinaya* of the piece is constructed.

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