

## DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

### Moving into and Beyond Form

### Sankalpam, Bharata Natyam and the UK Dance Landscape

Fionn Barr, Debbie

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# **Moving into and Beyond Form: Sankalpam, Bharata Natyam and the UK Dance Landscape**

By

**Debbie Fionn Barr**

September 2019



***A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the University's  
requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy***

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## **Certificate of Ethical Approval**

Applicant:

Debbie Fionn Barr

Project Title:

Beyond Form, re-evaluating tradition: a critical analysis of evolving pedagogies and embodied practices in the work of Sankalpam, Bharata Natyam dance company.

This is to certify that the above named applicant has completed the Coventry University Ethical Approval process and their project has been confirmed and approved as Medium Risk

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## Sankalpam

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Figure 1. Sankalpam exploring *abhinaya* in rehearsals at the University of Roehampton (2016). Photo: Allan Parker.  
From left: Mira Balchandran Gokul, Vidya Thirunarayan and Stella Uppal Subbiah. Courtesy of Sankalpam

## **Abstract**

### **Moving into and Beyond Form: Sankalpam, Bharata Natyam and the UK Dance Landscape**

This study investigates how a migrated dance form, Bharata Natyam,<sup>1</sup> is nurtured in an adopted locale, the UK dance landscape and is examined through the prism of one UK-based Bharata Natyam company, Sankalpam.

The study assesses the methods applied by Sankalpam to sustain and maintain the migrated dance discipline, despite its dislocation from many fundamental elements which nourish the practice and support the form in India. These are evident in the fabric of Indian culture and might include: literature, architecture, philosophy and art as well as dance training. This study is concerned therefore with what happens when you migrate a classical Indian dance form and the social and cultural structures that once supported the form are no longer easily accessible. By simply moving the classical form to a new locality a conventional dance practice can become specialist and yet can be simultaneously marginalised.

I analyse Sankalpam's working methods to examine the extent to which the company sustains the Bharata Natyam form in the adopted locale and I ask, how is existing knowledge processed in different contexts? I seek to argue that Sankalpam reconsiders Bharata Natyam through what I refer to are local and

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<sup>1</sup> There are several ways of spelling Bharata Natyam. I use the spelling that Sankalpam adopts in company publicity. I give a full explanation in chapter 1.8.

global ‘cultural knowledge systems’. In so doing, I propose that the company distils knowledge of the form. I describe this methodology as ‘the dialectic’ and I assess the impact of the dialectic on Sankalpam’s understanding of Bharata Natyam in this study.

The study employs a range of qualitative methods, including participant observation, interview, questionnaire, immersive-participation, as well as desk-based and archival research. By applying a range of methods, I reveal how Sankalpam circumnavigates the postcolonial narratives which permeate the UK dance landscape (those that generalise migrated forms under umbrella terms of reference).

Furthermore, I consider how Sankalpam’s creative process is underpinned by an Indian epistemology. This situates the Bharata Natyam form at the centre of the company’s investigation, underscored by Indian world-view thinking, to which other knowledge systems relate, and with which they intersect. I argue that by confronting hegemonic interpretations of migrated cultural dance forms which flatten the specificities of practices under universalised assumptions, Sankalpam plays an important role in challenging the UK dance landscape to find new ways to nurture the individual within the universal and the particular within the global. The broader implications of the study, particularly how it might illuminate the postcolonial discourse that has historically and continues to pervade South Asian dance in the UK, are therefore also addressed.

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Professor Niall O Dochartaigh, for reading, feeding back and staying clam; to my brother Andrew, for jumping in with technical advice when I was running on empty, and to Sarah Young, Amber Wing and Alice Freer, for being there with childcare support when it was needed, thank you.

To Mammy and auntie Cathy and to all the women for whom education was earned in adult life but interrupted in childhood to put bread on the family table, this thesis is dedicated to you.

## List of Images

- Figure 1.** Sankalpam exploring *abhinaya* in rehearsals at the University of Roehampton (2016). Photo: Allan Parker. From left: Mira Balchandran Gokul, Vidya Thirunarayan and Stella Uppal Subbiah  
Courtesy of Sankalpam.....iv
- Figure 2.** Painting of a dancing girl. Date unknown. Artist Unknown. Displayed in Albert Hall Museum, Jaipur, India.  
Photographed by Debbie Fionn Barr (2018)  
.....97
- Figure 3.** *Avatara* ( 2001). Photo: Chris Nash. Dancers from left, Mira Balchandran Gokul, Vidya Thirunarayan.  
Courtesy of Sankalpam.....190
- Figure 4.** *Dance of the Drunken Monks* (2002). Photo: Chris Nash. From left to right, Mira Balchandran Gokul, PT Narendran and Vidya Thirunarayan.  
Courtesy of Sankalpam.....200
- Figure 5.** Potter and Dancer, Thirunarayan at the Wheel. *The Clay Connection* (2016). Photo: Zoe Manders.  
Courtesy of Thirunarayan.....211
- Figure 6.** Thirunarayan exploring Bharata Natyam at the wheel, *The Clay Connection* (2016). Photo: Zoe Manders.  
Courtesy of Thirunarayan.....251
- Figure 7.** After ‘dehiscence’. Thirunarayan and Sridhar during *The Clay Connection* rehearsals (2016). Photo: Zoe Manders.  
Courtesy of Thirunarayan.....256

**Figure 8.** Three physical performers, *The Clay Connection* sharing (2017). Photo: Zoe Manders. From left to right: Vidya Thirunarayan, Marie-Gabrielle Rotie and Lee Hart.

Courtesy of Thirunarayan.....261

**Figure 9.** Clay transforms the space (2017). Photo: Zoe Manders. Vidya Thirunarayan & Lee Hart in *The Clay Connection* sharing

Courtesy of Thirunarayan.....263

**Figure 10.** Clay transforming the dancer (2017). Photo: Zoe Manders.

Vidya Thirunarayan in performance, *The Clay Connection* sharing.

Courtesy of Thirunarayan.....264

**Figure 11.** Uppal Subbiah teaches *mudras* (hand gestures) to the students at the University of Surrey (2017). Photo: Debbie Fionn Barr

.....274

## **Table of Contents**

<b>Abstract</b> .....	v
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	vii
<b>List of Images</b> .....	x
<b>Preface</b> .....	1

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introductions**

1.1 Overview.....	3
1.2 The Study.....	3
1.3 Sankalpam.....	5
1.4 My Researcher Perspective.....	8
1.5 Bharata Natyam – Politicised Territory.....	10
1.6 The Frame.....	17
1.6.1 Beyond Form.....	20
1.7 The Methods.....	24
1.8 Key Definitions .....	26
1.9 The Boundaries.....	34
1.10 The Outline.....	35
1.11 Summary.....	44

## **Chapter 2**

### **Methods: Researching Friends and Colleagues – A Tactical Analysis for Intimate Research Projects**

2.1 Overview.....	45
2.2 Researching on ‘Home Turf’ .....	45
2.3 The Methodological Framework.....	47
2.4 The Fieldwork.....	50

2.5 Approaches.....	55
2.6 Limitations.....	57
2.7 Ethical Concerns.....	59
2.8 Summary .....	61
<b>Chapter 3</b>	
<b>Contexts: Beyond Form, Beyond Postcolonialism</b>	
3.1 Overview .....	63
3.2 Generic Terms and Specific Practices.....	64
3.3 Cultural Borrowing and Interculturalism.....	70
3.4 Universalism and Classicism.....	76
3.5 Globalisation and Identity.....	80
3.6 Context, Form and Response.....	83
3.7 Reading Things Differently.....	87
3.8 Summary.....	93
<b>Chapter 4</b>	
<b>Histories: History, Contexts, Legacy</b>	
4.1 Overview.....	96
4.2 Colonial India and Dance: A Brief Introduction.....	97
4.3 Cultural Borrowing and Orientalism.....	99
4.4 Rukmini Devi: the Local and the Global.....	103
4.5 Devi, Bharata Natyam and the Re-imagining of <i>Sadīr</i> .....	108
4.6 Devi, Kalakshetra and Sankalpam.....	115
4.7 The Postcolonial Discourse and the UK Dance Landscape.....	120
4.8 The UK Dance Landscape and South Asian Dance .....	124
4.9 Sankalpam's Response to Context.....	128
4.10 Summary.....	129

## **Chapter 5**

### **Beginnings: The Birth of Sankalpam**

5.1 Overview.....	131
5.2 Sankalpam: A Brief Overview .....	131
5.3 Contested Beginnings.....	137
5.4 Early Conversations.....	140
5.5 <i>Walk Around Tradition and Alone by Themselves</i> (1994/ 1995).....	147
5.5.1 <i>Ellen Van Schuylenburch</i> .....	149
5.6 Nurturing the Form in an Adopted Locale.....	155
5.7 Summary.....	164

## **Chapter 6**

### **Collaborations: Observing the Dialectic – Sankalpam 1994 - 2004**

6.1 Overview.....	165
6.2 Collaboration as Provocation.....	166
6.3 Negotiating Terrains of Familiarity.....	169
6.4 Transitional Spaces.....	172
6.5 The “Truth in Movement” .....	176
6.6 Reflecting on Research.....	179
6.7 Collaborations 1996-2002.....	186
6.8 <i>Dance of the Drunken Monks</i> (2002/ 2004) .....	190
6.9 Summary.....	205

## **Chapter 7**

### **Processes: Individualising Cultural Knowledge in Clay Body Sites – A Discussion of Vidya Thirunarayan’s *The Clay Connection***

7.1 Overview.....	208
7.2 Clay and Dance.....	209
7.3 <i>The Clay Connection</i> .....	212

7.4 <i>Abhinaya</i> and the Disconnect.....	216
7.4.1 Reception.....	220
7.5 Negotiating Body States.....	222
7.6 The Team and the Process.....	223
7.6.1 The Process.....	227
7.7 Fluid Exchanges and Ethical Dilemmas.....	229
7.8 Challenging the Familiar Through <i>Pārvatī's Dirt</i> .....	233
7.9 Dehiscence.....	239
7.10 Revisiting the Final Rehearsal.....	246
7.11 Clay Bodies.....	249
7.12 The 'Sharing' in 2017.....	257
7.13 Summary.....	265
<b>Chapter 8</b>	
<b>Teaching: Testing the Dialectic</b>	
8.1 Overview.....	268
8.2 Teaching and the Dialectic.....	269
8.3 Systems of Transmission: <i>guru-shishya-parampara</i> .....	272
8.4 Bharata Natyam as Holistic Discipline.....	275
8.4.1 Uppal Subbiah's Teaching Practice.....	278
8.5 Teaching at the University of Surrey.....	280
8.6 The Lived Experience.....	283
8.7 Shifts in Focus.....	287
8.8 Ownership.....	290
8.9 An Indian Epistemology and 21 <sup>st</sup> Century Bodies.....	294
8.10 Summary.....	298

## **Chapter 9**

### **Conclusions**

9.1 The Study.....	300
9.2 Methods.....	304
9.3 Contexts.....	306
9.4 Histories and Beginnings.....	307
9.5 The Contexts for Analysis.....	308
9.6 Final Insights and Future Considerations.....	313

<b>Glossary.....</b>	<b>321</b>
----------------------	------------

<b>References.....</b>	<b>323</b>
------------------------	------------

<b>Appendix 1 Ethics Documents.....</b>	<b>341</b>
---	------------

Certificate of Ethical Approval.....	342
--------------------------------------	-----

Example of Gatekeeper Letter.....	343
-----------------------------------	-----

Participant Information Sheet.....	345
------------------------------------	-----

More Detailed Participant Information Letter.....	349
---	-----

Informed Consent Form.....	352
----------------------------	-----

Sample Questions.....	355
-----------------------	-----

<b>Appendix 2 Choreochronicle.....</b>	<b>359</b>
--	------------

<b>Appendix 3 Supporting Fieldwork.....</b>	<b>360</b>
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## Preface

### **Sankalpam**

*3<sup>rd</sup> April 2019*

*As I sit to write this introduction about friends, about colleagues whom I have known and worked with for over quarter of a century, I am concerned. Concerned that the very thing I am exploring about this company of Bharata Natyam artists, the co-Artistic Directors of UK classical Indian dance company Sankalpam, is so complex and so elusive that I cannot do it justice. As I write today the company members share their thoughts about Bharata Natyam as they do almost every day, many times a day through a WhatsApp group they have named Airing Chickens and of which I am a group member. I wake up to forty-five messages from the chickens and towards the end of the chat I am overcome with a sadness that is provoked by the thoughts that two of the co-Artistic Directors share with me. The messages today highlight just how isolated and dislocated these artists feel in their collective quest for a deeper understanding of Bharata Natyam. Their dedication to the classical Indian dance form, which in itself is disputed and politicised territory, is palpable, it is infectious, yet it is also elusive and Sankalpam's intensive investigation of Bharata Natyam is what both drives the company and sets it apart from many diasporic companies and artists. The company's quest to understand the form is also the starting point for my thesis study. On the WhatsApp chat, one member states that she wants to get away from the "spectacle" of Bharata Natyam that is being widely proposed and*

*presented, adding that, “there is no room for my understanding [of the art form]” (Uppal Subbiah 2019a, WhatsApp Airing Chickens). I have heard Uppal Subbiah speak about how isolated she feels Sankalpam’s practice is within the UK dance landscape before, and her thoughts are confirmed by her colleague, Mira Balchandran Gokul, who expresses a similar disconnect from the way other practitioners are working, simply stating that she feels that “they [Sankalpam] are on a different station” (M Balchandran Gokul 2019c, WhatsApp Airing Chickens)<sup>2</sup>.*

*The use of the word station is interesting in itself and perhaps there is a deliberation by Balchandran Gokul, in choosing this particular word to convey her thoughts. The station indicates a place of transitioning, of moving from one place to another. It suggests a place and period of waiting or a hovering between states, between thoughts, with neither having reached conclusions. The station also references a journey before and hints at the one to come, connecting past to future through a present and temporary locale. It is in fact a very fitting metaphor for Sankalpam’s journey. The chickens’ sentiments, which have been expressed to me in different ways, resonates most often however as a dislocation from the UK dance landscape and in particular from the disputed territories of Bharata Natyam within the UK.*

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<sup>2</sup> Balchandran Gokul refers to the company in the plural, as it is a company driven by a co-Directorship. I refer to Sankalpam throughout this thesis as a singular entity when talking about the company, or in the plural when referring to the co-Artistic Directors together.

# **Chapter 1**

## **Introductions**

### **1.1 Overview**

In this chapter I provide an outline of the thesis by introducing the topic of the study (Sankalpam) stating the aim of the research and setting out the research questions that frame the study. I continue by briefly introducing Sankalpam and highlighting my relationship with the company. I then introduce the politicised territory of Bharata Natyam, indicating the fields of scholarship that the study is situated within. These include historical, political, critical and aesthetic terrains. The theoretical frame of the study is then summarised. The three key contexts through which the study is focused are introduced, followed by a brief outline of the methodological approach adopted. I indicate the ethical concerns that arise from investigating from within the company as a non Bharata Natyam practitioner and highlight my own bias which is written into the study. I outline key definitions employed and offer a synopsis of the boundaries by which this study is contained, such as the time period (1994-2019) and the geographical and cultural location (the UK dance landscape). I draw attention to the specific exploration of Bharata Natyam as a classical practice and highlight the deliberate avoidance of comparisons with contemporary diasporic practitioners' and their work. I conclude with an outline of each chapter which summarises the main points of discussion.

### **1.2 The Study**

This study centres on UK Bharata Natyam company, Sankalpam. The aim of the study is to investigate how Sankalpam nurtures and evolves a migrated

classical dance form Bharata Natyam<sup>3</sup> in the adopted locale of the UK dance landscape. The study follows Sankalpam over a twenty-six year period (1993-2019) and examines the company's methodological approach for sustaining the form in collaborative, studio and teaching contexts. I will seek to argue that Sankalpam sustains and evolves a Bharata Natyam practice in the UK dance landscape through its working method of challenging existing knowledge and experience of the form in the new locale. My study therefore examines how this might be achieved and whether adopting a dialectic working method allows existing knowledge to be reconsidered and tested under different lenses. The lenses Sankalpam employs, range from within and beyond Indian classical performance practices and manifest through artists and scholars from different disciplines, cultural backgrounds, locations, aesthetic preferences and cultural knowledge systems. 'Cultural knowledge system' is a term I use throughout this study. It refers to systems of knowledge, experience, expertise and skills that emerge from a wide range of cultural, philosophical, artistic, personal and geographic origins.

The study therefore seeks to understand the ways in which Sankalpam acquires new knowledge by challenging Bharata Natyam through a dialectic with other cultural knowledge systems and how new knowledge is subsequently synthesised by the company members into their existing understanding of the form. Furthermore, I consider how Sankalpam distils knowledge and refines practice by immersing Bharata Natyam within a dialectic methodology and I

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<sup>3</sup> Bharata Natyam is a contested Indian dance discipline (see Meduri 2005; O'Shea 2005 225-228). It has been described as both classical and traditional (see O'Shea 2007: 26) and neo-classical (Lopez y Royo 2003: 3).

explore the ways in which the company reclaims the specificity of Bharata Natyam as a result (see Buckland 1999; Coorlawala 2002).<sup>4</sup> The dialectic in this study is understood to be a continuous process of provocation, experimentation, confrontation, discussion, reflection, analyses and subsequently synthesis. I consider then how the dialectic enables Sankalpam to go 'beyond form' by enlisting the lenses of other cultural knowledge systems to re-examine Bharata Natyam and achieve a deeper understanding of the migrated dance discipline in the UK dance landscape.

My research questions ask: in what ways might the dialectic with other cultural knowledge systems impact Sankalpam's understanding of Bharata Natyam? and how does the dialectic working method assist Sankalpam in reclaiming specificity of a migrated dance form in the adopted locale of the UK dance landscape? I do this by exploring the ways that Sankalpam reclaims the specificity of Bharata Natyam within the new locale facilitated through the dialectic. Simultaneously I consider what the broader implications of this study are, for example, how might it illuminate the postcolonial discourse currently pervading South Asian dance in the UK?

### **1.3 Sankalpam**

Sankalpam was established in 1994 (full details in chapter 5) and for twelve years maintained a core co-Artistic Directorship of three artists: Mira Balchandran Gokul, Vidya Thirunarayan and Stella Uppal Subbiah. Each co-

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<sup>4</sup> I argue that the specificity of classical Indian dance disciplines can become obscured under generalised labels and universalised terms (see Grau 2004) or confined by a critical focus on visual appearance and cultural identity (Dove 1990; Menon 1993).

Artistic Director trained in Bharata Natyam at the Kalakshetra Foundation in Chennai, India known simply as Kalakshetra. At Kalakshetra, aspects of other cultural performance aesthetics, philosophies and training systems were brought together by its founder, Rukmini Devi. At Kalakshetra Devi interwove cultural practices, arts training and aesthetics from many different contexts that included: contemporary and traditional, local, national and global (Meduri 2005). It is no coincidence then, that the co-Artistic Directors of Sankalpam should 'take up the baton' from Devi and also pursue a method of enquiry that embraces multiple systems of cultural knowledge.

In 2006 Thirunarayan resigned as co-Artistic Director of Sankalpam to pursue other interests (see chapter 5), leaving Balchandran Gokul and Uppal Subbiah as the current co-Artistic Directors of the company. Despite the shifts in Artistic Directorship, this study investigates all three artists under the Sankalpam umbrella and follows both company and individual inquiries through two time periods. The period between 1994 and 2004, when all three artists were co-Artistic Directors, is examined by investigating early Sankalpam collaborations and assessing how a company methodology for sustaining a migrated practice in an adopted locale evolved. The period between 2016 and 2019, is then investigated to understand how the methodology established by Sankalpam has permeated the artists' independent inquiries within and beyond the company.

To focus on Sankalpam's co-Artistic Director's independent inquiries, I examine the individual practices of current co-Artistic Director, Stella Uppal Subbiah and

former co-Artistic Director, Vidya Thirunarayan. Although Thirunarayan's project *The Clay Connection*, investigated in chapter 7 is not a Sankalpam venture, it nevertheless illustrates how the company's foundational thinking has resonated to Thirunarayan's independent practice. Similarly, Uppal Subbiah's independent teaching practice at the University of Surrey (detailed in chapter 8) is assessed to understand how the artist distils knowledge acquired through Sankalpam investigations and applies it in a non-Sankalpam context. I adopt this approach to illustrate how the umbrella of Sankalpam's foundational methodological approach to nurturing form, transmits within and beyond the company's practice, simultaneously indicating how the threads of its methodology are often interwoven in complex ways that reach from within and beyond the company.

My initial intention in writing this study was to present a chapter focusing on each of the core co-Artistic Directors of the company. However, during my investigation Balchandran Gokul began moving towards her own formal academic research inquiry, exploring phenomenology and Bharata Natyam through a research-based Masters programme. Balchandran Gokul's intention at the time of writing this, is to progress her research into phenomenology and Bharata Natyam as a knowledge system and to examine its relevance to twenty first century students.

Given the nature of Balchandran Gokul's current independent research, I am conscious of the ethical implications arising from an investigation of her evolving academic inquiry through my own doctoral research. I have therefore

chosen to focus only on the current practice of Thirunarayan and Uppal Subbiah, thus giving Balchandran Gokul's independent research some distance from this particular study.

Each of the three artists have generously given time to contribute to this study, without which it would have been impossible to undertake. Whilst Thirunarayan's and Uppal Subbiah's contributions are explicitly written into chapters 7 and 8, Balchandran Gokul's contribution permeates the fabric of this study, and is implicit in keeping Sankalpam rooted within a body of knowledge and experience that the artist retains within a textual, corporeal and memory archive.

#### **1.4 My Researcher Perspective**

My experience in the UK dance field is wide-ranging and spans over three decades, encompassing performance, teaching, choreography and directing within professional, community and educational contexts. I have been the rehearsal director for Sankalpam for two and a half decades, rehearsing each production the company has mounted since its emergence in 1994.<sup>5</sup> As a rehearsal director with Sankalpam I am paid for my professional contributions to productions. The boundaries between professional and personal are inevitably intricate and in many ways this reflects the complexity of the methodology I adopt to investigate the company and detailed in chapter two.

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<sup>5</sup> The company mounted ten national/ international touring productions between 1994 and 2010. I have rehearsed other company-associated productions since then.

I occupy an insider/practitioner perspective within the field of UK Euro-American contemporary dance practice, and also an insider position with Sankalpam as rehearsal director. That insider perspective is somewhat disrupted when viewed through the lens of South Asian dance. To begin with I am a white, Irish, middle-aged woman, trained in European and American classical, contemporary and somatic movement techniques. I have not trained in any classical Indian dance forms. My knowledge of Bharata Natyam has emerged through practice-based collaborations with Sankalpam over a twenty-six-year period. It is further complemented through gaining an MA (distinction) in choreography at Middlesex University, in which Bharata Natyam was the focus of my practice-based dissertation.

Developing practice-based collaborative projects with other South Asian dance practitioners has further augmented my knowledge of South Asian dance. I have for example explored choreography with Bharata Natyam practitioners, Dipisha Patel (2004) and Anusha Subramanyam (1999). I have shadowed Shobana Jeyasingh and her dance company, Shobana Jeyasingh Dance Company (SJDC) (1997/98). I have acted as mentor for Kathak performer Anuradha Chaturvedi (2015/16 & 2019) and as rehearsal director for other companies and projects, including the *Natya* project (2018), ReRooted Dance Collective (2019) and the *Sadir* project (2019).

My position as researcher on this study is tempered by other the roles that I have occupied throughout Sankalpam's evolution such as critical insider, (rehearsal director for company productions 1994 - present), as participant &

co-creative lead (choreographer in Thirunarayan's *The Clay Connection* studio research, 2016 & 2017) and as participant observer (during creative discussions). In addition, I am friend and colleague to the company. This enables me to undertake research from both an emic and etic perspective.

The concepts of emic and etic are described by authors Haan, Jorgenson, and Leeds-Hurwitz (2011), as originating over half a century ago through the work of linguist Kenneth Pike (1954, 1967, 1982). The authors describe the concept of etic as being defined "by the investigator independently of any particular context, and which can therefore serve as a basis for comparisons across cultures. An *emic* concept is grounded in the worldview of the participants, reconstructed by the researcher and corresponds to the meanings participants themselves attach to their experience" (Haan, Jorgenson and Leeds-Hurwitz 2011). The critical location of the emic perspective, embedded within the study enables a fluid but complex relationship between me as researcher and Sankalpam's co-Artistic Directors, the participants.

### **1.5 Bharata Natyam - Politicised Territory**

Bharata Natyam, like many South Asian dance practices is a deeply politicised dance form, carrying with it the burden of colonialism, religion, tradition, history and social status (Chatterjea 2011 and 2013; Jeyasingh 2016; Sankalpam 2008). The Bharata Natyam dancer by default then shoulders this load too and the image of the Bharata Natyam dancer as with other classical Indian dancers, embodies a composite model of conflicting tensions and orientalist presumptions and of colonial misconceptions (see Chatterjea 2011: 88-89;

Dove 1993: 2; Menon 1993: 2).<sup>6</sup> As a result of the territories that Bharata Natyam is situated within, the form itself has often receded to give way to history or religion, identity or culture, through journalistic as well as scholarly analyses (Jeyasingh 2010: 181-183; O'Shea 2008: 38-39). At times, these elements seem to carry more importance than the dance form itself and this, Sankalpam has proposed, can impact upon how Bharata Natyam is performed (Sankalpam 2008). Within the contested landscape of Bharata Natyam, where different practitioners and scholars choose diverse narratives, Sankalpam stakes a claim to form, not politics, to technique not history, and to the embodiment of practice, not ethnicity nor cultural identity. Although the form cannot be separated from history, colonialism, religion, nor politics, Sankalpam's investigation nevertheless circumnavigates the disputed territories of Bharata Natyam in order to render a deep investigation and analysis of the form itself and in the process, reclaims the specificity of the form as an embodied practice, evolving a new way of understanding the form in the process.

In this study therefore, it is Sankalpam's dialectic working methods, the process rather than the choreographic product, that sits at the heart of the study and which is central to my analysis, examined within the contexts of collaborations, studio processes and teaching.

This study is situated within the broad discourse of postcolonialism and South Asian performance practice. It adds to scholarship that reflects upon South Asian performance practice in a global context and particularly South Asian

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<sup>6</sup> This is by no means a definitive list.

dance practice in the UK, by offering an emic perspective<sup>7</sup> and a deep analysis of a single UK-based, Bharata Natyam company. In addition, unlike studies that establish choreographic output as a subject for analysis, my investigation evaluates Sankalpam by exploring the company's working methods and the impact of those methods upon the evolution of the company's practice.

Scholars have discussed the historical and political narratives underscoring the emergence of Bharata Natyam in India in the early part of the twentieth Century (Erdman 1998; Meduri 2005; O'Shea 1998). How relocated classical Indian dance practices are represented within postcolonial discourse is also debated (Chatterjea 2011 & 2013; Grau 2001 & 2004, Sarabhai 2009: 21). The work of Indian artists such as Uday Shankar, who traversed traditions and amalgamated cultural forms, are the focus for some scholarly research (Erdman 1998; Katrak 2011) whilst practitioners deconstructing the orientalist perspective and repositioning practice within a British contemporary category, for example UK-based choreographer Shobana Jeyasingh, are central to other fields of scholarship (see Briginshaw 2009; O'Shea 2008).

In other investigations feminist ideologies, new dance languages and the theme of resistance are examined (Bharucha 1995; Coorlawala 2013 Purkayastha 2014). The exoticisation and eroticising of Bharata Natyam has been a focus for debate within the field of gender politics and beyond, with practitioners and scholars arguing that the female Bharata Natyam body has been modified

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<sup>7</sup> According to Haan, Jorgenson and Leeds-Hurwitz (2011) "An *emic* concept is grounded in the worldview of the participants, reconstructed by the researcher, and corresponds to the meanings participants themselves attach to their experience".

through costume for visual pleasure (Coorlawala 2005: 183 & 184) and objectified through a dominant male gaze (Menon: 1993: 2). Some argue that the form has been defined through its particular representation of femininity, which focuses on lyrical grace and elaborate make-up and costumes (Coorlawala 2005: 183; O'Shea 2007: 104). Practitioners such as Chandralekha, despised such aspects of the form as dollified and fake, preferring to focus instead on the internal relationship between the dance and the dancer (Chandralekha 2010: 75). Despite the multiple relocations and incarnations of the form driven by religious, social and political motives (Coorlawala: 2005:173-175) Bharata Natyam is still bound with colonial readings of its *devadasi*<sup>8</sup> heritage which under colonialism, yoked the form (previously known under the name of *sadir*) to prostitution and immorality (Meduri 2005: 11). Hegemonic interpretations of the *devadasi* have also been historically bound with accusations of female exploitation (Coorlawala 2005: 175). Whilst acknowledging the complex gender issues which permeate the Bharata Natyam discourse, it is beyond the scope of this particular study to focus on this area specifically. I therefore I set gender issues to one side for the purposes of concentrating on an in depth reading of Sankalpam's evolving relationship with the migrated form.

In much of the research, diasporic artists from diverse dance genres, making work across different continents, are evaluated through their choreography and artistic output. Dance scholar Ananya Chatterjea for example, gives an in-depth

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<sup>8</sup> The *devadasis* were temple dancers who practiced a form of dance called *sadir*, from which Bharata Natyam emerges. I discuss this in detail in chapter four.

reading of three choreographers, of which Indian choreographer and feminist Chandralekha (1928-2006) is featured in her text, *Butting Out* (2005). Dance and theatre scholar, Ketu Katrak (2011), meanwhile examines contemporary Indian diasporic choreographers in her text *Contemporary Indian Dance* (2011). Recent doctoral thesis contributions to the field also present analyses by examining choreographic output. For example in Jade Yeow's thesis, *Choreographing Postcolonial Identities in Britain: Cultural Policies and the Politics of Performance, 1983-2008* (2015); in Anusha Lakshmi Kedhar's dissertation, *On the Move: Transnational South Asian Dancers and the "Flexible" Dancing Body* (2011) and in Suparna Banerjee's thesis, *Emerging Contemporary Bharatanatyam Choreoscape in Britain: the City, Hybridity and Technoculture* (2014).

What is difficult to source however is a deep analysis of a single UK-based Bharata Natyam company, which focuses the study on the company or artists' working methods rather than the creative product and which also emerges from an extensive emic perspective. There are two studies however which contribute in different ways to this field, and which address aspects of locality, classicism, and process. In her monograph, *Akram Khan: Dancing New Interculturalism*, (2015), performance scholar, Royona Mitra offers a substantial contribution to the broader field of South Asian dance in the UK. Her investigation of British Asian dance artist Akram Khan, is undertaken by examining Khan's contemporary choreographies through the lens of interculturalism. Although Khan is trained in the Indian classical dance technique of Kathak, Mitra's investigation centres on Khan's contemporary dance choreographies, through

which she argues, his Kathak knowledge resonates (Mitra 2015). Mitra's analysis of Khan is therefore developed through a close reading of his contemporary choreography. Mitra's text is extremely useful in viewing Khan's approach to interculturalism through his choreographic practice. She also firmly situates this interculturalism within a sociopolitical locale of the 1990s UK dance landscape, thereby addressing a similar time period to that of Sankalpam's evolution.

The other example which contributes to the field of Bharata Natyam scholarship and which additionally is examined from an emic perspective, is in theatre scholar, Rustom Bharucha's extensive investigation of Indian choreographer and arts practitioner, Chandralekha entitled, *Chandralekha Woman Dance Resistance* (1995). The investigation is approached from the perspective of a "critical insider" (Bharucha 1995: 4) as the author himself notes. Rather as in my own study, Bharucha maintains a complex relationship with the subject of his investigation, Chandralekha and this highlights the need to examine critically from within the research itself. Bharucha focuses his study on the "artistic sensibility" of Chandralekha (1995: 3) offering analyses of her choreographic work as part of his interpretation. Whilst Bharucha's investigation is useful in examining Chandralekha's exploration of Bharata Natyam, he also describes how the patriarchal and Brahmanical premises of the dance form, were questioned by the choreographer (Bharucha 2007). Since the 1980s, much has been written about how Bharata Natyam was textualised and Sanskritised states dance scholar Avanthi Meduri (2005: 201). This is significant in my exploration of Sankalpam as much of the debate about the

spiritualisation and sanitisation of the form centres around Rukmini Devi Arundale (Devi) whom, as founder of the Kalakshetra Foundation,<sup>9</sup> the institution where Sankalpam's co-Artistic Directors trained, provides Sankalpam with a complex legacy. Bharucha argues that in Kalakshetra, the female dancer was etherealised, modeled on the holy and chaste temple dancer, which was the exact opposite of what people thought of the "living devadasis" (1995: 45 & 46). Bharucha notes that despite Chandralekha's opposition to aspects of the Bharata Natyam form she recognised the richness inherent in it and probed and interrogated the form, deconstructing and reconstructing Bharata Natyam and focusing on the energies of the body in her choreography (Bharucha 2007). Bharucha's text is useful in its assessment of how and why Chandralekha developed her practice within the social and political tensions in India. My study is focused on the UK dance landscape as a geographical relocation for Bharata Natyam and therefore, the social and cultural systems that nurture or disrupt the form in India, are replaced with other influences in the UK dance landscape. These geo-political differences appear to impact the way artists develop their practice.

My study adds to existing South Asian performance scholarship in three ways. Firstly, it undertakes an extensive investigation of a single UK Bharata Natyam company Sankalpam, rather than of several practitioners/ companies together.<sup>10</sup> Secondly, it focuses the analysis on Sankalpam's working methods

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<sup>9</sup> This is the current name for the Institution, referred to only as Kalakshetra. It incorporates the, Rukmini Devi College of Fine Arts (RDCFA), the Besant Theosophical Higher Secondary School (BTHS), the Besant Arundale Senior Secondary School (BASS), and the Craft Centre.

<sup>10</sup> For studies, which address several companies, artists together see Banerjee 2015; Chatterjea 2005; Katrak 2011; Yeow 2015.

rather than the company's creative output, or choreographies.<sup>11</sup> Finally, the study emerges from what I refer to as 'the belly of the company', as an active participant, critical insider and observer, which gives the investigation a particular insider experiential knowledge and extensive access to data, archives, correspondence and working environments.<sup>12</sup>

## 1.6 The Frame

I examine the ways in which Sankalpam nurtures a migrated practice and distils embedded knowledge in an adopted locale in two ways: by drawing upon Theatre Scholar, Erika Fischer-Lichte's theory of interweaving performance cultures (2009, 2010, 2014) and by looking to Indian world-view epistemological concepts, as developed in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, for analysis.<sup>13</sup> Fischer-Lichte describes the interweaving of cultures as a cultural exchange of goods, techniques and knowledge (2010: 293). She argues that historically, cultures have always borrowed from each other (2009: 392), and that whilst the early interweavings of cultures enabled existing forms to modernise by addressing deficits within their own cultural forms, more recent interweavings from the 1970s onwards have emerged through a globalisation and for different reasons (2009: 400). Fischer-Lichte further argues that through the experimental framework established by interweaving cultures, in which differences are celebrated and negotiated, diversification occurs and new forms emerge (2009:

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<sup>11</sup> For examples of choreographic analyses, see Argade 2016; Briginshaw 2002; Chatterjea 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Whilst Bharucha (1995) and Mitra (2015) also have extensive access to company process, practice and people, in neither study it seems, are the researchers active as artistic collaborators.

<sup>13</sup> The *Nāṭyaśāstra*, which has several different spellings (I follow Indian arts scholar Kapila Vatsyayan's spelling), is commonly thought of as the treatise upon which Indian classical arts practices are based. It contains the rules for classical Indian dance forms as well as theatre, music costume and so on (Rao 1998: 40-41).

400). The new thing that materialises, she states, is however beyond the sum of any individual culture (2009: 400).

I build on Fischer-Lichte's theory by firstly considering Sankalpam's dialectic working methods, not as exchanges defined by culture, but as a deliberate mobilisation of other systems of knowledge from within and beyond the company's own cultural knowledge systems, to challenge the members' existing perception of Bharata Natyam. By adopting the dialectic as a working method, I argue that Sankalpam's approach to the form is modified. Indian arts scholar, Kapila Vatsyayan, describes knowledge as a long-term preoccupation of civilizations, stating that humankind has "the ability to be aware of both the world around [it and also] the world of reflection within (2013: 175). The systems of knowledge mobilised by Sankalpam are not limited by culture, geography, nor discipline, and include arts practice, and performance theories, scholarly research and philosophical concepts. Sankalpam therefore explores beyond the field of Bharata Natyam in order to reflect upon Bharata Natyam itself.

Fischer-Lichte's use of the term 'cultural exchange' is not entirely accurate for my study, as Sankalpam's interactions have a resonance that is derived from more extended interactions with other cultures than the term 'cultural exchange' suggests. Sankalpam's interactions are between cultures but are also implemented across skills and through many disciplines. They are shared amongst practitioners and between thought systems and opinions and they are processed through discourse and reflection. In this way Sankalpam's interactions illustrate a model of practice that is not dissimilar to Bharucha's

explanation of intracultural processes, which move both within and beyond the culture of origin (Bharucha 2000: 3-9).<sup>14</sup> I therefore replace Fischer-Lichte's reference to cultural exchange, by addressing the practitioners and practices that Sankalpam interact with as 'cultural knowledge systems' instead.<sup>15</sup> Where Fischer-Lichte refers to new forms emerging through interweaving cultures, this study examines new ways of understanding the primary form, Bharata Natyam by re-evaluating it through the dialectic. Rather than creating a new form, the primary form is instead clarified, reinterpreted and modified through Sankalpam's application of the dialectic, developed as a company working method.

Within the intercultural debate, Fischer-Lichte has stated that there are inherent assumptions, which she herself does not agree with. One assumption is that cultures are fixed, when in fact, according to Fischer-Lichte, they are processional and generated anew and under a process of transition and regeneration (2009: 399). I build on this argument too, by demonstrating how Sankalpam invokes the process of transition and regeneration through the dialectic. The Bharata Natyam form is I suggest the source, the journey and the destination for Sankalpam's investigation. I align the dialectic with the Indian world-view principles of *arūpa* (formless), *rūpa* (form) and *parārūpa* (beyond form), to consider the cyclical processes that knowledge moves through in order to regenerate. Sankalpam's working method is therefore I propose a

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<sup>14</sup> Although I argue that Sankalpam's interactions through the dialectic are more complex and cannot be summed up in simple terms of reference.

<sup>15</sup> 'Cultural knowledge system' is a term I use throughout this study. It refers to systems of knowledge, experience, expertise and skills that emerge from a wide range of cultural, philosophical, artistic, personal and geographic origins. See chapter1.1.

cyclical and iterative one, processed through the dialectic and recast in different ways, responding to new knowledge and modifying existing expertise.

### **1.6.1 Beyond Form**

Fischer-Lichte's dissatisfaction with the broader intercultural debate extends to how practices between cultures and cultural forms are theorised, and she has stated that a Eurocentric perception of modernity is perpetuated in the theorisation of intercultural theatre (2009: 399). This concept is further supported by theatre scholars, Rustom Bharucha (2014) and Khalid Amine (2014). Amine, stresses the dominance of the West and Europe in historical discourse, calling Europe the "silent referent" in theatre history" (2014: 26). He also highlights the disparity in scholarly inter-weavings, by stating that performance historians from the subaltern feel the pressure to include and refer to European history and theory, whereas the European historians do not feel the need to reciprocate (2014: 26).

To challenge the problem of exploring one cultural dance discipline from a universalised perspective (see Buckland 1999a: 3-4; Grau 2011; Farnell 1999; Kaeppler 1999) and in an attempt to decolonise the European epistemological lens in this particular study, I offer a reading of Sankalpam's methodology through aspects of Indian world-view thinking as adopted and adapted within the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and researched through the detailed investigations of Vatsyayan. Vatsyayan argues that, " 'dance', especially in the Indian context, cannot be viewed in isolation from the most significant framework of the philosophic thought and psychological concerns of the Indian people" (1997: 3). By

this she refers to Indian world-view thinking, which she has also described as “speculative thought” (1997 5-21). Vatsyayan, author of *Bharata The Nāṭyaśāstra* (2007) argues that the *Nāṭyaśāstra* was part of a wider tradition of theoretical discourse, performance practice and of oral transmission (2007: 38) and that the composition of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* is estimated "between the second century BC to second century AD" (2007: 24). What emerges from the *Nāṭyaśāstra* she argues, is a way of understanding the arts particularly through concepts such as *rasa* and *bhāva* that has been recognised for approximately 2000 years (2007: 25). Critically, she argues that the *Nāṭyaśāstra* itself is underpinned by Indian world-view thinking which is both implicit and explicit in the text (2007: 49). I therefore analyse Sankalpam’s working methods and the company’s application of the dialectic by drawing upon an Indian epistemological perspective as well as Fischer-Lichte’s proposal of interweaving performance cultures.

Indian world-view thinking promotes an understanding of ‘man’ in relation to the universe, of self to other and of all parts as interconnected and therefore impacted by those inter-relationships. Important in the Indian world-view are concepts that not one part is more important than another, that the internal and the external co-exist in harmony, yet “there [is] absolute value of the single parts. Each [is] important only in a framework of inter-relationships within a whole” (Vatsyayan 1977: 167).

The rationale for utilising the Indian world-view as an epistemological reference for my study lies in its relationship with Bharata Natyam as articulated by

Vatsyayan (1997, 2007, 2013). The movement language and theoretical principles of Bharata Natyam established in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* are underpinned by Indian world-view concepts states Vatsyayan, which promote: internal introspection and external manifestation, the transformation of physical into metaphysical, the transformation from the individual soul into the universal, from senses into spirit, and from gross movements to subtle (1977: 167).

I seek to argue that Sankalpam's dialectic working methods correlate with these particular Indian world-view principles and this can be seen when examining how the company interweaves the knowledge system of Bharata Natyam within a larger tapestry of multiple knowledge systems which interconnect between and impact upon each other. The specific world-view concepts articulated in *Nāṭyaśāstra*, of transitional and transformative states are furthermore explored by Sankalpam within the company's working method of the dialectic. The transitioning from internal impulse to external manifestation for example, is a key area of investigation for Sankalpam and examined by applying the dialectic to distil an embodied approach to the form. Bharata Natyam thus, I propose is reliant on other systems of knowledge to grow and evolve, just as 'man' is dependent and interdependent on the universe in Indian world-view thinking.

Vatsyayan states that within the *Nāṭyaśāstra* there is "an integral vision which blooms in a multiplicity which is not an aggregation of disciplines but an interpenetration of disciplines" (2007: 45).

I argue that Sankalpam's methodological approach to refining form and distilling knowledge is akin to the "interpenetration of disciplines" embedded in Indian thought systems, described by Vatsyayan. I apply the Indian world-view concepts of *arūpa* (formless) *rūpa* (form) and *parārūpa* (beyond form) to Sankalpam's methods of working with the dialectic (Vatsyayan 2007: 22). Bharata Natyam is thus read in this study as *rūpa*, the Sanskrit word meaning 'form'. Bharata Natyam *rūpa* is explored by Sankalpam I suggest, by going 'beyond-form'; *parārūpa*. This is approached through the dialectic with other practitioners and practices. Form (*rūpa*), is thus investigated by going beyond-form (*parārūpa*). In order to process the knowledge attained from the dialectic achieved by going 'beyond-form', a period of reflection and analysis must take place. I argue that in these moments of contemplation, Sankalpam's concept of Bharata Natyam is suspended and rendered therefore temporarily formless (*arūpa*). The concept of Bharata Natyam (form or *rūpa*) waits momentarily in a transitory place like Balchandran Gokul's 'station'<sup>16</sup> hovering between one journey and the next, between places of origin and destination. Form, (Bharata Natyam or *rūpa*) is therefore challenged by going beyond-form (through the dialectic or *parārūpa*) and is refined by reflection and analysis in which it is rendered temporarily formless (*arūpa*).

The Indian world-view concept of *arūpa*, *rūpa* and *parārūpa* therefore underpins Sankalpam's method of working with the dialectic, which is a cyclical transformative and regenerative process that modifies Sankalpam's perception

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<sup>16</sup> See *Preface*.

and interpretation of Bharata Natyam.<sup>17</sup> At the same time it aligns with Fisher-Lichte's proposition that moving between cultures is celebrated as a state of in-between-ness that in turn can transform spaces and disciplines, as well as the subject (2009: 400-401). For Sankalpam, it is the knowledge of the subject Bharata Natyam that is impacted by the movement between cultural knowledge systems. Therefore, I seek to argue that it is Sankalpam's perception and interpretation of Bharata Natyam that changes through the company's application of a dialectic working method. Consequently, this study argues that Sankalpam's investigation of form, whilst rooted in an embodied Indian epistemology, reaches at the same time beyond a fixed ideology. It embraces other thought systems and artistic practices thereby challenging embedded knowledge, provoking acquired knowledge and subsequently evolving a deeper understanding of Bharata Natyam and a refinement of company practice.

## **1.7 The Methods**

The methods I employ to gather and analyse data are mixed. I take a qualitative and postpositivist approach, which promotes fluidity and responsiveness as a researcher to emerging and evolving data as argued by, Hughes Kidd and McNamara (2011: 191-192). In this way my interpretation emerges from the investigation, as proposed by Green and Stinson (1999: 9). Importantly, I adopt a hermeneutic methodology, a cyclical model of analysis that allows for my subjectivity to be written into the enquiry (McNamara 1999: 182). It also enables

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<sup>17</sup> The fact that this is an inherited and embedded philosophical approach, rather than deliberately applied by Sankalpam's co-Artistic Directors, is discussed in detail in chapter three.

me to respond to, refine and to re-evaluate my interpretations as a researcher as data emerges (McNamara 1999: 182).

Critically, Sankalpam possess an active voice in this study. By using collaborative research orientation, as a methodological tool, the company is actively engaged in reflection and discussion. As a researcher, I am also an active participant in the company's methodology. I too, am part of Sankalpam's dialectic as a researcher but as a colleague as well. In this way my methodology for the study reflects Sankalpam's own working methods.

The research is enabled by my long-standing relationship with Sankalpam and I gain extensive access to Sankalpam's creative and rehearsal processes, studio processes, teaching and collaborative discourse. I occupy different positions to gather and interpret data, which include: the roles of critical observer, active participant and "critical insider" (Bharucha 1995: 4) Further data is collected from the company as well as UK arts and higher education organisations, individual practitioners, course leaders and company directors, using open-ended face-to-face interview, questionnaire, email correspondence, as well as phone, text messaging, WhatsApp and FaceTime. Primary source material from Sankalpam such as company publicity packs, programme notes, funding applications, evaluation forms, photos and video footage, are gathered from the company archives, my personal archives, and through public on-line sources. Crucially, my own bias is accounted for and written into the study and reflected upon as a researcher.

Consent for data obtained through observation, face to face interview as well as through digital platforms such as email, was given by participants at the outset of the study, or prior to interview/ observation and samples were approved by the ethics committee at Coventry University. Participants were formally approached via email to take part in the study and sent a 'gatekeepers' letter and an information sheet with details about the project and their contribution to the project. They were also asked to sign a consent form. Appendix 1 contains the approved ethics certificate (also attached at the start of this document) a participant information form and examples of consent forms and questions. Furthermore, as some of the data collected was through informal digital platforms such as WhatsApp, Sankalpam's co-Artistic Directors were each given a copy of the completed draft thesis for final approval and comments.

The ethical considerations of the participant/ observer model that I adopt (and which can be considered as fundamentally steeped in a hegemonic narrative) is also addressed.

## **1.8 Key Definitions**

### ***Abhinaya***

*Abhinaya* (a Sanskrit word) is a complex aspect of the Bharata Natyam technique, which relies on the technical expertise, experience and artistic interpretation of the dancer. *Abhinaya* is described as 'carrying' the emotion, event or intention to the audience (Rao, K. 1998: 1). *Abhinaya* is not however restricted to body and movement alone, but as described by Vatsyayan is "a

comprehensive term, comprising speech, body gestures, dress, ornaments and internalized states” (1997: 48). It is therefore subdivided into four more distinct categories, each one utilising a different medium to carry the intention towards the spectator. These are classified as: *angikabhinaya*, which uses body movements, facial expression and hand gestures as the primary vehicle of intention, *vachikabhinaya*, which utilises voice, *aaharyabhinaya*, in which ornamentation, costume, make up and set are harnessed, and *sattvikaabhinaya* where psycho-somatic expressions are utilised (Narthaki: 2016).

### **Bharata Natyam**

It is worth noting that there are several ways of spelling Bharata Natyam adopted by different scholars and practitioners. I spell Bharata Natyam as two separate words each with capitals and not italicised, because that is the spelling adopted by Sankalpam in the company’s publicity packs and brochures and it therefore seems a logical approach. When I transcribe from interview I use this spelling. If I use a direct written quote from a member of the company or another practitioner or scholar, then I use their particular spelling. Some scholars and practitioners interchange the spellings from one text to another. For example, Vatsyayan, in *The Square and the Circle of Indian Arts* (1997) spells Bharata Natyam thus, “*Bharatanātyam*” (1997: 69). Here it is spelled as one word, it is italicised, it begins with a capital B and Vatsyayan also uses the accent over the 4<sup>th</sup> ā. In her chapter on Rukmini Devi, (2005) edited by Meduri, Vatsyayan uses the spelling that I apply in this study, “Bharata Natyam” (Vatsyayan 2005: 58). In U.S. Krishna Rao’s dictionary of Bharata Natyam terms (1998) the form

is spelled “Bharata Natya”. Dance scholar Janet O’Shea uses the separate word spelling but without italics or capitals, hence “bharata natyam” (O’Shea 2007: 71) and dance scholar Prarthana Purkayastha uses the single-word spelling with a capital B and not italicised hence, “Bharatanatyam” (Purkayastha 2014: 148). Meduri italicises the single-word spelling, preferring “*Bharatanatyam*” (2005: 5) It is suffice to say that the spelling used as standard in this study Bharata Natyam, will only vary if direct quotes from others are used.

## **Body Analogies**

I often use the language of the body to refer to Sankalpam, and aspects of this research, for example, “the belly of the project”,<sup>18</sup> or “the heart of the study”.<sup>19</sup> I regard Sankalpam as more than a dance company, or the subject of my thesis, and in fact consider the company to be a living organism, sensate, responsive and evolving. The living organism must firstly have cells or units of life and this is represented in the co-Artistic Directors of Sankalpam. It must have the ability to reproduce, this manifests in a company legacy, established through teaching practice. The ability to respond to the environment and external stimulation is also a critical element of the living organism. This can be found in Sankalpam’s response to other artists and practices through the dialectic. The final critical element necessary for a living organism is metabolism, the processes of syntheses that take place and which are necessary to maintain life (The University of Tokyo 2019). Sankalpam maintains the life of the company and

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<sup>18</sup> See chapter 7.1.

<sup>19</sup> See chapter 1.3.

the dance form I suggest, by synthesising knowledge acquired through its working method, the dialectic and thereby evolving as an organism through practice.

The analogy of a living organism furthermore aligns with Indian world-view thinking and is articulated in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, which states Vatsyayan, sets out a structure for drama (2007: 52). Theatre, argues Vatsyayan, "is an organism, just as life is an organism" (2007: 50).

### **Company, Collective and Collaboration**

I refer to Sankalpam in different ways throughout this study. Each is distinct yet all are interconnected. Sankalpam is in the simplest terms a Bharata Natyam dance company and yet it is also an informal dance collective. Sankalpam has adopted a model of practice where the co-Artistic Directors of the company share company strategic and artistic decisions and responsibilities. This is highlighted as an unusual model within the UK South Asian dance landscape, although more recent examples of collective models do exist.<sup>20</sup> In addition to the company informally adopting collective principles, it also undertakes collaborative investigations primarily with other arts practices and practitioners as well as scholars. Collaboration is a foundational aspect of Sankalpam's working methods as I have indicated. The terms, company, collective and collaboration therefore are interrelated yet simultaneously distinct parts of Sankalpam too.

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<sup>20</sup> Examples include the contemporary Bharata Natyam company, *Angika* (1997-2008) which had a shared directorship of two. ReRooted Dance Collective (2018-) who share decision making and other responsibilities collectively.

## **Communities of Curiosity**

I use this term throughout the study as a way of addressing the deficits in some aspects of postcolonial rhetoric, which establishes terms of reference often from a hegemonic perspective. The term, 'communities of curiosity', refers to a broad and inclusive community of people who are interested in exploring knowledge and form with Sankalpam. The community is not restricted to Bharata Natyam, or to dance as a discipline, or to the arts specifically and encompasses scholars in literature and philosophy for example. Furthermore, the 'communities of curiosity' are not defined by race, religion, geography or ethnicity, but rather emerge through different platforms, both physical and virtual.

## **Cultural Knowledge System**

The term refers in the first instance and primarily to Bharata Natyam, but includes other artistic and cultural practices, thought systems and aesthetic practices throughout this study too. I use the term as a way of indicating more accurately, what Bharata Natyam represents. It presupposes that Bharata Natyam is beyond a body technique, beyond a cultural performance practice, beyond an Indian dance form. Bharata Natyam, like many arts practices is rooted in historical narrative, nurtured by societal practices, interconnected to literature, philosophy, music and theatre. In this way it is a system of knowledge, responsive to the changing elements that make up the cultures through which it evolves, and part of a larger organism, one that goes beyond the form itself.

### **Embodied and Embedded**

These are terms, which serve a useful purpose in this study, and the distinction between the two is important to outline here and is discussed in detail in chapter seven. The terms are often used side by side and the different interpretations can be difficult to articulate. I argue that Sankalpam's co-Artistic Directors embody certain aspects of Bharata Natyam through inherited societal, cultural, historic, geographic and religious pathways. Elements such as ritual practice, religious narrative, iconographic imagery, literary verse, historical and religious character, as well as music, language and place are imbibed and embodied during a particular cultural upbringing, and through everyday exposure. These elements exist beyond the Bharata Natyam training, yet also feed into the fabric of Bharata Natyam itself. They are further cemented through the training that the co-Artistic Directors of Sankalpam have received where they are subsequently embedded.

### **Gross and Subtle Body States**

I refer to the term 'gross' and 'subtle' body states in reference to activating *bhāva*, the inner intention, in Bharata Natyam. The term is used by theatre scholar Phillip Zarrilli, who uses the term 'gross' to describe the outer body, and the term 'subtle body' to describe the inner experience. The modulation between the two in South Asian embodied practices, he states, is activated through the breath or *prana* (2011: 248).

## **South Asian Dance**

I adopt the label South Asian dance as a reference throughout this thesis, with caution and acknowledging that it is a disputed term of reference (Coorlawala 2002; Meduri 2008). I do so despite the inherent problems that accompany the term. I do this for two reasons. Firstly, it is the common term adopted by most mainstream UK arts organisations and agencies. This includes current popular platforms such as the BBC Young Dancer competition which has a “South Asian Dance” category (BBC 2019) and UK agencies specifically established to promote and support classical and contemporary Indian and diasporic artists and arts practices. South Asian arts organisations such as Akademi, Art Asia and Sampad for example, have adopted the terms in their mission statements, whereas the magazine for South Asian dance in the UK, *Pulse Connects*, promotes itself as the, “hub of South Asian dance in the UK” (*Pulse Connects* 2019). The acceptance of this contested term into the mainstream UK dance landscape and by South Asian-focused organisations themselves is testimony to its usefulness as a generic label and acceptability within the sector itself.

The second reason I use this term as a reference is that it can be useful in avoiding confusion. For example, if I refer to Malaysian performer Mavin Khoo as an Indian dancer, it sends a signal that he himself must be Indian, when it is the dance form that is being referred to as Indian not Khoo. If I describe Khoo as a Bharata Natyam performer, this description is also limited offering a description of Khoo’s performance skills, when in fact Khoo has trained in many other dance disciplines, classical and contemporary European and American

as well as Bharata Natyam. In such instances the generic term South Asian can avoid mistaken assumptions from being made.

At the same time, I acknowledge that the term generalises specific forms under one umbrella heading and in so doing can in turn erase the specificity of particular cultural practices as highlighted by the late anthropologist Andr  e Grau (1954-2017) (2004: 31). That said, where possible, I reference specific dance forms by their individual names and reserve the umbrella-heading for much broader descriptions of, for example, communities of artists, categories of funding and so on.<sup>21</sup>

### **Indian World-View**

I refer to the Indian ‘world-view’ throughout this study. It is a term I apply from Vatsyayan’s research on Indian arts practices which, she argues, are underpinned by Indian world-view concepts, implicit within the *N  t  ya  s  stra* (1977, 1997, 2007). The Indian world-view is an ancient system of speculative thinking reflected in the *Upanishads*,<sup>22</sup> as well as in a wider body of literature (Vatsyayan 2007: 21-22). The Indian world-view concerns the universe and the proposition that the universe is an organism with each part interconnected. The concept of seed (*b  ja*) energy and growth is proposed as a fundamental principle from which individual, interdependent and interconnected parts blossom. There is a cyclical process of “growth, decay and renewal” which is implicit in these metaphors states Vatsyayan (2007: 49). In the Indian world-

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<sup>21</sup> It is beyond the scope of this particular study to offer a detailed analysis of the term South Asian dance, which can be found instead through dance scholars such as Meduri (2008).

<sup>22</sup> The *Upanishads* are ancient Sanskrit texts.

view, life, the mind, the human body, social philosophy, ethics and cosmology are considered, and spirit and matter are determined as being united (Mohanty 2019). This is a useful epistemology through which to view Sankalpam's methodology and by which the company, I argue are influenced.

### **The *Nāṭyaśāstra***

The *Nāṭyaśāstra* is commonly considered to be the treatise upon which Indian classical arts practices are based. It contains the rules for classical Indian dance forms as well as theatre, music costume (Rao 1998: 40-41). Some scholars however contest the link between Bharata Natyam and the *Nāṭyaśāstra* for example, Bharucha (1995: 40) who argues that the text was used as a way of authenticating the dance form.

### **1.9 The Boundaries**

This study pays specific attention to Bharata Natyam and more particularly to one company's methods of nurturing and evolving the classical form in the UK. The study is therefore confined to a deep analysis of a single company Sankalpam, by the time scale of the company's twenty-six year life span to date, 1993-2019, and by the geographical location, limited here to the UK dance landscape. The dominant focus of the thesis is on the classical practice of Bharata Natyam. Although other classical and contemporary Indian dance practices are mentioned and diasporic practitioners are introduced and discussed, this serves as a way of describing the local field, or of providing an historical context. This study does not therefore compare Sankalpam with other

companies or practitioners and it does not examine classical Bharata Natyam against contemporary diasporic practices, such as that of Jeyasingh.

Whilst the study acknowledges issues of identity, gender, politics, the postcolonial discourse, the colonial narrative, which help to situate Bharata Natyam and locate the evolution of the dance form in the UK dance landscape, this study is not however framed by these particular issues. I choose instead to let Sankalpam's working methods frame the study, drawing on sector tensions where relevant but without allowing them to dominate the inquiry.

### **1.10 The Outline**

Each of the chapters in this study has a single heading indicating simply which aspect of the research is being addressed. These follow from this chapter as: *Methods, Contexts, Histories, Beginnings, Collaborations, Processes and Teaching*. The chapters are completed with *Conclusions*. In this way the arc of the study can be viewed clearly in a single visual scan. Chapters two to four, provide the contexts in which Sankalpam is examined. These include methodological, scholarly and historical contexts. Chapters five to eight focus entirely on the company from its emergence (discussed in chapter five), to analysis of the company's application of the dialectic as a working method through collaborations, creative studio processes and teaching, detailed in chapters six, seven and eight. Chapter nine concludes the thesis. Each single heading is followed by an expanded chapter title in italics, which I now outline.

## Chapter 2

### Methods: Researching Friends and Colleagues – A Tactical Analysis for Intimate Research Projects

In this chapter I discuss the methodology used to gather and interpret data. The methods employed for gathering data are described as qualitative and mixed mode. They align with a postpositive approach, drawing on ethnographic techniques and adapting elements of hermeneutic research theories. The interweaving of different approaches establishes a flexible and responsive process and allows data and interpretation to emerge through the process of investigation. I detail my particular position within the research as an insider/outsider and highlight the ethical concerns and research dilemmas that arise from negotiating my positions within this study.

I set out the framework for examining how the dialectic enables Sankalpam to reclaim the specificity of Bharata Natyam in the UK dance landscape, by concentrating on three key areas of Sankalpam's practice: collaborative contexts, studio processes and teaching contexts (discussed in chapters six, seven and eight).

## Chapter 3

### Contexts: Beyond Form, Beyond Postcolonialism

In this chapter I examine the literature that both outlines and challenges the postcolonial discourse. I focus on how aspects of this particular discourse continue to frame different cultural practices within Euro-American aesthetic terms of reference and I highlight the problems for South Asian dance

practitioners who are developing practices within this framework. In particular I draw attention to three labels which have developed through a postcolonial discourse and which carry inherent problems for South Asian dance practitioners. The terms interculturalism, universalism and globalism, are highlighted as problematic. For example, they set up binary divisions such as 'local' and 'national' (Bhabha 2014), or 'our' culture and the 'other' culture (Fischer-Lichte 2014: 7), they flatten the specificity of particular cultural forms by being categorised under generic headings (Chatterjea 2013: 11; Grau 2004: 31) and they establish unequal power structures within the cultural arts landscape, which are dominated by hegemonic logic (Lepecki 2016: 3) and western academic scholarship and language (Amine 2014: 26; Bharucha 2014: 195; Fischer-Lichte 2014: 14).

I address the need to move beyond postcolonialism in order to accommodate the specificity, individuality and complexity of cultural practices and knowledge systems (Chatterjea 2013: 12). Therefore, I examine the literature of theatre scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte and her research team at the *International Research Centre "Interweaving Performance Cultures"* Berlin, where a discourse that moves beyond-postcolonialism is advocated. Fischer-Lichte and her colleagues address the need to develop new ways of looking at cultural exchanges of knowledge and skills, and new ways of addressing the complexities of such interactions (Amine 2014; Bharucha 2014; Bhabha 2014; Fischer-Lichte 2014, 2010).

I point to Sankalpam's working methods and I seek to argue that 'communities of curiosity' are created through these working methods, which transcend borders through exchanges of knowledge. One such example might be illustrated in the WhatsApp group, Airing Chickens, through which Sankalpam's investigation of Bharata Natyam is continually active and interactive, moving its own practice beyond the postcolonial debate into more subtle and nuanced territories of discussion (Discussed in chapters six to eight).

## Chapter 4

### Histories: History, Contexts, Legacy

In this chapter I locate Sankalpam within Bharata Natyam's historical context. In particular, I situate the company within the lineage of Rukmini Devi, founder of Kalakshetra. I detail how Devi negotiated the socio-political contexts of pre-Independence India, navigating both colonial and Indian Nationalist ideologies, in order to re-make the outlawed temple dance form *sadir*, into the classical, global dance form Bharata Natyam. I address the controversy surrounding Devi's response to a complex socio-political context in developing Bharata Natyam. However, I concentrate more specifically on the impact of Devi's local/global ideology as a legacy through which Sankalpam develops its own approach to nurturing Bharata Natyam in the adopted locale of the UK dance landscape.

I establish how the balance of power between the West and East in colonial India, infiltrates the UK dance landscape and the postcolonial discourse too. The impact upon diasporic artists is discussed, as technical proficiency and creative innovation are sidelined in favour of aligning practices with ethnicity,

religion, tradition and stagnation. The legacy of Devi's approach to seeking knowledge and expertise from local and global domains is examined for its significance in Sankalpam's methodology to negotiating the context of UK dance landscape.

## Chapter 5

### Beginnings: The Birth of Sankalpam

In this chapter, I discuss the rationale for Sankalpam's formation and its emergence into the UK dance landscape. I detail the first steps of the company's life, and the first collaborative investigations Sankalpam undertakes. I consider also how by putting form at the centre of the collective investigation, supported by shared values of rigour, attention to quality and a commitment to form, Sankalpam's working method is established as a dialectic with other cultural disciplines and practitioners. Although I argue that the company's first production was arrived at through happenstance more than design, the first company production also sets the tone for how Sankalpam later develops collaborative engagements with other cultural knowledge systems.

## Chapter 6

### Collaborations: Observing the Dialectic – Sankalpam 1994 - 2004

In chapter six I begin to scope out the impact of Sankalpam's dialectic method upon the company. I do this by focusing on detailed analyses of two productions; *Walk Around Tradition & Alone by Themselves* (1994/1995) and *Dance of the Drunken Monks* (2002-2004). The productions reference either end of a ten-year working period for Sankalpam, through which the application

and impact of the dialectic is examined. I also summarise the collaborations in the intervening years (1995-2002) but focus the detailed assessment on the two productions mentioned. I consider how collaborations with different cultural disciplines and practitioners, as well as engaging knowledge systems within local and global reference points, affects the ways Sankalpam nurtures the form. I examine therefore, how the dialectic emerges as a method for the company to reclaim the specificity of Bharata Natyam as an embodied practice, which is evidenced in the discussion on *Dance of the Drunken Monks*. I detail how the company responds to collaboration as provocation, and how it negotiates terrains of familiarity and the unknown. Furthermore, I argue that the boundaries of definition become fluid through Sankalpam's approach particularly when applied to definitions of 'local' and 'global', tradition and contemporaneity.

## Chapter 7

### Processes: Individualising Cultural Knowledge in Clay Body Sites – A Discussion of Vidya Thirunarayan's, *The Clay Connection*

Using my immersive role as co-creator and researcher, I assess how Sankalpam's dialectic methodology resonates in Thirunarayan's independent studio research. *The Clay Connection* (2016 & 2017) is analysed from the 'belly of the project'. As the data emerges from 'within' I use thick description to detail and analyse how Thirunarayan evolves the dialectic.

I consider how Thirunarayan brings clay and dance into dialogue in order to pursue a deeper understanding of *abhinaya* and to find new routes to access

emotional intention (*bhāva*) in dance. In setting up an enquiry through the studio process of *The Clay Connection*, Thirunarayan challenges the Bharata Natyam form once more. Combining the familiar elements of dance and clay creates unfamiliar contexts in which each are explored differently by Thirunarayan. Thirunarayan's embedded knowledge of each medium is disrupted by the introduction of one to the other and further by exploring the familiar alongside the unknown in the rehearsal process. Familiarity emerges as grounding, liberating and restricting for Thirunarayan in her process of developing new ways to understand Bharata Natyam. Similarly, for the team, familiar methods of investigation act as barriers to accessing routes to new knowledge.

The relationship between performer, performance and spectator is examined as integral to Indian classical performance practices and acknowledged in European theatre and scholarship too. How Bharata Natyam can be reclaimed as an embodied practice by attending to these interdependent relationships is arrived at through the intervention of clay and is the subject of further discussion. The familiar cultural narrative of *Pārvatī's Dirt* is examined which grounds *The Clay Connection* process and provides structure for a studio investigation to emerge through. By interrogating the emotional experience of Pārvatī (the narrative's key protagonist) a moment of dehiscence occurs in rehearsal, creating a rupture in thinking, which in turn enables a different approach.

Clay and dance are subsequently investigated through a new lens where the transformative aspect of clay is found to act as a catalyst for Thirunarayan to

access the *bhāva* in her dance, as a conduit for emotional intention to reside within and as a visual metaphor disrupting perceived notions of the Bharata Natyam dancer. How the acquired knowledge from *The Clay Connection* processes can be applied to Bharata Natyam repertoire more specifically, emerges as a key question from this particular study and is discussed briefly.

## Chapter 8

### Teaching: Testing the Dialectic

In this chapter I discuss how Sankalpam integrates teaching contexts into the dialectic in order to further assess and refine the form. I seek to argue that Sankalpam utilises teaching contexts as a way of testing knowledge acquired through the dialectic enquiry. I consider therefore the teaching context of the University of Surrey where Sankalpam's Uppal Subbiah, evolves and tests the transmission of Bharata Natyam as an embodied practice in different cultural bodies. I suggest that the BA Dance students at the University of Surrey become part of Sankalpam's dialectic too, feeding into the process which challenges existing knowledge of Bharata Natyam.

I discuss systems of transmitting the cultural knowledge of Bharata Natyam in traditional *guru-shishya-parampara* contexts. In these contexts, the form is learned through repetition and mimicry of the *guru* with little analysis of the physiology of the movement. I consider how Sankalpam adopts elements of this traditional mode of instruction, as well engaging with more fluid dialogues with students, thus reflecting a Kalakshetra methodology of conversational

discourse as highlighted by K Sankara Menon (1907-1995),<sup>23</sup> in a BBC documentary about the institution (BBC 1984). I examine how Uppal Subbiah facilitates a deep learning of Bharata Natyam, despite the restrictions of the university curriculum. Furthermore, I illustrate how students respond to Uppal Subbiah's approach of integrating body, mind, consciousness, emotions and sensations as well as the 'lived experience' within her teaching practice.

I argue that by encouraging students to take ownership of the form, Uppal Subbiah in fact enables a more embodied interaction with the discipline. Bharata Natyam is discussed as an holistic discipline, which is supported by "contextual foundations" that encompass other areas of knowledge such as music, literature, philosophy and religion (Prickett 2007: 26). I argue that Sankalpam acknowledges that Bharata Natyam is only part of a wider phenomenon and conclude that in this way the company further indicates an alignment with Indian epistemology (such as Indian world-view thinking).

## Chapter 9

### Conclusions

Chapter nine concludes the study, summing up how the research questions have been addressed and what has been discovered. In addition, I indicate my contribution to knowledge by highlighting the main insights gained from the research and offer suggestions for further research in this area.

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<sup>23</sup> Menon was first Principal of the Besant Memorial High School at Kalakshetra.

### **1.11 Summary**

In this chapter I offer a broad overview of the study, introducing the subject, Sankalpam and stating the main research questions. I signal the politicised terrain that Bharata Natyam exists within and outline the broad field of discourse that Bharata Natyam is located within. I give a brief overview of the theoretical framework that supports the study and the methodology. The key terms of reference used within the study are set out, as are its boundaries. I concluded this chapter with a brief outline of the thesis structure and the main points discussed in each.

In the following chapter I discuss the methodology employed to undertake the study, highlighting the ethical concerns arising from researching a migrated practice from a different cultural and aesthetic perspective.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Methods: Researching Friends and Colleagues – A Tactical Analysis for Intimate Research Projects**

#### **2.1 Overview**

In the last chapter I offered an overview of the study. In this chapter I discuss the methodological framework for the study and detail how it has been conducted. I highlight the particular issues that arise when research emerges from an insider/outsider perspective within a 'home-field' and I consider how a postpositivist approach is useful in accommodating multiple perspectives, emerging data and the bias and personality of the researcher. The ethical implications arising during the study are also addressed.

#### **2.2 Researching on 'Home Turf'**

To begin, I pose a set of questions to help establish a model of practice for researching friends and analysing colleagues. In so doing, I address how I might process a rigorous academic study of those with whom I have a long-standing professional and personal relationship.<sup>24</sup> I ask, how do I remain part of the process and yet separate my influence within the analysis? How do I temper my observations of colleagues viewed through my subjective lens? I consider what impact this might have on my methodology, data collection, selection and interpretation. The following discussion highlights some of the theories and methods that register as potential allies in supporting what has emerged as an intimate research project.

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<sup>24</sup> See chapter 1.4.

From one perspective I can be viewed as an insider as I research a company with whom I am deeply familiar in my own back yard, the UK dance landscape. From a different perspective I can be viewed as an alien and an outsider, as I come from another culture, training and aesthetic to Sankalpam. Working on 'home turf' yet with both familiar and unfamiliar elements, sets in motion an oscillating insider/outsider perspective of belonging and not belonging, from which my investigation must emerge. In some ways this concept is familiar to me through my split identity which being Irish as well as British, and from Northern Ireland (an occupied British territory) is confusing.

Anthropologists Drid Williams and Andrée Grau, explore the concept of a 'local' field of study. Williams follows the thought systems emerging in the 1970s which focused less on the object of study as having to be 'far away' and 'primitive', to a more accepted version that an anthropological study could be undertaken in your own 'locale' (1999: 27). Interestingly, Grau has stated that working in the field at home can be as daunting as the field abroad (1999: 167). This is partly because no one expects the culture shock of being an outsider in an inside environment. It is this juxtaposition of familiarity and strangeness within a local 'locale' that presents me, the researcher with a complex map of relational dilemmas.

This problem has been tested at several points during my research, and most notably, during studio research with Thirunarayan on her independent project, *The Clay Connection* (2016 & 2017). During rehearsals my roles as active insider, participant, researcher, choreographer, observer and friend were at

times woven neatly into rows, interconnected but distinct. At other times they became matted and indistinguishable from each other. The multi-faceted interactions I have with Sankalpam as a researcher, friend and colleague, present advantageous as well as problematic aspects to the study and as a result, the role of critical objectivity and subjectivity in studying an intimate environment with rigour and candor is called into question.

### **2.3 The Methodological Framework**

The complexity of this study is illustrated by the postcolonial, geo-cultural and socio-political issues that it encompasses. It is also bound with ethical questions raised by my insider/outsider position. This suggests that adopting a critical methodological framework which draws on multiple and flexible systems is appropriate. Positivist research and quantitative methods have been adopted for arts-based and dance research projects and have proved useful for statistical analysis of physical and psychological elements within the dance field, as illustrated in the research of dance scholar, Sara Houston (2011: 332-333). However, whilst positivist and quantitative methods can be useful in aspects of arts-based research, this study requires an approach that allows for interpretation to emerge by engaging with the evolving data.

Authors Gray and Malins refer to the type of methodology used by many in the arts and design field as being pluralistic in nature, eclectic, multi layered, responsive to the context and transparent (2004: 21). My preference for a fluid methodology is that it can accommodate the different roles I occupy in relation to Sankalpam. It also allows for different types of interactions with the company

through the various contexts I engage with. These include education and theatre settings, within arts organisations and with arts practitioners and so on. Hughes, Kidd & McNamara support this approach, suggesting that as soon as something is set up within a theoretical framework or a designed methodology, the inquiry is restricted (2011: 206-207). Furthermore, they encourage an artisan, improvised and decompositional framework in order to keep knowledge alive and emerging (2011: 206-207). Although the authors are referring to working models for Practice as Research (PaR), the same principles can be applied to my study, which might be considered as practice-responsive research.

A postpositivist lens encourages the utilisation of my insider status and my subjectivity as tools in the research. In support of postpositivist methods for studying intimate 'home' fields, Jill Green and Susan W. Stinson (1999: 99) point out that a key aspect of the approach is that interpretation emerges from the investigation, rather than being set out at the beginning as something to prove or disprove. Postpositivist research relies on many and varied approaches, such as phenomenology, ethnography, de-constructivism, and relativism and acknowledges the influence and bias of the researcher within the process. It also recognises other factors which may influence the outcome.

A postpositivist method acknowledges that there are many ways of looking at something and that these are shaped by many factors including the researchers themselves, society and culture. The role of and the personality of the interpreter is therefore consciously written into the process and reflected upon

as part of the process (Green and Stinson 1999: 91-100). The researcher interweaves many methods from many paradigms in order to get the best understanding of the subject as possible (Denzin and Lincoln (1994) cited in Gray and Malins 2004: 74). This aligns with the hermeneutic enquiry through which the researcher responds to the data, interpretation is therefore influenced by the emergence of new data. The hypothesis therefore emerges gradually in the hermeneutic inquiry (McNamara 1999: 172-173). This approach has been an effective one for my study, which evolves as a live project and which is served by a rich seam of data that emerges almost on a daily basis. This is perhaps most clearly illustrated in Thirunarayan's studio process, *The Clay Connection*, discussed in chapter seven.

In *Dance in The Hermeneutic Circle* (1999: 182) dance scholar, Joann McNamara states that hermeneutic inquiry is subjective by nature and does not attempt to find an ultimate truth but rather a better understanding. McNamara (1999: 163) suggests that dance is mostly concerned with the branch of hermeneutics that applies to phenomenology. The theoretical approach proposes that the meaning of a text emerges from the individual's interpretation of that particular text. She uses the example of the dance critic to illustrate. The dance critic brings to the performance pre-understandings, both conscious and unconscious, which are shaped by her understanding and experience of the world, as well as historical, social, cultural and economic influences. These cannot be ignored when interpreting the performance and must be considered as part of that individual's interpretations. Interpretation is in fact always in a

state of flux, always affected by prejudices, assumptions and expectations (McNamara 1999: 166).

This example resonates in my investigation of Sankalpam. I bring to the study a history with the company and a dance history before the company. I also have some knowledge of Sankalpam's working practices, the classical form and the personalities of the co-Artistic Directors. Simultaneously, I inhabit other experiences acquired from different interactions. These include different cultural, economic and social perspectives which influence my understanding and interpretation of Sankalpam and of Bharata Natyam in the UK dance landscape. Hermeneutic phenomenology is a useful framework for my study as it acknowledges pre-formed ideas as an integral part of the interpretation whilst at the same time allowing for these preconditions within us to move and change (McNamara 1999: 166-67).

## **2.4 The Fieldwork**

Data collection for this study undertaken through fieldwork and analysis of primary-source documentation has been extensive. My emic/etic relationship with Sankalpam has yielded considerable access to company processes, archives and discourse. Fieldwork has been carried out over a period of three years, 2016-2018 and regular correspondence with the company continues into 2019. As outlined in the hermeneutic research approach, the data collected is offered to Sankalpam's co-Artistic Directors for reflection and comments, which in turn impacts my own analysis. These reflections are written into the study. I take on two key roles during the fieldwork period: critical insider/ observer, and

critical insider/ participant. I also adopt a critical observer role for contexts beyond the company such as teaching, performance or interview with other artists, teachers, scholars and practitioners in the UK dance landscape. These roles often intersect and are sometimes interdependent. In this way they reflect the nature of my relationship with Sankalpam as both fluid and complex.

Detailed analyses of the company's working methods are presented in chapters six seven and eight. In each of these chapters I examine the dialectic in a different context. These include: collaborative contexts (chapter six), the studio context (chapter seven) and in a teaching context (chapter eight). In each context I gather data in different ways, thus reflecting my changing role within the study and with the company. In chapter six, I take on the role of participant observer, in chapter seven, I adopt an immersive participant perspective whereas in chapter eight, my role is of a critical observer. I now unpack my researcher perspective for each of the three Sankalpam-context-driven chapters.

In chapter six, I consider how Sankalpam uses collaborative investigations as a way of challenging existing knowledge about Bharata Natyam. My role as researcher in this context is broadly situated as a critical insider.<sup>25</sup> I gather data through my own and others' personal recollections using interview, as well as formal and informal correspondence with the company. I offer a close examination of two productions, *Walk Around Tradition* (1994/5) and *Dance of*

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<sup>25</sup> This is a term used by theatre scholar, Rustom Bharucha in his book, *Chandralekha: Woman Dance Resistance* (1995).

*the Drunken Monks* (2002/2004). Critically, the choreography is not the focus of the analysis. I concentrate instead on Sankalpam's rationale for each collaborative investigation and I consider how specificity of the form as an embodied classical discipline, is re-examined and manifests from one production to the next.

I draw on my personal recollections as rehearsal director during these productions, however this offers limited information as I often see only the completed choreography. More recently, I attended the company's research and development rehearsals with contemporary choreographer Lea Anderson and composer Steve Blake (2016). Although this particular collaboration is not discussed in detail in this study, the information gained from the fieldwork has nevertheless impacted my thinking. I was able to observe the collaboration process and subsequently witness how Anderson and Blake responded to the form through tasks, discussion and reflection. How the dialectic might be applied in Sankalpam's studio working methods was therefore evidenced in the process.

Much of the other research into collaborative contexts for chapter six is desk-based. I gather information from primary documentation, through personal and company archival material. This includes funding applications, company publicity packs, programme notes, evaluation forms, video and photographic footage, accessed through public sites and from company members and associates. Interview furthermore, plays a key role in supplementing archival source material.

In chapter seven I discuss how Sankalpam reconsiders Bharata Natyam in the context of studio processes. As a participant immersed in Thirunarayan's independent studio research (*The Clay Connection*) I play an active role in the dialectic that Thirunarayan establishes between clay and dance and with the wider creative team. This challenges her knowledge of the form, and the working method of the dialectic, developed through previous Sankalpam collaborations.

Through Thirunarayan's personal project, my professional artistic position with Sankalpam shifts radically from long-term rehearsal director (1994-present) to choreographer. Whilst I have been rehearsal director with Sankalpam for ten touring productions, I have also choreographed two pieces with members of the company, one in 1993 and the second in 1995.<sup>26</sup> As rehearsal director for Sankalpam's productions, my position is constructed as one of a critical insider. The company invites me in to rehearse the work of choreographers and directors at the end of its research and choreographic process. I refine and polish completed productions, but I have no choreographic input.

In *The Clay Connection*, my role as choreographer is one of an immersed insider. It includes co-determining and agreeing thematic material for exploration, devising workshop exercises and co-creating content and structure. Assessing the project from within and without therefore becomes

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<sup>26</sup> *For Those I Have Talked with by the Fire* (1993) was choreographed for Thirunarayan, and *Mother Most Missed* (1995) was choreographed with Thirunarayan and Balchandran Gokul. The piece was commissioned by Swindon Dance (NDA) and Merseyside Dance Initiative and premiered in 1996 at Bluecoat Arts Centre Arts Centre, Liverpool.

quite difficult. As a researcher, I sometimes experience for example ethical concerns about the processes and decisions arrived at through my choreographer self. I am, in these instances both aware of the situation and self-aware, yet, immersed in the creative process too. I utilise my own personal involvement in and responses to the process as a catalyst for investigation. Additional data for chapter seven is gathered mainly through interview with members of the creative team within twelve months of the project. This differs greatly from chapter six, where data is gathered many years after the events and my personal recollections support rather than drive the inquiry.

In chapter eight, I focus on the ways that Sankalpam reclaims the specificity of Bharata Natyam in teaching contexts. I concentrate on how students learn to embody aspects of Bharata Natyam and examine how the performer is taught to move between inner intention and outward expression in the discipline. I focus on teaching in the Higher Education context in the UK and centre the study on Sankalpam's Uppal Subbiah's teaching practice at the University of Surrey. I argue that Sankalpam utilises teaching as a context in which knowledge acquired through the dialectic is tested upon students. Of particular interest, is how Sankalpam processes the expertise of theatre scholar, director and expert in Indian performance practices, Phillip Zarrilli. I examine how Sankalpam employs Zarrilli's research on psychophysical performance training, in particular the performer's movement between gross and subtle body states.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Zarrilli uses the term 'gross' or gross body when referring to the outer body and uses the term 'subtle body' to describe the inner experience. The modulation between the two body states in South Asian embodied practices, Zarrilli states, is activated through the breath or *prana* (2011: 248).

Whilst the study is centered on Uppal Subbiah's teaching at the University of Surrey, I also explore the broader field of Bharata Natyam teaching in the UK dance landscape and undertake a survey across different contexts in the UK between 2016 and 2018. I target different geographical locations, teaching contexts, course/ module leaders and teachers. In addition to observations I interview teachers face to face or via Skype and where permissible, I conduct group interviews with students. Module and programme leaders are interviewed where possible as well as directors of key institutions such as DanceXchange, regional dance agency for Birmingham and the West Midlands, which houses Yuva Gati the UK, South Asian strand of the Centre for Advanced Training (CAT). The ethics committee at Coventry University approved sample questionnaires, consent forms and participant information sheets at the outset of this investigation (see Appendix 1). Only students over the legal age of consent have been interviewed and all student interviews have been conducted as group interviews and anonymised. My researcher role in the teaching context is primarily an observational one through which I maintain the most critical distance for the overall study.

## **2.5 Approaches**

Many researchers wrestle with the insider/outsider dilemma, particularly within the field of dance where researchers are often deeply immersed within the field as practitioners, performers, choreographers, and teachers. The contexts I examine Sankalpam within vary, as I have described. Dance scholar Sondra Horton Fraleigh (1999: 19) suggests that researchers should take on a

“beginner’s mind” at the start of their research to try and mediate their subjective stance as much as possible. By adopting the unknowing position, they can remain detached from the thing that as yet they do not know, and perhaps have a more thorough and objective inquiry as a result. Finish scholar, Teija Löytönen, highlights the shifting perspective needed to navigate between the role of insider and outsider when conducting an ethnographic study within her ‘home’ field (2011: 256). Löytönen argues that the researcher can become blind to her own perspective and ‘ways of knowing’ when researching from within familiar territory (2011: 256). The resulting ‘home blindness’ (Czarniawska 1997 cited in Löytönen 2011: 264) endangers the research process by restricting it to one perspective or authority, the researcher’s (Löytönen 2011: 256). Meanings can be taken for granted within such intimate environments. Löytönen’s personal response was to adopt a collaborative research orientation approach. This proved to be a useful methodological tool to counteract the problem. Data collected from participants was transcribed and sent back to the participants for comments. This process was repeated over a number of times, refining the themes and feeding into the data analysis. This approach gave Löytönen’s research group a voice and an active role in selecting and analysing themes as well as in interpreting the data (Löytönen 2011: 263-265).

Gray and Malins offer a similar example within the framework of Participatory Action Research that adopts the ‘lived experience of people’ as a way of democratising inquiry and in some cases empowering marginalised groups (Reason 1994 cited in Gray and Malins 2004: 75). Sankalpam’s voice within my

study has been an active one throughout. This is evidenced in different ways. For example, I have co-written and co-presented academic papers, discussing findings from this project at international conferences with Balchandran Gokul.<sup>28</sup> I have also developed and co-presented workshops with Thirunarayan to further develop aspects of *The Clay Connection* studio research and test ideas with an audience.<sup>29</sup> More generally the information, thoughts, analyses and interpretations of data are shared with the company's co-Artistic Directors on a regular basis through telephone conversation, WhatsApp, Messaging, face-to-face conversation and email. The company feeds its reflections back into my research, thereby keeping the dialectic between Sankalpam and myself a 'live' process. Integrating these multiple approaches into my study has been beneficial to the enquiry as well as complex to negotiate. The approach offers Sankalpam an active and an autonomous voice within the research, whilst simultaneously keeping my study responsive and flexible. Whilst undoubtedly useful for this study, at the same time a postpositivist approach can have its own complications, as I now discuss.

## 2.6 Limitations

Reflective methods of research such as this study, respond to messy and changing situations. Interpreters such as myself improvise within a given structure and also beyond the perimeters of the designed methodology.

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<sup>28</sup> Presentations with Balchandran Gokul include the IFTR conference, *Performance and Consciousness* working group, Stockholm (2016), *Stranger Aliens Foreigners* conference, University of Oxford (2016), *Asian Performance* conference, University of Lincoln (2016), *Sustaining the Discipline: Embedding the Right to Dance in the C21st*, Dance HE conference Northern School of Contemporary Dance (2017).

<sup>29</sup> Presentation/workshops include, *Diaspora & Embodiments of Hope: Performances of Spirit & Sustainability* Symposium, the University of Surrey 2018 and the *Dance and Academia* workshop/ presentation, Oxford 2019.

Reflective methods might include responsive, embedded and embodied processes. They may lead to discursive outputs, private journals or reflective conversations (Hughes, Kidd & McNamara 2011: 191-192). This material however can often be a form of advocacy as opposed to a critical analysis or reflection on the data. As researcher, I have to be mindful of defending my research from a critical perspective, albeit, acknowledging my professional and personal biases.

Within a postpositivist framework the interpretive research method provides a useful starting point for gathering and analysing field data, as well as for identifying and building patterns and themes from raw material. It relies on observation, participation, field notes, video or audio recording, open ended and or extended interviews. I have utilised all of these methods in my research, applying them in the collaborative, teaching and studio research contexts I investigate, and they have proved to be extremely fruitful in generating rich sources of material for analysis. Each individual interpreter working in this way may see or focus on different patterns, or give some, more prominence than others. Interpretive research is useful as a tool for giving the participants a voice, as I have established in my own study. It is also biased by the researcher's interactions with the participants as well as being the gatekeepers to the participants (for example a dance school or educational institution). Limitations therefore can include a lack of critical questioning, analysis or comparison (Green and Stinson 1999: 102-103).

To counteract this, I apply various strategies. For example, I extend my interviews and observations of teaching to a broader field, to include teachers and institutions beyond those directly connected with Sankalpam. This is useful in understanding the different approaches to teaching Bharata Natyam, as well as the different student responses. Differentiating areas of critical concern for Bharata Natyam teachers is, I have discovered, tempered by the particular institutional criteria that Bharata Natyam practitioners teach to in each institutional context. Similarly, by interviewing students in different learning environments the variations in student perceptions of knowledge gained from their Bharata Natyam classes, are also established. This broader fieldwork has proved useful in counteracting the limitations of reflective analysis on an intimate research project.

## **2.7 Ethical Concerns**

There are ethical concerns that emerge when adopting methodological structures and thought systems constructed by one culture, to understand the arts practice of another culture (Farnell 1999: 47). The model I adopt of participant/ observer is rooted in a hegemonic narrative and therefore the power relationships that might be established between the participant and observer through exchanges of knowledge, must be considered (Grau 1999: 167-170).

The theoretical systems I use to view and interpret another cultural movement system and to analyse Sankalpam are also processed through a particular bias. Anthropologist, Brenda Farnell argues that cultural and linguistic borders are often considered irrelevant where movement, body and dance are concerned,

adding that naïve presuppositions that dance and movement languages are universal and that all modes and methods of using the body and understanding the use of the body in dance are the same, prevail (1999: 146). The danger is in assuming universality, the specificity of particular dance forms can be lost, as Chatterjea argues (2013: 9-10). I must therefore consider how as researcher, I represent Sankalpam (the participants) and how I can limit my cultural bias within the study.

Similarly, I need to be aware of what anthropologist Adrienne Kaeppler highlights as the inaccuracy of western definitions of dance to identify other cultural movement-based systems, which may in fact be considered to be ritual, sport, dance or martial arts within their inherent cultures (1999:14). As an Irish/European practitioner trained in European and American movement forms, I must question my interpretation of aesthetics, of structure, of presentational modes when analysing Sankalpam's Bharata Natyam practice. Despite its migration to the UK dance landscape, Bharata Natyam is rooted in different cultural frames of reference than the forms I am most familiar with. Euro-American models of analyses will have limitations and can be reductive as argued by Williams (1999: 29-32). This reminds the researcher of Bharucha's argument that such models may in fact be inadequate systems of "knowing" (2014: 195).

Dance scholar Joan Frosch reminds the researcher to question who the research is for and what the researched participants get out of it (1999: 268). What is returned to the researched group is an important question for the

methods I adopt when considering the colonial legacy of earlier twentieth century anthropological studies (Geertz 2000: 95). Similar issues were highlighted in Zarrilli's discussion of Peter Brook's 1985 production of *Mahabharata*. Zarrilli addresses the socio-political-economic-and personal residue left in India by Brook and his company once the research period had been completed and the production had been created (Zarrilli 1986: 92). My study addresses these issues by writing Sankalpam's voice into the methodology as an active one and by processing aspects of the analysis with Sankalpam as I have discussed. Critically, the company's reflection and analysis of key themes is encouraged and promoted within my study. Knowledge, themes and ideas are shared, discussed, debated and analysed between Sankalpam's co-Artistic Directors and myself as part of this study. This ensures the company is not merely a passive participant. Furthermore, as discussed previously, I develop aspects of this study with Sankalpam to co-present findings from this research, thereby attempting to diminish the potential of a hegemonic power structure within my research.

## **2.8 Summary**

This chapter has outlined the methodology for my study and the methods I use to consider how a Bharata Natyam practice is nurtured and maintained by Sankalpam. I have explained how I examine Sankalpam from both emic and etic perspectives and I articulate why a robust framework is important in challenging my insider perspective and particular bias. I discuss why it is essential to establish a methodological framework that allows for fluid approaches and which facilitates multiple perspectives. With this in mind, I

describe how I adopt a qualitative mixed-methods approach and draw on many ethnographic techniques to gather and analyse data. This situates my study within several frames of reference, which include but are not limited to postpositivist, hermeneutic and deconstructivist researcher methods. The ethical implications of establishing a hegemonic framework with friends as participants is acknowledged and addressed and I explain how I therefore apply a framework that accommodates the voice of the participants within and beyond the fieldwork. I attend to aesthetic and cultural differences in perception and interpretations of knowledge by considering an Indian epistemological perspective, so that data can be interpreted through more than one cultural lens.

The next chapter focuses on the context of the study giving consideration to the literature that Bharata Natyam is located within and the discourse it is framed by. I focus the chapter on the erasure of specificity through a postcolonial discourse, which promotes universalism in favour of individualisation and diversity in place of difference. Furthermore, I address the need to move beyond the boundaries of such ideologies.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Contexts: Beyond Form, Beyond Postcolonialism**

#### **3.1 Overview**

In the previous chapter I discussed the methods employed to gather and analyse data for my study. In this chapter I consider where the study is situated within scholarly discourse. I focus on the field of South Asian dance, situated within an intercultural discourse and underscored by postcolonial ideologies. I explore generic labels such as the problematic term, 'South Asian' through which the specificity of particular cultural forms may be lost or neutered (Chatterjea 2013). I investigate how the themes of globalisation and universalism are complicit in erasing difference in favour of diversity and in negating specificity of the particular in preference of the global.

I bring Sankalpam into focus within the broader field by discussing how the company's dialectic working method, challenges the reference points of what constitutes 'local' in a global arena. I also consider the difficulties in challenging a system whereby other cultural arts practices are viewed through Western standards and aesthetic principles. The need to move beyond postcolonialism in theoretical models and language is highlighted (Fischer-Lichte 2014), and the importance of adopting and integrating other aesthetic concepts is raised (Bharucha 2014). Finally, I address the multiple worlds that Sankalpam inhabits and explore how engaging with a multiplicity of knowledge systems, gives voice to the migrated Bharata Natyam form in the adopted locale of the UK dance landscape.

### **3.2 Generic Terms and Specific Practices**

Issues arise from the postcolonial discourse, whereby generic terms emanating from notions of diversity plurality and hybridity, become essentialised (Eagleton 2016: 32). This can have problematic consequences for specific cultural arts practices and it raises questions about the limitations that generic terminology and categorisations place upon individual forms. Chatterjea highlights this when questioning the universalism of the stage which has expanded to include “other” bodies, forms and aesthetics from culture-specific origins (2013: 9). She questions however, who specifies what is universal or included and who sets the terms for this labeling? Is this a true universalism or one where Westerners set the definitions and the perimeters? In which case, she argues, the stage then becomes asymmetric (2013: 9).

Cultural theorist Terry Eagleton challenges thinking about diversity, culture and plurality (2016: 38). He argues that under a “cultural doctrine” shared human traits, virtues and capabilities have been spurned, which indicates a suppression of “cultural difference in the name of a spurious universalism” (2016: 38). He explains this as a prejudiced way of thinking because it puts everything in the same basket under culture and does not allow for difference, despite the incongruity of the things that are coupled together under the “cultural doctrine” (2016: 38-39).

For Chatterjea, the problem manifests in her work as a practitioner, when the issue of where her practice fits into the “contemporary” dance label and western

ideas about contemporary dance arises (2013: 9).<sup>30</sup> Chatterjea argues that the “contemporary” dance label is a Euro-American construct (2013: 9) and warns “against the flattening of specificity which leads in the end to capitulation to a constructed norm” (2013: 11). Generic terms however can be useful argues Grau, describing their usefulness as “a metaphorical shelter or refuge” whilst acknowledging simultaneously how reductive they can be (2004: 26).

The term South Asian, as I outline in chapter one, is a contentious label under which Bharata Natyam is located. It was adopted by the UK in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, states Meduri (2008) and under the term, she continues, classical and national Indian dance forms were re-positioned on a global stage, where previously they had been presented under the label of Indian (2008: 298-300). Furthermore, Meduri argues, the South Asian label promotes binary divisions, whereby the term is defined as a global one, whereas the Indian label is equated with localised forms (2008: 300). Grau extends this argument by explaining that whilst conveniently highlighting similarities of diverse cultural forms under one umbrella heading, the term South Asian can also ignore the uniqueness of particular cultural forms (2004: 31-32). The term shoehorns multiple cultures for example Sri Lanka, India, Nepal as well as genres of practice, from folk to classical, into the homogenous South Asian category with little indication of the wealth of difference the term in fact encapsulates (Grau 2004: 32; Meduri 2008: 303).

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<sup>30</sup> Chatterjea’s work draws on elements of the classical Indian dance form, Odissi, on yoga, the martial art form, Chhau, as well as Indian street theatre forms.

For some practitioners the term South Asian dance is flatly rejected. Dance scholar Uttara Asha Coorlawala has stated that for her, “the phrase ‘South Asian Dance’ is repeatedly embedded within a discourse of pain and anger, a discourse that interrogates whiteness, and negotiates a place for itself in a white driven power structure” (2002). Other practitioners circumnavigate the term and point to more nuanced elements of their practice in their company publicity. For example, Bharata Natyam trained Subathra Subramaniam, artistic director of Sadhana dance company, refers to her choreographic practice as navigating “the confluence of arts and science” (Sadhana 2019). Bharata Natyam practitioner, Kamala Devam of Kamala Devam Company (KDC) describes the company’s creative practice as “athletic and richly layered dance work” (Kamala Devam Company 2019). Despite each artistic director’s roots in Bharata Natyam and the use of the form within their individual choreographic practice, each chooses to avoid the term South Asian within their publicity. Instead they offer descriptions that attend to other specificities in their company practices. In other examples, the term South Asian is accepted and adopted by dance companies and arts organisations within the field of UK South Asian dance.<sup>31</sup>

The term intercultural has its difficulties too. Borne from a postcolonial context instigated by Edward Said’s seminal text *Orientalism*, first published in 1978 (Singleton 2014), the term emerged in the 1970s and 80s, in order to re-dress the imbalance of early 20<sup>th</sup> century western thinking (Fischer-Lichte 2014: 5).

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<sup>31</sup> See for example ATMA dance company, Akademi and Pulse Connects. All of whom actively use the term ‘South Asian’ on their website publicity.

Fischer-Lichte argues that the colonial presumption was that Europeans had the right to take other cultural forms to enhance their own (2014: 4). The term intercultural occurred in a postcolonial context as a reaction to colonialism, Fischer-Lichte continues, in order to re-dress the imbalance of appropriation by the west from other cultures (2014: 5).

Within each term, South Asian and intercultural, deeper issues fester which in turn raises questions that further problematise their use. For example, in applying the label South Asian to Indian dance forms, Meduri asks, is the label used to accommodate the ever-growing mix of nationalities from different nations or is it adopted in academic usage as a way of forgetting British colonial rule? (2008: 303). In either case, there are implications with its application that arise from a colonial narrative. Grau has questioned the restrictions that labels place on particular dance forms and practitioners, highlighting issues of inclusion and exclusion as well as identity and alterity, created through the limitation of labels, such as Indian dance/ dancer, South Asian dance/ dancer (2004: 31). For Coorlawala, the term South Asian is representative of a larger historical narrative and hugely politicised (2002). Coorlawala describes her Indianness as being a commodity on the global stage (2002), an issue that Grau too has acknowledged, arguing that interculturalism can be perceived as 'trade' (1992: 17). Philosopher Achille Mbembe, meanwhile, highlights that both culture and identity have become commodities to be traded on global markets (2010).

Despite the term intercultural arising as a response to colonial guilt (Amine 2014), it too carries traces of imperialistic imposition. The attempt to universalise and promote inclusivity ironically, levels difference, as Chatterjea argues, stating that under the banner of 'intercultural dance', we in fact lose diversity (2013: 9). Theatre scholar Craig Latrell, meanwhile, highlights the lack of agency afforded to other cultures to create self-defined roles within global discourse and intercultural analysis (2000: 53). The globalisation of cultures creates advantages but brings with it problems too. Bharucha highlights some of these issues within the intercultural discourse, when he questions the adoption of the term 'global' and the simultaneous erasure of the term 'national' (2000: 5&6).

Each label, South Asian and intercultural it seems, eschews the particularities of cultures and disciplines in favour of more generalised terms of reference, thereby erasing difference, the local and the particular, in order to champion diversity within a global framework. This is particularly relevant to my study when examining how Sankalpam reclaims specificity of Bharata Natyam within an adopted locale. Fischer-Lichte argues that the binary divides that set east against west, local against global, national against transnational, are promoted within a postcolonial context through which they emerged (2014: 7). This study, therefore, adopts some of the more recent thinking, which moves beyond postcolonialism and beyond the limitations of an intercultural discourse. Theatre scholar Brian Singleton has outlined how scholars such as Fischer-Lichte, Ric Knowles and Penny Farfan, have called for not only a new terminology that better describes exchanges between and within cultures, but

a discourse that has at its heart the transformative power of cultural exchange through performance (Singleton 2014: 86).

In this chapter, therefore, I survey the literature, which challenges a discourse that collapses the particularities of cultures and disciplines in order to universalise and globalise. Further, I challenge the binary divides and the homogenisation of individual forms which are promoted through a postcolonial rhetoric. I do this by arguing that Sankalpam reclaims the specificity of performance techniques such as *abhinaya*,<sup>32</sup> and of philosophical concepts such as Indian world-view thinking,<sup>33</sup> by going 'beyond form'. Sankalpam uses different cultural knowledge systems as catalysts to distill knowledge by engaging with 'communities of curiosity'<sup>34</sup> that both embrace and transcend commonalities as well as difference. The company therefore circumnavigates the binary divisions of a postcolonial rhetoric as it reconsiders Bharata Natyam, simultaneously reclaiming specificity within the migrated form.

Sankalpam's process is not in my view an intercultural exchange, nor a hybridisation of forms, nor is it an example of a globalised nor multicultural discourse. Fischer-Lichte's proposition of interweaving cultures comes closer to describing Sankalpam's process suggesting a more complex and continuous method of working with and between many cultural knowledge systems, through which transformation occurs (2009). However, I propose that rather than as Fischer-Lichte's argument suggests, beginning with different strands

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<sup>32</sup> See chapter 1.8.

<sup>33</sup> See chapter 1.8.

<sup>34</sup> See chapter 1.8.

and moving towards a completed outcome through interweaving, Sankalpam rather begins with the completed article, the art form of Bharata Natyam. The company interrogates Bharata Natyam from within the discipline itself but critically using a dialectic methodology. The dialectic enables Sankalpam to view Bharata Natyam from different angles, through diverse lenses, challenging and provoking the company's existing understanding of the form. By re-examining Bharata Natyam through the dialectic and drawing upon different cultural knowledge systems,<sup>35</sup> Sankalpam clarifies, filters and condenses knowledge. Bharata Natyam, the form, is therefore redefined by going 'beyond form' and it is the company's 'knowledge' of Bharata Natyam that is transformed rather than the form itself.

### **3.3 Cultural Borrowing and Interculturalism**

Brian Singleton argues that the seminal writing of Edward Said in his text, *Orientalism*, is a reference point from which the notions of how the West viewed the orient began to change (Singleton 2014:79). Although Said had many critics as well as supporters states Singleton, nevertheless, *Orientalism* seemed to be a catalyst for a revision of thinking habits. Many argue that the term interculturalism emerged in reaction to the crimes of appropriation perpetuated by the colonialist thinkers and makers, who took from other cultures for the benefit of their own (Fischer-Lichte 2014). Attitudes to cultural borrowing differed, depending on which culture was instigating the borrowing. Fischer-Lichte illustrates these discrepancies using the example of German theatre practitioner and playwright, Bertold Brecht who borrowed from Japanese

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<sup>35</sup> See chapter 1.8.

performance techniques and was, she states, viewed as a genius for such appropriations (2014: 4). Westerners, by contrast, viewed the Japanese theatre practitioners who borrowed from Western realism, as producing a “mere imitation” (Fischer-Lichte 2014: 4).

Grau offers an example from her research on intercultural performance (*The Pan Project* 1986-1989). She highlights how choreographer Jirí Kylián’s production of *Stamping Ground* (1980), which took inspiration for movement from Australian Aboriginal dancing viewed by Kylián at a three-day festival, was heralded by critics (Grau 2001). When she examined the response to South Asian dance practitioners who had experimented with Euro-American contemporary choreographic techniques, Grau saw a contrast in attitude. She offers by way of evidence, an extract of a review by Reginald Massey, who states that the work of the South Asian dance practitioners was:

Suspect because the choreography is usually based on an uncertain grasp of the innovative possibilities of Asian dance allied with, to put it mildly, a misunderstanding of Western Contemporary dance idioms (Massey, R. 1998 cited in Grau 2001).

There was a difference in attitude to cultural borrowing, argues Fischer-Lichte, despite evidence that each culture was borrowing from others to enhance its own practices, or to address inadequacies of its own practices (2014: 4 & 5). Fisher-Lichte and Grau demonstrate that in the colonialist reading of cultural borrowing, the dominant perspective lies with Western, or European and American aesthetics and thinking.

Fischer-Lichte then questions why, when there are many historic examples of cultures interweaving aspects of other cultural theatre forms into their own

practices,<sup>36</sup> did the term ‘intercultural’ emerge in the 1970s and 1980s (2014: 4). Her response and Singleton’s view align, arguing that it arrived with postcolonialism and in response to a growing awareness of the impact that the colonial narrative had on arts practices (Fischer-Lichte 2014: 4). However, in adopting the term intercultural, there was an unconscious expectation that all the interactions would be between the West and other cultures, not between or within non-European or non-American cultures (Fischer-Lichte 2014: 5). The term intercultural is further problematised states Bharucha, because of the ways it can limit the understanding of cultural borrowing to a flow of traffic between cultures, countries and continents (2000: 9). Bharucha has advocated the recognition of cultural borrowing that emerges from ‘within’ cultures, countries and continents as equally critical (2000: 9). This is an important aspect of postcolonialism to consider within this study, as Sankalpam moves between continents and countries but also within them, to explore cultural knowledge systems beyond and within its own disciplinary sphere. For example in 2002, the company undertook research into India’s oldest theatre form, Koodiattam, at Natanakairali in Irinjalakuda, Kerala, India. The knowledge gained through the dialectic in that particular context, was consequently synthesised into the company’s production of *The Dance of The Drunken Monks* (2002-2004). Through the production process of ‘*Monks*’, Sankalpam entered into a further dialectic relationship with theatre director Phillip Zarrilli. I discuss this in chapter six.

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<sup>36</sup>Fischer-Lichte offers examples from countries such as Nigeria, Japan and Korea (2014: 4). Grau offers further examples in dance and theatre, such as, Loie Fuller, Anna Pavlova, Ruth St Denis and Antonin Artaud (1992: 12-13).

Bharucha argues for the specificity of cultures to be recognised within the terminologies applied to cultural borrowing, by clarifying that cultures are not defined solely through nationhood or regionality, but through individuality (2000: 9). This he argues, may include caste, creed and economic situation (2000: 9). The postcolonial reading of cultural borrowing can therefore be seen to mimic a colonial attitude to interculturalism, where hegemonic aesthetics and thinking practices dominate.

In an attempt to address the colonial mindset regarding cultural borrowing, which manifested through cultural appropriation, Latrell has argued that the resulting accepted theory which developed in theatre practice<sup>37</sup> is that western theatre practitioners are represented as unstoppable and crass, military forces which railroad their way into other cultures, pillaging, raping and destroying for their own artistic gain (2000: 44). By implication Latrell continues, the East is depicted as the defenceless victim, and by association personified as female.

The traffic of appropriation within the postcolonial discourse has been considered therefore to be one way, that of the West taking from the East with no regard for its history, culture or tradition (Latrell 2000: 44). Whilst there are many examples of the one-way traffic of appropriation (see Grau 1992: 12-17), Latrell argues that the popular east-west “victim-victimiser narrative”, with the West forever the aggressor and the East the passive receiver, proposed by many scholars (Gautam Dasgupta, Patrice Pavis, Carl Weber) is no longer

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<sup>37</sup> This states Latrell, largely evolved from Edward Said’s seminal 1978 work *Orientalism* (Latrell 2000).

appropriate (2000: 45). The “victim-victimiser narrative” therefore, perpetuates the power relationship between western and non-western cultures. As a result, Latrell states, the claim to agency and autonomy by other cultures is negated in the narrative.

Latrell provides examples of interculturalism where Eastern theatre practitioners borrow from Western practices. In *Broken Birds: an Epic Longing* (1995)<sup>38</sup> for example, Latrell states that the production draws extensively on Western postmodern concepts and techniques. Many of the techniques used by the director Ong Keng Sen are states Latrell, de-contextualised and have no significant meaning to a Singaporean audience (2000: 49). He refers to this as “contextless borrowing” (2000: 49). In this example, no attempt is made to synthesise the borrowed techniques into the local context, nor is the director concerned if the local audience understands the context of the borrowed form (Latrell 2000: 49).

In another example, Latrell refers to an Indonesian style of acting, which in Indonesia is called “realism”. It draws on Western modern and postmodern acting techniques and is used in reconstructions of Western realist plays (2000: 50-52). The Indonesian interpretation of realism as a style of acting however, is far removed from Western concepts of realism (Latrell 2000: 50-52). For example, the Indonesian actors present what Westerners consider to be operatic displays of emotion. Latrell calls this a “syncretised” form of borrowing, where elements of Western techniques have been assimilated into Indonesian

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<sup>38</sup> Directed by Ong Keng Sen, artistic director of Theatreworks, Singapore.

theatre practice but re-imagined to fit the culture and society for which their plays are made. The Western techniques have been appropriated and adjusted to fit an Indonesian cultural context (Latrell 2000: 50-52). Fischer-Lichte describes the works of Directors such as Peter Brook, Eugenio Barba, Ariane Mnouchkine, Tadashi Suzuki and Yukio Ninawaga, as emerging from the director's theatre tradition, be it European or Japanese, in which elements from other cultural or traditions of theatre are interwoven into the director's dominant cultural form for political or maybe aesthetic reasons (2009: 397 - 399).<sup>39</sup>

Despite the desire to redress the unequal power relationship of cultural borrowing that has been perpetuated by both colonial and postcolonial discourse (Fischer-Lichte 2009, 2014; Grau 1992; Latrell 2000), it seems that interculturalism has continued to fall foul of the colonial mindset, as evidenced by Jeyasingh for example (1998) who discusses the ways in which her work was described in Britain in the 1990s. She refers to the descriptions as undemocratic and dictatorial (1998: 47). She explains how her works were defined to suit the expectations and preconceptions of the establishment, with areas of artistic concern prescribed for her (1998: 47). Jeyasingh states that her work was described as "cross cultural" or as an "east west collaboration", despite the fact that through her own upbringing, during which she resided in several countries, cities and continents, she had synthesised many cultural influences into her own 'artistic DNA' (1998: 48). Jeyasingh discusses one example where upon inviting contemporary choreographer, Richard Alston to make a piece for her company, for which he chose to work with the music of

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<sup>39</sup> See also Grau (1992: 12-17).

Purcell, she was surprised by the response of one Arts Council officer. The officer stated that, “the dancers are now dancing to *our* music, Purcell. It is wonderful that they have made it their own” (Jeyasingh 1998: 48). Jeyasingh argues that her background has been more global than local, therefore Purcell, Shelley and Bowie, were a huge part of her growing up, and not considered to belong to a different culture by her at all (1998: 48).

Chatterjea too has experienced similar issues with how her work is interpreted and where it sits within the broader dance landscape. Chatterjea’s practice is performed internationally she states, on a global stage, yet it is read - she explains - through a ‘template’ that upholds a Euro-American construct of contemporary dance as standard (2013: 9). Just as Jeyasingh has discussed frustrations with her practice being defined by a dominant Western perspective, arts scholar, Alessandra Lopez y Royo, considers how intercultural work is defined by hybridity (2004), hinting at an acknowledgment of the “cross-cultural” and “east-west” labels that have frustrated Jeyasingh. This in turn, argues Lopez y Royo, references the dominant white culture of the host country (2004).

### **3.4 Universalism and Classicism**

That the intercultural discourse has been dominated by a hegemonic aesthetic is of course problematic for the field as well as for practitioners. This is replicated in other areas of discourse too, including dance criticism as highlighted by Dove (1993) Menon (1993) Siegel (1991) and performance theory argued by Fischer-Lichte (2014) and Bharucha (2014). Many issues arise from the context of postcolonialism which are cause for concern,

particularly when trying to understand one cultural practice from another cultural perspective, which is the method underpinning this study.<sup>40</sup> Philosopher David Best has argued that we apply artistic criteria from our own culture to understand, appreciate and critique art from other cultures, adding that it is inevitable that we do so (1986: 7). However, Best states that imposing one standard of objectivity upon all cultural art forms is to understand objectivity as universal (1986: 5 & 6). What is considered universal, Best claims, is defined by one standard and to “impose one standard incoherently across a very diverse range of forms, [is to] distort and devalue the huge heterogeneity of possibilities of human experience and expression” (1986: 5 & 6). The universal standard in dance criticism is both “extremely Western” and hierarchical, states dance critic Marcia B Siegel (1991: 13). This is still reflected in more recent international performance theory, where homogenisation within the discourse remains (Fischer-Lichte 2014: 15). The language and theory therefore derives substantially from western academic traditions and institutions (Fischer-Lichte 2014: 15).

In this same context, Grau has raised key questions about the concept of universality and the subsequent effects of ‘leveling’ all cultures in an attempt to understand them (2001: 23-26). Grau interrogates perceptions of body, space and the senses, as dominated by a Western understanding (2011). She suggests that although there may be overlaps between different cultures, we should not ignore the differences (2011: 18). Grau’s concerns have been raised by other scholars in the field of ethnography such as Farnell, (1999) Kaeppler

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<sup>40</sup> See chapter 1.6.1.

(1999) and Williams (1999),<sup>41</sup> as well as those in the field of theatre scholarship such as Amine (2014) Bharucha (2014) and Fisher-Lichte (2014). Fischer Lichte argues that the universal theme is of course, based on a Western authoritative reading of it (2014: 8).

Grau comments on the verticality of the body in classical ballet (2011: 10), and she cites scholars and critics who associate the upright stance with heroic mood, Apollonian deed and defiance.<sup>42</sup> Verticality is linked with spirituality as well as hierarchy, a reaching towards heaven or God as well as an historical courtly dance (Grau 2011: 10). Thus, the vertical spine in Ballet is read as a representation of control over gravity as well as over others (Grau 2011: 10). Lopez y Royo considers this argument too, stating that Euro-American discourses about classicism and neoclassicism not only derive from Roman and Greek antiquity but as Euro-American constructs, they are based on striving for perfection and progress (Lopez y Royo 2004). They denote, she continues, “both an aesthetic attitude and an artistic tradition. [Their] aesthetic use suggests the classical characteristics of clarity, order, balance, unity, symmetry, and dignity” (2004).

Chatterjea queries why South Asian dance forms have to fit into Western standards and aesthetics fearing the “seduction of the West” as being too much for dancers and choreographers growing up in India to resist (2011: 91-93). Chatterjea states that the Western contemporary aesthetic and traditions that have been established through Euro-American concert dance, seem to offer

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<sup>41</sup> I discuss this in chapter 2.9.

<sup>42</sup> Grau cites Grau 2005; Homans 2005; Scholl 1994; and Volyniskii 1922 (Grau 2011: 10).

artists the way forward (2011: 91-93). Like Chatterjea, Lopez y Royo argues that classical South Asian dancers in Britain have had Western modern and postmodern aesthetic values imposed upon them. These postmodern ideals, she adds, equate with hybridity in order to achieve innovation and contemporaneity (2004). She adds that Euro-American models of classicism are based on a notion of universality, which in turn proposes a totalitarian approach, suggesting that there can only be one type of classicism. She argues however, that “there are other ‘classicisms’, all of which have come about as a result of the colonial encounter: modeled on western classicism yet, [and inevitably so] different” (2004).

Classicism itself then is disputed territory, as the standards for its production are measured by Euro-American aesthetic principles. How is classical Indian dance, Bharata Natyam in particular therefore, evaluated within Sankalpam’s adopted locale of the UK dance landscape? Lopez y Royo argues that comparing classical Bharata Natyam to western concepts of classical dance such as ballet, is simplistic and reductionist (2004). Yet, the classical forms of South Asian dance are not judged in Britain as they would be in India she continues, where they are evaluated on technical virtuosity and on expertise. These are elements she argues, that are “wholly rejected by postmodern attitudes” (2004). Having endured years of frustration at how the UK dance sector has evaluated classical Bharata Natyam as well as her own contemporary practice from a cultural perspective or as an ethnic phenomenon (Jeyasingh 1997; 1998; 2010), Jeyasingh argues for the technical and virtuosic elements of Bharata Natyam to be recognised (2010). She states that, “Bharata

Natyam is about dance and the most pertinent quality of that dance is its classicism. This seemingly simple truth is yet one of the hardest to convey” (2010: 183). She argues that the technique of the dance form has become obscured by associations with religion and Hindu mythology, despite the fact that it is not being performed in religious venues, but on theatre stages as other non-Indian performance arts are presented (2010: 183).

### **3.5 Globalisation and Identity**

As the postcolonial discourse mutates from interculturalism through universalism, the globalisation of culture emerges. It brings with it problems and raises questions as well as creating opportunities. Singleton argues that the globalisation of culture through technology in the mid - 1990s had made other cultures knowable and viewable, attainable and procurable, no longer a mystery (2014: 82). Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, recognised as one of the key theorists in globalisation studies, has asserted that “globalisation makes knowledge” due to the constant and rapidly changing globalised world of migration, media, technology and economic markets (2006: 167 & 168). Within this world the established niches of knowledge have become de-centered and destabilised, Appadurai argues (2006: 167 & 168). This proposition has more recently been reconsidered and refined by the scholar, as he examines the way globalisation both creates flow and disrupts flow, creates obstacles and pushes circulation. Appadurai calls this a “curious dynamic of co-production” (2014: 246).

The globalisation of culture is not straightforward as Appadurai suggests, and many scholars raise concerns. For example, Bharucha argues that certain assumptions that support arguments which universalise the migrant narrative are not interrogated (2000: 7). He offers an example of the commonly held belief that we live in a globalised world, through which we all constantly move around and in which we are all tourists (2000:7). This, states Bharucha, ignores economics and social mobility (2000:7). Furthermore, he continues, the non-critical reading of capital comes from those who are immersed within theories of performativity and who ignore the influences of capitalism (2000: 5 & 6). The impact of a global economy on cultural practices is however very real he continues, affecting the rights of ownership and belonging (2000: 5 & 6). This necessitates at the very least a recognition of, if not a critical interrogation of global capital within the intercultural discourse (Bharucha 2000: 5 & 6).

Capitalism, as performance scholar, Andre Lepecki has stated, in all its incarnations equates with colonialism, both are intertwined and deeply connected bedfellows (2016: 3 & 4). Appadurai addresses the issue of ownership in relation to knowledge and with specific reference to economically disadvantaged communities, arguing that research arms communities with strategic knowledge, which in turn enables their emergence as democratic citizens (2006: 167). I explore this theory more closely in relation to Sankalpam's methodological approach through Thirunarayan's independent research, in chapter seven.

The binary divisions that emerge within the intercultural discourse, of East and West for example or an, 'ours' and 'theirs' mentality highlighted by Fischer-Lichte (2009: 399) seem to permeate the discourse of globalisation too. Critical theorist, Homi Bhabha has argued, that the spatial frameworks in the discourse create binary divides, where 'global' and 'local' for example, are pitted against each other. These polarities, he adds, do not do justice to the temporal and historical aspects of the 'global' (Bhabha 2014: 526). Economics, politics and ethics are all subjects of the time frame they exist in and all interplay in the historical and temporal presentation and understanding of the 'global' (Bhabha 2014: 526).

Bharata Natyam too is subject to such binary divisions, as O'Shea has argued (2007). She states that, due to the complex history the dance form was forged through, it carries the weight of opposing expectations (2007:13). As an example, O'Shea argues that Bharata Natyam is expected to be, "verifiably traditional yet creative, authentically Indian yet globally accessible, respectable yet commercially viable" (2007: 25). In this way she continues, "Bharata natyam is therefore both haunted and enabled by its own contentious history" (O'Shea 2007: 25).

Meduri prefers the term, "translocal" in reference to Bharata Natyam in a global context (2004: 19). The term, she states, allows for the many locations the form emerges through and the unpredictability of different links between localities (2004: 19). The term also acknowledges the differences within a Nation and simultaneously recognises the problems associated with using the label

“national” as a mark of identity (Meduri 2004: 19). These more complex aspects of globalisation are not captured in the spatial terminology of the globalisation discourse argues Bhabha (2014: 525), who adds that “Global interdisciplinarity [...] increases the integration of existing fields of study and, in many instances, produces a connected map of learning” (2014: 524).

### **3.6 Context, Form and Response**

Each scholar and practitioner have their preferred terminologies that best capture the nuances and complexities of the ways that cultural forms work together and borrow from each other. Many of the terms are problematic or limiting as I have discussed. However, within the generic headings or generalised terms such as interculturalism, universalism and globalism, the question of identity is raised by practitioners negotiating the landscapes of arts and culture, of history and politics and for scholars investigating the cultural dance landscape. For some South Asian dance practitioners, the globalisation of performance flattens the nuances of practices and the particularities of disciplines as Chatterjea and Coorlawala have argued (Chatterjea 2013; Coorlawala 2002). This can impact on artists’ relationship with their discipline. In Grau’s 2002 report, *South Asian Dance in Britain: Negotiating Cultural Identity Through Dance* (SADiB), many UK South Asian dance practitioners raised the problematic issue of being recognised through a cultural lens rather than a disciplinary one (2002b: 9). In order to have parity with their Western classical and contemporary dance colleagues, South Asian practitioners argued for their work to be viewed as distinct from their ethnicity, their traditions their *oeuvres* (Grau 2002: 9). Yet Grau’s report found that different views on this issue were

held amongst practitioners within the UK South Asian diaspora. For example, some saw themselves as working within a Western and contemporary dance framework, whilst others expressed a connection to the heritage of the forms they represented and as such, were happy to have their dance practice and ethnicity amalgamated (Grau 2002: 9). Diasporic practitioners, such as Jeyasingh, on the other hand have publicly championed the argument to have their arts practice identified as distinct from ethnicity (1998), and instead of culture, to have technique, form and content critically evaluated (2010).

The contexts that practitioners move between and work within, impact upon identity within the Indian and South Asian dance Diaspora. This is often complicated with artists moving between continents and cultures, localities and nations as Meduri's example of Rukmini Devi highlights (2005). O'Shea emphasises the relationship between context, form and response, by arguing that diverse interpretations of Bharata Natyam arise in response to different contexts (2007: 13). She states that the many interpretations of the form illustrate that the form is responsive and current and that Bharata Natyam practitioners respond to broader issues but within specific contexts (2007: 13). O'Shea dissects the difference between Bharata Natyam being entrenched in history and therefore fixed, by exploring how dancers use the historiography to explore their own practice and develop their own understandings of and relationships with the form (2007: 14).

Dance scholar Prarthana Purkayastha, illustrates the impact that acquired traces from 'other' cultures, as well as inherited imprints from familial cultures,

have upon artists who shift between continents as well as within them (2014: 159). This is useful when examining Sankalpam's co-Artistic Directors and is significant when considering Sankalpam's implementation of the dialectic in engaging multiple cultural knowledge systems. Purkayastha examines the practice of Ranjabati Sircar (1963-1999) as well as the practice of Sircar's mother, Manjusri Chaki Sircar (1934-2000) also a dance practitioner. She notes that these were strong, independent, post-colonial Bengali women, who had lived and worked in Nigeria, the US and India. Subsequently, they embodied traces of geo-cultural migration as well as imprints of formal, classical Indian dance training (2014: 144).

The artists' development of a unique methodology for training dancers called *Navanritya*, argues Purkayastha, was a response to the geo-cultural and socio-political influences they had encountered through their migrations. Mother and daughter developed the training system in order to articulate feminist concepts explored in their early choreographies. The Sircars' intention was to develop a female dancing body that broke the confines imposed by "socio-cultural conditioning" (Purkayastha 2014: 144). The *Navanritya* training therefore, focused on expanding classical postures and incorporating a more fluid and open body, particularly the pelvis (Purkayastha 2014: 145-146).

Key socio-political conditions, pertinent to Ranjabati Sircar's artistic development in the UK in the 1990s are also addressed in Purkayastha's study. These are significant for my investigation of Sankalpam, as the company also emerged during the 1990s in the UK dance landscape. The new Labour

government for example, facilitated an environment where expressions of multiculturalism, ethnicity, and identity could be re-evaluated. The late cultural activist and commentator, Naseem Khan (1939-2017) has agreed that the decade saw a breaking down of previous ethnic labels and suggests that the 1990s saw a shift in the terms by which artists identified with race and ethnicity within the arts and began exploring how they wanted to negotiate those labels, reject them, and critique them for themselves (2006: 22).

The Sircars brought together their experiences of migrating identities and cultural politics by establishing an original training system that met their particular geo-cultural inheritance. Sankalpam's geo-cultural inheritance is impacted by the legacy of Rukmini Devi and the Kalakshetra training that the co-Artistic Director's received, renowned for its "refined aesthetics, simplicity and philosophical approach to art" (V Thirunarayan 2019, WhatsApp *Airing Chickens*). In addition, it is impacted by the socio-political landscape of the UK and in particular the UK dance landscape, through which the company has developed.

Grau has stated that identities are fluid and responsive to context, as well as given (2001: 23-26). The identities of Sankalpam's co-Artistic Directors as well as my own are written into this study, in so much as they are fluid and adapting to changing ideas, contexts and circumstances. Yet they are fixed too, through ethnic origins and national status. Bhabha warns that the politics of identity within the intercultural discourse can become a trap, leading "to separatism and sectarianism for those who most need to be embraced by solidarity and

community” (2014: 520). On this aspect I am in agreement with Bhabha. Although identity politics is written into my study, it does not dominate the investigation. This is deliberate and reflects an alternative concentration on the particularities of the study, the Bharata Natyam form and the specificity of Sankalpam’s working methods. At the same time, it allows a new subject of discourse to establish primacy, that is, the impact on Sankalpam, of borderless transactions between cultural knowledge systems, through communities of curiosity.<sup>43</sup>

### **3.7 Reading Things Differently**

Many South Asian dance practitioners are aware that their work is now situated in terms of postcolonial theory, argues Grau (2004: 34). She adds that for some, not much has changed in terms of power relationships and that South Asian dance practices still provide Western academics with material for cultural analysis or feeds intercultural practices for Western choreographers (2004: 34). Grau furthermore stresses that the binaries, white/ non-white, for example, are essentially Western ways of looking at and reading matters both in academia as well as socially (2001: 26)<sup>44</sup>. She argues that this is further impacted by the fact that we all see the world from an ethnocentric position, that is to say that we are the centre of the world and everything is viewed and understood in terms of our relationship to the world (2002a).<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> See chapter 1.9.

<sup>44</sup> See also, Chakrabarti (2012).

<sup>45</sup> See also, Best (1986).

In alignment with Grau's thinking, Bharucha argues that the systems which we call interculturalism, or interweaving cultures, need to open up to, "aesthetic concepts and social imaginaries outside Euro-American academia" (2014: 194). He states that aesthetics has been left out of the post 1980s postcolonial narrative, largely ignored, distanced from the politics of inequality and power, only to be successfully countered by Fischer-Lichte in her book *The Transformative Power of Performance* (2008), (Bharucha 2014: 367). Fischer-Lichte herself points out that international performance theory draws predominantly on Western concepts and this needs to change to incorporate other concepts and ways of understanding performance (2014: 17). Chatterjea too has argued that Indian dance should be explored and developed on its own terms and not defined through Western cultural narratives or parameters, not by the Western binary frameworks that force tradition against innovation (2014). She adds that the political and historical connections with traditional dance forms have been neutered in this globalised dance platform, where movement is segregated from aesthetic origins, leaving behind a kind of "domesticated diversity" (2013: 14).

In order for practitioners to be separated from the politics of identity, which address simplistic binary divides, and for diasporic practices to be read through lenses that are informed by the cultural *milieus* from which they emanate, much more work is needed. The changing climate of awareness necessitates a move beyond the postcolonial rhetoric, through which many of the relationships between cultures have become entangled. The discourse developed by Fischer-Lichte and the research team at the International Research Centre for

Interweaving Performance Cultures<sup>46</sup> has established new thinking that goes beyond postcolonial readings of cultural exchanges of skills and knowledge. Fischer-Lichte, however, warns that even though the case studies at the Centre prove that diversity is accented and generated through the interweaving of performance cultures rather than the homogenisation of cultures (2014: 15), the language and theory derive substantially from Western academic traditions and institutions (2014:15). She goes on to give examples of words such as the Chinese word *qi*, the Sanskrit word *rasa* or the Japanese word *yūge*, all of which are single words for complex theories or ideas, and which have no equivalent in Western Languages (2014:16). She stresses that, “we must address the question of whether and how we can productively deal with processes of interweaving if we are embedding them in a theoretical discourse developed in Western academia” (Fischer-Lichte 2014: 16).

Fischer-Lichte has therefore argued for a renaming of the term ‘intercultural’, as well as for a deeper scholarly interrogation of what constitutes intercultural exchanges (Singleton 2014: 86). The International Research Centre for Interweaving Performance Cultures, moves somewhat towards defining a new terminology.<sup>47</sup> Theatre and literature scholar, Gastón Alzate, considers that what lies at the heart of studying interweaving cultures is “the manifold possibilities that reveal themselves when we think about the performative events in our contemporary world” (2014: 42). He continues by explaining that these are also however, “marked by globalisation” (2014: 42) and he advocates

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<sup>46</sup> Housed in the Freie Universität Berlin.

<sup>47</sup> Others highlight issues with the ‘interweaving’ label too (see Bharucha 2014).

that research should be carried out with “a critical mind and an open eye for cultural subtlety, beyond - and sometimes in direct confrontation with - the ultimately similarly homogenising perspectives of Euro centrism and political correctness” (2014: 42). Mitra addresses some of the issues raised by Alzate, Bharucha, Fischer-Lichte and Grau, by examining Akram Khan’s contemporary choreographies through the lenses of Kathak principals. Mitra argues that the British Asian choreographer has evolved a new interculturalism through his choreographic practice and proposes that he has done this by bringing together multiple identities, vocabularies, aesthetics and narratives and processes these through a corporeal and embodied site (2015).

Mitra’s analysis proposes that Khan uniquely engages Western audiences with *rasa* (emotional resonance) by deconstructing *abhinaya* (to convey meaning).<sup>48</sup> By subverting the codified classical practice and deliberately creating ambiguity in his work, Khan, Mitra argues, creates readerly pieces, accessible therefore to knowing and unknowing audiences and in so doing he encourages them to bring their own “culturally embodied subjectivities” to his work (2015: 159). In her detailed study, Mitra argues that Khan’s brand of interculturalism is unique because it encompasses an interventionist aesthetic and an embodied, political and philosophical way of thinking and being within oneself (2015: 15).

Mitra’s extensive investigation extends the debate about intercultural practice within the arts. The ‘other’ is viewed from different perspectives hence the flow of traffic of cultural borrowing drives back and forth (2015: 15). Mitra’s analysis

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<sup>48</sup> See also, chapter 1.8.

however, lacks inquiry into the European and American choreographic methods used by Khan and in which he has trained, making the argument somewhat asymmetrical. Despite this, Khan's corporeal site is at the centre of Mitra's investigation, and multiple perspectives are processed through Khan, politicised through his body, his ethnicity, his cultural influences and his multiple dance trainings.

In the case of Sankalpam there is also a movement of cultural traffic driving back and forth, but the traffic is that of cultural knowledge systems. The fulcrum in this case is the Bharata Natyam form. The form is the centre of the investigation, rooted in Devi's inherited legacy from which multiple cultural knowledge systems are accessed and processed. New knowledge is synthesised through choreographic product in the example of Khan, but with Sankalpam new knowledge is tested beyond the choreographic context through teaching practice through which it evolves further. The focus for my study therefore is not on the choreographic output of the company, but on the working methods of Sankalpam as well.

As Mitra herself has pointed out, Khan's contemporary choreographic work has benefitted from his minority status on many fronts. The 'immigrant artist' or ethnically diverse British artist became politicised under the Labour government and later the coalition government as symbolic of how successful the integration of the migrant had been into the British culture. Hybridity, Mitra states, became the key indicator of this success (2015: 17 &18). For Sankalpam's inquiry, however, there is no reference to hybridity, nor deliberate association with

intercultural practice. The classical form is placed firmly at the centre of the company's inquiry, it is the source, the journey and the destination. In my study I re-assign the migrant position to Bharata Natyam, rather than imposing it upon Sankalpam and in doing so, the politicisation of the immigrant recedes. This allows for a clearer view of Bharata Natyam itself to emerge through the study.

Many classical Indian dance practitioners are caught between preservation and innovation, between nurture and ossification, especially in adopted contexts where the dominant aesthetic is a hegemonic one (Chatterjea 2011, 2014; Lopez y Royo 2004). I argue that Sankalpam has developed another way to sustain the Bharata Natyam form in an adopted locale, to reflect upon and to refine knowledge. Because Bharata Natyam is at the root of Sankalpam's investigations, all enquires flow from and back to the classical form. This enables the company to go beyond form and enter new terrains of knowledge, skill and expertise in order to revisit Bharata Natyam from different perspectives. The specificity of the form, rather than being flattened by globalisation as Chatterjea suggests (2013: 12-14) is in fact reclaimed and nurtured. The apparent tension between the migrated form and the influence of other cultural knowledge systems, is the nub of this study. Sankalpam's working method, the dialectic, is what makes Sankalpam's response to context, the adopted locale of the UK dance landscape, unique.

Philosopher and political theorist, Achille Mbembe has posed the question of, "how [we] inhabit multiple worlds simultaneously. And in inhabiting multiple worlds at the same time, how to nurture, to express, to voice, to name and to

represent life?” (2010). Mbembe’s question elegantly sums up the work that practitioners of migrated cultural forms such as Sankalpam are engaged with. Both the company and the form inhabit multiple worlds of historical narratives, political tensions, geographic locations and religious influences simultaneously. Sankalpam negotiates the tensions between these elements through its own inquiry. Mbembe argues that

When we were able to put to local use that which we had borrowed from either our neighbours or from long distance interactions with the wider world; when we were able to make things ubiquitous, that is, translate them and in so doing, empty them out of their absolute authority and certainties, and invest them with meanings of our own making, [we] make them speak in a different language (2010).

I argue that by applying a dialectic, which embraces different cultural knowledge systems and through engaging with ‘communities of curiosity’, Sankalpam is enabled to reflect on its own cultural knowledge system, thereby translating knowledge, modifying thinking and refining practice.<sup>49</sup>

### **3.8 Summary**

This chapter has surveyed literature that both outlines and challenges the postcolonial discourse. In doing so, I have addressed issues that South Asian dance practitioners experience in sustaining migrated classical forms in adopted locales. I have brought into focus how hegemonic models of scholarship and aesthetics dominate migrated dance forms and I have highlighted the imposition of binary divides and the flattening or erasure of migrated forms under generic titles of universalism.

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<sup>49</sup> For further information, see Best 1986: 9.

I have argued that through advancements in technology, different cultures and cultural forms become knowable, commodities to be traded on the global market. The binary divisions created through globalisation once again flattens specificity. This in turn politicises identity for practitioners working with migrated forms in relocated contexts.

Focusing on literature that challenges postcolonial thinking, I have traced the trajectory of how unequal power relationships became established between East and West through cultural borrowing; emerging during colonialism, criticised as orientalism and re-established under the postcolonial discourse arising from colonial guilt.

I have drawn on the scholarship of Purkayastha (2014) and Mitra (2015) to evidence ways in which contexts impact upon the development of form and choreographic practice. I have discussed how practitioners respond to specific socio-political contexts by nurturing something particular to them, through dance and through the body. This addresses the broader field in which my study is situated, providing a frame of reference to examine how Sankalpam responds to the context of the UK dance landscape. This is essential in my study which seeks to argue that Sankalpam's working methods enable the company to circumnavigate issues inherent in postcolonialism and simultaneously reclaim the specificity of Bharata Natyam, nurturing the form in the process.

Having provided the broader theoretical context in which Sankalpam is situated, the next chapter examines the histories that frame Bharata Natyam and the tensions that have underscored Bharata Natyam's evolution in India and the UK.

## Chapter 4

### Histories: History, Contexts, Legacy

#### 4.1 Overview

In the previous chapter I established theoretical foundations for the study, focusing on critical thinking that challenges postcolonial discourse. I addressed the need to embrace other knowledge systems, academic languages and aesthetic practices, in order to re-establish the individual within the global, the particular within the universal and the uniqueness of culture within the intercultural.

In this chapter I explore the relationship between context, form and practitioner, with particular reference to the intersection between Sankalpam, Bharata Natyam and the UK dance landscape. However, I consider this by examining the legacy of Rukmini Devi Arundale, known as ‘Devi’. I investigate Devi’s approach to context and form, by examining the ways she responded to tensions between colonialism and the rising national discourse in India. I trace the evolution of Bharata Natyam through the particular lens of Devi’s local/global methodological approach to “remaking” an outlawed Indian temple dance form.<sup>50</sup> I assess how Devi’s approach to nurturing local cultural arts and skills by embracing many approaches to knowledge, culture and creativity, manifests in Sankalpam’s dialectic methodology today.

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<sup>50</sup> “Re-making” is a term used by Lopez y Royo (2003: 4) to describe how Devi took the temple dance form *sadir* and reshaped it into a new dance discipline, Bharata Natyam. Many other terms have been used to describe Devi’s actions including, reclamation (Bharucha 1995: 44,) re-imagining and rehabilitating (Jeyasingh 2016).

## 4.2 Colonial India and Dance: A Brief Introduction

Before the 1920s, little was known about Indian dance<sup>51</sup> both within India and beyond (Massey 1997; Erdman 1998). Indian dance was practiced within the temples and courts of 18th and 19th century India but was not on general public display (Erdman 1998: 70). The dance form, known as *sadir*, was further confined by an hereditary system through which only women called *devadasis* could practice. Figure 2. Illustrates a painting of a dancing girl wearing the typical attire of a *devadasi* which includes pajama trouser, pleated saree and blouse. Ornamental jewelry adorns the ankles, wrists, upper arms, neck and head.

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Figure 2. Painting of a dancing girl. Date unknown. Artist Unknown. Displayed in Albert Hall Museum, Jaipur, India. Photographed by Debbie Fionn Barr (2018)

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<sup>51</sup> The term 'Indian dance' is used by Massey and Erdman and reflects how dance forms from India were thought of beyond India at the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that is, as a singular cultural form.

The *devadasis* were dedicated to the temples at a young age and remained under the patronage of temple benefactors for life (Massey 1997; Erdman 1998; O'Shea 1998). *Devadasis* upheld a matrilineal tradition, experienced relative freedom, financial independence (from a single male benefactor) and were at liberty to explore many relationships. They were, however, also marginalised because of their relationship to the temples and their distance from mainstream societal rules (O'Shea 1998: 50).

The British government had hoped to rule India by civilising Indian society, and to achieve this it concentrated on building infrastructure, imposing laws, rejecting indigenous religious practices and replacing language, education and medical systems with its own (Massey 1997: 19). This of course impacted the views of some in Indian society who carried the 'white man's burden' (Massey 1997). These often middle class and upper caste Hindus considered everything that was British as superior and everything that was Indian as inferior (Massey 1997: 19). For example, the *anti-nautch* movement, a 19th century reformist organisation, associated the temple dance form, *sadir* with prostitution and erotic practices and consequently forbade the dance practice in India during the 1880s (Meduri 2005: 11). *Sadir* was later outlawed by the colonial government in 1911, regarding the practice as indecent (Meduri 2005: 11). The hegemonic logic sealed within the colonial alliance between Britain and India (Lepecki 2016) established a power relationship between Indian dance forms and colonial contexts and this power relationship would migrate to infiltrate the UK dance landscape in years to come, as I will go on to discuss.

There is virtually no recorded presentation of Indian dance outside the continent before the 1920s, states cultural anthropologist Joan Erdman (1998: 71). No one, she argues, had thought to export Indian dance culture to Europe or America (Erdman 1998: 71). In fact Erdman continues, before the 1920s, the English were not concerned with the aesthetics of native Indian dances at all; the leisurely pace, the detailed articulation and refinement of limbs and positions were of no interest. The British were more involved with bringing their own civilisation to the Indian population than in exporting Indian cultural dance forms to the West. The British, Erdman argues, therefore ignored Indian aesthetics in favour of their own dance parties<sup>52</sup> (1998: 71). It appears that the British indifference to Indian performance practices illustrates a “western bias”<sup>53</sup> (Grau 2011) that continues throughout the following century and, it has been argued, has subsequently impacted the evolution of Bharata Natyam and Bharata Natyam-evolved practices in the UK (see Grau 1992, 2004, 2011; Iyer 1997; Khan 1981, 2006; Lopez y Royo 2003, 2004).

#### **4.3 Cultural Borrowing and Orientalism**

The twentieth century brought with it, advancements in communication and transport, which in turn opened the world to exchanges of cultural art forms, practices and ideas. Before then, cultural exchanges had existed between cultures but were, argues Fischer-Lichte, mostly limited to exchanges between neighbouring countries such as China and Korea, or England and France (2009: 392). Fischer-Lichte explains that most examples of cultural exchanges

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<sup>52</sup> A dance party is a predominantly social gathering during which dancing is the primary function.

<sup>53</sup> For more information on “western bias” see Bharucha 2000; 2004; 2014; Chatterjea 2013; Said 2003.

in the arts illustrate neighbouring countries sharing or exchanging performance cultures, where certain similarities or familiarities pre-existed (2009: 392).

From the beginning of the twentieth century however, a different type of cultural exchange began to appear states Fischer-Lichte. Boosted by the arrival of modern transport and communication, Europeans were exposed to forms beyond the continent of Europe, specifically Asian forms, which motivated practitioners to integrate elements into their own practices, or which inspired new approaches and new practices (2009: 393). Europe had developed a passion for the orient, states Erdman (1998: 69). Theatre practitioners such as Antonin Artaud, Vsevolod Meyerhold and Konstantin Stanislavsky for example, adopted and explored other cultural forms within performance and training (Fischer-Lichte 2009: 393). Dancers such as Anna Pavlova and Ruth St Denis, reflected this shift and began utilising oriental themes, costumes and narratives for their performances (Erdman 1998). Ruth St Denis was captivated by Indian dance, welcoming Indian dancers to Jacob's Pillow in the USA, and touring globally with her '*Radha*' dance (Massey 1997: 20). American contemporary dance pioneer, Martha Graham (1894-1991) bore a deep respect for Indian dance, whilst Russian ballet dancer and choreographer, Mikhail Fokine (1880-1942), was inspired by narratives of Krishna and Radha (Massey 1997: 20).

The shift in cultural borrowing from neighbourly exchanges to global transactions brought with it, however, the affliction of orientalism, as identified by the American writer and academic, Edward Said (1935-2003). Said has argued that the Orient is described through a generalised view arrived at firstly

through Western eyes and then through a localised more detailed logic made up of, he states, “empirical realisms [...] desires, repressions, investments, and projections” (2003: 8). Said’s definition also takes into account that because orientalism insists on a demarcation between the East and the West, the resulting accepted distinction constitutes the premise for thought, description, accounts and theories, through a variety of outputs including political, artistic and philosophical (2003: 2).

The appropriation of one culture by another, framed by colonialism (Tan 2012: 5) and perpetrated through orientalism, is infused in the thinking, writing, and practice of colonised cultures and how those cultures are viewed by the colonisers, argues Said (2003). This is critical in understanding the contexts through which Bharata Natyam has evolved, both historically in India as I have described, and in the UK as I will discuss below. As many scholars and practitioners have argued, the cultural perspective derived through orientalism, has also perpetrated beyond colonialism into a postcolonial discourse (Bharucha 2014; Fischer-Lichte 2014; Singleton 2014). The postcolonial discourse then establishes a context of perception through which other dance forms are understood and evaluated. This in turn is powered by a particular aesthetic derived from European and American ideologies, and which manifests in universalism, globalism and postcolonialism. The postcolonial discourse, therefore, is implicit in perpetuating colonial power structures, and scholars such as Amine, Bharucha, Fischer-Lichte, and Singleton argue to move beyond postcolonialism, in order to examine the interactions between cultures from different perspectives.

Fischer-Lichte describes the interactions between different performance cultures as “interweavings” and she states that cultural interweavings were not historically adopted as processes to imitate the other culture (2009: 396). She demonstrates how, by borrowing from other cultures, and interweaving aspects of other cultural forms, practices were able to function in a different way within their own culture, and within their existing forms. Borrowing from other cultural sources, therefore changed the functionality of the indigenous form. As an example, she explains how Japanese theatre took aspects of Western theatre, sometimes the play itself, the authors (Ibsen or Shakespeare), or aspects of Western theatre delivery, interweaving them with its own cultural theatre forms (for example Kabuki). This enabled Japanese theatre, for instance, to deal with social issues of the time (Fischer-Lichte 2009: 396). It also led to the invention of a new acting style, *Shingeki*, which integrated spoken theatre and developed a new, more realistic style of acting (Fischer-Lichte 2009: 396). This enabled Japanese theatre to have a more social and political function, Fischer-Lichte argues (2009: 396).

Fischer-Lichte’s analysis of the historical exchanges between neighbouring and distanced cultures provides an understanding of the rationale for cultures to borrow from each other. The examples highlight some of the ways in which practitioners actively respond to contexts, such as integrating other practices and skills in response to limitations of cultural art forms, or socio-political conditions. Fischer-Lichte’s research provokes the two key questions in this study which ask: in what ways might the dialectic with other cultural knowledge

systems impact Sankalpam's understanding of Bharata Natyam? And how does the dialectic working method assist Sankalpam in reclaiming specificity of a migrated dance form in the adopted locale of the UK dance landscape? In order to address these questions, it is important to first establish the lineage that Sankalpam has evolved from, established by Devi and cemented in the Kalakshetra training which each co-Artistic Director of Sankalpam has been immersed in.

#### **4.4 Rukmini Devi: the Local and the Global**

By the mid 1920s, orientalism was in full swing in Europe (Erdman 1998: 69). Whilst European, Russian and American dance and theatre practitioners were finding inspiration in arts practices originating in the subcontinent, in India similar exchanges of cultural knowledge were also taking place. Not only were Western performers such as Pavlova and St Denis adopting and integrating elements of Indian dance, narrative, costume and theatre into their work, but Indian artists exposed to Western practices were similarly informed by new ways of presenting and staging work; inspired by different choreographic techniques and other training systems from Europe, Russia and America. Here, Indian practitioner Rukmini Devi's individual response to a colonial narrative and nationalist discourse is assessed. How Devi actively responded to a nationalist and colonial context by curating a different journey for *sadir*, both within and beyond its cultural context, is examined. Meduri has written of Devi:

When we try to understand Rukmini Devi's aesthetic vision, encompassing a span of over fifty years, we find that her vision moved backwards to embrace traditional pasts adapted those pasts to serve the contemporary needs of her time and propelled them into new futures [...] Originality could be seen on the canvas, as well as conformity, contemporaneity as well as received pasts (2005: 14 & 15).

Devi's fluid oscillation between tradition and contemporaneity, between received pasts and current needs, as articulated by Meduri, is not a surprising response to context, given that her life was bound by multiple narratives, cultures, influences and thought systems.

Devi came from a family of mixed influences and beliefs, her father was a progressive, a theosophist<sup>54</sup> as well as a Sanskrit scholar, whilst her mother was a more traditional Hindu (Meduri 2005: 9). Growing up, therefore, Devi was exposed to traditional and local religious practices, traditions and thinking, as well as global thought systems and beliefs. Devi met Dr George Sydney Arundale, an Englishman, a theosophist and an educationalist, through her father, and was married to him in 1920 at the age of sixteen, becoming Rukmini Devi Arundale (although she is most often referred to as Devi). This was a scandalous match at the time, not merely because of the age difference of twenty-six years, but the different cultural backgrounds, religions and race were also problematic for Devi's wider family and the Madras society (BBC 2014). Devi's marriage to George Arundale, however, catapulted her further into a global world of intercultural experiences, influences and thinking (Meduri 2005: 9). She travelled globally with her husband and became a pupil and a companion to Dr Annie Besant (Meduri 2005: 9).

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<sup>54</sup> “Theosophy or Theosophia may be defined as “knowledge of divine things” or “Divine Wisdom such as that possessed by the gods’. Its philosophy is a contemporary presentation of the perennial wisdom underlying the world’s religions, sciences, and philosophies” (Theosophical Society in England 2017).

Besant was hugely politically active and in this sense was an atypical British woman for the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. She was a social reformer; she believed in home rule for both Ireland and India and became president of the Indian Home Rule League. She was involved in the Indian Nationalist movement and was a leading member of the Indian National Congress (BBC 2014)<sup>55</sup>. Perhaps more importantly for Devi though, Besant was leader of the Theosophical society, which was established in New York City in 1875 by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, Henry Steel Olcott and William Quan Judge.

The society's current stated aims are to form a universal brotherhood regardless of race, creed, religion, ethnicity or caste. The society promotes the understanding that all life, "human and non-human is indivisibly one" (Theosophical Society in England 2017) and the search for truth and broad tolerance are founding principles. It is a global society and draws members from many (or no) religious beliefs and philosophical practices. Teachings are not imposed and dogmas do not have to be accepted by members (Theosophical Society in England 2017).

The founding concepts of the Theosophical Society are important to understand because they can be seen reflected in Devi's career, influencing her approach to education and to dance. They helped to create, as Meduri argues (2005), a foundation from which her life's work developed. It is also interesting to note however, the similarities between the Theosophical Society's concepts and

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<sup>55</sup> Besant's anti-religious beliefs had ended her own marriage to clergyman Frank Besant. She became a member of the Secular Society promoting free thought and was also a member of the Socialist movement the Fabian Society (BBC 2014).

those of the Indian world-view, as articulated within the *Nāṭyaśāstra*.<sup>56</sup>

Devi, it is argued, adopted the *Nāṭyaśāstra* in order to link Bharata Natyam with ancient Sanskrit sources, thereby authenticating the form and at the same time historicising it (Bharucha 1995: 40-41). Vatsyayan emphasises the absolute importance of the Indian world-view within *The Nāṭyaśāstra*, which she states, is implicit and explicit within the text (2007: 49). Furthermore, she argues that theatre is replicated as an organism within the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (2007: 50), arguing that this replicates man's relationship to the universe as understood in Indian world-view thinking. She adds that the cosmic principles of *purusa* (the Universal Principle), are utilised in the text of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* to set out a structure for drama, and this mirrors world-view concepts, where all parts of the body, are connected to the centre and to the whole, are inter-related and inter-independent (2007: 52). The *Nāṭyaśāstra*, argues Vatsyayan, also applies across multiple art forms and disciplines from architecture to painting, and includes, dance, music and drama (2007: 45). The multiple disciplines are interrelated to each principal discipline (2007: 45). The text itself, in its very structure, argues Vatsyayan, makes room for fluidity of interpretation and allows for multiple ways of understanding it (Vatsyayan 2007: 45).

The Theosophical Society's concepts embrace multiple ways of looking at and gathering knowledge, reflecting a flexible approach to adopting different cultural concepts. The concepts are not based on any one specific religious belief

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<sup>56</sup> The *Nāṭyaśāstra* is the ancient Sanskrit text, which offers a manual for technique and performance for Indian classical arts practices. See 1.8.

system, but rather draw upon aspects of many thought systems from across the globe (Theosophical Society in England 2017). Such versatility manifests in Devi's approach to developing Bharata Natyam, as I now discuss and subsequently permeates in Sankalpam's working methods, which draws upon multiple systems of knowledge and many disciplines, to gain new insights into the Bharata Natyam form.

With time, Devi's responsibilities within the Theosophical Society increased, and she became president of the All India Federation of Young Theosophists, president of the World Federation of Young Theosophists and finally, leader of the World-Mother Movement<sup>57</sup> (Meduri 2005:10). Devi travelled widely with her responsibilities for the society and as Meduri points out, she "made a home for herself in a global world" living between India, Europe, Australia and America (2005: 11). Meduri states that Devi's global travels and intercultural marriage impacted upon her view of India within a global arena, and that she carried a local/global view of India as a message stating that "to be truly Indian one had to be truly international" (Devi in Radha Burnier cited in Meduri 2005: 9), encouraging Indian nationals to see the best in all civilisations (Meduri 2005: 9). Devi's statement encapsulates her connection to life on a local and global level and reflects her humanitarian ideology. Her early exposure to and immersion in the Theosophical Society through her father, her husband and Besant, clearly impacted her outlook, as Meduri indicates. However, Devi's exposure to world thought systems, the adoption of broad tolerance, the acceptance of global cultures and the search for knowledge and truth, were

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<sup>57</sup> The World-Mother movement is associated with the Theosophical society.

instrumental in Devi's re-imagining of *Sadir*, and I argue, critical in underpinning the dialectic method that Sankalpam adopts within its own UK-based practice today. Devi's exposure to these qualities and beliefs lay the groundwork from which her life's work evolved, and I discuss how she then nurtured a dance practice that was shaped by her philosophical approach and was influenced by her exposure to Indian as well as Western aesthetics and arts practices.

#### **4.5 Devi, Bharata Natyam and the Re-imagining of *Sadir***

Many argue that the Indian dance form *sadir* was almost extinct in India when middle class Brahmin and Theosophist, Devi returned in 1933, from her global travels, states Meduri (2005)<sup>58</sup>. Devi had met ballerina Anna Pavlova whilst touring with the Theosophical society. She had begun to learn ballet from Pavlova and was also a student of the ballerina, Cleo Nordi (Katrak 2011; Meduri 2005; Menon 1984; O'Shea 2005). Both Pavlova and Ruth St Dennis had tried to see a glimpse of Indian dance on their travels to the subcontinent, Pavlova in 1923 and Ruth St Denis, with the Denishawn dancers in 1926, but with little success (Erdman 1998: 70). What tourists saw in India was a version of '*nautch*' dance<sup>59</sup> which was unimaginable as legitimate performance in the theatres of Europe, where the aesthetics of the Ballets Russes or the fantastical reconstructions of Josephine Baker's "*Revue Nègre*" dominated (Erdman 1998: 70-71). Pavlova had subsequently encouraged Devi to seek out her own

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<sup>58</sup> This too is contested. See Katrak (2011), who suggests that many scholars disagree that *sadir* was all but extinct. Katrak cites Dr V. K Naryana Menon who states that *sadir* was in fact "quite alive" (Katrak 2011: 30).

<sup>59</sup> The term '*nautch*' derives from north India and refers to a type of Indian dancing performed by professional dancing girls for human entertainment as opposed to the temple form *sadir* which was performed by the *devadasis* in southern India in temples for the deities (Definitions.net n.d.).

indigenous dance forms (Katrak 2011; Meduri 2005; Menon 1984; O'Shea 2007). Pavlova's advice was to prove fundamental in the reimagining and globalising of an Indian temple dance form, which had already transitioned between the temples and courts in India (Meduri 2005). However, through Devi's re-formation of the dance, it would transition once again to stage, creating a new functionality for *sadir* within in its own cultural *milieu* and beyond.

Both Indian and British society publicly objected to the *devadasi* system through which *sadir* was practiced and examples include Mahatma Gandhi who described it as "a blot upon those who countenance it" (Bharucha 1995: 43). High ranking Indian female official, Dr Muthulakshmi Reddi, outwardly opposed the presence of *devadasis* at official functions, and condemned their practice as "unwholesome", whilst other British aristocrats campaigned against the form as "evil" (Bharucha 1995: 43). Devi herself has stated that although she was living in a part of India that was famous for dance and music, she was not allowed to see indigenous dance because of the stigma attached to it, as the *devadasis*, coming from a particular caste, were considered to be temple prostitutes (BBC 1984).

In 1933, after the death of Annie Besant and as part of the Indian National Movement, Devi began reviving traditional Indian arts and culture in India. She managed to see the forbidden *sadir* dance the following year, accompanied by her brother, by Dr Sankara Menon<sup>60</sup> and Menon's brother (BBC 1984). Devi

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<sup>60</sup> Menon was a long-term friend and colleague of Devi's and became the first Headmaster of the Besant Memorial High School at Kalakshetra.

recalls that she was fascinated by the dance and decided to search for a teacher, but she had no idea what to look for, what was good, what was bad, right or wrong and so she tried out different teachers to see which attracted her most (BBC1984). Despite opposition from the Madras<sup>61</sup> society and against the wishes of her family, Devi began to learn *sadir* (Meduri 2005).

After ten years of intensive training and at the age of thirty-one, Devi gave her first public solo performance, inviting one hundred friends to attend. Instead, over 2000 came out of curiosity and most, she states, were offended by what they saw (BBC 1984). Devi remembers that Brahmins, non-Brahmins and theosophists were all shocked and thought it vulgar (BBC 1984). This reaction from the Theosophical Society members is particularly interesting, given the radical nature of the former leader of the society, Annie Besant. Devi herself, however, felt that aspects of the dance form needed to be reformed, such as the music and presentation (BBC 1984). Given Devi's exposure to classical ballet, it is not surprising that elements of European dance would infiltrate her thinking in response to how to take *sadir* forwards.

Inspired by her global travels, her exposure to European dance and theatre and navigating between a colonial and reformist logic, which outlawed the indigenous *sadir* practice, Devi began to find a way to re-create the temple dance on and for urban stages. She utilised religious iconography and sculpture on front and backcloths, for example, to help stage a temple atmosphere

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<sup>61</sup> Until 1996, what is now called Chennai was known as Madras. Both names are used in this thesis according to the date the city was renamed.

(Meduri 2005: 12). *Sadir*, which had been performed in both temples and courts, was thus re-imagined, codified and systemised by Devi, argues Meduri, stating that Devi enabled “a new kind of seeing that would facilitate the spiritual revival of the dance” (2005: 12). Meduri states that in doing so, Devi was theatricalising *sadir* as stage performance (2005: 12).

Yet Devi also spiritualised and classicised Bharata Natyam Meduri adds, by linking it with the ancient Sanskrit text, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and traditionalising the form by highlighting its association with, and preservation by great gurus (2005: 12). Bharucha has questioned why Bharata Natyam had to be yoked to ancient traditions, customs, texts and knowledge at all (1995: 40). He asks why it had to be validated as an ancient classical dance form (1995: 40). Bharucha argues that the links between ancient, classical and Bharata Natyam have been fabricated to authenticate the history of Bharata Natyam, which, he adds, amounts to an, “invention of a tradition” (1995: 39 & 40). However, ancient of course becomes aligned with sacred and this acknowledges Bharucha, was a strategic necessity at a time when *sadir* was condemned as unrespectable, and so who better to adopt and sanctify *sadir* than elite Brahmin Rukmini Devi<sup>62</sup> (1995: 41). The claim that Devi saved a dying art form, however, is taking it too far, Bharucha adds (1995: 41).

O’Shea argues that Devi’s “project” was in fact a reconstruction, “based on the values, not the content, of ancient practice” (2005: 233) and thus, she states,

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<sup>62</sup> Bharucha adds that Devi was assisted by elite Brahmins, E Krishna Iyer and V. Raghavan (1995: 41).

Devi's Bharata Natyam drew upon aspects of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*'s aesthetic features of "Sanskrit 'total theatre'" (2005: 232). Meduri meanwhile argues that Devi embraced the past by adopting *sadir* from traditional literature and ancient classical texts, adapting the past to meet the needs of the present, and in so doing contemporised the past to meet demands of her day (2005: 14). The re-making of *sadir* to the classical dance form known today as Bharata Natyam is a complex narrative, acknowledges Katrak (2011: 26-27).<sup>63</sup> O'Shea argues that the narratives which frame the revival of the dance form, often presented as binaries are in fact nuanced and deeply aligned within particular training lineages which she herself has been impacted by in her own Bharata Natyam training (2005: 226).

The arguments over the "re-making" of Bharata Natyam as a modern classical form by Devi, have nevertheless been polarising and are, Lopez y Royo argues, provocative and contested (2003: 4). Lopez y Royo states that Bharata Natyam is not simply a reconstruction of an ancient form dating back 2000 years through its association with the ancient text the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, as some claim (2003: 4). Nor she continues, is it solely a reconstruction based on cultural appropriations from the West, adding that Bharata Natyam evolved from two different dance practices, *margi* (meaning high class dance) and *desi* (indicating a formal but more localised dance) and is therefore, "a re-embodiment of dance traditions and practices which go back several centuries" (2003: 4).

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<sup>63</sup> Coorlawala argues that the renaming was a reaction to the negative associations with *sadir* (2005: 178).

Bharata Natyam was a political move argues Lopez y Royo, created in response to political and social conditions impacting *sadir* (2003: 3-4). The political climate of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century therefore demanded a response if this indigenous dance form was to be kept alive (Lopez y Royo: 3-4; O'Shea 2005: 225). Devi's adaptation of *sadir* to accommodate Western influences, argues O'Shea, thus legitimised Bharata Natyam according to new postcolonial values, allowing Bharata Natyam to be reclaimed as an authentic Indian classical dance form, yet under the template of the Western dance style of Ballet (O'Shea 1998: 54).

Through reimagining, codifying systemising and renaming *sadir* as Bharata Natyam, the dance form gained a status equating with Western classical forms such as ballet (Lopez y Royo 2003: 3). In reconstructing *sadir*, Devi had reclaimed it from the legislation of colonial rule and reformist ideologies. She had aligned Bharata Natyam with Western systems of training, by for example establishing a conservatoire-model at Kalakshetra (Meduri 2005). She integrated Western aesthetics, such as classical line and symmetry in the body and adopted Western staging through the use of backcloths and proscenium settings (Meduri 2005). In doing so, Devi had adapted one cultural form, *sadir*, to enable it to survive under the dominance of another cultural system, the British colonial system.

If Bharata Natyam developed as a form of anti-imperialism in response to the anti-*nautch* movement, argues Bharucha, it was nevertheless tied to a small and specific group of art lovers and intellectuals, rather than a mass national

collective (1995: 42). Bharata Natyam, Bharucha argues, therefore became associated with upper caste and middle class Brahmanical values, run by the religious and economic elite members of society (1995: 42). Thus, it became a vehicle for those values to be propagated (Bharucha 1995: 42).

Bharucha argues that politics, economics and religion played a significant role in the successful transition of *sadir* to Bharata Natyam, and he states that, “the conflation between the promotion of Bharatanatyam and the propagation of values associated with the Brahmin-dominated Congress lobbies of the Indian elite was becoming increasingly apparent” (1995: 42). Devi, he continues, was a focal point of connection between the Indian National Congress and the Brahmin elite, ensuring the successful reclamation of the dance form (Bharucha 1995: 44). However, Vatsyayan rejects the intellectual postmodern discourses which brand Indian Nationalists such as Devi as “constructing a Nationalist discourse” (2005: 56). Vatsyayan, who knew Devi well, argues that “this was a search for identity and at no point at all was it merely an intellectual stance or for that matter ideology” (2005: 56).

Devi’s response to the political climate of the time, in reclaiming and transforming the traditional Indian temple dance, *sadir*, provides a meaningful example of how one practitioner, Devi, responded to a pervasive colonial narrative that impacted society and politics, and which was increasingly challenged by the Indian Nationalist agenda. Both Meduri (2005) and O’Shea (2005) agree that the function of the dance form shifted through its metamorphosis. By nurturing an ancient cultural practice and providing it with

a home in a changing nation, the functionality of the dance form would inevitably change.

Devi's narrative is immersed in a changing political landscape, where religion, class, caste and economic status played a significant role in facilitating her reimagining of the outlawed *sadir*. Yet Devi's vision reached beyond dance, and encapsulated humanitarianism, theosophical concepts, animal welfare and social activism in an holistic approach (Ramnarayan 2005: 145). Although Devi had learned *sadir* from the Tanjore Quartette system of training, she was open to developing the form in a different direction. She expressed a belief that artists should be able to experiment with form, once they understood the fundamental principles (Sudharani Raghupathi 1981). Devi was not precious that her style was copied nor adhered to, nor that Kalakshetra carried on her particular way of doing things. She stated in an interview with the BBC in 1984 that, "I didn't copy anybody, so they need not copy me either, as long as what is created is something true and beautiful that's all that matters" (BBC 1984). She argued that she had, "sown the seeds, what else can you do" (BBC 1984) stating that it was up to the following generations to develop the form in their own ways (BBC 1984).

#### **4.6 Devi, Kalakshetra and Sankalpam**

In order to nurture traditional Indian arts and crafts as well as her vision for dance and education, Devi founded Kalakshetra in 1936, on the Adyar estate, Madras. It was established originally as the International Academy of Arts (IAA) to revive traditional south Indian arts including dance, specifically Bharata

Natyam, dance drama, including Kathakali, literature, painting, folk arts and crafts (Meduri 2005: 15-16). A further four institutions were established on the Adyar estate by Devi, which included a high school, a Library, a crafts and weaving centre and a teacher training college (Meduri 2005: 15). Meduri describes Kalakshetra,<sup>64</sup> as the most famous institution on the estate because of the way that Devi interwove global, local and national knowledge, skills and expertise into learning (2005: 15).

Devi's Kalakshetra reflected the different aspects of her persona, her humanitarian and social concerns, her theosophical beliefs as well as her artistic interests. These elements combined to underscore a Kalakshetra training by a multi-disciplinary, inter-cultural and holistic philosophy. This is not surprising, given her life to date, her immersion in the Theosophical Society, and the influences she had subsequently absorbed. Devi's fluid oscillation between past and present, between tradition and contemporaneity was reflected in the curriculum. Students learned English and Tamil alongside traditional Indian arts and crafts and Devi adopted an innovative multidisciplinary approach to training her students within a dual system of learning. She therefore followed the traditional Indian *guru-shishya-parampara* model of teaching<sup>65</sup> housed within a European-influenced *conservatoire* system. Devi also extended her invitation to teachers from an international base, to teach within their own areas of expertise, which included traditional

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<sup>64</sup> Meduri here is referring to what is today called the Rukmini Devi College of Fine Arts, within the institution of Kalakshetra Foundation, but which is referred to as Kalakshetra (2005: 15).

<sup>65</sup> The *guru-shishya-parampara* system is a culturally rooted system, which promotes the dissemination of a particular style or school of Indian classical dance through lineage from the *guru* (teacher) to the *shishya* (student) through the *parampara* (succession of teachers/disciples).

crafts, weaving and pottery, along with classical dance, music, painting, drama and Sanskrit (Meduri 2005: 15 &16).

The multidisciplinary approach and global reach for knowledge established at Kalakshetra, signals a critical foundation from which Sankalpam's co-Artistic Directors have emerged. How this approach has impacted upon Sankalpam can be seen clearly in different aspects of the company's evolution and I examine these in detail, by investigating three specific areas of the company's practice through, collaborations, studio processes and teaching contexts (discussed in chapters six, seven and eight). The co-Artistic Directors of Sankalpam are driven by a curiosity to refine and distil their collective knowledge of Bharata Natyam. Through this curiosity, Sankalpam has evolved a methodological approach to gaining different insights about the dance form, by examining it through different lenses. Like Devi, the lenses Sankalpam utilises to examine form are not restricted by culture, nor discipline, by contemporaneity, nor tradition. Many methods and means are embraced by the company in order to clarify knowledge and re-define practice.

Sankalpam has for example, interrogated Bharata Natyam by examining different local, national and international forms of literature, musical composition, aesthetics and staging. The company has reimagined traditional costume design through a contemporary lens, explored dance technique through the context of teaching practice, investigated the body through Euro-American contemporary dance styles, and explored performance techniques through Euro-American dramaturgical techniques and academic research,

rehearsal direction and workshops. Sankalpam's approach to developing understanding and increasing knowledge to refine practice, can therefore be understood as mirroring Devi's approach in developing Bharata Natyam at Kalakshetra, which evolved through the lenses of many crafts and skills, knowledge systems and disciplines.

Devi's vision for Kalakshetra reflects the shifting attitudes of the time. As India was moving towards Independence, Kalakshetra embraced an individual-centered almost utopian ideal, where life, art and culture were interwoven within the individual's education (Chandrasekhar 2005: 94; Ramnarayan 2005: 146). This is clearly evident on the home page of Kalakshetra's website on which a picture of Devi and the following quote from her stand alone:

Kalakshetra is an institution not merely for the development of art. It exists in order that youth may be educated, not to become artists alone, but to have the right attitude to life, the right attitude to art, in order that they may be of great service to our country (Kalakshetra Foundation n.d.).

Devi's statement is clearly reflected in the comments of co-Artistic Director of Sankalpam, Thirunarayan who, when asked what of Devi's legacy has permeated her practice, replied that she, "learnt [...] how arts whether it be dance, music, visual arts or crafts, fitted into the bigger Indian thought [system] and way of living, in a more composite and holistic manner" (2019).

Devi's philosophy for dancers to reach beyond the confines of artistry is also evident in the testimony of one of the first of Devi's students, later an eminent teacher at Kalakshetra, Sarada Hoffman. In an interview with the BBC in 1984, Hoffman states that, "all our Indian dancing was intended to understand life and

also to give the right path for living” (BBC 1984). Sankara Menon, long-term colleague of Devi and first headmaster of the Besant Memorial School at Kalakshetra, illustrates Devi’s philosophy by describing how she welcomed staff there. He states that Devi would bring fantastic teachers and artists to teach there whom, he adds, “had no public”, and she looked after them, she paid them, she fed them, she respected them, and gave them a world in which to live and create” (BBC 1984).<sup>66</sup> The environment that Devi created for students to learn how to be excellent artists as well as citizens, to have a sense of their own role in the larger global picture, is an important part of the Kalakshetra ethos.

Former student, teacher and later Director of Kalakshetra, Leela Samson,<sup>67</sup> has also commented on Devi’s approach. In an interview with the Hindu newspaper (2010), Samson states that Devi, “wasn’t training us just to be dancers. Time and again she would tell us to be good citizens; good human beings. Her approach was educational [...] dance was another vehicle, like craft or weaving” (2010). Samson has described how Devi’s holistic methodology would permeate every aspect of the students’ learning stating that, “we were tutored in inexplicable ways: what it meant to wear cotton; to tie your hair... she’d talk about these things. Her aesthetics on stage, the colour combinations; she’d adorn you with the most beautiful of colours” (2010).

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<sup>66</sup> See also Venkataraman (2005: 129).

<sup>67</sup> Sankalpam engaged Samson for its first collaborative investigation in 1993, which I discuss in chapter five.

Sankalpam brings Devi's particular aesthetic to the company's work with, for example, attention to detail, a rigorous approach within the dance technique itself and beyond in (for example) the choice of fabric, colour and drape of costumes (V Thirunarayan 2019, WhatsApp *Airing Chickens*). Former students have recollected aspects of Kalakshetra that were integral to the institution, such as the sense of equality and self-discipline promoted by Devi (Venkataraman 2005: 133). These qualities were embedded in Kalakshetra where the design and layout of the buildings and grounds reflected Devi's belief in sensitising her students to aesthetics through the physical environment, which nurtured a co-existence with nature (Venkataraman 2005: 131). Attention to aesthetics, to quality and a self-discipline ingrained through the training at Kalakshetra, permeate Sankalpam's practice too and are discussed in chapters six to eight.

#### **4.7 The Postcolonial Discourse and the UK Dance Landscape.**

Devi's narrative illustrates the complex negotiations that took place as a response to the contexts that her practice evolved within. As well as transitioning a dance form through the socio-political contexts of pre-Independence India, Devi also cultivated traditional arts and crafts, supported creative practitioners to evolve and flourish, and embedded a multitude of cultural and aesthetic influences within the training at Kalakshetra. Devi's choices have been controversial, critiqued, as well as embraced. Her narrative sits within a broader postcolonial discourse that addresses ongoing issues including the marginalisation of migrated practices (Bharucha 2000) and the imposition of Western theories, ideologies and systems upon minority and

migrated forms (Amine 2014; Bharucha 2000, 2014; Chatterjea 2013; Said 2003). Here I consider the postcolonial discourse as the context through which Sankalpam's practice has evolved within the UK dance landscape, and I illustrate the inherent tensions that Sankalpam negotiates in order to nurture a migrated classical practice in this adopted locale.

The orientalist system perpetuated in the historical narrative of Devi's pre-Independence India, manifests in an unbalanced power relationship between the former colonisers and migrated forms.<sup>68</sup> Performance theorist André Lepecki argues that the relationships that develop and are maintained between nation states of former colonial power and the former colonised territories today, are still dominated by a "colonialist logic" (2016: 3). Grau has pointed to how this logic pervades a contemporary UK cultural sector, arguing that everything from the West (the colonisers) is viewed as "the norm" and everything else is considered to be "the other" (2001). The 'other', Grau continues, is often tied to ideas of tradition and stagnation, whereas the West is seen as changing and innovative (2001).

The mono-ethnic perspective limits ways of looking at and reading matters both socially and academically, challenging the "fluidity of identities" (Grau 2001:10). Furthermore, it perpetuates an, 'us' and 'them' mentality, which, argues philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah, is a feature of our evolved psychology (2016). However, the binary mentality of "what is ours and what is theirs" (Fischer-Lichte 2009: 399) is a reductionist route to take, argues Fischer-Lichte

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<sup>68</sup> As I discuss in chapter 3.3 and 3.4.

(2014: 7). By following a binary mentality two things are highlighted she continues: cultures are suspended in a sealed and homogeneous casing and cultures are defined as permanent, the impact of change and exchange upon cultures is consequently denied (2014: 7). This in turn bolsters the orient/occident power relationship referred to by Said (2003).

The framework that the mono-ethnic lens is facilitated through further perpetuates the dominant, colonial narrative, as cultural critic, Ziauddin Sardar proposes (2006). Sardar states that UK arts and cultural policies are situated within a framework of modernity, which does not support a pluralistic Britain (2006: 31). Modernity, argues Sardar, emerges from “ideological, social and cultural patterns that shape the outlook of Western societies” (2006: 31). It therefore, affects attitudes to ethnic minorities, which as other scholars have also noted, tends to result in minorities being viewed as unchanging (Fischer-Lichte 2009; Grau 2001; Lopez y Royo 2003). Sardar explains that modernity lays the foundations for UK arts and cultural policy, stating that it “tolerates minority rights, traditions and lifestyles because it assumes that under its tutelage all cultures will eventually become modern and join the dominant order” (2006: 32). The dominant view of colonised cultures is therefore, Sardar argues, cemented within the modernist framework (2006).

To locate the cultural frameworks of modernity more broadly, Eagleton situates them within an economic context and challenges views that underscore postmodern thinking (2016: 30-32). Eagleton argues that postmodern thinking equates diversity with value and that the absolutist attitude adopted by many

postmodern thinkers about 'otherness' does not nurture a pluralistic society (2016: 30-32). For Eagleton, the absolutist attitude is evidenced in post 1980s anti-essentialist thinking where everything becomes reframed under a 'cultural' doctrine. At this point, he continues, change begins to be thought of as positive, unquestioned and is therefore generalised in its beneficial qualities and affects upon the human condition (Eagleton 2016: 38). He argues that under the cultural doctrine everything becomes one, cultural hierarchies are eradicated, discrimination, difference and distinction are leveled but this is arrived at through a carelessness, driven by a capitalist agenda where discrimination gives way to indifference (2016: 157). Eagleton's concerns about the eradication of difference and the erasure of the particularity of cultures, are echoed by scholars such as Bharucha (2000), Fisher-Lichte (2014) and Grau (2011). Bharucha, like Eagleton, highlights the inseparable nature of cultural practices from the influences of capitalism, which, he argues are conveniently ignored by those who are immersed within theories of performativity (2000: 5&6).

Eagleton states that as long as the economy drives culture, culture is surface and unrooted (2016: 158). The leveling of cultural individuality created by indifference and perpetuated by anti-essentialist thinking (argued by Eagleton) and a postcolonial discourse (Fischer-Lichte 2014) is evidenced in the indifference shown by the ruling British in India. This is highlighted by Erdman (1998) who explains how the ruling classes had little interest in exploring the indigenous dance practices that were so aesthetically different from their own

(1998: 71).<sup>69</sup> How cultural practices retain specificity in a globalised economy therefore, is problematic.

#### **4.8 The UK Dance Landscape and South Asian Dance**

The erasure of individuality in favour of pluralism, of difference in favour of diversity as argued by Eagleton, is evident in the UK dance landscape during the period of time through which Sankalpam's practice has evolved (1994-present). Whilst Eagleton argues within the reference points of an economic context, Sardar blames the politics of colonialism within the UK arts landscape (2006). In the 2006 Arts Council report, *Navigating Difference: Cultural Diversity and Audience Development*, Sardar highlights the imposition of paternalistic colonial values upon migrated cultural forms (2006: 31-32). In 1976, the marginalisation of minority and ethnic arts<sup>70</sup> within the UK arts sector was shamefully exposed in Naseem Khan's report, *The Arts Britain Ignores: The Arts of Ethnic Minorities in Britain*. Khan cited amongst other things, a lack of knowledge and interest in minority ethnic practices as part of a wider problem within the UK cultural sector. She observed that ethnic and minority arts' visibility was poor in the wider cultural sector, rendered by a cultural sector disinterest in minority arts practices (Khan 1981). Furthermore, a bounded sector mentality consigned minority and ethnic practices to community arts platforms, which in turn, Khan noted, forced practices to remain within and develop from their own communities (1981).

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<sup>69</sup> See 4.2.

<sup>70</sup> The terminology has changed from minority, or ethnic, to current use which is minority ethnic.

Bharata Natyam practitioners had encountered their own specific barriers in the UK dance landscape and were for instance, often viewed as cultural ambassadors as well as dance artists, aligned with ethnicity rather than artistry (Grau 2002: 23-26; Jeyasingh 1997: 31-32, 2010: 182-183). Grau, who worked on several research projects with the South Asian dance and theatre communities in the UK,<sup>71</sup> illustrated this in her 2002 article *Dance and Cultural Identity*, stating that the South Asian dance bracket was limiting in the preconceptions and perceptions brought to it. This was compounded, she argued, when South Asian dance artists, highly skilled in their art form, were expected to give the whole cultural experience as part of their education work, often being asked to talk about Indian food when they had come to give workshops in schools, “as if the French ballerina Sylvie Guillem would be asked to describe *Boeuf Bourguignon* in order to situate her dance practice!” (Grau 2002: 23-26).

Thirty years after her ground-breaking report, Khan reviewed the Arts Council England’s response to and engagement with diversity (2006).<sup>72</sup> She noted how little had changed over three decades (2006: 20). Khan acknowledged the distance travelled from the Arts Council’s benevolent paternalism in the mid 1970s, however, she argued that progress had been slow (2006: 20-23). She revealed that the Arts Council had recognised deeply embedded institutionalised racism within the organisation at all levels, and she warned it was clear that some cultural thinking was embedded within the consciousness

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<sup>71</sup> For example, *South Asian Dance in Britain: Negotiating Cultural Identity through Dance* (SADiB), (2002).

<sup>72</sup> The Arts Council England (ACE) is the term currently employed by the national arts funding body in England.

of the sector, and so familiar that it was almost invisible (2006: 22-23).

In the 2016-2017 Arts Council report (*Equality, Diversity and the Creative Case: a Data Report*), evidence highlighted that black and minority ethnic (BME) and disabled people were under-represented across the cultural sector at all levels (Arts Council England 2018: 10). People from BME backgrounds were under-represented in the staff of ACE funded organisations, and at management level, only 9% of the workforce was represented by people from BME backgrounds, compared to 75% under the category of White British or Irish (Arts Council England 2018: 20-23). Only 8% of people from BME backgrounds were in Chief Executive positions across the sector (Arts Council England 2018: 30). Within the Arts Council itself, the representation of people from BME backgrounds was also low, at 9% of the total workforce, compared to 83% from white, British or Irish backgrounds (Arts Council England 2018: 42). Despite Khan's recommendations in her 2006 Arts Council report to abandon the term 'cultural diversity' altogether (Khan 2006: 23) the term still prevails and in fact dominates the recent ACE data report. Based on current ACE data (2018), there appears to be little progress in the intervening years in increasing the visibility of people from BME backgrounds right across the sector, from arts practitioners to executive directors. The focus on 'diversity' rather than 'difference' highlighted by Eagleton (2016) would appear to dominate the Arts sector policy to establish equality in the arts. Yet the focus on 'diversity' it seems, is making little difference for people from BME backgrounds.

Diasporic practitioners in the UK respond to an historical colonial context and its legacy in varied ways as practitioners evolve from the multiple contexts in which they live and work. Jeyasingh for example, has spoken often about her experiences of navigating such a landscape, where the balance of power hovers between history and contemporaneity, between orient and occident, between a diasporic artist and culturally-curated perceptions of art (1997, 2010).<sup>73</sup> Jeyasingh has argued that, “an important part of the history of Bharata Natyam in the west, is the methods and avenues through which the Westerner has striven to understand and respond to it” (2010: 181). She states that post-war Britain, brought with it the “sloe-eyed damsel” as an immigrant from the orient, who settled in the UK but quickly lost her exoticism, as distance, being the most exotic of qualities, disappeared and she was now the next-door neighbour (2010: 182). Physical proximity brought with it a new set of problems, which was how to assimilate the native migrants and, Jeyasingh continues, subsequently the British fascination with ‘The Orient’ died (2010: 182).

Jeyasingh argued that Bharata Natyam shifted from an orientalist and exotic dance form to “one of the ‘ethnic’ dances of Britain” (2010: 182), tied to culture and religion. Its exponents became valued she continues, “as race relation officers, cultural ambassadors, experts in multiculturalism, anthropological exhibits – everything save as dance technicians” (2010: 182). For Jeyasingh, who, like Sankalpam, draws upon multiple cultural, historical and disciplinary influences (Jeyasingh 1997: 32), the constant element throughout her journey

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<sup>73</sup> See chapter 3.1, 3.3 & 3.4.

is not India, but cities. The pace of life has therefore been the connecting factor in her work, her 'home ground' (1997: 32).<sup>74</sup>

Jeyasingh's personal response to the context of the UK dance landscape illustrates how preconceptions and misconceptions of classical Indian dance have been problematic for artists who want to explore the specificity of their practice. This is the landscape in which classical Indian dance practices are still evaluated... under one aesthetic, a Euro-American aesthetic. This is further perpetuated through a colonial reading which emanates from a hegemonic perspective. Despite postmodern and postcolonial attempts to eradicate such embedded prejudices, I will demonstrate that they still infiltrate the UK dance landscape (as highlighted by Jeyasingh 1997 & 2010; Khan 1981 & 2006). It is this landscape, which the artists of Sankalpam have to navigate in order to sustain a migrated practice and reclaim specificity of form, against what has been a rising tide of postcolonialism, universalism and globalisation.

#### **4.9 Sankalpam's Response to Context**

Guided by the global outlook of Devi's legacy, through which the individual is valued within the global and the traditional sits alongside the contemporary, Sankalpam emerged into the UK dance landscape with a particular inheritance. Rigour and discipline are key inherited elements and central to the company's practice, along with Devi's aesthetic concepts regarding costume, music composition and drama. Beyond the aspects of Devi's legacy that are more obvious in Sankalpam's physical practice of Bharata Natyam, there are subtle

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<sup>74</sup> See also Briginshaw (2009).

influences embedded within the company's ethos. Although the company does not claim this, neither collectively nor as individuals, my reading is that Sankalpam embodies Devi's particular philosophical outlook in its employ of the dialectic as a working method. Devi's open approach to different sources of knowledge and expertise, to establish a Kalakshetra system for education (Venkataraman 2005:127-128) is evident in Sankalpam's practice.

The company employs, for example, a local/global outlook when applying the dialectic to examine current and ancient literary sources through local and global expertise. Ancient Indian drama techniques such as Koodiyattam, are examined through contemporary academic and dramaturgical lenses. This is seen in the production, *Dance of the Drunken Monks* (2002-2004) directed by and researched with theatre scholar and director, Phillip Zarrilli and discussed in chapter six. My argument is that Sankalpam's response to the hegemonic context of the UK dance landscape is underpinned by Devi's legacy, which supports the company in focusing on the uniqueness of an individual practice within a global dance industry, thereby reclaiming the specificity of Bharata Natyam as a cultural knowledge system and an embodied practice in the adopted locale.

#### **4.10 Summary**

In this chapter I have located Sankalpam within the historical narrative of Bharata Natyam. I have illustrated the tensions between colonial rule, the *devadasis* and the practice of *sadir*. I have focused on the importance of Sankalpam's lineage from Rukmini Devi, with particular reference to the local/

global influences that impacted Devi's re-imagining of *sadir* as Bharata Natyam. I have discussed how Devi's local/global ideology impacted her vision for Kalakshetra and indicated the significance of her ideology and approach upon Sankalpam's dialectic methodology.

In the next chapter I will discuss the birth of Sankalpam. I consider how the contested and complex emergence of the company into the UK dance landscape, signals something specific about the company's ability to respond to context. I establish how shared values are at the root of Sankalpam's dialectic interactions, creating a platform from which the artists can depart and to which they can return. I also consider how Sankalpam's local/global approach to investigating Bharata Natyam through different lenses, enables the company to resist the lure of Euro-American 'ventriloquism' as argued by Chatterjea (2013: 11). As importantly, I discuss how by adopting other ways of viewing Bharata Natyam and the body, Sankalpam reclaims and situates the technique as an embodied practice within the UK dance landscape.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Beginnings: The Birth of Sankalpam**

#### **5.1 Overview**

In the previous chapter, I introduced the historical lineage of Bharata Natyam and discussed how Rukmini Devi's local/global approach laid the foundations for Sankalpam's methodology. In this chapter I consider the company's rationale to re-assess Bharata Natyam through different cultural knowledge systems whilst keeping a shared Kalakshetra aesthetic constant, hence developing a methodology that is driven by an inquiry both into and beyond the Bharata Natyam form. I therefore examine the importance of Sankalpam's first collaborative engagements and consider how the aesthetic ideology inherited from Devi traverses cultural and geographic boundaries. Sankalpam's beginnings also reveals that shared core values are important reference points for the company's collaborative investigations. They provide platforms for dialectic interactions between different cultural knowledge systems. The dialectic methodology subsequently challenges Sankalpam's experience and understanding of Bharata Natyam. It enables the company to examine the specificity of the form under new lenses and to reconsider Bharata Natyam from different perspectives.

#### **5.2 Sankalpam: A Brief Overview**

In 1994, three Bharata Natyam practitioners came together under the name of Sankalpam (meaning, commitment to a process) to create a new evening of dance funded by the Arts Council of England (ACE). The programme of work included two new choreographies: a Bharata Natyam piece entitled, *Walk*

*around Tradition* by Stella Uppal Subbiah and a contemporary piece, *Alone by Themselves*, by Ellen Van Schuylenburch. The evening of work premiered in April 1995, as part of the Spring Loaded festival at The Place, London. The performers were, Mira Balchandran Gokul (1962-), Valli Subbiah (1961-)<sup>75</sup> and Vidya Thirunarayan (1966-). Core company member, Stella Uppal Subbiah (1962-) was choreographer for the production. In establishing the name Sankalpam the three performers had formed a UK-based classical Indian dance company that was founded on an ideology, as the name suggests, of committing to investigating the Bharata Natyam form through process.

Each of the three Bharata Natyam performers became a co-Artistic Director of Sankalpam, soon to be joined by a fourth in 1995 (Uppal Subbiah) and thereby forming an unusual model for a Bharata Natyam company at the time.<sup>76</sup> The co-Artistic Directors shared an aesthetic vision and negotiated artistic and strategic plans and tasks between them (Sankalpam 2001). The collective decision-making established by the artists at this embryonic stage of development, highlights a particular approach in which the company is seen operating as an organism, in which each member is both independent and interdependent. This I argue, indicates the influence of an Indian epistemology. In Indian world-view thinking, Vatsyayan argues, the world is understood as an organism, where no single part is more important than another and where all parts are inter-related and interdependent for the success of the organism (2007: 49). Through Sankalpam's birth therefore, the importance of collectivity

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<sup>75</sup> Valli Subbiah is now Valli Mohideen but is referred to as Subbiah in this document.

<sup>76</sup> There are a few examples of collective Indian dance companies for example the Post Natyam Collective and ReRooted Dance Collective.

is established within a culturally rooted epistemological framework and this I suggest, is cemented as a core Sankalpam approach.<sup>77</sup>

Three of the four co-Artistic Directors (Balchandran Gokul, Thirunarayan and Uppal Subbiah) had migrated to the UK and each one lived in a different UK locality, London, Merseyside and Swindon.<sup>78</sup> Valli Subbiah however, had grown up in London and moved to Madras to train at Kalakshetra, later returning to London to pursue a professional practice. In the respective 'new' localities the company emerged as a democratic group of artists aspiring to forge a vision that was greater than each individual component (Thirunarayan 2017). For example, each co-Artistic Director practiced in their respective UK region, and formed individual relationships with local, regional and national organisations. These included: The Royal Ballet, Swindon Dance, Merseyside Dance Initiative (MDI), the University of Roehampton and the University of Surrey (Sankalpam 2005). In this way Sankalpam was able to draw on broad sources of financial support and artistic nourishment. The company therefore benefitted from the wide geographic spread of its co-Artistic Directors. The regional and urban areas supporting the individual artists, simultaneously benefitted from the company's practice.

In 1997, shortly after the company was established, Subbiah left the company to pursue life in Sri Lanka. The company maintained a co-Artistic Directorship of three for a further nine years when in 2006 and after twelve years as

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<sup>77</sup> Despite this Sankalpam is not constituted as a collective.

<sup>78</sup> Thirunarayan later moved to Hampshire.

company co-Artistic Director, Thirunarayan resigned from Sankalpam to pursue a career as a professional potter alongside her dance practice.<sup>79</sup> Thirunarayan's departure left the current co-Artistic Directorship of Balchandran Gokul and Uppal Subbiah. Despite Thirunarayan's subsequent independence from Sankalpam, she has remained engaged with some aspects of the company's work. Examples can be found in the company's research and development as part of The University of Roehampton's Choreomundus research project (2015),<sup>80</sup> and through the production, *Unarvu* presented by Sankalpam at the Bhavan Centre 2016.<sup>81</sup> Thirunarayan has also invited Uppal Subbiah to choreograph for her forthcoming production *Sites of Belonging*, to premier in 2020 and regularly contributes to the WhatsApp group, *Airing Chickens*.

Although Thirunarayan practices independently of Sankalpam, her role as a foundational core member of the company and throughout the first twelve years of Sankalpam's evolution is critical in the company's development, justifying her importance within this study. Furthermore, Thirunarayan's independent practice offers interesting data about how the impact of Sankalpam's methodological approach and the resonance of the dialectic, reach beyond the company unit. This is discussed in detail in chapter seven. Whilst acknowledging that Thirunarayan is now an independent practitioner from

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<sup>79</sup> This is addressed in chapter seven.

<sup>80</sup> Stella Uppal Subbiah was awarded a Roehampton University Choreomundus Scholar's residency to tutor Masters' students as part of the Choreomundus International master's in dance Knowledge, Practice and Heritage programme in 2015. Uppal Subbiah invited Balchandran Gokul and Thirunarayan to participate in the project.

<sup>81</sup> Sankalpam presented an evening of Bharata Natyam entitled *Unarvu* on 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2016. The evening's programme platformed a community group of Sri Lankan Tamil ladies called UYIR, who have been rediscovering Bharata Natyam as adults.

Sankalpam therefore, she is nevertheless referred to as a co-Artistic Director of Sankalpam throughout this study.<sup>82</sup>

Due to the changing nature of the co-Artistic Directorship of Sankalpam (outlined), as well as because of the links the three key artists continue through performance, research and discourse, I have chosen to focus on three, not four of the co-Artistic Directors of Sankalpam. Subbiah is not highlighted due to the brevity of her role as co-Artistic Director and her subsequent inactivity within the company since. However, Subbiah's contribution to and founding role in Sankalpam are acknowledged and detailed in this chapter. Balchandran Gokul, Thirunarayan and Uppal Subbiah are therefore referred to as the co-Artistic Directors of Sankalpam throughout the study with no further distinctions made between their positions within the company, past or present, other than to highlight the impact of Sankalpam's methodology on Thirunarayan's current practice, discussed in chapter seven.<sup>83</sup>

All four of Sankalpam's co-Artistic Directors trained at the world-renowned Kalakshetra College of Fine Arts, globally referred to as Kalakshetra, situated on the outskirts of Chennai in Southern India. The impact of Kalakshetra's founder, Rukmini Devi's vision and approach to dance and education, as discussed in chapter four, is acknowledged by the company in its 2008 brochure (Sankalpam 2008). Sankalpam has been financially supported by a

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<sup>82</sup> See 1.3.

<sup>83</sup> Two periods of research and Development for Thirunarayan's current project entitled The Clay Connection (2016/17) are discussed in chapter 7, which examines the introduction of clay as a catalyst, through which Thirunarayan and her creative team explore Bharata Natyam.

diverse range of organisations that have included: Arts Council England, London Arts Board, Swindon Dance, The Point Dance and Arts Centre, and North West Arts Board. Sankalpam became a regional dance company funded through Southern Arts in 2001 and a Regular Funded Organisation of Arts Council England, South East in 2003 (Sankalpam 2005). More recently the company has been focusing on research and development opportunities, through production, studio research and teaching, which I detail in chapters six to eight. Sarah Trist managed Sankalpam from 1994-1996, at which point June Gamble took over the management of the company 1996-2006. In 2006 Sarah Trist again took on the management of the company and remains the company manager today.

My own involvement with Sankalpam's co-Artistic Directors began in 1993 when I collaborated with Thirunarayan on a solo performance: *For Those I have Talked with by the Fire*. The piece was choreographed by myself and performed by Thirunarayan at Swindon Dance as part of the *She Moves* platform. In 1994 Thirunarayan invited me to rehearse Sankalpam's first production. Thus, began a twenty-six-year relationship between Sankalpam and myself, evolving through the contexts of professional practice and personal friendships. I have continued to rehearse each of the company productions over the past two and a half decades, whilst maintaining personal friendships with the co-Artistic Directors of the company. Now, as the company forms the core of my research, another strand emerges to our relationship, one that calls for a critical distance in order to manage a successful inquiry into researching friends and analysing colleagues, as discussed in chapter two and acknowledged once again here.

### 5.3 Contested Beginnings

The complicated birth of Sankalpam is considered here against a backdrop of the validity of different source material as historical data. Historical accounts are provisional and open to contested views. Dance Historian Alexandra Carter states that the neat packaging of time frames are made by historians and not through the “all-inclusive, clusterings of events themselves” (2013: 12). Sankalpam’s birth illustrates Carter’s proposition. The emergence of the company, for example, identifies several conflicting birth dates, situated in textual sources and embedded in personal memories and body archives, highlighting both the difficulties in obtaining accurate accounts of events but also bringing into question the importance of the veracity of accounts.

The oral sources offer a broad consensus. The co-Artistic Directors agree that the first Sankalpam production was choreographed in 1994 and toured in 1995 (Balchandran Gokul, Thirunarayan and Uppal Subbiah 2017, WhatsApp *Airing Chickens*). The consensus is arrived at in different ways through, for example, the birth of a company child, the year the company account was set up, the year the first Arts Council grant was awarded (Balchandran Gokul, Thirunarayan and Uppal Subbiah 2017, WhatsApp *Airing Chickens*). This is supported by textual data, which offers the same date of Sankalpam’s birth (1994) in several years of Sankalpam’s publicity (1998, 1999, 2001, 2003, 2005). However, the date is also presented and contradicted in a 2008 limited-edition brochure (Sankalpam 2008). This creates a discrepancy in the company’s date of origin within the same textual source. The contradictory evidence for the company’s birth date is examined for two reasons. The first is

to interrogate the validity of data derived from body archive, memory recall and textual sources. The second is to understand if the different accounts represent a broader reflection of Sankalpam itself.

It is necessary to consider the extent to which the contradiction in establishing the date of Sankalpam's origin is important and of interest. The discrepancy highlights that wide-ranging source material offers different data about the same events. The date of Sankalpam's birth is further complicated by the changes in co-Artistic Directorship, which was established by three, became four, reduced to three again, and now exists as two (Balchandran Gokul, Thirunarayan and Uppal Subbiah 2017, WhatsApp *Airing Chickens*). The discrepancy in accounts of Sankalpam's beginnings is important to note, because within the different accounts of the company's birth, the fragmented emergence and shifting shape of the company is reflected. The conflicting dates of Sankalpam's birth are therefore I suggest, representative of a company which adopts an ethos in which fluidity is valued and embedded.

The importance given to one form of knowledge over another, and the subsequent hierarchical value that each form of knowledge acquires in writing history, is called into question by cultural theorists states Carter, who points to discourse theories which question the "logocentric" view of written texts, and she highlights instead the importance of multiple sources (2013: 10 & 11). Historian, Paul Thompson, supports the view that oral history sources should share an equal place with textual sources in the writing of history, and proposes that history can be given a new dimension if human life experience is utilised

as “raw material” (2006: 28). The evidence uncovered to establish a starting date for the birth of Sankalpam, appears to suggest that each source of data; body, memory or textual, has equal importance in this investigation. Yet each source also has limitations. This illustrates the need to regard multiple sources of data as both important and flawed sources of knowledge.

Whilst establishing an accurate date of origin is important in tracing Sankalpam’s history, the discrepancy surrounding this formative company reference point perhaps reflects something more interesting about Sankalpam that is worth further exploration. The numerous accounts of events may be revealed to highlight the richness and fluidity of Sankalpam’s co-Artistic Director structure where the various Artistic Directors share responsibilities, negotiate strategy and artistic vision for example. The geographic dispersion of Sankalpam’s co-Artistic Directors furthermore, enables the company to tap into local as well as national sources of funding, expertise, knowledge and skills. This increases the opportunities for growth and survival. The company therefore can be viewed as an organism and each co-Artistic Director as a part of the organism. Each part is autonomous, surviving independently in the various locales, yet for Sankalpam, each part is also interdependent, relying on the co-labour<sup>84</sup> of the collectivity of the company to operate successfully and to flourish. In this way, Indian world-view thinking, as applied within the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (Vatsyayan 2007) is revealed to underpin the organism of Sankalpam.

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<sup>84</sup> See (Colin and Sachsenmaier 2016:2).

#### 5.4 Early Conversations

In 1992, Balchandran Gokul received funding from Arts Council England (ACE) to create a solo production. Like the other Sankalpam artists, Balchandran Gokul had trained at Kalakshetra. She subsequently moved to the UK and after touring as a performer with the UK-based SJDC, she established a career as a solo performer. Balchandran Gokul used the ACE funding to facilitate a collaborative project with renowned Bharata Natyam artist Leela Samson (1951-). The two artists collaborated in India to produce *Akasa* (1993) which Balchandran Gokul toured in India and the UK.

Excited by the collaboration with Samson, Balchandran Gokul reflects upon the project in a face-to-face interview stating that, “we felt that it was taking Bharata Natyam somewhere” (Balchandran Gokul 2017). During rehearsals for *Akasa*, held at Kalakshetra, Balchandran Gokul was joined by former fellow student, Valli Subbiah who observed rehearsals. At that time, Subbiah was a member of Kalakshetra’s teaching faculty. Discussions followed between the two alumni about the possibilities for exploring the Bharata Natyam form further with Samson, not as a solo project but with a small group of dancers (Balchandran Gokul 2017). The performers’ rationale to explore Bharata Natyam further and to develop the Kalakshetra aesthetic was beginning to lay the foundations from which Sankalpam would emerge.

Subbiah had already established an international reputation as a Bharata Natyam performer. As a student at Kalakshetra she had been profiled in a BBC documentary about the institution entitled *World About Us* (1984). Subbiah

subsequently earned a reputation through her lead-role performances with Kalakshetra dance-drama tours of India, Europe and the UK. This reputation was further enhanced by her other projects including solo productions, *The Search* (1989) and *Margam* (1990) as well as collaborative work with institutions such as The Royal Ballet for the production, *Sacred Lands* (1995) (Iyer 1997: 78). Upon returning to live in England in 1993, Subbiah asked another former student of Kalakshetra to sing for her solo performance. The singer was Bharata Natyam dancer and fellow Kalakshetra alumni, Vidya Thirunarayan, who had also performed alongside Balchandran Gokul with SJDC (Balchandran Gokul 2017 & Thirunarayan 2017). During rehearsals for Subbiah's solo performance the three dancers shared accommodation and conversation often centered on dance, "it was a major preoccupation" recalls Thirunarayan, who explains that they wanted to explore Bharata Natyam collectively. A decision was made therefore, to apply for Arts Council funding to enable the performers to investigate some of these concepts collectively in India with Samson (Thirunarayan 2017).

I described in Chapter four<sup>85</sup> how Samson, also a former student of Rukmini Devi, was inspired by Devi's aesthetic and approach to dance education. Samson was senior to the younger alumni and had an established international reputation as a Bharata Natyam performer. The fact that Samson had also trained and taught at Kalakshetra was no coincidence. Balchandran Gokul explains how by working with Samson the dancers could reference, "the same technique and that same aesthetic [as Samson]" (2017). Samson, nevertheless

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<sup>85</sup> See chapter 4.6.

was pushing the Bharata Natyam form within Devi's aesthetic principles, which further appealed to the dancers and played an important role in the artists' choice of collaborative partner (Balchandran Gokul 2017).

The collective interest in the form, the understanding of a shared aesthetic and a deep exploration of the Bharata Natyam technique, are key elements inherited through Kalakshetra. They have underpinned the company's rationale for exploration throughout. This inheritance forms a cornerstone to the company's development and ethos as I have discussed in chapter four.<sup>86</sup> The Bharata Natyam form itself, therefore, was the starting point for collective enquiry (Thirunarayan 2017) and remains so today for the individuals within and beyond the company.

What emerges through interviews with the company are shared core values, a willingness to challenge the form, to extend the artistic investigation of Bharata Natyam and to push it further whilst simultaneously rooting it in the foundations of a Kalakshetra ethos. Thirunarayan explains that Samson personalised the form through her choreography (Thirunarayan 2017) explaining that Samson was "trying to understand the movement from within" (Thirunarayan 2017). Thirunarayan's statement is critical, and in it lies the seeds of Sankalpam's future research and the rationale for independent investigations, beyond Sankalpam. The artists were rooted in a Kalakshetra aesthetic, they were focused on investigating the Bharata Natyam form, but the enquiry was driven

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<sup>86</sup> See chapter 4.6.

by a curiosity to explore the deeper aspects of the form, such as the articulation between the internal impulse for, and the external manifestation of movement; or the relationship between body, mind, imagination and emotion. It seemed to the young artists that Samson was exploring these concepts in her own work and she therefore provided an excellent collaborative partner with whom they could extend their investigation.

The articulation between inner states (*bhāva*) and outward expression, through the relationship between gross and subtle body is explored by Zarrilli, whom Sankalpam have collaborated with on several projects. Zarrilli argues that many Indian daily practices draw on body and mind, from martial arts to performing arts and include meditational practices such as yoga (1998: 275). These disciplines could be considered as part of a “‘field’ of psychophysical practice” argues Zarrilli (1998: 275) as they share similar “basic cultural assumptions about the body, mind and their relationship to exercise and embodiment” (1998: 275).

The relationship between the body and mind can be summed up in the “Upanisadic statement ‘You are that (*tat tvam asi*)’” states Zarrilli (1998: 277). I asked Sankalpam’s co-Artistic Directors what this statement meant to them and how important it was to their performance practice. Balchandran Gokul stated that to her it translates as “that what I am seeking is within me” clarifying that it is to do with self-realisation which, of course should be applied to performance (Balchandran Gokul 2018, WhatsApp *Airing Chickens*). Thirunarayan agrees that it is connected to Indian world-view thinking where

each individual part has an important role in forming the whole (Thirunarayan 2018, WhatsApp *Airing Chickens*). Zarrilli states that psychophysical practices embody, embed and embrace this ontology, which puts the practitioner and action within a larger framework of the universe and through which the performer is transformed in the moment of performance (1998: 277- 280). He further explains that through training, practitioners move from gross to subtle body, from external to internal and from outward tactile actions “to apparent inaction and stasis” in a journey towards bodily self-perfection and to alter, ultimately the actor’s “mode of being in the world” (Zarrilli 1998: 280).

The relationship between gross and subtle body and of the individual to the universe, are concepts that underpin Bharata Natyam as extracted from Indian world-view thinking and applied within the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (Vatsyayan 1997: 3, 2007: 49). They are complex concepts for practitioners to understand and become expert in, however, even at this early stage, these deeply philosophical and psychophysical elements of Bharata Natyam practice were at the forefront of the co-Artistic Directors’ thinking. Later, Sankalpam’s co-Artistic Directors would explore fundamental aspects of Zarrilli’s research, both through collaborative work with the artist as well as through his academic research. Furthermore, they would extend this particular enquiry with myself through the rehearsal process and test it out on students in their individual teaching practices. I argue that it is this embodied aspect of the practice that is reclaimed by Sankalpam in nurturing the form in the adopted locale of the UK dance landscape.

With a rationale for collaborating with Samson firmly established, the three artists agreed to make an application to ACE to support a project where they could investigate the Bharata Natyam form with Samson in India. As yet, the concept of Sankalpam was still in the embryonic stages. The application was made under Balchandran Gokul and Subbiah's names. Both had already established careers in the UK and were known to the national funding body. The artists agreed that Thirunarayan would be invited to join them as the third member of the group (Balchandran Gokul 2017).

In 1993, and before ACE funding had been approved, Balchandran Gokul, Subbiah and Thirunarayan decided to begin a period of research with Samson at Kalakshetra and at Samson's studio in Delhi (Balchandran Gokul 2017, Thirunarayan 2017). After several weeks the performers received news that their ACE funding bid had been successful, bringing with it the restrictions of UK public funding systems. The UK model of producing work in a limited time frame was very different to the process of making work in Kalakshetra at the time and in India generally, creating pressure on the collaborative process (Balchandran Gokul 2017). The dancers therefore cut short the research period in India and returned to the UK.

Now back in the adopted UK dance landscape and having agreed to create a production as part of the ACE funding, the artists approached Brendan Keaney (Dance Officer at the Arts Council at the time<sup>87</sup>) for advice. Keaney encouraged

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<sup>87</sup> According to Balchandran Gokul, Keaney took over as dance officer at ACE from Simon Dove, and was the officer to whom Sankalpam had to report during the company's first project (M Balchandran Gokul 2019, WhatsApp *Airing Chickens*. See also One Dance UK <https://www.onedanceuk.org/jane-attenborough-award-winner-brendan-keaney/>)

the performers to explore something else with the funding, trusting the artists to follow their own artistic inquiry to develop their practice (Thirunarayan 2017).

The open-minded attitude of the dance officer Keaney is perhaps a reflection of the cultural climate that influenced arts funding policies in 1990's Britain. Mitra argues that during this period the Arts were at the centre of the new drive to place ethnically diverse citizens in prominent positions, making the New Britain, the ethnically diverse Britain visible (2015:16). Perhaps Sankalpam had emerged at a fortuitous time in which artists could experiment and take risks. Naseem Khan has suggested that the 1990s saw a shift in the terms by which artists identified with race and ethnicity within the arts and began exploring how they wanted to negotiate those labels themselves (2006: 22). Sankalpam was firmly in the classical Bharata Natyam camp, the artists had worked with Samson as a respected and talented practitioner who understood the training and aesthetic principles the dancers had emerged from. She also understood the desire to push the form and to go deeper with it. Now that the dancers were back in the UK, they had financial backing from ACE as well as a supportive Dance Officer who encouraged the artists' autonomous approach to Bharata Natyam. Whom the dancers would approach to collaborate with next and what the project would develop into, was still to be decided.

The socio-political climate of the 1990s was it seems advantageous for the three Bharata Natyam performers, whom, having spent an intense period of time living and working in India together, had now "really bonded" (Thirunarayan 2017). They had an opportunity to investigate their practice,

thanks to a funding policy that promoted diversity in the arts, and to the liberal attitude of an Arts Council officer who trusted practitioners to take charge of their own artistic development. What's more, the time spent with Samson, as well as time spent focusing their funding application had clarified a collective rationale for working together. And so it appears that the collaborative period with Samson, which indicates yet another potential birth date for Sankalpam (1993), marks the true emergence of Sankalpam as a UK-based, Arts Council funded, touring Bharata Natyam company.

### **5.5 *Walk Around Tradition and Alone by Themselves* (1994/1995)**

By 1994 Sankalpam was in possession of a substantial ACE grant with which to investigate the Bharata Natyam form but had no artist to collaborate with. The company had to decide how best to use the public funding and whom to invite as collaborator. Valli Subbiah suggested working with her sister in law Stella Uppal Subbiah, who had choreographed a solo production for her in 1989, entitled *The Search*. Uppal Subbiah had recently moved to London from Nigeria. She had trained at Kalakshetra under Rukmini Devi and later in Delhi under Samson (Sankalpam 2008). The other dancers knew Uppal Subbiah personally, professionally, and as a choreographer and all knew her by reputation as “a fabulous dancer” (Balchandran Gokul 2017). In choosing Uppal Subbiah as a collaborator the company cultivated a continuity with the art form as well ensuring that the artistic lineage of Devi and her aesthetic principles continued. The shared Kalakshetra training and Devi's aesthetic would remain the constant base from which to develop a production. In addition, the project could easily develop in the UK as all four of the artists were now

based in Britain, albeit in different geographic locations. In these different ways, the choice of Uppal Subbiah as creative collaborator made perfect sense.

Initially the company thought that Uppal Subbiah might re-work *The Search* (Balchandran Gokul 2017 & Thirunarayan 2017). However, it was decided that a new work should be created for the company (Thirunarayan 2017). Studio space was booked at Islington Arts Factory and Westminster University (Thirunarayan 2017). Balchandran Gokul describes the rehearsal process with Uppal Subbiah stating that “we didn’t know exactly what we were going to explore, [...]. It was all very raw” (Balchandran Gokul 2017). Uppal Subbiah’s starting point for the choreography was the “physical impulse for movement” (Sankalpam 2008). In Sankalpam’s choice to work with Uppal Subbiah, the exploration of Bharata Natyam towards a production began in earnest. As with Samson, the dancers shared the foundations of a Kalakshetra training and Devi’s aesthetic and were driven by a curiosity to interrogate Bharata Natyam from within the form, examining the specificity of the practice. The relationship between the internal impulse and the external manifestation through the body would become a continuous thread of investigation for the company’s co-Artistic Directors, to which they returned again and again in different ways (and which I discuss in detail in chapters six seven and eight).

In addition to Uppal Subbiah, the company invited *mridangam* percussionist and composer, Karaikudi Krishnamurthy and Jazz saxophonist and composer Iain Ballamy, to collaborate on the project (Balchandran Gokul 2017, Sankalpam 2008). Sankalpam would collaborate with each of the musicians

many times in the future. Although the resulting piece was a pure Bharata Natyam *nritta* piece,<sup>88</sup> the combination of Western jazz and classical Indian percussion initiated a collaborative cultural conversation which both allowed the dancers to draw upon the rich heritage of Bharata Natyam whilst enabling the company to redefine form, by reaching beyond form and beyond cultural, temporal and geographic boundaries. The methodology initiated in Sankalpam's first production, later becomes embedded in Sankalpam's ideology as evidenced in the company publicity (1999) in which Sankalpam is described as a company that combines "respect for tradition with a desire to reach beyond current convention" (Sankalpam 1999).

#### **5.5.1 Ellen Van Schuylenburch**

To complete an evening-length production, Sankalpam invited contemporary dance practitioner, Ellen Van Schuylenburch to make a second piece entitled *Alone by Themselves*.<sup>89</sup> What is clear from interviews with the company is that Schuylenburch's rigour, commitment to form and her uncompromising attitude to perfection, were elements of her practice that the co-Artistic Directors of Sankalpam could identify with. Sankalpam shared these particular values with the contemporary dance practitioner even though Van Schuylenburch knew little about Bharata Natyam.

The decision to work with Van Schuylenburch seems completely at odds with the company focus, which had been to explore Bharata Natyam through a

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<sup>88</sup> *Nritta*, meaning pure dance.

<sup>89</sup> I examine this piece in detail in the following chapter focusing on the impact the collaboration with Van Schuylenburch had upon Sankalpam evolving a dialectic methodology.

Kalakshetra aesthetic, a shared training and knowledge of the dance language (Balchandran Gokul 2017). As I research the company's birth and remember my reaction upon first seeing Van Schuylenburch's piece, I am reminded that even then, it seemed like an odd combination of collaborative choices and I felt at the time that Van Schuylenburch's movement material sat awkwardly in the Sankalpam performers' bodies. I question therefore, the rationale behind the decision.

When interviewing the co-Artistic Directors of the company, I wanted to find out more about why the company had chosen to look beyond the Bharata Natyam form for the second choreographic collaborator, when a closer examination of the classical form had been so central to the company rationale and had driven the research with Samson and Uppal Subbiah. Balchandran Gokul states that it was not a deliberate choice to search for a contemporary dancer and explains the circumstances that lead to the decision (Balchandran Gokul 2017). The invitation came through a chance meeting between Balchandran Gokul and Van Schuylenburch on a choreographic project entitled, *Touts Femmes*, which was commissioned by Janet Archer, then Director of Dance City, Newcastle. The aim of the project was to shine a light on female choreographers (Balchandran Gokul 2017). Balchandran Gokul explains how when she met Van Schuylenburch and saw her work, she really "took to her robust approach" (Balchandran Gokul 2017). She expands her thoughts by explaining that "there was no messing [...] she just wanted [...] in her words 'the truth in movement'. She pursued that with a vengeance" (Balchandran Gokul 2017). It was evident to Balchandran Gokul that Van Schuylenburch, despite being from a different

cultural dance discipline to Sankalpam, nevertheless shared some core values about dance. Balchandran Gokul explains these as rigour and movement quality (Balchandran Gokul 2017). Thirunarayan in a separate interview, concurs, shedding further insight into the rationale for engaging Van Schuylenburch. Thirunarayan states that the company commissioned the contemporary dance practitioner because:

her relationship with her art form was something that was really fascinating [...] how uncompromising she was in her commitment to the art form, and her understanding of the art form. Her conviction, her sincerity [...] you felt that she might be somebody to bring in, who might give a new insight into our own art form (Thirunarayan 2017).

I was curious about the commonalities that existed between the different choreographers that Sankalpam had chosen to collaborate with to this point, Samson, Uppal Subbiah and Van Schuylenburch. Balchandran Gokul explains that “the commonality [was] the thoroughness of approach to dance” (Balchandran Gokul 2017). She goes on to add that at that time, Van Schuylenburch was not yet known as a choreographer, adding that they were not looking for a well-known name and explaining that what they were seeking was, “this quality of movement in our dance” (Balchandran Gokul 2017). I asked if the company had wanted to create a fusion work when Van Schuylenburch was commissioned. Balchandran Gokul responded that whilst she was inspired by Van Schuylenburch’s work, there had been no intention to mix dance styles (Balchandran Gokul 2017). Furthermore, Sankalpam’s co-Artistic Directors were not interested in becoming contemporary dancers, nor in merging Bharata Natyam with other cultural practices. Thirunarayan explains, “we wanted to remain within our forte [...] to extend our understanding of Bharata Natyam and to evolve as Bharata Natyam dancers” (Thirunarayan 2017). The dancers soon

realised that it was possible to do this by working with other forms and practitioners, and recognised through working with Van Schuylenburch, the important role that collaboration with different disciplines and thought systems could play in understanding dance, the body and Bharata Natyam differently.

Balchandran Gokul argues that, “the logic of contemporary dance is different to the logic of Bharata Natyam” (Balchandran Gokul 2017), whilst Thirunarayan remembers rehearsals with Van Schuylenburch as a completely new and also a frustrating process. Van Schuylenburch wanted 100% from the dancers, which the Bharata Natyam dancers gave even though, because they had a differently informed awareness of the body, they did not always understand what Van Schuylenburch wanted from them in rehearsals (Thirunarayan 2017). However, despite the difficulties, the collaborative process of working with Van Schuylenburch became advantageous for the company. Thirunarayan describes how although it was all so different for the Bharata Natyam dancers:

suddenly it opened up a completely new perspective. She [Van Schuylenburch] was looking at the depth of the movement, she was literally looking at the skeleton and the facility it had from a very physiological point of view, which we never really had (Thirunarayan 2017).

Despite the newness of the Cunningham<sup>90</sup> form in the Bharata Natyam dancers’ bodies, and the odd pairing of two seemingly disparate codified techniques, as well as the different aesthetic perspectives between Van Schuylenburch and Sankalpam, there were advantages in collaborating in this way. From Balchandran Gokul’s perspective, the depth of focus on the body gained from

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<sup>90</sup> Cunningham Technique is a modern dance technique developed by American dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham in the 1950s. Cunningham’s approach emphasised rigour and physical precision, whilst risk taking and questioning the ‘status quo’ was encouraged.

working with Van Schuylenburch not only made Sankalpam's dancing better, but the quality achieved through the process of such physical rigour also permeated into Uppal Subbiah's piece, *Walk around Tradition* (2017). She adds that, "all we wanted to do was to push that physical dexterity [...]. Really, we were looking at where does the movement come from? And really, really looking at how the body is used for every nuance of the movement" (Balchandran Gokul 2017).

Fischer-Lichte states that through interweaving performance cultures a new space is created, one that draws on different cultures yet is neither one nor another (2009: 391). Whilst Fischer-Lichte's argument applies to performance and the relationship that evolves between performers and spectators in the moment of performance, I argue that for Sankalpam, the interactions with other cultural knowledge systems, rather than creating a new space, opens up a different space for Bharata Natyam to be understood within. Simultaneously this also manifests as a safe space for Bharata Natyam to be investigated through and supported by. I suggest that Sankalpam's process with Van Schuylenburch, with Samson and with Uppal Subbiah, can therefore be viewed in a similar way to Fischer-Lichte's view of performance, where she argues, it is the transition through these spaces, the journey and not the end result which is important (2009: 392).

This is a very complex idea to unpack in relation to Bharata Natyam and Sankalpam's methodology. However, I offer my analysis as follows. Sankalpam's co-Artistic Directors share all the tools, the training, the

philosophy and the aesthetic principles of Bharata Natyam as a collective of individuals. There are however, aspects about the form that the company, at the point of their emergence into the UK dance landscape, wanted to interrogate more rigorously by going deeper into the form. These, I argue, are the specificities of the form, which I argue further, manifest as the psychophysical aspects of the discipline, the tensions between impulse and physical manifestation for example. The migration of the form to the UK dance landscape, through which Sankalpam itself had emerged, enabled the company to engage with other ways of looking at dance, of experiencing the body and of challenging the collective 'existing' knowledge about Bharata Natyam at that point. Despite the fact that the company did not want to hybridise or fuse forms, there was nevertheless, a company instinct that working with other cultural knowledge systems could benefit the collective inquiry if underpinned by core shared values.

I argue therefore that Sankalpam has created a different space for Bharata Natyam by using the interaction with other practitioners and disciplines as a dialectic methodology. The dialectic generates a research environment in which the company can nurture the form through processes of interrogation, reflection, provocation debate and analyses. In the early years, Sankalpam investigated Bharata Natyam predominantly through performance and production, but more recently Sankalpam has utilised studio processes and teaching practice as part of the company methodology to develop new knowledge and test new theory. I discuss each of these methods of investigation in detail in chapters, six to eight.

Through the dialectic with multiple cultural knowledge systems, the company began to investigate ways of negotiating between different body states. This started in Sankalpam's first project with Samson and developed in the production with Van Schuylenburch and Uppal Subbiah. In addressing this aspect of Bharata Natyam which is embedded in *abhinaya*,<sup>91</sup> Sankalpam began to reclaim specificity of the form by investigating the tensions between gross and subtle body states. This is fundamental to the practice, yet often missing in the delivery as Vatsyayan states, "often, you see that the forms are alive and multifaceted, but that their spirit is at the point of decay or overstatement" (Vatsyayan 2015).

## **5.6 Nurturing the Form in an Adopted Locale**

From the first exploration with Samson in 1993, to more recent collaborative conversations with practitioners such as choreographer Lea Anderson, Sankalpam's focus has been to investigate the co-Artistic Directors' own cultural form. Vidya Thirunarayan expresses it as follows, "every person who came in, we took something from that and that filtered through to our own thinking, our approach to Bharata Natyam and how we looked at the art form" (Thirunarayan 2017). I refer to Bharata Natyam often as a cultural knowledge system<sup>92</sup> as the term incorporates more than body technique, physical skill, aesthetics and performative qualities. The cultural knowledge system of Bharata Natyam has many other influences, which include but are not defined

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<sup>91</sup> See chapter 1.8.

<sup>92</sup> See chapter 1.8.

by the socio-political contexts through which the form has evolved, history, religious narrative and iconography, architecture and painting, literature and so on. Bharata Natyam, is not a stand-alone dance form, but is dependent upon and interdependent with other forms of arts practices such as, music, theatre, literature, and art.

This too reflects Indian world-view thinking (Vatsyayan 2007) and a broader Indian ontology, as explained by Zarrilli (1998). The interconnectedness and the interdependency of the parts in relation to the whole is deconstructed from Indian world-view thinking in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and reconstructed as a logic by which Indian classical arts are underpinned (Vatsyayan 2007). The Kalakshetra style was shaped by Devi's approach to dance, which in turn was impacted by her exposure to global influences. This is Sankalpam's rich and complex inheritance, the contexts through which the company has emerged and continues to evolve. Yet in migrating a classical dance form to an adopted locale where many of the systems that support the form are absent (Vatsyayan 2015), how does Sankalpam nurture Bharata Natyam and at the same time challenge its own understanding of the form in a new environment? Vatsyayan, argues that many of the classical forms now ossify in the large urban environments where, she states they:

have come to live in the city like cut flowers - they will either die or exist artificially. Unless they can draw their sustenance either from their cultural roots or from some other new intellectual source, these forms will become wooden, rigid replicas of the original (2015).

From the company's birth, Sankalpam has forged its own path to nurture and evolve, challenge and provoke Bharata Natyam as a cultural knowledge system in the adopted locale of the UK dance landscape. Bolstered by the legacy of

Devi's local/global approach and underpinned by an interdisciplinary logic established through the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, as well as inherited from Devi, Sankalpam opens up a dialectic between different disciplinary and cultural expertise, knowledge, aesthetics and skills. This is evidenced in the collaborative work with Samson, Van Schuylenburch and Uppal Subbiah in the first company inquiries.

Through the dialectic, knowledge and skills are shared, debated, analysed, reflected upon and processed. Sankalpam's rationale is not to hybridise nor militarise the cultural knowledge system through collaboration as the frameworks of postcolonialism and modernity have sometimes encouraged in intercultural collaborations,<sup>93</sup> but to refine practice and distill knowledge in order to nurture the form. Nevertheless, the company encourages challenges to the form and welcomes provocations to the collective and individuals' understanding of Bharata Natyam. This, the co-Artistic Directors argue, promotes a deeper reading of Bharata Natyam and clarifies the specificities of the practice as an embodied dance technique.

Sankalpam was initially encouraged by a Dance Officer who supported the co-Artistic Directors' autonomy to investigate Bharata Natyam in whatever way the dancers considered to be appropriate. The company may have taken many different approaches and may have been lured into what Chatterjea refers to as "a kind of ventriloquism, where contemporary Asia finds its voice through the signifiers of the Euro-American modern/ postmodern, the latter passing once

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<sup>93</sup> See Latrell (2000) and Sardar (2006).

again as the neutral universal, which is able to contain all difference” (2013: 11). In examining why South Asian dance forms seem to be trying to replicate or fit into Western standards and aesthetics (2011: 91-92), Chatterjea argues that through mimicking Euro-American standards the “local specificities” of classical Indian dance forms are neutered, flattened or lost (2011: 89). I argue however, that Sankalpam has resisted this path, retaining a focus on the specificities of Bharata Natyam by investing in the process with Van Schuylenburch and their shared core values. The company became better dancers as a result of working with such a technically-focused contemporary dance practitioner, argues Balchandran Gokul (Balchandran Gokul 2017) despite the different aesthetic and technical approaches.

Chatterjea argues that ‘Indian dance’ practices should be explored and developed on their own terms and not defined through Western cultural narratives nor parameters, nor by the Western binary frameworks that force tradition against innovation (2014). “One’s own terms” as described by Chatterjea, need not necessarily be one’s own system of cultural or disciplinary knowledge. Sankalpam demonstrates an autonomous approach in the collaboration with Van Schuylenburch, and through subsequent collaborations with local, national and global disciplines and thought systems. Chatterjea advises dancers from classical Indian dance forms to “hold on to the bases of [their] particular aesthetics and resist the pull to spectacularise [in order] to match Euro-American notions of virtuosity and line” (2014). Sankalpam circumnavigates the pull of Euro-American aesthetics, as argued by Chatterjea, looking beyond product, to the collaborative process itself for sustenance. This

is not surprising given that the name Sankalpam means ‘commitment to process’. Hence the company name is a constant reminder to focus on the ‘process’ of collaboration in order to progress inquiry and refine the Bharata Natyam form.

Whilst in the 1990s the UK dance landscape may not have offered many of the support systems Bharata Natyam benefitted from in India,<sup>94</sup> it nevertheless provided other ways to nurture the exploration of this cultural knowledge system. The wide geographic spread of Sankalpam’s co-Artistic Directors for example, has enabled access to a broad pool of funding from different locations and different regional organisations and this has been advantageous for Sankalpam. A critical element in supporting the company’s artistic evolution has manifested through regional organisations which have provided long-term commitment to the development of Sankalpam and mentorship of the company’s co-Artistic Directors.

The evolution of this classical Indian dance company over two and a half decades and within an industry dominated by a Euro-American framework of modernism (Chatterjea 2011, 2013, 2014; Sardar 2006) owes much to the liberal vision and nurturing instincts of these regional organisations and their Artistic Directors. Significant long-term relationships have been developed with mentors: Karen Gallagher, Artistic Director of Merseyside Dance Initiative (MDI) (1994-2018) and Marie McCluskey, Artistic Director of Swindon Dance,

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<sup>94</sup> The support systems that Bharata Natyam might benefit from in India are for example, socio-cultural; they may be religious, or artistic, appearing in architectural structures. In addition, India offers a plethora of experts in different classical Indian arts practices, from literature to composition, dance and theatre practices training and skills.

National Dance Agency (NDA) (1979-2016). Purkayastha argues that the 1990s saw Indian dance artists exploring movements between cultural and geographic worlds. This reflected a political environment she adds, where expressions of multiculturalism, ethnicity, identity, loyalty, assimilation, and integration could be re-drawn (2014: 158). Crucially, the re-negotiations of temporal, cultural and geographic worlds addressed by Sankalpam to refine Bharata Natyam have been supported by Sankalpam's regional mentors, whom, explains Marie McCluskey in a face-to-face interview, have understood and responded to the need for artists from other culturally rooted dance forms to explore their own practices (McCluskey 2017).

Keeping a classical Indian dance form at the centre of the investigation did not however always reflect the funding policies of the time. McCluskey proposes that some of the funding policies at the time were detrimental to artists from culturally rooted dance forms, adding that some funding policies encouraged artists to explore other routes without investigating their own cultural forms deeply enough (McCluskey 2017). McCluskey, who has had over forty years of experience mentoring, nurturing and commissioning artists from different culturally rooted backgrounds states that:

in the UK, I think the funding system has encouraged and at times directed deep rooted culturally based forms for example, Bharata Natyam [...] to modernise their work too speedily, based on a limited or lack of a deep understanding of the [particular] form (McCluskey 2017).

This has been confusing for artists and audiences continues McCluskey, who proposes that companies such as Sankalpam should in fact become guardians of their art forms, of the techniques and principles that the forms are culturally

rooted within, without simultaneously being tethered to concretising their practice (McCluskey 2017). These companies, she argues, should be able to continue “their artistic explorations and development” (McCluskey 2017). McCluskey’s statements echo those made almost forty years ago by Khan, in her 1976 Arts Council report.

Sankalpam adopts a similar principle to that proposed by McCluskey, evidenced in the company strap line “celebrating tradition celebrating change” (Sankalpam 2008). The company mission statement expands on this principle stating that Sankalpam “combines respect for tradition with a desire to venture beyond current convention and build a choreographic framework for Indian classical dance” (Sankalpam 2001). This is evidenced in archival sources which highlight collaborations with artists from such diverse backgrounds as Jazz saxophonist and composer Iain Ballamy, (1994/1995, 1996/1997, 1999/2000, 2001) composer and percussionist Karaikudi Krishnamurthy (from 1994-present), Tamil scholar and Bharata Natyam expert Anandi Ramachandran (1998) and Director and theatre scholar Phillip Zarrilli (2003 & 2010) (Sankalpam 2008). Most recently, Thirunarayan has completed two phases of independent research and development with theatre director Tim Supple, writer Chris Fogg and myself, using clay as a catalyst to examine the specificity of *bhāva* (emotional intention) (2016 and 2017). Balchandran Gokul and Uppal Subbiah meanwhile have initiated studio research with Choreographer Lea Anderson and Anderson’s long time Composer-colleague Steve Blake, to examine the mis-readings of historical dance (2016 and 2017). Although the cultures, disciplines, socio-economic and geo-political contexts that Sankalpam

engages with may be wide-ranging, the shared values of rigour, discipline and commitment to each one's individual practice between Sankalpam and its collaborators, root the dialectic interactions. The shared values are not goals, but used by Sankalpam as reference points for departure, which in turn anchor the company to new and familiar localities from which the company can navigate different perspectives on Bharata Natyam.

Chatterjea asks how classical Indian dancers might “negotiate [...] spiritual expression with the contemporary urban contexts they traverse” (2014). Her question is significant for this study and applies to Sankalpam's employ of the dialectic with multiple cultural knowledge systems. I argue that Sankalpam negotiates the distances between tradition and contemporaneity through a dialectic methodology that values process in an investigative framework. Where “spiritual expression” within contemporary contexts is reclaimed through attending to the specificities of the form. I explore this in chapter seven.

My analysis is that the geo-cultural relocation of Bharata Natyam facilitates a different understanding of Bharata Natyam for Sankalpam which is then processed through the dialectic. The form is nurtured in the adopted locale of the UK dance landscape in different ways than it would be supported in India. This has been beneficial and challenging for the migrated dance form and for Sankalpam, compelling the company to find different routes to sustain the migrated practice and refine the form in a landscape that is dominated by a hegemonic aesthetic.

As Sankalpam's methodology does not rely on a specific culture or discipline for its inquiry, the company can draw on a wide pool of expertise from within its own cultural field and beyond, to refine the co-Artistic Director's collective understanding of Bharata Natyam. This can be problematic when little knowledge of Bharata Natyam is shared between collaborators, subsequently restricting possibilities. I argue however, that limitations can also seed possibilities by requiring Sankalpam to examine Bharata Natyam from different perspectives. Working with the restrictions of other cultural knowledge systems is limiting for Sankalpam but simultaneously expands the company's field of knowledge. It challenges the company to find new ways of looking and experiencing. In turn it helps the company to define and refine the classical form leading to "a deeper appreciation of the form" (Thirunarayan 2016a). Mira Balchandran Gokul agrees with this view explaining that:

the more I experienced different forms, the more I wanted to explore my own. I could feel the way these different forms flowed in [my] body and it made me look deeper at how my own dance form flowed or how expression was treated in different forms [...] this inevitably made me question how I do what I do (2016a).

Testimony collected from interviews with company members, archival sources and presented throughout this chapter, suggests that Sankalpam views all dance as relevant, and other cultural disciplines as appropriate for sustaining the development of the classical Bharata Natyam practice. This can be problematic when viewed through Chatterjea's argument of "ventriloquism" (2013: 11). Yet when the product is not the main concern and the inquiry is processed within different frameworks including discussion, collaboration, studio process and teaching, the potential for 'mimicry' of other cultural aesthetics which Chatterjea refers to, is diminished.

## **5.7 Summary**

In this chapter I have argued that Sankalpam's birth was a complicated one, straddling continents, practitioners and cultural forms. I have illustrated that the date of the company's birth itself is part of the narrative of its complex arrival and reflects an integral characteristic of the company evident in its fluidity and responsiveness to context. I have discussed how the emergence of Sankalpam into the UK dance landscape indicates a birth that was process-driven rather than strategy-led and argued that the company's rationale to distill knowledge and refine practice through shared core values, initiated the birth of the company. This, I have proposed, was underpinned by the ideologies and principles acquired through a Kalakshetra training and a local/global approach to dance and education inherited through the legacy of Devi. I have considered how shared values, which rooted the dialectic between Sankalpam and diverse cultural knowledge systems, enabled Sankalpam to move 'beyond form', culture and discipline to collaboratively investigate Bharata Natyam. By rooting the company methodology in shared values, Sankalpam I have argued, created a platform from which the dialectic could be activated, simultaneously facilitating a different way of viewing and experiencing Bharata Natyam.

In the next chapter I discuss how Sankalpam's dialectic methodology is employed in collaborative processes during the first decade of the company's evolution.

## Chapter 6

### Collaborations: Observing the Dialectic – Sankalpam 1994-2004

#### 6.1 Overview

In the previous chapter I discussed the birth of Sankalpam and focused on the events that led to the company's first production. I argued that through these events, Sankalpam began to clarify a company rationale. This emerged as a collective aspiration towards a deep investigation of the Bharata Natyam form. In this chapter I consider the first collaborative processes. I discuss how examining the impulse for movement through different cultural knowledge systems becomes a process in which the familiar and the unfamiliar are addressed, thereby creating a site of transition for dancers. In the act of negotiating different territories of familiarity, the company's understanding of Bharata Natyam is subsequently modified.

I summarise the ways that Sankalpam applies the dialectic in collaborations between 1995 and 2001, then I offer a detailed analysis of the company's 2002/2004 production of *Dance of the Drunken Monks*. I highlight this particular collaboration as significant for two reasons. The first is, that through the collaboration, various strands of the company's practice are interwoven. The second is that in my role as rehearsal director for the production, I can reflect upon tensions that emerge when the application of new knowledge and adaptation of existing knowledge are negotiated in a live studio rehearsal. As a result, I discuss the role of technique in anchoring Bharata Natyam as an embodied performance practice.

## 6.2 Collaboration as Provocation

For the first decade of Sankalpam's life, 1994-2004, the company had a vibrant national touring profile, performing regularly throughout the UK and in India. Sankalpam had mounted seven original productions for national touring (see Appendix 2), performed at national venues such as the Purcell Rooms; The Place, London; The Alhambra, Bradford; Lilian Baylis/Sadler's Wells, as well as at international arts festivals in Chennai (India). During this period, the company operated as a Regularly Funded Organisation (RFO) of the Arts Council South East (1996-2006). It also received commissions and support from many national and regional organisations including for example, Trinity Laban, Brindley Arts Centre and The Green Room, London. In addition, the co-Artistic Directors were strengthening relationships with individual regional as well as national organisations such as Merseyside Dance Initiative (Liverpool) Swindon Dance and The London School of Contemporary Dance as discussed in chapter five.<sup>95</sup> As with many companies, these vital relationships were established through creating and performing new work, teaching and running education workshops for youth and community groups, students and practitioners.

Sankalpam had begun its public life in 1994 by profiling two pieces. In the previous chapter I detail how these collaborative choices came about and how important they were in establishing a methodology for Sankalpam to nurture the Bharata Natyam form in the UK dance landscape. In this chapter I extend the investigation to analyse how working in different terrains of familiarity and

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<sup>95</sup> See chapter 5.6.

unfamiliarity opened up a new way of understanding Bharata Natyam for the company. Van Schuylenburch's choreography was in many ways, a product of the dance genres that she had emerged from, displaying elements of abstract form, Cunningham technique and aspects of absurdity in the costuming, which had been a feature of the Michael Clark Company productions, of which Van Schuylenburch had been a founding member (Trinity Laban 2016).

Van Schuylenburch's costumes for Sankalpam challenged the classic aesthetic attire for a Bharata Natyam performer. The costume worn by women performers in Bharata Natyam is traditionally based on the *saree*, worn over a blouse with *pyjama* (loose trousers) worn underneath for modesty. The *saree* is stitched or draped to allow movement, but also stylised to highlight, or show off aspects of the movement such as the turn out. Ornamentation of the face, hair, eyes, feet, ankles, wrists and neck, is also common in classical Bharata Natyam performances. Colours may vary from vivid hues with ornate borders to simple monochromatic pieces and are an aesthetic choice of the choreographer or of the dancers themselves.

Van Schuylenburch had dressed the dancers against the typical Bharata Natyam attire and this challenged both the dancers and the audience's expectations. She had chosen strappy nylon dresses, which hung limply from the body and which were printed with butterfly patterns (Balchandran Gokul 2019a, WhatsApp *Airing Chickens*). Underneath the dresses, the dancers insisted on wearing leggings and tops to cover their shoulders and legs, which are always covered in traditional classical work. Van Schuylenburch went

further by covering the dancers' hands, the almost universal symbol of the Bharata Natyam dancer, with gardening gloves. This gesture alone challenged the aesthetic expectations of audience members familiar with the Bharata Natyam form. A high-visibility jacket was gifted to one of the performers, Thirunarayan, to cover her dress, giving a bizarre un-coordinated effect to the dancers on stage (Balchandran Gokul 2019a, WhatsApp *Airing Chickens*). On reflection, Van Schuylenburch's choice of costumes could be viewed as a colonial imposition of contemporary Western aesthetics upon the Bharata Natyam dancers, indicating a total disregard for the aesthetic principles of the dancers' own cultural knowledge system, Bharata Natyam.

Through the costuming alone, Van Schuylenburch was confronting the perceptions of those viewers who may have come expecting something closer to the "doe eyed damsels" more typically referred to by dance critics reviewing classical Indian dance at the time (Dove 1990; Jeyasingh 2010; Menon 1993). Balchandran Gokul believes that this was not intentional on Van Schuylenburch's part whom, she felt was, "going with her own aesthetic" (Balchandran Gokul 2019a, WhatsApp *Airing Chickens*). Van Schuylenburch's costuming nevertheless challenged the dancers' aesthetic sensibilities, which inherited from Devi's Kalakshetra approach, were more accustomed to a certain quality in the choice of fabric and in the structure of the design.

In choosing to work with van Schuylenburch for her expertise in movement, Sankalpam had inadvertently invited a provocation to the perceived notions of Bharata Natyam, such as how a Bharata Natyam dancer should be costumed,

as well as challenging notions of what and how Bharata Natyam dancers performed. Although confronting perceived notions of Bharata Natyam had not been an intentional aspect of the collaboration with Van Schuylenburch, she would nevertheless provide a catalyst for the company to test its own perceptions of the body, of dance, of movement and ultimately of Bharata Natyam. This would evolve into a methodology for investigating the form as the company developed, and as I now discuss.

### **6.3 Negotiating Terrains of Familiarity**

Sankalpam had arrived onto the UK dance landscape in a way that would provide audiences unfamiliar with Indian classical dance, entrance points that enabled them to connect with the work through Van Schuylenburch's Euro-American contemporary dance approaches. For audiences accustomed to Bharata Natyam, but who had little exposure to contemporary European or American techniques, there was a recognisable dance language in Uppal Subbiah's choreography. Audience members attending to watch classical Indian dance could therefore relate to something familiar in Uppal Subbiah's choreography. Costumes for Uppal Subbiah's piece, *Walk Around Tradition*, also bore some relationship to Indian traditional attire as the title of the piece suggests. The dancers wore *veshti*-inspired trousers and long tops made of silk, but with little of the stylisation in shaping the body, more commonly seen in traditional attire.

Sankalpam's first production then offered audiences an exposure to Bharata Natyam that was marshalled through gateways that included familiar elements

for the spectator who had no previous experience of the classical form. For example, Uppal Subbiah's complex and unusual choreographic spatial structuring, would not have been out of place in a Cunningham choreography and so might plausibly resonate as a familiar choreographic language for those more attuned to European and American contemporary dance practices. The collaboration with Jazz Saxophonist Iain Ballamy also provided a bridge between familiar instruments and soundscapes for audiences used to European and American dance forms and musical composition.

Both Ballamy and van Schuylenburch were well known in their respective fields. Ballamy had been in the popular jazz band, Loose Tubes throughout the 1980s and later collaborated with the well-known Jazz musician and composer, Django Bates amongst others. Van Schuylenburch had gained a public profile through her work with the Michael Clark Company, performing with the company throughout the 1980s. For audiences who had come to Bharata Natyam for the first time from a Euro-American contemporary dance background, this added another layer of familiarity. For audiences acquainted with classical Indian dance, all three of the Bharata Natyam performers, Mira Balchandran Gokul, Valli Subbiah and Vidya Thirunarayan, had established profiles in the UK, either performing with SJDC and/or as established solo artists.<sup>96</sup> The performers were also Kalakshetra alumni, which, having gained an international reputation for excellence in training dancers was a further draw for audiences versed in classical Indian dance.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> See chapter 5.4.

<sup>97</sup> For further information about Kalakshetra see Meduri (2005).

Schuylenburch did not attempt to work with the Bharata Natyam form in any way through her choreography, nor was she asked to, explains Balchandran Gokul in a face-to-face interview (Balchandran Gokul 2017). She provided the company instead with a contemporary dance piece, which drew largely on Cunningham technique. The dancers trusted her integrity, even if they were not totally reconciled with her aesthetic (Balchandran Gokul 2019a, WhatsApp *Airing Chickens*). Schuylenburch's piece profiled alongside Uppal Subbiah's contemporary Bharata Natyam piece, which explored the classical Indian dance language through contemporary choreographic techniques. Uppal Subbiah's choreography experimented with group form and structure and yet was grounded within the Kalakshetra aesthetic principles and technique of Bharata Natyam.

Audiences acquainted with either dance tradition (classical South Asian and Euro-American, contemporary) were therefore presented with a double bill, which included both familiar and uncharted aesthetic territories upon which they could reflect. Contemporary Euro-American dance resided alongside new Bharata Natyam choreography, Jazz composition and saxophone sat beside Indian percussion, yet the company's intention was not to fuse styles, hybridise genres, nor to interweave cultures as Balchandran Gokul has clarified (Balchandran Gokul 2017).

The company's rationale behind the collaborations was, as explained to me by Balchandran Gokul, "to explore the impulse for movement" (Balchandran Gokul

2017). On reflection, Sankalpam's first production might be described as a shrewd political move, offering audiences from different dance genres a means of entering into the performance space and facilitating routes to connect with the work. Yet this had not been an intention of the company states Balchandran Gokul (Balchandran Gokul 2017). Sankalpam's first production nevertheless, provided an opportunity for different audience members to experience both the familiar and the unfamiliar. In this way dancers and audience were traversing a similar terrain.

#### **6.4 Transitional Spaces**

When theatre-makers create new spaces that draw on different cultures yet are not specific to any particular culture, they create an in-between space, states Fischer-Lichte<sup>98</sup> (Fischer-Lichte 2009: 397-399). Fischer-Lichte argues that in creating this transitional environment, spectators are also placed within a liminal space, and therefore both audience and performers are familiar with some aspects of the performance and at the same time unfamiliar with others. This, she suggests, mirrors a globalisation that we all experience, where we exist in a world in which some things are familiar yet others we are not at home with, and so we negotiate our relationship in that space. The third space created in theatre states Fischer-Lichte, causes the spectator to be both present in the liminal space but also to reflect upon that space and its liminality (2009: 397-399).

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<sup>98</sup> Fischer-Lichte refers in this instance to Homi Bhabha's proposition of liminal spaces.

Here, I suggest that in Sankalpam's first production, not only the audience, but also the company's co-Artistic Directors were compelled to negotiate a transitional space, where some things were familiar and others were not, where they were present in the moment but simultaneously reflecting upon their experience of the moment. In the company's first production, *Walk Around Tradition & Alone by Themselves* (1994/ 1995) different disciplines, cultural forms and practitioners had been brought together to create a collective response to the question, "what is the physical impulse for movement" (Balchandran Gokul 2017).

It could be argued that in this first production, Sankalpam had latched on to a socio-political trend that was manifesting in the arts in the mid 1990s. Mitra argues that during this period the arts in Britain were at the centre of the new drive to make ethnically diverse citizens of the UK more visible (2015: 16-18). The immigrant artist, or ethnically diverse British artist, Mitra states, would later become politicised under the Labour government as symbolic of how successful the integration of the migrant had been into British culture (2015: 17-18). Sankalpam was evolving as this political agenda played out. Hybridity, Mitra argues, became the key indicator of this success (2015: 17-18). However, although in this first production Sankalpam had brought together diverse genres of music and dance to explore a fundamental question about the physical impulse for movement, how this impulse might then be refined in Bharata Natyam technique, remained at the centre of the company investigation. Sankalpam was not at all interested, states Balchandran Gokul in a face-to-

face interview, in hybridising the form, nor for that matter in mimicking other forms (Balchandran Gokul 2017).

Indian contemporary choreographer, feminist and activist, Chandralekha, had been questioning Bharata Natyam since her first piece *Devadasi* in 1961. She promoted the recovery of the form for its own strengths which she felt lay in more abstract elements such as space and shape and time (Chandralekha 2010: 76 & 77; Katrak 2011: 44). She wanted to celebrate these elements which, she insisted were embedded in tradition, and should not she argued, be framed by a binary discourse, whereby tradition and modernity were in opposition. Rather, Chandralekha believed that tradition could be modernised through the creative process and through the artist (Chandralekha 2010: 77).

She argued that the artist would not achieve this by:

borrowing, imitating or becoming a 'shadow culture' of some other culture. [...] It has to be an inward journey into one's own self; a journey constantly relating, refining, the reality of the in-between area; to enable tradition to flow free in our contemporary life (2010: 77).

Although Chandralekha's relationship with Bharata Natyam was hugely politicised and she rejected many aspects of the form as "spectacle" (Chandralekha 2010: 75) she nevertheless saw the potential in Bharata Natyam as a powerful medium for reclaiming the vitality of the human spirit stating that, "it is this aspect of classical dance and its unflagging potential to regenerate the human spirit that constitutes its *contemporaneity* and the reason why we need to work with the form" (Chandralekha 2010: 75). Sankalpam shares with Chandralekha the belief in Bharata Natyam as a powerful medium and of tradition as valid on its own terms. Sankalpam had emerged appearing to fuse genres, hybridise styles and adopt intercultural collaborative processes, but

Sankalpam's rationale, as I discussed in the previous chapter, was to further the company's collective knowledge of Bharata Natyam, not to fuse it with Euro-American movement practices.<sup>99</sup>

Anthropologists, ethnographers and philosophers usefully remind us that not everyone understands the world in the same way, proposing that the arts are very much defined by the societies and cultures from which they emerge (Appiah 2016; Blacking 1984; Farnell 1999; Fraleigh 1999; Grau 2011; Kaeppler 1999). This is further complicated for dance practitioners such as the co-Artistic Directors of Sankalpam, who evolve migrated dance practices in adopted landscapes such as the UK. Adopted landscapes may have a limited understanding of the classical Indian dance forms which are in turn framed by a colonial and postcolonial discourse (Coorlawala 2011), supported by hegemonic power structures (Chatterjea 2013) and seen through a "western bias" (Grau 2011). In the adopted locale of the UK dance landscape, a dislocation from the elements which nurture the classical form (Vatsyayan 2015) therefore prompts artists to explore different methods to sustain it.<sup>100</sup>

For practitioners working within the classical fields of South Asian dance, I suggest that the difficulties have been hard to overcome. In the early 1990s, for

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<sup>99</sup> In fact, the company did not work collaboratively with another contemporary Euro-American choreographer again until 2010, when they invited Southbank Centre, resident choreographer, Stephanie Schober, and Artistic Director of Protein, Luca Silvestrini, to investigate how choreographers from other cultural disciplines might engage with Bharata Natyam (Balchandran Gokul 2019).

<sup>100</sup> I use the term migrated for Bharata Natyam, because it suggests the relocation of a cultural practice into the domain of a different culture and society, one in which the migrated practice has to establish itself, evolve and survive, just as the immigrant has to.

example, many practitioners within the South Asian dance community in the UK voiced dissatisfaction with the inability of audiences to grasp certain aspects of their particular dance forms (Iyer 1997: 2). This resulted, states arts scholar Alessandra Iyer, in some practitioners giving up aspects of the traditional forms (1997: 2). Other practitioners, such as Jeyasingh have explored movement beyond the classical dance language of Bharata Natyam (Jeyasingh 2016; Katrak 2011) but have also found the analysis of their work to be restrictive and culturally-bound, with attention to form and technique almost absent (Jeyasingh 2010).

### **6.5 The “Truth in Movement”**

Through its first collaborative investigation, Sankalpam found new ways “to deepen and refine the physicality of movement” states Balchandran Gokul in a face-to-face interview (Balchandran Gokul 2017). Consequently, the dialectic between how the body moves in Bharata Natyam and how it moves by applying Cunningham technique to the same body was initiated. Best suggests that through the process of coming to understand other cultural art forms, one’s concept of one’s own cultural art may in turn be modified (1986: 9). His proposition is a useful starting point from which to examine Sankalpam’s methodology. Although the Bharata Natyam and Cunningham techniques were very different, they also shared similarities such as: an upright spine, clarity of line and accuracy of shape, technical precision and physical codification. These are elements also found within a Kalakshetra training. For Sankalpam the familiar... Bharata Natyam, was therefore modified by applying the unfamiliar, Cunningham technique. In addition, both Van Schuylenburch and Sankalpam

shared a common goal, states Balchandran Gokul, which was the search for the “truth in movement” (Balchandran Gokul 2017).

In the previous chapter, I touched upon how the relationship between the mind and body, the performer’s articulation between internal impulse and external manifestation is fundamental to Indian classical performance practices, as well as to psychophysical practices such as Yoga and martial arts, as argued by Zarrilli (1998, 2004, 2009). Zarrilli describes this relationship as a, “dialectical engagement of body-in-mind and mind-in-body” (2004). Reflecting on this period and the subsequent collaborative investigations that Sankalpam has undertaken leads me to suggest that it is the embodied aspect of Bharata Natyam that Sankalpam has been searching for, when referring to the “truth in movement”.

The articulation between internal impulse and external manifestation is according to Vatsyayan, grounded in Indian world-view thinking, or “speculative thought”, aspects of which, she argues, “determine artistic vision and expression” (1997: 6). Vatsyayan highlights how in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (commonly considered to be the treatise upon which Indian classical arts practices are based),<sup>101</sup> there is an emphasis on the interaction between mind and body, through the principle of *rasa* (sentiment)<sup>102</sup> (2007: 21). This, she states is a world-view concept that originates in Upanishadic texts, which is concerned with the relationship between the microcosm and the macrocosm,

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<sup>101</sup> See chapter 1.8.

<sup>102</sup> See Vatsyayan (1977: 5-22) for detailed examination of *rasa* theory.

internalisation and externalisation (1997: 23). Zarrilli's extensive research on Indian embodied practices, which he refers to as psychophysical practices and which include Indian performance disciplines, also illustrates the relationship between the inner intention/the subtle body and the outward manifestation through, what he refers to as, "the gross body"<sup>103</sup> (1998, 2004, 2009).

Zarrilli argues that in embodied performance practices, "inner feeling"<sup>104</sup> and outer (physical) form are two sides of the same coin" (2009: 20). Their interconnectedness and interdependency once again illustrates an alignment with Indian world-view thinking which, as articulated in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, and illustrated in the concept of seed (*bīja*) energy and growth, is proposed as a fundamental principle from which individual, interdependent and interconnected parts flower (Vatsyayan 2007: 49). The psycho-element of psychophysical performance, Zarrilli continues, is therefore a reference to "the actor's complete engagement of her energy, sensory awareness, and perception-in-action in the moment" (2009: 21). Furthermore, Zarrilli argues, the articulation between inner and outer body is negotiated through technique, body discipline and rigorous training (1998, 2004, 2009). The embodied aspect of Bharata Natyam illustrated by Vatsyayan and explained by Zarrilli, is I suggest, the "truth in movement" that Sankalpam was searching for in its collaboration with Van Schuylenburch. Sankalpam's search for the "truth in movement", I propose is a search for a particularity of the technique which is imperceptibly bound with Indian world-view concepts. The dialectic between

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<sup>103</sup> See chapter 1.8.

<sup>104</sup> Zarrilli argues that the term "inner feeling" does not imply personal subjective feeling as used more commonly in Western theatre practices (Zarrilli 2009: 221).

“body-in-mind and mind-in-body” (Zarrilli 2004) was provoked I argue in the collaboration between Van Schuylenburch and Sankalpam.

Through Sankalpam’s first production in 1994, it appears that the co-Artistic Directors had discovered that in engaging a collective consciousness with other cultural arts practices and knowledge systems, the company’s understanding of Bharata Natyam could be refined. Best has argued that, “it is the consciousness of other cultures which allows us more fully to appreciate our own” (1986: 9). The rigour of another cultural practice, which views for example the body in a different way, became, I propose, an analytical tool, through which Bharata Natyam could be questioned. Best explains that “engaging with the arts of other cultures, is to stimulate a process of dialectical interaction (1986: 9). This in turn, he continues, can “extend and enrich one’s artistic conceptions” (1986: 9).

## **6.6 Reflecting on Research**

Vatsyayan states that, “in the Vedic tradition, there is a deep reflection on what constitutes the truth” (2013: 175) and how it is approached and articulated in different ways (2013: 175). I am interested in how Sankalpam’s approach sits quietly alongside Vedic tradition.<sup>105</sup> The broad principle of research and reflection applied through different approaches, and manifesting in different contexts, appears to ground Sankalpam’s investigation of Bharata Natyam and blossoms in the company’s methodological approach. This may be in part

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<sup>105</sup> The Vedic tradition provides the foundations for Indian world-view thinking, which according to Vatsyayan underpin Indian literature and the arts. For further information see Vatsyayan 1977 & 1997.

established through a cultural inheritance, which is cemented further by a philosophical approach embedded at Kalakshetra.<sup>106</sup> Vatsyayan has further argued that within the Indian arts, both “theory (*śāstra*) and practice (*prayoga*), are branches of a single living tree of Indian culture” (1988: xi). She continues by stating that these “elements cannot be understood in isolation from other dimensions of thought and science, myth and ritual, spiritual and secular traditions” (1988: xi). The inter-relationship between Indian world-view thinking and artistic exploration cannot be overstated. Chandralekha argued that through these traditional knowledge systems:

we get some idea of the directions for a fresh search, questions of perceptual and creative levels, exchange and transmission, movement and control, art and experience, tradition and modernity, inner and outer, space and time, individual and collective, integrity and rupture, quantity and quality (2010: 75).

What is examined here is how the deep reflective methodology that Vatsyayan refers to as a fundamental aspect of the Vedic tradition, is utilised by Sankalpam to nurture the form and to reclaim the specificity of Bharata Natyam as an embodied practice, in the UK dance landscape.

As with most research projects, and after a period of reflection, what followed after the company’s initial production in 1994 was a need to test and refine newly acquired knowledge. The company however, wanted to test this knowledge by applying it to Bharata Natyam technique and to a classical repertoire. Consequently in 1995 Sankalpam mounted *Margam* (path/ journey) through which the company focused on clarifying intention within the dancers’

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<sup>106</sup> Whilst it is interesting to consider, it is beyond the scope of this research to address this particular point in detail, and therefore, this comment remains broadly speculative.

performances and through the classical movement of traditional repertoire. To do this the company explored a different awareness of the physicality of the Bharata Natyam technique, by applying new knowledge acquired from the collaboration with Van Schuylenburch.

Sankalpam invited me to rehearse *Margam* and although I had little knowledge or experience of Bharata Natyam at the time, there were common elements that were familiar to the dancers and myself, shared between different cultural codified dance disciplines. As rehearsal director, I applied my knowledge of Euro-American classical, contemporary and somatic practices to the dancers' Bharata Natyam repertoire and technique. *Margam*, therefore, created a platform for Sankalpam to test new knowledge on existing repertoire, within the same dancing bodies, thus activating the next phase of the dialectic.

After working rigorously to explore physical impulse with Van Schuylenburch and Uppal Subbiah in *Walk Around Tradition*, and drilling into the intention behind each classical item<sup>107</sup> with myself in *Margam*, the company was ready to address the expressive element of Bharata Natyam through the technique of *abhinaya*.<sup>108</sup> By 1996 therefore, the territory of "emotional impulse" had become the focus of Sankalpam's enquiry (Balchandran Gokul 2019). Sankalpam set about the exploration in two ways. Firstly, the company chose to investigate different entry points into *abhinaya* by examining "rare choreographic works of Rukmini Devi" (Sankalpam 1997). The company invited Kalakshetra senior

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<sup>107</sup> As mentioned previously Sankalpam refer to classical dance repertoire pieces as items, hence the use of the word here.

<sup>108</sup> See chapter 1.8.

tutor and colleague of Devi, Pushpa Shankar, to share her knowledge, skill and expertise for this purpose, simultaneously investing in Devi's legacy, and the Kalakshetra heritage. At the same time, the co-Artistic Directors of Sankalpam agreed that it would be useful to explore the concept of emotional impulse from a completely different cultural perspective as well as from within their own cultural knowledge system of Bharata Natyam. To this end, Sankalpam invited contemporary dance practitioners, Janet Smith and Sue MacLennan, to mentor the company during a research and development (R&D) period, funded by the Arts Council (1996).

The decision to simultaneously engage Shankar, MacLennan and Smith, for the investigation of emotional impulse, reflected once again how Devi's local/global outlook on dance and learning had permeated Sankalpam's practice. It also mirrored Devi's approach to embracing both traditional and contemporary knowledge by interweaving diverse cultural perspectives. Bhabha argues that the binary divisions created by the spatial frameworks in the globalisation discourse, where global and local are pitted against each other, are inadequate, as they do not capture the more complex and multiple aspects of the bigger picture of globalisation (2014: 525). Bhabha refers to "profound transitionality and contingency in the global world picture, which is not adequately described in the distinction between the global and the local" (2014: 525). Although I agree with Bhabha that the local/global terminology can be problematic by setting up binary parameters, I nevertheless use the terms here. I adopt them as reference points rather than boundaries or binaries, and in the spirit of Indian world-view

thinking I see them as connected and interdependent, highlighting the transition points of knowledge transfer within the fluidity of Sankalpam's approach.

Prior to a four-week studio research period with MacLennan and Smith at Swindon Dance, each company co-Artistic Director had undertaken individual literary research with experts at Oxford University on *Kavya* (Sanskrit poetry) which became the starting point for physical exploration (Sankalpam 1997). As Sankalpam became more embedded in the UK dance landscape, what constituted 'local' began to take-on a fluidity. For example, local/Sanskrit knowledge was utilised as source material for the R&D period, but this was examined through the expertise of local /Oxford academics. The adopted locale was now providing 'local' knowledge and expertise to reflect on local Indian knowledge and expertise, thereby challenging the parameters of cultural borrowing that have been perpetuated through orientalism and which have continued to seep into the postcolonial discourse. Bharucha has argued for a different reading of cultural borrowing, which better reflects the complexities of what defines culture (2000: 7-8). He has argued that cultures are not defined solely through nationhood or regionality, but through individuality (2000: 9). Bharucha proposes therefore equal emphasis on cultural borrowing that occurs within regions or between states as that which occurs across continents (2000: 9).

I argue that Sankalpam's dialectic methodology in fact illustrates the complex and individualised nature of working with different cultural forms, across different cultural continents and between socio-political, and historical contexts as Bharucha suggests (2000). The company clearly had a rationale to

investigate Bharata Natyam and to do this, experts from the world of classical Indian arts and literature were engaged in the company investigations, for example; Krishnamurthy, Samson, Shankar and Uppal Subbiah. Sankalpam, however, realising the value of examining Bharata Natyam through other lenses, also extended the invitation to research and reflect on Bharata Natyam to European and American contemporary disciplines through engaging practitioners, such as Ballamy, myself, MacLennan, Schuylenburch, and Smith. The research and training with Pushpa Shankar took the form of a summer school, housed at Chisenhale Dance Space, and at the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan (London). The two iconic institutions represented respectively, cutting edge contemporary dance (Chisenhale) and classical Indian arts (Bhavan) in the UK. It would appear that even in Sankalpam's choice of venues for the summer school, different cultural influences were acknowledged and encompassed within the dialectic.

To have the luxury of an expert in *abhinaya* resident with the company for four weeks in London<sup>109</sup> was a huge support for Sankalpam. It nurtured the company's practice by relocating Sankalpam with the Kalakshetra heritage through Devi's choreography and aesthetic. Shankar had performed with Devi and had been a senior tutor at Kalakshetra. She had taught Uppal Subbiah at her home in Patna as a child and was instrumental in bringing her to train at Kalakshetra (Uppal Subbiah 2019b, WhatsApp *Airing Chickens*). Shankar provided a vital link with Sankalpam's heritage and training. She had taught all

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<sup>109</sup> The morning sessions of the Summer School were open to other Bharata Natyam practitioners, who came from as far afield as Venice to attend (Sankalpam 1997).

of the Sankalpam members at Kalakshetra, who continued to visit and take class with her in India for many years. Shankar therefore provided continuity with Devi's lineage, with Kalakshetra, and with Bharata Natyam technique. With her body of knowledge and experience in Bharata Natyam, Shankar also brought rigour, providing an artery between the migrated from in the UK and Sankalpam's practice, thereby nourishing and sustaining the company.

The summer school grounded the company in the specificity of *abhinaya*, through the skills of an experienced and accomplished professional. Sankalpam was evolving in a dance landscape that at the time had a tense relationship with South Asian dance practices, classical and contemporary (Grau 2002). Nurturing a migrated discipline in a landscape that was dislocated from the support mechanisms that sustained it (such as access to professional development and training) could be problematic for practitioners. Vatsyayan has argued that, "as long as [Indian classical dance forms] [a]re still practised in a society that share[s] certain social and cultural values, the art forms could continue to live and breathe" (2015).

Yet in the adopted locale of the UK dance landscape, both critics and practitioners were encountering difficulties. Dance critic, Fiona Burnside for example, reviewing Jeyasingh's presentation of *Romance with Footnotes* at the Dance Umbrella season (1993) observed the knowledge-gap between mainstream critics and the techniques of South Asian dance (1994: 34). She expressed how daunting it was to comment upon South Asian dance forms, when she was versed only in "western dance traditions" (1994: 34). Jeyasingh,

who was evolving her company<sup>110</sup> during the time period, has argued that South Asian dance was at that time bound within an unequal power relationship with the West,<sup>111</sup> through which she explained, inaccurate assumptions were made about Indian and South Asian dance “which are the by-products of this inequality” (1997: 31).

## **6.7 Collaborations 1996-2002**

Sankalpam’s summer school with Shankar, nevertheless, served to nourish the company’s practice in an adopted locale, and contributed directly towards developing a framework for two subsequent Sankalpam productions, *Sambhavam* (1996/97) and *Ulaa* (1998/99) (Sankalpam 1997). For the productions, Sankalpam continued to build on its collaborative relationship with composer and Jazz saxophonist, Iain Ballamy and composer and percussionist Karaikudi Krishnamurthy. Each of the pieces was underpinned by classical Indian texts and song, researched with Sanskrit scholars at Oxford University during the R&D period and with Tamil scholar and Bharata Natyam expert, Anandi Ramachandran in India and the UK (Sankalpam 1997, 2008).

The company explains that through *Sambhavam* and *Ulaa*, the technique of *abhinaya* was redefined, and subsequently, audiences were offered “a new entry point into classical Indian dance” (Sankalpam 2008). This is not surprising given the interweaving of cultural knowledge systems that Sankalpam had engaged with through research, training, production and collaboration. Like Van

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<sup>110</sup> The Shobana Jeyasingh Dance Company (SJDC).

<sup>111</sup> I try to avoid using terms ‘East’ and ‘West’ where possible, but many scholars and practitioners use the terms within their analyses, as with Jeyasingh and so they are sometimes found within the study.

Schuylenburch and myself, neither MacLennan nor Smith had experience in working with Bharata Natyam prior to Sankalpam's invitation, and this had both advantages and disadvantages for the research. In a company evaluation report, Sankalpam states that the process:

pushed us into territories and opened up possibilities that we would not have arrived at on our own. They [MacLennan and Smith] sparked off a whole set of new ideas as well as reaffirm[ing] our belief in the style [Bharata Natyam] and how it should evolve (Sankalpam 1997).

The disadvantage of working with practitioners not familiar with Bharata Natyam repertoire was expressed as limiting the possibilities for exploration, which might have been extended, with further opportunities for knowledge exchange (Sankalpam 1997). Through the process of interrogation, provocation and discussion, Sankalpam could reflect upon how other culturally informed practitioners engaged with Bharata Natyam and how they experienced it, and subsequently apply this knowledge to the company's own practice.

In the following years, 1999-2002, Sankalpam continued to build on a methodology that took a view of Bharata Natyam from different perspectives. The methodology wove together local (UK) and local (Indian) perspectives, traversed traditional and contemporary art forms, examined different disciplinary techniques and embraced many diverse practitioners, who inhabited multiple cultural experiences and outlooks. Research took place in India and the UK. Ancient Sanskrit literature, classical Indian music and ancient Indian theatre techniques were investigated and European contemporary composers, costume designers and lighting designers were invited to collaborate with the company. Rhythm was explored as the catalyst for

movement in the company's 1999/2000 production, *Tat*. This was examined through pure dance (*nritta*),<sup>112</sup> which shifted the tone of Sankalpam's investigation once more, focusing on technical expertise in rhythmic delivery. Victoria Baker's costumes for the production were inspired by the "Dancers of Thanjavur" painting at the Victoria and Albert Museum (London). Once again Sankalpam's ability to traverse geographical locations, history and culture in its research and search for ways to reconsider Bharata Natyam was evident in the production.

By the beginning of the new millennium, a curiosity to explore the dramatic element of Bharata Natyam (Balchandran Gokul 2019; Sankalpam 2008) was in the spotlight of Sankalpam's investigation through the production *Avatara*<sup>113</sup> (2001). Sankalpam re-engaged the previous collaborative team, (costume designer Victoria Baker, Lighting Designer Lee Curran, mridangam player and composer Karaikudi Krishnamurthy, saxophonist and composer Iain Ballamy) and invited composer Madurai GS Mani, a collaborator on *Ulaa*, to explore Indian classical dramatic texts.

The production was in three parts and once again, Sankalpam traversed the cultural, disciplinary and temporal terrains of arts practice to enrich the investigation. Kathakali<sup>114</sup> dance and music influenced the first composition of the production, *Vaikuntha*, which investigated the metamorphosis of the God

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<sup>112</sup> *Nritta* is an element of Bharata Natyam that is often, usefully described as "pure dance" (Rao 1998: 43).

<sup>113</sup> *Avatara* means descent

<sup>114</sup> Kathakali is an ancient dance drama technique, originating in Kerala. Rukmini Devi introduced the performance of dance dramas and Kathakali training into the curriculum at Kalakshetra (Meduri 2005).

Vishnu as half man half lion, manifesting as *Narasimha* (Sankalpam 2001). Balchandran Gokul had studied Kathakali with Sadanam Krishnankutty in Kerala and Sadanam Nandakumar in Delhi as a child and was exposed to a wide variety of classical and folk theatre forms of Kerala. She also studied Mohiniattam with Nirmala Venu during her school years and studied Bharata Natyam as a full time student at Kalakshetra during Rukmini Devi's directorship. The dramatic techniques of the ancient Indian dance form of Kathakali lent a particular quality to the dramatic intention of the piece.

The second piece of the evening entitled *Ka* (meaning 'who?') explored the descent of Ganga<sup>115</sup> on earth. For *Ka* the company collaborated with composer, Paul Jacob of Funky Bode, a Chennai-based music 'outfit' (Sankalpam 2001). Ballamy was once again commissioned and composed the third piece for the evening entitled, *Moksha* (meaning liberation). It is interesting to note how the boundaries defining what constitutes local and global became more and more blurred through Sankalpam's evolution. Geographic location, or state lines, for example no longer denoted the cultural specificity of the practitioner, nor the particular discipline. Sankalpam was employing practitioners, expert in their particular field and who were committed to their particular art form. These core values were the threads with which Sankalpam's collaborative investigations were interwoven. *Avatara* toured nationally and internationally in 2001, performing to packed audiences at venues in the UK and Chennai, India (Sankalpam 2008). Figure 3. (Nash 2001) highlights the dramatic use of

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<sup>115</sup> Ganga, or the river Ganges.

costume and design by long-term costume designer and collaborator Victoria Baker.

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Figure 3. *Avatara* (2001). Photo: Chris Nash. Dancers from left, Mira Balchandran Gokul, Vidya Thirunarayan. Courtesy of Sankalpam

Baker used theatrical traditions as a reference point for *Avatara*, drawing on Kathakali for inspiration and dramatic affect. This took the company away from the traditional attire of Bharata Natyam. At the same time it referenced other Indian cultural knowledge systems in the design.

### **6.8 *Dance of the Drunken Monks* (2002/ 2004)**

The anti-colonialist, nationalist and political ethicist, Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi (1869-1948), discussed the importance of holding on to a sense of

one's location and one's ethos when negotiating the larger contexts of sharing. He stated that, "I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any" (Bombay Sarvodaya Mandal/ Gandhi Research Foundation n.d.). This statement almost seems to have been written for Sankalpam's methodological approach to investigating Bharata Natyam, where many cultural influences are welcomed but the foundations of the primary source, Bharata Natyam remain central. The dialectic has served as a vehicle through which Bharata Natyam can be re-assessed and from which the specificity of the form can be reclaimed through many viewpoints.

The Bharata Natyam form remains fundamental to Sankalpam's methodology and is recast through the sharing of knowledge between many cultural knowledge systems. Bhabha argues for humanistic knowledge which is less bound in identity politics and builds instead he states, "communities of interest" (2014: 522). He argues that, "global interdisciplinarity [...] increases the integration of existing fields of study and, in many instances, produces a connected map of learning" (2014: 524). Bhabha's statement resonates with the methodology that Sankalpam has developed. Interdisciplinarity is of course built into the classical dance practice itself which relies on narrative, music, costume and speech in *abhinaya*, but which also shares the principles of aesthetics, analysis and technique with other classical Indian art forms. Vatsyayan states that, "Indian dance [...] has always to be comprehended as a complex synthesis of the arts of literature, sculpture and music" (1997: 23). She argues that, multiple approaches to seeking the truth in knowledge are also

manifest in Vedic tradition,<sup>116</sup> which she explains “are not closed systems; there is always interaction between the different schools of philosophy” (2013: 176-177).

As Sankalpam has evolved, so too has the complexity of its interactions with other cultural knowledge systems. The Bharata Natyam form may be central to the investigation but it is not autonomous and relies, aligning with Vatsyayan’s argument (1977: 23), on other disciplines, skills and knowledge systems. The importance of world-view thinking underpinning Sankalpam’s philosophical outlook cannot be under-estimated. Although the company may not adopt the world-view principles as an active strategy, they are nevertheless inherent in the Bharata Natyam form, inherited through Devi’s legacy, and through a socio-cultural ontology as argued by Zarrilli (1998: 277). The principles underlying Indian world-view thinking dispel the binary frameworks that are so often established through a postcolonial rhetoric (as discussed in chapter three). They provide foundational concepts which permeate Sankalpam’s practice. This is evident in the company’s cyclical pattern of research and reflection, where the process of clarification is a cumulative one.

In 2002, Sankalpam created a new production *Dance of the Drunken Monks* (2002 - 2004) hereafter referred to as ‘*Monks*’.<sup>117</sup> In concluding with ‘*Monks*’, I am interested in highlighting two things. Firstly, ‘*Monk*’s brings together many

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<sup>116</sup> Which underpins the form through its articulation in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*.

<sup>117</sup> As with Sankalpam’s first production, the dates given for *Monks*, from archive and source material vary. Sankalpam’s publicity pack for the production gives a 2003 date whilst their 2008 brochure offers a 2002-2003 date. Phillip Zarrilli’s website gives a 2003-2004 time period in which the production was created and toured. I take therefore the longest period as reference points, 2002-2004.

of the specific elements of Bharata Natyam that Sankalpam had been striving to investigate to this point in a complex layering of physical technique, *abhinaya*, text, musical composition, dramatic intention, lighting and costume design. As I have discussed already, each of these elements are inherent in the classical Bharata Natyam discipline, and all are interdependent within the form itself (Vatsyayan 1977: 23-25). The production also illustrates a complex interplay between local sources of knowledge from India with local sources of knowledge from the UK, between traditional/ ancient Indian theatre techniques and contemporary Euro-American dramaturgy, between classical Indian text and contemporary adaptation. '*Monks*' therefore highlights a culmination of the possibilities of the dialectic to the date of this particular production, as well as illustrating the success of the company's dialectic methodology.

The second point of interest to note is that in this production I experience for the first time as rehearsal director, how the interplay between mind and body is yoked to Sankalpam's performers' technical expertise. Zarrilli argues that this is achieved through a rigorous training (Zarrilli 1998: 277-278). The absence of such an embodied approach in one particular rehearsal compelled me as rehearsal director, to direct the performers to re-establish the connection between internal impulse and external manifestation between gross and subtle body in the moment of action. This once again manifests as a specificity of the practice and of the ontology underscoring the discipline, through which the integration of body, mind, imagination, technique and lived experience, come together in artistic creation.

Vatsyayan's research provides compelling accounts of how interwoven Indian arts practices are with Indian spiritual and philosophical thinking (1977, 1997, 2007). She has argued for example that for the traditional Indian artist, art was a means of achieving complete harmony or (*sāmarasya*) and that, "the spiritual, mental and physical discipline required in the search for complete harmony is *yoga*" (Vatsyayan 1977: 5). Yoga, she continues, "is the power of withdrawal of mental energy from all activity not directed towards the single end in view" (1977: 5). The difficulty for the performers in the '*Monks*' rehearsal that I refer to, appeared to be that in negotiating so many diverse aspects of knowledge and skill through the dialectic that was informing the production, the essence of the piece, particularly the humour, was difficult to convey in an embodied way. The "single end in view" that Vatsyayan refers to (1977: 5) was therefore not clear. Once remedied through the rehearsal direction process, the complex dramaturgical layering and nuanced individualities of this production could find full voice, thus indicating the success of the dialectic methodology in reclaiming the specificity of Bharata Natyam as I now discuss.

The core creative team for '*Monks*' was now a well-established one, having worked together on a number of productions, yet the company continued to extend invitations to new collaborators, notably Phillip Zarrilli, whom the company were aware of through his scholarship. Zarrilli was invited as stage director, dramaturg and acting coach on '*Monks*' but primarily to adapt the 7<sup>th</sup> Century Sanskrit farce (*Matta-Vilasa Prahasanam*) for a 21<sup>st</sup> Century UK

audience (Phillip Zarrilli n.d.).<sup>118</sup> Zarrilli's extensive experience of and expertise in Indian martial arts practices and Indian theatre forms provided a foundational rigour from which the production would emerge. Also invited to join the team from India, were two Kalakshetra-trained guest performers, PT Narendran and Narendra Gundurao.

The dramatic aspect of Bharata Natyam was applied to investigate the theatricality of humour in *Monks* (Balchandran Gokul 2019). To this end, the production drew upon theatrical techniques of Koodiattam,<sup>119</sup> arguably the oldest Sanskrit theatre form. Consequently, in 2002, Sankalpam undertook a period of R&D in Kerala, with experts and scholars of Koodiattam, G. Venu and Nirmala Venu (Sankalpam 2008).

Perhaps significantly, '*Monks*' is the only Sankalpam production of which I have been able to trace two reviews. I find this interesting, as despite the company's regular funding and public profile during the period 1994-2005, despite the high-profile venues the company performed in, Sankalpam drew little interest from dance critics, evolving, it appears, on the margins of an already marginalised dance practice. The production of '*Monks*', was significant for many reasons as Zarrilli himself explains. On his extensive website encompassing his productions, training and publications, Zarrilli devotes a page to Sankalpam's

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<sup>118</sup> Zarrilli's spelling differs from that on Sankalpam's programme notes, in which the title of the play is without the hyphen, as Mattavilasa Prahasanam

<sup>119</sup> I use Sankalpam's spelling of Koodiattam here (Sankalpam 2003, 2008), which differs from Zarrilli's spelling, which appears as Kutiyattam (Phillip Zarrilli n.d.). Zarrilli's spelling of Sankalpam also differs and he sometimes refers to the company as Sangalpam.

*The Dance of the Drunken Monk*,<sup>120</sup> and clarifies why the production is significant by stating the following:<sup>121</sup>

This was a highly unusual project. With the exception of a handful of Sanskrit dramas still performed in the kutiyattam tradition preserved in Kerala, India's temple theatres, or occasional productions by Indian theatre directors, most Sanskrit dramas, including *A Farce of Drunken Sport*, have not been performed in India for centuries.

The adaptation and choreography of "The Dance of the Drunken Monk" brought to life this 7th century Sanskrit farce in a bi-lingual (Sanskrit-English) dance-drama, allowing UK audiences to appreciate both the dramatic narrative in its own right as a hilarious farce, as well as the traditional South Indian bhava-rasa aesthetic which allows an audience to 'taste' the subtle 'flavors' of comedy. The acting, voice work, and staging conventions in the production were inspired primarily by kutiyattam—the oldest extant form of continuously performed dramatic theatre in the world, and the only extant form of staging Sanskrit dramas that dating from approximately the 9th century. The choreography is based on bharatanatyam<sup>122</sup> (Phillip Zarrilli n.d.).

'*Monks*' was co-commissioned by The Bull, Barnet. Research took place at Zarrilli's studio in Wales, and at G. Venu's performing centre for traditional arts in Kerala, funded by the British Council (Chennai), London Arts Board, South and South East Arts Board, UK. The production itself was subsequently funded by Arts Council England, as well as South and South East Arts Board (Sankalpam 2002).

The 7<sup>th</sup> Century farce, written by King Mahendra Varma, was a social comment upon the moral degeneracy of the time, enacted through the story of a highly

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<sup>120</sup> Once again, Zarrilli and Sankalpam give different renditions of the spelling. Zarrilli entitles the production, *The Dance of The Drunken Monk*, (Phillip Zarrilli n.d.) whereas Sankalpam's publicity entitles the production *Dance of the Drunken Monks* (Sankalpam 2003, 2008).

<sup>121</sup> It is worth adding Zarrilli's lengthy text to give a comprehensive overview of the historical background to the piece.

<sup>122</sup> Zarrilli's spelling of Bharata Nataym again differs from my own. I give a rationale for the particular spelling I adopt in chapter 1.8 (23-24).

unorthodox Saivite monk, Kapali and his woman,<sup>123</sup> Devasoma (Sankalpam 2002, 2003). The drama was written specifically for the Indian theatre discipline of Koodiattam (Sankalpam 2003), however, Zarrilli notes that:

while keeping the overall dramatic structure of the farce, in our adaptation we have judiciously edited the original to emphasize the choreographic, physical, and mimetic/acting strengths of our core performance tradition, bharatanatyam. While emphasizing movement in our adaptation, we have kept some of the dialogue. The main male character—an unorthodox Saivite wandering holy man or ‘Kapali’—speaks only in Sanskrit. All the other characters speak bi-lingually—in Sanskrit or a Prakrit, as well as in the ‘local dialect’—English (Sankalpam 2002; Phillip Zarrilli n.d.).

As with other Sankalpam productions, and as is typical in Bharata Natyam, the text was the starting point for this production. The production draws therefore upon text as a source for narrative and also performance, as Zarrilli indicates, thereby “maximising the use of recitation and song as well as developing the assimilation of movement material drawn from both Koodiattam and Bharata Natyam” (Sankalpam 2003). Zarrilli’s contemporary adaptation of the 7<sup>th</sup> Century farce brought classical and current topics into a dramatic interplay, emphasising the humour of the production for a contemporary audience (Sankalpam 2003).

*‘Monks’* was an ambitious and complex project interweaving movement with text, and dramatic narrative with music. The interweaving of different art forms is not unusual for Indian dance dramas, nor for Bharata Natyam specifically as I have discussed. The production however, was layered in different ways, giving the performance a nuanced depth. For example, the production presents as a

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<sup>123</sup> Devasoma is described as Kapali’s ‘woman’ in the company publicity, therefore despite the serious problematic use of the term, it is an accurate account of primary source terminology, but used with awareness of its questionability in relation to gender politics.

play within a play, and so has complex layers of commentary, which are further nuanced through Zarrilli's contemporary adaptation. Zarrilli's input brings into relief, the current political events of the time. Reviewed in *Pulse* (2003) Bithika Chatterjee, describes the layering thus:

Sankalpam has cleverly adapted the original text into a contemporary performance work, using *bharatanatyam* (the company's forte), movement vocabulary from *kalarippayattu* and some theatre conventions from *kootiyattam*. Thus, the main character speaks in Sanskrit and the other characters speak in the 'local' language - English. The performance of the farce is in the *natyadharmi* (stylized theatrical mode) appropriate to the theme - exaggerated movement and inflated speech delivery. The costumes, essentially *bharatanatyam* costumes recast without the conventional elaborateness, have a modern and traditional textural quality. Similarly, the storytelling uses both traditional and modern techniques. What I enjoyed most about the performance was its distilling of the social and human commentary from the original work. *Monks ...* meaningfully exists on its own. A play within a play, it succeeds as performance by clearly presenting the process of transformation from performer into character and from one character into another (Chatterjee 2003).

Zarrilli's description of the play, Sankalpam's programme notes and Chatterjee's review reveal from different perspectives, how the intricate interweaving of different cultural knowledge systems within the production was achieved. Within the drama itself, for example, the company deploys different local Indian forms of theatre and movement. The bi-lingual delivery of narrative which although a 7<sup>th</sup> century Sanskrit play, was furthermore adapted to address current issues in UK politics. Underpinning the farce was the combination of skills and knowledge systems that had been employed and interwoven to produce the work. For example, all of the performers were trained at Kalakshetra in Bharata Natyam and two of the performers (Balchandran Gokul and Narendran), also had a training in the Keralan dance discipline, Kathakali. Performers had trained in Koodiyattam during the R&D period adding a further

layer of Indian performance skills to the company's repertoire. Added to this, Zarrilli's extensive knowledge of Indian performance practices and Euro-American dramaturgical techniques brought an element of insider knowledge and expertise about Indian performance and psychophysical practices to the production from his own particular cultural and disciplinary perspective. This was not missed in Chatterjee's review.

After Van Schuylenburch's piece, *Alone by Themselves*, where the costumes had proved to be such a radical gesture, Sankalpam had invited costume designer Victoria Baker to collaborate on productions and had been working with her as a core-collaborator for several years. As with other core-company collaborators, Baker's rigorous attention to detail and uncompromising attitude to quality, served as a foundation from which the dialectic between Baker and Sankalpam, between traditional Bharata Natyam costuming and Baker's own creations could develop. It also echoed the Devi legacy. Baker's contemporary reimagining of traditional Indian dance and theatre costumes had become a significant part of Sankalpam's dialectic, as well as a signature look of the company. Baker, like Sankalpam, drew on multiple sources of knowledge for her research, using the Victoria & Albert museum for inspiration, to articulate the company's aspiration in her designs. The desire to reach for the future whilst embracing the past was clearly visible in Baker's costumes by applying another layer of the dialogue between temporal, cultural, disciplinary and geographical contexts. Figure 4. (Nash 2002) highlights how Baker's costumes interweave traditional and contemporary elements.

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Figure 4. *Dance of the Drunken Monks* (2002). Photo: Chris Nash.  
From left to right, Mira Balchandran Gokul, PT Narendran and Vidya Thirunarayan. Courtesy of Sankalpam

Baker's costumes draw on elements of traditional *veshti*. The simplicity of the lines creates a contemporary feel whilst also echoing the costuming of the north Indian classical dance form, Kathak.

Despite the rich and nuanced strata of complex concepts and disciplines in '*Monks*', or perhaps because of them, there was a single issue with the production that as rehearsal director, I was confronted with on first viewing the piece. On reflection and examining the work through the eyes of a researcher now rather than as a rehearsal director then, it is clear that the issue had arisen because of a dislocation between technique and performance in the delivery of the material. Vatsyayan states that, "all Indian arts create an illusion of

spontaneity which, when examined carefully, is the result of the perfect and flawless execution of multiple and complex systems of technique” (1977: 20). What I witnessed in my first rehearsal of *Monks* was a presentation of complex material and an interweaving of multiple skills, knowledge and cultural disciplines. However, the presentation offered to me on the first day of rehearsals did not evidence an embodied delivery of the drama, particularly the drunken scenes. These were comedic in intention but not in delivery. Vatsyayan argues that technique in Indian arts, “becomes especially significant because it is the vital vehicle of a profound vision which the artist has known and which he is seeking to suggest through his particular medium” (1977: 20).

My instinct at the time was that the performers’ movement was being accessed from their impression of what drunkenness looks like, so the ‘drunken’ movement sat on top of the body as mimed ‘drunkenness’, and the performers’ enjoyment of the humorous scene was overriding the thematic intention of the narrative. It is the technique of the artist, argues Vatsyayan, that carries the intention of the creator, and in this technique the performer’s “undisciplined subjective emotions have no part to play” (1977: 21). The choreography and direction of *Monks* demanded that the performers developed the ‘drunken’ quality first, from the artistic intention of the narrative, then in the physicality of the dance technique. The performers as I understand it, were allowing subjective emotions to get in the way of the delivery of the humour. Ultimately, I argue, this could get in the way of the audience finding the humour in the movement themselves.

When we learn a new skill all our concentration goes into receiving instructions and telling the body what to do and how to do it, how to position the feet, eyes, head, align the spine and so on, states Zarrilli (2004). Furthermore, this extrinsic information is processed consciously (Zarrilli 2004). When we become proficient in a skill, Zarrilli continues, we move to a different state of experiencing the movement where we take ownership of it and can move in and out of it knowingly (2004). With accomplished control of movement, a type of body absence comes. According to Zarrilli, “one’s bodymind ‘intuitively’ adjusts as one moves. In this sense, the body disappears” (2004). Zarrilli is in this instance, explaining the processes necessary to achieve the articulation between internal intention and physical expression the negotiation of subtle and gross body. In order for the performer to achieve an embodied performance, where the articulation between gross and subtle body is under the expert control of the performer. The performer, argues Zarrilli, must first be in control of the body and this he states, comes through extensive and repetitive rigorous body training (1998, 2004, 2009).

The humorous element central to ‘*Monks*’, was initially lost in an attempt by the performers to “act it out”. As I reflect on why this was the case, I consider that the humour of the piece, the drunkenness in particular, although choreographed using the technical language of Bharata Natyam, with some references to Kathakali and Koodiattam, was somehow being rendered without attention to technical skill, to the quality of movement itself. By this I am not referring to the dramatic portrayal, I am referring to the physicality of the Bharata Natyam and Kathakali movements, which in this instance were neither

grounded in technique nor rigorously executed. Mimetic movements instead had taken the place of Bharata Natyam technique, the body in this sense was not absent, but present as a conscious entity. Rather, it was the bodymind that was for me at least, absent. In that moment the intention of the piece was not delivered with clarity as it was being accessed through the mind only and not embedded in the physical action. In an attempt to make the action funny, the dancers had somehow forgotten to work with the rigour of the physical technique of Bharata Natyam, and in particular how the gross, physical body must activate the subtle body in order to render expression (Zarrilli 1998, 2004, 2009).

The humour of '*Monks*' did exist in the choreography, in the adaptation of the narrative and in the text. Yet the very technique the company had striven to investigate for almost a decade, had somehow been subsumed by the distraction of humour. The disconnect between intention and expression was clear. The absence of a route from subtle to gross body was also clear. This resonates with Zarrilli's "disappearing body" (2004). In order to convey expression, the performer must be both present and absent letting the technique do the work.

Within a few hours, the situation was addressed. The dancers were reminded to revisit the technique of the form as a baseline. Re-calibrating the drama to the reference point of technique enabled the humour to emerge through the choreography, the text and the dramaturgy as the following reviews illustrate. Richard Turner writing for *Veena* (2003) describes:

the drunken Bharatanatyam duo of Kapali (PT Narendran) and Devasoma (Vidya Thirunarayan) [as] genuinely funny, with their poorly functioning legs and baffled, clownish facial expressions [rendered through] a clever 'double vision' sequence (cited in Sankalpam 2005).

Chatterjee too recognised the skill of the humour in the dancers' delivery and in the choreography itself, stating that she was:

particularly impressed by Uppal-Subbiah's choreography to portray Thirunarayan's drunken double vision, the effect of 'soma' on her movements. Thirunarayan and Narendran were impressive in the imaginative use of their bodies, especially the use of their eyes and the stupor of their speech (2003).

Chatterjee also reflects upon the multiple transformations that some of the performers had to make in '*Monks*', by highlighting Balchandran Gokul's rendition of the hand-gestured dog as an example of "excellent physical theatre" (2003). Turner, meanwhile, acknowledges that without compromising the traditional form of Bharata Natyam, Sankalpam had created something in '*Monks*', that was accessible and, "capable of appealing to the widest possible audience" (2003). For such a complex and culturally rooted narrative to successfully translate across diverse audiences, when the primary mode of delivery was through three different Indian dance and theatre traditions, is an indication of the success of Sankalpam's application of the dialectic. Whilst enabling Sankalpam to investigate and nurture a migrated dance practice, the dialectic enabled diverse audiences to engage with it too.

Sankalpam has continued to investigate Bharata Natyam through dialectic collaborations with other practitioners, disciplines and cultural knowledge systems, and I consider the application of this methodological approach in Sankalpam's studio processes and teaching contexts in the next two chapters. *Dance of the Drunken Monks*, nevertheless, represents a watershed moment

in the company's evolution. Through the production, Sankalpam successfully managed a complex interweaving of cultural disciplines from within Indian traditional contexts and beyond. The ingredients for a production which could traverse cultural codes and disciplinary frameworks, were combined through the dialectic. Sankalpam had the methods to make the production work on multiple levels, however an outside eye (in that particular instance it was my own) viewing the work from a different cultural perspective, recognised the missing ingredient, technique. The ingredient was not missing from the performers' 'bodies of knowledge'; it just had not been added at that point. The different cultural knowledge systems of dramaturgy, movement, text and costume applied through the dialectic, further augmented the production, refining Sankalpam's reflection on Bharata Natyam in the process.

Knowledge was processed through a methodology that utilised ancient Sanskrit text to comment on twenty first Century UK politics, which applied Euro-American dance and dramaturgical expertise to embody dramatic intention. In the process of producing '*Monks*', Sankalpam had reclaimed the specificity of Bharata Natyam as a nuanced and embodied practice, grounded in an Indian epistemology, and drawing upon ancient and current knowledge systems, thus nurturing the form and evolving the company's practice in the process.

## **6.9 Summary**

In this chapter I have considered how a dialectic methodology is applied by Sankalpam in collaborative processes and how the dialectic impacts the company's nurturing of Bharata Natyam in the UK dance landscape. I have

offered detailed analyses of two productions at the start and end of a ten-year period, (1994/1995 & 2002-2004) and considered the ways in which the dialectic methodology has enabled Sankalpam to reclaim specificity of the form as an embodied practice. I have illustrated how collaboration can be a useful provocation to challenging existing knowledge and discussed how by negotiating unfamiliar and familiar terrains, new understandings of the body and of dance have emerged for the company.

I have indicated how against a UK dance landscape that was uncomfortable with South Asian dance practices, Sankalpam has successfully negotiated the contexts of perception and expectation, by focusing on developing a new cultural understanding of Bharata Natyam against a push by the socio-political climate to integrate forms and hybridise techniques. I have demonstrated that by rooting the Bharata Natyam form as a fixed point of reference, Sankalpam has undertaken excursions across terrains of global disciplines, and entered into dialogues with experts in contemporary forms and ancient knowledge.

I have offered a detailed assessment of the company's 2002-2004 production *Dance of the Drunken Monks*, highlighting its particular significance in demonstrating a successful interweaving of multiple cultural knowledge systems. These emerged as both familiar and unfamiliar, as local, national and global, and they engaged traditional and contemporary techniques, and concepts.

How Sankalpam's methodological approach (the dialectic) permeates the studio context is the focus for the next chapter. I discuss this by examining the dialectic between clay and dance in Vidya Thirunarayan's independent studio research, *The Clay Connection* (2016 & 2017). I consider how Sankalpam's approach resonates within Thirunarayan's individual practice as a potter and dancer, thereby enabling her to individualise her response to Bharata Natyam as a cultural knowledge system and as an embodied practice.

## Chapter 7

### **Processes: Individualising Cultural Knowledge in Clay Body Sites – A Discussion of Vidya Thirunarayan's, *The Clay Connection***

#### **7.1 Overview**

Up to this point in the study I have established the contexts through which Sankalpam's practice has evolved: the UK dance landscape, the birth of the company and company collaborations. I have also established the contexts through which I examine Sankalpam: history, legacy, literature, and methods. In the previous chapter I detailed how the dialectic is applied as a methodology in collaborations, acting as a provocation and challenging Sankalpam's existing knowledge of Bharata Natyam through unfamiliar terrains of movement, costume, music and dramaturgy.

In this chapter I consider how Bharata Natyam is individualised. The word 'individualise' means to modify for the particular needs of an individual, to particularise or to make distinctive (Collins 2019). How cultural knowledge is individualised by bringing clay into dialogue with dance is therefore examined through Thirunarayan's independent dance and ceramic studio processes. Sankalpam's dialectic methodology is revealed to underpin Thirunarayan's approach, as I consider how the intervention of clay enables Thirunarayan to find new entry points to Bharata Natyam as an embodied or psychophysical practice.<sup>124</sup> I align this concept with Zarrilli's term 'embodied' as he explores the

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<sup>124</sup> See Zarrilli (2009).

performer's relationship between the body and mind, between inward focus and outward focus, which manifests in the states of "being/doing (*bhava*)"<sup>125</sup> (2009: 23).

I discuss the project through different temporal frames of experience, which reflects my own immersive roles within the project. I therefore weave present tense, first person description and past tense reflective observation and discourse, with theoretical analysis and discussion. The length of the chapter reflects the depth of analysis which, due to my immersive role in the clay project and the multiple perspectives I draw together to analyse the process, could be considered as thick description (Geertz 1973).

## 7.2 Clay and Dance

In recent years, clay has been appearing in a small number of dance productions and gaining interest with movement practitioners as a medium of research and play. Pieces such as *Icon* (2018) co-created by choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui and sculptor Antony Gormley, brings together clay and dance on Sadler's Wells stage (The Guardian 2018), whilst artist Florence Peake's (2017) choreography, *RITE* explores primal body through clay and dance (Florence Peake 2018). The growing interest in clay as a facilitating partner for dance is interesting and raises the question why these mediums come together now. However, it would be naïve to attempt a comparative

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<sup>125</sup> Zarrilli spells *bhava* without the accent, where I adopt Vatsyayan's spelling (2007) which has an accent over the first 'a', *bhāva*.

analysis of Thirunarayan's project within this small clay/dance field for several reasons.

Thirunarayan's project sits apart in several ways. Uniquely, as artistic director and performer on the project, Thirunarayan is also both a practicing potter and Bharata Natyam dancer. As such, she is skilled in bringing both dance and clay to life. She understands the principles that underlie each discipline and is fluent in the techniques of making and presenting in both fields. In this way, clay provides both a medium of play for Thirunarayan but play from an informed perspective, one of an embedded knowledge and evolved relationship with dance and ceramics.

Another unique aspect to Thirunarayan's project is the potter's wheel. Other clay/dance productions have utilised clay in many states, as does Thirunarayan's studio research. Thirunarayan's project, however, is innovative in its centralisation of the potter's wheel, which provides a fulcrum for the artistic investigation. Thirunarayan's research evolves from the wheel. Being also rooted in a migrated classical dance form sets this project yet further apart from others working in the clay/dance field. Figure 5. (Manders 2016) illustrates the skill of Thirunarayan at the wheel in rehearsals for *The Clay Connection* (2016). Although it is worth noting that Thirunarayan's investigation of clay is part of a growing investigation in the wider UK dance landscape, a comparative analysis at this stage however does not add to the analysis of Sankalpam's dialectic.

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Figure 5. Potter and Dancer, Thirunarayan at the Wheel. *The Clay Connection* (2016). Photo: Zoe Manders. Courtesy of Thirunarayan

Reclaiming specificity of a migrated cultural form in a way that is meaningful to the practitioner can be difficult. Particularly argues Chatterjea, in an arena of modernist arts' sector consciousness and globalised dancing bodies, where cultural forms can become flattened and differences erased (2013: 7). Here I explore how Thirunarayan has negotiated dislocation from the cultural, religious, historic and social moorings that support her Bharata Natyam practice, highlighted by Vatsyayan (2015). I consider how by bringing into dialogue the mediums of clay and dance in the terrain of a new locale, Thirunarayan is able to reclaim specificity of the migrated classical form.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> See Buckland (1999) for her cautionary warning against collapsing the particular into the general through the casual adoption of generalised terms and methodologies, with all forms sharing the same 'routes and destinations' (Buckland 1999: 3-4).

Through examining Thirunarayan's individualised responses to embedded cultural knowledge and by assessing the impact of clay upon her process and corporeal site, clay is found to be a catalytic and transformative medium. Clay therefore, enables Thirunarayan's relationship with Bharata Natyam to evolve in a way that is meaningful and personal for her (Thirunarayan 2016b). I argue that bringing clay and dance into conversation nurtures Thirunarayan's practice, enabling her to engage with her embedded dance practice in a different way. Whilst this echoes the methodological approach of Sankalpam, it also presents possibilities of achieving sustainability for the artist's independent practice within a broader UK arts landscape.

### **7.3 The Clay Connection**

My discussion is centered upon the studio processes entitled *The Clay Connection*, conceived and commissioned by Thirunarayan.<sup>127</sup> Thirunarayan invited me as choreographer, to be part of an interdisciplinary team of collaborators during the project's research and development phases (R&D) in 2016. My associated role as researcher was agreed to by the team. *The Clay Connection* generated two periods of collaborative R&D during 2016 & 2017, and the creation of a full-length touring production is planned for the future pending funding. This discussion however focuses on the studio research completed in the summer of 2016 and towards the end of this period of research when it became evident that the dialogue between clay and dance was yielding interesting routes of access for Thirunarayan between internal states and

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<sup>127</sup> Thirunarayan's project has since been re-named, *Lives of Clay*, but for the purposes of this study is referred to by its original name, *The Clay Connection*.

external manifestation in performance. I use Zarrilli's terms of reference to examine embodied performance as a psychophysical practice between the states of body and mind in the moment of being/doing (Zarrilli 2009: 23).

Thirunarayan's rationale to unite the performance art of Bharata Natyam with the craft of throwing a pot, is not simply decided upon as a creative exploration between two diverse mediums, although this of course plays its part. It is the commonalities between the diverse mediums that Thirunarayan has discovered as a practitioner of each discipline, which has prompted the collaborative exploration. The mediums appear dissimilar on initial assessment. After all, one is a performance practice, the other traditionally a non-performative craft. The dancer's body provides both instrument of execution and the raw components, whereas the potter's basic ingredients reside in the elemental materials, clay and water and the potter's tools resemble those from an operating theatre, including scalpels, needles, wires and cutters. In Bharata Natyam the product, the performance, is transient and ephemeral, suspended in a temporal and spatial frame. The product of ceramics, on the other hand, the pot, is finite in shape and texture, yet can be carried through space and time. The potter's wheel facilitates the creation of the pot whilst the kiln adds another dimension to ceramics, creating a physical barrier between the maker and the product whilst simultaneously enabling the creation to manifest in a more permanent form. Although the mediums of clay and dance are clearly dissimilar they also share common traits. As with Sankalpam's other collaborative investigations, it is the commonalities that provide the foundations for Thirunarayan's '*Clay Connection*' project.

Working across the physical mediums of clay and dance leads Thirunarayan to consider shared aspects of the disparate individual forms, noticing key embedded elements, such as the role of physical preparation, centering, the use of breath and the journey between inner intention and outward expression. Through her dual practices, Thirunarayan experiences these foundational principles within one body site (her own) yet from different perspectives. Theatre scholar Tara McAllister-Viel argues that bringing different cultural training methods together in one body site is a form of “embodied cultural exchange” (2016: 444) and stresses the usefulness of understanding the body in multiple ways and from multiple perspectives (2016: 445-446).

Through Sankalpam’s dialectic methodology other Indian arts practices such as Koodiattam have been employed to explore aspects of the form such as *abhinaya* in the dancers’ Bharata Natyam body sites.<sup>128</sup> Despite and also because of the close allegiances between different Indian performance practices, other sources of ‘local’ Indian knowledge can be particularly helpful in modifying the company’s understanding of the expressive element of Bharata Natyam. Mitra argues that in order to find a different way to explore classical Indian dance, Chandralekha also looked to Indian body practices such as Yoga and Kalaripayattu (2014: 8). These she states, have a distinctly internalised focus which is “distinct from concert dance forms such as bharatanatyam”<sup>129</sup> (2014: 8). In a similar way, by experiencing the same principles of different

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<sup>128</sup> See chapter 6.8.

<sup>129</sup> Mitra’s spelling of Bharata Natyam.

mediums in one body site, Thirunarayan begins to understand how the complex interplay between inner intention and outer expression is implicit within both her dance and clay practices. Each is anchored, Thirunarayan discovers, by a physical centering through the body's core, ignited through a subtle articulation of energy and delivered through the physical body itself (Thirunarayan 2016b).

The shared elements of Thirunarayan's clay and dance practices, she has discovered; are bound by breath, which is a concept in south Asia described as *prana*, "vital energy" or "vital life force" (Zarrilli 2011: 248). For Thirunarayan, the concept of breath as a binding force is more easily achieved at the wheel than through dance yet, by 2015 she had begun to realise that she was looking at her practice as a potter, through the lens of her embedded dance knowledge. As I understand it from informal conversations with Thirunarayan, she was using her embedded dance knowledge to become more embodied as a potter. Thirunarayan had been developing a ceramics practice for over a decade and had been practicing as a dancer for more than two decades. Whilst her dance training and experience was impacting her work at the wheel, she had not yet worked out how ceramics would influence her understanding and experience of Bharata Natyam. In this sense the dialectic between clay and dance had not yet been established. When asked if she was hoping to discover something else about her dance practice by initiating *The Clay Connection*, Thirunarayan's answer surprised me. She responded, "no, I think I was more interested in the bigger question. I kept going back to [ask] 'is *abhinaya* restricted to dance and to the performing arts?' [...] That was the over-arching question" (Vidya Thirunarayan 2016b). Thirunarayan was clear; *abhinaya* was the fundamental

unexplored element that would lead her investigation across, between and within each medium, dance and clay.

#### **7.4 *Abhinaya* and the Disconnect**

In chapter one, I introduced the concept of *abhinaya* and explained the complexity of the technique.<sup>130</sup> *Abhinaya* relies on mastery of both codified and improvisational techniques. It requires the performer to be in command of subtle shifts of energy in the body and performance, to carry narrative, characterisation and emotional intent to the viewer. Through *Abhinaya*, the performer can build layers of complexity to distill nuanced individuality. For this to happen the spectator must receive the intention or the emotion from the dancer, which should resonate in the spectator and this is referred to as *rasa*. The relationship between the creator's intention, the performer's delivery and the audience's reception as articulated in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*,<sup>131</sup> evolves from Indian world-view thinking and underpins the aesthetic principles of classical Indian performing arts as discussed by Vatsyayan (2007: 58). The performer/spectator relationship is furthermore explored in European and American performance practices by scholars such as Fischer-Lichte who comments that, the performance or event "emerges out of the encounter between performers and spectators, with unforeseen reactions and responses constantly changing the planned course" (2009: 392). Theatre director Peter Brook acknowledges the performer/spectator relationship too, by focusing on

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<sup>130</sup> See chapter 1.8.

<sup>131</sup> See chapter 1.5.

the event itself as a critical one that depends upon an exchange of energies between the spectator and the performer (1988: 15-16).

Before the studio research began in 2016, Thirunarayan shared her initial thoughts with the creative team. The artist sent the following document containing, *Thoughts on the Wheel*, writing:

Is Abhinaya restricted to dance? That was the question that surfaced as I watched Ken, a master potter throw a pot on the wheel. I have watched Ken at the wheel many times. But every time I watch entranced as through for the first time, and I suppose it is. I watched him prepare the clay to the right condition. Then he 'centered' it on the furiously spinning wheel before he slowly developed the shape outwards and upwards. I watched the measured play between his hands and the clay, the give and take, the absolute attention and intention at his fingertips [...] in the moment and sheer poetry to watch. If Abhinaya is the drawing forward of the inner bhavana or intention, isn't this Abhinaya? (Thirunarayan 2015).

This early correspondence rooted Thirunarayan's investigation firmly within the terrain of *abhinaya*, about which she hoped to elicit new knowledge. She confirms this in a Skype interview in 2016 stating that, "even though I [was] familiar with these things, it was time to rediscover them" (Vidya Thirunarayan 2016b). Thirunarayan's statement echoes Sankalpam's rationale to rediscover Bharata Natyam in order to understand the form in a deeper way. Through her independent project, Thirunarayan's enquiry continued the work Sankalpam had begun with Shankar, Smith and MacLennan in 1996. Whilst Thirunarayan was focused on the importance of how *abhinaya* could be enriched in each discipline, clay and dance, my interest centered upon how the intention of *abhinaya* would resonate within the spectator.

In classical Indian performing arts, the spectator plays an active role, explains Vatsyayan (1997). The “work of art” is an event, which requires both the performer and the spectator to actively engage “to contemplate” she states (1997:169). Peter Brook has described the communion between audience and performer as the final ingredient in the success of a production and refers to both as “participants” in the performance event (1988: 18). Fischer-Lichte, meanwhile, examines how theatre director Max Reinhardt changed the relationship between spectator and performer, and perceptions of the use of space through the integration of *hanamichi*<sup>132</sup> in Western theatre (2009: 395). She argues that this disrupted the concept of the performer as being part of a distanced tableau and a new way of looking and experiencing theatre was introduced as modern Western theatre (2009: 395).

The complexity of emotional textures and imagined landscapes, which often lie within the lyrics accompanying *abhinaya* pieces and which are critical to their reception, can be missed by a non-informed audience (one that has little or no knowledge or experience of the form or culture). This can leave the spectator disengaged from the core intention of the work. Many practitioners have expressed frustration with the disconnect between audience and performer, as I illustrate in chapter six. Iyer states that Jeyasingh chose to bracket off this part of the migrated form from her contemporary practice (1997: 2&3), whilst Valli Subbiah (a founding co-Artistic Director of Sankalpam) has argued to keep *abhinaya* ‘in the public focus’ as an important aspect of the technique (1997:

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<sup>132</sup> The *hanamichi* is a section of raised staging used in Japanese theatre that runs through the audience from the back of the theatre to the stage itself (Massachusetts Institute of Technology n.d.).

2&3). The uneducated views of Western audiences furthermore, are highlighted as problematic for classical practitioners in Grau's *South Asian Dance in Britain* (SADiB) report (2002), in which Grau argues that one "ethno aesthetic" is applied to all dance forms (2002: 10).

More recently, at the *Navadisha* international dance conference, held in Birmingham UK in 2016, prominent Bharata Natyam artists were clear that it was important to advocate and promote the narrative and emotional aspects of the form to contemporary British audiences (Gibson 2016: 9), whilst promoters and funders at the conference suggested a need for practitioners to open up conversations with audiences in order to de-mystify aspects of the classical forms (Gibson 2016: 10). The disconnect between intention and reception, between classical cultural codification and contemporary spectator reception, is historical and yet clearly remains problematic for this migrated dance form in the UK dance landscape. Diasporic practitioners meanwhile, must navigate through Euro-American definitions that homogenise the specificity of their art forms, whereby the particularities of complex disciplines are sometimes collapsed into generalisations for ease of understanding (Buckland 1999; Coorlawala 2002). The resulting broad categorisations can alienate Indian classical practices from Western mainstream dance. Thirunarayan was rooting her project within the soil<sup>133</sup> of classical Indian dance and philosophy, despite the difficulties within the terrain of reception in the UK. However, by investigating the concept of *abhinaya* through a dialectic between clay and dance and assisted by an experienced multi-disciplinary team, both she and I

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<sup>133</sup> I borrow this metaphor from Shobana Jeyasingh (2016).

hoped that the disconnect between intention and reception, and between performer and viewer, might be addressed.

#### **7.4.1 Reception**

If *abhinaya* relies on the successful transmission of emotional intention to the spectator through the vehicle of the dancer's body, how is that intention interpreted by an audience, which may not understand the codes of the dance practice? I discuss this question by examining it in relation to disputed views of universality. In her keynote address at the *Asian Theatre Conference* at the University of Lincoln in 2016, Fischer-Lichte contested the theory of a universality of emotion in performance proposed by such performance practitioners as Eugene Barba and Richard Schechner (2016). Fischer-Lichte states that there are similarities in performance theories emanating from different cultural sources (2016). She argues that the representation of emotional states through body and performance may draw upon similar physical aspects (for example the raising of eyebrows the clenching of fists and jaw, to show anger), in order to manifest the required emotional state (2016). However, the representation of emotions through body and performance, she continues, is only one side of the equation.

In Bharata Natyam, in order to render *rasa* (sentiment) through the *bhāva* (emotion) the *rasika* (receiver of the emotion) must be in a prepared state to receive that emotion (Vatsyayan 1977: 3). To create this emotional intensity or empathy in the performance event, both performer and spectator must be willing to take part and become immersed in the experience (Fischer-Lichte

2016). But how does a 'non-informed' spectator prepare to receive an emotional intention that is culturally curated through codified body language and movement? This question has been widely debated within the South Asian dance community as outlined in chapter three, but it is further problematised when examined through a mono-ethnic lens which views dance and the body as empirical concerns (Grau 2001: 5-6). Intention, rather like dance itself, is then regarded from a singular standpoint, from a dominant Western or Euro-American perspective. In the universalising and globalisation of diverse dancing bodies, difference, specificity and individuality are flattened argues Chatterjea (2013). Chatterjea asks how practitioners of Indian classical forms might negotiate the contemporary and urban contexts they navigate, "without denying the inherent spiritual foundation of Indian classical dance" (2014).

Whilst Vatsyayan proposes that it is emotion that is universal, Fisher-Lichte argues that although the phenomenon of emotion may be universal, the transmission, reception and perception of emotion is not. Nor is the systemisation of codes for transmitting emotion (2016). Fischer-Lichte's proposition offers a nuanced understanding of transference of emotional states across cultures histories and experiences. The conduit between emotional intention and reception in Bharata Natyam is deployed through the body. Each body retains individual specificity and particularities, which are further mediated through culturally specific codes of the narrative and dance form.

## 7.5 Negotiating Body States

Fueled by a rationale to deepen the company's understanding of Bharata Natyam and in turn modifying knowledge and refining practice through the dialectic, I argue that Sankalpam finds new ways of understanding embodiment in the migrated form. Each co-Artistic Director utilises a different terminology, to express the same process, that of accessing internal imagined or emotional states of 'being' and realising them through external physical manifestations of 'doing'. Each practitioner describes the psychophysical/embodied process differently as, "internal intention and external expression" (Thirunarayan 2016b) "material body and inner enquiry" (Uppal Subbiah 2017, WhatsApp *Airing Chickens*), or "gross and subtle body states" (Balchandran Gokul 2017b, WhatsApp *Airing Chickens*).

Zarrilli states that in South Asian disciplines, embodiment in performing and the inner and outer dimensions of the body are approached from a unique perspective (2011: 244 & 245). South Asian embodied practices utilise the concept of *prana* or *prana-vayu*, to animate the body (Zarrilli 2011: 248). The breath or the "psychophysical vehicle" (Zarrilli 2011: 248) is therefore the pathway between gross outer body and inner experience or the subtle body, which is both a practical and conceptual link he states (2011: 248).

Zarrilli notes that in order to train the breath as the vital life force for performance, one must master<sup>134</sup> a total control of the body through repetition

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<sup>134</sup> The word 'master' is used frequently by Zarrilli and is common parlance when referring to Indian performance practices and methods of training. Despite the problematic associations it has in a UK setting, which I hereby acknowledge, the term is culturally situated.

of physical exercises. Through mimicry of the master or *guru*, and over many years of training, a transformation emerges in the student as s/he begins to internalise (Zarrilli 2011: 249). The physical, mental and behavioral shift emerges as the student's relationship to doing the exercises moves from gross physical to psychophysical, from external to internal (Zarrilli 2011: 249). Zarrilli argues that the shift happens from gross physical body to internal subtle body, when the student becomes able to integrate the *vayu*<sup>135</sup> fully into her/ his practice (Zarrilli 2011: 250) and states that:

The relationship between the doer and what he does [is] qualitatively transformed from an external process that only engages the gross physical body to a psychophysical one in which the practitioner's inner experience, awareness, attentiveness and perception are ideally engaged and altered (2011: 249-250).

The skill of the performer in traversing the two states (internal/external, inward/outward, gross/subtle) and the methods used to achieve this oscillation described by Zarrilli, are mastered in classical Indian dance by skillfully managing the tensions between the two states, of 'being' and 'doing', within the body.

I now turn to *The Clay Connection* team and the process in more detail to offer an example of how the psychophysical process described by Zarrilli, was addressed through the dialectic between clay and dance.

## **7.6 The Team and the Process**

The R&D has thus far taken place over two summer periods, in 2016 and 2017. In the first year of the project (2016), Thirunarayan had recognised that taking

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<sup>135</sup> *Vayu* is the life force, energy, breath.

a look at the familiar from different vantage points would be useful to her as a practitioner. She also understood that having other perspectives would further benefit her inquiry, thereby continuing Sankalpam's dialectic methodology. Philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah reminds us in the second of his Reith lectures, *Mistaken Identities* (2016) that in re-positioning our understanding from the perspective of others, we find out something new, adding that, "it's not yet a flat world and so things look very different in different places" (2016). Thirunarayan's research project would examine dance and clay from different reference points, through the collaborative enquiry of different artists and disciplines including, text, dance, craft, theatre, movement sound design and musical composition. In 2015, therefore, Thirunarayan began to assemble a team of creative artists for the first *The Clay Connection* R&D.

A core team of creative practitioners was established over the two-year period (2016 and 2017) totaling four artists. This included Thirunarayan who acted as Artistic Director, performer/ potter. Thirunarayan was joined by theatre director, Tim Supple, writer, Chris Fogg, and myself as choreographer. All members of the core team had worked with multiple disciplines and within different cultural contexts. Additionally, all had experience of working with Indian dance or theatre practice and practitioners, although this had not been a requirement. In addition to the core team, other practitioners were invited to take part in the project.

In 2016 Jazz composer/flautist Keith Waithe and Bharata Natyam performer Geetha Sridhar joined the team. In 2017, five different practitioners spent time

exploring ideas with the core team in the studio over a two-week rehearsal period. Artists included musician/composers Barry Ganberg and Jon Banks, sound designer Alberto Ruiz Soler, Butoh-trained performance artist, Marie-Gabrielle Rotie, theatre practitioner, Lee Hart and dramaturg Kate Ebner-Landey. Thirunarayan had consciously expanded the skills and experience of her team so that we could explore multiple possibilities in a limited time frame. To this end Thirunarayan invited practitioners that would enable an exploration of different genres of music and styles of composition. The expanded team would also enable us to investigate sound design as score, to try out different theatre and movement practices (*commedia dell'arte* and *butoh* for example) and to address the potential of dramaturgical input. Consequently, each team encompassed a range of cultural and artistic skills and experience.<sup>136</sup>

The studio process took place at Westergate Village Hall (Sussex) and Farnham Maltings (Surrey) over a ten-day period throughout the spring and early summer of 2016 and a fourteen-day period in 2017. The research was supported by Arts Council England, Farnham Maltings, Surrey and Art Asia, Southampton. Asked why she chose to work with these particular artists, Thirunarayan replied that the choices were made based on who they were as people, their strength of experience and vision, those respected for their contribution to the arts world and those who complemented her own thinking and vision (Thirunarayan 2016b). Although this project was developed outside of the Sankalpam framework, Thirunarayan was clearly continuing to operate

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<sup>136</sup> The 2016 team, which is the focus for this discussion, was smaller and the rehearsal process more spread across time than the 2017 phase.

with Sankalpam principles underpinning her process. As with other Sankalpam collaborations, those principles were grounded in broader values and not framed by cultural or disciplinary specificities.

Thirunarayan had already discovered that she could experience the same principles (those of breath, centering, preparation and the journeys between internal intention and external expression) through different mediums (clay and dance) in the same cultural body site (her own). The process of viewing the same knowledge and experience from a different perspective excited her. Not only was Thirunarayan bringing clay and dance together in a dialogue but she was processing this further through the dialectic with an interdisciplinary team of practitioners, as Sankalpam had done in many of its previous collaborations.

Thirunarayan's approach reflects scholarly thinking that argues for more fluid systems of thinking about intercultural practice, systems that go beyond a postcolonial rhetoric (Bharucha 2014; Fischer-Lichte 2014; Mbembe 2010; Said 2003). Her investigation suggests that there are far more subtle exchanges of cultural knowledge yet to be uncovered and analysed, between and within cultural contexts such as her own cultural body site. In choosing to explore the potential of *abhinaya* through a dialogue between clay and dance, Thirunarayan also recognised that this element of the form (*abhinaya*), whilst being deeply rooted within cultural specificity, simultaneously went beyond culture. This was revealed through the different lenses applied during the process.

### 7.6.1 The Process

Director Tim Supple led the process. Supple has a vast experience of working with other cultural practices and practitioners and within global contexts. In the rehearsal studio, Supple ensured that time was spent at the outset for the team to become familiar with each other and each other's practices. Studio time was given to exploring the team's individual skills, exchanging knowledge about different mediums, instincts and interests. At the same time, we exchanged and shared individual methodologies, research, responses and ways of looking. Each member of the core team had an individual understanding of Thirunarayan's rationale, to explore *abhinaya* through clay and dance.

Diverse stylistic and cultural aesthetics existed between us. Common reference points were shared through source material offered by Thirunarayan. Prior to and during rehearsals, Thirunarayan emailed the team with background information to support her vision. Her choice of sources ranged from imagery of religious iconography and ritual practices, to audio or video sources of Indian classical and folk theatre forms and included textual sources of Indian classical literature, narratives and philosophy. Thirunarayan shared information as a way of illuminating her thoughts and of keeping everyone on the same page. In doing so, she was reminding the team of the critical nature of culture, and cultural practices within her work.

Thirunarayan had set up a process of knowledge-exchange from the outset with which the team could interact and to which it could respond. Email exchange was a critical tool in informing and provided a platform for the dialectic to ignite.

Through emails concepts were discussed, assessed, critiqued; material was shared, reflected and commented upon and the process was planned and defined. At times the information flowed between all core team members, at others between only two or three. The resource became a platform for airing contested issues, which might then be continued in studio time or resolved there or through email. As a researcher, this process allowed me access to the dialectic from multiple perspectives, through the studio process, via email, Skype, WhatsApp, text and phone conversations.

In order to investigate ways in which clay and dance might work together, it was important to get a grasp of the Bharata Natyam form, and explore its parameters, possibilities and potential. The core team members each had different experience of and encounters with Bharata Natyam, but this was an opportunity to synchronise our starting points. Abstraction and extraction were utilised as tools to access the gross material of Bharata Natyam technique. *Adavus* (combination/ sequence of steps) *jatis* (rhythmic patterns) *mudras* (hand gestures) eye, head and arm movements were explored in familiar contexts of narrative frameworks, but dislodged too and presented as a lexicon, disconnected from narrative, investigated as abstract content, without emotion or specific context applied.

Sometimes the focus was on *nritta* (pure dance) at other times personal narratives were improvised set against rhythmic sequences, testing the possibilities of the performers' ability to deliver simultaneously two disconnected skills verbally and rhythmically, one improvised, one embedded

in the dancers' expertise in the dance technique. In this way the team was disrupting the codified framework of the form, sometimes placing movement out of its narrative context, other times stripping expressivity out, moving elements of the form around to see how or if they had any resonance with clay. I acknowledge that in describing our process, I may alarm postcolonial scholars as the overtones of imperialistic, postmodern methods collide with cultural conventions of ancient forms. It is worth mentioning, however, that as researcher and co-creator on the project, I had the same concerns. I was a co-instigator of the methods of extraction, experimentation and analysis, but simultaneously held an ethical perspective that the rest of the team, including Thirunarayan seemed unconcerned with.

### **7.7 Fluid Exchanges and Ethical Dilemmas**

As a diverse team we explored from our own cultural contexts, which for most are plural, and from our individual experiences, which are multiple. As choreographer and researcher, I often felt caught between artistic investigation and the ethical implications of my role within the project. We had been invited to work on *The Clay Connection*, because of our experience, yet I questioned my own cultural approach as the process developed. Fischer-Lichte argues that cultures are not clear-cut and definitive, but fluid and changing (2014: 7). She explains that the binary split between 'our' culture and the 'other' culture results in a reductionist route, through which two things are highlighted: the first, she states, is that cultures are suspended in a sealed and homogeneous casing, the second is that in suspending cultures as defined and permanent, their fluidity is negated (2014: 7). The impact of change and exchange upon cultures

is therefore denied, she concludes (2014: 7). The binary assumptions associated with coloniser/colonised collaborations and cemented through postcolonial discourse, was forever present in my working analysis however. Therefore, I chose to keep my ethical concerns alive during the process, bringing them to the team for discussion. We were working through an artistic process, practical dilemmas and ethical concerns together to get to a deeper rendition of *abhinaya*.

As Supple and myself directed the dancers to undertake tasks that were familiar to us, to unlock material that was familiar to the Bharata Natyam performers, I sometimes found the process uncomfortable. From my perspective, I considered our methods as sometimes imposing and imperialistic. However, as choreographer I was implicit in their design and instigation. Supple, for example, set a task for the performers in which they were asked to talk about an event from their past, improvising the text and drawing on real life testimony. At the same time, he instructed the Bharata Natyam dancers (Sridhar and Thirunarayan) to perform a familiar, learned rhythmic movement sequence, one that could be repeated with accuracy, indefinitely and automatically. These were theatrical and choreographic methods, deployed in artistic exploration, to elicit new knowledge that would benefit the artistic director of the project (Thirunarayan), as well as the project overall. I was interested in how the dancers would manage such a complex task requiring skillful negotiation between body and mind, lived memory and live action, improvised text and learned rhythmic movement. Yet I also felt conscious that the task involved

disrupting the contexts from which each of these separate tasks had been brought together.

For my own part, many times in the studio I would ask the dancers to “forget the Bharata Natyam!” As a choreographer in these moments I wanted the dancers to bracket off their technique so they could go deeper into quality or narrative, emotion or intention. I was using techniques familiar to my cultural knowledge of dance, to access the technique of *abhinaya* in a more embodied way. This was the phrase that seemed most useful as an instruction, yet is demonstrably tactless, lacking in cultural sensitivity. As researcher I observed in myself a radical, colonial, dictatorial tone. As choreographer, however, I understood these methods as tools, useful for shifting the dancers’ process beyond form and beyond the gross physical body, to enable them to access technique in a deeper way, and I have used them often with many different groups of practitioners.

When I raised my concerns to the team, members responded differently. Thirunarayan did not have an issue with the methods we were using stating that, “the whole point in bringing all these people together is that they all open different doors to the same room [...] and give me a fresh insight” (Thirunarayan 2016b). Thirunarayan has stated that these methods in fact helped her, saying, “It is what I wanted because it [focused] on getting to the essence of *abhinaya*” (Thirunarayan 2016b). For Sridhar, however, being asked to abandon her dance form was a very difficult concept to work with as she explains, “at heart I’m classically trained, so preciseness is something that I look for in my own

dance, in what I watch and what I expect [...] this became a huge hindrance” (Sridhar 2016). Sridhar had performed as principal dancer with Chandralekha’s company and was therefore used to the Bharata Natyam form being challenged (Sridhar 2016). Chandralekha had realised that the knowledge she had absorbed through her gurus was rich in rigour and demands, but simultaneously, like Sankalpam’s co-Artistic Directors, believed that it needed to be questioned and probed (Bharucha 1995: 38).

Writer Chris Fogg at times found my analysis of our working methodology overly academic for an artistic project, getting in the way of the process. Supple was open to the discussion, but equally felt more bound to the artistic investigation, taking a reading from Thirunarayan. In a face-to-face interview with Supple, I asked how, in his experience of working in global contexts with multiple cultural forms and practitioners, he enables diverse practices to evolve in ways that are equally meaningful to the practitioners as they are to him as director? Supple’s answer was interesting, and he explained that he uses different strategies. Sometimes starting from a neutral point, where no reference is made to the individual forms, stating that in this method “through working together you come together” (Supple 2017a). The second strategy is almost the opposite, Supple continues, in which he will ask the performers to lead the rest of the team in their particular approach, and this is the approach employed for *The Clay Connection* in 2016. Supple states that this can be a good way to give full voice to each of the participants and the differences in the room (Supple 2017a). In a third strategy he combines versions of the two previous methods, using a neutral starting point to “play it in a way that is absolutely how you would

naturally play it” (Supple 2017a). He adds, “I select actors who are not bound to their form” (Supple 2017a). In this way the actors can move away from, around and within their form without feeling compromised. I found Supple’s answer interesting in relation to Sankalpam, a company that are bound to their form as a cultural knowledge system, yet not in ways that stifle the exploration of the form, or of other knowledge systems.

### **7.8 Challenging the Familiar Through *Pārvatī’s Dirt***

Supple’s final comment is critical in understanding the delicate nature of working relationships between different arts practitioners, disciplines, cultural knowledge systems and experiences. In *The Clay Connection*, we worked in an environment of collegiate trust and experimentation towards the same goal. We were all open to experiment beyond our forms and practice, yet the process was led predominantly by Supple and myself and as such, we often set the parameters for rehearsal tasks from our own working methods. Although the team members embraced the process with openness, it was often an uncomfortable journey for all of us. At times this seemed particularly difficult for the Bharata Natyam performers whom, I argue were being challenged in a different way as their bodies represented the ‘sites’ that different cultural knowledge systems were processed through. Sridhar explains in a face-to-face interview (2016) how some tasks were familiar territory for Bharata Natyam dancers, whereas others were more uncomfortable for her personally. She says, “I was body shy [adding that] there were a lot of things that [...] were very challenging” (Sridhar 2016).

Sridhar's comment emerges after we speak about a particular rehearsal process, through which a process of unlocking potential new routes to *abhinaya* was enabled. Our dialectic process was opening up tensions between familiarity and the unknown, and familiarity was bringing with it new restrictions. Bharucha argues that Chandralekha, referring to Bharata Natyam, understood how "without being questioned, this 'storehouse of knowledge' could easily become a prison. Its 'embarrassment of riches' could become stifling" (Bharucha 1995: 38). For both Bharata Natyam practitioners, Sridhar and Thirunarayan, the form was providing both familiar territory and a restraint, as different cultural knowledge systems demanded a negotiation of some common ground.

In 2016, the team had worked in blocks of rehearsals and across different venues. On the 21st June, we were nearing the end of our research time, with only the final day of the sharing to prepare for. Towards the end of the afternoon session, when the team members were exhausted, Supple asked Sridhar to improvise the narrative of *Pārvatī's Dirt* by working with the methods she would normally use to develop the story, for example by layering narrative and description with intention, emotion and characterisation through codified movement and gesture.

As the studio investigations progressed the team had begun to search beyond the 'personal' for a narrative from Indian classical literature. Supple's rationale was that an Indian classical story would provide an anchor for the process, as well as structure, theme and character. The multiple complex characteristics of

the Goddess Pārvatī, offered a rich source of excavation and exploration for the team. This was further solidified through one classical myth that the team adopted for the research. The story chosen by the team, and suggested by Sridhar, reveals one account of Lord Ganesha's birth and is told in the story of *Pārvatī's Dirt*. The following version of the narrative is the one that the team agreed on and was sent to Thirunarayan by her father. The narrative expresses the powerful and transformational interplay between woman, creation and clay. *Pārvatī's Dirt*, describes how Lord Siva's<sup>137</sup> wife Pārvatī, desperately wants to have a child. But Siva does not want to be distracted from his aesthetic ways, his life of meditation. Siva declines Pārvatī's imploring requests. In desperation, Pārvatī takes the dirt from her own body, mixes it with clay from the earth and sweat from her brow, fashions the image of a child and breathes life into it. The story continues, but this is the relevant part.

The Goddess Pārvatī's characteristics manifest through many avatars (incarnations) up to a hundred in some accounts (Kinsley 1988). Pārvatī is sometimes described as having powers equal to her consort Lord Siva.<sup>138</sup> In other accounts, Pārvatī offsets Siva's destructive nature through preservation and reconstruction (Kinsley 1988: 48). Pārvatī is described as Siva's rival (Kinsley 1988: 48). At the same time, within Hindu iconography, Pārvatī and Siva are often represented as combined deities, and some icons depict a union of interdependence and reconciliation, Pārvatī completing the other half of Siva (Kinsley 1988: 50).

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<sup>137</sup> I use Mitter's spelling of Siva (2001).

<sup>138</sup> Siva, or Shiva, has multiple spellings as with the Goddess *Pārvatī*, and multiple incarnations/ avatars. Shiva, or Shakti, equates with power and is considered the most powerful god of the Hindu pantheon. Kinsley (1988: 43).

Sridhar's description of Pārvatī is described through a feminist perspective on the deity (not surprisingly, given Sridhar's experience of working with Chandralekha). Sridhar, in a face to face interview, states that Pārvatī "is known as *Simhavahini* the one who rides on the lion" (Sridhar 2016). She explains that Pārvatī combines the energy of the trinity of Gods and represents "the one power of all the male Gods" (Sridhar 2016). Clay was becoming a metaphor for life through our studio research, and the story of *Pārvatī's Dirt* was emerging as strong narrative through which we could explore this metaphor. Moreover, the character of Pārvatī gave the team many perspectives from which we could address the theme of womanhood, which our writer Chris Fogg had begun to highlight as a central theme emerging from the fieldwork.

Having explored *Pārvatī's Dirt* through the methods she was most accustomed to in the rehearsal task, Supple then asked Sridhar to identify with the visceral qualities of the narrative and the emotion. He asked her for example, to engage with the sheer desperation of Pārvatī's situation in trying to have a child. Supple was asking Sridhar to locate the narrative and emotional intention within her own physicality and suggesting even to move beyond codified and familiar processes to achieve this. On reflection, Supple was in fact asking Sridhar to access *abhinaya* through a different route in order to get closer to the *bhāva*, the emotional intention of the story and the character.

Sridhar found this task extremely difficult stating in a face to face interview that, "Almost everything that we did with Tim, for me at least, was always thrown at

the deep end, to look at [things in] a different way, to explore [them in] a different way, so I wasn't completely in my comfort zone" (Sridhar 2016). Trained in specific methods of accessing and presenting *bhāva* through *abhinaya*, Sridhar felt frustrated by the lack of time available to develop these qualities (Sridhar 2016). Supple has stated that he was also conscious of the limited time to develop relationships with the practitioners, to devise creative content and nurture quality in delivery, adding that there is both joy and challenges in working with performers who are outside of their comfortable place (Supple 2017a).

Thirunarayan, who also took part in the exercise, has expressed an understanding of how challenging this process was for Sridhar because of the Bharata Natyam training, which in this moment gave the performers both a deep understanding of the narrative, characters and content of the story, but at the same time restricted access to the same elements through the familiarity of technique. Zarrilli has argued that in South Asian performance practices becoming expert in technique is in fact fundamental to achieving an integrated state of body and mind in performance (1998: 275-276). Zarrilli states that the correct repetition of exercises as daily practice over a long period of time and to achieve a "state of accomplishment", are necessary to attain fundamental changes within the practitioner (1998: 275-276). These changes, states Zarrilli, are accomplished by controlling both physical and mental elements, which may interrupt the ultimate psychophysical goal for the practitioner, which is he concludes, to achieve "states of accomplishment" in the bodymind (1998: 276).

Sridhar and Thirunarayan were both trained and expert in methods of accessing *bhāva* through technique. The rigour of their training, which relies on mimicry and repetition, had enabled them in earlier tasks, to execute highly complex rhythmic motifs whilst simultaneously improvising on a completely different theme. Yet despite the team's combined experiences of different cultural knowledge systems, techniques and working methods, we were all struggling in that moment to find a common language to explore the same thing.

How then do we understand practices that are immersed in cultural systems that differ greatly from our own? Fischer-Lichte acknowledges the complexity of such aesthetic interactions and highlights that exchanges between people from different and or the same religious, cultural, social, economic milieus, can be achieved by “interweaving cultures without erasing their differences” (2009: 392 - 401). Theatre scholar, Craig Latrell, proposes that we place other cultural, local and aesthetic perspectives at the centre of analysis (2000). Latrell advocates attributing artistic agency to other cultures in how they adopt and adapt elements from cultures beyond their own (2000: 44 & 45).

This project was a collaborative process, but driven by an individual's vision, Thirunarayan's. *Who* took ownership of *which* cultural aesthetic was complicated and the process therefore demands a more refined understanding than Latrell provides. Thirunarayan was at the centre of this project in many roles: as instigator, artistic director, project manager, fundraiser, and employer. Consequently, her collaborative, interdisciplinary and iterative methodology allowed for the complex cultural interweavings, proposed by Fischer-Lichte

(2009: 392-401). Thirunarayan's methodology resonates with Sankalpam's dialectic approach and reflects the Indian world-view outlook promoted by Devi in gathering and disseminating knowledge. *The Clay Connection* studio research therefore, illustrates a methodology that acknowledges the "active" role of "other" cultures in engaging with cultural transfers (Latrell 2000: 46), which according to Latrell, re-calibrates the one-way system of cultural transactions that many have argued against (2000).

## **7.9 Dehiscence**

Underpinning the project and keeping it rooted was the question of "what binds clay and dance?" (Supple 2017b) and we were each and all using our own cultural knowledge to solve the question. Chatterjea warns that in applying similar methodologies to all forms, they are globalised and this eradicates cultural nuances in favour of a universal "norm" (2013: 12). Anthropologist, Arjun Appadurai voices concern that "the central feature of global culture [...] is the politics of the mutual effort of sameness and difference to cannibalize one another" (1990: 307-308). I however argue that these statements are too reductive and generalise particular investigative practices that emerge through complex interactions of multiple experiences and knowledge systems.

As I have discussed, Supple and I were applying methodologies embedded in our own cultural experiences of Western contemporary and postmodern dance and theatre. Our rationale was to discover how to bring clay and dance into a dialogue performatively. The methods of extraction, abstraction and intervention used in setting task-based exercises were fundamentally useful in

challenging embedded knowledge and experience of both clay and dance. Our process interrupted the pathways that Thirunarayan and Sridhar were familiar with. Our methods put obstacles in the way, forcing them to find new routes to explore familiar territory.

There are some similarities between this process and that of the first Sankalpam collaboration with Ellen Van Schuylenburch, who challenged the dancers to re-assess their understanding of dance and of the body. As I was not there to witness the collaboration with Van Schuylenburch and have only oral testimony accounts of the process, it is impossible to offer a direct comparison. However, my understanding is that whilst Van Schuylenburch challenged the performers through unfamiliar territories of dance, the body and aesthetics, *The Clay Connection* challenges Thirunarayan through both familiar and unfamiliar domains. Bharata Natyam and clay are the terrains of familiarity but in testing their relationship performatively, each is approached as if anew and Thirunarayan's relationship with each is consequently tested.

I argue therefore, that introducing the medium of clay to that of dance, forced Thirunarayan's dance practice through a process of dehiscence, during which the artist's familiarity with Bharata Natyam technique is ruptured. The term 'dehiscence' is a botanical term and denotes when a plant is brought to maturation and then ruptures and disperses its contents (McMullan 2010: 15). The term is adopted by Anna McMullan, theatre scholar and expert on the Irish playwright Samuel Beckett, and used to describe Beckett's "conscious dramatic strategy" to actively rupture existing conventions of theatre and text (2010: 15

& 23). I have recruited the word dehiscence for this discussion because it usefully denotes a process that goes beyond rupture alone.

Whilst Thirunarayan's relationship with Bharata Natyam was fractured in the many different tasks that were set during the rehearsal process, in this final rehearsal of *The Clay Connection* process, new understanding about how to approach the process differently emerged for me as choreographer, as a result of the schism created through the rehearsal task with Supple. This in turn, and through subsequent studio investigations, helped Thirunarayan to reflect on her embedded practice and reclaim the embodied aspect of it as I go on to discuss. The term dehiscence accounts for the resulting diffusion of content after the moment of rupture. What is released through the process is as important as the process of herniation itself. In this study therefore, rupture is discussed as a process and also viewed as a tool for disseminating emerging knowledge from within *The Clay Connection* process.

As Thirunarayan navigates between one embedded skill and another, between craft and art form, she notes how the lines between inner experience and outward expression, are not confined by specific forms. She states that:

being present without and within the body, extending from the physical [...] is a quality that makes dance for me. Beyond this comes the ability to be focused on an essential train of thought / *being* [italics mine]. If being present inside the body and outside the body is dance for me, then what is not dance? (2016b).

I argue that as a consequence of the dehiscent process, Thirunarayan finds new ways to modulate between gross and subtle body states, between internal intention and outward expression. This is prompted by the interplay between

the codified technique of Bharata Natyam and interrupted by the active engagement with clay. The role of technique in this process of transitioning between body states is also addressed as Thirunarayan re-evaluates her practice and ways of knowing Bharata Natyam. The dehiscent process is then shown to be advantageous as part of the dialectic methodology for Thirunarayan, encouraging the artist to re-appraise and re-experience her embedded cultural knowledge.

Epic narratives, Goddesses, and Gods are integrated into everyday life in many parts of India, and encountered through iconography, literature, ritual and music, within and beyond religion. Within each of the two Bharata Natyam performers (Thirunarayan and Sridhar) an embedded knowledge of the Goddess Pārvaṭī already existed, inherited from cultural pathways that integrate religion, society and the arts. This inherited knowledge was further embodied through their acquired Bharata Natyam training, which develops repertoire from mythology, depicting Goddesses and Gods. It is important to note how Thirunarayan thinks about deities in relation to mortal souls. Thirunarayan does not see Gods and Demons as separate from herself, stating that, “I feel that Gods and Demons are within us, they are the superhuman waiting to be uncovered and expanded” (Thirunarayan 2016b).

In this statement resides an important piece of personal cultural information. Thirunarayan views the relationship between the mortal and the divine as fluid and real. She draws on Indian world-view thinking in this way in which the human body replicates in micro, the cosmic universe consisting of body (*śarīra*)

and soul (*ātman*) (Vatsyayan 2007: 52). This thinking is employed within the technique of *abhinaya*, where the relationship between the dancer and the deity is unified (Chakravorty 2009). Thirunarayan's perspective is inherited through religion and culture, developed through philosophical exploration and cemented by her dance practice.

The performers had a familiarity with the narratives and characters. They each, however, had a different response to working with classical narrative and familiar characters as I discovered through personal interviews. Thirunarayan explained that she had in fact wanted to steer clear from using Indian classical literature during the R&D time (Thirunarayan 2016b). She states that although Indian classical literature was a valued route, a source of inspiration for her, it was her familiarity with this route that she wanted to challenge in her own creative process. For that reason, Thirunarayan wanted to use the studio process as an opportunity to try something new, to experiment and to take risks (Thirunarayan 2016b). However, she also understood that most other members of the team did not carry the same associations with classical literature as she did. Thirunarayan knew how she would deal with classical literature, but she didn't know how others would investigate these narratives and characters (Thirunarayan 2016b). The dancers had a route to explore the deity that was familiar to them. The rest of the team, although familiar with classical and epic narratives, had no pre-existing route. The team would therefore explore the divine Goddess from very differently informed perspectives.

Sridhar reflects upon how her perceptions and preconceptions of Pārvatī affected her process of working with that particular narrative. She explains that it made sense to her to use a story where creation emerges from the dirt of the Deity's body. Sridhar saw this as a fantastic connection with Thirunarayan, Bharata Natyam and ceramics, and viewed it as a ritualistic preparation for dance. However, the methods of exploring the narrative were challenging for Sridhar as I have described (Sridhar 2016). The dancers were often required to jump into one scene with little or no preparation. Although Sridhar knew the scenes well, the concept of immediately accessing narrative intention, emotion or character was not comfortable for her and she explains that in Bharata Natyam the character and narrative evolve, and the performer builds layers of complexity and emotion (Sridhar 2016). Sometimes this created tension, between exploration and familiarity.

Familiarity, therefore brought with it two things. Firstly, expertise, which enabled the performers to develop, as is typical in the dance form, a sophisticated layering of underlying thematic material, an excavation of character and a complex disclosure of expressive content. At the same time, the particular familiarity with the Goddess, through inherited and acquired cultural routes, brought with it a barrier. Thirunarayan describes this as a barrier to exploring the familiar in different ways (Thirunarayan 2016b). Supple was ambiguous about using the story of *Pārvatī's Dirt* and how the narrative impacted the creative process stating in a face to face interview that:

It grounded us, it brought us out of ourselves, in a way that I think myths do, they are great narratives, incredible, symbolic narratives, and Pārvatī is an incredibly potent set of propositions and it's inspiring, it brings you alive creatively. At the same time there's the danger that

it's a fall back or a safety net [which] stops you exploring other things that lie out there in the unknown (Supple 2017a).

It is worth examining Chandralekha's relationship with Bharata Natyam, in order to understand the complex negotiations that were taking place in *The Clay Connection* process and in particular in examining the story of *Pārvatī's Dirt*.

Chandralekha berated classical dance for its “fake religiosity”, its “archaic social values” its “numbing sentimentality, literalism, verbalism and its “dollification” (Chandralekha 2010: 75). She was outraged that the classical form had become hijacked by these external forces and wedded to such false ideals. She questioned why the classical forms remained suspended in time and unresponsive to social, economic, scientific and political situations (Chandralekha 2010: 75). Chandralekha's views were driven by the contexts through which she herself emerged as a performer, where social deprivation and gender inequality sat side by side with high arts practices, causing her to question the classical dance form and re-evaluate its role and its relevance in Indian society (Bharucha 2007; Katrak 2011; Chandralekha 2010). Despite this, Chandralekha also understood that the form had something much greater to offer in its ability to distill human essence and vitality (2010: 75). She saw these elements of classical dance, “and its unflagging potential to regenerate the human spirit [as aspects] that constitutes its *contemporaneity* and the reason why we need to work with the form” (Chandralekha 2010: 75).

In the tensions manifested in Chandralekha's relationship with Bharata Natyam, I see the frustrations with the dance form experienced by non-Bharata Natyam practitioners such as myself. At the same time, there is a resolute knowledge

that the form has huge potential and that the relationship between the form and its potential are critical in keeping Bharata Natyam fluid and responsive. In *The Clay Connection*, the members of the team experienced the tensions between the potential of Bharata Natyam and its limitations in different ways. Whilst the individual responses to the tensions between Bharata Natyam and the team is interesting to examine more closely, it adds little to this particular discussion and therefore beyond the scope of this particular research project.

### **7.10 Revisiting the Final Rehearsal**

In choosing the story of *Pārvatī's Dirt*, the team had wanted to explore *bhāva* as much as the dramatic narrative. It was the perfect myth through which the dialogue between clay and dance could be examined, but also through which to bring expertise from our different team members into conversation. In the final rehearsal we were all struggling to access the *bhāva* of Pārvatī's desperation to have a child. As a choreographer I was aware that Supple was trying to access something alive and vital from the narrative, which I understood to reside in the physicality. From my choreographic perspective the narrative was getting in the way of the dancers' embodying the emotion. Yet fundamental to Bharata Natyam is text, narrative, lyrics, and poetics. The dancers, it seemed, were frustrated with the process and not being able to meet the expectations of the director and myself. The Bharata Natyam technique at that point was becoming a barrier for Thirunarayan. We were all in our different ways looking for something that wasn't materialising. Familiarity was creating an *impasse* in the process and this was what brought the process to a point of dehiscence.

The question Supple asks of himself in his working processes is “how do I assist a performer in getting to a place which is beyond the confines of the place where they currently reside” (Supple 2017a). But at this point in the rehearsal process none of us had been able to reach beyond the confines in a way that we were all satisfied with. I felt that the responsibility to help the dancers go beyond their form lay with Supple and myself, yet as a researcher I was attentive to the ethical implications of such a proposition. I had two concerns. Firstly, how could the performers’ cultural knowledge of the classical narrative be distilled, yet at the same time disturbed? Thus, how could the performers’ familiarity with the cultural narrative be individualised? Underpinning this, was the ethical question of the methodology as discussed already; how might the interweaving of cultural knowledge, cultural expectation and cultural practice, be managed in a way whereby “the absolute authority of the other culture” is not eradicated (Fischer-Lichte 2014: 13). I did not want to dictate the movement language, nor dominate the techniques that the Bharata Natyam performers utilised, yet I wanted the dancers to find different ways to access a visceral quality in their delivery, to get beyond the gross physical body to the internal states of being.

It occurred to me that ‘being’ in the moment, whilst ‘doing’ the movement was frustrating Thirunarayan, both when the narrative was culturally familiar as in the exploration of *Pārvatī’s Dirt* and when it was not, as in our earlier task-based explorations. In these instances, I concluded that ‘experiencing’ the lived body whilst ‘performing’ the epic or imagined narrative, was often restrained by the

very technique of *abhinaya*, which Thirunarayan had always relied upon and which is the foundation for expressive narrative work in Bharata Natyam.

Thirunarayan, who had always found the technique liberating, was in these moments restrained by her embedded cultural knowledge and experience of *abhinaya*. She later confirmed this in a paper we co-presented about the work at The University of Surrey (2018). I began to understand that without addressing the connection between internal and external body states, the investigation into *abhinaya* would remain a surface one. In order for the team to distill the technique of *abhinaya*, Thirunarayan's process would have to be scrutinised, deconstructed, and investigated in another way. The final rehearsal had ruptured a seam of familiarity for me. The dialectic in this instance, how each member of the team responded to the rehearsal, had created a rupture in my own thinking about how to approach *abhinaya*. I had been working from my own territories of familiarity, but it seemed logical to go back to *bhāva*, not through dance, but using clay as a route to the internal states of 'being'.

I have reflected upon the final day of rehearsals and consider that Supple's task forced a dehiscence in *The Clay Connection's* process, not in the dancers' practice at this point, but in my own thinking. Supple's task had ruptured my blinkered thinking about how to get deeper into the work, which I had been attempting by abstracting text from movement, and dislocating narrative from physicality. Clay, it seems, had nudged me to reconfigure my relationship with my own cultural practice. I wondered if the new knowledge could be applied to

find another way forward in our investigation of *abhinaya*, and of clay and dance.

Thirunarayan's embedded cultural knowledge and experience would have to be challenged differently, but so would my own cultural knowledge, experience and expectations, in ways we could both relate to and by placing *bhāva* at the centre of the investigation. Having discussed this with the team, we agreed to set up an extra rehearsal day, where Thirunarayan and I could seed some ideas that had emerged from Supple's task. And so on the 18<sup>th</sup> July 2016, Thirunarayan and I met in an art studio at Oxford Brookes University's Headington campus, to contemplate *Pārvatī's Dirt* in a different way and quietly.

### **7.11 Clay Bodies**

As *The Clay Connection* evolved, I had shifted my focus from the Indian performance practices that Thirunarayan had shared with the team. I turned to other performance practitioners who were exploring the medium of clay. I had found many examples of practitioners from performance-art disciplines that were exploring clay as a performative medium, although not necessarily through dance. The practitioners were producing exciting work that investigated clay in ways that were visceral and theatrical. Oliver de Sagazan, and Philip Lee, for example, were utilising clay as a way of physically transforming the body or face, using liquid clay (called slip) props and paint to exaggerate and distort the human form. In some examples, although the face was masked by clay, an emotional resonance materialised for me in the process of watching their performance evolve.

Another practitioner, JJ Mc Cracken, was working with fired clay pots, which she carried on her body, bound by and buried from the weight of the vessels. This was intense physical work. For some performance artists, clay was used on a large scale, becoming a theatrical set, for others' mundane tasks shifting and moving clay bricks were endlessly repeated in outdoors settings. In some instances, clay-noises were used as an accompanying soundscape to the performance. For me, a different field of possibilities revealing how performing with clay could manifest had opened up.

Unlike the more recent dance/clay collaborations of Peake and Gormley /Cherakoui<sup>139</sup> these performance pieces emerged in outdoor sites, in studios, galleries as well as on stage. What struck me was the theatricality of the work and most significantly the transformative power of clay. Through our clay process we had focused on the wheel and on making pots at the wheel and trying to marry the performative aspects of the wheel and dance. This is illustrated in Figure 6. (Manders 2016), which shows Thirunarayan exploring Bharata Natyam at the wheel.

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<sup>139</sup> See chapter 7.2.

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Figure 6. Thirunarayan exploring Bharata Natyam at the wheel,  
*The Clay Connection* (2016). Photo: Zoe Manders. Courtesy of Thirunarayan

The discipline and skill of the Bharata Natyam form and of throwing a pot had been central to the investigation so far. To explore clay in its different states seemed to me to have liberating possibilities for the dancers and for the dance. The new sources of performance revealed how transformative the visceral element of clay was. As such, I wondered if it could carry, like the body of the performer, the intention of the narrative, providing another conduit for reception of creative intention.

The role of body in relation to self and other in performance is critical to this study. The modulation between intention and manifestation, subtle and gross body states, as well as embodied and embedded practice, is analysed by understanding the body in relation to other, by questioning the self in relation to the world and considering embodied practice in relation to technique. Thus,

Indian world-view thinking is never far away, running as a central seam of Sankalpam's process. The company may not always be aware of its constant presence, nor consciously draw from its source, but nevertheless it permeates Sankalpam's processes.

*The Clay Connection* brings different cultural disciplines and perspectives, knowledge and experience together, to explore one form through another medium and through several diverse lenses of the creative team members. Clay is ultimately a transformative medium that enables bodies to carry traces of emotional, narrative, thematic intention and emotion. In addition, clay holds the histories of place and recalls the labour of craft. As *The Clay Connection* team, we had barely scratched the surface of this versatile medium in our short rehearsal period. We were restricted by budget and space, which had to be cleaned at the end of every day and so clay was used sparingly and tentatively.

Inspired by new knowledge rendered through the dialectic that included research, process, discussion, reflection and analysis, and armed with the task of helping Thirunarayan to inhabit her body differently, we met for our extra rehearsal. We added clay in different states and forms, fired, wet, in liquid form (slip). We included the potters' tools and added various other vessels and materials. Until this point, the Bharata Natyam dancers had remained pretty clean and neat but my intention was to work with the transformational properties

of the medium and having shared the videos of clay sources with Thirunarayan, she was happy to explore the mess of the medium.

I set physical tasks for Thirunarayan to explore, re-visited the tasks that Supple had set at the last rehearsal to interrogate the character of Pārvatī and distil her emotions. Thirunarayan experimented with ways of using the liquid medium of slip on her face and body, using her potter's tools as well as her hands. This began as a movement-based task to explore the medium of slip on the dancer's body and evolved into a narrative section of the myth. Thirunarayan, as Pārvatī, examined the emotional quality of desperation as she stood on top of an upturned bowl, repeating a ritual task of preparation. Painting her face with slip, Thirunarayan as Pārvatī used a tool delicately at first, rhythmically and carefully applying slip to her forehead, cheeks and arms as if engrossed in some ritual act of beautification whilst waiting for the return of Siva. Through the repetition of the action and the act of repetition, movement became more hastily and carelessly executed. The application of clay through repeated, ritualised gestures, transformed Pārvatī as wife into warrior, as patient waiting shifted to resolution in the body's intention. Grey slip dripped down Thirunarayan's face soiling the Bharata Natyam dancer's neat appearance. Her spoiled beautification metamorphosed into a grotesque caricature of femininity, as clumps of mud matted her hair and soiled her clothes.

In another task, I asked Thirunarayan to move across the floor, laying prostrate (as pilgrims do at the temples, or dance students do to receive their teacher's blessing). In addition, I asked her to carry along the floor, a small lump of wet

clay wrapped in cloth. The movement quality transformed through the body, restricted by this ritualistic movement pattern and which Thirunarayan associates with religious ritual rather than dance. The clay provided a focus for her journey and mutated into the longed-for child, simultaneously reading as a ritual offering. As Thirunarayan made a laboured progression from one end of the space to the other, the clay left a dark wet smear in her wake resembling the viscosity of birth or the remnants of miscarriage.

Clay assisted in bedding emotion and intent in Thirunarayan's body which now, stripped of Bharata Natyam language but not technical principles, was free to explore essential qualities of the narrative through more subtle body states. Simultaneously, clay transformed the imagery by earthing Thirunarayan's movement in mess and stain, thereby offering different possibilities for the spectator to respond to. By using clay and physicality as a starting point, narrative and emotion could evolve. This gave Thirunarayan much needed space in rehearsal to experiment with transitioning between gross and subtle body states and time to sense where in the body those emotional intentions resided. I was struck by how easily Thirunarayan slipped into working with clay in this unfamiliar way. Although it is a medium that she knows well, the new exploration of clay was undertaken with an ease that is not usually present when dance is challenged by strange and unknown tasks. In this moment, clay became a vehicle for Thirunarayan, facilitating an exploration of body and movement differently in relation to narrative but more particularly to access *bhāva*.

Body is described as dependent and as a symbol of interdependence by Eagleton, who considers the body an historical agent, yet subject to multiple influences (2016b: 5). These influences recall us to our dependence on our surroundings and on each other (Eagleton 2016b: 5). In our quiet rehearsal time in 2016, Thirunarayan and I discovered that in these moments, her body was dependent on many things. It was dependent on clay to navigate the different body states required to access *bhāva*; dependent on Supple's rehearsal task to instigate a new enquiry and on our process to discover a new way of understanding her home field. I too was dependent on the rupturing of systems of comprehending, in order that new possibilities could be tested and new knowledge could emerge.

Despite her training in South Asian performance practice, underpinned by a philosophical understanding of a psychophysical body in performance, Thirunarayan had not been able to access the subtle transformations between internal and external, gross and subtle body states through the directions of the team. The team simultaneously had not been able to find a route into *bhāva* in the final rehearsal either. The interruption of her technique, of her knowledge of the body by the physical introduction of clay, herniated our cultural knowledge systems, our ways of understanding dance, the body, and performance. The schism allowed new knowledge to emerge, through Thirunarayan's clay body. Thirunarayan describes how the intrinsic qualities of Bharata Natyam emerged through these tasks, stating that:

What was interesting when we did the clay/ slip work [...] was that even though I was not using Bharata Natyam, I was quite aware of using the intrinsic quality of Bharata Natyam in terms of living in your fingertips for instance, or that mind-body connection, you know expressing

through your body. Those are the things that I was trying to translate, even though it was not necessarily Bharata Natyam technique. And that is something that I would like to revisit when I do the Bharata Natyam technique again (Thirunarayan 2016b).

By stripping the Bharata Natyam out, we had allowed a transformation to take place. What we didn't have time to do as Thirunarayan highlights, was to examine what would happen when Bharata Natyam is reintroduced into the process. Figure 7. (Manders 2016) illustrates the transformation that begins to occur on a visual level when slip is introduced into the process.

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Figure 7. After 'dehiscence'. Thirunarayan and Sridhar during *The Clay Connection* rehearsals (2016). Photo: Zoe Manders.  
Courtesy of Thirunarayan

### 7.12 The 'Sharing' in 2017

One year later, the knowledge gained from the dialectic between clay and dance, between both mediums and the team was investigated in a second R&D phase. The disseminated contents of the moment of dehiscence, once seeded and nurtured, were in this phase, further tested. What emerges in the learning is that the relationship between performer, performance and spectator can be modulated by the intervention of clay. This may be because it is possible for Thirunarayan to access *bhāva* more easily with clay as a conduit between body states. The transformation is particularly resonant in a cultural form such as Bharata Natyam, the very image of which denotes neatness and clarity, precision and complexity.

As I have discussed, in Bharata Natyam the performer and the performance are interdependent relying on the relationship between the creator's intention and the spectator's reception being moderated through the body of the performer. In this instance both clay and the body of the performer are in dialogue and modulating the reception of the spectator, partially through the transformative quality of clay. It is difficult to test this proposition rigorously so long after the event, however anecdotal evidence would suggest that audience members too felt the transformative power of clay on Bharata Natyam and Thirunarayan. After the sharing in 2016, and again in 2017, for example, audience responses were recorded for Thirunarayan's evaluation. Many spectators responded to the interaction between clay and dance, commenting on the visceral quality that clay brought to the performance, bringing the narrative alive, and in particular the transformative quality it had on

Thirunarayan as she became more and more immersed in clay and consequently less representative of the image that typifies the Bharata Natyam dancer.<sup>140</sup>

In 2018 and 2019, Thirunarayan and I continued the dialectic by testing how the same process of using clay as a catalyst to access *bhāva*, might be applied to Bharata Natyam movement language and repertoire. To this end we devised a workshop/demonstration in which we tested some interactions between clay and Bharata Natyam and gathered audience responses through a sequence of task-based exercises. Dance scholar and Bharata Natyam performer, Magdalene Gorringer, who attended a demonstration at The University of Surrey in May 2018, stated in an email correspondence that:

the [exploration] with clay gave the bharatanatyam a feel of being literally earthed. At the same time, it disrupted the sense the form can sometimes have of domesticity and safety. Given the powerful rhetoric of 'purity' within certain aspects of Hinduism, the deliberate embrace of dirt in the piece is particularly significant.

The mud and the bamboo (arranged like bars) suggested for me a number of ideas to do with the pure and the impure; 'embodiedness' and transcendence; imprisonment and release; uni and multifocality. It would be interesting to pursue these themes – what constitutes a 'free' performance of bharatanatyam, and when is our performance (effectively) behind bars?<sup>141</sup> (Gorringer 2018).

Gorringer's comments illustrate the potential that the dialogue between clay and Bharata Natyam brings to the classical dance form, challenging the presentation, and cultural associations through disrupted imagery and suggesting a politicised response in this particular viewer.

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<sup>140</sup> Responses were recorded by Thirunarayan, to gather feedback for her project from spectators, who came to see the sharings in 2016 & 2017

<sup>141</sup> We had added bamboo poles to our repertoire, inspired by images Thirunarayan had shared with the team in 2017, of multiple pots being secured to a bamboo pole and carried to market.

As with all Sankalpam processes, the dialectic continues beyond the rehearsal studio and after the performance event. In the case of *The Clay Connection*, sometimes opportunities are created to further test knowledge in public platforms such as academic symposiums. In this way the search for the “truth in movement’ referred to by Balchandran Gokul in relation to Sankalpam’s first collaboration in 1994, is live, fluid and continually refined and reassessed by the company’s continued enquires and through independent projects such as Thirunarayan’s *The Clay Connection*.

What follows are selected field notes from the final sharing in 2017 to invited guests in the second year of *The Clay Connection*. The notes give a flavour of the presentation and indicate the shifts in process between 2016 and 2017. They highlight the ongoing nature of Sankalpam’s methodology, whilst reflecting aspects of the knowledge disseminated from the moment of dehiscence.

*It is July 28<sup>th</sup>, 2017. The venue is Studio A at Farnham Maltings Arts Centre. We are here to witness a sharing of work from Vidya Thirunarayan’s project The Clay Connection. The research has brought together a team of creative practitioners in order to assess the possibilities of uniting the disparate mediums of clay and Bharata Natyam.*

*At 3pm the space fills with people. The room is long and narrow; light streams in from the velux windows in the ceiling, which are open on*

*this warm, balmy day. Across the wooden floor, linoleum has been stretched, extending from end to end and stopping short of the area reserved for the audience to sit. This space has a row of plastic chairs along the wall, in front of which are placed woven matting and cushions. The audience can choose to sit formally or informally in this intimate environment.*

*The mirrors along two sides of the room are covered in rough hessian cloth, strung up on hooks and over these are placed long bamboo poles, attached to which are various objects; shards of pottery, brass pots, dangling from different lengths of rope. The rest of the white walls in the room are covered in plastic sheeting. In the space, various objects are visible but as yet, their presence is unexplained. An electric potter's wheel sits empty and expectantly undisturbed, beside which, mounds of wet clay bricks are piled in neat rows. More plastic sheeting protects Arabic and Eastern European musical instruments, and clay pots of various sizes, shapes and states of readiness are placed along the edges of the room, marking out the creative territory. Although this sharing is simply that and not a performance, the space has been set as if it is a stage. The space is therefore dressed, transformed by the objects and people within it, all carefully considered in this informal offering.<sup>142</sup>*

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<sup>142</sup> Figure 8. (Manders 2017), illustrates the relatively clean space as the performers begin to interact with clay.

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Figure 8. Three physical performers, *The Clay Connection* sharing (2017).  
Photo: Zoe Manders. From left to right: Vidya Thirunarayan, Marie-Gabrielle  
Rotie and Lee Hart. Courtesy of Thirunarayan

*We, the team and the objects, are not alone in the space as it fills with audience members: family, friends, funders and colleagues. Today, the creative team, number nine. This number has been in flux over the two-week R&D period as different artists have come to play. The five artists who populate the performance territory comprise of female Bharata Natyam dancer/potter (Thirunarayan) dressed in simple dance sari, female butoh performer (Rotie) dressed in t-shirt and leggings, male actor (Hart) tall, insect-like bare-chested and bald, composer/ musician (Banks) and sound designer (Ruiz Soler). The compact space fills with viewers who have come to witness the offerings arising from the past two weeks of research.*

*The sharing is, explains the project's Director, Tim Supple, essentially fragments, "fragments of possibilities" (Supple 2017b). In this way Supple is informing the viewers that the work on offer is not a production, nor a sketch, nor perhaps even cohesive, but sits alternatively as multiple possibilities, of ideas, tasks, improvisations, that have emerged over the past two weeks of research. This research has built upon the R&D findings from 2016. The fragments on offer today may or may not be connected, but they sum up the possibilities from the two-week investigation, which, on this final day, sit side by side. In this way, the core creative team can contemplate what potential has emerged from the dialectic, whilst the viewer shares in a rich selection of the material.*

*As the sharing unfolds over the course of the next 60 minutes, the space becomes consumed by clay, and the environment is transformed. The performers too become increasingly dirty, evolving from familiar bodies of movers and actors to creatures of earth, mud, dirt, narrators of lives lived and imagined. They too are transformed. During this hour, narratives unfold through poetry, verbatim text, and reportage. Multiple props are taken up, played with and abandoned. Pots are made, destroyed and preserved as the performers get on with the work of moving between and through text, music, sound design, theatre and each other.<sup>143</sup>*

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<sup>143</sup> Figure 9. (Manders 2017), illustrates the transformation of the performers and the space.

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Figure 9. Clay transforms the space (2017). Photo: Zoe Manders. Vidya Thirunarayan & Lee Hart in *The Clay Connection* sharing  
Courtesy of Thirunarayan

*If the viewer knew something about Bharata Natyam then she would (understandably) be perplexed as to how this offering was connected with the migrated art form. If the viewer knew nothing about Bharata Natyam, she may feel the same. She may wonder if the Bharata Natyam artist at the centre of this investigation, Vidya Thirunarayan, has become so dislocated from her migrated source, Bharata Natyam, that she has lost connection with it altogether in this, her adopted locale.<sup>144</sup>*

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<sup>144</sup> Figure 10 (Manders 2017), illustrates Thirunarayan immersed in clay.

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Figure 10. Clay transforming the dancer (2017). Photo: Zoe Manders.  
Vidya Thirunarayan in performance, *The Clay Connection* sharing. Courtesy  
of Thirunarayan

*But as with the other core members of Sankalpam, as with other Sankalpam projects, Thirunarayan's investigation reflects a need to question her understanding of Bharata Natyam, to challenge her knowledge of how to access and apply fundamental aspects of this art form, of this cultural knowledge system, in order to refine and define her own cultural practice, and this artist believes that through combining the mediums of clay and dance, there is more to be discovered about Bharata Natyam which may not be at all evident to the viewers today.*

### 7.13 Summary

*The Clay Connection* provided me with an opportunity to investigate Sankalpam's dialectic methodology from an immersed perspective. Using thick description, I have addressed how Sankalpam's dialectic methodology resonates beyond the company and filters into Thirunarayan's personal practice. Thirunarayan's project offered me an opportunity to explore how the dialectic operates between different mediums as well as between practitioners, from within the project as well as actively shaping the project. This illustrates why the broader term 'cultural knowledge systems' is useful in this study.

I began this chapter by outlining how the union between movement and clay seems to be a current trend in the UK dance landscape. I highlighted how Thirunarayan's project was unique in several ways which separated *The Clay Connection* from other dance/clay explorations. I outlined how *abhinaya* has been a difficult element of the dance form for non-informed audiences to engage with. I indicated how historically this has frustrated practitioners and audiences alike (Iyer 1997) yet prevails in current discourse (Gibson 2016). I considered how clay becomes a catalyst for change and for transformation both as a theatrical device but also in the body of the performer. I considered therefore, Thirunarayan's bodily response to clay and how this enabled a different way of accessing *bhāva*.

The project illustrated the complexities of individual responses to context and highlighted the need for more tailored approaches in understanding where migrated forms are located in adopted locales and how they might be explored.

I discussed how postmodern methods of exploration sat uncomfortably for me as a researcher against the conventions of a South Indian classical dance form, despite my direct implication in those methods as a choreographer. I highlighted the tensions between my dual roles as choreographer/ researcher and acknowledged both the usefulness and frustrations of each in the process.

I argued that as the process was nearing its final stages, a dehiscence occurred as the familiar cultural pathways of the dancers were disrupted once more, challenged through re-imagining *Pārvatī's Dirt*. The dehiscent moment set in motion a sequence of events through which I began to look at the dialogue between Bharata Natyam and clay in a different way. Clay was a powerful theatrical device, a transformative medium, which in communion with Bharata Natyam had the potential to challenge the performer and the spectator. I have discussed therefore how the dialogue between clay and dance created possibilities for Thirunarayan to access *bhāva*, brokered by the intervention of clay upon Thirunarayan's movement practice. Through this process, Thirunarayan's body emerges as both a singular agent of cultural practice, and also a body of pluralities, dependent and interdependent upon learned systems and evolving processes, inheriting and inhabiting different cultures and histories. How her critical thinking and tacit knowledge develops, and how her cultural knowledge of each medium (clay and dance) is impacted in the process, were also discussed.

Thirunarayan's independent project illustrates the complex negotiations that can take place in the dialectic methodology that was established by Sankalpam.

It also illustrates how through the dialectic, the specificity of Bharata Natyam as an embodied practice can be reclaimed for Thirunarayan. Thirunarayan's response to moving with clay is particular to her relationship with both mediums, which is a highly unusual combination of skills. The usefulness of clay in helping to access *bhāva* through a different route therefore may be particular to Thirunarayan. I illustrate in chapter six, how Sankalpam applies the dialectic through collaborations to provoke new ways of understanding and refining the form. Sankalpam's dialectic methodology indicates a way forwards I argue, to tailoring individualised approaches to working with migrated dance forms. The dialectic methodology therefore accommodates individual responses to different contexts, driving home the issue that particularities and specificities can become nurtured through individualised approaches.

In the following chapter, I turn my attention to how Sankalpam applies knowledge acquired from dialectic interactions to further distill and refine practice, by examining how the company disseminates and tests acquired knowledge in teaching contexts.

## Chapter 8

### Teaching: Testing the Dialectic

#### 8.1 Overview

How knowledge is interrogated, absorbed, reconsidered and refined by Sankalpam has been discussed in chapters six and seven. This was focused through the dialectic that emerged within company collaborations and independent practice. How new knowledge is applied and evaluated in other culturally-informed bodies is examined in this chapter by assessing the role of teaching in Sankalpam's dialectic methodology. I focus primarily on the teaching practice of Uppal Subbiah, delivered on the BA Dance programme at the University of Surrey during 2016 & 2017. The context provided consistency for collecting data across a two-year period.

During the research period I complimented the focused fieldwork with staff and students at the University of Surrey, by undertaking a broad survey of UK Bharata Natyam teaching practices. I therefore conducted ethnographic fieldwork in a range of geographic, community, educational and private settings, which included Balchandran Gokul and Thirunarayan's private classes. This established a greater understanding of the different teaching methods employed in the broader Bharata Natyam teaching landscape in the UK, providing some useful reference points and supporting my evaluation.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> See Appendix 3 for details of fieldwork.

## **8.2 Teaching and the Dialectic**

To nurture Bharata Natyam in an adopted locale, Sankalpam is dependent upon new ways of exploring the form. For Uppal Subbiah, teaching has emerged as a main artery to refining her particular understanding of Bharata Natyam as an embodied practice and crucially, of exploring the body within the technique. Teaching therefore provides a context for Uppal Subbiah to apply knowledge about body and form, acquired from the dialectic and to test how it is received in different bodies.

Whilst the focus of this chapter centres on the BA Dance students at the University of Surrey, Uppal Subbiah also tests her acquired knowledge in other teaching contexts; with for example the Sri Lankan Tamil women's group UYIR, and in her children's classes at the Tamil school in Wembley. The methods deployed to transmit Bharata Natyam to different cultural communities, and to understand where it sits in diverse bodies, has become a primary tool for Uppal Subbiah's own investigation. Teaching therefore benefits her understanding and articulation of the form and enables her to examine the way Bharata Natyam sits within her own body, leading her to individualise the cultural knowledge system. Much the same was identified in studio process of Thirunarayan, who individualises the form by examining it through a dialogue with clay.

The co-Artistic Directors of Sankalpam, have cultivated their individual teaching and performance practices throughout Sankalpam's evolution in a variety of settings, through the company's dialectic and independently. All three artists

have delivered workshops and residencies as part of Sankalpam's education work. All have established private classes for their local communities, in Swindon, Portsmouth, Southampton, Westergate, Southport and London. Both Thirunarayan and Balchandran Gokul have worked extensively in regional communities through building relationships with Swindon Dance and MDI respectively. Much of Uppal Subbiah's earlier teaching and mentoring invitations were mediated through organisations such as Sampad,<sup>146</sup> or The Place (dance and performance centre, London). As regionally-based artists, Thirunarayan and Balchandran Gokul have been exposed to many varied aspects of teaching in community settings through the dance agencies which supported and nurtured them as artists. Hence, they have worked extensively with youth groups, community groups and older people as part of agency-organised projects. The knowledge gained through such a wide range of teaching contexts in urban and regional environments has nurtured Sankalpam's exploration of Bharata Natyam and simultaneously feeds back into the company's teaching practice.

By 2010, Sankalpam had undergone a shift from operating as a regularly funded dance company, which toured new productions annually, to a company that was beginning to examine a new path for exploring Bharata Natyam. Sankalpam was entering a period of change. The co-Artistic Directorship of three, was now headed up by two, as Thirunarayan had resigned to pursue her apprenticeship as a potter. Balchandran Gokul, although still co-Artistic

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<sup>146</sup> Sampad is a UK arts organisation, which aims to connect communities with British Asian and South Asian art forms and heritage. The organisation is based in Birmingham.

Director, was occupied with her master's degree at the University of Manchester and employed by MDI as project manager for the *Big Dance* project (2012). Balchandran Gokul's role with Sankalpam was therefore limited over this period of time. Uppal Subbiah was herself embarking upon an MA in choreography at Middlesex University and this allowed her time to reflect upon whilst simultaneously question her dance practice (Uppal Subbiah 2017a). The immersion of the remaining co-Artistic Directors in academic study and large-scale community projects set a new course for Sankalpam.

At the same time the company was launching another production, *Corporalities*, to which it had invited three Euro-American contemporary performance practitioners to contribute. Italian choreographer and Artistic Director of Protein dance company, Luca Silvestrini and German choreographer Stephanie Schober created pieces about "cultural hang ups" and "the desire to communicate" respectively (Anderson 2010). In addition, Uppal Subbiah invited Zarrilli to collaborate once again<sup>147</sup> to explore, this time, the process of *abhinaya* (Anderson 2010). The piece, *...sweet...dry...bitter...plaintive* (2010 & 2011) completed Sankalpam's triple bill for touring. Of the five company dancers, Uppal Subbiah was the only co-Artistic Director of Sankalpam to perform in this production. This was a first for the company.

Uppal Subbiah, triggered by her Masters' enquiry and her collaboration with Zarrilli on, *...sweet...dry...bitter...plaintive* was questioning her habitual

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<sup>147</sup> See *Dance of the Drunken Monks*, chapter 6.8.

responses in dance, and this began to impact upon her teaching as she asked herself “what do you teach in the form? What is so precious about the form which you can deliver to people who don’t necessarily want to be performing artists?” (Uppal Subbiah 2018). She explains how she views herself as responsible for holding the form, seeing herself as being both defined by the form and the repository for it and asking therefore “*HOW* do you deliver?” (emphasis Uppal Subbiah) (Uppal Subbiah 2018).

### **8.3 Systems of Transmission: *guru-shishya-parampara***

Indian classical dance is traditionally passed on through a vertical system of transmission, which promotes the dissemination of a particular style or school of classical dance through lineage from the *guru* (teacher) to the *shishya* (student) through the *parampara* (succession of teachers/ disciples). In the culturally rooted *guru-shishya* system, much more than technique is passed on to the student by the *guru*, argues dance scholar Stacey Prickett (2007: 26). Within this system, explains former Director of Kalakshetra, Leela Samson; the *shishya* (student) has to undertake particular physical tasks as a means of payment and to earn their worthiness from their *guru*. This serves as a way of releasing the ego and surrendering in servitude to their *guru* (Samson, L. 1997 cited in Prickett 2007: 27). The extensive time the student spends with the *guru*, Prickett explains, results in all sorts of core belief systems being transmitted in addition to the *guru*’s specific dance style and the actual steps of the particular technique (2007: 26).

Although Kalakshetra adopted a system, which employed both a European conservatoire model and a *guru-shishya* system simultaneously,<sup>148</sup> the transmission of core beliefs from Devi to Sankalpam's co-Artistic Directors is, nevertheless, evident in the company's methodological approach, as I have previously discussed. O'Shea proposes that a Bharata Natyam dancer is not just a performer of the dance but an authority of the style, the lineage and the authenticity of the style, referring to the unbroken line of knowledge and instruction that is passed through the *guru-shishya-parampara* (1998: 52).

In traditional Indian *guru-shishya-parampara* systems of body training (including martial arts, theatre and dance) technique is taught primarily through the visual field, with little analysis of body, or muscle, and written transposition of the form was not common. Learning traditionally happens through repetition and mimicry of the teacher and is ingrained in the body as muscle memory (Chatterjea 1996; Zarrilli 2011: 249). Exercises are learned through rote and questions are not encouraged. From my fieldwork observations, teaching styles in the UK vary and include the archetypal example, where the teacher demonstrates and students repeat. All of Sankalpam's co-Artistic Directors employ this method of demonstration and repetition as part of a variety of teaching techniques for private classes, as well as in higher education settings. In Figure 11. (Fionn Barr 2017) Uppal Subbiah demonstrates *mudras* (hand gestures) to the students at the University of Surrey, in a typical seated fashion, employing the use of demonstration, repetition, vocal recitation and mimicry, as highlighted by Zarrilli (2011: 249).

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<sup>148</sup> See chapter 4.5 and 4.6.



Figure 11. Uppal Subbiah teaches *mudras* (hand gestures) to the students at the University of Surrey (2017). Photo: Debbie Fionn Barr

From my fieldwork observations I noted that many students in Higher Education contexts were very vocal and asked for information, corrections and clarification. There was a marked interactive element in Balchandran Gokul and Uppal Subbiah's classes between teacher and students, with children as young as six raising questions and issues for the teachers to resolve. This, Balchandran Gokul revealed in a personal correspondence, was welcomed as it encouraged her to think about the form in different ways and ultimately it enhances her practice (Balchandran Gokul 2017). The active and interactive method of engaging with students, observed in Balchandran Gokul and Uppal Subbiah's teaching practices, reflects a Kalakshetra approach to learning, summed up by

the first headmaster of the Besant Theosophical High School (BTHS),<sup>149</sup> Sri. K. Sankara Menon (1907-1995). Menon describes the philosophy underpinning Kalakshetra as a “transaction of teaching and learning [...] [and as] conversations between teachers and students” (BBC 1984). From my observations Sankalpam’s teaching methods, mirror the Kalakshetra approach described by Menon, where the class is a conversation, an interaction and where the transmission of knowledge is a two-way process. Furthermore, I noted through observations and subsequent informal conversations with Balchandran Gokul, that teaching provides a platform to examine, refine, challenge and extend existing knowledge, and in this way teaching too becomes part of the dialectic.

#### **8.4 Bharata Natyam as Holistic Discipline**

Bharata Natyam has been described by Naseem Khan, as a “stringent discipline” which requires an expert articulation of virtually every single muscle of the body, both major and minor, including eyes, fingers, neck, and eyebrows (1981: 63). This, states Khan, is unlike Western classical ballet and she details the rhythmic complexity and dexterity, and the interpretive and improvisatory skills that are also acquired during a Bharata Natyam training (1981: 63). In addition to attaining the virtuosity of physical articulation, notes Prickett, a training in classical Indian dance demands a much broader knowledge and understanding of related practices such as literature, historiography, aesthetics,

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<sup>149</sup> The school was started by Devi’s husband George Arundale in 1934 and re-housed by Devi on the Kalakshetra campus in 1976 (Kalakshetra 2019).

religion and mythology (2007: 26).<sup>150</sup> It is this broader understanding which Prickett refers to as “contextual foundations” that underpins the physical technique (2007: 26) and which students may typically learn as an integral part of their training. Indeed, not only are theory and practice yoked in Indian culture, as demonstrated through Indian arts practices (Vatsyayan 1988: xi), but argues Vatsyayan, the theory of Indian dance is also interdependent upon other arts disciplines, with which it shares technical principles (1988: 23 & 24).

Bharata Natyam training, as Khan describes it, is viewed as an holistic discipline framing the physical technique within social, cultural, historical, aesthetic, religious and philosophical contexts. Indian dance historian, scholar and critic, Sunil Kothari, emphasises the holistic approach adopted within an Indian dance education too, which he states, is particular in its reflection of a life-philosophy of interconnectedness between the individual and the cosmos (2002: 485). Zarrilli refers to the ‘holistic approach’ as “unique” (2011: 244).<sup>151</sup> Kothari suggests that Indian dance has a state of completeness, which other art forms do not have, by both incorporating other art forms and processing them through the body of the dancer and he states that:

at the level of both theory and technique, the approach is holistic. Indian dance synthesizes the techniques of other arts to evolve an art form which is considered the most significant of all [...] Indian dance treats the human form as a vehicle of aesthetic expression and embodies the content and the form of other arts in one homogeneous beautiful whole (2002:485).

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<sup>150</sup> Stacey Prickett’s research interests include South Asian dance in Britain. She has authored reports for Akademi (UK South Asian dance organisation in London), and has undertaken training in Kathak.

<sup>151</sup> Zarrilli refers to South Asian psychophysical practices, in which he includes the performing arts. Bharata Natyam would then fall within this category.

At the level of the practice itself, the holistic rationale is summed up as I observe Uppal Subbiah teaching different communities of students. I notice a constant theme in her teaching contained in a phrase she recites at the end of each class. In this phrase lies some critical information about the way Uppal Subbiah thinks about dance. It reveals, I suggest, how the legacy that Sankalpam has inherited through Devi's Kalakshetra training and of Indian classical performance practices more broadly, permeates. As Uppal Subbiah's students stand with their feet neatly together, eyes closed and palms of the hands pressed together, she concludes each class by reciting the phrase, "lift your heart, bow your head, honour the spirit of dance which is within you"<sup>152</sup> (Uppal Subbiah observation, 2016 and 2017).

This simple recitation can be read as an instruction to the student to be mindful of the body on multiple levels, to integrate the heart, mind and consciousness within the physical frame. As I understand it, the phrase sums up Indian world-view thinking about the body in relation to the cosmic universe. For example, it addresses the external/physical or gross body (head), it acknowledges the internal mechanical body (heart), it speaks to the lived body (spirit or consciousness) manifesting, I suggest, in a mindful recognition that each part is connected and interconnected, dependent and interdependent through the medium of dance which resides, states Uppal Subbiah, "within you" (Uppal Subbiah observation, 2016 and 2017). In this phrase, which all Uppal Subbiah's students learn, I suggest that there is a powerful link to the legacy of Sankalpam

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<sup>152</sup> Sometimes Uppal Subbiah recites this iteration instead "lift up your heart, bow your head and honour the consciousness that is within you".

through Devi and to an Indian epistemology. The phrase suggests that within each one, the spirit of dance dwells and is yet to be activated, it is dependent upon the engagement of the physical, mental, conscious and lived experience of the dancer.

#### **8.4.1 Uppal Subbiah's Teaching Practice**

When I interviewed Uppal Subbiah about her teaching practice in 2017, she explained that it has evolved in two stages. The first stage took place, she stated, over a period of about fifteen years (1996 - 2011) the focus of which was teaching workshops and classes for and with Sankalpam, as well as delivering technique training to conservatoire students at the London School of Contemporary Dance. Uppal Subbiah describes in a face-to-face interview, how she considers herself in this phase of teaching, stating that:

the ten to fifteen years that I have taught with Sankalpam, I've taught as a performing artist. [...] challenging the perception that people have of Bharata Natyam and actually showing it and saying, 'look we also have a jump, you have a jump, we have a jump, we have a turn, and it's equally technical, equally virtuosic, so there is no difference between what your dance form is and what my dance form is in terms of virtuosity. That was my main impetus for so many years (Uppal Subbiah 2018).

The artist exploited these formative teaching sessions as a way of illustrating the potential of Bharata Natyam, of promoting the form itself, not as a cultural dance form, but as a rigorous technique and a highly evolved arts practice (Uppal Subbiah 2018).

Sankalpam has always aligned its practice with core aspects of the discipline, such as rigour and virtuosity. The co-Artistic Directors also look for these qualities from other practitioners and disciplines. This removes Bharata Natyam

from the politicised and cultural readings that have so often frustrated Jeyasingh, who also sees the value of the form as a technique with much to offer (2010: 183). In foregrounding her role as a performing artist, Uppal Subbiah inherently rejects the imposition of the ‘cultural ambassador’ label, historically bound with Indian dance practices in the UK (Jeyasingh 2010: 182), and which many Bharata Natyam practitioners will recognise through experience.<sup>153</sup> Uppal Subbiah makes no qualitative distinctions between Bharata Natyam and other codified dance techniques stating that “I never thought that this art form was substandard or culturally different, or that it had to be done within [a specific] cultural context [...] I didn’t learn the art from as a cultural identity” (Uppal Subbiah 2018). Sankalpam’s methodology reinforces this view of Bharata Natyam, which is explored by the company as a technique, supported by, but not defined by culture. It is refined however through the lenses of many cultural knowledge systems.

Uppal Subbiah describes the second phase of her teaching practice, as “truly teaching”, where she focuses much more on teaching those she describes as ‘non-professionals’ (Uppal Subbiah 2018). Uppal Subbiah’s idiosyncratic language is central to both her teaching style and methods as well as in her responses to questions during formal interviews and informal discussions. My understanding of Uppal Subbiah’s phrase “truly teaching” is based on my knowledge of her over many years and I understand it to refer to when she began to use teaching as a method to explore the body in Bharata Natyam. Uppal Subbiah’s shift in focus is a personal journey for her but it also reflects

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<sup>153</sup> See chapter 4.8.

the deeper learning acquired through Sankalpam's dialectic. As the company's understanding of Bharata Natyam became re-defined through many diverse and complex dialectic interactions, the individual co-Artistic Directors processed the new knowledge in different ways. They digested and tested new knowledge in their individual regions and cities, with their private students, and continued through company discourse research and analysis.

### **8.5 Teaching at the University of Surrey**

Sankalpam has delivered Bharata Natyam teaching in many different Higher Education Institutions. The company was resident at the University of Roehampton on the Choreomundus - International master's in dance Knowledge, Practice and Heritage (2016), and has taught at University of Chester (2019). At the University of Surrey, Uppal Subbiah has delivered twice-weekly classes in Bharata Natyam since 2014, on the BA Dance programme. There, Bharata Natyam is situated as part of a shared central canon rather than on the borders of mainstream learning. On the programme all forms of dance are considered cultural and two classical practices, Bharata Natyam and ballet, share equal status. This echoes anthropologist, Joann Kealiinohomoku's 1969 provocation that all forms of dance are ethnic (2001: 33-42). The absence of an hierarchical structure for dance techniques at the University of Surrey, allows each technique: Bharata Natyam, ballet, contemporary African and released-based contemporary, to be viewed, as Sabine Sörgel, former Programme Director (2013 - 2018) clarifies, "from a contemporary perspective [...] through the ethos and pedagogy of the programme" (Sörgel 2016). I note how Sörgel suggests that Bharata Natyam is valued as a 'classical technique',

examined from a 'contemporary perspective'. Sörgel, also a theatre scholar, states that the aim of the course is to train "contemporary dancers with an awareness of some of the principles underlying different cultural dance forms" (Sörgel 2016). When asked why Bharata Natyam was chosen, when previously the programme had focused on another Indian classical dance form, Kathak<sup>154</sup>

Sörgel reflects that:

Bharata Natyam was chosen for the new programme because of its theatrical nature [...]. Whilst Kathak had been taught at Surrey before and has received a lot of attention through Akram Khan's work, we were interested to shift and/or alternate the two classical forms in the curriculum. When I met Stella [Uppal Subbiah] I was very convinced [...] in the way that she teaches a yoga warm up and integrates tasks for the students that translate the classical into the contemporary for them (Sörgel 2016).

For her part, Uppal Subbiah explains that she was interested in working with the dance students at the University of Surrey, because they have had no experience of the form and for her this is an advantage (Uppal Subbiah 2016). She states in a Skype interview that this presents her with "a great challenge and excitement, because they don't have to fit into a particular model and [therefore, she continues] I feel very free" (Uppal Subbiah 2016). I understand Uppal Subbiah's statement to mean that teaching at the University of Surrey provided her with a platform to explore and experiment with her own learning, as the dancers would have no preconceived ideas about how the form should be taught, nor what they should be learning. The undergraduate classes, I suggest, would therefore enable Uppal Subbiah to experiment with her own learning, where she could trial new knowledge acquired from Sankalpam's dialectic exchanges.

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<sup>154</sup> Kathak is a classical Indian dance form originating in North India.

At the University of Surrey, Bharata Natyam practical training is supported through theoretical input, which provides the students with a more in-depth understanding of the form. Uppal Subbiah's teaching methodology emphasises both a physical rigour and an embodied understanding of the form. The accent upon the co-existence of external manifestation and internal impetus is cemented through a rigorous approach to codified movement and technical proficiency. This reflects Sankalpam's approach to nurturing the migrated form in the adopted locale of the UK dance landscape as illustrated in the choice of collaborators such as Van Schuylenburch. It also reflects Zarrilli's analysis of South Asian psychophysical disciplines more broadly (2004: 11). Uppal Subbiah for example, draws upon the methodologies described by Zarrilli when detailing Indian psychophysical performance and martial arts practices in attending to the physical rigours of technique whilst encouraging students to simultaneously activate the subtle body (Zarrilli 2004).

Uppal Subbiah begins her class with a yoga warm up, after which she begins the Bharata Natyam technique itself with *namascaram*. The *namascaram* is a sequence of ritual movements that are performed at the beginning and end of every Bharata Natyam class to formally open and close the session. Throughout the class, Uppal Subbiah employs the technique of repetition of positions, timing and detailed articulation of limbs to embed physical patterns, body postures and rhythmic sequences. However, whilst Uppal Subbiah adopts a typical class structure in her delivery of Bharata Natyam, of demonstration and mimicry, she also resists the restrictions imposed by institutional

frameworks, which limit Bharata Natyam from being taught and from being learned in a deeper way. For example, she requires the students to pay attention to what is happening inside the body, on the surface of the body, to their mood, their energy, throughout the class. She reminds them to recalibrate their relationship between body, senses, space and consciousness. She uses phrases such as “imprint that feeling” and, “observe your body” whilst giving very detailed instructions about shape, form, rhythm and posture (Uppal Subbiah 2016).

### **8.6 The ‘Lived Experience’**

Uppal Subbiah facilitates students to learn by integrating body, senses, mind and consciousness within their learning experience. She also encourages her students to individualise the cultural knowledge she transmits to them, by taking ownership of the form and exploring it as a ‘lived experience’. The term ‘lived experience’ is used by Uppal Subbiah and other Sankalpam co-Artistic Directors and refers to an integral part of the dance form, particularly the narrative, descriptive and emotional elements more commonly found in *abhinaya*. It is to activate these aspects of *abhinaya* that the dancer draws on her ‘lived experience’ to get to the essence of the narrative, mood or emotional quality of the dance.<sup>155</sup>

Students are encouraged to draw upon their own life experience by Uppal Subbiah. This proves particularly useful when working with students that have no historical relationship with, nor cultural connection to the narrative or

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<sup>155</sup> See chapter 1.8.

characters they are learning to portray through repertoire. It is also useful for drawing out particular qualities when teaching within a limited time frame. Referring to their own lived experiences therefore allows students to access complex material through a personal route, which they are often dislocated from culturally. Uppal Subbiah employs this technique (that of accessing 'lived experience') to enable students with their pure dance (*nritta*) work too.

Performance scholar Jerri Daboo stresses that the time-poor economy promoted through university learning systems is not conducive to embedding techniques which require time and repetition to become embodied and to then progress to a more cultivated bodymind practice (2009: 125). Yet within the bodies of Uppal Subbiah's students, who receive limited training over a finite period of time, I observe an attention to the inward impulse and the outward manifestation, which resonates between gross and subtle body and beyond the students entirely to the spectator. The students may not have the technical skills or knowledge to proficiently modulate between these two states in the refined and controlled manner that Zarrilli advocates, and which Daboo describes, nevertheless the quality of the inner intention, manifests externally in their physical body sites, despite limited expertise in the technique itself.

Uppal Subbiah explains to the students that she is not trying to create Bharata Natyam dancers in her short time with them. She is very clear that she is passing on the principles of Bharata Natyam technique so that the students might utilise them to create work independently (Uppal Subbiah 2016). She tells the students that she is offering them little windows to look at the form through;

from the perspective of one item of repertoire, *alarippu*. She states that, “with great definition I have taken *alarippu*, which is the first piece [...] in an evening’s performance. It’s a very, *very* tough piece, it looks simple, but it is a *very* tough piece” (Uppal Subbiah 2016 & 2017). She continues by explaining to the students her rationale for choosing this item for their introduction to Bharata Natyam as part of their undergraduate course, stating that she has chosen it:

because I feel it covers all aspects of [Bharata Natyam] it has the standing, it has the sitting and it has the full sitting. Not only that, it covers the embodied approach to [the form]. It [addresses] the seen space, it [addresses] the unseen space and because the details are so minute you need to be really clear (Uppal Subbiah 2016 & 2017).

What is evident from observing Uppal Subbiah teaching and talking to the students is that she is presenting them with an item to learn that explores both the physical technique and the more complex nuances between subtle and gross body states. To emphasise the internal aspects of the form and help the students to access the subtle body, Uppal Subbiah uses idiosyncratic phrases that carry complex instructions such as asking the students to remember, “the taste” of the movement (Uppal Subbiah 2016 & 2017). She reminds them to recalibrate their relationship between body, sense, mind and spirit. She uses phrases such as, “imprint that feeling” and, “observe your body” and she challenges them by saying, “I am giving you a pointer, so you can aim for the pointers and then the inner body can produce the sensation” (Uppal Subbiah 2016 & 2017).

Uppal Subbiah’s directions combine physical instruction and experiential imagery. Her phrases are perhaps culturally moderated by a dance inheritance which draws on different methods of guiding the performer to access the lived

body. Zarrilli explains just how differently the body and the relationship between internal and external is considered in Indian performance practice by giving the example of *Kutiyattam*<sup>156</sup> actress and dancer Usha Nangyar, whom when teaching a set-piece for a *kutiyattam* performance, asks the actor to “breathe through the eyes whenever there is a point of emphasis” (2011: 244). Zarrilli states that the method of instruction provides a phenomenologically informed account of the actual embodied process, proposing that when the student is asked to breathe through the eyes, Nangyar is referring to the use of the subtle body (2011: 245). Uppal Subbiah’s directions too, indicate a modulation between the internal and external experience, assisting the student/performer in finding ways to navigate between the two.

Daboo argues that in Higher Education institutes, module criteria can get in the way of a deeper learning<sup>157</sup> as students might focus on the external manifestations of the movement rather than the internal impulse or connection (2009: 127). I found this to be true from my survey of students across Higher Education institutions in the UK, where Bharata Natyam was taught on the dance or theatre programmes. I observed that many students when interviewed, referred first and foremost to the external skills of Bharata Natyam when discussing their learning. And yet a certain level of physical skill is necessary Zarrilli explains, for a deeper level of learning to happen (2004: 11). Zarrilli argues that in order for the performer to activate the subtle body, there is a need for rigour, discipline and technical proficiency (2004: 11). He

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<sup>156</sup> I use Zarrilli’s spelling here.

<sup>157</sup> Daboo refers here to Paul Ramsden’s notions of a deep and surface approach to learning as well as teaching (Ramsden 2003 in Daboo 2009).

emphasises that it is through the external-facing activities where the oscillation between an inward/outward method of body awareness really manifests (Zarrilli 2004: 662). He concludes that, “it is in these outwardly oriented practices that one’s stance ecstatically modulates between the inner and outer, the to-the-body and from-the-body, the inner/ depth core, and the outer world one encounters” (2004: 662).

Daboo explains that to train immersively in bodymind practices, to ‘learn with the body’ to understand on an experiential level; space and time are essential components and that these are often restricted in a university curriculum (2009: 125). Daboo points to an increase in modular systems of learning and teaching which leads, she proposes, to unsatisfactory “‘bite-size’ learning” (2009: 125). Uppal Subbiah herself is conscious of students understanding the form in a surface way. She therefore refuses to treat the classical form as “Bollywoody”<sup>158</sup> (Uppal Subbiah 2016) and expects the rigour and discipline that Zarrilli refers to, from her students in their learning.

## 8.7 Shifts in Focus

After Sankalpam’s tour of *Corporealities* (2010-2012) the company began to focus on projects that were more research-based and process driven, each co-Artistic Director began to develop a particular individual route to exploring Bharata Natyam more closely. For Thirunarayan, now an independent practitioner, the exploration began to emerge through her work with clay. For

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<sup>158</sup> Meaning, like the popular Bollywood style of dance used extensively in Indian popular movies.

Balchandran Gokul, the relationship between Bharata Natyam and philosophical thought had been present in her independent creative practice since her first collaboration with Samson (*Akasa*). This reflected an ongoing interest that had emerged through her training at Kalakshetra where, as a member of the Theosophical Society Library, she was exposed to a number of different thinkers. This interest was further nurtured by completing a BA in English Literature at the University of Madras.

Balchandran Gokul's exploration of the relationship between dance and philosophical thought continued through her training and performance career, finding new routes of exploration through Sankalpam's dialectic. Through her independent practice as well as her roles with Sankalpam, Balchandran Gokul developed an extensive knowledge and experience of community practice. This was nurtured through her roles with MDI in Liverpool where she had been Artist in Residence and Youth Dance Development Officer. Here she was responsible for developing and delivering the Youth Dance England's national programme in Merseyside. By 2012 she was leading on the national *Big Dance* programme in the North West region as part of the London Festival 2012. Through working on these programmes, Balchandran Gokul was brought into contact with thousands of participants from different backgrounds, giving her an insight into community dance activity within the region and nationally. Her community practice was nominated for the Cultural Champions of Merseyside award in 2008 and 2009 as a member of the combined arts collective, Kaleidoscope Arts.

Balchandran Gokul's experience of community dance practice at national and regional levels, fed an interest in the role of dance in society more broadly which was further developed through Sankalpam's research project in Colombo and Jaffna (Sri Lanka). This led to a formal academic investigation at the University of Manchester (2014) through which, reflecting upon her own practice, she examined the role of the Bharata Natyam artist in society.

As Uppal Subbiah began working with community dancers through teaching young children at the weekend Tamil school in Wembley and by forming the UYIR company of Sri Lankan Tamil women, she also found a platform to investigate Bharata Natyam in different ways. Uppal Subbiah was looking closely at how Bharata Natyam could be transmitted to non-professional bodies. This in turn fed her own dance practice and resonated with her discoveries about the body through her personal yoga practice. It was further cemented by teaching the BA Dance students at the University of Surrey who also presented Uppal Subbiah with a different community of cultural bodies to transmit Bharata Natyam to. In a face-to-face interview (2018) Uppal Subbiah states that she had moved away from focusing on external physicality and was zoning into the subtle body<sup>159</sup> instead and how to activate it (Uppal Subbiah 2018).

In the interview, I was curious to find out if she was consciously utilising her teaching practice as a tool to inform a deeper understanding of her own personal artistic and body practice. She replied stating that:

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<sup>159</sup> See Zarrilli 2004 for information on the subtle body.

I really feel I've moved away from the external physicality, you know, the shape making. I've really zoned into the *crux*, *the matrix* of Bharata Natyam, and the matrix of the South Indian art form. Whether you take Kathakali, whether you take koodiattam, whether you take *any* of these art forms, it is to do with the inner body the *Sukshma Sharira* we call it, the subtle body. And *HOW* do you *activate* your subtle body?<sup>160</sup> (Uppal Subbiah 2018).

Uppal Subbiah continues by explaining that in her earlier career she didn't have the maturity to look deeper than the external body (Uppal Subbiah 2018). She clarifies that the shift from teaching the form as a virtuosic body technique, which she focused on in her early teaching years, to exploring the more nuanced tensions between the body, the imagination, the senses and the codified language of technique, was prompted by several factors. These include the direction Sankalpam was taking as a company, the influence of Uppal Subbiah's personal body practice through yoga, and her maturing age (Uppal Subbiah 2018).

## 8.8 Ownership

Uppal Subbiah's teaching at the University of Surrey, illustrates the interweaving of the two teaching periods that she has described. She combines more formal teaching techniques in which the teacher demonstrates and the students follow, with other methods such as hands-on corrections, setting creative tasks, questioning the students' experiences, and encouraging students to work in pairs, to ask questions and critically to take ownership of their own learning. Whilst her classes have a formal set up (as do many of Sankalpam's classes); for example, students work in rows facing her, or sit in a circle to copy and repeat hand gestures, she will also take students outside

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<sup>160</sup> I have italicised to replicate Uppal Subbiah's points of emphasis.

for yoga by the lake, or send them away to explore the environment and their emotional responses to the wind or the temperature, to become aware of the lived experience in the moment, so that they can access these sensations at a later stage in their dancing.

As I observe Uppal Subbiah teaching, she offers students different approaches to access the cultural knowledge system of Bharata Natyam, by alerting them to the different ways it sits in their bodies. Uppal Subbiah uses a combination of techniques to activate the lived experience or at the very least to keep it at the forefront of all the physical movement sequences. For example, she uses physical demonstration, oral recitation of musical or rhythmic phrases, she attends to the underlying mechanics of the exercise, and the deployment of muscle groups, joints, bone and tendons. Simultaneously, she questions the students about how they are experiencing the movement, asking for example “how do you feel when you move forward?” (Uppal Subbiah 2016 & 2017).

As the students come to terms with the mechanics of the body, the structure of the movement, the placement of micro and macro body parts, the timing and rhythmic phrasing of sequences; Uppal Subbiah stresses the individualisation of the Bharata Natyam skills they have learned, not content with mimicry of the form. She asks the Surrey students, “now you know the movement, how will you individualise it? How do you make it your own?” (Uppal Subbiah 2016 & 2017). By combining these different methods of instruction and analysis, she explains to the students that in doing this, “you are forcing your mind to become present with your inner body” (Uppal Subbiah 2016 & 2017). In some Euro-

American teaching contexts, these instructions may be expected. However, from my survey of Bharata Natyam dance teaching in different contexts within the UK, I did not witness this approach as typical.

The traditional methods (described by Zarrilli) of attaining proficiency in Indian bodymind practices, come first through an expertise in physical skills and technique, with the subtle body following after external physical expertise is attained (Zarrilli 2004). From my observations of the students at the University of Surrey however, Uppal Subbiah appears to have found a way to enable students to access the subtle body, the lived experience, through a different route. Sörgel suggests that Uppal Subbiah's insistence that the students take ownership of the technique, her aspiration for them to find ways to make it sit within their own body sites and relate the narratives to their personal lived experiences, opens a gateway between the two body states to be mobilised (Sörgel 2016). Both Zarrilli and Uppal Subbiah advocate ownership of the physical technique in order to embody it. Uppal Subbiah teaches ownership from the outset, as technique and proficiency of the body is achieved. Zarrilli, however, proffers the traditional route where physical and technical 'mastery' are embedded before ownership can be attained (Zarrilli 2004).

It would seem that ownership of the technique through the ability to embody and articulate through gross and subtle body states are advanced skills, which come later in students' learning. However, when I watch Sankalpam teach and when I talk to Sankalpam's co-Artistic Directors about transmitting their knowledge of Bharata Natyam, this 'advanced' aspect of the technique sits at

the core of their practice and thinking and is therefore deployed from the beginning of students' training. Facilitating "dancers to find a truth in their movement" (Balchandran Gokul 2018, WhatsApp *Airing Chickens*) is a motivating factor for Balchandran Gokul, emerging from Sankalpam's early explorations of the form. For Thirunarayan, "embodying the form" (Thirunarayan 2017) is the fulcrum around which the rest of her teaching emerges. "Being present as a performer" (Thirunarayan 2017), and "engaging truthfully with an audience" (Balchandran Gokul 2018, WhatsApp *Airing Chickens*) are fundamental aspects of Bharata Natyam that each student must learn from the beginning. Balchandran Gokul explains that not only are they important aspects to develop with her students, but fundamental to her own continued learning (Balchandran Gokul 2018, WhatsApp *Airing Chickens*).

Sankalpam's co-Artistic Directors do not wait for technical proficiency in the gross body to emerge before exploring the subtle body with their students. They consider the articulation of the subtle body to be a necessary skill, as important in learning as correct alignment. Through Sankalpam's teaching and in conversation, I observe this core element of the technique explored and explained to students variously as, "making space inside the body" (Uppal Subbiah 2016 & 2017), described as, "engaging truthfully with an audience" and as finding "stillness in movement" (Balchandran Gokul 2018, WhatsApp *Airing Chickens*). For each of the Sankalpam artists, teaching is part of the dialectic, a way of nurturing the migrated form and of reconsidering the ways it can be reclaimed as an embodied practice in the adopted locale.

## 8.9 An Indian Epistemology and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Bodies

Sörgel is aware of the restrictions the Dance programme at Surrey places on learning Bharata Natyam. She states that “dance training needs to sink into the body and I’m not sure the University degree allows for that” (Sörgel 2016). The programme is not after all a conservatoire training and therefore contact time is restricted (Sörgel 2016). However, she does indicate how Bharata Natyam benefits the undergraduate dance students as a cultural knowledge system that is rooted in rich historical, geographical and political contexts, yet which can also be applied to a 21st century body. She refers to the form as an “experiential” and “embodied” way of understanding (Sörgel 2016) and explains that:

Learning Bharata Natyam challenges some of the body habitus they bring [...] you enter a different cultural, geographical, mythical-temporal space and yet you are in your own 21st century dancing body; the creative potential this opens up is immense (Sörgel 2016).

Vatsyayan explains that the concept of yoga is introduced into theatre in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* so that the physical becomes metaphysical; therefore the body, mind, senses, intellect and emotions work together to create an harmonious framework (2007: 56). Consistent with Sankalpam’s approach to evolving Bharata Natyam in the UK dance landscape, Uppal Subbiah applies a methodology which is rooted within Indian world-view thinking as articulated in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, in which the senses play a fundamental role in the concept of aesthetics (Vatsyayan 2007). Uppal Subbiah’s teaching methodology therefore reflects an underlying framework of harmonious interaction, applied by Sankalpam in productions, collaborations and processes and through the teaching contexts of Balchandran Gokul and Thirunarayan.

The interplay between temporal, cultural geographical states is illustrated in Sankalpam's collaborations (as discussed in chapter six) and processes (as discussed in chapter seven), highlighting how the dialectic is utilised. In teaching contexts too there is evidence of fluid transitions between traditional and contemporary contexts. Sörgel believes that Uppal Subbiah utilises contemporary and relevant imagery and analogies in her teaching to locate the Surrey students with the Bharata Natyam narrative and the form (Sörgel 2016). She explains that what is interesting about Uppal Subbiah's teaching methodology is that she "has a very classical approach teaching, and yet the way that she transmits the form is coming from a [...] contemporary angle" (Sörgel 2016). Whilst Uppal Subbiah may be drawing on contemporary imagery to activate responses in her students, she is also yoking her teaching to an Indian epistemology thereby, in my view, resisting the institutional epistemic framework that a sector-wide and colonial curriculum promotes.<sup>161</sup>

Student comments gathered from group interviews in 2016 and 2017, suggest that the inter-related aspects of an Indian epistemology within 21<sup>st</sup> Century bodies is not lost in the transmission from Uppal Subbiah to themselves. Many of the students grasped the concept of internalising Bharata Natyam, encouraged through Uppal Subbiah's teaching. In interviews they talked about the essence of the form, about the body's relationship with space and about Uppal Subbiah's use of imagery. One second year student tells me that Bharata Natyam has helped her "to focus on the relationship within" (2016). A first year

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<sup>161</sup> See Daboo 2009.

student explains how, “I really enjoyed being able to [use] the imagery of the present to get there” (2016) reflecting on Uppal Subbiah’s approach to locating imagined landscapes within lived experience. Other students relate Uppal Subbiah’s teaching approach to their somatic studies, as described by another first year student who tells me that, “it has a lot to do with what Stella [Uppal Subbiah] says in class, she says no two bodies are the same and to feel rather than to look [...] that makes it somatic” (2016). A second year student describes the principles of the form that she has learned through Uppal Subbiah’s approach stating that, “we are taught with principles like breath, alignment, imagery” whilst another states that “it’s all focused on embodiment” (2016).

The students clearly relate to Bharata Natyam as an embodied dance practice. Many of the students at Surrey grasped the concept of internalising Bharata Natyam, encouraged through Uppal Subbiah’s teaching, and subsequently related it to a somatic approach. One student defines what she means saying that, “on the course we do a lot of focus on the somatic approach. Bharata Natyam, quite naturally from the Hindu philosophy it’s based on, has that sense of bringing the internal out and having that awareness of the body” (2016). Another second year student defines it in a different way, by stating that because they had been learning the technique for two years, their bodies were, “opening up to the style, [describing it as] your mind is in your body” (2016).

The second year student’s reading of Bharata Natyam technique is close to Zarrilli’s explanation of South Asian psychophysical training in which the inner and outer dimensions of the body are approached from a unique perspective

(Zarrilli 2011: 244), illustrating that the psychophysical methodology Uppal Subbiah is applying to her teaching with the Surrey students has had an impact on their learning. Sörgel explains that what is interesting about Uppal Subbiah's approach is that, "how engaging with these sort of essential classical elements of Bharata Natyam opens something for them [the students] as dancers that allows for their own life experience and expression to come through in the form" (Sörgel 2016).

My reading is that through Sankalpam's teaching, the company has illustrated some success in reclaiming the specificity of Bharata Natyam as an embodied technique in the adopted locale. The students at Surrey illustrate an understanding of the discipline that clearly goes beyond physical technique. They display an understanding of the discipline as an embodied practice as illustrated in their comments. Sörgel also recognises Uppal Subbiah's pedagogic achievement by clarifying that even though their contact time is limited she is impressed at how the students embody Bharata Natyam explaining that, "it's astounding how it sits in the body, because it's also a form that they haven't done before" (Sörgel 2016). The dialectic is evident within the teaching of Sankalpam I argue, informing practice and acting as a platform for the company to test evolving knowledge. Teaching is thus another context through which the company can examine and test existing and new knowledge. By bringing the dialectic into teaching contexts I suggest that Sankalpam in fact invites students to be part of the exchange, extending the enquiry further. Student learning and embodiment of the discipline therefore becomes part of

the data that Sankalpam processes, part of the fluid exchange and transference of knowledge.

### **8.10 Summary**

In this chapter I have considered how Sankalpam is evolving a methodology in which teaching practice acts as a platform to test emerging knowledge in differently informed bodies. In this way I observe how teaching is located within the dialectic methodology, through which Sankalpam nurtures form and reclaims its specificity as an embodied practice.

I examined the different methods that Sankalpam employs to disseminate the company's understanding of Bharata Natyam and I discussed how teaching has become a main artery for Sankalpam's Uppal Subbiah in nourishing her personal body practice and refining her understanding of the classical form.

I assessed Uppal Subbiah's teaching at the University of Surrey by outlining the more traditional transmission of Bharata Natyam through the *guru-shishya-parampara* system. I described how Sankalpam reflects aspects of more formal systems of teaching, but also explores an iterative approach in which the interactions between student and teacher are considered beneficial to both participants. This I have argued, reflects a Kalakshetra methodology.

I have described how Bharata Natyam might be considered to be an holistic discipline which is supported by other disciplines and underpinned by the "contextual foundations" (Prickett 2007: 26) of other areas of study. I have argued that Sankalpam's co-Artistic Directors consider the form to be

connected to a larger knowledge system, a bigger phenomenon and that this reflects an Indian epistemological way of thinking.

At the intersections between personal body practice, discourse, research and teaching, Sankalpam considers the possibilities for Bharata Natyam in contemporary bodies. I have argued that the bodies in this research, both Sankalpam's and those of the company's students, are sites of embedded and embodied histories, where cultures reside and collide; sites for narrative and emotion to emerge from and develop within; sites which retain traces of historical narratives, of societal codes, of life, yet also as Sörgel notes, contemporary sites. This is interesting in addressing some of the issues raised by scholars such as Ann David (2010) regarding the boundaries within which, South Asian classical dance forms are sometimes contained.

## **Chapter 9**

### **Conclusions**

#### **9.1 The Study**

At the centre of this study sits a UK classical Indian dance company: Sankalpam, a migrated dance form: Bharata Natyam and an adopted locale: the UK dance landscape. Driving the study has been the question of how Sankalpam nurtures a migrated classical practice in the adopted locale. The aim of the study has been to consider how it is possible to maintain and sustain a dance form that is dislocated from its cultural moorings and the associated arts practices, societal, religious, historic and geographical contexts that support it. This has been examined through the prism of one company, Sankalpam.

I have argued that Sankalpam has developed a working method, which enables the company not only to nurture, evolve and refine Bharata Natyam in the adopted locale of the UK dance landscape, but also to reclaim the specificity of the form as an embodied practice. I have further argued that the methodology adopted by Sankalpam, which facilitates the company to sustain the form and refine practice, is both a product of the lineage the company has inherited through the local/global outlook of Kalakshetra founder, Rukmini Devi, but is also supported by an Indian epistemology, which underscores a broader company outlook. This has been interesting to explore, because it positions Sankalpam as a company that resists the postcolonial narrative which has historically, but also continues to, assess migrated dance forms through a Eurocentric lens, as I discuss in chapter three. However, I do not consider that

Sankalpam actively resists the postcolonial narratives which universalise migrated practices through hegemonic categorisations. That would assume that the company actively pursues that particular stance. I have argued rather, that Sankalpam circumnavigates the dominant postcolonial narrative, driven by a desire to instigate a deep inquiry of Bharata Natyam, accessed through 'knowledge systems' that stem from within India, from within the UK, beyond each territory, yet intersecting through the Bharata Natyam form. I have discussed this in detail by testing it in the contexts of Sankalpam's collaborations, independent studio processes and teaching practices, which are detailed in chapters six, seven and eight.

Whilst a postcolonial discourse, which acknowledges the history of colonialism, frames the study, postcolonialism simultaneously provides the study with a provocation. This is because of the deficits of the postcolonial discourse which are found in the generalisation of particular forms, that emerge for example within categorisations and criticisms, and where the globalisation of cultures neuters the specificity of practice.<sup>162</sup> By working within a framework that is inherently problematic, I have illustrated the tensions that exist between the migrated cultural form, Bharata Natyam, the practitioners, Sankalpam, and the adopted locale, the UK dance landscape.

I have argued that the methods adopted by Sankalpam to nurture form, refine practice and reclaim specificity of Bharata Natyam as an embodied discipline, manifest in this study as 'the dialectic'. The dialectic is understood as the

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<sup>162</sup> See 3.2 and 3.4.

iterative encounters initiated by Sankalpam and which take place between Sankalpam and other practitioners, between Bharata Natyam and other disciplines, between different thought systems, both 'local' and global. I refer to these broadly as 'cultural knowledge systems', which is a term that encompasses systems of knowledge, experience, expertise and skills that emerge from a wide range of cultural, philosophical, artistic, personal and geographic origins (as explained in 1.8).

Critically in this study, I have revealed that Sankalpam initiates dialectic interactions with cultural knowledge systems that are both 'local' to Sankalpam, originating in India, as well as 'local' to the adopted locale of the UK dance landscape, thereby drawing from rich sources of knowledge and experience across different cultural and geographic terrains. This brings the question of what constitutes 'local' into focus and highlights the complexities of evolving and sustaining a migrated practice in an adopted locale.

In chapter five and six, I have detailed the many dialectic engagements that Sankalpam has initiated through collaborative contexts. These illustrate that a range of practitioners, disciplines and scholars from within the local contexts of Indian and South Asian performance practices, arts scholarship, literature, architecture, music and philosophy are marshaled by Sankalpam to investigate the Bharata Natyam form. However, the study has also revealed that Sankalpam has at the same time, engaged with practitioners, scholars and disciplines from beyond 'local' Indian and South Asian contexts. The inclusion of Euro-American performance practices, scholarship, music and philosophy

into Sankalpam's dialectic can also be considered 'local' to the company which has operated in the adopted locale of the UK dance landscape for over quarter of a century.

By drawing on reference points that are multiple and widespread, the dialectic has been revealed to operate as a system of communication between practitioners, as a process for knowledge enhancement for the participants and as a disruption and provocation between thought systems, disciplines and techniques. Thus, I have argued that the dialectic enables a re-consideration of existing knowledge, through which the Bharata Natyam form is sustained and nurtured, it establishes 'communities of curiosity'<sup>163</sup> through which Bharata Natyam can be examined and experienced from different viewpoints. By 'communities of curiosity', I mean individuals who come together through different platforms to discuss, research, interrogate and analyse.

My research questions have considered how the dialectic impacts upon Sankalpam's knowledge and practice, how it enables the company to reclaim the specificities of Bharata Natyam in an adopted locale and what the broader implications beyond this particular study are, particularly for migrated practices in the UK dance landscape. What is revealed by this study is that through the knowledge acquired from the dialectic, Sankalpam's understanding of Bharata Natyam is modified through distillation. This manifests most particularly in how the company addresses the embodied aspect of Bharata Natyam, drawing upon ancient aspects of Indian world-view thinking, and addressing this thinking

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<sup>163</sup> See 1.8.

through ancient and contemporary Indian and Euro-American disciplines and theories, with a diverse range of practitioners. This is explored through different company contexts and illustrated in chapters six, seven and eight.

The study has revealed that whilst Bharata Natyam is central to Sankalpam's inquiry, the company nevertheless benefits from going 'beyond form' by engaging with other Indian and South Asian cultural knowledge systems, as well as those from within and beyond the adopted locale of the UK dance landscape.

## **9.2 Methods**

In designing this study and to test the validity of the claim that Sankalpam gains a deeper understanding of Bharata Natyam and reclaims specificity of the form by going 'beyond form', I selected three primary contexts through which the claim could be evaluated. The contexts included: collaborations, studio processes and teaching. I assessed the dialectic in each context from different researcher perspectives, but I also brought a body of knowledge and experience of Euro-American contemporary and classical forms, as well as prior knowledge and experience of Sankalpam and Bharata Natyam to the study, which I detail in chapter 2.3. This unique combination of knowledge and experience facilitated different approaches to and ways of evaluating the study.

My various roles with Sankalpam created an opportunity to examine each context from a different perspective. These varied from my immersive/participant role in Thirunarayan's studio process, *The Clay*

*Connection* (discussed in chapter seven), to a more distanced observational role in Sankalpam's teaching contexts (discussed in chapter eight). The different roles I inhabited, and the diverse sources of knowledge and experience I imported to the study,<sup>164</sup> were beneficial in several ways. Firstly, they established both a broad and a specific knowledge of different dance disciplines, including Bharata Natyam, which positioned my understanding of form, body, technique, process and performance, from different knowledge bases. Secondly, they determined a particular knowledge of Sankalpam, which included a professional and a personal relationship.

The long-term and close relationship I have established with the company granted me extensive access to company archive material, studio processes, production rehearsals and performances, as well as regular correspondence through interview, and ongoing discussion. In addition, it located me and the study within Sankalpam's dialectic, which simultaneously impacted upon the research. The study therefore was dependent and interdependent upon my insider/outsider role<sup>165</sup> which generated data and knowledge and through which I gained a depth of experience and insight to Sankalpam's practice that would otherwise have been difficult to access. The various roles I inhabited in the study enabled me to test my thinking and arrive at new knowledge through different routes.

Whilst my role as 'insider' and 'outsider' was a valuable method for gaining first-

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<sup>164</sup> See 2.6.

<sup>165</sup> See 2.5.

hand knowledge of the company's working methods, aims and intentions, it has nevertheless posed challenges. The inevitable biases that emerged through the different roles were sometimes difficult to navigate. They highlighted a need to distance myself from the company in order to challenge my own biases. This was achieved by employing a wide range of research methods which included desk-based research, interviews with the company and within the wider UK dance landscape. Furthermore, I conducted interviews with national and regional organisations, with scholars and former collaborators with Sankalpam. I conducted observational fieldwork in the broader context of South Asian dance in the UK and received peer feedback on findings at conferences and symposiums, through presentations and workshops. The broad approach to employing different methods of data collection and analysis has been a useful intervention in managing this complex position and in locating Bharata Natyam more broadly within the UK dance landscape.

### **9.3 Contexts**

On surveying the scholarship, I found that cultural practices such as Indian classical dance, and Bharata Natyam specifically, are often positioned within a politicised discourse, located in historical scholarship, situated within feminist ideologies and between the markers of colonialism, orientalism, postcolonialism and nationalism (as discussed in chapter three). I have argued that despite Bharata Natyam being present within and making an important contribution to the UK dance landscape over many years, and despite important

scholarship that has argued for its role in understanding cultures, prejudice still lurks in how the practice is viewed and critiqued.<sup>166</sup>

I illustrated how philosophical and religious narratives play their part too in the assessment of Indian classical dance, whilst universalised readings of particular practices are promoted through globalisation.<sup>167</sup> Whilst this study locates Sankalpam within the framework of postcolonialism, I have argued (see chapter three) that the framework is problematic. It is often critiqued for universalising all cultural forms under a hegemonic doctrine and from a Eurocentric perspective. Chapter three revealed however, that there are more complex and subtle ways to understand other cultural systems of knowledge than exist within the parameters of a postcolonial discourse.

#### **9.4 Histories and Beginnings**

To understand the contexts from which Bharata Natyam emerged and arguably by which the form has been supported, I assessed the historical contexts through which the form has evolved and concluded that it is deeply invested in the politics of class, religion nationalism and colonialism, as discussed in chapter four. Carrying the weight of such issues, I argued that the form has been further burdened, through its migration to the UK, where, the power relationship between East and West, established under colonial rule, perpetuated through orientalism, universalism and globalism, continued to seep into the postcolonial discourse.<sup>168</sup> I discussed how Bharata Natyam has

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<sup>166</sup> See 4.8.

<sup>167</sup> See 3.2.

<sup>168</sup> See 4.7 & 4.8.

nevertheless also benefitted from the UK dance landscape. Examples can be found in the financial support Bharata Natyam has received through funding streams, as well as the support offered by dance agencies and arts organisations and through promotion within Higher Education contexts and by performance venues. It seems that what nurtures the form in the UK, differs from the cultural elements that underpin and nourish the form in different ways in India. This, I have argued, encourages other ways of exploring and maintaining the form in an adopted locale, as I discussed in chapter 5.5.1 and 5.6.

The UK dance landscape proved to be a fortuitous location for Sankalpam at the time of the company's birth in 1994. Whilst companies such as Sankalpam were supported financially and oftentimes nurtured through mentorship, the study reveals that there was often an arts sector 'push' to develop practices in certain directions.<sup>169</sup> What is revealed when examining Sankalpam's evolution however is that there is no evidence of a 'push' for the company to explore other cultural dance forms, despite the cultural climate at the time. Rather, it seems that Sankalpam initiated a 'pull' in reaching out to other cultural knowledge systems to support Bharata Natyam and thereby help to refine the company's knowledge of the migrated practice in the UK dance landscape.

## **9.5 The Contexts for Analysis**

The research questions driving the study considered: how the dialectic impacted upon Sankalpam's knowledge and practice; how the dialectic enabled

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<sup>169</sup> See 5.6.

the company to reclaim the specificities of Bharata Natyam in an adopted locale and furthermore, considered what the broader implications beyond this particular study might be, particularly for migrated practices in the UK dance landscape. The scope of the study was defined by approaching the research questions through three separate contexts. In each, the relationship between history and contemporaneity, between different cultural knowledge systems, between Indian and European epistemologies, between legacy and vision, has been assessed.

In each context, I highlighted how engaging with diverse and multiple reference points of knowledge, expertise and skill, provoked and challenged Sankalpam's existing understanding of Bharata Natyam. Yet each context has also revealed something different about how Sankalpam engages with the dialectic and what the dialectic has offered the company. For example, in the collaborative context discussed in chapter six, the dialectic with an American, postmodern technique and aesthetic, experienced through collaborating with Van Schuylenburch, was found to be a provocation. The provocation, I have argued, challenged Sankalpam to view the body differently, and to find the "truth in movement", by applying an unfamiliar movement technique to familiar and Bharata Natyam-trained bodies. From the collaborative process with Van Schuylenburch, and in negotiating both the familiar and unfamiliar through the dialectic, I have argued that Sankalpam began to crystallise a rationale for collaborating with other cultural knowledge systems, acknowledging that a deeper understanding of Bharata Natyam could be established through this method of working.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> See 6.5.

I have argued that upon reflecting on the experience with Van Schuylenburch, the company began to utilise the dialectic as a method to investigate different ways to embody the classical form. These, I proposed, were furthermore underscored by an Indian epistemology, which was revealed through further collaborative engagements as I discussed in chapter 6.6 and 6.7. In these collaborative engagements, the relationship between the internal impulse for movement and the external manifestation of movement, were investigated in different ways.

In the context of studio processes, which I discuss in chapter seven, I have argued that the technique of *abhinaya*, was once again challenged but in this instance, the dialectic occurred primarily between clay and dance, although a multidisciplinary team of experts were also active in the dialectic. The new knowledge that emerged, resulted from the intervention of clay. It ruptured thinking and created simultaneously, new spaces to explore how to embody technique.<sup>171</sup> In the dialectic between clay and Bharata Natyam, I have argued that clay emerged as a transformative medium and a catalyst, enabling a different relationship between dancer and movement to emerge.<sup>172</sup> Furthermore, I have argued that clay acted as a conduit between gross and subtle body, which simultaneously bound the narrative and rooted the intention of the studio research, offering Thirunarayan new tools with which to navigate between gross and subtle body states as I discuss in chapter 7.11. Through the

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<sup>171</sup> See 7.9 and 7.10.

<sup>172</sup> See 7.11.

disrupted image of the Bharata Natyam dancer, clay, I further proposed, provoked a response in the spectator, as well as in the performer. This theory was tested in later workshops and presentations and thus, the dialectic was extended to spectators, whose feedback has contributed to the analysis, as discussed in chapter 7.12.

The study has answered the research questions by demonstrating that in migrating Bharata Natyam to a new locale, exploring different methods of sustaining the dance form are necessary in order to keep the form active and responsive to new contexts. I have shown how the dialectic with other cultural knowledge systems proved to be a method of working whereby Sankalpam could reach 'beyond form', whilst simultaneously keeping its inquiry rooted in Bharata Natyam. This impacted Sankalpam by illustrating to the company that the specificities of Bharata Natyam, and particularly the investigation of the form as an embodied practice, could benefit from the input of other cultural knowledge systems. This, I have argued, enabled the company to explore and test different ways to access the embodied aspect of the technique. Accessing *bhāva*, for example, was facilitated in different ways, through the dialogue with clay, through the provocation with Van Schuylenburch, and between the collaborative interactions with Koodiattam, Zarrilli and my own contribution as rehearsal director. This has impacted how the company accesses and delivers Bharata Natyam as an embodied practice, further refining company members' performance technique. Furthermore, it has filtered into Sankalpam's teaching practice.

Teaching, I have argued, provided a platform for Sankalpam to test the knowledge it had acquired through the dialectic by applying it to different bodies, and differently informed bodies. I discuss this in chapter eight where I consider how, in line with a Kalakshetra approach, Sankalpam has invited students to be part of the dialectic, thereby testing acquired knowledge and encouraging students to be part of the broader conversation. Student input thus challenges the company in new ways and from other perspectives.

In chapter eight I explored how the students at the University of Surrey learned about embodying the Bharata Natyam form through being encouraged by Sankalpam's Uppal Subbiah, to combine the different aspects of the dancer. To achieve the embodiment of culturally-specific narratives, the students were required by Uppal Subbiah to become alert to the body on multiple levels; what I have identified as, simultaneously being aware of and in control of the muscles, and the mechanics of the body, the senses, the emotions, as well as simultaneously accessing 'lived memory' and present consciousness.

The different elements that make up an embodied approach enabled the students to modulate between the internal and the external, between the gross and the subtle body, thereby applying Indian world-view concepts. Uppal Subbiah's teaching methods were, I argued, influenced by Zarrilli's research, by her personal yoga practice and by knowledge acquired through other Sankalpam collaborative investigations.<sup>173</sup> By encouraging students in different teaching contexts to question and challenge, I have argued that the students

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<sup>173</sup> see 8.6, 8.7 and 8.8.

themselves have become part of Sankalpam's ongoing dialectic, adding to Sankalpam's 'communities of curiosity', which in turn, has informed the company's practice.

## **9.6 Final Insights and Future Considerations**

To date, there is little evidence of studies which concentrate on UK Bharata Natyam practitioners from an immersive perspective. Additionally, there are few examples which focus on processes and on nurturing Bharata Natyam, most tending rather to concentrate on analyses of product and choreographic output. This study is an important addition to current scholarship because it provides an in-depth investigation of one UK Bharata Natyam company, through its relationship with the classical form by examining the company's working method. Significantly, the study is investigated from within the company's practice, examined over a significant time frame and exposes how the company methodology impacts the ways in which it reconsiders Bharata Natyam from an embodied perspective.

Through this research, Bharata Natyam is revealed to be a fascinating discipline to study, because when it relocates to a new locale, the complexity of the practice exposes the limitations of the postcolonial discourse in which it is situated. Some of the criticisms of the postcolonial discourse are addressed in the study, particularly those which suggest that postcolonialism generates broad categorisations that sit within theories of universalism and globalism. By addressing these generalisations and focusing instead on the specificities of particular cultural practices, current discourse is both included and confronted.

Sankalpam's dialectic methodology affirms the intricate nature of interweaving cultural knowledge systems. The local/global input of knowledge into Sankalpam's dialectic, illustrates how a multiplicity of approaches to a singular discipline can be useful in defining form and reclaiming particular aspects of form. It also illustrates the benefits of traversing between channels of thought, practice, geography and aesthetics without essentialising or generalising the form in the process. This in turn, highlights how the specificity of a migrated cultural form can be reconsidered by working within and beyond the parameters of the adopted locale and the migrated practice.

Whilst Bharata Natyam is the subject under consideration in this investigation, the study nevertheless illustrates how individual cultural practices, practitioners and forms might be reconsidered within broader scholarly discourse. It affirms the need to evaluate the importance of the individual in the universalised narrative and of nurturing the particular within the global which to date, has been rather lost within more politicised discussions. The study therefore redresses the balance between theory and practice by focusing on the individual and the particular.

The study resonates beyond the company and has broader implications for the ways that Bharata Natyam might be disseminated in adopted locales, to differently informed bodies which may not necessarily inhabit the cultural codes, nor the historical narratives that underpin the form. It offers therefore, a useful model for future research into migrated cultural practices which might

benefit from a more nuanced understanding of the individualisation of cultural practices in the UK and beyond. At the same time, and within the spirit of understanding individualised issues within a globalised economy, the study is equally helpful by providing a framework which can be challenged and deconstructed.

The study has identified the influence of Indian world-view thinking in Sankalpam's methodological approach. This raises further questions about the dominance of hegemonic thought systems in evaluating other migrated cultural practices within adopted locales. It therefore provides a provocation for future scholarship to question the authenticity of a singular hegemonic perspective in analyses. It challenges scholars to identify different thought systems and modes of evaluating migrated cultural forms in adopted locales, looking to the participants as well as beyond.

Sankalpam has proved to be a rich subject for investigation. For four years, this study has been an active and ongoing element of Sankalpam's dialectic, processed in the studio, through observation, reflection and evaluative discourse. The study has naturally therefore, permeated the thinking and practice of the co-Artistic Directors' of the company, the participants in this study.

Sankalpam's enquiry into the form now finds another voice emerging through academic research. Balchandran Gokul and Thirunarayan for example, have developed presentations with myself at national and international conferences

and symposiums. Within these academic arenas, we have investigated questions emerging from the study and tested theories arising from the research. This has fed into the thinking of the co-Artistic Directors of Sankalpam and has been processed in different ways. Balchandran Gokul and Uppal Subbiah have previously pursued their individual research interests by studying on taught MA programmes at the University of Manchester and Middlesex University respectively.

Recently Balchandran Gokul has extended her ongoing enquiry into the relationship between dance and philosophy by investigating the different phenomenological approaches used to understand dance more broadly at Coventry University. She pursues her practice-based research through training courses in acting methodologies, explored through the *Navarasas* with Abhinaya Gurus, G Venu and Nirmala Venu in Kerala, India. She continues to apply her knowledge of Bharata Natyam through her independent teaching practice as well as through her role as Principal Artist for the Centre for Advanced Training (CAT) programme at DanceXchange, Birmingham, where she develops the programme and individual training plans for talented young people.

Uppal Subbiah's enquiry into the embodiment of Bharata Natyam progresses as she considers how to apply her knowledge to Rukmini Devi's choreographic works. She is contemplating how Devi's dance dramas might be reconsidered through the lens of embodied choreography. Simultaneously, she is developing ideas arising from studio research in 2016 with Contemporary choreographer

Lea Anderson. For this project she is considering themes inspired by the Chola bronzes housed in the Victoria & Albert Museum (London), such as the relationship between historical dance forms and misreadings of historical dance scores, ownership of cultural heritage and reclaiming colonial spaces. Uppal Subbiah continues with her practice-based research project, which investigates the legacy of Kalakshetra principle teacher Sarada Hoffman. To this end, she has undertaken fieldwork with Hoffman in the US for a documentary film, examining the techniques underpinning Hoffman's teaching practice at Kalakshetra and with a particular focus on the embodied dancer. The project has been funded by ACE. Uppal Subbiah's teaching and choreographic explorations continue with the community group UYIR in Wembley, north London.

Thirunarayan meanwhile has been extending her studio research exploring embodiment in the Bharata Natyam performer and potter. She is developing partnerships with scholars and institutions within academia and the creative and craft industries. She is also developing a solo production entitled, *Sites of Belonging*, continuing her investigation into *abhinaya* through the Indian concept of *bhakti*.<sup>174</sup> For over fifteen years, Thirunarayan has been a student at the School of Philosophy and Economic Science, which roots its thinking in Hindu *Advaita* philosophy.

Beyond the independent and collective research interests of Sankalpam's co-Artistic Directors, there is an appetite within the UK dance landscape to know

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<sup>174</sup> In Hinduism, *bhakti* refers to devotion to or worship of a singular deity.

more about the company. Sankalpam has flown under the radar of typical UK dance company models for many years now, maintaining a low public profile. Many industry practitioners remember the company's choreography and performances and confirm the importance of Sankalpam's practice in the evolution of the UK dance landscape.

The study contains important historical and cultural information which locates the company within the landscape of UK dance. This may benefit the UK dance industry more broadly. It provides examples of different ways to support practitioners and to nurture migrated forms in adopted locales. This is also a useful model for practitioners sustaining their practice in a globalised economy which operates within the reference points of hegemonic thought systems. The study provides a useful model from an academic perspective too, encouraging new approaches to thinking about the contexts in which migrated cultural practices and companies are framed and the theories through which they are understood. To this end, there is a persuasive rationale to add this body of research to the wider academic field in the form of a book/ monograph. At the same time there are clear advantages to publishing within a more industry focused publication such as *Pulse*. Both are avenues that I am pursuing.

This study has impacted my practice and my approach in several ways. I have found that Bharata Natyam is a subject that people are both confused by and drawn to in both academic and creative communities. This has advantages and disadvantages for research and for the form and I find this simultaneously frustrating and joyful. As a practitioner, the study has opened up new ways to

approach the familiar and digest information from unfamiliar encounters. The study has therefore encouraged me to nurture the relationship between practice and research but simultaneously has illustrated the distances between the creative industry and academia. Each area has the potential to evolve differently by engaging more fully with the other and I find that I oscillate between the two worlds. As a result of this research I am, on a very personal level, more comfortable inhabiting different worlds from different perspectives, in knowing, not knowing and discovering.

My research continues to inform the practice-based work that I do with Sankalpam's co-Artistic Directors and other practitioners working with migrated cultural forms in the UK. I am developing a research proposal examining the embodied relationship between clay and dance with Thirunarayan and as a choreographer, I will be exploring the subject of devotion through Thirunarayan's, *Sites of Belonging* production (2020/2021). I have also been applying my own learning from this study with Oxford-based Bharata Natyam practitioners, *The Sadir Ensemble* (2019) and with Reading based Kathak performer Anuradha Chaturvedi and her company, Drishti Dance (2019/20).

The socio-political contexts from which concepts of identity are formed and which in turn impact upon creative practice, are key in stimulating a more fluid cultural debate. This debate is necessary for a sophisticated articulation of geo-cultural concepts and practices and important for scholarship to progress in this area. Nevertheless, whilst Bharata Natyam is undoubtedly rooted in a complex and controversial history, which subsequently politicises the form, this study

reveals that the fascination with the 'politics' of Bharata Natyam can dominate the practice, and in-depth investigation into the 'particularities' of the practice can, as a result, become sidelined.

I have investigated the particularities of Sankalpam's practice, taking into account the complex political issues that accompany the Bharata Natyam form, but also investigating how Sankalpam approaches Bharata Natyam as an evolving embodied discipline. Through the study, the dialectic has been revealed as an enabler in reconsidering the body in Bharata Natyam; as a catalyst in rupturing existing knowledge; as a provocation in challenging the company's approaches to embodied practice and as an evaluative tool for testing new knowledge in differently informed bodies.

Throughout the study, Sankalpam's local/ global outlook, and fluid transitions between the reference points of time, location, culture and discipline, are revealed to be deeply impacted by Devi's vision, which roots the company's approach to her legacy. The reach 'beyond form' is therefore, revealed to be grounded by 'form' itself. By going 'beyond form' by reaching beyond traditional routes and familiar pathways, Sankalpam, steps into the unknown. The unfamiliar challenges the company's understanding of accepted knowledge, provokes reaction, and disrupts the lens of familiarity. Sankalpam's application of the dialectic, approaching the familiar through the unfamiliar, therefore provides a useful model of practice for other migrated disciplines evolving in adopted locales.

## Glossary

**abhinaya:** This aspect of the technique is often described as the dramatic element of Bharata Natyam and draws on the dancer's improvisatory skills. It is concerned with the expressive element of Bharata Natyam in which the performer carries the emotional intention or idea of the narrative to the audience.

**adavus:** These are units of codified dance movements in which hands, eyes, feet, and head are co-coordinated in rhythmic phrases. Adavus are used in training and prominent in *nritha*.

**alarippu:** *Alarippu* is described as an invocation dance item, and is usually the first item performed in a full evening's classical repertoire, it is an abstract piece and therefore a *nritha* item.

**ātman:** Soul

**avatars:** Incarnations in to human or animal form, of a deity, or supreme being. Gods and deities can have many *avatars*

**bhāva:** *Bhāva* indicates the emotional state, or the aesthetic feeling described through the dancers' skill of bringing the internal emotional state to manifest in the external portrayal through the dance.

**Brahmin:** is traditionally associated with the educated, and priestly in the Indian caste system. It can often be conflated with the middle classes.

**devadasi:** These were girls and women who were dedicated to the temples to serve a particular God or deity.

**guru:** Mentor or teacher.

**jati:** Rhythmic patterns. A combination of *adavus*.

**mudras:** Stylised and codified hand gestures, which can be used to have linguistic meaning as well as used in the abstract.

**nritta:** Often described as pure dance, *nritta* is the abstract element to the technique of Bharata Natyam.

**margam:** The standard sequence of items for a classical Bharata Natyam recital. The word literally means 'path' in Sanskrit.

**Nāṭyaśāstra:** Treatise or text of aesthetics for the Indian arts

**Parampara:** The succession of knowledge through the oral tradition.

**Pārvatī:** One of the principle female deities in Hinduism, Pārvatī is wife of Siva.

**prana-vayu:** vital life force, breath through which the drawing forth of the internal intention can be transported to the external manifestation.

**rasa:** When the emotional intention of the piece is brought forth by the performer, the audience should experience *rasa*, which literally means taste.

**sadir:** The dance form from which Bharata Natyam evolved.

**śarīra:** Body

**shishya:** A disciple or student.

**Siva:** One of the primary Hindu Gods, or supreme beings, and one of the holy trinity of Gods, along with Vishnu and Brahma.

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## **Appendix 1 Ethics Documents**

Certificate of Ethical approval.....	342
Example of Gatekeeper Letter.....	343
Participant Information Sheet.....	345
More detailed Participant information letter.....	349
Informed Consent Form.....	352
Sample Questions.....	355



## **Certificate of Ethical Approval**

Applicant:

Debbie Fionn Barr

Project Title:

Beyond Form, re-evaluating tradition: a critical analysis of evolving pedagogies and embodied practices in the work of Sankalpam, Bharata Natyam dance company.

This is to certify that the above named applicant has completed the Coventry University Ethical Approval process and their project has been confirmed and approved as Medium Risk

Date of approval:

26 January 2016

Project Reference Number:

P40082

### **Example of gatekeeper e-mail/letter**

**Date**

**Name of organisation**

**Dear**

My name is Debbie Fionn Barr and I'm currently beginning a research project for my PhD at Coventry University.

Subject to approval by Coventry University Ethics this study will be using interviews and observations, to assess the types of teaching methods used when teaching Bharata Natyam dance in different contexts within the UK and India

I'm writing to ask your permission to be allowed access to your classes to observe, make notes, film and record an interview with yourself/ a member of your staff. This can be conducted at a convenient time and date to be arranged at your convenience. All I will need is to arrange a suitable time with you to come and set up.

Data collected from you/ your colleagues, will be attributed to you/them and your institution credited, in the final publication, unless you specify that you would like to remain anonymous on the attached consent form, in which case this will be respected. The research will be published in a final Thesis, and potentially through other academic outlets such as journals, conference proceedings, book chapters and available to the public.

If this is agreeable to you please could you E-mail me [address retracted] to confirm that you are willing to allow me to observe and/ or film one of your classes and conduct an interview with yourself/ one of your staff, providing they agree to take part? A participant letter detailing the research is also attached.

Yours sincerely

Debbie Fionn Barr  
PhD Student  
C-DaRE  
Faculty of Arts and Humanities  
Coventry University  
Institute for Creative Enterprise (ICE)  
Coventry University Technology Park  
Parkside  
Coventry  
CV1 2NE

## **Participant Information Sheet**

**Debbie Fionn Barr**

**PhD Candidate**

**Coventry University**

1.

### **Information about the project/ purpose of the project**

Project title: Beyond Form, re-evaluating tradition: a critical analysis of evolving pedagogies and embodied practices in the work of Sankalpam, Bharata Natyam dance company.

This project will explore the impact of geo-cultural migrations upon pedagogy and performance in the classical Indian dance form Bharata Natyam. It looks closely at one company's evolution (Sankalpam) over a twenty six year period and draws on the experience and expertise of other professionals within the field.

2.

### **Why have I been chosen?**

You have been chosen because of your role within the Bharata Natyam dance world/ or the UK dance landscape

3.

### **Do I have to take part?**

You do not have to take part in this project

4.

**What do I have to do?**

You will be asked some open-ended questions about your experiences of and thoughts about classical Indian dance, theatre or intercultural practice. You will be given time and space to explain your ideas fully

5.

**What are the risks associated with this project?**

There are no risks associated with this project

6.

**What are the benefits of taking part?**

The benefits of taking part in this project include contributing to a detailed study of the classical Indian dance form Bharata Natyam within the UK and furthering the understanding of the form's evolution through migrating practices.

7.

**Withdrawal Options**

You may withdraw from this project at any time, before and during the interview, or after the interview up to a date agreed with the researcher.

8.

**Confirming your contribution**

Participants will be sent a copy of their contribution as it appears in the final transcript. You will not be sent the entire transcript, but the portions that directly pertain to your contribution. This is to ensure that you are happy with how your comments have been used and to give you the opportunity to make amendments if necessary. You will be given a deadline by which amendments have to be returned to me, after which date it will not be possible to make further changes.

9.

#### **Data protection & confidentiality**

In signing the consent form, you agree to your data being credited to your name. There is also an option to remain anonymous.

10.

#### **What if things go wrong? Who should I complain to?**

There are unlikely to be any issues with this process, however if things do go wrong please contact my supervisor: Professor Sarah Whatley

11.

#### **What will happen with the results of the study?**

The results of this study will be written up as a final thesis and a copy will be available to the public at the British Library and on the Coventry University Open Access platform, CURVE. In addition, elements of the study may be published through other academic outlets such as journals, conference proceedings, book chapters and available to the public.

12.

**Who has reviewed this study?**

This study has been reviewed and approved by Coventry University Ethics Committee

**Further information/Key contact details:**

<b>Researcher:</b> Debbie Fionn Barr PhD Candidate C-DaRE Faculty of Arts and Humanities Coventry University Institute for Creative Enterprise (ICE) Coventry University Technology Park Parkside Coventry CV1 2NE [details redacted]	<b>Independent Contact</b> Professor Sarah Whatley PhD Professor of Dance and Director: Centre for Dance Research (C-DaRE) ICE Building Coventry University Priory Street Coventry CV1 5FB [details redacted]
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## **More detailed participant information letter**

**for**

**Debbie Fionn Barr**

**Project title:** Beyond Form, re-evaluating tradition: a critical analysis of evolving pedagogies and embodied practices in the work of Sankalpam, Bharata Natyam dance company.

### **About this study**

This interview is part of a study that explores the impact of geo-cultural migrations upon pedagogy and performance in the classical Indian dance form Bharata Natyam within the UK. It looks closely at one company's evolution (SANKALPAM) over a twenty-six year period and draws on the experience and expertise of other professionals in the field.

I am interested to find out about your relationship with classical Indian dance practice and the different cultural dialogues you engage with as part of your role within the dance industry and or/ within higher education. I am interested in finding out about your perception of classical Indian dance practice in the UK, and how practices have acquired and resisted differing cultural traces. In addition, how might this have impacted upon your work, decisions you make, and the relationship you have with classical forms.

I am interviewing a number of practitioners, teachers, academics, directors, choreographers, critics and others, who have experienced and or explored

issues resulting from geo-cultural practices. They may also have experience in supporting artists develop their practice.

This sheet is for you to keep and tells you more about the study and what it involves.

- The researcher who is conducting this study (Debbie Fionn Barr) has been the Rehearsal Director with Sankalpam, Bharata Natyam dance company for over 20 years and is based at the Coventry University.
- Interviews ideally will be face to face discussions, and may be followed up if necessary, via Skype, by telephone, e mail, or another format as agreed between yourself and the researcher. Recorded interviews may last up to an hour, to be agreed with individuals.
- With your permission, I shall digitally record (audio) your interview, and then it will be written out so that I have a record of what was said in the interview. This may be followed up with some further questions via e mail (as agreed with you) which you will respond to electronically and that information will be copied and a record of it kept for my research
- The written interview will be held on a password protected computer file.
- When the interviews are written up your comments will be credited to you/ your organisation unless you opt for an anonymous contribution on the consent form, in which case your comments will remain anonymous

- The study is funded by the Centre for Dance Research (C-DaRE ) at the University of Coventry.
- If you agree to take part in this interview but feel at any stage that you would like to stop, you are free to do so at any time, and your data will be destroyed.
- Your comments will be sent to you for approval within the context of the thesis. If after the interview has taken place you decide you do not want your comments used in the study, you are free to withdraw them up until the 01 January 2018 when the project will be written up. If you withdraw your comments before this date your data will not be included in the final thesis and will be destroyed.
- If you have any questions about this study, feel free to contact me: Debbie Fionn Barr, e mail: [details redacted]. Please see below for informed consent form

## Informed Consent form for Beyond Form for Debbie Fionn Barr

**Please tick**

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the participant information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

3. I understand that all the information I provide may be published and available in the public domain as part of this study and agree to this

4. I agree that my name can be published as part of this research

☐

**OR** I would like my contribution to this project to be remain anonymous

5. I understand that I also have the right to change my mind about participating in the study for a period after the study has concluded to be agreed with the researcher.

6. I agree to be filmed/ audio recorded (*delete as appropriate*) as part of the research project

7. I agree to take part in the research project

Name of participant: .....

Signature of participant/ parent signature if needed: .....

Date: .....

I, the undersigned, consent to the use of my words, images, images of my work or recordings of my voice being used within Coventry University publications or video case studies. I understand that this may be used for educational, marketing, and/or commercial purposes, and that copyright will reside with Coventry University.

I acknowledge that the quote, image or recording may also be used in, and distributed by, media pertaining to Coventry University's activities other than a printed publication, such as, but not limited to CD-ROM, DVD or the World Wide Web.

Copyright restrictions placed on Coventry University publications and case studies prevent content being sold or used by way of trade without the expressed permission of the University, as copyright holder. Images and recordings may not be edited, amended or re-used without permission from **Debbie Fionn Barr** on behalf of Coventry University. Personal details of those taking part are not made available to third parties.

Please complete the **Participant** details below and return the form to:

Debbie Fionn Barr e mail: [address redacted].

**Participant's details:**

Name:

Organisation Name:

(if applicable)

I require/do not require that my name is removed/retained in association with

images and/or recordings (please delete as appropriate)

Contact details:

Signature:

Date:

### **Coventry University Contact**

Name: Debbie Fionn Barr

Title: PhD Student

Contact Details:

C-DaRE

Faculty of Arts and Humanities

Coventry University

Institute for Creative Enterprise (ICE)

Coventry University Technology Park

Parkside

Coventry

CV1 2NE

[Details redacted]

### **Independent contact at C-DaRE:**

Professor Sarah Whatley PhD

Professor of Dance and Director: Centre for Dance Research (C-DaRE)

ICE Building

Coventry University

Priory Street

Coventry

CV1 5FB

[Details redacted]

## **Sample questions for interviews about teaching practice**

1. Briefly, can you tell me a little bit about your training. Where? the way in which you were taught, by whom and what dance/ movement/ theatre/ performance practices you have trained in
2. How long have you been teaching in UK?
3. Why do you teach? (livelihood, to keep the form alive, to progress your own pedagogy and practice?)
4. What types of teaching contexts do you use/ have you used your Bharata Natyam training in? For example, private classes, HE students regular, as a guest lecturer, one off taster sessions, ISTD exams,
5. What do you want students to gain from experiencing aspects of BN with you? (for example, open them up to new practices, ways of performing, attention to detail and articulated body)
6. What have you gained from your teaching practice in UK?
7. What are the most challenging aspects of teaching/ delivering BN in UK contexts... be specific as you can and give as many different examples as you want to. (e.g. Student attitude, lack of cultural knowledge, lack of time, resources, parental expectations?)

8. What are the most rewarding aspects of delivering BN in teaching / workshop contexts?
9. How has your relationship with the form been impacted through working in UK teaching contexts... e.g. do you feel you have to compromise on quality, or water down? Have you developed or learned new teaching practices that make change your relationship with the form?
10. How do you think the form might benefit from its dissemination through different pedagogic routes in the UK CAT, Private, HE, Conservatoire
11. Where do you think the BN form is situated in UK pedagogic contexts?
12. Can you tell me a bit about Sankalpam's teaching philosophy... do you have a particular direction as a company in which you want to drive the pedagogy for example? How does that compare with your individual teaching practice?
13. What is Sankalpam's legacy?
14. Finally, how has the relationship with the form through its development in UK dance landscape impacted these thoughts, decisions?

**Sample questions for collaboration interviews via Skype, in person, or via phone**

1. What is Sankalpam looking for in a collaborative process generally?
2. Why did Sankalpam choose to collaborate with particular artists.
3. How has Sankalpam's journey/ investigation/ artistic practice, been affected by the collaborations you have entered into? Please can you give specific examples.
4. From all Sankalpam's collaborative processes, can you describe any practitioners, moments, processes, where you have felt that your work has shifted as a result, OR... your relationship to your own practice, vision or form has shifted as a result (This of course might happen every time in small ways, which is also important to highlight).
5. Sankalpam have not worked with many Bharata Natyam choreographers besides yourself, why is this?
6. You have collaborated with contemporary and often Western/ or Euro-American practitioners as we have discussed. Why did Sankalpam choose to work with Lea Anderson at this particular point in time (2016) and why Steve Blake at this early stage of the process?

7. What did you find interesting and or useful about Lea and Steve's process during the R&D 2016?
8. What aspects of this work would you like to explore further and why?
9. What Indian performance practices have the company collaborated with and why?
10. How do you think being based in the UK and working with the artists you have collaborated with has affected your choice of working methods when you make work or bring a production to life?

## Appendix 2

### Sankalpam Choreochronicle

Title	Choreographer	Date
<i>Corporealities 1</i>	Luca Silvestrini	2010
<i>Corporealities 2</i> <i>...Sweet ...Dry...Bitter...</i> <i>Plaintive</i>	Phillip Zarrilli & Stella Uppal Subbiah	2010
<i>Corporealities 3</i>	Stephanie Schober	2010
<i>Psyche: The Modern Self</i>	Stella Uppal Subbiah and Sankalpam	2004/2005
<i>Meenakshi</i>	Stella Uppal Subbiah and Sankalpam	2004/2005
<i>Rukmini Kalyanam</i>	Stella Uppal Subbiah and Sankalpam	2004/2005
<i>Dance of the Drunken Monks</i>	Stella Uppal Subbiah and Sankalpam	2002-2004
<i>Avatara</i>	Stella Uppal Subbiah and Sankalpam	2001
<i>Moksha</i>	Stella Uppal Subbiah and Sankalpam	2001
<i>Tat</i>	Stella Uppal Subbiah and Sankalpam	1999/2000
<i>Ulaa</i>	Stella Uppal Subbiah and Sankalpam	1998/1999
<i>Sambhavam</i>	Stella Uppal Subbiah and Sankalpam	1996/97
<i>Margam</i>	Stella Uppal Subbiah and Sankalpam	1995
<i>Walk Around Tradition</i>	Stella Uppal Subbiah and Sankalpam	1994/95
<i>Alone by Themselves</i>	Ellen Van Schuylenburch	1994/95

## Appendix 3 Supporting Fieldwork

What	Who	Where	When
Teaching Observation	BA Dance Yr 1 & 2	University of Surrey	5-May-2016
Teaching Observation	BA Acting & World Theatres Yr 2	Regents University	2-Nov-2016
Teaching Observation	BA Urban Dance Yr 2 x 2groups	University of East London	15-Nov-2016
Teaching Observation	CAT <i>Yuva Gati</i>	London	26-Oct-2016
Teaching Observation	CAT <i>Yuva Gati</i>	Manchester	29-Oct-2016
Teaching Observation	2 x Tamil school groups 1x adults/ 1x children	Uppal Subbiah Tamil School Wembley	08 May16
Teaching Observation	3 x private classes, children, adults & young people	Balchandran Gokul Southport YMCA	1-May-2016
Teaching Observation	2 x private lesson ISTD	Thirunarayan Cantell School Southampton	13-Nov-2016
Teaching Observation	Kala Arpan private classes. Beginners 1	Risinghurst Community Centre Oxford	6-Oct-2016
Teaching Observation	Kala Arpan private intermediate	Risinghurst Community Centre Oxford	6-Oct-2016
Teaching Observation	Musical Theatre & Performance Practices Yr 3	University of Chichester	14-Nov-2016
Teaching Observation	World Performance Students E 15	Shane Shambu East 15 Southend Central Campus	24-Jan-2017
Teaching Observation	Geetha Sridhar, private classes	School of Carnatic Music Sivain Temple Lewisham	29-Jan-2017
Teaching Observation	World Music and Dance	Roehampton University	30-Jan-2017

Teaching Observation	Chitrleka Bolar, private	King Edward VI Handsworth School Birmingham	12-Feb-2017
Pedagogy Interview	Mark Hamilton	Senior Lecturer, BA World Stages, Regents University	8-Aug-2017
Pedagogy Interview	BA 2 Dance Students x 2 Groups	The University of Surrey	5-May-2016
Pedagogy Interview	Tanusree Shankar Director, Tanusree Shankar Dance Company Kolkata	The Place café London	8-Aug-2016
Pedagogy Interview	Sabine Sorgel Programme Director BA Dance and / BA Dance and Culture, The University of Surrey	The Festival Hall, South Bank London	8-Aug-2016
Pedagogy Interview	Chris Fogg Independent, producer and dramaturg	Skype	17-Oct-2016
Pedagogy Interview	Anusha Subramanyam, Artistic Associate, <i>Yuva Gati</i> (CAT) DanceXchange Birmingham	The Dance House Manchester	29-Oct-2016
Pedagogy Interview	Swati Raut Director Swati Dance company and guest tutor <i>Yuva Gati</i>	The Dance House Manchester	29-Oct-2016
Pedagogy Interview	Jayanti Sivakumar Assistant teacher <i>Yuva Gati</i>	The Dance House Manchester	29-Oct-2016
Pedagogy Interview	BA Acting and World Theatres	Regents University	2-Nov-2016

	second year students		
Pedagogy Interview	Kala Arpan Bharata Natyam dance school, tutors and senior students, Oxford	Risinghurst Community Centre Oxford	5-May-2016
Pedagogy Interview	Andrew Wright, Programme Coordinator, BA Musical Theatre, University of Chichester	University of Chichester	8-Aug-2016
Pedagogy Interview	Musical Theatre and Performance Practices Yr 3 students, University of Chichester	University of Chichester	8-Aug-2016
Pedagogy Interview	University of East London students, 2 x groups	University East London	17-Oct-2016
Pedagogy Interview	Kamala Devam, Independent Artist and visiting lecturer at University East London	Costa Coffee, Stratford	29-Oct-2016
Pedagogy Interview	Magdalen Gorringer PhD student and guest lecturer, Roehampton University	Museum & Art Gallery, Birmingham	29-Oct-2016
Pedagogy Interview	SANKALPAM	SKYPE	29-Oct-2016
Pedagogy Interview	SANKALPAM	MAO café Oxford	2-Nov-2016
Pedagogy Interview	SANKALPAM,	SKYPE	6-Nov-2016
Pedagogy Interview	Independent artist/teacher		6-Nov-2016
Pedagogy Interview	Ann R. David Roehampton University	SKYPE	confirmed
	E15 Students	E15 BA World Performance	13-Mar-2017

Pedagogy Interview			
Pedagogy Interview	Silveira Ramiro	Head of BA World Performance E 15	13-Mar-2017
Pedagogy Interview	CADT Students Birmingham		18-Jan-2017
Rehearsal Observation	Lea Anderson & Steve Blake	Greenwich Dance Agency & Marylebone Dance Studios	14-16 Dec 2017
Participant Observation	The Clay Connection 2016 R&D 1	Farnham Maltings & Westergate Village Hall	2016 May-July
Participant Observation	The Clay Connection 2017 R&D 2	Farnham Maltings & Westergate Village Hall	2017/July
Participant Observation	UYIR 2016	University of Roehampton, & The Bhavan	2016 June/July
Artist Interviews	Mira Balchandran Gokul		1-May-2016
Artist Interviews	Mark Hamilton		8-Aug-2016
Artist Interviews	Kamala Devam		20-Dec-2016
Artist Interviews	Magdalen Gorrige		16-Mar-2016
Artist Interviews	Subathra Subramaniam		8-Feb-2017
Artist Interviews	Stella Uppal Subbiah		10-Feb-2017
Artist Interviews	Archana Ballal		18-Feb-2017
Artist Interviews	Vidya Patel		16-Feb 17
Director Interviews	David Massingham, Artistic Director, DanceXchange		09/08/16
Director Interviews	Piali Ray, Director, Sampad		09/08/16

Director Interviews	Eddie Nixon, Director, The Place Theatre		29/09/16
Director Interviews	Marie McCluskey, Artistic Director, Swindon Dance		23-Mar-2017
SANKALPAM Interviews	Mira Balchandran Gokul		ongoing
SANKALPAM Interviews	Stella Uppal Subbiah		ongoing
SANKALPAM Interviews	Vidya Thirunarayan		ongoing
SANKALPAM Interviews	Tim Supple		28-Jul-2017