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The spiritual transformation of Indian dance in Australia - from Lightfoot to Aboriginal corroboree

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Abstract

In this presentation via text and moving images I narrate the story of how Indian performative arts, in particularly Indian – classical and modern – dance arrived and made its mark in Australia. I demonstrate the ways in which this art form in its various permutations and productions, original and creative, in interaction with Indigenous and contemporary Australian dance repertoires, have impacted on Australian culture, audiences and art-world in general. The origins of the Indian performative arts recede far back to Natyashastra, (300 BCE); while the first signs of Indian performative arts in Australia are dated to around mid-1920s. A chance meeting of two itinerants in Sydney: Anna Pavola and Rukmini Devi (the wife of a prominent English theosophist from Madras) set off the first sparks. The movement gained momentum with Louise Lightfoot, a Melbourne ballerina (also Australia’s first woman architect, assisting Walter Burley and Marion Griffin) who attended a performance by Pavola, took lessons from Rukmini Devi, and staged ‘The Blue God’ (Krishna) performance in Melbourne in 1938. Later she travelled to learn the more classical dance styles in Bangalore and Kerala, returning to Australia with the legendary Shivaram in 1947, and performing together at national theatres.
throughout Australia. Since the 1970s, with the ‘multicultural turn’, there have been significant developments in the arena of Indian performances, establishment of dance schools, and creative engagements with both local (indigenous and contemporary) dance troupes, and with visiting maestros from India (e.g. Shivaram again 1974 and Sonal Mansingh in 1985). With Australia Council support since 1987, high-level choreographs of classical Indian and creative dance forms have evolved. Two resident Indian dance maestros (one being the first Indian woman) have also been awarded Order of Australia Medals for "service to the performing arts as a teacher, choreographer and performer of classical Indian dance."

I have been documenting this experience, and asking who have been the key players on the ‘desi’ dance stage and transmission process? How have their achievements impacted on the diasporic community and what has been the extent of its popular acceptance in the mainstream performative arts? How extensively is Indian dance, along with yoga, taught in schools and whether this of educational and cultural appreciation value?
In the beginning the gods and heavenly nymphs danced. Priests in the highly evolved Vedic age in northern India, some 3,000 years back, knew of these primeval dances and enacted them ritually in sacrificial rites through incantations of metrical chants and mantras. The Great Lord-Person in a famous hymn is dismembered by the gods in the act of creating the world; elsewhere creation is depicted as proceeding through a series of cosmogenic dances by the Great Lord. Sanskrit drama and theatricality evolved out of these latent forms as the academic means of communicating the moods and intentionalities of the virtuous gods, and their stormy fights with the demon-gods, performed in open pantomimed mimicry and embellished with songs and music (sangita-shala). The latter art itself goes back to the Indus Valley civilisation pre-dating Vedas, where it had a religious folk style of mimicking gestures from everyday life, its pleasures and tribulations, and the various emotions evoked in the natural world.

The legendary Bharata, somewhere between 200 BCE to 400CE, systematised the extant styles and literature in dramatic and dance artforms in his compendium, the Natyashastras. This has long been the canon for deriving and developing all forms of classical dance in India, and its influence has spread wherever Indian dances have travelled to. To enable a framework, Bharata identified eight primary quasi-emotive dispositions, namely erotic love, comic laughter, grief, fury, heroic spirit, fear, wonder, and disgust or revulsion (with a ninth, of peace, added
later). Collectively, these are called rasa, the aesthetic imaginary or quasi-emotive inward dispositions, which in turn (re)presentable through corresponding forty-nine moods or feeling-states (bhavas). The latter have immense evocative or overtly suggestive and transferential potential especially when kinesticised into stylised gestures, mimicry, and movement. Dancing, like any form of 'high art' (sanskrta) integral to drama, stimulates the cultivation and maturity of rasa (to enhance the aesthetic imaginary of the sublime with rapturous religious or devotional ecstasy, pleasure and peace, as ends-in-themselves), and only secondarily do they seek to entertain or reduce it to theatre art.

Australian scenario

For the sake of brevity, I will present a shorter rather than a longer vignette, highlighting the key features of the development of Indian dance in Australia. The arrival of Indian dance in Australia is linked with the revival of temple dance form hitherto performed by devadasis (trained temple nymphs) in India early this century and its transition to the secular stage where it attracted wider audience, and a cultured following in the West as well. Names such as Anna Pavlova, Ruth St Denis, Martha Graham and Jean Erdman were associated with the inspirations derived from the Indian Nautch dance and its incorporation into ballet and 'Oriental Dances' within classical compositions on European stages,
echoing (also inflecting in) the re-workings of Hungarian, Gipsy-Romani, Romanian and other folk dance cycles by the likes of Stravinsky and Rimsky-Korsakov. Pavlova had already worked in London with the exceptionally gifted Uday Shankar, who she had discovered and with whom she had choreographed several such 'Oriental Dances' with strong Indian mythological motifs. On her 1921 visit to Australia Pavlova met Rukmini Dewi, a young Indian adept married to an Australian theosophist by the name of George Arundale. Pavlova inspired Rukmini Dewi to learn traditional Indian dance, and this eventually led to the revival of Bharata-Natyam.

It appears that Rukmini Dewi held dance workshops and one of the Melburnians attending was a keen student of ballet, Miss Louise Lightfoot - perhaps also the first Australian woman architect, associated with Burley Griffin’s planning of Canberra. In the 1930s Lightfoot en route to Europe decided to stop over in Bombay where the ship she was travelling on had docked visit and she ended up spending four to five decades in India, immersing herself in the study, teaching and choreography of temple dance with a focus on Kalari or the traditional Kathakali (a slow mimetic narrative form evolved in the south-west Indian state of Kerala). She became interested also in Manipuri, a more energetic north Indian style of dance. Among the highly-skilled Indian dancers she enlisted in her work and who accompanied the tours Lightfoot made of American and Europe were Sivaram from Kerala, and Baumali from Manipur region.
In 1947 she brought her Indian-based dance troupe to Australia. This would be the first time that the public in Australia would have been treated to the classical forms and formations of Indian dance performance, and Sivaram is became a popular figure among non-Western dance groups during the 1950s and early ’60s in Australia.

A satellite company comprising the newly attracted Anglo-Australian enthusiasts in Indian dance was set up under the guidance of Lightfoot and increasingly Sivaram. In the early 1970s Lightfoot worked closely with the newly established Department of Music and Dance at Monash University, presenting dances from India and, indeed, spearheading a tradition of warm receptivity towards Indian aesthetic expressions in Australia. Her Indian collaborators returned in the mid-1970s to demonstrate the dance forms now revived, thanks to the diligent work of Lightfoot in her years in India. It is astonishing though that the first Australian pioneer of Indian dance with such an illustrious history has all but faded from the national memory. No scholarly monograph has been produced that brings together her vast experiences and contributions, the records of which lie buried archived in a trunk, only to be visited intermittently on stage enactments based on her life (of which a little more later).

In the late 1960s, a south-Indian amateur dancer took residence in New South Wales. Krishna Nair offered modest lessons in Bharata-Natyam and Kathakali more as a hobby for local consumption than out of
a desire to develop an enduring professional base for Indian dance.

However, the timing seemed immaculate as this was the period when fall-outs from the 'counter-cultural' drive were blending their interests in the spiritual promises of the East with explorations of the aesthetic and alternative forms of expressions. The gaze turned somewhat, as it were, towards the East, and to India in particular.

In this ambience arrived a young Malay-born student to study for his PhD in social anthropology with Monash University. Already introduced to traditional dance, around the mid-1970s he took keen interest in learning classical Indian dance while on a field-visit to south India. There he teamed up with a well-known maestro, Adyar Laxman based in Madras, to learn Bharata-natyam style of classical Indian dance, whose 20th century revival is traced back, of course, to Rukmini Dewi's brief sojourn in Australia. The hermeneutical circle finds its own completion; and thence began the second phase of the substantive development of Indian dance in Australia. In 1977, the young student, who later changed his name to the artistic epitaph of 'Chandrabhanu' ("moon-shine"), also took lessons in Odissi dance style during a visit to the heartland of Krishna devotion in north-eastern India. Upon his return he began classes on an ad hoc bases in Melbourne and shortly thereafter founded the first successful school for Indian dance in Australia, known as Bharatalaya School of Classical Dance (in 1980). The Company was restructured and re-named as The Bharatam Dance Company in 1987 and
Chandrabhanu has remained its Artistic Director and chief artist since, bringing both traditionally choreographed and classically re-created multicultural performances to theatre-school- and media-stages.

Before a dance season is finalised, much research goes into the historical background of the narrative theme chosen and the idiom mitigated by contemporary sensibilities in which the work is best communicable. Meticulous attention is payed to details of costume, artistic set, hand and body movements, lighting, music and other technicalities. With generous funding forthcoming from the Australia Council for the Arts and other sponsoring arts organisations, musicians are regularly brought out from India to provide live accompaniment for certain works, and the scores may be entirely rewritten to accentuate the idiom, vocabulary and the cultural dimension thought most suitable for the traditional style and media for the contemporary Australian psyche (the recent anti-indigenist and racist backlash notwithstanding). The classical productions of the traditional Bharata-natyam program, such as 'Devi: Goddess Absolute' and 'Dance of Shiva', and Odissi dance styles on the multivalenced life of Krishna, have made strong impressions on appreciative audiences drawn widely from a cross-section of devotees of the arts in Australia. The company has extended its repertoire to include 'multicultural' experimentations with narrative themes based on, for example, Greek tragedy, as in 'Meda', a work performed in collaboration with Turkish-Kurdish musicians in mid-1990s.
The second school I wish to flag is the Kailash School of Indian Dance founded in 1990 in Canberra by Padma Menon. Padma hails from Kerala in south India and was formerly a student of English literature and Elizabethan theatre. Before arriving in Australia for higher studies, she had studied for some fifteen years with Vempati Chinna Satyam of Madras and performing dance in Kuchipudi style, a highly pantomimic theatrical dance form evolved from ancient Indian theatre. She had also taught for the Meryl Tankard Campany, before becoming President of the Australian Association for Dance Education (Ausdance). Padma’s main focus and concerns have been to make Indian dance accessible to a wider (non-Indian and Indian) audience, without compromising its aesthetic and native base. Dancers from a varied dance background are involved in her Company as they struggle to make sense of Kuchipudi in terms of their own former training and sensibilities; the audience too are expected to gain some understanding of the classical aesthetics and techniques underpinning Indian dance in order to appreciate its innovative extensions. 'Hybridity', far from being a dirty trade word, is an order or rather 'calling' of the day in the field of contemporising dance in Australia, given the pluralist demography and cultures now extant in the island-continent in the Asian antipodes. Nevertheless, Padma Menon’s alter ego, the literary hermeneutician and the urbane-diasporic South Asian voice for the under-represented (subaltern village) women, informs her dances with the firm belief that there are certain universal emotions, character
traits and signals which people, especially theatrical performers anywhere, appeal to: Indian dance embellishes these with a great deal of flourish, colour, elegant mimetic, dramatic movement and sublime music, while drawing on mythic motifs and narrative themes. Audiences reared in this environment find it somewhat easy to become involved in the emotions, sentiments and moods being represented. She is all for creating a space for dialogue with the audience in the mode of communication and understanding or interpretation best suited to its cultural background (or admixture thereof in the multicultural context). Australia for her provides such a context and a rapportive or responsive audience.

Padma Menon is best known among academic critics for her cute utilisation of A.K. Ramanuja’s English translations of Shaivite poetry for depiction of traditional worship, which was voice-over during a performance, thereby infusing a traditional dance pattern with modern prose form, which resulted in a new aesthetic appreciation for an already heterogenous Australian audience.

The third school I shall turn to, namely, the Natya Sudha Dance Company, is significant for another reason also: here we encounter the memory of of Louise Lightfoot. But before that a brief word on the founder of this school.

Tara Rajkumar arrived in Australia in 1985 after several years of involvement with the Academy of Indian Dance (of which she was founder-director) in London. There she had worked to encourage
heritage preservation with collaborative contemporary explorations in Indian dance. Her work gained recognition from the Arts Council of Great Britain, and The London Contemporary Dance Centre (which has been the home of the Academy of Indian Dance), and The Dance Umbrella that sent Tara to Australia in 1983 to perform for the inauguration of the newly-constructed the Melbourne Arts Centre. Tara Rajkumar’s training has been in the Kathakali and Mohiniattam, which have been developed extensively in Kerala in south India. These forms had hardly been heard of when she arrived in Australia. So she founded a dance company and began to train a handful of dancers in the Mohiniattam style. She also worked closely with the diaspora Indian community (which has grown considerably in the past three decades) and enlisted children, as young as four years of age, for her regular classes. In a short time, she gained recognition and even sympathy for her ‘purist’ endeavours in the community, in universities (appointed Honorary Fellow in the Department of Music at Monash University; choreographed for the IXth World Sanskrit Conference in Melbourne), in arts centres (first Indian dancer to perform in the Sydney Opera House and Melbourne's Arts Centre), and in theatre groups, especially the contemporary choreographers collective, known as the Green Mill Dance Project of which she is a sitting Board member. Under the aegis of the latter, Tara had presented, in 1996, an ‘Indian Double Bill’ in which a visiting guest dancer of much renown in India, Sonal Mansingh, played Draupadi (the
wife of the noble five brothers and cohorts of Krishna in the epic Mahabharata) and Tara herself depicted the life of Malache, a young widow bringing up two small children in a depraved third world settlement, as originally narrated by the Anglo-Australian writer Virginia Jane Rose.

What is different about Tara is that she attempts very hard to articulate a perspective from her own previous experiences - in India and in Britain - and with scholastic correctness, which appear to be more orthodox than those we have so far encountered. She appeals to what, for some, might appear as an arcane concept - namely, tradition (Sanskrit parampara). Tradition is the horizon that provides the authoritative canon against which an artform can be judged, and legitimately extended. But then Tara is also one for contemporary innovations and development. How does she balance the two strands in her discourse and repertoire.

Basically, Tara believes that a context such as Australia’s with its pluralist-multicultural profile provides a fertile environment for both the continuity of tradition and an extension of the tradition into current cultural expressions, themes, identity-formations and negotiations in the transmigrant ambience. An apt example that comes to mind is the recent success in the complete adoption and adaptation of the Western jazz-blues instrument, the saxophone, into the classical Indian music repertoire, such that the medieval kritis or devotional compositions of Puranadaradasa and Tyagaraja can be played on the instrument as though
it were an Indian invention coterminous with the raga-s or set rhythmic melodies governing such compositions.

Now Tara also claims to have achieved just such a success with the classical Mohiniattam style, which itself has a hoary history of innovative forays into an otherwise moribund and sectarian-riven environment in India. What changes are the vocabulary, idiom, perhaps even the costume and technical (technological) effects through which the communication occurs to better suit the orientation of the audience. There are variables in respect of the sensibilities, range of emotions, language and outward aesthetic modalities (or their modesty in some specific local narrative themes) that can be varied and exploited for their innovation, improvisation and creativity without turning it into a 'hotch-potch', 'masala' affair for an unsuspecting audience.

Tara believes that new developments in this regard can emerge effectively in the wider Australian context. One such development she has been investing much energy, time and research into is the revival of the memory of Louise Lightfoot through a spectacular dance performance she has called 'Temple Dreaming'. This performance was choreographed to enact and re-enact the symbolic discovery of both Lightfoot and her own almost hitherto unchartered forays into the treasures of Indian classical dance styles. It is a moving presentation of the various intersecting gestures that helped give birth to modern Indian dance in the subcontinent, ironically with some parts of the embryonic processes
occurring in an Australia which hardly had a clue of the rich cultural artefacts of a by-gone Indian heritage. (Australia of Lightfoot's time was rather more preoccupied with Gandhi’s threatening gestures to the Empire and about the agitations of resident Indian nationals demanding franchise and better living conditions.) Through the use of interpositions, metaphors and dialogue, Tara attempts to portray Lightfoot's experiences of the constituent ingredients of the rich and variegated Kathakali form, in the village setting of folk story-telling, proximate ritual enactments, women’s daily domestic routine, the luscious natural wilderness and the movement of animals within it.

This re-visit to the legacy of Louise Lightfoot has elicited much interest in India as particular, particularly in the year that celebrates the 50th anniversary of the subcontinent’s freedom from the cringing hold of the Empire. Consequently, 'Temple Dreaming' is to tour India under a bilateral cultural program supported by Australia Council and Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts with the Indian Council for Cultural Relations in India. Dancers from established institutions in India will join the Australian-trained troupe in the performances. This is an encouraging beginnings of what is hoped to be led to a more detailed and complete unveiling of Lightfoot's legacy in this arena.

**Concluding remarks**
Indian dance has had a longer and more varied history in Australia - contingently also linked with the modern revival of classical dance forms in India - than is hitherto realised. There have been a number of players in the process and the development of Indian dance in Australia. The earlier interests were marked by a stringent adherence to the purist, orthodox canons and classical styles. However, there has been a shift in emphasis and modes of expressions in more recent times with the arrival of new dancers and choreographers on the scene or the stage. The new signal terms appear to be 'multicultural' and 'contemporary'. However, a general difficulty that has been expressed with experimental work of these kinds is that while they are excitingly novel and entertaining, they also tend to fall between the wedge, as it were, of heritage work and innovative work, and they come across as being an amalgam of different cultural artefacts and artistic techniques that barely hold together as a coherent whole. But this attempt at 'hybridisation' is inevitable - a condition of the post-colonial/post-modern possibility - and arguably a desirable artefact at that, as the culture in which the artforms play themselves out is not an essential, static moment which resists challenges from the outside, 'the other'.

Nevertheless, despite the flirtations with 'multicultural' arts and the royal rhetoric of 'contemporary' contextualisation, little if any serious effort has been put towards an engagement with indigenous, i.e, native Australian or Aboriginal dance form, its extensive corroboree, ceremonial
'rites of passage', and the more recent stage performances. The horizon that inexorably marks the alterity (or altarity, alternation, and hence authentication) of Indian dance has been the West or the European legacy in the arts - in its earlier orientalist-colonialist, then modernist and now multicultural-postmodernist modes. Likewise, the Pacific (Islander and Maori), and other regions of Asia where forms of traditional dance and folk styles are thriving in their own cultural settings, have been all but ignored. There have of course been some dilettantish encounters with such disparate artforms - Chandrabhanu's revisit to the sites of his Malaysian roots; Tara Rajkumar's conversations with Thai traditional dancers during her conference visits (for APACAE); and the shared stage by Indian dancers with Balinese or Javanese visiting troupes - but there the road ends. Nor has there been much interest in exploring the deeper existentialist-aesthetic tropes in Noh and Kabuki, or for that matter in Zen (as distinct from depicting the Buddha's life for its moral intonations), in terms of the Emptiness or nothingness of all existence as the inexorable ontological predicament facing the 21st century human *lebenswelt*.
References and Further Reading

A. Books


B. Book chapters


C. Periodical articles


D. In-house media


Author's library and private archival collections on theosophy, diaspora, artists, interviews, performances, and artefacts from India to Australia.