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Dance in South Asia

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Our Contemporary dance in India has to evolve and be Indian Contemporary.

Astad Deboo[[1]](#endnote-1)

The number one problem of modern social science has been modernity itself. By *modernity* I mean that historically unprecedented amalgam of new practices and institutional forms (science, technology, industrial production, urbanization), of new ways of living (individualism, secularization, instrumental rationality), and of new forms of malaise (alienation, meaninglessness, a sense of impending social dissolution).

Charles Taylor, “Modern Social Imaginaries”[[2]](#endnote-2)

Modernization involves transformation of an entire way of life, with or without a population’s consent. As Charles Taylor notes above, modernism involves new forms of social living that emphasize the individual versus community, new communications technologies, and new modes of social and economic organization.. Such dramatic changes profoundly affected the arts. However, as Taylor adds, ‘we need to speak of *multiple* modernities, the plural reflecting the fact that non-Western cultures have modernized in their own ways and cannot be properly understood if we try to grasp them in a general theory that was originally designed with the Western case in mind’ (original emphasis, 91). Such ‘multiple modernities’ are significant in analyzing dance in South Asia.

In this essay, I redefine the parameters of modernism as relevant for dance in South Asia, influenced increasingly by transnational travel and creative collaborations across geographic and artistic borders. Modern initiatives in dance make changes 1) in the form of a dance style (such as the Indian classical style of bharatanatyam, which was transformed by including modern dance movements); 2) in collaging two or more dance styles together (such as kathak, modern dance, and odissi); 3) in choreographing new themes from current social issues such as gender and ethnic identity, poverty, and the environment; or 4) in using voice, silence, story-telling, and theatre techniques with movement creating hybrid dance *cum* theatre works.

A chronological trajectory for analyzing dance in South Asia is useful: the ‘modern’ generally spans the period from early twentieth century (revival of classical Indian dance styles) until the 1960s and 1970s. Next, the ‘contemporary’ period in the arts extends commonly from the 1980s with globalization and technological advances. Moving into the twenty-first century, artistic practices from pre-modern, modern, and contemporary times continue along with growing use of computer technology, innovative lighting, theatre and multimedia tools. Modern dance in South Asia is a palimpsest of old and new, traditional and contemporary reflecting Booker Prize-winning Arundhati Roy’s words, ‘India lives in several centuries at once’.

In the geopolitical territory named South Asia (demarcated by super-powers vying for political allegiances after the Second World War), India occupies the largest landmass along with Pakistan, Bangladesh (formerly East Pakistan), Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon), Nepal, and Bhutan. Since the modernizing of dance is more prevalent in India than in other South Asian nations, I will discuss Indian dance more extensively, although the pre-modern period, prior to the nearly 200-years of British colonization (ending in 1947) encompasses all of South Asia. In postcolonial times, independent nations plan future development and modernization on their own terms though neo-colonial dependence on the West continues even today.

In analyzing when modernism began in South Asia, what traditions it rejected or incorporated, it is necessary to remember that there was more than one period of modernization in the region. The production of different genres of art—visual, architectural, coin inscriptions, ancient Sanskrit drama, folk dance—unfolded at their own pace without outside interventions. Modernization as understood today (industrialization, new communication methods), however, was introduced and imposed by British colonizers; once colonization took root, pre-modern South Asian societies could not evolve over time and arrive at alternative modernities best suited to their cultures. Additionally, British attitudes of superiority denigrated local customs as backward, leading to ironic pressures on local people in the nineteenth century to prove that their indigenous traditions, such as classical Indian dance were also ‘modern’ as in terms defined and understood by westerners.

Further, the British modernized South Asia selectively and for the benefit of the colonial administration. At times, the results were beneficial; at others, destructive or somewhere in between. The English school system, as imposed on India under Macaulay in the 1850s had as its primary stated objective production of native funcationaries to carry out the colonialist administration, but simultaneously created an educated class who could – and eventually did – put their knowledge to use in overthrowing British rule. British-built railways both facilitated colonial administration and benefitted local people by expediting transport of people and goods. Conversely, the introduction of cheap factory-made clothing from England into the Indian market destroyed local *swadeshi* (hand-woven, indigenous cloth) endeavors. Such modernizing moves also played havoc with long-standing traditions, customs, and rituals, at once destabilizing many aspects of Indian society and leaving some horrible practices in place. For example, the British, though they were quick to outlaw other practices that interfered with economic and political modernization. The resulting unevenness of British modernization in India – at times beneficial, at times detrimental, and at times both at once – was all too often viewed by the colonizers as an unmitigated good despite its profoundly selective and self-serving implementation.

In the performing arts, the British stigmatized the tradition of *devadasis* (servants of god) who danced within the temple and who were ‘married to the temple deity’. *Devadasis* in Southern India (whose *sadir* dance became bharatanatyam), as *tawaifs* (courtesans) in North India (whose *nautch* dance was revived as kathak) preserved dance and music traditions.[[3]](#endnote-3) Wealthy patrons who also expected sexual services supported these art connoisseurs. The contested histories of reviving bharatanatyam and kathak are significant since these classical styles inspire modernizing idioms unfolding at the intersection of classical and modern, old and new.

Social reformers countered colonizers’ ignorance by demonstrating a different form of Indian modernity rooted in ancient, even timeless Indian culture distinct from Western modernity. This endeavor to invent, even ‘culturally engineer’ an Indian past within which classical Indian dance belonged was a complex process undertaken by Brahmins and educated elites; effectively, they marginalized *sadir*’s actual community of practitioners.[[4]](#endnote-4) ‘The genealogy of the classical in modernity and its location in the spiritualized inner realm of the indigenous’, remark Indira Viswanathan Petereson and Davesh Soneji in an excellent revisionary history ‘suggest why upper-caste elites and middle-class nationalists became the chief engineers of the classicization of indigenous dance and music in both northern and southern India’ thereby proving its unique modernity to the colonists.[[5]](#endnote-5)

One key player in bharatanatyam’s revival was Rukmini Devi Arundale who institutionalized bharatanatyam with her establishment of Kalakshetra Dance Academy in 1936.[[6]](#endnote-6) Born into the Brahmin caste, she broke tradition at sixteen to marry George Arundale of The Theosophical Society in Madras. This marriage enabled Devi to travel extensively and view different artistic traditions. The famed Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova inspired her to study ballet; Pavlova was also instrumental in persuading Devi to explore her own Indian dance traditions – encouragement that led Devi to study *sadir* with *devadasi* Mylapore Gowri Amma and to be involved in its ‘revival’.

Although Devi asserted bharatanatyam’s traditionalist base, she modernized dance presentation via modern stagecraft and lighting that rendered the dance theatrical. Simultaneously, in asserting the spiritual over the sensual in bharatanatyam, Devi worked against modernizing the style; rather, she valorized tradition, and claimed to ‘purify’ *sadir*, replacing sensuality with religiosity. This approach dismissed *devadasi* practice that embraced the sensual, sexual and spiritual as integrally related. The legendary *devadasi*, T. Balasaraswati strongly objected to Devi’s ‘Brahminized’ dance, describing it as ‘vulgar’.[[7]](#endnote-7) Nationalist fervour influenced Devi and the Theosophical Society’s role in reviving the dance with ‘almost religious idealization’ that was itself, according to Amit Srinivasan, ‘an effect of westernization’.[[8]](#endnote-8)

In the 1920s and 1930s, the American dancer, Ruth St. Denis, inspired the reformer Madame Menaka to transform the North Indian dance style, *nautch*, which had fallen into disrepute into ‘a modern aesthetic expression’ known as kathak. Like Devi, Menaka also introduced modern stagecraft and created new dance-dramas relying on Hindu myths. Uttara Coorlawala notes that St. Denis’s initial inquiries about *nautch* dancers were met by ‘silence’ and ‘embarrassment’ since *nautch* was already considered debased. Nonetheless, she met Bachwa Jan, a famous *nautch* dancer. The rest is history as St. Denis and Ted Shawn created many dances with the Denishawn Company such as *Nautch Dancer*, and *Radha* (1905).[[9]](#endnote-9)

As the sun was setting on the British Empire, India and Pakistan were divided into two nations in the bloody 1947 Partition. The British-drawn national boundaries – created without regard for separating peoples of the same ethnicity, language, and religion – continue to be problematic even today. Since independence, India and Pakistan have fought two wars, and to this day, each rival, now with nuclear weapons, views the other with suspicion. It is a sad reality that the arts are not encouraged though they persist in the margins in the Muslim state of Pakistan. Political suspicion accompanies anathema to Indian dance styles—bharatanatyam is shunned since it translates as ‘dance of India’, and is associated with Hinduism, a rival to Islamic Pakistan. However, classical Indian dances influence its neighbours to the East, in Bangladesh and to the South in Sri Lanka.

To de-center the dominance of India in any discussion of South Asia, I will discuss dance in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, before returning to India. The climate for dance in public in Pakistan’s Islamic State is restricted. Since 1947, Pakistan’s mostly military governments follow conservative, even fundamentalist interpretations of Islam that do not foster dance or creative experimentation.

Prior to Partition, prominent dancer, Indu Mitha trained in the Uday Shankar (discussed below) style by Zohra and Kameshwan Sehgal in Lahore. Later, Mitha visited India to study bharatanatyam in Delhi and Chennai with Lalita Shashtri. After her marriage in [DATE?], Mitha returned to Pakistan and continued to teach bharatanatyam even during General Zia’s repressive regime when dance performances were relegated to private homes. Mitha adapted her signature bharatanatyam style to include Urdu songs attuned to Pakistani cultural identity. This entailed an innovative blending of Hindu and Muslim affects, and though the Urdu songs add different themes to bharatnatyam, there is no distinct modernizing of the form. Modern influences come from Pakistanis who have moved abroad such as Mitha’s daughter and disciple, Tehreema Mitha, who moved in 1997 to the US. She formed Tehreema Aabvaan Dance Productions Company in Maryland where she now lives.

~~[[start proposed cut]]Like her mother, Tehreema combines bharatanatyam with inventive uses of North Indian music, folk instruments, along with guitar, saxophone, and piano for contemporary work. Tehreema’s choreographic explorations move away from Hindu mythology to themes from science, philosophy, literature, everyday struggles of modern life, and gender issues. Tehreema remarks, “My work is not fusion. It is what we are today; now, I refuse to be tidily slotted and labeled as ‘Ethnic’, ‘Oriental’, or ‘Traditional’ . . . We are part of a dynamic, ever changing World Culture in which, if we do not lose our roots and sense of self, we can discover so much more.” (http://www.jazbah.org/tehreemam.php)~~

~~The first National Dance Festival in Pakistan (1995), a landmark event, showcased three artists who had lived and studied abroad--Tehreema Mitha, Sheema Kirmani (odissi) and Nighat Choudhry (kathak). They presented innovative choreography and modern themes of gender and identity based on poems by Faiz Ahmad Faiz, by Sufi saints, Rumi, Bulleh Shah, by feminist Ismat Chugtai. Such imaginative work is promising for the development of dance by diaspora Pakistanis who, if politically feasible, may bring their new works to their homeland.~~

~~East Pakistan became independent Bangladesh in 1971. Although predominantly Muslim, Bangladesh borders the majority Hindu Indian state of West Bengal and the two share the Bengali language and a love for Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore’s dance dramas and music. In 2012, in celebration of Tagore’s 150~~~~th~~ ~~birth centenary, the Bangladeshi Shadhona Company adapted Tagore’s~~ *~~Tasher Desh~~* ~~using different movement vocabularies—Indian classical dance style of Manipuri, Purulia~~ *~~chhau~~* ~~(West Bengal’s martial arts with huge masks and actors playing gods, demons, animals), and contemporary movements. This innovative venture was a transnational collaboration between Bangladeshi dancer Warda Rihab, specializing in Manipuri, and UK’s Rachel Krische.~~

~~In general, folk and tribal dances such as~~ *~~santal~~*~~,~~ *~~chhokra~~* ~~(where boys play female roles),~~ *~~lathi~~* ~~(performed by youth carrying daggers and cymbals during Muharram, the Muslim holy month),~~ *~~ghatu~~* ~~dance, and Kali dance, along with Manipuri, and Middle Eastern dance influence dance in Bangladesh.~~

~~In Sri Lanka, modernizing dance includes the use of traditional and western contemporary styles. naTANDA, Sri Lanka’s first contemporary dance company blends traditional Kandyan dance with ballet, yoga, and bharatanatyam in its signature style creating contemporary Sri Lankan dance theatre. Chitrasena Dance Company (since 1940), Sri Lanka’s oldest, pioneering dance company experiments with movement vocabularies while preserving traditional dance forms. Mohan Sudusinghe’s Meranga Dancing Company explores new avenues in modern dance and along with traditional forms creates contemporary works. Venuri Perera, a member of Chitrasena Vajira Dance Ensemble, a choreographer-dancer and psychologist collaborates in various dance/theatre/multimedia projects in Sri Lanka, UK, Japan, Spain, and Cambodia.~~

~~Nilan Maligaspe of Arpegio Creative Dancing Academy teaches creative dance, ballet, and modern dance to underprivileged children. Maligaspe has produced ‘Black White and Red’, a ballet, and ‘Solace in Stone’ a dance-theatre piece (2010). Currently, he is creating a dance theatre based on Aime Cesaire’s~~ *~~Tempest~~*~~.~~

~~I return now to~~~~India’s rich and long tradition of classical dance styles and theatre that remain significant in modernizing dance forms. There are eight recognized Indian classical dance styles that figure overtly or subtly in dynamic Contemporary Indian Dance, most prominently since the 1980s, influenced by the opening to global cultures, the web and transnational travel.[[10]](#endnote-10) Bharatanatyam and kathak, most commonly innovated, are integral to transformative journeys for performing artists along with modern dance (use of the floor), abstract dance (non-narrative content), martial arts, theatre techniques, and multimedia in new, multi-layered choreography.[[11]](#endnote-11)~~

~~Curiously, the key characteristic of modernism in Indian dance today, even with borrowing from western modern dance, is its persistent Indianness—not as narrow or monolithic, but multifaceted, varied regionally, with different languages, musical, folk, and martial arts traditions. This persistent Indianness is visible in contemporary Indian dancers’ costuming, or aurally in Indian music, or in affect and expression of~~ *~~rasas~~* ~~(emotion and taste—aesthetic and gastronomic). The~~ *~~navarasas~~* ~~(nine primary emotions such as love, anger, fear, disgust, compassion, valor, laughter, sorrow, and peace) are discussed in the ancient Indian treatise of drama, dance, and dramaturgy,~~ *~~The Natyasastra~~* ~~(anywhere from the 2~~~~nd~~ ~~to the 5~~~~th~~ ~~century BCE). The depiction of~~ *~~rasas~~* ~~prominent in classical dance is also found in contemporary Indian dance. Hence, even as an Indian dancer uses certain modern dance techniques such as the floor, abstract movement without narrative—the distinctive flavor comes across as Indian or South Asian especially when abstract movement is expressed uniquely with~~ *~~rasa~~*~~.~~

~~Pioneer Astad Deboo~~

~~This technique of using abstract movement with emotion rather than the impassive face common in modern dance is realized beautifully in Mumbai-based Astad Deboo’s choreography spanning 40 years. As quoted in the epigraph, Deboo enjoins contemporary Indian dancers to be “Indian contemporary”, not simply imitate the west. “Indian contemporary” idioms evolve from India’s classical and folk dance, gesture language, martial arts along with openness to intercultural and cross-disciplinary interactions in today’s shrinking world.~~

~~Deboo’s name is synonymous with Contemporary Indian Dance, a style that he pioneered at a time when innovations were not welcomed. In the 1970s-80s, his work was not accepted by Indians who saw it as “too western” and by westerners who judged it as “not Indian enough.” By the 1990s, audiences in India and beyond grew receptive to new Indian dance idioms partly influenced by information on the web. Deboo was recognized as a pioneer in Contemporary Indian Dance by the Indian government—in 2007, he received the Padma Shri, a high artistic recognition. Deboo has performed in over 60 countries includes solo, group and collaborative choreography with performing artists (the late Pina Bausch, Pink Floyd), with musicians (Gundecha brothers), martial artists (~~*~~thang-ta~~* ~~of Manipur), and puppeteers (Dadi Pudamjee).~~

~~Deboo’s dynamic dance career demonstrates openness to different movement vocabularies worldwide along with his base in kathak studied with Guru Prahlad Das from a young age (later studying kathakali with Guru E.K. Pannicker) Deboo travelled to US, Europe, Southeast Asia and Japan observing and learning different dance vocabularies. “My style has evolved from energetic and entertaining” remarks Deboo, “to minimalist and introspective, from the narrative to the abstract.” His stunning signature style is characterized by intense concentration and technical virtuosity along with a distinctively Indian aesthetic of evoking~~ *~~rasa.~~* ~~Deboo describes his style as “contemporary in vocabulary and traditional in restraints.”~~

~~Deboo’s contributions in modernizing Indian dance include collaborative initiatives such as with Manipuri martial artists, i.e.~~ *~~thang-ta~~*~~, and with drum dancers,~~ *~~pung cholam~~*~~. He observes them, and then integrates his own signature movements from modern dance, emphasizing the body along with expressive~~ *~~rasa~~*~~. With Manipuri artists, Deboo created~~ *~~Rhythm Divine~~*~~. Another noteworthy collaboration is Deboo’s nearly 20- year creative choreography with the deaf—first with The Action Players (~~*~~Dancing Dolphins~~*~~) in Kolkata, then in Chennai with Clarke School for the Deaf (~~*~~ContraPosition~~*~~)~~*~~. ContraPosition~~*~~, that opened the International Deaf Olympics (Melbourne, Australia, 2005), uses modern dance movements along with a modernized depiction of the~~ *~~rasas~~* ~~(emotions of fear, disgust, compassion). Since 2004, Deboo has led~~ *~~ContraPositions~~* ~~in 75 shows across India, Southeast Asia, Europe and Australia.~~

~~Deboo’s deep humanity informs his evocative work,~~ *~~Breaking Boundaries~~*~~, with street children of Salaam Baalak Trust (established by filmmaker Mira Nair after~~ *~~Salaam Bombay’s~~* ~~success). As in Deboo’s work with the deaf, he challenges these youth (some coming from violent pasts) to achieve his signature meditative and minimalist style. He uses modern dance in emphasizing the dancers’ bodies in difficult balancing poses, and in creating geometrical patterns. The youth, only aware of Bollywood style dancing, were amazed to discover that even silence is potent in performance and that holding poses, lifting other bodies, and working with unfamiliar music—Deboo’s musical soundscapes bring together classical piano, opera, and other global sounds—are part of Indian dance~~ today. [[end proposed cut]]

Before Deboo’s post-1980s creative work using modern dance with Indian dance *mudras* (hand-gestures), affect, and *rasa*, artist Uday Shankar (1900-1977) in early twentieth century is regarded as a pioneer of what was then called ‘Modern Indian Dance’. Shankar is credited with being the first to bring Indian classical dance to the West. Shankar’s ‘Creative Dance’ combined Indian dance with new movements and story telling, searching for a dance language that would communicate Indianness to varied audiences.[[12]](#endnote-12) Recent scholars, challenging earlier dismissal of such efforts as ‘orientalist’, have reassessed Shankar’s contributions; scholar Joan Erdman calls him ‘India’s first modern dancer. [Further] Shankar’s translations for the West become both a success in their own time and a significant reference for contemporary attempts in modern and ethnic dance production’ (84).[[13]](#endnote-13)

Once again, Pavlova enters Indian dance history—Shankar toured with her and choreographed two pieces, though he received no recognition from local reviews. Pavlova advised him (as she advised Devi) to return to India and explore his own traditions. Shankar did so in 1938, establishing his Culture Center in Almora where students studied Indian classical movement (not entire items), music, improvisation, and fine arts. Shankar’s goal was the body’s free exploration unrestricted by classical styles’ rules, hence, traditionalists criticized his appropriation of classical vocabulary. Another of Shankar’s key modernizing contributions was in works like *Labour and Machinery* critiquing the increasing mechanization of life. Such choreography about current themes is a mode used by Contemporary South Asian artists.

Another icon in innovating Indian dance is the wholly original artist Chandralekha (also known as Chandra, 1928-2006). Chandra used abstract movement (less common in the 1970s than today) to evoke *rasa*, demonstrating that emotional responses were *not* confined to narrative dance—this is her core legacy for future Indian dancers. Chandra trained initially in bharatanatyam, but rejected its superficial religiosity, over-ornamentation, and reliance on epic stories and myths.

Although, like modern dancers, Chandra embraced the human body, the central role of the spine, male and female energies in her various works beginning with *Angika* and ending with *Sharira* (both translate as the body), her vision was grounded firmly in Rustom Bharucha’s words, in ‘the Indian psychophysical tradition’ including martial arts such as Kerala’s *kalaripayattu*.[[14]](#endnote-14) Chandra never claimed that she was doing anything new or modern. She was a risk-taker and gives new meaning to truly working on the edge.

I recognize Chandra’s lasting legacy as a pioneering foremother for artists in India and the diaspora using abstract movement with *rasa*—reverberating in Deboo’s and Chennai-based Anita Ratnam’s choreography, in Toronto-based Hari Krishnan, trained in bharatanatyam, Artistic Director of a multi-ethnic dance company entitled InDance. Krishnan’s vibrantly hybrid work seamlessly integrates bharatanatyam, modern dance, and post-modern breaks in the choreographic progression. Krishnan and Anita Ratnm work transnationally between Chennai and Toronto, both deploying modern dance with *rasa*, and transforming bharatanatyam from within, as well as re-interpreting India’s epic figures and stories in contemporary choreography. Ratnam’s *A Million Sita-s*, and Krishnan’s *Owning Shadows* delve via abstract movement into human emotions of love, lust and greed.

Chandra’s legacy is also alive in Los Angeles-based Shyamala Moorty who works with The Post Natyam Collective (with members in Los Angeles, Kansas, and Germany) who creates ‘long-distance choreography’ via the internet.[[15]](#endnote-15) Moorty’s solo entitled *Sensitize*, represents female desire and pleasure via movement and *mudras* (from classical bharatanatyam) reminiscent of Chandra’s use of abstract movement infused with *rasa*. Among other Indian descent diaspora artists, Los Angeles based Sheetal Gandhi, and New York based Parijat Desai embrace a vibrant post-modernity that breaks down the body lines even further than in modern dance; their jagged choreography works against linear meaning-making.

Movement-based groups that encourage innovative modern work along with national and international collaboration, workshops and mentoring young artists in India include New-Delhi-based Gati Dance Forum ([www.gatidance.come](http://www.gatidance.come)) since 2007; Bangalore-based ‘Attakalari: Center for Movement Arts’ (since 1992) that also offers a Diploma in Movement Arts and Mixed Media (www.attakalari.org). Gati ‘focus(es) on the evolution of new languages through innovation and experimentation in the context of existing dance practices in India’”

Among other performing artists using elements of modern dance in their work in India are Madhu Nataraj, trained in kathak by her mother Maya Rao (www.natyamaya.in) and in Contemporary Dance in New York, is Artistic Director of Bangalore-based Natya STEM (Space, Time, Energy, Movement) Dance Kampni (since 1995) recognized as one of India’s leading contemporary dance companies that showcases how “tradition and modernity co-exist” ([www.stemdancekampni.in](http://www.stemdancekampni.in)). Chennai-based Padmini Chettur trained in bharatanatyam danced from 1991-2001 in Chandralekha’s works then formed her own company creating works with impeccable bodily rigor and virtuosity. Chettur, different from Chandra, or Ratnam elects to wear modern dance’s black leotards and tights and not evoke any Indian affect in her presentation. ([www.padminichettur.com](http://www.padminichettur.com)).

Thus far, I have analyzed modern dance techniques influencing the *form* of Indian dance. Modernity is as importantly expressed via dance and theatre representations of *modern themes* concerning women and the poor by Ahmedabad-based Mallika Sarabhai (1954--) bharatanatyam trained by her mother, Mrinalini Sarabhai. Sarabhai creates modern, feminist works against gender discriminations (as was done by her mother earlier in critiquing dowry related deaths in dance) by drawing upon female icons Sita (from *The Ramayana*) and Draupadi (Sarabhai played Draupadi in Peter Brooks’ *Mahabharata*). Her one-woman dance-theater work, *Sita’s Daughters* (with over 500 shows) valorizes women who question rather than acquiesce to males in their lives.

Anita Ratnam ([www.arangham.com](http://www.arangham.com)), founder/Director of Arangham Trust and Dance Company (since 1992), described as a ‘contemporary classicist’ retains, like Chandralekha, an Indian aesthetic affect in her choreography along with modern dance movements. Ratnam’s wholly modern take on traditional goddess traditions and ‘parallel mythologies’ from India, Tibet, China, and Egypt lies behind her non-linear, non-narrative choreography that uses abstract movement with *rasa* in works such as *7 graces* (that abstracts from the qualities of the Tibetan goddess Tara), among other works.

Ratnam created a key modern tool that has become indispensable for anyone interested in Indian dance worldwide—a web portal for Indian dance, [www.narthaki.com](http://www.narthaki.com) (since April 2000) that includes reviews, interviews, announcements, and interactive segments. Ratnam is renowned as a visionary curator of cutting-edge Indian performing arts events, and for her pioneering co-production of “The Other Festival”, 1998-2006 ([www.theotherfestival](http://www.theotherfestival).com) that provided a platform for experimental dance.

British-Indian artists who use modern and contemporary dance most skillfully in their choreography include bharatanatyam-trained Shobana Jeyasingh, and British-Bangladeshi Akram Khan trained in kathak and contemporary dance. Recently, Khan returned to his parents’ home in Bangladesh with *Desh* (homeland), a work that evokes immigrant dilemmas of cultural identity and belonging. ([www.shobanajeyasingh.co.uk](http://www.shobanajeyasingh.co.uk) and www.akramkhancompany.net)

In conclusion, the legacy of distinctive South Asian modern dance continues to evolve. Today, artists create choreography regionally and transnationally reinventing their rich dance traditions along with openness to global dance influences in vibrant new work.

1. “Astad Deboo in conversation” at the Ananya Seminar in New Delhi, 7 October 2009 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Charles Taylor, “Modern Social Imaginaries”, *Public Culture* 14:1 (Winter 2002), 91-124. Quotation on p. 91. See also, Dilip P. Gaonkar, ed. *Alternative Modernities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See useful reconstructions of kathak history in Sunil Kothari, *Kathak:Indian Classical Dance Art* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publciations, 1989), and Pallabi Chakravorty, *Bells of Change: Kathak Dance, Women and Modernity in India* (Calcutta, London, New York: Seagull Books, 2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See also, Uttara Asha Coorlawala, “The Birth of Bharatanatyam and the Sanskritized Body”, in *The Body in Dance: Modes of Inquiry*, Conference Proceedings, The Congress of Research on Dance, 1996; Matthew Allen, “Rewriting the Script of South Indian Dance”, *Tulane Drama Review*, 41:3 (1997), 63-100; Janet O’Shea, *At Home in the World: Bharatanatyam on the Global Stage* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2007); Janet O’Shea, “Traditional Indian Dance and the Making of Interpretive Communities”, *Asian Theatre Journal* 15: 1 (1998), 45-63. Other scholars on this “revival” history are noted in the course of the chapter. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Indira Viswanathan Peterson and Davesh Soneji, eds., *Performing Pasts: Reinventing the Arts in Modern South Asia* 9New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008), 6. Hereafter, citations from this text are indicated by *Performing Pasts.* [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See Avanthi Meduri, ed. *Rukmini Devi Arundale (1940-1986): A Visionary Architect of Indian Culture and the Performing Arts* (Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass Publishers, 2005); Leela Samson, *Rukmini Devi* (Biography), (Viking India, 2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. T. Balasaraswati, “The Art of Bharatanatyam”, *Sruti*, 50 (1988), 37-40 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Amrit Srinivasan, “Reform and Revival: The Devadasi and her Dance”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 20:44 (November 2, 1985), 1869-1876. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See Uttara Asha Coorlawala, “Ruth St. Denis and India’s Dance Renaissance,” *Dance Chronicle* 15:2 (1992), 23-52; Jane Desmond, “Dancing Out the Difference: Cultural Imperialism and Ruth St. Denis’s ‘Radha’ of 1906”, *Signs* 17:1 (Autumn 1991), 28-49. See also Priya Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor in the US* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011); and “The Bodies Beneath the Smoke or What’s Behind the Cigarette Poster: Unearthing Kinesthetic Connections in American Dance History”, *Discourses in Dance* 4:1 (2007), 7-48. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. The eight classical dance styles recognized by the Indian Government’s major arts organization, Sangeet Natak Akademi are: Bharatanatym, Kathakali, Kuchipudi, Mohiniattam (from Southern India), Kathak (from the North), Odissi, Manipuri, Sattriya (from the East) [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. See Janet O’Shea, *At Home in the World: Bharata Natyam on the Global Stage* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2007), and Ketu H. Katrak, *Contemporary Indian Dance: New Creative Choreography in India and the Diaspora* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. See Urmimala Sarkar Munsi, “ Boundaries and Beyond: Problems of Nomenclature in Indian Dance History”, in *Dance Transcending Borders*, ed. Sarkar Munsi, Urmimala (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2008, 78-98. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Joan Erdman, “Performance as Translation: Uday Shanka in the West” TDR: The Drama Review (1987), 31:1, 64-88; See also, Urmimala Sarkar Munsi’s essay in *Dance Transcending Borders*, ed. Munsi, U.S. (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2008, 78-98. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Rustom Bharucha, *Chandralekha: Woman/Dance/Resistance* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 1995) [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. See Ketu H. Katrak, *Contemporary Indian Dance: New Creative Choreography in India and the Diaspora* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). See especially Chapters 5 & 6 [↑](#endnote-ref-15)