

**Frame by Frame:
Akademi's Symposium on the Dance of Indian
Cinema
and its Transition into Bollywood Dancing**

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Report author and Rapporteur: Dr Ann R. David, Roehampton University

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Introduction:

Akademi's Symposium focusing on the dance of the Indian cinema, held at the prestigious Linbury Theatre at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London in July 2009 drew a large crowd of appreciative delegates. Dancers, dance teachers, dance aficionados, film experts, Akademi's friends and supporters attended as well as the general public. Although Akademi is well-known for its work engaging with classical dance artists, it has also embraced folk, street and film styles of dance in its increasingly busy outreach work, and particularly so with young people. The decision to organise such a symposium day was an obvious one, stated here by Akademi in the *Frame by Frame* programme:

For 30 years, Akademi has shaped the creative landscape, working to enhance the practice, understanding and appreciation of South Asian dance across the UK. Akademi's education and community work has imbibed the dance of Indian cinema as a medium for expressive learning for more than 10 years. After the major site-specific Bollywood production, *Escapade* in 2003, the time has come for Akademi to examine and celebrate the dance of Indian cinema. As this dance strengthens its position alongside other South Asian dance forms, we feel it is time to take a closer look at the mechanics that drive this booming industry. (*Frame by Frame* programme)

The conference day was designed to strike a balance between performance and discussion, and aimed to explore the economics of the Indian film industry whilst unpicking the ramifications of the popularity of dance on screen in relation to the construction of an 'Indian' identity. Through presentations by film directors, academics and dancers in addition to screenings of selected Indian films, dance's transition from screen to stage was not only tracked but its stylistic evolution through a collection of dance styles ranging from classical styles such as Bharatanatyam and Kathak, jazz, modern, cabaret, disco to hip hop and

to street styles was noted. These wide-ranging styles appear to have evolved into a single entity through the alchemy of the cinematic experience. Finally, the importance of the impact of globalisation of the Indian commercial film industry on the dance form of the Indian cinema formed a major part of the day's discussions.

The day's programme

As the audience found its way down to the Linbury Theatre, interactive encounters with strategically placed Indian dancers created a sense of fun and lively expectancy. Installed on the stairs and on top of the bar, sitting with audience members and dancing in the bar space, all dressed in colourful shalwars and dance costumes, these young dancers led the audience into the imaginative world of the Bollywood film. Inside the theatre, a dramatic opening by a male Bharatanatyam soloist (Ash Mukherjee) dancing a dedication to Siva Nataraj, god of the dance, followed by a sloka to Ganesha, the elephant-headed god set the scene for the Symposium to follow. Then a short piece of classical Odissi from Nutkhut dancers segued into the welcome given by Akademi's Chair,

Fiona Sheridan. The Chair reminded the audience that this was Akademi's 30th anniversary year, emphasising its record for innovation and for breaking down boundaries between dance styles, dancers and audiences, east and west, and reminded everyone of how Akademi had been using Indian film dance in its education outreach work for the last 10 years. She then introduced the host of the Symposium, Nina Nannar, a news correspondent for ITV News. Nannar spoke of the recent success of the film *Slumdog Millionaire* at the Oscars and that Bollywood film and dance is 'loud and proud', and now is even here at London's famous Royal Opera House. She welcomed the first invited speaker, **Parminder Vir** OBE, the award-winning film and TV producer and businesswoman, to address the audience on the subject of *The Globalisation of Indian Cinema*.

This fascinating talk began with a brief personal history of Vir's interest in film before explaining how powerful Indian cinema had become in the world's economies. Due to the massive expansion of the Indian economy (at 9-10%), the Indian film industry is now one of the world's largest financial players, able now to dictate its terms, even to Hollywood. 'It's all about money, talent, economies and markets', Vir stated. As Hollywood is hit by the recession, and European film directors also are finding difficulty raising money for their films, Indian films are flourishing and are leading the way with their technological developments and achievements. Many western actors and producers are now wishing to access the success of Bollywood – Steven Spielberg is interested in partnerships, Kylie Minogue is in a forthcoming Indian film, and Amir Khan and Danny Boyle are planning on a new collaboration. The big players in Indian films can now go to Hollywood and state their terms for negotiations, as well as developing links with China, South America, Korea and Nigeria (where the newly growing film industry is called Nollywood). Vir also noted that diasporic Indians living all over the world are great consumers of Indian culture and worth over 3,000 billion dollars. Bollywood producers are aware of this and so make films that directly appeal to such consumers.

This presentation was then followed by the key-note speaker, **Nasreen Munni Kabir**, documentary film-maker and author, whose illustrated talk, entitled *Why Make Song and Dance? What Defines Indian Cinema and How is it Different to World Cinema?* drew on her extensive experience in the film world. She traced the history of dance in Indian films, reminding the audience of the importance of songs in the films – how dance had to be part of the story-telling and the songs. By the 1940s, the song and dance items were beginning to develop as an art form within the film, and often utilised the trope of a performance within a performance. Kabir talked of the significance of the choreographers in Indian film, and related how several dance masters had become well-known film dance directors, such as Hiralal and Saroj Khan. These choreographers now wielded a huge amount of power within the film.

Finally, Kabir noted that up to the 1990s, dance and music were inseparable but now, dance has developed beyond the film, becoming a genre in its own right, a theme developed also by later speakers at the Symposium. It no longer remained just a story-telling device, but has become a global phenomenon, where language was no longer so important. It is less specific and more fragmented, able to travel easily on the internet without a loss of meaning. She commented that the dance has developed, but the poetry has been lost, and closed her presentation with some excerpts of her Channel 4 documentary on Bollywood dance.

The afternoon then moved onto an interview between Parminder Vir and film producer, **Gurinder Chadha** OBE, during which they discussed Chadha's past work and her new film due to be released in 2010. Chadha told the audience how she had grown up in Southall, west London, regularly watching Indian films at the local cinema and grappling with her British/Indian identity. She explained how her work always tries to fuse elements of India and British life which seem to be incompatible – in *Bend it Like Beckham* it was football and the Indian girl, and in *Bride and Prejudice* it was Jane Austen and Bollywood. She is constantly having to make decisions regarding who is the audience for her films, and in *Bride and Prejudice*, Miramax insisted that she cut the opening song sequence, stating it was 'too Bollywood to start with a song'. When asked if she directed the dance sequences, Chadha described how she had worked closely with Saroj Khan, telling Kahn what type of effect she wanted and then leaving her to get on with the detail of the choreography. The dance number 'No life without a Wife' was made in the style of a 90s Bollywood song in the way it was cut, the dance moves and the costume changes. Chadha completed the interview by stating that she intends to direct a stage version of *Bride and Prejudice* that will be updated and have Jane Austen as a character in it who watches the play!

After a short break, the programme moved on to a lively presentation by **Dr Sangita Shresthova**, scholar, dancer and filmmaker, who took us through the colourful history of Indian dance on screen, using narration, film excerpts and live

dance presentations on stage. Clips of dance items from well-known films such as *Awaara* (1951), *Jhanak Jhanak* (1955), *Guide* (1965), *Pakeezah* (1972), *Sholay* (1975), *Disco Dancer* (1982), *Chandni* (1989) and *Khalnayak* (1993) were shown, leading us on a journey through the decades of film dance. Several of these clips segued into a choreographed version on stage, performed by today's younger generation of dancers, bringing an interesting juxtaposition of tradition and modernity. Shresthova noted how, as film dance has become globalised, the dancing body is changing: in Los Angeles, Bollywood dance is about getting fit and producing a new, lean body; in Prague, it is about performing the 'exotic'. Bollywood dance as a term carries different meanings in different places. During her presentation, **Keith Khan**, director of Motiroti and Head of Culture for the 2012 Olympics, was welcomed on stage to talk about costumes for dance performance on screen. He related the changes through the decades, illustrating his talk with examples on slide. Khan also discussed the change in body type now shown in Indian films where men are more androgynous in their appearance, yet more sexualised and the women presented are more petite with smaller busts and with lighter hair. The talk ended with a live dance sequence by **Karan Pangali**.

The final part of the programme was necessarily curtailed as time was short. Academics **Professor Rachel Dwyer** from SOAS, University of London and **Dr Anna Morcom** (Royal Holloway), both specialists in Indian film spoke briefly about their work. Dwyer noted that both in India and in the diaspora, Bollywood dance had gone out beyond the films themselves and was even found as far afield as in Bollywood dance clubs in Senegal. Morcom spoke about the power of the economic capital of Indian film dance, giving it nowadays, real cultural presence and status, something very different to its previous low status in India for decades. She mentioned too how it had become institutionalised in the UK, available through dance schools, and seen at weddings, hen parties and other social events. Dancers **Rakhi Sood, Simmy Gupta** and **Ajay**

Chhabra then talked about their own performances and the dance schools and companies they had set up, with Gupta noting that none of her company dancers are Asian.

Lord Desai came on stage to give the closing address and humorously noted that as a boy, watching Indian films and the dancers had been all about sex, and that fact had not been mentioned throughout the Symposium. It had been his only chance to see women not so covered up! He thanked all the presenters and dancers and mentioned one of his favourite Indian films with its dance numbers, *Jhanek Jhanek Bayel Bhajee* (1955). The day concluded with a final Bollywood dance number from **Karan Pangali** and the **KSPARK** dancers.

Summary

This conference day put on by Akademi was clearly a great success and an important landmark both for Akademi and for Indian dance in the UK. In a continuing celebration of Akademi's 30 years of existence, this Symposium featuring the dance of Indian cinema acknowledged the significance of such a genre and highlighted its powerful position in today's global popular culture. The mix of academic debate, professional expertise and dance performance brought a comprehensive engagement with the current and historical issues in Indian film dance, and especially emphasised both the financial and economic considerations as well as the details of the dance styles inherent in the form. The audience was engaged, inspired and entertained, and left amidst lively chatter and debate. Akademi had aimed to 'examine and celebrate the dance of Indian cinema', and this it did, most effectively.

Participators

Ajay Chhabra
Anna Morcom
Gurinda Chadha
Keith Khan
Lord Desai
Nasreen Munni Kabir
Nina Nannar
Parminder Vir
Rakhi Sood
Rachel Dwyer
Samir Bhamra
dancers
Sangita Shresthova

Dancers

Alison Ho Chee
Ash Mukherjee
Anukur Bahl
Arunima Kumar
Craig Whymark
Darren Charles
Eloise Sheldon
Jade Eden
Jay Saunders
Jo Schofield
Karan Pangoli & KSPARK
Mani Kaur
Moni Singh
Nyron
Payal Patel
Rebecca Coates
Seema Patel
Simon Barnum
Tanya Greig
Yamuna Devi
Yinka Williams

Additional credits

Concept and Programming

Mira Kaushik

General Manager

Matthew Jones

Dance master/mistress

Mavin Khoo & Gauri Tripathi

Akademi staff
Linton,

Christina Christou, Catherine Kelly, Jess

Lui Sit, Robyn Sticker, Kath Veitch, Lucia
Vivanco

Lighting

Mickie Mannion

Filming

Marko Wasche

Clips & projection

Glyn Ley

Stage Manager

Fay Patterson