

Negotiating Natyam

**Akademi's one day conference at the Linbury
Studio, Royal Opera House, London, held
on Sunday October 2005.**

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Negotiating Natyam

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1. Introduction

Akademi's latest full-scale symposium, *Negotiating Natyam*, held on October 9th 2005, in the Linbury Studio Theatre at the Royal Opera House, London, attracted a wide range of contributors and audience from the arena of South Asian dance both in the UK and world-wide.¹ Drawing on performance, film, lecture-demonstrations and panel discussions, it celebrated and debated the classical dance form of Bharata Natyam from the past to the present day. The event continued Akademi's long-standing tradition of presenting innovative conferences that have focused for the most part on the development of British South Asian dance, and revealed Akademi's place at the heart of that growth. These conferences, symposia, and days of debate have been one of the hallmarks of Akademi's twenty-six year presence in the UK, extending from the most recent – *No Man's Land – Exploring South Asianness* (2004) and *South Asian Aesthetics Unwrapped* (2002) – back to the three-day conference held in London in 1983 titled, *The Place of Indian Dance in British Culture*.

Akademi is renowned not only for its ground-breaking work in encouraging and stimulating debate on South Asian dance, but also for its wider presence in commissioning new choreographic work by emerging young performers, and by established professionals for new young dancers, and for its pioneering work in education. This latter part of Akademi's portfolio extends from the running of numerous school workshops/projects through to the establishing of the ISTD² syllabi and examinations in the classical dance forms of Bharata Natyam and Kathak, and the new South Asian dance component of the BA (Hons) dance course at the London School of Contemporary Dance. Additionally, Akademi has created three major dance performance projects during the last five years, namely, *Coming of Age*, a site-specific dance work held at London's South Bank in 2000, featuring eighty-five South Asian dancers and attended by an audience

of over 10,000; *Escapade*, inspired by popular South Asian culture and danced by over one hundred and fifty participants in the outdoor spaces surrounding the Royal Festival Hall, London, and *Waterscapes* (2004), which offered a Kathak spectacle set between cascading fountains in the courtyard of London's Somerset House, and evoking images of the traditional Mughal courts. *Negotiating Natyam* follows this rich trend established by Akademi over the last quarter of a century and advances the debate concerning the place of South Asian dance in Britain today.

Negotiating Natyam aimed to reflect on current issues and questions – political, cultural, aesthetic and technical – regarding the UK presence of Bharata Natyam as part of the global diasporic emergence of this dance form. Three key aspects were practice, performance and perception, which were considered through the following points:

- Contextualising and locating the form – the history and development of Bharata Natyam from the 1900s to today.
- Debating and exploring the current teaching of Bharata Natyam in the UK and its perception in the contemporary world.
- Celebrating Bharata Natyam in all its forms and through its performance from the purely 'classical' to its use as a kinetic language in contemporary dance making.

The rationale for the symposium also raised the following urgent questions for general debate and discussion:

- How may Bharata Natyam retain its integrity in a global context?
- How may it be accessible to all without compromising its cultural specificity?
- How may a dance form that conventionally focused on the exploration of divine and erotic love make sense in a world where these themes have very different associations?

Negotiating Natyam aimed to provide a fresh and enquiring investigation into the contemporaneous situation of one of the most popular South Asian classical dance forms globally and in the UK.

2. Participants in *Negotiating Natyam* (in order of appearance. See attached biographies at the end of the report)

Seeta Patel
Geetha Sridhar
Anusha Subramanyam
Professor Chris Bannerman
Leela Samson
Pushkala Gopal
Sangeetha Balasingham
Jasline Anthony
Priya Prabhananda
Harpal Bamrah
Sambhavi
Dr Avanthi Meduri
Dr Janet O'Shea
Mavin Khoo
Sita Nandakumar
Lakshmi Kuhendran
Kavita Gundur
Dr Ann David
Stella Subbiah
Uma Chandratheva
Chitraleka Bolar
Nina Rajarani
Dr Swati Raut
Dr Andrée Grau
Liz Lea
Shane Shambu
Dr Vena Ramphal
Mayuri Boonham
Subathra Subramaniam
Chitra Sundaram
Y.Yadavan
Sanjoy Roy
Shobana Jeyasingh
Prashanth Nayak
Mira Balachandran-Gokul
Shijith Nambiar

3. Summary of the day's proceedings

With an initial focus on performance, the day began with a short film, 'Bharata Natyam for me is...', commissioned by Akademi and showing selected viewpoints on Bharata Natyam by audience members and dancers. This set the scene for the *Negotiating Natyam* symposium. A short, but exquisitely performed invocatory Shiva sloka, *Nagendra Haaraaya*, danced by Seeta Patel, plus a carefully crafted *jatiswaram* presented by Geetha Sridhar and Anusha Subramanyam followed. Moderator and chair of the day, Chris Bannerman, a regular contributor to Akademi events who has played a significant part in the development of South Asian dance in the UK, then introduced the rest of the day's programme. Bannerman commented on the overall theme, welcoming the concentration on the specificity of Bharata Natyam and the move away from the geographical focus on 'South Asian' dance. He indicated that the day would be rich and full, offering a blend of performance, academic presentation and informed discussion and that his role would not only be in introducing the different sessions, but in summarising and contextualising the debates and conversations.

3.1 Keynote address

Leela Samson, recently appointed director of the Kalakshetra Foundation and renowned Bharata Natyam dancer, presented 'Bharata Natyam in a global context – practice, performance, perception' as her keynote paper. Developing part of Akademi's rationale for the symposium, Samson proposed that two major upheavals in the history of Bharata Natyam's 'reclaimed' form had affected its technique and its perception; one was the move from a predominately temple and religious/court context to staged performance; the second was the increasing practice and performance of Bharata Natyam in diaspora contexts. Samson argued for the need to end the debate concerning its past religious aspects, for, in her eyes, Bharata Natyam was no longer a religious art form but now a purely

social one that is in continuous change. Bharata Natyam's metamorphosis and growth needed space to breathe, she stated, space to be itself, not like a young Indian bride entering her new in-laws' home where she may be constrained and stifled. Samson petitioned for an understanding of the 'soul' of Bharata Natyam, suggesting that an inability to teach or master the grammar of dance weakens the form and places performers and audiences out of touch with its inner content. Yet at the same time, she agreed, innovation is needed. Her address ended with the dramatic and slightly alarming conclusion that there is 'widespread ignorance of the philosophy and architecture' of Bharata Natyam, and of the music and the rhythms that are intrinsic to its construct. Samson's paper without doubt raised questions about ownership of the dance form, about today's new generation of dancers and their training, and about the power of changes to Bharata Natyam through globalisation and the diaspora context. Like other later presentations that picked up these themes, it offered much ground for reflection.

3.2 Locating Natyam – Introducing the form

Following the keynote address, Pushkala Gopal, dancer, choreographer and musician, who has pursued the performance and teaching of Bharata Natyam in the UK for over twenty years, presented a delightful, informative and authoritative lecture-demonstration. Aply assisted by her young and well-trained students, she introduced some of the components of Bharata Natyam, describing aspects of *nritta*, *natya* and *abhinaya* and basic *adavus*. She spoke of the traditional concert *margam*, calling on her students to demonstrate an *alarippu*, a section of a *varnam* and a *tillana* and gave detailed explanations of their quality and function in a recital. Gopal stressed how the notion of a word being directly related to a gesture was the essence of communication in Bharata Natyam, and of how much subtlety and depth was possible through such *abhinaya*. Bannerman noted at the end that this was a chance to see Bharata Natyam unbound, rather than through the 'exotic' lens that still covers some of its contemporary UK performance.

3.3 Locating Natyam – The historical debate

The first panel of the day, chaired by Bannerman, presented Avanthi Meduri and Janet O'Shea, both respected academics and performers/practitioners. Meduri's paper 'The Legacy Lingers on', tackled the subject of the historical place of dance luminaries Balasaraswati and Rukmini Devi and their influence today. Drawing on her many years of work investigating and writing on these two authorities on Bharata Natyam³, Meduri refused to see them in a binary, opposing relationship. She accentuated their similarities rather than their differences, drawing attention to the fact that they were both modernists and pioneers, that they both transcended the restrictive ideology of India at that time, and both defined themselves as regional, national and international. They were globalised dancers of their period, as she saw it, creating large trans-cultural visions of Bharata Natyam and endowing those who followed in their global legacy. Calling them 'two jewels in the crown of the Indian nation', she set out to show how today's dancers are directly related to their heritage.

Janet O'Shea continued the theme of Balasaraswati and her inter-cultural and trans-national role, underlining again her global history.⁴ She described how for Bala, the Bharata Natyam revival (spearheaded by Devi) was both a sadness and a celebration. Bala had mourned the changes made to the form, but was too highly aware of the need for creative transformation. O'Shea stressed how both dancers spoke of their allegiance to the past, but that their view of the past differed. Both retained the *margam* form, and this was a way for Bala to preserve her lyrical, poetic approach with emphasis on improvisation rather than on dramatic clarity. O'Shea raised questions as to what each dancer selected for retention and what strategies were created by that choice, suggesting that Bala was able to carve out a performance space for herself in this way. But the enquiry O'Shea raised remains for consideration: How does this affect dancers today? What can be carried forward from Bala's work? What influence does it have on the teaching of Bharata Natyam in the diaspora space?

There was a short space for audience discussion, although this was not easy given the physical setting of the panel on stage, a fair distance away from the audience. Questions raised related to wanting further details of the history of these dancers, and the 'fact' of the appropriation of Bharata Natyam by the middle-class. Time unfortunately did not allow for a fuller debate, perhaps to some of the audience's frustration.

The morning ended with a riveting performance of a section of the Tanjore Quartet's *Varnam* danced by Mavin Khoo to Pushkala Gopal's vocal rendition. Khoo's maturity and the sensitivity of his abhinaya held the audience spellbound as he wove the story of the piece through slow, sustained and controlled movements and expressions. The theme of love conveyed in the dance touched all very deeply.

The afternoon sessions began with a second showing of the symposium's opening film, and an assured presentation of a newly composed *Devi Tillana* by senior students of Prakash Yadagudde at London's Bhavan Centre. These danced pieces, before and after the lunch break, provided the performative element amidst the discussions and debates that preceded them and those that were to follow, demonstrating how both the practical and theoretical aspects of South Asian dance complement each other and sit comfortably side by side.

3.4 Performing Natyam – Teaching an art form

The afternoon commenced with a further panel discussion, introducing pedagogic aspects of British Bharata Natyam. Teachers Swati Raut, Stella Subbiah, Uma Chandratheva, Chitraleka Bolar and Nina Rajarani gave short presentations of their teaching methods and interests. Chaired by Ann David, each teacher spoke of key strategies in their training of young people in the British context, and this ranged from a very traditional understanding of the *guru-sishya* relationship to more innovative, creative applications of methods suited to individual students' needs. Most participants of the panel use the ISTD syllabus

for their students, finding it successful and appropriate to their needs. Two members of the panel, Bolar and Rajarani, are actively involved with the ISTD, being respectively Chair and Secretary of the South Asian Dance Faculty. These ISTD syllabi and examinations have been tailor-made for students in the diaspora, where training conditions and cultural assimilation differs.

Conversation focused too on the difficulties for students in moving into the professional sphere and the lack of financial support and opportunity for further training for these committed dancers. Bolar described her work in creating a Youth Dance Company to provide such experience and extra guidance, and Subbiah detailed her teaching on the new South Asian Dance component of the BA (Hons) Dance at the London School of Contemporary Dance. Time again did not permit any real engagement with the audience, apart from one or two questions for clarification. However, the key points facing teachers of South Asian dance in the UK were flagged up and the problems aired, whilst also acknowledging the potency of today's teaching situations.

Juxtaposing the two afternoon discussion panels was a presentation by *Angika's* Mayuri Boonham and Subathra Subramaniam, who spoke of their company's work and showed a filmed excerpt of *Bhakti*, their recent piece for five contemporary and Bharata Natyam trained performers. The piece combines Carnatic and contemporary electronic music and presents a concentrated vitality and sculptural geometry in the movement phrases. Speaking of how they found in Bharata Natyam a powerful dance language for communicating ideas, each described their aim to explore spiritual concepts within a contemporary expression. As they see it, the performance space is sacred and can be energised with light, so, in their work significant emphasis is placed on the lighting design as well as the created sound tracks to support the choreography. This session provided a pertinent transition to the next panel in which *Angika* also contributed – a panel that investigated 'What is British Natyam?' with emerging and established young Bharata Natyam dancers.

3.5 Performing Natyam – British Natyam

Chaired by Andrée Grau, seven young dancers reflected on their views of British Natyam, offering an insight into their current work in performance and choreography. Each one brought an individual, innovative and creative aspect to the discussion, revealing how widely their backgrounds and interests differed. Stella Subbiah described the journey of her work with *Sankalpam*, and of how Bharata Natyam is the source and the inspiration for creating new pieces that draw on dramatic theatrical expression as well as technique. Rooted in Bharata Natyam, *Sankalpam*'s work attempts to 'reach into the future whilst remaining linked with the past'. Vena Ramphal's short film *Fold* and an extract of *Skin* were offered as part of her contributions to the discussion, and she added that in terms of 'British Natyam', she related more to being in London than to Britain. *Fold* showed her interest in what lies in the frame of the picture whilst thinking about the body, display and feminist issues. The medium of film too was selected by Shane Shambu to show part of his latest choreographic piece *Impermanence*, which contains a strong narrative element and questions whether life can be free of suffering, seen through the lens of Hindu mythology. Intense, and alternating between moments of serenity and fast action, Shambu's dancing on film carried authority and clarity.

Australian Liz Lea, currently working with *Sankalpam* and touring her own one-woman shows, talked of her training in Bharata Natyam and how it complemented her ballet and contemporary professional background. She enjoys moving between solo work and dancing with other companies and loves the sheer physicality of Bharata Natyam. She spoke too of finding it highly influential in her creative work. Lea praised the British Bharata Natyam scene, describing it as rich and exciting in comparison to other European countries – Britain is a place in her view where contemporary work is strong and therefore challenges performers and dance creators to drive forward creatively. An uncompromising Mavin Khoo talked of his work first and foremost as a dancer, a dancer whose personal relationship is with the classicism of dance rather than

just to ballet or Bharata Natyam. His work is specifically related to and influenced by living in London and its rich hybridity, and its performance therefore has an aesthetic which he feels is not specifically South Indian.

Angika dancers Boonham and Subramaniam added that their *Bhakti* piece was based on their own experience here and now in Britain – their training, their life experiences, geographical aspects – all these influenced how the work was created. They touched too on the problems of funding, saying how initially they were forced into investing their own time and money. Now with a bursary from The Place, they feel freer creatively which has too influenced their work. Others on the panel agreed that with funding they were able to effectively plan tours, book other artists in advance and generally work more independently.

Before the final plenary session, Chitra Sundaram, accompanied by singer Y.Yadavan, performed a short excerpt of her piece, *Moham*, delighting the audience with her assured abhinaya and powerful presence. The subtlety of her movements to such exquisite singing was a delight and a brief respite from the intense concentration of the day.

3.6 Perceiving Natyam – What makes the Bharata Natyam aesthetic?

The final panel of the afternoon, chaired by Sanjoy Roy, asked dancers/choreographers Chitra Sundaram, Shobana Jeyasingh and Pushkala Gopal for their comments on the aesthetic specificity of the Bharata Natyam form. They were joined by Prashanth Nayak, director of Milapfest, a UK arts charity that successfully promotes all aspects of Indian culture. The conversation ranged from the deeply inner emotional aesthetic of the style, that is its 'interiority' as Sundaram expressed it, through to the practical questions of attracting mainstream, non-Asian audiences.

Focusing initially on how Bharata Natyam is perceived in Britain, Jeyasingh spoke of a perception of Indianness being directly linked to the perception of

Bharata Natyam. People comment on her work, saying ‘she has moved a long way from her roots’, but a change in the British perception of the form would be when someone says, ‘she has moved closer to her roots!’ Jeyasingh’s commitment is to a body that moves through space – a displaced and migrant body – and she uses the exterior of Bharata Natyam for this display. This theatrically charged outer form is most potent, she believes, and is an essential part of Bharata Natyam. ‘It wears its psychology on its sleeve’ she commented.

Gopal and Sundaram followed with equally eloquent statements on the need to recognise, teach and perform from the inner depth of feeling, to create the *satvika* abhinaya and allow the *rasa* aesthetic to be experienced. This means the stripping away of layers to expose the personal emotional level. Gopal commented that it is easier to teach technique than to train students to feel the aesthetic from within. Nayak, with his pragmatic interests, spoke of how traditional Bharata Natyam performance is enjoying a huge comeback. Yet, he said, questions still remain as to how arts managers can create more performance opportunities for young dancers, and how more meaningful dialogues can be initiated between arts organisations and performance artists. Further discussion between the panel examined issues of ensemble work as distinct from traditional solo presentations, and how dancers can be trained to work together on stage.

Taking up these points, questions from the audience ranged from probing the concept of individuality in Bharata Natyam, to the conveying of abhinaya in group work, and querying how to convey the aesthetic of the style to audiences who do not understand it. Finally, there was a further point questioning how to make the form of Bharata Natyam more appealing to a wider dance audience.

3.7 Final summary from the Chair

Chris Bannerman began his summary of the whole day by praising the Bharata Natyam community for the level of debate and argument that it engages with –

an exemplary model for other dance forms, where such discussion tends not to be visible.⁵ It is a healthy sign, he believed, indicating both a feeling of security in the dance's heritage, and an assured sense of its new developments. The afternoon teaching panel, noted Bannerman, showed how there is a strong confidence in the form of Bharata Natyam and its diversity in practice, where experiential learning is playing a significant role. He commented too on how the younger generation, in examining British Natyam, spoke of diverse or multiple identities which were flexible and changing, and of a sense of dissonance and dislocation in their work. Bannerman summed up by stating that 'Bharata Natyam resists closure, resists a final, fixed definition. It is evolving, it is unbound', remaining a rich and potent source of inspiration.

4. Conclusion

Negotiating Natyam was a highly successful venture on many levels – an extremely well organised, full programme, a wealth of talent in performance and oral presentation, a suitable balance of words and the kinetic medium through dance, film, music, discussion and demonstration, and a large, and for the most part, appreciative audience. Perhaps not enough time, however, was scheduled for real debate and analysis where issues raised could be more fully aired and challenged. In future, maybe a two-day event could be planned to address this need. But there is no doubt that a symposium such as this, focusing on the form of Bharata Natyam, must be the blueprint for a future conference to debate the current climate of British Kathak performance and tuition. Indeed, some of the professional Kathak artists in the audience were overheard discussing this point with some vigour.

Were the aims and rationale of the conference addressed? Certainly the main themes of practice, performance and perception were at the fore throughout the day, and there was an historic contextualising of Bharata Natyam and detailed considerations of its current pedagogy in the UK. Celebration of Bharata Natyam's form and expression were also prominent, both in its more traditional

appearance and its freer contemporary usage. The more difficult issues of retaining integrity in a global context, the purity of its aesthetic, its accessibility to wider audiences and the constantly-vexed question of funding recurred at points throughout the day, but were not fully engaged within debate. This was no doubt due to the restriction of time, as it was clear that for many of those attending the symposium, there was no reluctance to grapple with these rather more challenging themes.

The day closed with a performance from *Sankalpam* who showed an excerpt of their latest work *Psyche*. This was a riveting, beautifully danced item, which re-energised the enthusiastic audience. 'Natyam', particularly in its British context, was certainly 'Negotiated' during this stimulating, entertaining, celebratory and reflective day, and this was a fitting climax on which to end.

Notes:

¹ This symposium was supported by The Arts Council, Dance UK, the South Asian Dance Alliance and the Royal Opera House.

² Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing.

³ See Meduri 1996, 2004, 2005.

⁴ See O'Shea 2001, 2003.

⁵ The autumn issue of *Pulse* journal (2005) featured an article, 'Why do [South Asian] dancers talk so much?' offering that perhaps it is because South Asian dance has a 'deep and formal relationship' to text, creating a 'speaking' tradition, in which dancers nowadays are trained to introduce their pieces, from memory, on stage. (Lopez y Royo, p.9).

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Dr Ann David
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PARTICIPANTS' BIOGRAPHIES

ANGIKA (Presenters and Panellists – Performing Natyam) is a leading British Indian dance company and was founded as a creative partnership between London based choreographers and Bharata Natyam dancers Mayuri Boonham and Subathra Subramaniam. ANGIKA are Choreographers-in-Residence at The Place, which is the home of contemporary dance in the UK and one of dance's most respected institutions. The company has a reputation for producing and touring imaginative and exciting high quality dance productions at some of the most prestigious venues, dance seasons and festivals nationally. www.angika.co.uk

Christopher Bannerman (Moderator and Chair – Locating Natyam, The Historical Debate) began his career in dance in Canada where he danced with the National Ballet of Canada. He subsequently joined the London Contemporary Dance Theatre, where, for fifteen years, he performed numerous principal roles, was active as an arts education worker and choreographed numerous works. He has served as a panel member on the Drama, Dance and Performing Arts Panel for two Higher Education Research Assessment Exercises and as a Specialist Assessor for the Quality Assurance Agency. He has also served as Chair of Dance UK, Chair of the Arts Council of England's Advisory Panel for Dance, Chair of the National Dance Co-ordinating Committee, as a member of the Trustee's Committee of Akademi (formerly the Academy of Indian Dance) and Adviser to London Arts. In 2001 he choreographed a quartet section of the South Asian Dance celebration Coming of Age at London's South Bank Centre and also returned to the stage in a duet, Cast in Stone? with the renowned South Asian dancer Mavin Khoo. He is now Professor of Dance at Middlesex University and Heads the Centre for Research into Creation in the Performing Arts, ResCen.

The Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan (Performers – Practising Natyam) exists to preserve for posterity the tradition of Indian art and culture. The Bhavan in London was inaugurated in 1972 as the UK's first independent overseas branch and it is also the largest institute for Indian art and culture outside India. The Bhavan provides courses in music, dance, languages, drama, art and archaeology and yoga. Some nine hundred students attend these courses during the year. The Bhavan Centre is associated academically with the University of Cambridge and Trinity College of Music, London, in collaboration with whom the Centre will shortly be offering a Bachelor of Music degree in Indian Classical Music. The Bhavan is presenting 3 of their senior bharata natyam students today in a traditional piece choreographed by their resident bharata natyam tutor, Prakash Yadagudde.

Chitrleka Bolar (Panellist – Practising Natyam) is one of the leading exponents of Bharatanatyam in the UK and is the Artistic Director of Chitrleka Dance Company. She has worked extensively in Britain and abroad as a performer, teacher and choreographer and workshop leader across education, community and theatre contexts. Chitrleka's current focus with the Company is on dance-in-education and this work is based predominantly in the West Midlands. She is also responsible for creating touring performances linked with educational relevance and the Company recently toured a science and art production, 'The Story of Carbon' to national and international venues. As a practitioner of Bharatanatyam, Chitrleka has over the years worked on the training and professional development of young dancers. In 1998, she undertook a unique initiative that focused on the training of young dancers, with the start of a Youth Dance Company. Chitrleka's work is supported by the Arts Council England and Birmingham City Council and her Company is based at the University of Birmingham, School of Education as 'Artist in Residence'. Chitrleka is currently serving as chair for the South Asian Dance Faculty of the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dance and is also an examiner for the Society.

Uma Chandratheva (Panellist – Practising Natyam) trained at Kalakshetra between 1969 and 1973, during time that Rukmini Devi Arundale was heading the school. She has taught bharata natyam in London at the London Tamil School for the last 10 years, and has conducted 10 arangetrams. She is currently Head of the Dance Department at the School, which has about 125 students.

Ann David (Chair – Practising Natyam) is currently completing her Ph.D. in Dance Ethnography at De Montfort University in Leicester, supported by a full-time three-year award from the AHRC. She gained an MA in Dance Studies (Distinction) from the University of Surrey, Guildford, and has worked for many years in the field of South Asian dance, studying the classical Indian styles of Bharatanatyam and Kathak, as well as ballet and contemporary dance. She has lectured at the National Portrait Gallery, London on the Indian dancer Ram Gopal, and has taught on the Masters course at Royal Holloway, University of London, as well as occasional lecturing at the University of Surrey. Her present research examines dance practices in the UK Hindu Diaspora with particular reference to a religious/temple context and asks whether dance and music practices are an integral part of religious expression, and whether they support notions of religious identity.

Pushkala Gopal (Presenter – Locating Natyam – Introducing the form). Pushkala had her early training in Bharatanatyam under Gurus Pakkiriswami Pillai, Malathi Srinivasan and Dakshinamurthi Pillai of the Dandayudhapani Pillai school. After a degree in Maths Hons from the Delhi University, she was awarded a Govt of India fellowship to culminate her training (deemed at a post-graduate level) fulltime for two years under the Dhananjayans. During this time she had an active role as a performer in their professional company. Some years of intensive performing, writing, teaching and choreography followed, after which she was awarded a British Council fellowship in 1983 to study different aspects of dance theatre and training at Trent Park. This led to her stint as director of Akademi for a couple of years. She has worked as a free-lance artiste, choreographer, teacher, director, composer and musician for several years since, being based in Britain and doing some projects in other countries. She is vice chair of the South Asian dance faculty of the ISTD, and chief examiner. She has directed two pedagogic videos on Bharatanatyam for the I.S.T.D. She has been a lecturer at Middlesex University, and has run courses at Surrey University and Laban Centre in previous years. Work in India includes her teaching at the dance camp of Natyarangam 2004. Her latest work was a choreographer in Devi Diva for the Northwest Dance Alliance

Andrée Grau (Chair – Performing Natyam) F.I.Chor. MA PhD, Subject Leader for Music and Dance Roehampton University, Convener MA Dance Anthropology and MA Ballet Studies. Andrée Grau trained in dance in her native Switzerland and in London. She graduated from the Benesh Institute in 1976 and was awarded a MA in Social-Anthropology (Ethnomusicology/Ethnochoreology) and PhD in Social-Anthropology from The Queen's University of Belfast, respectively in 1979 and 1983. She has carried out fieldwork among the Venda of South Africa; among the Tiwi of Northern Australia; India and London, looking at performance from cross-cultural and interdisciplinary perspectives. Her book *Eyewitness Dance* has now been translated into seven languages. She has co-edited with Stephanie Jordan *Europe Dancing: Perspectives on Theatre Dance and Cultural Identity* (2000). She was director of the Leverhulme-funded project 'South Asian Dance in Britain: negotiating cultural identity through dance' 1999-2001 and is co-director of the AHRB (Arts and Humanities Research Board) Centre for Cross-Cultural Music and Dance Performance, a collaboration between SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies), UniS (University of Surrey Guildford) and Roehampton, which started in September 2002.

Shobana Jeyasingh (Panellist – Perceiving Natyam) Born in Chennai, India and now living in London, Shobana founded Shobana Jeyasingh Dance Company in 1988. She has produced numerous works for stage, theatre and television. Her most recent works includes *Flicker* (2005) and *Transtep* (2004). Shobana was awarded a London Dance and Performance award in 1988, received three Digital Dance Awards and, in 1993, an Arts Council Women in the Arts Project award in acknowledgement of her valuable contribution to the arts over the past decade. She has also been awarded two Time Out Dance Awards and in 1993 her Company was the overall winner of the prestigious Prudential Award for the Arts. Her dance work "Palimpsest" was nominated for the South Bank Show Awards in 1996. The Company tours extensively throughout Britain and has visited major European and North American festivals. Shobana Jeyasingh was awarded an MBE in January 1995 for services to dance and holds an honorary MA from Surrey University and an honorary doctorate from De Montfort University, Leicester. She is also a Research Associate at ResCen - Centre for Research into Creation in the Performing arts at Middlesex University.

Mavin Khoo (Performer, and Panellist – Performing Natyam), 'one of the UK's most exciting dancers' (London Evening Standard), was born in Malaysia where he began his dance studies, training in India, Britain and the USA. He studied Bharata Natyam and Odissi, but has also trained in Classical Ballet (with Marian St Claire and Michael Beare) and Contemporary Dance (at the Merce Cunningham studio in New York). An established soloist and choreographer, he has performed solo and in collaboration with Wayne McGregor (*Encoder* 1997), Akram Khan (*No Male Egos* 1999), Christopher Bannerman (*Cast in Stone?* 2000) and others. He has danced with Sankalpam and Random dance companies and has toured and guested internationally. He was associate artist at Akademi, for whom he performed in the major *Coming of Age* and *Escapade* celebrations at the Royal Festival Hall on London's South Bank (2001 and 2003). He has created choreography for National Youth Dance Company (*Mirror of Gestures* 2000) and London Studio Centre (*Unfrozen* 2001 and *Unauthorized Reserves* 2003). As a soloist, Mavin has toured around the world, dancing in Britain, USA, France, Spain, India, Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan and Japan. He has toured two major shows - *Images* in Varnam, commissioned by the Royal Ballet's Artists Development Initiative, and *Chandra/Luna*. He has performed with the Shobana Jeyasingh Dance Company in *Phantasmaton*, *Surface Tension* and *[h]Interland* (2002/3). He is currently performing as a guest artist with Sankalpam.

Liz Lea (Panellist – Performing Natyam) is originally from Sydney and trained at London Contemporary Dance School and Akademi in London and Darpana Academy in India. She specialises in the field of contemporary dance, Bharata Natyam and martial arts. She primarily works as a solo performer

choreographer but has also created works for Mavin Khoo Dance, Intoto and Ballet Arabesque. She is currently dancing with Sankalpam

Avanthi Meduri (Panellist – Locating Natyam) is a Reader in the Dance Programmes, University of Roehampton, London, and Convener of the new interdisciplinary MA in South Asian Dance studies. She received her PhD from New York University, and pioneered trans-national and postcolonial studies of South Asian dance in the US. As part of her postdoctoral research in India, Meduri curated Rukmini Devi's photo archive and presented it in India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Singapore, Japan, Australia, and London. Her edited volume on Rukmini Devi (2005), was recently released by the President of India. A professional dancer with an international reputation, Meduri works as dance educator, choreographer, playwright and actress. Her two most recent theatrical productions featured the Biography of Devadasis (1997) and Rukmini Devi Arundale (2004).

Prashanth Nayak (Panellist – Perceiving Natyam) is the Executive Director of Milapfest a registered charity based in the Northwest of England which for the past years, had worked in the cause of supporting and promoting all aspects of Indian/South Asian culture. Milapfest is the only year round South Asian Arts festival of UK that commissions and produces over 70 events in 4 cities of UK-Manchester, Liverpool, Leicester & now London. We are a development agency for South Asian Arts with several national projects; Samyo, Britain's first South Asian Youth Orchestra; Tarang, The National Asian Music Ensemble; Sangeet Sabha, the National South Asian Music Conference; Jhankar a unique year round South Asian Dance festival; Music Yatra, a classical music concert series; We also annually hold Anand Yatra, the annual Indian folk dance festival at the Lowry in Manchester; We commissioned Dance Yatra 2003, a major South Asian Dance showcase with over 330 dancers in the Manchester Games Festival. We are actively engaged in South Asian Dance promotion, education and teachers training in the Northwest; we help support between 3 to 5 dance commissions each year. We also run and support two week long residential summer music and Dance schools each year.

Janet O'Shea (Panelist – Locating Natyam) has studied and performed bharata natyam since 1989. She has trained in Madras under Nandini Ramani, a senior disciple of T. Balasaraswati. She holds a PhD in Dance History and Theory from the University of California, Riverside and an MA in Tamil from the University of California, Berkeley. She is currently a Lecturer in Dance Studies at the University of Surrey. Her book on twentieth century bharata natyam, *At Home in the World: Bharata Natyam on the Global Stage* is forthcoming with Wesleyan University Press.

Seeta Patel (Performer) began training under the guidance of Kiran Ratna and has since worked with a range of Bharata Natyam and contemporary dance professionals including Mavin Khoo, Pushkala Gopal, Liz Lea and Laurent Cavanna. She has toured with Kiran Ratna's company and the Menaka Thakker Dance Company, Toronto. She joined Mavin Khoo Dance as a founder member for Parallel Passions in 2003 and continued with the company in its recent production Chandra Luna. Seeta received Arts Council England funding to produce a solo show in collaboration with a choreographers, a live cellist and digital musician. She has also been awarded the Lisa Ullmann Travel Scholarship to study Bharata Natyam in India.

Nina Rajarani (Panellist – Practising Natyam) carried out her Bharatanatyam training under Prakash Yadagudde at Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan's London branch, where she staged her Arangetram in 1987. Since 1988 Nina has received training regularly in Chennai under Shanta and VP Dhananjayan. Nina's professional touring company SRISHTI presents Nina's choreography in which preservation of the authenticity of Indian classical dance traditions is of prime importance. Srishti has toured several productions nationally in the UK – including *Women Are From Venus...* (2005), *Equilibrium* (2004), *She* (2003) and *Vaachikam* (2002). Srishti's projects have been regularly funded by the Arts Council of England and Regional Arts Boards as well as reputed organisations abroad. Nina has earned herself an admirable reputation as a teacher and has to her credit, a thriving school of dance based at the Harrow Arts Centre in Middlesex since 1991 where students pride themselves upon the high standard of dancing they aim to achieve. Recently, the school has opened new branches in Reading and Warwick. In recent years, Nina Rajarani has been closely involved with a committee of dance teachers that has devised a syllabus for Bharatanatyam with graded examinations. These examinations are being conducted by the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing (ISTD) Nina is currently the secretary of the South Asian Dance Faculty of the ISTD and also serves as one of their Bharatanatyam examiners.

Vena Ramphal (Panellist – Performing Natyam) is a choreographer, director and performer Vena's work explores selfhood, identity and transformation. Recent work includes 'Londoner' a site specific solo for the plinth of Nelson's column in Trafalgar Square, and 'Fold' a dance film co-produced by South East Dance and Moving Pictures Festival Toronto co-commissioned by channel 4 and Bravo! Her next dance piece 'Meeting You' will be performed at the Linbury, ROH on the 25th and 26th of October as part of the 'Firsts' programme.

Swati Raut (Panellist – Practising Natyam) has a Ph.D in Organic Chemistry and trained in Bharatanatyam at 'Nrityashree', Mumbai, founded by Guru Krishnan nan Kutty. Guruji is not only a well known Kathakali dancer but is also an able Bharatanatyam teacher who trained under the late Lakshmi Kantham of Tanjore of the Pichhaiya Pillai School. Following her Arangetram in 1979, Swati continued to train in Bharatanatyam and also learnt Mohiniattam from Smt. Ammu Kutty. She has performed extensively in India in the eighties, both as a solo artist and in Dance Dramas produced by Nrityashree. She moved to the UK in 1987 and started teaching dance to community groups. Presently, Swati is pursuing dance full time and is one of the founder members of the Northwest Dance Alliance. She conducts Bharatanatyam and Indian Folk dance classes as an independent artist in Bolton, Preston and Ashton and has around 90 students. Her students have been taking ISTD exams for the past three years. She teaches Bharatanatyam to dance students at Ashton Sixth Form College and Preston College as a curriculum enrichment activity. She has performed in both the productions of NWDA viz, Nritya Sandhya 2004-05 and Devi Diva 2005-06. This has given her the opportunity of working with choreographers like Angika, Chitralekha Bolar and Pushkala Gopal. She is on the board of DIGM.

Sanjoy Roy (Chair – Perceiving Natyam) writes on contemporary dance for the Guardian, Dance Now, Dancing Times, and is dance editor of Contemporary magazine. He is author of 'Growths and Outgrowths' in New Directions in Indian Dance Ed S. Kothari, Marg Publications 2003), of 'Dirt, Noise, Traffic: Contemporary Indian Dance in the Modern City' (Dance in the City, ed. H. Thomas, Macmillan 1997), and editor of White Man Sleeps: Creative Insights (Dance Books, 1999).

Leela Samson (Keynote Speaker) received the impulses for her growth as a dancer from Kalakshetra, the College of Fine Arts in Chennai, Tamil-Nadu. She adheres to the mould of the Kalakshetra technique yet has grown out of its binding, believing as she does that adherence to any school is a point of reference only. She is however deeply influenced by Rukmini Devi, the founder of that institute and its philosophy. Leela joined Kalakshetra in 1961. She left the institute in 1975 as one of its lead dancers. In the following decade, she went back every year and in 1985, visited China with Rukmini Devi and her troupe. In 1975, Leela joined the Sriram Bharatiya Kala Kendra, Delhi to start a Bharata Natyam section in that institute. When she left the institute in 1990, there were over 60 students learning this form. She is a virtuoso performer and sensitive interpreter of the nuances of this form. She is widely acclaimed as a leading soloist of the Bharata-Natyam style of dance. For thirty years she has held the stage in Delhi both as a dancer and a teacher, as a writer and a choreographer. She is the author of 'Rhythm in Joy' – a book on the major classical dance forms of India. In September 1995, she launched a group called 'SPANDA' to explore new areas of creativity in Bharata-Natyam. Leela is the recipient of the Sanskriti Award in 1982, the Padmashri Award in 1990, the Nritya Choodamani Award in 1997 and the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 2000. In March 2005, she was offered the opportunity to head her alma-mater, a responsibility she accepted. She took over as Director of the Kalakshetra Foundation on 6th May 2005.

Sankalpam (Performers and Panellists – Performing Natyam) celebrates its 10th anniversary this year. The Company has become a by word in Britain for innovation and excellence, rooting their work in Bharata natyam, yet always seeking to give audiences a new entry point into Classical Indian Dance – with 'the confidence to embrace the future whilst embracing the past' (The Guardian). Today they present a section of their most recent work *Psyche*. Sankalpam's Artistic Directors are Stella Uppal Subbiah, Vidya Thirunarayan and Mira Balachandran- Gokul. Today's performers are Stella and Mira, joined by Shijith Nambiar, Liz Lea and Mavin Khoo.

Stella Subbiah will also be a panellist for Practising Natyam. Stella completed her postgraduate qualification at Kalakshetra with a Government of India Merit scholarship, and went on to train under Leela Samson. She is currently teaching on the South Asian Dance Degree Course at London Contemporary Dance School.

Shane Shambhu (Panellist – Performing Natyam) is a British born dancer and Artist In Residence at Derby Dance Centre. He trained in Bharatanatyam in London with Mudralaya led by Pushkala Gopal & Unnikrishnan and further trained with Mavin Khoo. He performed nationally and internationally as part of Mudralaya Youth Group and as a solo Bharatanatyam performer. He began working professionally with Akshaya Dance Theatre [Secret Of Life]. Since, he has been involved in numerous projects and has been dancer/performer for Annapurna Dance Company [Moods & Melodies], Srishti Dance Creations [Milapfest-Danceyatra 2002, Equilibrium (Spain Tour)], Mavin Khoo Dance [Milapfest-Danceyatra 2002], Vayu Naidu Company [South, Joining Forces] and for three years with Shobana Jeyasingh Dance Company [Phantasmaton, Hinterland, Transtep (guest choreographers Filip Van Huffell, Lisa Torun & Rashpal Singh Bansal), Flicker]. He was Choreographer for Para-Active Theatre's "Al'-Daakan", Institute of Fine Arts' "Mate" and "See Wha' I'm Sayin'" in collaboration with Vayu Naidu Company & Creative Partnerships. In 2003 he was supported by Sampad's Choreolab to develop his first collaborative work "illusions..." and in 2004 he received a commission from Arts Council England to create his first solo work "impermanence" which showcased as part of decibel x/trax 2005 and Royal Opera House's New: Currents season. He was

supported by Dance 4 to receive mentoring from Jonathan Burrows for his work 'impermanence' which will form a platform tour in 2006.

Geetha Sridhar (Performer) I underwent formal training in Bharathanatyam at Kalakshetra College of Dance and Fine Arts in Madras, India. I have featured in some of their productions and I have performed as a principal artiste with the renowned Chandralekha Dance Company from India in many of their productions. I have performed and conducted workshops in India, Germany, Italy, Australia, United Kingdom, and the former USSR. Since my move to the United Kingdom over 10 years ago, I have been actively involved in teaching, choreographing and performing, initially in Scotland, later in the Midlands and currently in London. Amongst my major works are an educational dance programme for Tern Television Productions on Hindu mythology relating to the origin of the Universe, screened on Channel 4 in Autumn 1995 as part of a religious education series. I received a dance development award from the Scottish Arts Council leading to a Bharathanatyam production of "Anna Karenina", which was performed to critical acclaim before an invited audience in May 1994.

Anusha Subramanyam (Performer) is a dancer, choreographer, teacher and dance movement therapist. She is one of the best known faces of Bharatanatyam in the UK. She is an alumna of the renowned Kalakshetra College of Fine Arts, Chennai, where she graduated with honours in 1986. As a solo dancer Anusha has performed at many prestigious venues for a variety of appreciative audiences internationally. She regularly collaborates with other classical and contemporary performing artists exploring and expanding the vocabulary of dance and music. In recent years Anusha has explored performing Bharatanatyam in non-conventional public spaces. Anusha was part of the team that formulated the ISTD Bharatanatyam syllabus in UK. Her interest in physical aspects of the dance on the body led her to train as a Pilates teacher. Anusha has trained as a dance movement therapist and is constantly working towards exploring the power of dance and movement as a form of healing. She has worked with the special needs groups, children, adults, teachers and other associated professionals, evolving various methodologies of training through conducting workshops of her own design and formulation.

Chitra Sundaram (Performer and Panellist – Perceiving Natyam) London-based Chitra Sundaram is a dance artist of distinction and the editor of Pulse, the premier South Asian dance magazine in Britain sponsored by Arts Council England and published by Kadam Asian Dance and Music Ltd. Her full-length work Moham - A Magnificent Obsession has been presented by mainstream venues in the UK and India as well as in North America. Primarily a soloist, her collaborations include Akademi's, "Coming of Age" at the South Bank Centre and the Royal Opera House's Back Garden Project with Mavin Khoo Dance. Chitra has taught dance at academic and practice-led institutions including Goldsmith College. Chitra also serves artists and organizations in trustee and advisory/mentoring capacities. She has lived and worked in several countries around the globe and is a keen, informed and respected participant in the current aesthetic debates in and around South Asian dance. She describes her ambition for South Asian dance as not getting sideswiped as a cultural phenomenon by the socio-political discourse yet finding stature as a thoughtful, contemporary performing art form with an adaptable/exportable movement vocabulary as well as a unique interiority and expressive power.